Playing Pacifism

by

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Abstract

Violence is commonplace in video games, making the practice of engaging in *pacifist runs* — the completion of violent video games using minimal amounts of violence, or avoiding it all together — a fascinating object of study. In real life, the practice of pacifism is about opposing violence due to one's personal principles or beliefs. In video games it has come to mean progressing using nonlethal tactics, and has, at least historically, been motivated by a desire to add an extra challenge to completing the game. This thesis will look at nine games in roughly the order they were published — beginning with *Ultima IV* released in 1985 to *Undertale* released in 2015 — in order to show how emergent player behavior and developer-led initiatives to allow for nonviolent approaches came together to form a practice of pacifism within video games. The role-playing game *Undertale* in particular touches heavily on themes of pacifism, in a genre otherwise known for its reliance on conflict as a means for advancement, and so is the main focus for the second (and final) chapter.

To evaluate these games in a way that would allow them to be readily comparable, I identified three key mechanics from *Undertale* that pertain to its message of pacifism, and which could be generalized to the other games. To identify specific game mechanics, I used Sicart's method of finding the simple verbs in the game, as defined in "Defining Game Mechanics." The mechanics chosen were attacking, sparing, and save scumming (basically the practice of reloading a save file any time something undesirable happens). Then, in the interests of critically analyzing these three mechanics and their effects on the rest of the game and the player, I utilized the MDA framework established by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek. Standing for Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics, the MDA framework was developed with researchers and game developers in mind, to examine how a game's basic mechanics combine to provoke

certain emotional responses in a player. And finally, this analysis focuses on three elements at the start of each game in order to understand how violence is framed in the game as a means of navigating the puzzles and plot: the tutorial (either one built into the game or existing in an out of game manual), the first level, and dialogue and reactions of NPCs to the player's actions.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

It was in the early 2000s, while playing *Deus Ex*, that I first developed an interest in what would become known as doing a "pacifist run." In short, I had experience with playing first person shooters and I had experience with playing role-playing games — *Deus Ex* being an interesting amalgamation of the two genres — neither of which I'd thought to play in a nonlethal manner before. I had created a player character (PC) who was good with lockpicking and low-tech weapons, making him something of a stealthy assassin who snuck around knifing enemies in the back. I'd learned that killing enemies to remove them from the game space was the optimal way to play these games because it made exploring a level, and otherwise accomplishing your goals, easier. Sometimes games even have numbers that go up, indicating how good of a player you are based on how many enemies you've managed to kill. It was something of an epiphany for me, however, when my character's in-game brother seemed disappointed in me for my murdering. I had never thought to avoid using lethal combat mechanics in genres designed around lethal combat, and the idea of playing the game in a different way was appealing to me. I didn't change my first character's approach, he still murdered his way to the end of the game, but I did immediately start a new playthrough afterward, this time aiming to kill no one.

This thesis will look at a history of the term pacifist run in video game discourse, and how it has been shaped by both players and video game developers. I will specifically examine games that have supported or even encouraged pacifist playstyles. I will show how the limited agency and affordances of video games have caused video game conceptions of pacifism to diverge from how it is conceived of in the real world. To do this, I will cover eight games in the second chapter that all have something interesting and unique to add to the conversation,

beginning with *Ultima IV* published in 1985. I make no claims that these games were the first to do a particular thing, or that they are the only games to have pacifist routes.[1] However these games were reasonably popular, and they all have explicit and implicit things to say about video game pacifism through their stories and mechanics. While formulating my ideas for this thesis I had the good fortune to sit down and play *Undertale*, which will serve as the focus of the third chapter. *Undertale* reinforces, challenges, and subverts gaming conceptions of pacifism in a manner that provoked a community of gamers to engage with pacifism in new and unexpected ways.

Literature Review

My work exists in the field of game studies and builds on the existing work of many game theorists. This work includes concepts such as emergent versus progressive forms of play, the promise and limitation of procedural rhetoric as a form of argument making in video games, and gaming capital. It also draws heavily from community and journalistic sources regarding the playing of video games as a "pacifist." I also touch on discussions of morality in video games, if only in order to distance myself from such discussions; though pacifist play could be framed as a moral issue, this is not a stance often taken by the community, or a reason given for pursuing it.

Emergent game structures arise from play in the community in response to rulesets created by the developer. Progressive structures require the player to complete a list of tasks, as prescribed by the game designer, in order to finish the game with little or no variation in

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[1] Certainly, there are plenty more games that I would've liked to talk about but had to trim for length.

playstyle.[2] Within this thesis, I use the term emergent gameplay to discuss video games that do not explicitly endorse a pacifist method of play (and may in fact explicitly endorse the opposite) but in which pacifist players have found ways to advance, even if only partially. Although pacifist play has its roots in this sort of emergent play, this thesis is largely devoted to looking at the switch from emergent forms of play to more progressive forms of play as developers started to explicitly adopt pacifist routes into their games.

Procedural rhetoric explores the idea that video games make arguments through their gameplay and systems. Ian Bogost formalizes the idea of procedural rhetoric in *Persuasive games: the expressive power of videogames*: procedure in the sense of rules to follow, and rhetoric in the sense of making a convincing argument.[3] It is used to describe how procedures can make implicit arguments, such as how rules are followed within the context of a video game. If a violent video game can be seen as making a certain type of argument with its progressive gameplay, then emergent gameplay — in this case pacifist runs — can be seen as rejecting that argument. For example, in most first-person shooters, the player's main means of interacting with the world is a gun; this is a form of procedural rhetoric where every problem the player faces must/can be solved through violence. A player going out of their way to not use that gun is therefore rejecting that argument. On the other hand, a game that has an achievement labeled pacifist, which directs the player to play a certain way, is also making an argument about what constitutes video game pacifism, but in this case the pacifism is no longer emergent. Some scholars have since problematized the idea of procedural rhetoric, including Miguel Sicart who points out that players also have agency within the game, and that games cannot be distilled

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[2] Jesper Juul, "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression," *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, (2002), http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05164.10096.pdf.

[3] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames* (MIT Press, 2007), EBSCOhost.

down into a series of immutable arguments that are merely waiting to be consumed.[4] Sicart

argues that meaning only arises out of the combination of values inherent in the game (the

procedural rhetoric) and the values brought by the player themselves, which includes how they

choose to play the game and interpret the procedural rhetoric. The player is an important part of

meaning making in games, and how they interpret what they're playing cannot be ignored. Here I

must emphasize that my own reading of the games covered in this thesis relies heavily on the

interaction between the game and myself, and the meaning found in those interactions.

      Pacifist runs in video games are not a topic that has received a lot of academic attention

in game studies. The most directly focused on the subject is perhaps Scott Whitehurst's 2013

dissertation. In *Pacifism in Video Games,* Whitehurst's goal is to identify what pacifism looks

like within the context of contemporary video games.[5] In order to make the choice of pacifism a

meaningful one, he limits his selection of games to those where the player can kill other

characters. This is an important distinction that I and others also use to define what can

reasonably be defined as a pacifist run. The concept of a pacifist playthrough requires a player to

choose pacifism when there are violent options available, which discounts any games where

violence is never an option. After examining a handful of games where "pacifist runs" (that is,

completing the game without killing other characters) are possible, Whitehurst built a video

game level using ideas gleaned from his case studies. Whitehurst's dissertation served as an

effective starting point for my own formation of ideas, though this thesis looks more at how the

concept of video game pacifism began, and how it evolved over time.

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[4] Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011),
http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap.
[5] Scott Whitehurst, "Pacifism in Video Games" (BSc (Hons) diss., Staffordshire University, 2013),
https://scottacon.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/scott-whitehurst-pacifism-in-video-games-dissertation.pdf.

In order to deal with the fact that players are still constrained by a system of rules as defined by the game, and may be required to perform violence to proceed, Whitehurst draws on the concept of practical pacifism. In his book *Practical Pacifism* (2004) author Andrew Fiala talks a bit about the roots of pacifism, democracy, war, and peace, from an American perspective, before defining what he calls practical pacifism. It borrows somewhat from the just war perspective — in that the violence of war can be justified as a last resort. For example, certain playthroughs of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* might conceivably fall under the umbrella of practical pacifism because pacifism is possible throughout most of the game, even though completing the boss battles required the player to kill. There is no other option and so the player is not necessarily breaking any pacifist rules they have for themselves as lethal force is the only option the game allows. The concept is used by Whitehurst in order to distinguish between games requiring some combat and those that allow a more "purist pacifism" approach. What is important to note here is that there can be a broad interpretation of what constitutes pacifism in video games with some players merely avoiding violence when possible. Again, although it is an interesting starting point, this thesis will be more devoted to looking at how the term pacifism (and all related terms) has come to have its own meaning in the video game space.

The term "pacifist run" seems to have emerged from the practice of speedrunning: a (usually emergent) form of play that is motivated by player-defined goals. Speedrunning, as a concept, aims to "impose additional or alternative rules on video games, in order to refine or expand gameplay and to create new gaming experiences."[6] Koziel describes speedrunning as "the act and process of reaching a goal in a video game while intending to minimize interaction cycles

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[6] Felan Parker, "The Significance of Jeep Tag: On Player-Imposed Rules in Video Games Authors," *Loading...* 2, no. 3 (2008): 1, https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/44.

between human and machine"[7] or, in other words, getting through a video game as fast as possible. Pacifist runs, too, are often framed as an added challenge, or a way to mix up the gameplay a little and get a new experience out of a game. The first usage of the word pacifist in reference to video game play I could find was in the *Doom* speedrunning community. In 1998, a community of *Doom* speedrunners decided to introduce the category of "UV pacifist" or "Ultra-Violence pacifist" as a twist on a more straightforward speedrun.[8] This seeming oxymoron of a title refers to the performance of a speedrun on the Ultra-Violence difficulty level (one of the harder ones, with more monsters) while harming no monsters. Although there were earlier and even contemporary works by other game developers that played with the idea of non-lethality in otherwise violent video games, the word pacifist was not adopted by developers until later.

Over time, the ties to speedrunning became more distant, and pacifist runs came to stand on their own both as a form of performance (on the players' side of things) and as an alternate style of play (on the developers' side). In a 2012 article in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "Videogamers Embark on Nonkilling Spree," Conor Dougherty covers the idea of doing a pacifist run of a video game, and highlights people such as Daniel Mullins (a.k.a. WestSideLuigi) and Ian Jones and their playing of *Skyrim* and *Battlefield 3*, respectively, without killing any other characters. While the article takes a very shallow look into video game violence, it does serve to highlight the concept of pacifist runs for those who don't play video games. The article highlights the spectrum of what some consider a pacifist run, with the example of Ian Jones getting other characters in the game to do the killing for him. This sort of practical pacifism exemplifies one form of pacifistic play. Videogame pacifism has been

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[7] Eric Koziel, *Speedrun Science: A Long Guide To Short Playthroughs* (Tucson, Arizona: Fangamer LLC, 2019), 24.

[8] "About COMPET-N," *COMPET-N*, accessed July 24, 2021, http://www.doom.com.hr/index.php?page=compet-n_about.

observed to be "'an urge to break the rules' — and dial up the difficulty of the game,"[9] suggesting

that, for many, it is less of a moral issue and more an issue of emergent gameplay. This could

suggest a typology of players within the faction of pacifist players, where some are motivated by

their own personal ethics and others are motivated by the challenge of it. These all tie into the

notion of subversive play, or emergent play: play not intended by the developers of the game,

and perhaps springing from a desire for rebelliousness.

The video game community itself has also made a habit of making lists of pacifist

runnable games, as well as drawing attention to pacifist run attempts in specific games. A few

lists which I drew some inspiration from included a wiki style list used by Whitehurst,[10] the

TVTropes page for Pacifist Run,[11] and a Steam curator list called "Pacifist Games."[12] These all

serve as interesting artifacts for the kind of content the community has deemed to be pacifist in

nature. Specific game or play callouts, in addition to those mentioned in the Wall Street Journal

article above, include "Noor the Pacifist" from *World of Warcraft*,[13] a player completing *Fallout

4* without killing anyone,[14] and another who endeavored to play *Grand Theft Auto Online* as

nonviolently as possible[15] while journaling his attempts in a series of humorous YouTube videos.

This last one is especially interesting for how much he describes his own personal process of

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[9] Conor Dougherty, "Videogamers Embark on Nonkilling Spree," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2012, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203806504577181320148513432.

[10] "Pacifist Playthrough," *Giant Bomb Wiki*, last modified June 12, 2019, https://www.giantbomb.com/pacifist-playthrough/3015-7589.

[11] *TV Tropes*, s.v. "Pacifist Run," last modified July 8, 2021, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PacifistRun.

[12] "Pacifist Games: Offering a complete guide to games with Pacifist and non-combat options," *Steam Curator*, last modified April 3, 2020, https://store.steampowered.com/curator/6934530-Pacifist-Games.

[13] L. Poisso, "15 Minutes of Fame: Noor the pacifist," *Engadget*, January 8, 2008, https://www.engadget.com/2008/01/08/15-minutes-of-fame-noor-the-pacifist.

[14] Patricia Hernandez, "Guy Beats Fallout 4 Without Killing Anyone, Nearly Breaks The Game," *Kotaku*, December 28, 2015, https://kotaku.com/guy-beats-fallout-4-without-killing-anyone-nearly-brea-1749882569.

[15] Patricia Hernandez, "One Player's Quest To Play GTA Online Without Murdering Anyone," *Kotaku*, October 9, 2014, https://kotaku.com/one-players-quest-to-play-gta-online-without-violence-1644393866.

translating real world ideas of pacifism into a video game context, going so far as to make up rituals to mimic paying restitution toward a wronged party. These examples reinforce how much the definition of pacifism within a video game depends on the player making judgment calls while working within, and often against, the procedural rhetoric that the game provides.[16]

The idea of doing something in a video game, primarily because it is deemed a challenge, is closely tied to the concept of gaming capital, as defined by Mia Consalvo in her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*.[17] Gaming capital is something of an intangible currency encapsulating such things as a particular gamer's level of knowledge, skill, and experience with a particular game or games in general. For the purposes of this thesis, players can be said to accrue gaming capital by sharing or otherwise showing off their achievements to the rest of the gaming community. Players engaging in pacifist runs could be said to be doing it for the gaming capital, though the concept will also be important in chapter three, when discussing potential reasons for why so many players choose to pursue the genocide route[18] in *Undertale*, contrary to the game's own overt message of pacifism.

Although this thesis will only give brief mention to an ethics perspective, it is still worth noting that video games can be viewed using an ethical framework, and that the very concept of performing pacifism in a video game, as a challenge out of the multitude of possible challenges to be pursued, is likely partially rooted in a moral perspective. In *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Sicart lays out a framework for analyzing video games as ethical entities.[19] In this framework,

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[16] For example, WestSideLuigi's usage of the kill count statistics in Skyrim to prove that he is indeed doing a pacifist run. (All the kill stats are at zero.) This is a combination of the procedural rhetoric as provided by the game (a statistic specifically for "kills" has been deemed important) and a player's determination to play against the rules in a form of emergent play (co-opting the kill stats to instead reflect the lack of lethal violence employed).

[17] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: gaining advantage in videogames* (MIT Press, 2007), ProQuest.

[18] The term genocide route, as it pertains to *Undertale*, will be covered in chapter 2.

[19] Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, (MIT Press, 2009).

players are defined not as passive observers to video games, but as active participants who can in turn be regarded as ethical agents. This is significant to defining a pacifist playthrough of a video game as well, as a player must actively choose to play a game pacifistically. Sicart also asserts that video games must be seen as content that is capable of being analysed ethically, and this holds true for pacifism runs as well. The very concept of being a "pacifist" within a video game relies on there being some kind of morality involved. Sicart references the term "banality of evil" where evil acts are rendered as mundane things that one just does.[20] He applies this to video games, pointing out the banality of killing other players' avatars in online games like Counter-Strike, but ultimately rejects the idea that video games are ethically wrong, arguing that the banality of evil does not exist in video games. Instead, he describes video games as informational systems and players' actions as being constrained by the rules defined by them. Whitehurst recognizes this point in his usage of the concept of practical pacifism. Sicart complicates this position in his later work, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, stating that video games can be judged ethically, and that players have agency in choosing video games that do not conflict with their own ethical guidelines.[21] I argue that video games that tie ethical decisions to gameplay, progression, or score are not actually presenting ethical choices, and that ethical decisions should arise from the player's own morals and how they choose to interact with a particular game's procedural rhetoric. For example, BioWare's *Knights of the Old Republic* has a morality mechanic that allows the player to align themselves with either the Dark Side or the Light Side of the Force. And yet, regardless of this alignment, the game does not allow for any level of

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[20] Miguel Sicart, "The banality of simulated evil: designing ethical gameplay," *Ethics And Information Technology* 11, no. 3 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-009-9199-5.
[21] Sicart, *The Ethics*.

pacifistic play and does not seem to view ridiculous levels of murder as being problematic for

"morally good" aligned characters.

Alexandra Müller's extended essay on the context of violence in *Undertale* juxtaposes the

very overt message of nonviolence in the game with the popularity of the game and the often

hostile online communities that champion the game.[22] This work was useful in building my own

understanding of pacifism in *Undertale*, not only for corroborating my own findings in

discussions of community with regard to *Undertale*, but also for sharing an interest in the pacifist

elements of the game, albeit coming from a serious games perspective. Müller makes numerous

keen analyses of many of the mechanics and other elements of the game (for example sound

design), which was helpful to me while I was still narrowing in on the precise elements of

Undertale that I wanted to focus on.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the elephant in the room: that of how violence in

video games is seen by society at large, even if only to distance my work from it. In "Face to

Face: Humanizing the Digital Display in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2," Timothy Welsh

discusses how violence in video games is vilified by society.[23] He points to the case of

Schwarzenegger v. Entertainment Merchants Assn. and how it was argued by California (here

represented by state governor Arnold Schwarzenegger) during the case that the player is not a

passive observer in a video game, and that this could translate into real world violence. The

player as active agent, which mirrors Sicart's argument about players being ethical agents in and

of themselves, casts games in a harsh light with respect to violence. Even though such arguments

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[22] Alexandra Müller, "Undertale: Violence in Context" (MA Extended Essay, Simon Fraser University, 2017), http://summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/17572/etd10369_AM%C3%BCller.pdf.

[23] Timothy Welsh, "Face to Face: Humanizing the Digital Display in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*," in *Guns, Grenades and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games*, ed. Gerald A. Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012).

exist, especially in popular media, this thesis will not make any commentary on the nature of video game violence and how it does (or does not) change the behavior of the real-life player. Still, it is important to acknowledge that there is a real world precedent for controversy surrounding the subject, and that further enabling pacifism in video games could be seen as a step toward dispelling the negative reputation of violent video games.

The scope of this project is limited to video games, those who play them, and those who develop them. Although there is a significant number of people who engage with video games, this project is not going to benefit humankind as a whole. I am, however, making the assumption that video games are an important cultural artifact to research. I am also making the assumption that the ethics presented within video games are not inconsequential. That said, I am not making an argument about video game violence and its effect on players in the real world. Ideally, I will point out certain trends and help those who have an interest in studying video games analyze pacifist approaches more critically.

One final thing to note about the emergence of pacifism in video games is how often it shows up in stealth games. Stealth, as a genre, "is a type of video game that rewards the player for using *stealth* to avoid or overcome antagonists"[24] (emphasis in original). Perhaps this makes the stealth genre uniquely suited for enabling more pacifistic play styles, however this, in turn, makes games that do not fall into those genres, such as *Ultima IV*, *Doom*, and *Undertale*, even more interesting as objects of study. I have attempted to select games from different genres as well, relegating the study of the importance of genre to future work.

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[24] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Stealth game," last modified July 26, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stealth_game.

Methodology

This thesis tracks how developers and players have navigated the concept of pacifist runs in violent video games. I selected a series of games to cover in this thesis, consulting various online lists (mentioned above) and then chose based off a personal assessment as to whether a particular game was bringing anything new and interesting to the concept of pacifist runs within violent video games. The games selected had to allow violence in order to make the choice of pacifism meaningful, and had to largely be single player experiences as my area of interest is in interactions between a game's procedural rhetoric and the meaning that players as individuals bring to the games. The end goal is to see how these interactions changed pacifist runs into what they are today. One game in particular, *Undertale*, stood out as being particularly noteworthy in pacifist runnable games, and so I decided to only look at games up until its release.[25] The games chosen, in order of release date, are: *Ultima IV* (1985), *Doom* (1993), *Thief: The Dark Project* (1998), *Deus Ex* (2000), *Postal 2* (2003), *Mirror's Edge* (2008), *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), and *Dishonored* (2012).

To evaluate these games in a way that would allow them to be readily comparable, I identified three key mechanics from *Undertale* that could be generalized to the other games. In order to zero in on what counts as a mechanic, I used Sicart's method of finding the simple verbs in the game, as defined in "Defining Game Mechanics."[26] The verbs I chose are as follows:

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[25] Newer games will almost certainly do interesting things with the concept, but they will have to be covered in future work.

[26] Miguel Sicart, "Defining Game Mechanics," *Game Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008), http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart.

1. *Attacking (enemies with violence until dead):* Although a bit of a simplification, it's an important one to establish and it's one that all these games require in order for me to consider them as pacifist runnable in the first place.

2. *Sparing (pacifying without killing):* It is not always a clear option, as in *Undertale*, but the reflection of sparing being an "alternate" option to the more straightforward "killing" is resonant with a lot of these games. This is a mechanic that allows the player to still progress through the game without killing any of their enemies, even if sparing is merely eschewing the attack mechanic. The implementation of sparing mechanics also loops into the discussion of "technical pacifism" where player/developer defined rules can make some seemingly questionable actions count as being a pacifist while other actions do not.

3. *SaveScumming (saving and reloading):* Saving and loading your game can be framed somewhat as meta-mechanics that most modern games have, regardless of genre. However, in the context of pacifist runs, the presence and function of the mechanic becomes important, and especially will become important for *Undertale* in the third chapter. The ability to "savescum" is hugely important to the majority of pacifist runs, a fact that perhaps springs from their origins in speedrunning communities, and the fact that early games were not meant to be played nonlethally. Doing a section until you "get it right" (in the pacifist run case meaning: to get through without killing anyone) can require a **lot** of repetition. Getting to this point, players may even start with violent playthroughs just to learn a level and figure out how to do their eventual nonlethal playthrough. Save scumming also enables the player to take risks that would not be reasonable if it's understood that they only have one life to live. Being able to replay the

game allows the player to experiment and take risks that they otherwise would not do
without a save/load mechanic.

In order to further analyze these three mechanics critically and make arguments about
them, I utilized the MDA framework established by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert
Zubek.[27] Standing for Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics, the MDA framework was
developed with researchers and game developers in mind, as a way to look more critically at how
a game's basic mechanics combine in order to provoke certain emotional responses in a player.
They define each category thusly:

> **Mechanics** describes the particular components of the game, at the level of data
> representation and algorithms.
> **Dynamics** describes the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and
> each others' outputs over time.
> **Aesthetics** describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she
> interacts with the game system.[28]

Using the MDA framework allows me to move from the three basic mechanics outlined
above, to looking at the way they interact with other mechanics and the player, and then what
sort of emotional responses these interactions elicit from players, specifically with a lens toward
playing these games as a pacifist. Since the MDA framework was also developed with a goal of
assisting developers design their games, this also proves a good fit for my thesis in terms of
making assessments about how much particular mechanics support (or don't support) a pacifist
style of play.

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[27] Hunicke, Robin, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek, "MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research," (2004), www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf.
[28] Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek, "MDA," 2.

Criticisms of MDA

There are certainly limitations to this particular framework; for example, making mechanics the centerpiece of video games has been argued to be an oversimplification that doesn't work for every type of video game.[29] However it suits my purposes here because I have already decided to compare multiple games at the level of three generalizable mechanics. The MDA framework has also been criticized for its focus on eight specific aesthetics: "Sensation" "Fantasy" "Narrative" "Challenge" "Fellowship" "Discovery" "Expression" and "Submission." These have been regarded as rather arbitrary classifications, with poor codification for what they all mean.[30] For my purposes I've discarded these eight and instead focused on how a particular game encourages or discourages a pacifist approach, and what following a pacifist approach might make a player feel. This is largely based on my own emotional responses, but also on inferences drawn from community responses, such as those posted in forums or on websites.

This framework should help identify games that emerged as a **practice of pacifism as emergent player behavior** and **developer-led initiatives to allow for nonviolent approaches**. And finally, in order to keep the thesis from getting too long, this analysis focuses on three elements at the start of each game in order to understand how violence is framed in the game as a means of navigating the puzzles and plot: the tutorial (either in game or in an out of game manual), the first level, and dialogue and reactions of NPCs to your actions.

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[29] Wolfgang Walk, Daniel Görlich, and Mark Barrett, "Design, Dynamics, Experience (DDE): An Advancement of the MDA Framework for Game Design," in *Game Dynamics: Best Practices in Procedural and Dynamic Game Content Generation*, ed. Oliver Korn and Newton Lee (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53088-8_3.

[30] Joris Dormans, "Engineering emergence: applied theory for game design" (PhD diss., Universiteit van Amsterdam: Creative Commons, 2012), http://dare.uva.nl/document/352033.

Chapter 1: Pacifist Signposts

This chapter has two goals. The first is to briefly explore player driven pacifism: cases where players adopted the word pacifist to describe emergent ways of playing video games that otherwise focused on violent action as a means for overcoming in-game conflict. The second is to explore developer-driven pacifism: cases where developers intentionally introduced mechanics that permitted and even encouraged players to win the game without killing or inflicting violence. This adoption of the word pacifist, and all related words, to describe a certain style of play arose as a conversation between the two, a conversation that would discuss what could and should be classified as nonviolent, and consider ideas such as pacifism, no-kill, environmental deaths, and ghosting. To this end, this chapter will identify key games that served as signposts for important moments in this evolving discussion.

Within the framework — player driven / designer enabled games that offer nonviolent opportunities for action even when violence is privileged — eight games stand out as signposts: *Ultima IV* (1985), *Doom* (1993), *Thief: The Dark Project* (1998), *Deus Ex* (2000); *Postal 2* (2003), *Mirror's Edge* (2008), *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), and *Dishonored* (2012). I make no claim that these games were the "first" to do anything, even though some may very well have been. I have chosen these games as they meet the requirements mentioned previously. In addition, as these games were generally successful from a sales point of view, they generated a reasonably robust following of fans and critics that permitted a discussion of the games' potentials for nonviolent playthroughs. Each game can be seen to have built on the earlier ones in some ways, extending and enhancing the potential for pacifist play styles. For example, *Thief: The Dark Project*, a role-playing stealth game with first person shooter affordances, promoted

non-lethality as a viable game strategy, making it a requirement at higher difficulty levels. Following that, *Deus Ex*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and *Dishonored* pushed the boundaries of stealth game play from a first-person perspective, while at the same time increasingly making the question of using lethal force or not an important player choice.

Player-Driven Pacifism

Doom

Doom seems an unlikely place to start a conversation about nonviolence, and yet one of the earliest references to the usage of the word "pacifist," to describe a particular playstyle of a violent video game, appears alongside *Doom*.[31] Released in December of 1993, *Doom* is a First-Person Shooter.[32] In it, players take the role of a "space marine" who is part of a doomed military response to a distress call from the Martian moon of Phobos. As the manual explains, your character is left behind to "secure the perimeter of the base"[33] while the rest of your team investigates. Your character hears various sounds of violence over the radio for several hours, and then all goes silent. You're now stranded on Phobos with only a pistol, and seemingly your only option is to move forward into the base.

Doom is a game where your primary interaction with the world is shooting a weapon at something on screen. You can also move around in the world, which facilitates finding more things to shoot at and kill, as well as finding bigger and better weapons with which to do the

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[31] "About COMPET-N."

[32] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Doom (1993 video game)," last modified July 28, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doom_(1993_video_game).

[33] "Doom Game Manual," *DJ Old Games*, accessed August 8, 2021, https://www.starehry.eu/download/action3d/docs/Doom-Manual.pdf, 1.

killing. Just from the design of the mechanics alone, it is clear that *Doom* was not intended to be played non-violently.

Figure 1.1: A screenshot from the first level of Doom, and the typical view that a Doom player will have. Note the pistol held out in front, from a first-person perspective, and the various numbers related to combat on the heads-up display at the bottom of the screen.

There's not much to say about the tutorial or first mission that relate to the subject of video game pacifism. *Doom* also contains no discernable NPC dialogue or explicit side objectives that are distinct from the main goal of finishing the current level you are in. The heads-up display (HUD), as seen in figure 1.1, shows almost exclusively stats that relate to combat effectiveness. "AMMO", "ARMS" and the various ammo counts on the very right side all relate to weapons, while "HEALTH" and "ARMOR" relate to how much damage the Doom marine can take — usually in the form of enemies attacking him but sometimes in the form of

environmental hazards — before dying. The head shot in the middle largely serves as another

health indicator, with the marine looking more and more wounded the lower his health is.

Figure 1.2: A screenshot of the statistics screen that appears at the end of each level of Doom. This one is for level one.

One bit of reactivity it does have though is a stats screen at the end of each level — figure

1.2 shows this screen for the end of the first level — which details: the percentage of enemies

killed, the percentage of items picked up, the percentage of secrets found, and the time taken to

complete the level, along with a "par" time.[34] This screen implicitly encourages players to aim

for as close to 100% in all categories (including killing) as they can, as quickly as they can;

evidence of this can be seen in the rise of speedruns for *Doom*, which could easily use the time

listed on this screen as their point of comparison. Purportedly the oldest speedrunning website

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[34] Par time is set by the developers as a goal for fast completion times.

for *Doom* goes by the name Compet-n[35], which was founded in "probably November 1994" as per The Doom Wiki.[36] On it one can find various player defined speed running categories, such as UV Speed, which means finishing a level as fast as possible, while playing on the "Ultra-Violence"[37] difficulty.[38] These categories are all examples of emergent gameplay, with the game only enabling them insofar as it shows a completion time whenever the player finishes a level.

It is in these categories that *Doom* becomes noteworthy to this thesis: not because of the game itself, but because of a player community forming an idea of what pacifist play looks like within the confines of the game's rules. In 1998 the website added some new categories, one of which was the "UV pacifist" category (here too, the UV stands for completing the run on the "Ultra-Violence" difficulty level).[39] This was an interesting subversion of the kill percentage statistic and a definite example of emergent play; rather than aiming for 100% completion, in this category players are aiming for 0%. As the FAQ states: "UV Pacifist: finishing the level as fast as possible, in Ultra Violence, with the following restrictions: not harming monsters directly (no shooting at, chainsawing, boxing monsters), not harming monsters indirectly (exploding barrels that hurt monsters, activating crushers that hurt monsters). Allowed is making monsters fight each other and unintentional telefrags."[40] This is an explicit definition of what it means to be a pacifist in *Doom*, as agreed upon by a community of speedrunners.

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[35] Its newest incarnation can be found here: https://www.doom.com.hr/index.php?page=compet-n_news.

[36] "Compet-n," *The Doom Wiki*, last modified May 19, 2020, https://doomwiki.org/wiki/Compet-n.

[37] The second highest difficulty level in Doom

[38] "Competition Doom rules (CNDOOM)," *COMPET-N*, accessed August 8, 2021, https://www.doom.com.hr/index.php?page=compet-n_rules.

[39] "Compet-n."

[40] Telefragging refers to the player teleporting into a space occupied by a monster. Because the player and monster cannot occupy the same space at the same time, the monster is killed, i.e. "telefragged." - "Competition Doom rules (CNDOOM)."

Doom is noteworthy because it is one of the first instances in which the word pacifist is

used and adopted by a community of gamers in the context of describing a way of playing a

video game. Over time, the idea of "pacifist running" a game became an even more distinct

category from speedrunning, and one can find news articles detailing pacifist runs for many

otherwise violent AAA games such as, *World of Warcraft*,[41] *Skyrim*,[42] *Fallout 4*,[43] and *Grand

Theft Auto Online*.[44] One directive of the UV pacifist speedruns that remains of particular

importance to pacifist running in general is the "No harming monsters directly" part; this same

directive comes up in a lot of the self described restrictions for people pacifist running other

games. Using the word pacifist ultimately becomes indicative of a specific playstyle, and while

the exact conditions vary, based on the player and on the game, seeking to minimize the killing

of enemies remains a staple of this sort of run.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming

I can approach *Doom*'s mechanics by looking at its controls, which are intentionally very

simple (see figure 1.3). Ignoring the meta-mechanics such as saving, quitting, changing the

sound volume, etc. for now, the player driven mechanics of *Doom* are largely:

- Open/Close map (and various sub mechanics associated with the map screen)

- Choose a weapon (numbers 1-7)

- Move in one of four directions (forward, backward, left, or right)

- Modify the movement to running (i.e., move faster)

- Turn left or right

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[41] Poisso, "15 Minutes of Fame."
[42] Dougherty, "Videogamers Embark."
[43] Hernandez, "Guy Beats Fallout 4."
[44] Hernandez, "One Player's Quest."

- Use the currently equipped weapon

- Activate buttons/doors

Figure 1.3: A screenshot of Doom's in game help screen that details the controls. By looking at what actions have been assigned to buttons, one can determine a lot about what mechanics have been prioritized.

Attacking

     Doom does not involve many compound mechanics, and only has a few context-dependent mechanics. (For example: moving over a health/armor/ammo pickup in order to increase the relevant number is a context-dependent mechanic.) Attacking can thus be said to be one of the core mechanics of *Doom* as there is no point in the game where the player's avatar, the space marine, is not holding some kind of weapon (even if it's just the player character's fists) and during which pressing ctrl or the left mouse button (LMB) does not attack with that weapon.

     Pushing the attack button causes the player to attack the area directly in front of them. There are a couple variants of how the attack is expressed, but essentially, if there is an enemy in

the space that can be affected by the weapon the player character is currently holding, that enemy's HP or protective armour will be decreased by an amount determined by the weapon used. If an enemy's HP is reduced to zero or lower, that enemy is "killed": the sprite is replaced with a visual "corpse" version that can no longer be interacted with, and the enemy ceases to execute any of its own mechanics, such as moving or attacking the player. This, in turn, causes the percentage of total kills number, displayed at the end of the level, to increase. If the player "kills" every enemy in a level, with repeated applications of the attack mechanic, they will achieve a score of 100% kills. Although many early *Doom* players likely played without using the mouse, using the mouse as an input device for first person shooters has since become a personal computing standard. It is therefore important to note that, for those players using a mouse, the attack mechanic is one of the easiest mechanics to employ in this game by virtue of being bound to the left mouse button (LMB). For any computer user, this is arguably the most important input button at their disposal; even a computer user who hasn't played any video games will see "left-clicking" as the primary means by which to affect change in whatever activity they are doing. This makes any mechanic that is assigned to this button significant by association, and this trend of binding some kind of attack mechanic to the left mouse button will continue for many of the later games discussed in this chapter as well.

"Attacking enemies until they are dead" can be said to be the core gameplay loop of *Doom*. As a consequence, it is perhaps the most fun and detailed. Enemies react in pain to being shot and have gruesomely detailed death animations to be marveled at. Enemies who are killed stop being hazards to the player; there is a sense of satisfaction at simplifying a problem by eliminating troublesome variables as, once dead, enemies no longer interfere with the player's goal of completing a level. And finally, there is a sense of accomplishment at seeing a higher

percentage on the end level statistics screen. In fact, any player with a completionist mindset will feel compelled to replay levels until they hit 100% in all categories, including kills. Including this statistic on the end level statistics screen therefore not only encourages killing the enemies, but in fact encourages seeking out and killing all of the enemies in a level, and not just the ones directly conflicting with one's goal of completing the level. However, the inclusion of the kill percentage statistic can also have the opposite effect, leading to emergent gameplay where getting the lowest possible percentage, while still completing the level, is the goal.

Sparing

As will be a theme with a number of the games discussed later in this chapter, sparing is not so much a concrete mechanic in and of itself as it is an avoidance of using the attack mechanic detailed previously. Sparing, as a mechanic (or at least as the purposeful avoidance of another mechanic) is not one explicitly supported by the game and arose out of the speedrunning community. As quoted earlier, the rules defined for a UV pacifist run explicitly forbid using the attack option in any way that would directly or indirectly harm other enemies. Therefore, in the pacifist context of *Doom*, sparing means not using the attack mechanic in a way that would harm enemies.

It should be noted that sparing here arises more out of avoiding the dynamic of two other mechanics interacting: the attack mechanic and the damaging/killing enemies mechanic. Using the attack mechanic is still allowed so long as one does not damage an enemy, either directly or indirectly, with said attack (for example: shooting a wall is allowed). The result of avoiding this interaction is that enemies will typically not be put into their killed state via the player's actions alone; as noted in the rules quoted from the Compet-n website, getting another enemy to kill an enemy is still allowed. This is an interesting example showcasing how video game pacifism is

often strictly defined: killing an enemy yourself either directly or indirectly is not allowed, however orchestrating a situation in which another enemy does the killing is okay. Here we can see an example of "technical pacifism" where avoiding the death of enemies is not so much the point as is avoiding having the player doing the killing. In addition to this, because enemies are not being put into their killed state, they are free to continue exercising the mechanics available to them, which largely boil down to pursuing and attacking the player. This makes the challenge of accomplishing the mechanic of ending the level[45] much more difficult.

Because of this increase in challenge, compounded by the fact that the speedrunner must play on the Ultra-Violence difficulty level, this sort of "pacifism" is not something that many new *Doom* players can achieve. It is generally expected that this sort of playstyle comes from plenty of practice and experience with the game. Much like speedrunning itself, this sort of challenge is not inherent to *Doom* itself and is an emergent gameplay challenge added by the community. This particular example is a clear case of video game pacifism not really being about taking a moral stance so much as it is about raising a challenge for those wanting to be challenged further than what the base game offers. As a result, the aesthetics associated with sparing enemies in *Doom*, in the context of UV Pacifist speedruns, result primarily in feelings of competition and accomplishment. As the community rhetoric might go: any dedicated player of *Doom* might eventually work their way up to being able to complete a level on the Ultra-Violence difficulty level, having killed 100% of the enemies. However, only a truly seasoned professional can do the same thing while having killed 0% of the enemies, all in the shortest amount of time possible.

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[45] Generally, via pushing a big button in the level; a simple task in and of itself.

Saving and loading your game is a key mechanic in *Doom*, especially on higher difficulties such as Ultra-Violence, when death can come quickly. In *Doom*, saving and loading works as one expects, rolling back the game to the state it was in when the player last saved. The saving and loading mechanics as implemented are not at all unique to Doom, and many other games use them the same way. Players can save and load a game at any point, and also have access to more specific quicksave and quickload mechanics, which enable saving and loading with just the touch of one button each (in this case F6 and F9 respectively, as seen in Figure 1.3).

Although saving and loading as mechanics are less important during the actual performance of a UV Pacifist speedrun, they are certainly key ingredients while practicing a UV Pacifist speedrun. In addition, although the save/load mechanics are not used during an actual speedrun, the ability to restart the level being attempted (and thus restart the speedrun attempt itself) is certainly used during any failed attempts. A UV Pacifist run can only be said to be such if the level is finished without killing any enemies; merely getting as close as possible to that goal is not enough. Any time an enemy is inadvertently killed, the player can reload a saved game and try again. Essentially, the save and load mechanics are key to getting the required experience in a level and then to perfecting the run as much as possible. Were players only able to attempt a UV Pacifist run once, it is unlikely the category would exist at all.

Developer-Driven Pacifism

Ultima IV

In retrospect, *Ultima IV* was an almost impossible creation. In the words of CRPGAddict, a prolific blogger of early computer role-playing games:

> There has never been, and I suspect never will be again, a CRPG--or, indeed, any game-- like *Ultima IV*. Today's gamers wouldn't have the patience for it. I'm surprised they ever did. Perhaps it was only because CRPGs were so young, computers less ubiquitous, and computer gamers more cerebral (in the 1980s, mostly nerds had computers), that *Ultima IV* ever found an audience in the first place. Imagine, today, a game without a "big boss," but rather a more complicated quest to become a moral exemplar; a game in which progress is made less through combat than through meditating at shrines; a game whose character creation process invites you to explore your own morality; a game in which, to win, you must give gold to the poor, sacrifice hit points at a blood bank, always tell the truth, and let fleeing monsters escape;[46]

Though not a professional video game researcher or journalist, CRPGAddict's extensive knowledge of the computer role-playing games (cRPGs) of the '80s and '90s does highlight just how noteworthy and unusual *Ultima IV* was in the cRPG space. The *Ultima* series was significant to the formation of the cRPG genre[47] so it is a good place to start. The first three games were a standard fare of: "Player is summoned to a fictional world where evil reigns, to defeat the evil and restore peace." However, the fourth game deviated from this standard design, making it a point of interest for this thesis. Released in November of 1985, *Ultima IV* is a Role-Playing Game using both first person (for dungeons) and top-down perspectives.[48]

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[46] CRPG Addict, "Ultima IV and Virtue," *The CRPG Addict*, April 19, 2010, http://crpgaddict.blogspot.com/2010/04/ultima-iv-and-virtue.html.

[47] Matt Barton, "The History of Computer Role-Playing Games Part 2: The Golden Age (1985-1993)," *Gamasutra*, February 23, 2007, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130124/the_history_of_computer_.php.

[48] "Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar," *MobyGames*, last modified June 15, 2019, https://www.mobygames.com/game/ultima-iv-quest-of-the-avatar.

My interest in *Ultima IV* springs from it being one of the first big CRPGs to encourage fleeing certain combat scenarios, without killing the enemy combatants, in order to win the game. This paradigm of "sometimes you must retreat from fights even if you didn't start them" was fairly unique in the genre, and is still somewhat unique to this day. It largely sprang from series creator, Richard Garriot, experimenting with wanting to make a game about being a hero who aspires to be a good person more so than one who aspires to defeat evil. In a recent interview (last updated in 2019), Richard Garriott discussed how getting feedback from the community about how players were playing the first three games shaped his approach to making the fourth.[49] Some players would try to find optimal ways to advance through the games, without following any sort of moral code. So, for example, a player might steal items from a shop rather than purchase them. When the only goal to finish the game was to kill the bad guy at the end, these players did not feel an intrinsic need to be the heroic character that Garriott was hoping they would be. So, *Ultima IV* was designed such that the player's ultimate goal was to be a good person, by following eight Virtues.

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

The game does not feature an in-game tutorial; instead, the opening scene of the game encourages players to read the manual. Within the manual there are a few hints for what one should do to start: "Perhaps the seeker of wisdom and enlightenment should begin by visiting Lord British, for his knowledge of the ways of the land is great."[50] Upon visiting Lord British

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[49] Jeremy Parish, "How Ultima 4 and Wasteland Ushered in a New Era of Maturity for RPGs," *USgamer*, January 17, 2019, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/history-of-rpgs-part-6-ultima-4-wasteland-mature-rpgs.

[50] "Ultima IV Game Manual," *Internet Archive*, uploaded April 1, 2016, https://archive.org/details/manual_Ultima_IV/, 34

(see figure 1.4) one learns that his citizens "lack purpose and direction in their lives"[51] and that a "champion of virtue is called for."[52] Asking him about Virtue, one is told that "The Eight Virtues of the Avatar are: Honesty, Compassion, Valor, Justice, Sacrifice, Honor, Spirituality, and Humility."[53] And that "To be an Avatar is to be the embodiment of the Eight Virtues."[54] Asking about each individual Virtue leads Lord British to tell the player which town best exemplifies each Virtue. (For example, the town of Minoc exemplifies the Virtue of Sacrifice.)

Figure 1.4: A screenshot of what an Ultima IV player might typically see. Here the player is in a conversation with Lord British.

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[51] Origin Systems, *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, GOG.com version, November 1985, Microsoft Windows.
[52] Origin Systems, *Ultima IV*.
[53] Origin Systems, *Ultima IV*.
[54] Origin Systems, *Ultima IV*.

The other direction the manual gives is to talk to the Seer Hawkwind in Lord British's castle. "Seek the advice of the Seer as to thy progress upon the Path. He can look into thy heart's heart and read thy progress or failure. Heed his advice, for feet that have strayed may be brought back upon the Path."[55] Talking to the seer, and asking about the various Virtues, has him tell the player how well they are doing toward that particular Virtue (see figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5: Talking to the Seer Hawkwind in Ultima IV to get feedback about how the player is progressing in their Virtues. Here, Hawkwind is telling me that I have not done much to increase my Honesty.

While the manual and the game itself do not outright encourage pacifism, the manual does encourage you to only kill "evil" creatures. In a section labeled, "Ethics of war" on page 32,

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[55] "Ultima IV Game Manual," 14

the player is told, "The Code of Chivalry states that before engaging in combat with a foe, the warrior should ask, 'Is this foe truly evil?' If it is not, then thou must not kill it, but stand thy ground and force it to retreat." Although the question "Is this foe truly evil" seems like a morally complex one, the manual also includes a bestiary that helpfully includes the word "evil" in some form or another in the description of every evil monster.[56] It's a very simplistic and black and white approach to any kind of morality, and doesn't entirely make sense using real world or roleplaying game precedent (for example, squid are evil for some reason, while giant rats and spiders are not), but it is at least internally consistent.

Ultima IV does not have a "first mission" per se either, being somewhat of an open world for the player to explore, but it could be argued that the player's first real goal is to figure out what they need to do in order to best represent the eight Virtues. This is accomplished largely by talking to the Non-Player-Characters (NPCs) in the game, especially ones that live in whatever city best exemplifies a particular Virtue. Doing so also reveals to the player that there are shrines dedicated to each Virtue, and that meditating at said shrines will also provide guidance. For example, meditating at the shrine of Compassion will reveal: "Kill not the non-evil beasts of the land, and do not attack the fair people!"[57] Similarly, the shrine of Justice gives this insight: "Kill not a non-evil beast for they deserve not death, even if in hunger they attack thee!"[58] The player's ultimate goal then is to play a game where they practice the eight Virtues as per how the game dictates they should.

Interestingly, although the manual and the game encourage a certain way of playing, as do many walkthroughs, digging into the source code reveals systems that do not wholly align

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[56] "Ultima IV Game Manual," 23
[57] Origin Systems, *Ultima IV*.
[58] Origin Systems, *Ultima IV*.

with that mentality, especially for players who are looking to minimize their time spent maximizing their Virtue scores. In a public blog post,[59] one player decided to break down what exactly causes Virtue scores to go up or down, and what is the most efficient method to raising all of them to their maximum values. It turns out that only initiating combat with an NPC who is not trying to initiate combat with you will negatively punish your Virtue scores: the actual killing of enemies does not result in lost Justice, Compassion, or Honor points. In fact, this player argues, killing everything will yield more loot and experience, which the player can then use to effectively buy Virtue points by paying fair prices at shops. Still, the fact remains that, while killing non-evil enemies is not punished, running away from them is still rewarded with a few points, even if this is not the "optimal" way to play. There was still an attempt made to encourage a more "heroic" style of play, even if the procedural rhetoric of the game falls short of really encouraging it wholeheartedly.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming:

Attacking

In *Ultima IV*, although there is only one "Attack" mechanic (executed by pushing the 'A' on the keyboard) what it does is context dependent. When not in combat, pressing the 'A' key, followed by inputting a direction, is used to select an entity to initiate combat with. Once in a combat context, however, pressing the 'A' key (again followed by a direction) is used to direct the player character to attack a space with their currently equipped weapon. Since both contexts are important in terms of learning when to use them and when not to, both will be examined.

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[59] Michael Martin, "Hacking the Virtues: Becoming the Avatar in Five Easy Steps," *Bumbershoot Software*, September 29, 2017, https://bumbershootsoft.wordpress.com/2017/09/29/hacking-the-virtues-becoming-the-avatar-in-five-easy-steps/.

Like with *Doom*, attacking is one of your primary actions, usable on basically any other animated entity in the game, although unlike *Doom* players have access to a lot more mechanics with which to interact with the world including a "Talk" option. Also as with *Doom*, there are not a lot of different contexts in the game, and most mechanics are always available to the player, with the exception of the combat context. From a controls standpoint, the attack mechanic is given no more priority than any of the other mechanics as they all have associated keyboard keys.

While in the usual mode of play, the Attack mechanic can be used on any other character or creature in the game in order to enter into combat with that entity. Interestingly, this mechanic never needs to be used due to the fact that using it to instigate combat with non-evil creatures will negatively affect one's Compassion, Justice, and Honor,[60] and most evil creatures will be happy to instigate combat with you first. Plus, using this mechanic yourself does nothing to improve any of the eight Virtues.[61] When in a combat context, however, the attack mechanic functions very similarly to how it did in *Doom*. If there is an entity in the space that is affected by a player's currently equipped weapon, then that entity may[62] be hit and have their HP decreased accordingly. Like in *Doom*, if an entity's HP is decreased to zero or lower, that entity is considered "killed" and ceases to be an active participant in the combat. Killing an opponent will have various effects depending on whether the opponent is flagged as "evil" or not. Killing an opponent that is not evil will do nothing, whereas killing an evil opponent has a chance to boost one's Valor.[63] There is an additional mechanic that *Doom* did not have, however, whereby,

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[60] Martin, "Hacking the Virtues."
[61] Martin, "Hacking the Virtues."
[62] In *Ultima IV*, unlike in *Doom*, there is a chance of missing an enemy, which isn't entirely determined by the player's ability to aim.
[63] Martin, "Hacking the Virtues."

when reduced to a certain amount of HP, many enemies will attempt to flee, providing an opportunity to show mercy.

Outside of combat, the attack mechanic is always available so curious and/or particularly bloodthirsty players might be inclined to try using it on every single NPC in the game. However, since the player is heavily penalized for using this mechanic when not fighting something, and since there are plenty of NPCs who will be happy to attack you first, players are encouraged to shy away from using it.

Once in combat however, attacking (and killing) your enemies yields valuable loot and experience, so players at that point are incentivized to use it. This is also the way combat in the genre typically works (hit things until they are dead so you can take their stuff) so any genre savvy players will also be inclined to use the attack mechanic once in combat. Although this behavior is not actively penalized, it is not always rewarded via the Virtue system either, as outlined below.

Sparing

Also like with *Doom*, there is not so much an explicit "spare" mechanic as there is an avoidance of using the attack option. However, unlike with *Doom*, the game actively encourages players to avoid using the attack mechanic in certain situations, as part of fulfilling its victory conditions. The act of "sparing" an opponent really only becomes meaningful once the combat state has been entered. At this point players can avoid killing their opponents by either reducing their HP until they decide to flee, or by fleeing themselves. Fleeing from a non-evil opponent will always provide a boost to Compassion and Justice, while getting the opponents to flee provides a slightly smaller boost to Compassion and Justice. However, since getting the opponents to flee requires damaging them just enough without killing them, it is a lot trickier to

pull off than just fleeing yourself. Although many walkthroughs imply that fleeing from combat will yield a Sacrifice penalty — the manual itself also talks of the importance of standing your ground and forcing your opponent to relent — the loss of points in Sacrifice only occurs if the player flees while at full health.[64] The only other Virtue point case where fleeing is not encouraged is if the player flees from a creature that is flagged as evil. In this case, the player suffers a penalty to their Valor virtue.[65] Although there is no explicit "spare" mechanic, the game and the game's manual do encourage players to not use the attack mechanic in certain situations. And because of the way the game's Virtue system works, players are encouraged to think more critically about when to employ violence and when not to.

The problem in the execution of all this is that the game does not provide players with any sort of explicit reward, either money or experience, in the cases where they flee. This can lead to a sense of frustration in players, again especially those who are genre savvy and used to the dynamic of: kill things → get loot and experience to better enable killing things. Taken at only the level of what the narrative of the game and manual are telling you, the Virtue system is asking players to play against their self-interests as roleplaying gamers. Of course, for those players who get deep into reverse engineering the game's systems, as in the case of our blog post friend mentioned earlier, they will find ways to kill all hostile creatures, evil or not, and still manage to succeed at the game. For those who don't dig as deeply though, the game can instill an interesting feeling of dissonance where they feel they must give up the explicit rewards of experience and treasure, in order to gain the implicit rewards of "being a good person" who is worthy of the title of avatar. This dissonance, and ultimate goal of being a good person, subverts

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[64] Martin, "Hacking the Virtues."
[65] Martin, "Hacking the Virtues."

the expected notions of how combat works in these types of games, and it is an experience that has stuck with many of the people who played it.[66]

SaveScumming

Interestingly, though perhaps more due to technical limitations at the time than anything else, *Ultima IV* did not have a robust saving/loading system. Saving could only be accomplished when quitting the game (and only in certain locations, like on the overworld map) and loading could only be accomplished when booting up the game. In theory a player could roll back to a previous save by forcing the game to close without saving (for example, by turning off their computer), although this was the extent of save/loading manipulation for most players. However, though the game expects the player not to kill certain enemies in certain situations, because the Virtues are internally represented as numerical scores, the player could always "atone" for past mistakes by doing more of the actions that increase the Virtue scores. In some sense this more closely mirrors how a pacifist might work in the real world, rather than one that has regular access to save/loading and can rollback any transgressions.

The key point of interest in *Ultima IV*, as far as this thesis is concerned, is in those instances where the player ends up in combat with a non-evil foe. Here, although RPGs have established that combat is a specific video game context a player can find themselves in, with specific rules of engagement and victory conditions (i.e. one does not try to talk to their opponents during a fight, and one wins the fight by killing every single opponent), *Ultima IV* teaches the player that, if they want to pursue the victory conditions of the game as a whole, they must end these combat contexts without killing their opponents. This is not something that was

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[66] CRPG Addict, "Ultima IV and Virtue."

common in cRPGs at the time, and it is not something that is common to cRPGs today either. However, it is something that will show up again in *Undertale*.

Thief: The Dark Project

Thief: The Dark Project (1998) is notable for how it builds off of what *Doom* started in the First-Person Shooter genre but employs its procedural rhetoric toward driving players towards a nonlethal playstyle. Here, developers support and encourage a nonlethal playstyle in a genre characterized by its violence (the word shooter being right in the name). And, much like the pacifist *Doom* speedrunners, they frame doing so as a challenge rather than a moral thing. Even within the narrative itself the motivation is framed as a challenge and point of pride, rather than one of morals, with the main character eschewing violence as, "the mark of the amateur."[67]

Although *Thief: The Dark Project* borrows heavily from the first-person shooter genre, it is generally categorized as a stealth game.[68] The way the game is designed makes it clear that the developers were tapping into the popularity of the first-person shooter genre, spawned in large part by *Doom*, but building off of it in order to do something very different. In this case, though they kept the first-person perspective and the shooting, they discarded the hyperviolence, conflict-centric and loud gameplay, etc. and went for their opposites: patience, avoidance of conflict, and long quiet moments of observing and listening. This is reflected in the HUD (seen in figure 1.6), which prominently displays a visibility meter front and center rather than an assortment of weapons related information. This sort of subversion can perhaps be likened to the

[67] Looking Glass Studios, *Thief: The Dark Project*, in *Thief Gold*, Steam version, Eidos Interactive, December 1, 1998, Microsoft Windows with TFix patch.

[68] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Thief: The Dark Project," last modified August 3, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thief:_The_Dark_Project.

Doom pacifist runners on the community side of things; those that took a violent video game (such as *Doom*) and played against the expectation that they would indulge in said violence themselves. However, in the case of *Thief*, it was the developers themselves designing their game to support and encourage this kind of play. It was wholly unorthodox at the time.

Figure 1.6: This is the very first thing a player sees on starting the first level of Thief: The Dark Project. Notice how the heads-up display is a lot more minimal than Doom's was, with a health meter on the left and a visibility meter (for stealth purposes) in the middle, and that there is no visible weapon being held. This immediately suggests a less violent approach will be called for.

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

This is the first game on this list which includes an in-game tutorial. However, the tutorial does not overtly encourage the player to play in a pacifistic or violent manner; it largely just walks you through the various explicit mechanics in the game, which cover such things as traversal mechanics, stealth mechanics, and combat mechanics. Your in-narrative "trainer" does not encourage or discourage you from using a violent approach towards your enemies, he merely

explains to you all of the mechanics at your disposal, and tests your ability to use them. The only thing in the tutorial that might hint toward a certain way of playing is that the stealth mechanics are covered first, while the archery and sword fighting are covered last. Once one leaves the tutorial however, the player character (PC) utters this line: "The Keepers were training me to be one of them. But I found other uses for those skills."[69] This line serves a narrative purpose, but it also serves to notify the player that these first-person mechanics will not be used in a way that they are likely familiar with.

This is also the first game on this list where video game pacifism (though it is not yet called that in this game) enters the picture in a developer intended way. And the way it does it is very much tied into the community notions of "pacifism as challenge" rather than "pacifism as a moral standpoint." Essentially, at higher difficulty levels the game will cause the player to fail the mission if they kill any human beings. This "pacifism as challenge" notion is even reinforced narratively with the PC, Garrett, noting to himself that, "Violence is the mark of the amateur."[70] You're encouraged to avoid murder not because it is a morally questionable act to engage in, but because it is a sign that you're "not good enough" at the game.[71]

This "pacifism as added challenge" thinking was very much an intentional design of the game as well, with the Lead Programmer, Tom Leonard, admitting that they got the idea of higher difficulties adding new objectives from the Nintendo64 game *Goldeneye*.[72] When thinking about how they might apply a similar system to their game, the team decided that

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[69] Looking Glass Studios, *Thief: The Dark Project*.

[70] Looking Glass Studios, *Thief: The Dark Project*.

[71] Though, interestingly, this only applies to the "human" enemies in the game. One can still kill giant spiders, other animals, and undead zombies, without any sort of repercussions. The developers, through the procedural rhetoric of the game's systems, are making an argument with regard to what counts as targets that are off limits for murdering.

[72] Tom Leonard, "Postmortem: Thief: The Dark Project," *Gamasutra*, July 9, 1999, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131762/postmortem_thief_the_dark_project.php.

increasing the difficulty level should impose stricter limits on the playstyle of the player (see

figure 1.7 for an example). The expected playstyle is described thusly: "The expert *Thief* player

moves slowly, avoids conflict, is penalized for killing people, and is entirely mortal."[73]
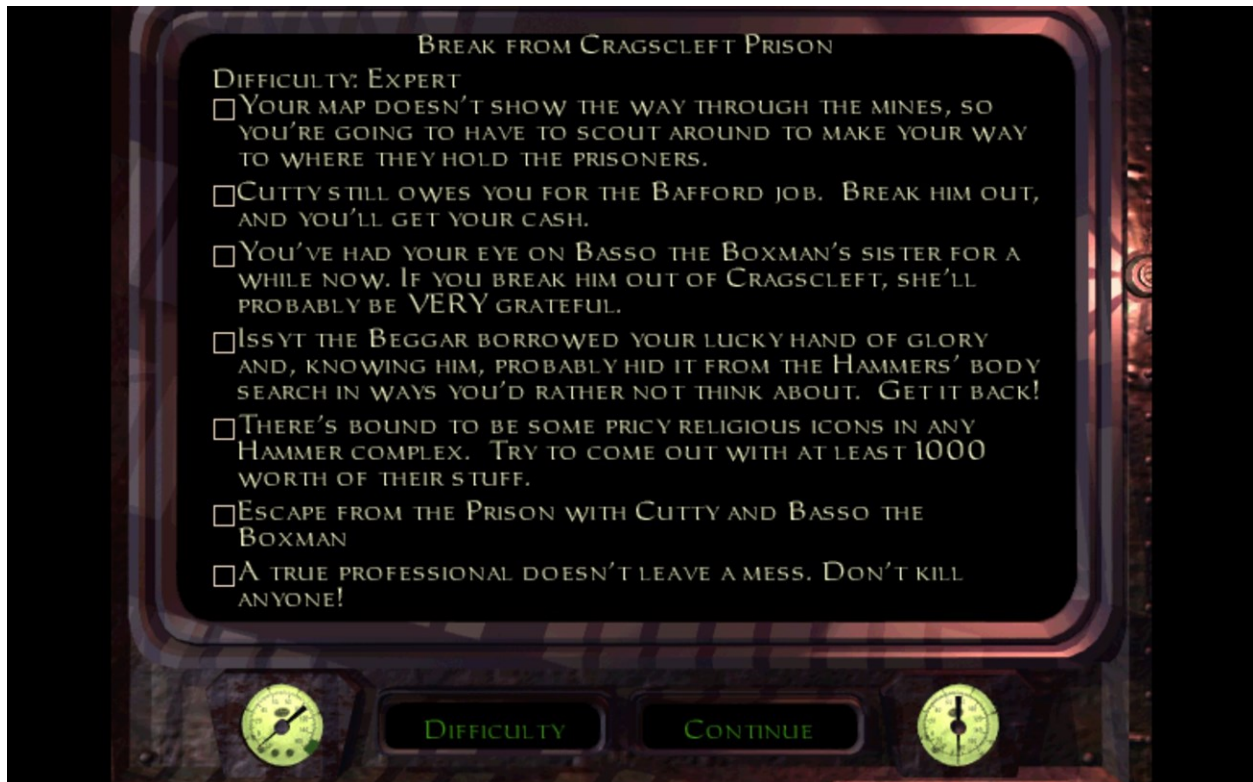
***Figure 1.7: This is the Thief objectives screen seen prior to starting the second mission on the hardest
difficulty. Note the last objective: "A TRUE PROFESSIONAL DOESN'T LEAVE A MESS. DON'T
KILL ANYONE!"***

Once players start the first mission, one of the very first things they run into is a lengthy

(over a minute and a half) conversation going on between some guards. This conversation has

been somewhat burned into the minds of many a *Thief* fan, and it is not uncommon to see *Thief*

players wielding the question, "you goin' to the bear pits tomorrow?" as a meme. This

conversation can be skipped entirely by just running past the guards, or interrupted by engaging

the guards in combat. However, its inclusion cements early some of the main things that will

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[73] Leonard, "Postmortem: Thief."

help you advance in this game: waiting, watching, and listening. This sort of dialogue between

enemy NPCs is something that often appears in stealth games, or games that incorporate some

kind of stealth mechanic (see games such as *Splinter Cell*, *No One Lives Forever*, *Far Cry*, etc.).

The lesson being taught is that, by waiting and observing the situation, one will learn the best

way forward. Unlike with *Doom*, "charging in guns blazing" is punished — the player dies very

quickly if caught and attacked — and patience is rewarded instead.

Additionally, these bits of overheard dialogue from guards, while serving as both audio

cues to tell you where the guards are and giving the player the meta knowledge that this is a

game to be played slowly, also serve to humanize the guards. In the first mission one finds a

lowly guard on duty in a basement, and he constantly mutters to himself about the injustice of

those above him getting all sorts of luxuries while he hasn't gotten anything to eat in days.

Hearing this might make the player sympathize with the guard a little. He's not an obstacle with

statistics attached to it, waiting for the player to shoot him in the neck, he's got a personality

(even if it is still somewhat limited in scope). At least for me, I found this sort of characterization

made me less likely to charge in and kill him.

Despite eschewing violence as, "The mark of the amateur," violence in this case is

explicitly coded as "killing someone." The player is still equipped with a blackjack that they can

use to knockout guards with reckless abandon, and both Garrett and the game have little problem

with this form of violence. This sort of "violence is okay for a pacifist playthrough so long as it's

not killing someone" is something we will see again in future games on this list such as *Deus Ex*

and *Dishonored*. Another point worth noting is that, while murder is given a mechanical

restriction, and the abhorrence of it is narratively explained as an element of Garrett's character,

it does not influence the direction of the story at all. Someone playing on the easiest difficulty,

and murdering every single guard, will get the same story as someone playing on the hardest

difficulty and avoiding every guard. Although the game supported a pacifist style of play

mechanically, it does not do anything with it narratively. This sort of narrative reactivity, with

the story or characters somehow reacting to the player's level of lethality, is something that will

be seen in later games discussed in this chapter.

As with the *Doom* community of players, the *Thief* players also came up with their own

challenges to lay on top of the game's already existing challenges. One notable player in the

community came up with "The Lytha way" of playing, which extended the "do not kill human

beings" challenge to a broader "do no harm to anything" one. The Lytha way also stipulates that

one must get all the loot in a particular mission, and that one must play on the hardest difficulty

level.[74] Though, as Lytha themself proclaims, the ultimate goal of orchestrating this challenge is

to enable players to find new ways to have fun. When searching for pacifist playthroughs on

YouTube, I found a player who also adopted a "I cannot kill spiders either" restriction, so players

themselves still extend the concepts based on their own beliefs of what constitutes pacifism,

despite what the game's rhetoric may argue.[75]

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming

Attacking

Attacking is again a primary action, as in *Doom*, though mildly context dependent. The

player has a very simple arsenal, with each weapon fulfilling a wholly unique role. The sword

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[74] Lytha, "The 'Lytha way'," *Lytha.com*, accessed August 8, 2021,
http://www.lytha.com/thief/lythaway/index.phtml.

[75] Saleck the Dragon, "Thief Gold Pacifist - Level 1: Lord Bafford's Manor," October 25, 2011, YouTube video,
43:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9EWLP1Dfp8.

kills things. If used from stealth it does five times the usual amount of damage. The blackjack also kills things just much slower than the sword. If used from stealth, however, it will knock out enemies instead of killing them (which I will cover in more detail under the sparing mechanic). The bow shooting broadhead arrows also kill things. Same as the sword, broadhead arrows do five times their usual amount of damage if shot from stealth. This is likely where players will usually want to be shooting from all the time, as being hit in the face with a sword makes aiming a bow a slightly more stressful experience, and the sword proves more effective at that point.

However, attacking human enemies at any point is heavily discouraged by the game. At higher difficulties this is a very blunt form of discouragement, delivered in the form of a gameover should any human enemies die by your hand. And attacking without delivering a lethal blow serves little purpose: at best you now have a guard chasing you around trying to kill you; at worst you now have several guards chasing you around trying to kill you. Because the player cannot take a lot of damage before dying themselves, stealth is key to enabling the player character to survive for longer. Attacking the human enemies at any point on the hardest difficulty breaks stealth at best, and results in a gameover at worst.

The feeling then, and this is reinforced by the game's language, is that only players playing at a lower challenge level (read: only players who are, as Garrett puts it: "amateurs") will use the attack mechanics against enemies. A player might go through and attack all the guards on a lower difficulty level, but if they want to truly feel accomplished then they will go to the highest difficulty and not be caught at all. Attacking enemies therefore feels like a mechanic that is more a crutch to use only until one gets better at the game.

There are two more types of arrows that can be said to be attacks, but aren't directed toward enemies: water arrows and moss arrows. Both types of arrows serve to enhance the

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player's ability to remain stealthy, rather than running counter to it. Water arrows can be used to attack exposed torches and extinguish them. Because of how the stealth mechanics work, being in the dark makes the player harder to see, and thus stealthier. Moss arrows do not appear in the first level, but they serve to add a carpet of moss to surfaces that they are shot at. This too enables the player to be stealthier by making their footsteps quieter. Both types of arrows are limited however — for example the player starts with only eight water arrows in the first mission — and so players are encouraged to save them for when they're absolutely necessary, as opposed to extinguishing every light source they can in the level.

These last two types of arrows are a bit of a subversion of the attack mechanic in that they serve a purpose that runs counter to killing enemies. Their inclusion lends to a feeling that skilled players are subverting the attack mechanic. Their limited supply means that players must think strategically about when to use them. Suddenly using the attack mechanic is not about killing enemies but about enabling the player to get around them.

Sparing

The addition of the stealth mechanics make sparing an enemy become slightly more complex than merely avoiding the usage of the attack mechanics. Sparing becomes an exercise in either knocking out enemies with the blackjack, which can only be accomplished while in stealth, or an exercise in avoiding enemies entirely, which is also most easily accomplished while in stealth. If an enemy becomes alerted to your presence, a player has no means to dispatch them nonlethally so sparing them becomes an exercise in running away. Since the higher difficulties making sparing your enemies a requirement, this likewise makes staying in stealth incredibly important.

This serves to make the experience of breaking stealth incredibly stressful. Stealth can be easily broken with a simple mistake, at which point the game becomes much more difficult. When being pursued, players can't really fight back without killing someone, and, if they run away in the wrong direction, they could very well alert more guards. Recovering from breaking stealth is possible but requires knowing where it is safe to run to. Success thus hinges on remaining in stealth, giving the player an incredible sense of tension while sneaking around.

One interesting mechanic that *Thief* has is the ability to pickpocket enemies. Later games, like those in the *Deus Ex* series, require the pacifist player to knock out enemies if they want to search them. In this way, *Thief* encourages an even more strict version of stealth than those games. It empowers a kind of stealth power fantasy, as seen in things like the previously mentioned community challenge: Lytha's Way. The idea of being skilled enough to move through a space, without ever interacting with the inhabitants of said space, is a powerful one for some players.

SaveScumming

Saving/loading becomes much more important, much like in *Doom*. Though unlike in *Doom*, here killing a human enemy is strictly punished by a gameover on the higher difficulties. The pacifist challenge becomes enforced by the game rather than by the player following the player defined rules of a speedrun category. Because of the dynamic between sparing an enemy and the stealth mechanic, covered above, save scumming also becomes a response to breaking stealth. Since the player can quicksave at any point in a level, it can become second nature to quicksave right before trying something risky, such as opening a door into a new room, or attempting to sneak past a guard that isn't moving away from a specific spot. If the player character dies and they get a gameover, they have a game that they can load. However, because

coming out of stealth makes things so much more difficult, merely breaking stealth might be enough to get the player to reload their saved game and try again. Although it is still possible to run away and hide, this takes time and could quickly result in a more permanent failure state anyway, so it is faster and easier to just reload the save.

Although not exactly a game mechanic, the player's knowledge of the game plays an important dynamic in all of this, and it is something that save scumming empowers. Every time the player walks into a guard they didn't know was there, every time the player tries a new trick and has it fail, they learn something new about the game. A quote from the Lytha Way page above illustrates this way of thinking as well: "If you ever tried but failed, this indicates nothing but that you might need more patience (observe the movement patterns of all these Guards, so that you know which areas are safe and which aren't), more lore about the mission (which places are safe places-to-flee-to in a mad chase), and also a tiny little bit of more practice (i.e. it took me also a while to figure out how to get the sceptre of Bafford without ever getting seen)."[76] Note the references to learning guard patterns and knowing what places are safe to escape to, as being important knowledge. Although it likely doesn't require the same time investment, it is somewhat similar to the *Doom* speedrunners practicing a speedrun. Doing a perfect pacifist run of a level on one's first attempt is not expected; it is more likely a player will practice (using save scumming) in order to get to that perfect pacifist run.

This leads to very different feelings in a player, depending on if they are just playing the level for the first time, or if they are a seasoned pro coming back to test their game knowledge. A new player attempting to remain stealthy will move very slowly. They will observe guard movements and memorize the patterns. They may very well decide to bump the difficulty down

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[76] Lytha, "The 'Lytha way'."

and kill everyone in the level in order to explore unmolested. They will learn which doors are locked and which guards have the key that they can pickpocket. Because the levels in *Thief* do not change between play sessions, all this knowledge can be applied toward future attempts of the level. A seasoned player will have learned all these things already and will have identified where to best employ their tools such as the limited-use water and moss arrows.

As a player, I did not work to recover from my non-fatal mistakes in a stealth game such as this, I merely erased the mistake by quickloading/restarting and tried not to make the same mistake again. In this way, save scumming has become an integral part of maintaining stealth and, subsequently, maintaining a pacifist style of play.

Deus Ex

Released in June of 2000, *Deus Ex* extended *Thief: The Dark Project*'s blending of first-person shooter and stealth gameplay, while also adding RPG elements.[77] Players fill the shoes of J.C. Denton, a superspy augmented with nanotechnology, who works for a United Nations task force called UNATCO. In terms of supporting pacifist play, where *Thief* encouraged non-lethality through its difficulty mechanic, *Deus Ex* encouraged it through its NPC dialogue. *Deus Ex* moves nonlethal play away from a mechanical challenge and more toward a way to expand upon the reactivity of its NPCs; rather than resulting in a strict pass/fail, here the game merely comments on and reacts to the level of lethality employed by its players.

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[77] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Deus Ex (video game)," last modified July 25, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_Ex_(video_game).

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

The tutorial section of *Deus Ex* hearkens back to *Thief*, with it being framed as a training exercise for your player character as well as for the player themselves, however it does encourage the player to use certain styles of play. While there is a "combat portion" of the training, which involves discharging various firearms, it is framed as shooting at paper targets on a shooting range. Another part has the player use explosives to destroy two robots. The final section of the tutorial however, the covert section, explicitly frames sneaking around as a means to "avoid a confrontation altogether." Interestingly, the tutorial includes no section on stealthy nonlethal takedowns, and so this is something the player must learn on their own.

Once you start the first level, your first interaction with a major NPC is with J.C.'s brother Paul, who immediately sets a tone that certainly had me questioning my approach toward the rest of the game during my first playthrough. After J.C. comments that he doesn't feel very well equipped for the mission, Paul reminds J.C. that "we're police" and encourages him to stick with nonlethal options (see figure 1.8).[78] However, given that he's been ordered to provide J.C. with an additional weapon, he further gives the player the choice of a sniper rifle, an explosive weapon, or a mini crossbow. Here too, Paul's commentary on what weapon the player picks reveals an opinion he has about the player's level of lethality. If you pick the sniper rifle, he chides: "This isn't a training exercise, JC. Your targets will be human beings. Keep that in mind."[79] However if you pick the mini crossbow, he positively reinforces the choice saying, "Good thinking. With these tranquilizer darts, you'll have another nonlethal way to take down an

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[78] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex: Game of the Year Edition*, Steam version, Square Enix, June 22, 2000, Microsoft Windows.
[79] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

enemy in addition to the prod.[80][81] It is clear that Paul, the very first NPC you have a

conversation with in the game, and arguably your first real guiding figure, has a preference for

you **not** killing your opposition.
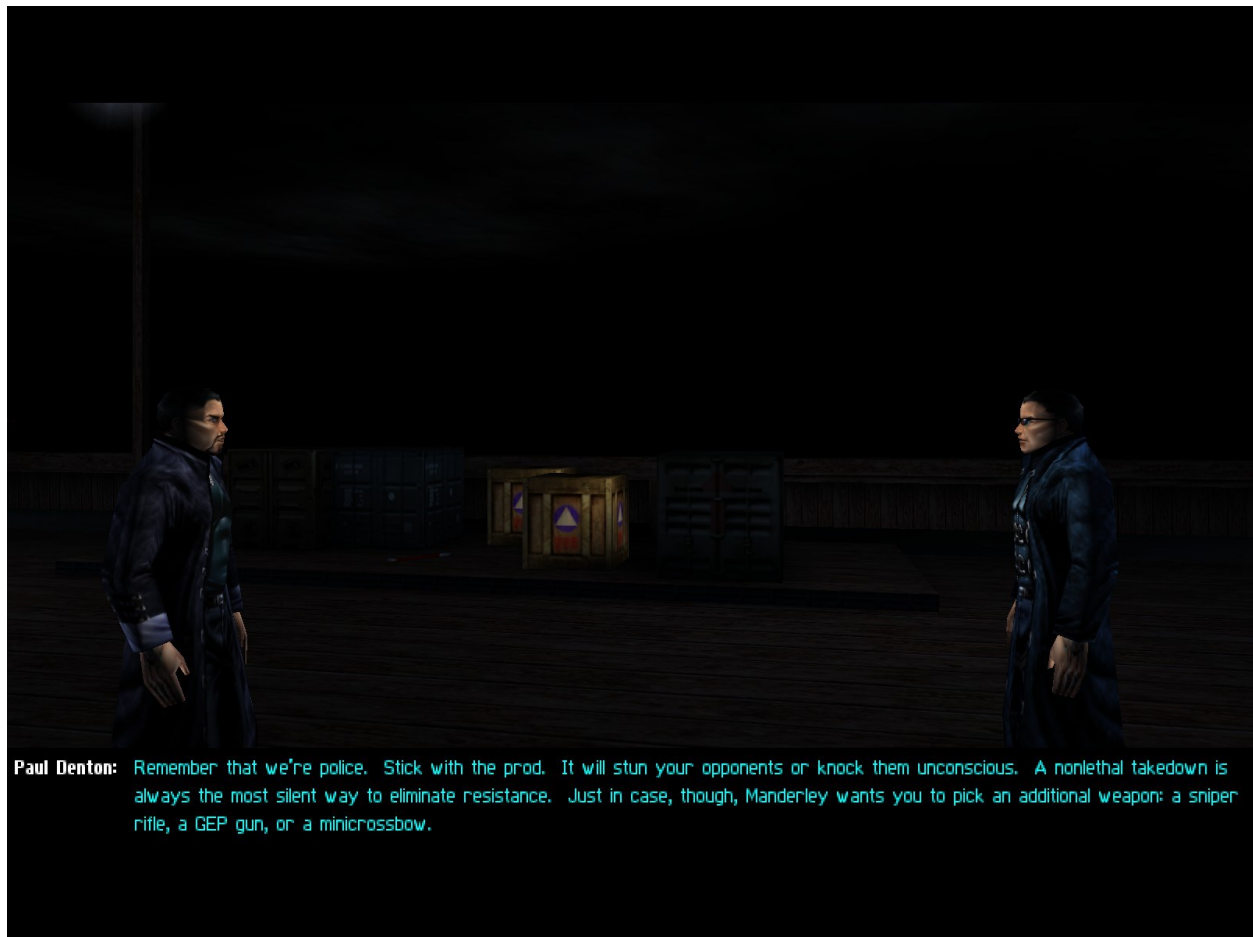
Figure 1.8: Your first major encounter with an NPC in Deus Ex is with Paul Denton: the brother of
J.C., your player character. Notice his endorsement for nonlethal takedowns.

There are, however, also plenty of characters you meet afterward who encourage you to

take a more lethal approach. Alex Jacobson, your radio contact, instructs: "Your orders are to

shoot on sight" and advises that, "if you have to get your hands dirty, remember that a headshot

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[80] "Prod" here refers to the riot prod: a handheld weapon that delivers nonlethal shocks to enemies to knock them
out.
[81] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

is a lethal takedown."[82] A minor NPC ally named Tech Sergeant Kaplan expresses admiration if you tell him you're going to "clean the place out" and expresses disdain if you tell him you're going to take "a minimum force approach."[83] In fact, most of the NPC UNATCO guards express admiration when you kill everything, and seem slightly less impressed when you don't. They themselves also spout lines such as "If I catch sight of the NSF commander at the top of the Statue, I'm gonna take a shot. Screw Manderley!"[84]

Upon completing the first mission, your brother has three different appraisals, which vary based on your level of lethality. If you kill the enemy commander, whom even your direct superior (Manderley) ordered you not to kill, he chastises: "You were a little out of line up there."[85] If you kill most of the terrorists, but not their leader he only makes a seemingly mildly disapproving comment about how you need to pace yourself: "You killed a lot of people tonight."[86] If, however, you kill no one during the mission (or very few people) he is unabashed in his praise: "Just keep a level head. You're doing well so far."[87]

Although it might seem that the game encourages both violence or nonviolence through the NPC dialogue, eventually UNATCO turns against J.C., and the player is forced to side with Paul. This implies that Paul is one of the "good guys" while all the soldiers espousing violence are shown to be the "bad guys." This disruption that sees you turning against people you were previously allied with (and allying with people you were previously fighting against) also serves

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[82] The concept of "Headshots do more damage" being a very familiar first-person shooter (FPS) trope at this point.

[83] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

[84] Manderley being the one calling the shots in this entire operation, and the one who has given explicit orders to capture the enemy leader alive. - Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

[85] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

[86] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

[87] Ion Storm, *Deus Ex*.

to make the player question if killing their enemies is the "morally right" thing to do. Can you kill people that you were previously working alongside?

The game does not fully support a pacifistic style of play, however. Most of this sort of NPC reaction to your level of lethality comes very early in the game and is largely ignored in the latter half. There are also a few NPCs that the player cannot avoid fighting in regular play. Though here we return to players finding emergent ways of playing the game, and glitching their way past a couple "required" fights. Killing Anna Navarre seems to be required, however crafty players have discovered that, if you can get her AI into a "panicked state" she will often open the locked door that you usually have to kill her in order to unlock.[88] You can also flee other "bosses" such as Gunther and Simmons. Simmons will even re-appear at Area 51 if you do not kill him in the sub-base, revealing that the developers accounted for players "running away" from their first encounter with him.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming:

Attacking

As has become convention in the first-person shooter genre, left clicking with the mouse causes J.C. to attack the space in front of him with whatever weapon he is equipped with, though there are now even more complexity and context differences to this action than there were in *Thief*. Weapons flagged as nonlethal (such as the riot prod and baton) will always drop enemies into unconsciousness, even if they are attacked while they are alerted. There are also now more

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[88] BoredGuest, "Avoiding Anna Navarre - No Kills," November 11, 2006, YouTube video, 43:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hsh24FmYlNQ.

nonlethal options such as a mini crossbow loaded with tranquilizer darts, which will be covered in more detail under the sparing mechanic.

Even if players decide to liberally use lethal forms of attack, all out aggressive play is still discouraged, at least initially. This contrasts with the style of *Doom* and aligns more with what was seen previously in *Thief*. However, unlike in *Thief*, players have no mechanical constraint dictating that they cannot kill anyone. This, coupled with the fact that lethal methods are more easily delivered from a distance (like with a sniper rifle for example), makes killing your enemies the easier way to play. Neutralizing enemies, either through lethal or nonlethal means, also makes exploration much easier for first time players who wish to familiarize themselves with a particular level. There are even parts of the game where the player is forced into a situation where they must neutralize a target in order to continue.

In addition to this, because the game contains RPG elements, players can improve their PC's ability to use specific types of weapons — such as rifles, pistols, or explosive weapons — which then incentivizes sticking with that type of weapon. If players choose to specialize in a lethal type of weapon (again, such as a sniper rifle), this will provide further incentive to keep using that weapon when faced with enemies. Players can also choose to make their PC harder to kill, which can allow them to use the more aggressive *Doom* approach to playing.[89] It should be noted however that the player does not earn experience points for taking out enemies, rather they earn experience points for the completion of objectives. So, in this case the game provides some flexibility in terms of how much the player wants to utilize the attack mechanic.

In terms of ways that the game might discourage killing, from a mechanical perspective: bullets are a limited resource and firing weapons is generally noisy. The former is offset by the

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[89] I.e., less stealth and more guns blazing.

fact that neutralized enemies can be searched for additional ammo. Neutralizing enemies can also

free the player up to explore more of a particular level, where they might find additional ammo

as well. The latter requires a bit more strategic thinking to overcome but can be overcome by

attacking from stealth whenever possible and using hit and run tactics. There are also some

weapons that either come already equipped with a silencer, or can be outfitted with one, which

further enables attacking from stealth without breaking it.

Ultimately, just as in *Thief* even if it's not as explicitly called out, avoiding the use of

lethal force entirely is something more likely to be employed by players who have more

experience in the game. For new players, especially ones who don't know where everything is

and want to get a sense of the layout of a level, finding ways to take out enemies is often the

most expedient solution. The player's level of lethality doesn't change the narrative of the game

much at all, and so employing a pacifist style of play stems from external motivations —

whether it stem from wanting to display a certain level of skill and mastery over the game or

from ethical reasons — rather than internal ones like wanting a particular ending, for example.

Sparing

Not killing enemies can be achieved either by avoiding them, when possible, as in *Thief:*

The Dark Project, or using a weapon that delivers a nonlethal type of damage to reduce their HP

to zero or lower. Unlike how it works in *Thief: The Dark Project*, players can now also knock

out enemies who are aware of their presence by using weapons that are explicitly tagged as being

nonlethal (such as the baton or riot prod) in their in-game descriptions. This makes the

maintenance of stealth a less strict requirement for success. The game also lacks any overt

mechanics that heavily punish lethal play, as with *Thief*'s difficulty selection, and so sparing

enemies comes down more to player choice.

Figure 1.9: The dead body of an NSF Terrorist in the first level of Deus Ex.

Figure 1.10: An unconscious body of an NSF Terrorist in the first level of Deus Ex. Notice how the two states are explicitly labeled.

The game makes little distinction between a dead enemy and a knocked out one, although it does distinguish between them (see figures 1.9 and 1.10). Both result in a neutralized enemy and, unlike in its successor *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, knocked out enemies cannot be revived; the distinction becomes largely a semantic one, at least mechanically. The one exception is one type of enemy in the game that explodes when killed. This explosion can not only kill the player but also means the player cannot gain any resources from said enemies. Neutralizing this particular enemy with nonlethal force (or avoiding them entirely) enables players to avoid this explosion.

Narratively, at least in the broader story context, the game also makes little distinction between a player employing lethal force and one using more nonlethal methods, however there is a level of reactivity seen from various NPCs such as your brother. Paul's previously mentioned subtle chiding or praise can inspire players to try approaching the game as more of a video game pacifist, rather than as a typical shooter. Certainly, when I first played the game and built my character into a sneaky assassin, it was Paul's gentle chiding (as well as the mid game reveal that I had been working for the "bad guys") that encouraged me to try a less lethal playthrough. As mentioned in the introduction, the idea of doing so was not something that had previously occurred to me when playing a first-person shooter or roleplaying game,[90] and it was merely my character's brother's reactivity that got me to try it out.

It is worth comparing how this approach contrasts with previous games on this list such as *Thief: The Dark Project*, and *Ultima IV*. While *Ultima IV* will lightly punish you mechanically, and *Thief* will hand you a gameover on the harder difficulties, *Deus Ex* leaves the

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[90] I had not played any of the games in the *Thief* series at this point.

decision of playing lethally or not entirely in the hands of the player, and merely suggests that both highly lethal and pacifist styles of play are options through the NPC reactions. This affords the player much more flexibility and can leave them feeling more like pacifist play is a decision they are making for themselves, as opposed to one required by the game's mechanics or narrative.

SaveScumming

As has become common in these games, saving and loading is something the player can do at virtually any time, and there also exist quicksave and quickload buttons. Although the penalty for breaking out of stealth is not quite as severe as it was in *Thief: The Dark Project*, much of the same motivations for save scumming still apply. Remaining in stealth still makes progressing easier for the player and so players might find themselves saving before risky maneuvers and loading if they get spotted. The ability to knock out alerted enemies does provide players a little more flexibility than *Thief* did, however, so save scumming does not feel quite as necessary. The acquisition of knowledge about the game is also still a huge motivator for save scumming, and combined with how lethal approaches are generally easier, players can be easily tempted to make a save, eliminate all the guards in an area, figure out an optimal way through, and then reload their saved game to continue their "pacifist" run.

Postal 2

Figure 1.11: A content warning you get when you first boot up Postal 2. Note the (presumably meant to be humorous) warning for politicians in the second paragraph, and the assertion that "violence and inappropriate actions belong in video games and not the real world" in the third paragraph.

Postal 2, released in April of 2003, is a first-person shooter and follow up to the infamous

Postal. It is an arguably offensive game, full of crude humor, violence, and racist stereotypes,

(see, for example, the notice that appears when booting the game, shown in figure 1.11) but it

also contains a pacifist route that was intentionally put there by the developers. Arguably the

route is only in the game to make a tongue in cheek point about how the game is only as

tastelessly violent as the player makes it,[91] but it is worth discussing due to how the path of

nonviolence is framed.

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[91] As the tagline states: "Remember, it's only as violent as you are!" - *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Postal 2," last modified July 31, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postal_2.

In *Postal 2* players take the role of a character known only as "The Postal Dude." The game is divided into days of the week, with The Postal Dude being given a list of mundane things to do every day, including such things as picking up his paycheck, picking up milk, and returning an overdue library book. The game's central conceit is that it plays out much like a lot of open world crime games in the vein of the *Grand Theft Auto* series; so long as players don't break the law, the game is just a satire of everyday city life. If they do break the law, however, they will find increasing waves of police officers coming after them. In *Postal 2* breaking the law means anything from firing a weapon, to flashing other NPCs by unzipping The Postal Dude's pants, to merely walking into a place he's not supposed to be (such as someone else's house) and causing an NPC to become alarmed.

The game opens with the camera moving through the city of Paradise Arizona, eventually zooming in on the rundown trailer the main character lives in with his spouse. It swiftly becomes clear that the PC is a rather crude and unpleasant person, bickering with his wife and swearing about the heat. He proceeds to shoot his non-functional air conditioner and kick his dog moments after stepping out of his trailer, giving the impression he's no stranger to the casual usage of violence. The PC lives a miserable existence and is generally miserable in temperament as well.

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

There is virtually no tutorial to speak of, short of a few quick messages that, somewhat surprisingly, give players advice for avoiding trouble with the law. One of the first a player will see comes up almost immediately, regardless of whether they are carrying a weapon or not, and instructs how to put away any weapons that The Postal Dude might be brandishing. "Don't forget

to press F to hide your weapon. You'll be glad you did…"[92] This advice springs from the fact that NPCs may react with hostility or panic if they see the PC holding a weapon, and the police officer NPCs will generally try to arrest him. The second notice players see pops up when near other people's houses and warns: "People may not like you barging into their house…"[93] These two bits of advice actually serve the player pretty well in terms of avoiding getting into trouble in the early game.

Players have a button that makes The Postal Dude shout "Get down!" They have a button to unzip his pants. There is no button for interacting with objects in the world, which seems conspicuously absent for an FPS released in 2003: one merely just walks up to things (such as doors) to activate them, or pick them up (such as items[94]). Players also have a kick button, which can be employed on doors, animals, and people.

In terms of NPC reactivity, there isn't any deep characterization given to the majority of characters in this game; players are given no reason to care about them beyond the fact that they make funny noises and do funny things when the game's other systems trigger some kind of reaction. Yelling "Get down!" at random NPCs might have them shriek and run away. It might have them start shooting at the PC. Or they might not react at all. The same story goes for walking around in front of them with The Postal Dude's pants unzipped (with the addition of them sometimes commenting something like, "Pull your pants up!"). It's also the same for doing things like walking into restricted areas (like other people's houses), brandishing a weapon, or jumping on tables in a bank. Panicked NPCs, if they run into a police officer, will send the police

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[92] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*, Steam version, Whiptail Interactive, April 14, 2003, Microsoft Windows.

[93] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*.

[94] It is worth noting that most of the items you pick up are weapons.

officer looking for the PC. However, the average NPC in this world doesn't do anything aggressive toward you if you don't antagonize them first.

The police officers are somewhat fascinating for authority figures, in a game that gives the feeling of a sandbox crime game, due to the fact that they will not open fire on the PC immediately at the first provocation. They also tend to be on the player's side in all cases where the player is not the obvious aggressor. For example, leading an NPC who is attacking The Postal Dude to a police officer will see the police officer attack said NPC on the player's behalf. As in games like those in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, the player has a level of notoriety that builds up if they're caught doing something illegal, or if they cause another NPC to panic and seek out a police officer. When being pursued, players can choose to surrender to the police by complying when they tell you to freeze and drop your weapon.[95] Surrendering to police sees the player transported to a jail cell. At this point the player's only option is to stage a jailbreak, so any pacifist players wishing to stay on the right side of the law are better off avoiding being arrested in the first place.

As previously mentioned, the game is divided into days, and the first day (a Monday) stands in neatly as something of a first mission. Players start with three objectives that can, at least in theory, be done in any order. One of the first objectives on the first day is to pick up The Postal Dude's paycheck from his job at Running with Scissors,[96] a task that is easily started without inciting any violence but ends with him getting shot at by protestors protesting the existence of violence in video games.[97] Initially the protestors are outside, marching in circles

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[95] This restraint seemingly only applies towards the PC as they appear to always kill any NPCs instead of trying to arrest them.

[96] An in-game representation of the real-life developers of the same name, responsible for developing the Postal series.

[97] The ironic humor is quite slick on this one.

Figure 1.12: Protestors outside of the Running with Scissors offices in Postal 2, chanting: "Games are bad, they make you mad!"

and chanting, "Games are bad! They make you mad!"[98] (see figure 1.12). The player makes their

way past them and into their boss's[99] office, who then informs The Postal Dude that he's been

fired after only working at the company for a day. His paycheck is on the boss's desk and players

pick it up by running into it as usual. It's at this point that the protestors decide to storm the

building and shoot everyone inside, including the PC. Here players can either retaliate in kind or,

at best, employ a kind of technical pacifism and crouch behind The Postal Dude's former boss's

desk while he shoots everyone. There is no notable difference between fighting back and

choosing the pacifist route except for the player's personal stats. Upon leaving the area The

Postal Dude remarks: "I think I'll need to keep an eye out for these folks. They're definitely

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[98] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*.

[99] The boss incidentally, also an in-game representation of the real head of Running with Scissors, wears a shirt that states, "I regret nothing," just in case players weren't sure about the developers' level of irreverence.

hazardous to my health,"[100] and any protestors The Postal Dude meets going forward in the game will now attack him on sight.

Another task is to buy milk. When picking up the milk players get a note saying "pay 5 dollars, or don't…"[101] Buying the milk is straightforward: players stand in a very short line, get insulted by a rude, racist caricature of a convenience store clerk, hand him $5, and leave. Conversely, if the player decides **not** to pay for the milk… a barricade comes down across the entrance and the clerk pulls out a rifle and starts shooting at The Postal Dude. This prompts him to break the fourth wall and wryly point out what the player needs to do to extricate themselves from the situation, as well as make fun of the developers: "Guess I need to get up to the top floor! I'm sure that seemed intuitive in the design docs."[102] The player must now work their way to the top floor and escape out the window, all while being shot at by various employees. Here, not conforming to the expectations of "polite society" results in a much longer sequence (conforming takes less than a minute versus the five minutes or so that I spent navigating the employees only area while being shot at).

The last objective that the game presents players with on the first day is to go to the bank and deposit the paycheck claimed in the first objective. Upon arriving at the bank, The Postal Dude is greeted with a single teller and a line of people waiting in front of him. There is the sound of a ticking clock and some easy-listening music to accompany him while he waits in line, though standing in line only lasts around two and a half minutes.[103] The two and a half minutes also felt surprisingly quick to me as each NPC had a (presumably) randomly generated

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[100] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*.
[101] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*.
[102] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*.
[103] A short amount of time compared to the amount of time I've spent in bank lineups in real life.

interaction with the teller where they withdrew or deposited a random amount of money. Still, the setup of waiting in line, something that might frustrate players in their regular lives, makes for an enticing opportunity to cut loose with some violence.

If players do choose to employ violence, they can very quickly cause the line to disappear. Bizarrely enough, the bank teller will simply greet The Postal Dude as the one now at the front of the line and allow him to cash his check. It should be noted that if the player chooses to kill the bank teller, the mission cannot proceed. However, much as was the case in *Ultima IV*, simply leaving the area and coming back results in the entire bank resetting: all NPCs respawn, including the line.

Either way, upon depositing the check the bank is then hit by bank robbers armed with shotguns. Despite shouting, "Don't move and you won't get hurt!"[104] they almost immediately start shooting, with the police and bank guards shooting back. I decided to try crouching in a corner and letting the police and robbers shoot it out. This strategy was surprisingly effective and I was able to walk out unscathed. Reinforcing its sense of being an absurdist reality where extreme violence just happens sometimes, as soon as the shootout was done (and the robbers all killed), everyone calmed down, the alarms turned off, and the easy-listening music returned. Nobody even seemed particularly bothered by all the bodies and blood on the floor. This sort of behavior is not uncommon in games in the sandbox crime genre, where the game's systems must account for moments of absurdist violence, but then still reset within a reasonable amount of time in order to allow the player to continue progressing.[105]

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[104] Running with Scissors, *Postal 2*.

[105] See series like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Saints Row*

With these three tasks done, as a pacifist or not, the player is free to return to their trailer and end the day.

All in all, the game feels very similar to those in the same vein as sandbox crime simulators like the *Grand Theft Auto* series. While walking around in the town between missions, the player can start random firefights with other NPCs, but there is little reward for doing so as it causes the police to start pursuing the PC in an ever-escalating cycle of violence. The Postal Dude's health is limited and can only be replenished by finding health items in the world, and exploring all parts of the world with reckless abandon is discouraged if trying to keep a low profile.

However, during specific objectives, violence often feels encouraged. The game also similarly "resets" to a calm state after a period of time, much like those in the sandbox crime game genre. When acting violently out in public, The Postal Dude gains a degree of notoriety, but avoiding the police causes this notoriety to slowly decay over time, until they forget about him entirely. As previously mentioned, leaving an area and coming back also sees all dead NPCs come back to life and forget all about a player's previous actions. On a grander scale, it is also worth noting that it doesn't matter how many people the player murders on Monday, everything goes back to "normal" on Tuesday, regardless of how much the police were looking for the PC when the player ended the day. Nothing really changes in the long term if the player engages in violence or not, except for the player's statistics.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming:

Attacking

The execution of attacking things is very straightforward: the left mouse button hits things with the weapon the player has equipped. Most of the early mechanisms for interacting with NPCs as a player are tied to violence; either the player attacks them, or they (potentially) attack the player in response to the player doing something (e.g. barging into their house or shouting, "Get down!" at them). Most of the items the player picks up are either health related (surviving violence) or weapons (doling out violence). Another mechanic worth noting is that The Postal Dude has an extensive number of one-liners that he delivers after killing someone; in contrast there is typically not any one-liners to accompany the player **not** killing someone. In essence, the game provides the player more feedback for killing NPCs than it does for not, arguably making killing the more interesting option. In terms of dynamics, it is also worth noting the overarching mechanics common to many sandbox games of this type: the aforementioned decaying notoriety meter, the way areas "reset" when the player leaves them and come back, and so on. Attacking is not punished in any sort of long-term way, except causing the player's own personal kill statistics to go up.[106] Even the name of the game itself is a crude reference to the idiom of "going postal."[107]

A lot of the game's humor is tied to being a violent character — the game itself even establishes The Postal Dude as somewhat prone to violence in its opening moments — and in many ways violence is the only thing separating the game world from a realistic, mundane existence. The tasks given to the player are things like "pick up paycheck," "cash paycheck," and

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[106] Which, in turn, prevents the player from getting the pacifist achievement.

[107] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Going postal," last modified August 5, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Going_postal.

"get milk" and it is only through exercising violence, or having violence exercised on the PC, that the game adds any sort of tension or challenge. Like in *Doom*, the PC carries a lot of weapons around, and there is a lot of work put into the murdering aspects of the game (all the animations for the weapons and characters when attacked, the way blood fountains out of NPCs, the way bodies can be dismembered, etc.). That said, the violence is still "sanitized" and avoids anything that could be construed as a depressing emotional response.[108] All of these things together serve to make doling out violence feel "fun."

Sparing

The Postal Dude does not really have any nonlethal means for defending himself short of a stungun (which becomes lethal if applied for too long) and the truly bizarre tactic of urinating on people to make them stop attacking him and vomit. However, neither of these methods are long term solutions; there is nothing that will allow players to knock out a hostile NPC, as there is in *Deus Ex*. As a consequence, the act of sparing enemies mirrors that of *Doom*: sparing involves avoiding the usage of the attack mechanic. However, unlike in *Doom*, this avoidance of a mechanic is something that the game actively recognizes; ever since the game's release, completing the game without killing anyone is acknowledged during the credits with the notice: "Thank you for playing, JESUS." One can see the pacifist playstyle being acknowledged in the bulleted game features on Steam today too (see figure 1.13): "If you choose to play as a pacifist, you will still have to deal with the NPC's who may also go POSTAL!"

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[108] Such as having other NPCs grieve for the loss of the murdered ones, for example.

Blast, chop and piss your way through a freakshow of American caricatures in this darkly humorous first-person adventure. Meet Krotchy: the toy mascot gone bad, visit your Uncle Dave at his besieged religious cult compound and battle sewer-dwelling Taliban when you least expect them! Endure the sphincter-clenching challenge of cannibal rednecks, corrupt cops and berserker elephants. Accompanied by Champ, the Dude's semi-loyal pitbull, battle your way through open environments populated with amazingly unpredictable AI. Utilize an arsenal of weapons ranging from a humble shovel to a uniquely hilarious rocket launcher. Collect a pack of attack dogs! Use cats as silencers! Piss and pour gasoline on anything and everyone! YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO!

Key Features

- Aggressive vs. Passive: POSTAL 2 is only as violent as you are.

- One large non-linear world.

- Explore the world and accomplish your errands at your own pace.

- Interact with Non-Player Characters

- Survival Mode: If you choose to play as a pacifist, you will still have to deal with the NPC's who may also go POSTAL!

- Based on the Unreal Editor: Easy to use and very powerful, with many mods already available from the community.

Figure 1.13: Some text taken from the Steam store page for Postal 2. Note that this would've been written well after launch, but it is an interesting look into how the developers currently describe their game. Note the "[Postal 2] is only as violent as you are" bullet point, and the one that explicitly uses the word pacifist, reinforcing its usage in the gaming community to describe a certain style of nonlethal play.[109]

The dynamic of employing pacifism in *Doom* is relatively straightforward: everything is trying to kill you and you try not to kill anything back. In *Postal 2* it is slightly more complex in that, for large sections of the game, nothing is trying to kill you. This makes sparing a relatively straightforward affair of just proceeding without violence and without breaking the law. For example, players can avoid any violence at the convenience store by simply paying for the milk. However, there are also sections of the game where NPCs will attack the player regardless of

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[109] "POSTAL 2 Store Page," *Steam*, accessed August 8, 2021, https://store.steampowered.com/app/223470/POSTAL_2/.

how violent they are being. Here one must fall back on the *Doom* pacifist's mentality of evasion, though there is also sometimes the option (at least for the first day) of doing nothing and relying on other NPCs to suppress the violence for you. During the paycheck objective players can rely on other Running with Scissors employees to dispatch the protestors, and during the cashing the paycheck objective players can rely on the police and bank guards to deal with things.

However, while the *Doom* pacifist speedruns fall into the realm of exhibiting mastery over a game through emergent play, *Postal 2*'s pacifism feels rather disempowering. The character you play as has a rotten life (and even worse luck) and is just trying to do things like pick up milk. As a pacifist player, it feels as if the game world exists entirely to enact violence on you. You wait/run away from all the other violence. Being a pacifist largely means either not playing the game (letting the police NPCs handle things) or running away constantly. You can never fight back. As The Postal Dude's life gets more and more ridiculous, and as he builds up enemies who want him dead for no reason, the player's behavior is increasingly constrained. The pacifist player finds themselves playing more and more of a stealth game, as they try to avoid catching the attention of any of the NPCs who want them dead. The only option that the game presents for taking back agency in your PC's life is by, "going postal" yourself. The "Thank you for playing, JESUS" message itself can also be seen as something of a mockery of the player: that only someone akin to the religious figure of Jesus Christ could ever possibly finish the game as a pacifist.

This is also reinforced in a meta sense in that the *Doom* developers did not account for pacifism, and therefore pursuing it is very much an act of emergent play and showing mastery over systems that were not designed for this. In contrast, the *Postal 2* developers clearly expected people to try this playstyle, and it does not feel as transgressive or empowering as a result.

It is possible that for some *Postal 2* players, due to the difficulty and frustrations involved with getting through the game as a pacifist, it does wrap back around to something of a badge of honor to say that one completed *Postal 2* as a pacifist. At the time of writing this, the "My Name is Jesus"[110] achievement on Steam is ranked as the least achieved.[111] This makes it an attractive prospect to those looking for bragging rights and social capital, but the fact that it is the least achieved also speaks to the difficulty in achieving it and/or perhaps a lack of interest in achieving it among *Postal 2* fans.

SaveScumming

Arguably more than any other game on this list, the ability to save and reload is of huge importance to successfully completing a pacifist run of *Postal 2*. There is the ability to quick save, as in the previous games mentioned,[112] and it will be used a lot as players try to avoid being killed during some of the shootouts. The ability to save scum so easily also encourages sandbox style of playing. Someone on the pacifist run can, at any point, decide to vent their frustrations via some bullets into some NPCs, and then merely load back to their previous save to continue their murderless run. *Postal 2* continues the trend of making save scumming an integral part of the pacifist run.

Mirror's Edge

Mirror's Edge, much like *Thief: The Dark Project* before it, takes the first-person shooter genre and subverts it into something more unique, with less focus on violence as a central tool of

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[110] In other words, the pacifist achievement.

[111] "Global Gameplay Stats: POSTAL 2," *Steam Community*, accessed March 2, 2021, https://steamcommunity.com/stats/223470/achievements.

[112] Though in game it's called "easy saving" for some reason.

player empowerment. Released in January of 2009, *Mirror's Edge* is of note to this thesis because it is one of the first games to see the developers use the word pacifist to describe a certain way of playing the game, via an achievement. The achievement in question, appropriately named "Pacifist," requires players to, "Complete a chapter without firing a gun,"[113] thus continuing and further codifying the trend of assigning a clear and narrow definition to what exactly pacifism entails in violent video games. The gameplay of *Mirror's Edge* also serves as a nice counterpoint to that of *Postal 2*: while evading enemies in *Postal 2* feels disempowering, in *Mirror's Edge* it feels empowering. It is also somewhat unique on this list due to the emphasis not only on avoiding detection or knocking enemies out, but on evading enemies who are actively trying to harm the PC.

Players take the role of Faith, a freerunner in a futuristic dystopian city. The opening cutscene very concisely explains that runners are couriers who ferry packages for clients who want to avoid the scrutiny of the police. It makes a point to mention that runners typically keep a low profile and don't attract much attention, and that being good at running is what keeps a runner alive. It very concisely sets up not only who the PC is, but also the type of approach players should use to stay alive and advance through the game.

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[113] DICE, *Mirror's Edge*, Xbox Live version, Electronic Arts, November 11, 2008, Xbox 360.
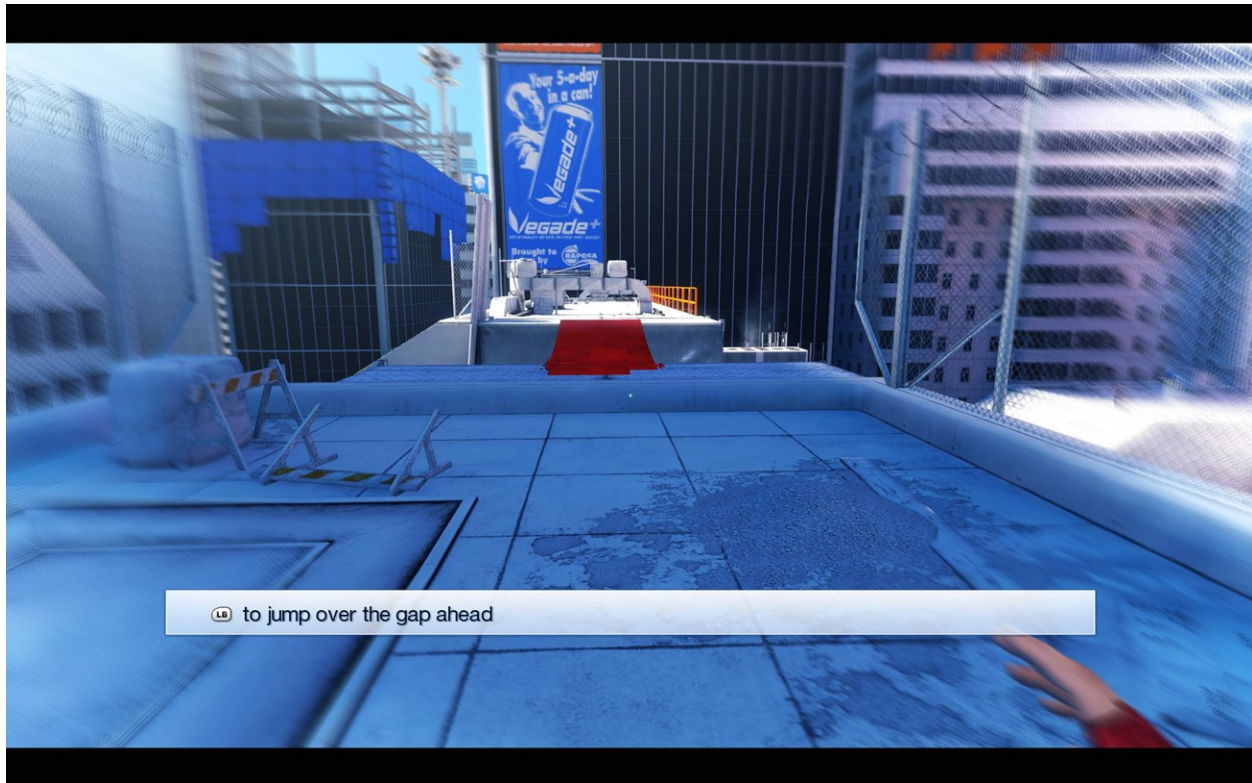
Figure 1.14: A screenshot from the tutorial level of Mirror's Edge.

The tutorial emphasizes and explains movement and mastery over the environment from the very start. The user interface (UI) is almost non-existent (as seen in figure 1.14), with the graphics and colors also being simplified to allow for players to quickly make judgement calls about where to go in a level. After explaining how to jump, duck, and check objectives, it sets players free to run through an obstacle course, which seems to be set up on top of some buildings. In fact, a lot of the game is spent running around on the tops of buildings, providing plenty of opportunities for lethal falls. Faith soon meets up with a fellow runner who seems to be a friend of hers, named Celeste. Celeste serves as a guide, showing the player what moves they need to do before the game allows you to try doing them yourself. These moves include everything from wall running, to sliding under low obstacles, to swinging on crossbars. A couple of the tutorial messages make a point to emphasize how successfully executing a move "builds

momentum." Momentum is essentially what it says on the tin: Faith starts out moving slowly but builds speed the longer she can move forward without being interrupted, up to a maximum.

After successfully performing a vast number of movement techniques, Celeste announces that Merc (their handler, for lack of a better term) wants her "to run [Faith] through some sparring,"[114] thus beginning the combat tutorial. The combat portion of the tutorial is noticeably shorter and mostly focuses on delivering kicks and punches, noting that Faith's jump kick does more damage depending on her momentum. Finally, the tutorial runs Faith through how to disarm enemies armed with guns. Only one tutorial message briefly mentions how to fire a weapon that has been stolen from an enemy, but otherwise Faith simply grabs the weapon and tosses it away.

At the start of the first real mission in the game, Faith automatically runs through a brief opening bit, displaying an impressive level of agility, before players are given control. Almost immediately Merc contacts you to deliver the objective of your first mission: "Yeah, yeah, I'm sure the birds are real impressed, Faith. But once you've finished showing off, you think you might concentrate on some actual work? Gettin' Celeste in position for a hand-off. You need to get the delivery to her. She'll be near the communications tower ahead of you."[115] Again, the game delivers everything you need to know to start moving in a very concise manner while also further providing characterization for Faith; it suggests that Faith really enjoys freerunning just for its own sake.

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[114] DICE, *Mirror's Edge*, Steam version, Electronic Arts, November 11, 2008, Microsoft Windows.

[115] DICE, *Mirror's Edge*.

After some brief running and jumping, Faith is informed that "Blues[116] are headed [her] way,"[117] giving the player a heads up before their first encounter with enemies. Just before falling out of a vent in front of the aforementioned Blues, the game pops up a hint stating, "You should always try to get away from hostiles."[118] Upon falling out of the vent, the Blues demand that Faith drop the courier bag or that they "will open fire."[119] They then open fire regardless, with Merc advising over the radio: "Just get the hell out of there." Clearly surrendering to the police is not an option for Faith.

It is here that, if the player tries to rush the police, the fragility of Faith becomes evident. Like Garrett in *Thief: The Dark Project* before her, Faith is very fragile and cannot take more than a few hits before dying. The HUD is very minimal in design and doesn't show a health count or ammo count or anything of the sort. Instead, Faith's health can roughly be determined by how grey the colors of the game have gotten; the more greyscale the game, the closer to death she is. In lieu of having to rely on picked up health resources, as in every prior game on this list barring *Ultima IV*, Faith's health instead automatically regenerates a few seconds after she stops taking damage.

If the player hasn't already died from a missed jump previously, it is perhaps here that they learn that the game doesn't allow for manual saves, but instead relies on checkpoints. Every time the player progresses through a level in some major way, the game automatically saves for them. Upon death, the player is very quickly whisked back to the last checkpoint they reached so that they can try again.

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[116] The game's slang for police officers.
[117] DICE, *Mirror's Edge*.
[118] DICE, *Mirror's Edge*.
[119] DICE, *Mirror's Edge*.

Evading the police is reinforced to be your only option, and it's one that shows up again and again throughout the course of the game. The Blues here move slower than you and lack Faith's mastery over the environment (such as being able to run along walls or vault over fences) so evading them is easy.

Further into the level Faith runs into two police officers with Merc encouraging her to find a way through. A hint popup elaborates: "Enemies you need to get through are marked red with Runner Vision. Fight them or run past them." It is here that a player is given the option of trying out the sparring tricks that Celeste taught them in the tutorial. Dispatching the two enemies is very straightforward, and players can even steal the pistol from the first officer and use it to shoot the second, but engaging the enemies at all still noticeably slows Faith down. No longer are you advancing through the level with a hefty dose of momentum behind you, instead you are circling an enemy, trading blows.

Faith reaches Celeste, passes off the bag, has one more encounter with much more heavily armored police officers and then the level ends. During this last encounter with police, she is again strongly encouraged to run rather than engage with them.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming:

Attacking

Mirror's Edge continues the standard for first-person games such as this and has clicking the left mouse button make Faith attack in front of herself with whatever weapon she currently is equipped with. When not equipped with a weapon, Faith lashes out with her hands and feet; there is a dynamic between the attack mechanic and her movement mechanics that determines what kind of attack she does. If jumping with momentum she does a jump kick, with the kick doing

more damage the more momentum she has. If sliding she does a slide kick. Otherwise, she delivers a punch.

When she is equipped with a gun, attacking with it causes her to shoot at whatever is in the center of the screen. This mechanic interacts with a limited ammo mechanic with weapons: namely all weapons run out of bullets after being fired a certain number of times, and then are discarded automatically. The size of the gun also interacts with Faith's movement mechanics: larger guns cause her movement to slow down, and some two-handed weapons deny her the use of her hands (such as for grabbing onto a ledge), further hampering her mobility mechanics.

The mechanic of attacking with guns further interacts with the meta-mechanic of achievements. Namely, there are two achievements that restrict Faith from using guns: "Pacifist" and "Test of Faith." The first requires her to finish a level without firing a gun, the second requires her to finish the game without shooting an enemy.

Attacking enemies causes Faith to slow down; there are no moves in her repertoire that involve keeping her momentum after attacking. Players also find their camera locked into facing any enemies they interact with, until the enemy is dispatched or until they back away a suitable enough distance to break this lock-on. This makes engaging with enemies feel awkward and a bit clumsy; when a player may want to maintain that sense of freedom and speed achieved at high levels of momentum, engaging an enemy brings Faith back down to a standstill.

Ultimately, whether the game's systems clashing with each other is intentionally meant to drive the player away from the use of violence or not, using the attack mechanic feels sluggish and the transition from high momentum to combat feels clunky. This drives the skilled *Mirror's Edge* player away from combat whenever possible, as the speedy, almost speedrun-esque,

experience is where the game feels the most fun. This leaves combat as more something a new player slogs through when they're still trying to learn a level.

Sparing

Sparing, as per how the game defines it via the "Pacifist" and "Test of Faith" achievements, basically involves not using the attack mechanic when Faith is holding a gun of any sort. Enemies can be avoided, or the attack mechanic can be used to subdue them so long as Faith is not holding a weapon when it is used. Notice that the language around the achievement explicitly labeled "Pacifist" is strictly about firearms. It is completely acceptable, as per the game's rhetoric, to pummel a guy with your fists until he stops moving, and still call yourself a pacifist.

As mentioned in the attacking section above, fighting enemies in *Mirror's Edge* feels a bit clumsy and disrupts flow. One can, for example, deliver attacks while benefiting from being in a state of motion (delivering flying kicks, sliding kicks, or dropping down onto someone's head) but doing so always brings Faith to a halt. Because the game "feels" good when you're moving (momentum takes a bit to ramp up, so finding ways to keep the existing momentum you've gained, while progressing quickly, feel really rewarding), finding ways to avoid having to use the attack mechanic at all can feel the most rewarding.

It is also notable that Faith never enters a level with a weapon already equipped, and she largely only gets access to them via disarming an enemy. She also will automatically discard any weapons she is currently carrying when passing certain checkpoints in levels. Unlike most other first-person shooters, the game has not been designed around allow the player to acquire weapons and keep them. This implies that Faith's "default" and/or preferred state is weaponless. The framing of "weapon disarm" also biases towards framing the act as removing a weapon from

an opponent, not necessarily as "gaining a weapon for yourself." This contrasts with most of the other first-person games mentioned, where weapons and/or ammo are often lying on the ground waiting for players to pick them up and use them.

Since the player spends so much time mastering the traversal of their environment, and since the enemies shooting at them are often not nearly as adroit at navigating the environment as Faith is, running away from people starts to feel quite empowering. And since holding weapons starts to limit Faith's mobility, my feelings of empowerment come very directly from being speedy and evasive rather than from being able to pose a threat to NPCs in the game. This contrasts heavily with the passive nature of playing a pacifist in *Postal 2* and hearkens back to the pacifist speedruns in *Doom*.

SaveScumming

Players cannot save the game themselves, or load the game from anywhere other than the main menu, for that matter; *Mirror's Edge* relies wholly on checkpoint saving. That is to say that saving happens automatically when the player progresses to specific points within each level. Loading is also automatic and happens immediately upon Faith's death.[120]

Due to how easy it is to die in *Mirror's Edge*, a player can easily find themselves replaying a section many times, even without the ability to save scum being directly at their fingertips. This, coupled with the fact that checkpoints are usually only minutes of action apart from each other, can embolden experimentation to a certain extent. Dying might only set you back 30 seconds or so, and so trying to find ways to evade enemies or other hazards becomes an exercise in puzzle solving. Failure comes quickly in *Mirror's Edge*. This contrasts with

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[120] In fact, the death of Faith seems to be the only thing that will trigger a reload, other than quitting the game entirely.

something like *Thief: The Dark Project* where failure can be a prolonged affair of breaking out of stealth and then spending several minutes futilely trying to get back into it, thus encouraging saves scumming as soon as things show even a hint of going badly. Though the player may engage in save scumming just as much, if not more, in Mirror's Edge, it is not pursued as voluntarily, and only comes following explicit failures.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

First released in August of 2011, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* inherits a lot from its prequel, including its genres of first-person shooter, role-playing, and stealth,[121] while also adding newer gameplay conventions that became commonplace to video games in the 11 years that separate them. The original *Deus Ex* was notable for having NPCs that react to your gameplay and for being a first-person shooter that encourages more than just shooting while at the same time explicitly codifying a pacifist route as a valid route through the game. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* continues these traditions but adds a few more. Like *Mirror's Edge* it includes an achievement titled "Pacifist," and also like *Mirror's Edge*, the requirements for achieving it are an argument for a kind of video game pacifism that doesn't necessarily mesh with the real-world concept, bending it to accommodate various game design choices.

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

The tutorial of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, unlike the tutorial in the first game — which was separate from the main game and was framed as a rather neutral exploration of the

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[121] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Deus Ex: Human Revolution," last modified August 4, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_Ex:_Human_Revolution.

mechanics available to you in the form of a series of training ranges — drops players right into the main story. You are Adam Jensen, security chief for Sarif Industries, a biotechnology corporation specializing in biomechanical augmentation and headed by David Sarif: your boss. After a brief walking tour of the facility, alarms start blaring and you are tasked with investigating an "environmental malfunction." Bizarrely, your character responds to news of this environmental malfunction by pulling out an assault rifle, and thus begins the first real moments of gameplay.

The game provides pop ups to explain basic movement and manipulation of the environment, as well as revealing to the player the existence of armed intruders, now retroactively providing justification for the assault rifle. Shortly before encountering the intruders in a gameplay sequence, the game provides a basic combat tutorial. It is interesting to note that this "combat" tutorial immediately contextualizes the cover system as a part of combat by discussing its utility in combat: "When the lead starts to fly, it's wise to take cover."[122] It goes on to explain how this will protect the player character from taking damage from things such as bullets and explosives, and further elaborates on how one can combine cover and shooting. Interestingly, the last part of the combat tutorial has a slight disconnect between what the written line states and what the voiceover says out loud. The written line is, "Line-of-sight is important -- and by keeping behind cover, you'll stand a better chance that enemies won't detect you,"[123] while the voiced line is the same except for the ending: "you'll stand a better chance that enemies won't get a bead on you."[124] Note that the voiced line is referring to being in an active firefight

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[122] Eidos Montréal, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution - Director's Cut*, Steam version, Square Enix, October 25, 2013, Microsoft Windows.

[123] Eidos Montréal, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

[124] Eidos Montréal, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

with an enemy, while the written line is referring to remaining undetected in the first place. Since Jensen dies extremely quickly when exposed to bullets[125] — being hit 3-4 times leads to death and can happen in a few seconds — a straightforward approach to combat is absolutely discouraged. The player only has their lethal assault rifle on hand when they encounter enemies, and further note that at no point during this tutorial is the player given any instruction (beyond the barest of implications in the written, "Enemies won't detect you," line mentioned prior) about avoiding enemies entirely. The player is funneled toward three different encounters and the only instructions they've been given are how to move, how to take cover, and how to shoot. Starting the player out with an assault rifle is perhaps both ironic and appropriate. It is ironic given the pains that the first game took to differentiate itself from the shooter genre, but appropriate because it hearkens back to its shooter roots; your first real means of interacting with the world is to shoot at it. After this brief introduction to the gameplay, and regardless of whether the player has tried to avoid combat or not, the PC is critically wounded in a cutscene and requires major reconstructive surgery. As a result of this surgery, he segues into life as a cyborg.[126]

A first-time player likely won't think twice about this section, however a player who has played before, and/or a player who has checked the achievements and discovered the existence of the "Pacifist" achievement, might be inclined to try something different for this tutorial. Although it is never telegraphed as an option, either mechanically or narratively,[127] players can completely avoid all the enemies at this point in the game through clever use of cover and avoiding being seen. In fact, in order to get the "Pacifist" achievement it is **required** that the player not kill anyone here. And because the player has only lethal means of subduing opponents

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[125] As one does.

[126] As promoted by all the gameplay trailers and marketing released prior to the game.

[127] I mean, what sort of security chief would ignore all the armed combatants inside the building they have been hired to safeguard?

at this point in the story, avoiding the enemy completely is an unintuitive requirement. Having

played this part both lethally and nonlethally, I can attest that just shooting the intruders is far

easier and more straightforward. By the time the game teaches and affords the player nonlethal

combat options, it is already too late for you to be a pacifist, by the game's own standards. You

will not get the pacifist achievement at the end of the game, after having shot any armed

intruders in the tutorial. This ludo-narrative dissonance, and requirement of outside of the box

thinking, serves to frame the pacifist route as an alternate route.[128]

After Jensen's surgery, the game jumps forward six months and you are given your first

real mission. Jensen walks into the Sarif Industries headquarters, having just been called out of

his rehabilitation period in order to personally see to a hostage taking situation at a remote Sarif

Industries manufacturing plant. There is a brief conversation with Sarif Industries' head of cyber-

security, Frank Pritchard, which serves to hint at some of Jensen's backstory (see figure 1.15).

Pritchard directs a constant attitude of irreverence and sarcasm toward Jensen the entire time,

and players are given the choice to ignore it or to confront it, with Jensen even threatening

violence in the latter case. The narrative building for our character Jensen does not make him

seem like he's particularly disposed toward taking nonviolent approaches. It is only once you get

into the company VTOL,[129] and begin conversing with Sarif about the best way to handle the

hostage taking situation, that the game raises non-lethality as an option.

Where the original *Deus Ex* had the PC's brother Paul ask you what kind of weapon you

want to use, here choosing a weapon to start the game with is framed differently. Players are

instead first asked how lethal they want to be (see figure 1.16), and then whether they want to

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[128] The concept of pacifist play being framed as an alternate route will be explored in more detail with the next (and last) game on this list.
[129] Aircraft capable of Vertical Take Off and Landing

take down targets up close or from far away. Also unlike the first game where Paul comments favorably or unfavorably on your choice of weapon, here Sarif (the PC's boss) makes a point of deferring entirely to the player's choices, only adding that he'd prefer that nothing be damaged, be it property or hostages. The game switches the framing: in the original Paul is the expert and mentor while here, if anything, Jensen is framed as the mentor figure, with whatever the player chooses (and by extension, Jensen himself) being given the weight of coming from an expert in tactics and security. The tutorial popups continue into this first mission, with the game only now revealing the possibilities of stealthy and nonlethal play.

The very first guard players come across (see figure 1.17) helpfully faces away from your point of entry the entire time, and out of view of any other guards, allowing players to try out the takedown system.[130] First it describes how to put enemies to sleep by tapping the takedown button (in my version of the game this was the Q key) and then it elaborates with, "Killing them is a more permanent solution, but also involves making more noise,"[131] and explains how to do a lethal takedown as well. Although it doesn't elaborate on why a permanent solution might be preferable, players may eventually discover that merely unconscious enemies can be woken up by other guards, while dead enemies cannot. This seems to be the only major mechanical

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[130] Which is also helpfully described in the same tutorial.
[131] Eidos Montréal, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.
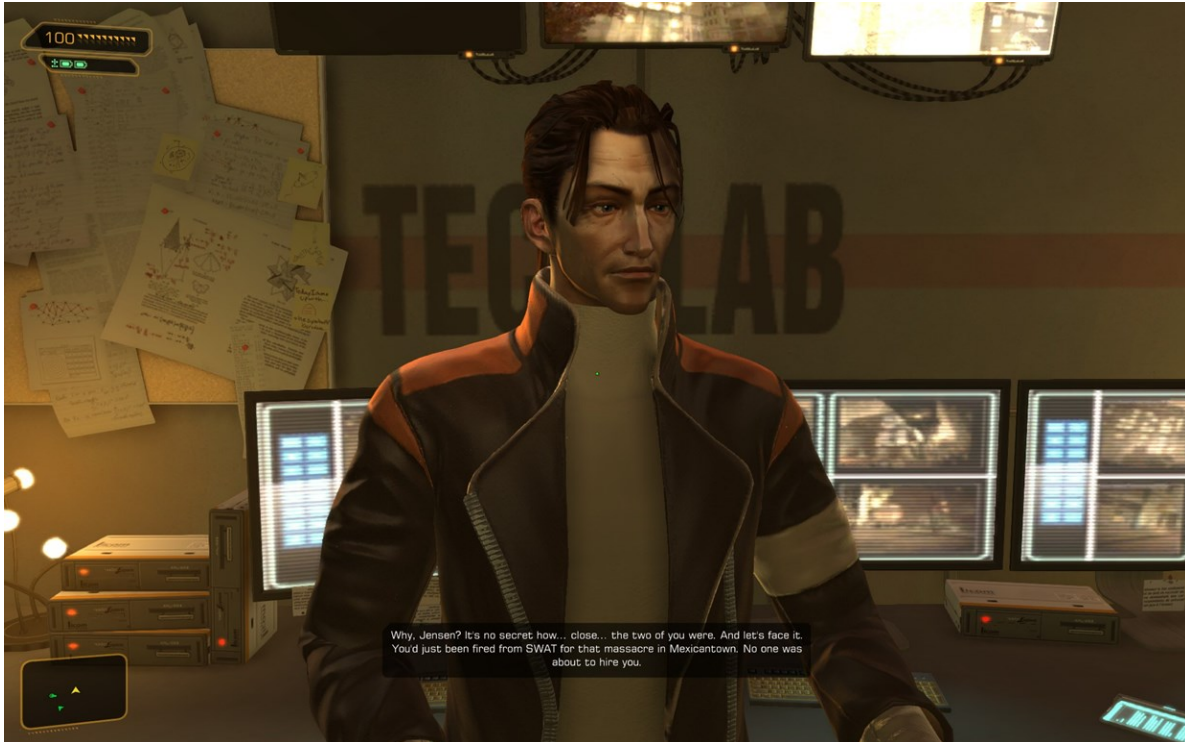
Figure 1.15: Conversing with the character Pritchard in Deus Ex: Human Revolution. Note the exposition giving Jensen a backstory as a former SWAT officer who was supposedly involved in some massacre debacle.

Figure 1.16: Your first dialogue choice in conversation with your boss, David Sarif, in Deus Ex: Human Revolution.

Figure 1.17: These Deus Ex: Human Revolution popups serve to both inform the player that they are close enough to perform a takedown, but also as a reminder for how to perform the two different kinds of takedowns.

distinction between a guard being unconscious and a guard being dead as, just like in the original

Deus Ex, unconscious enemies do not seem to wake up on their own.

Progressing further players run into the now familiar trope of enemy chatter.[132] Though

the characters are rather less sympathetic than the ones in *Thief: The Dark Project*, and seem to

be having less interesting conversations about political ideology and identity than the ones in

Deus Ex, the player will likely still pick up on there being a level of disenfranchisement amongst

them. These early guards are not well off in their day to day lives.

The game frames the choice to be lethal or not as an exercise of player choice rather than

about taking any sort of moral stance (as the original game does, recall Paul's "We're police"

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[132] *TV Tropes*, s.v. "Enemy Chatter," last modified July 27, 2021,
https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/EnemyChatter.

line). Your first real authority figure here, your boss, defers to you: the player. Instead of subtly encouraging one way of playing over another he merely asks the player how they want to handle the situation. That said, the game codifies combat into two distinct modes in a way the original never did: Lethal and Non-lethal. Rather than asking a more neutral question of, "What weapon would you like?" it frontloads thinking about levels of lethality. After this it then asks you, "Short range or long range," which is more of a gameplay preference type question. Sarif's responses feel very corporate: do what you need to do, just don't hurt our bottom line. He does not encourage one way of playing over the other, but perhaps that encouragement is not necessary. It has been 11 years since the first *Deus Ex* game was released and players have had time to get used to games that play with the tropes of first-person shooters. It still does immediately ask you whether you wish to be lethal or nonlethal; although it might not encourage one approach over the other it makes it very clear that there are two distinct approaches. This serves to inform the player that the distinction is important, even if it's not clear why in that moment. Arguably, it never really becomes clear, given the very minimal narrative differences that arise from choosing one over the other, and is only important for the one achievement.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming:

Attacking

The mechanism of attacking is the same as all the previous first-person shooters in this list: clicking the left mouse button makes your PC attack the area in front of them with whatever weapon he has equipped. Just like in its predecessor, *Deus Ex*, the player is given the option of a number of lethal weapons and a number of nonlethal ones. For the most part the mechanic of attacking mirrors the one in *Deus Ex*, however *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* also adds the

"takedown" move. As briefly covered above, this move is executed by getting close to an enemy and then either tapping or holding a keyboard button: tapping for a nonlethal takedown, holding for a lethal one.

In terms of dynamics with other systems, it is again worth noting that a dead enemy cannot be revived, and that taking out enemies (either lethally or nonlethally) gives the players points for advancement. More points are given for takedowns (requiring the player to get close) versus taking out enemies from far away (like with a sniper rifle for example). This stands in contrast to the original *Deus Ex* where points were only given out for making progress towards mission objectives. This also somewhat stands in contrast to the tutorial text itself when it encourages players to avoid engaging with enemies wherever possible. The procedural rhetoric inherent in the points system pushes players toward not only attacking every single enemy that they can but attacking them at the closest range possible.

In fact, players are not penalized in any way if they decide to nonlethally attack every single enemy in a level; the game will still hand out bonus points for achievements such as "Ghost," (not being seen, not touching conscious enemies,[133] and not allowing enemies to see the bodies of their allies) which is essentially a reward for being as stealthy as possible when traversing a level. There is no mechanical (or even narrative) reward for not using the attack mechanic on every single enemy in the game. This can easily drive a completionist mindset in players where they feel they must find ways to neutralize every enemy and not merely just remain undetected. As with *Thief: The Dark Project* and *Deus Ex* before this, taking out enemies also enables the opportunity for more thorough exploration of a level.

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[133] Punching them being an exception, apparently.

All of this essentially makes employing violence, whether it be lethal or not, feel like the most rewarding way of playing the game.

Sparing

As in the original *Deus Ex*, sparing is an exercise in using either nonlethal weapons/takedowns or avoiding enemies entirely. However, as mentioned in the attacking section, the latter option does not afford a player any points that the player who knocks everyone out will not also get. Therefore, sparing largely becomes an exercise in walking up to everyone and knocking them out.

Comparing the lethal takedown method to the nonlethal version shows that each has their own pros and cons, but that nonlethal takedowns are generally better. For starters they are mechanically faster to pull off: tapping a key is quicker than having to hold it down for a split second longer. Furthermore, although the tutorials say nothing about experience points gained via takedowns, experimentation reveals that nonlethal takedowns grant 50 points total, while lethal ones only grant 30.[134] Lethal takedowns also make enough noise to alert any nearby guards, whereas nonlethal takedowns, despite aesthetically making just as much noise,[135] are completely silent as far as the game mechanics are concerned. A player can sneak up and punch out a guard perhaps only a meter away from another one, and the second guard will not detect anything so long as this act of violence fails to enter their field of vision. The only benefit that lethal takedowns seem to have over nonlethal ones is that unconscious guards can be woken up again, as previously mentioned. Because of the way the point system works, incentivizing never

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[134] "Takedown: Experience," *Deus Ex Wiki*, last modified July 18, 2021,
https://deusex.fandom.com/wiki/Takedown#Experience.
[135] The smack of a metal fist impacting someone's head; the grunt emitted by said head.

being seen and never raising any alarms, using lethal takedowns ends up feeling like an act of sloppiness, relegated to those players who aren't skilled enough to prevent unconscious bodies from being discovered. This feels somewhat like an echo, intentional or not, of *Thief*'s messaging that, "Violence is the mark of the amateur."

It swiftly becomes clear that the procedural rhetoric embedded in the point system encourages close range takedowns of every enemy. Experimenting with long distance takedowns (read: using ranged weapons) not only replicates the trend of the player being rewarded more points for nonlethality, but also shows that the close-range takedowns yield the largest amount of experience points. Not taking down enemies, and avoiding them when possible as the tutorial suggests one should do, yields no points. This encouragement toward nonlethally punching everyone is also encouraged via other game mechanics such as the looting system. Knocked out or dead enemies can be searched, yielding both valuable resources in the form of money and ammunition, but also sometimes valuable information for circumventing obstacles in the future, such as passcodes for door locks or computer systems. This was the same for the original *Deus Ex* where currently conscious enemies could not be searched. It's only when going back to *Thief: The Dark Project* that we had a pickpocketing system, where keys could be lifted off a guard's person while they are still conscious. It is important to note that taking out enemies does not void the acquisition of any of the achievements for never being detected. There is nothing that a player who does not engage with the enemies at all gains over the player who knocks everyone out. More points, more resources, and more intel all make it easier for the player to progress, making it easier for them to become a more "efficient pacifist." Basically, and somewhat ironically: the easiest way to achieve the "Pacifist" achievement is to go around punching people in the head with your metal arms.

In terms of influencing the player towards a certain playstyle it contrasts heavily with the first *Deus Ex*. There are not many cases of major NPCs encouraging lethal or nonlethal approaches. Narratively *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* leaves the choice up to you, but mechanically it rewards the nonlethal approach more. This serves to essentially empower the violent but nonlethal playstyle while further codifying it, via achievement, as the pacifistic one.

One final important point to focus on, which is not covered during the tutorial or first mission, is the pacifist achievement and the exemption given to "boss fights." At a few points during the game players will find themselves locked in a room (or series of rooms) with a much stronger enemy than the usual fare they face. These encounters can only be surpassed with the death of the boss, even if nonlethal methods are used to wear the boss down (such as tranquilizer darts), which occurs during scripted cutscenes. This leads to pacifist rather clumsily being defined as one who: "Complete[s] *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* without anyone dying by your hand. (Boss fights do not count.)"[136]

SaveScumming

Saving and loading work about as one would expect, returning complete control over the saving and loading mechanics to players after the brief divergence that was *Mirror's Edge*. Somewhat like *Mirror's Edge*, however, it also employs frequent autosaving, should the player forget to save for themselves. Quicksave and quickload are both available at almost every moment of gameplay and triggered by one button push each, allowing for quick usage of both, which in turn makes save scumming all the easier.

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[136] Eidos Montréal, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

Save scumming is itself encouraged to an even greater degree than in its predecessor *Deus Ex*, due to the aforementioned point system rewarding knocking everyone out. There are certainly cases where the tutorial text is right, that the easier path is to entirely avoid enemies that aren't blocking your way, but doing so would mean giving up on valuable points, resources, and possibly intel. This encourages a style of problem solving that involves a small amount of trial and error, where players try to figure out what is the best way to lure enemies away from their compatriots, one at a time. The addition of the goal to knock everyone out, even if it's only implicitly being encouraged by the point system, makes save scumming arguably even more necessary than it was in *Thief: The Dark Project*, or *Deus Ex*.

Another complicating factor is how knocked out enemies can still die if they, for example, fall from a great height or are exposed to lethal damage (being caught in an explosion, being shot at, etc.) and so achieving the Pacifist achievement can also require a lot of save scumming to avoid this happening.

Dishonored

Released in October of 2012,[137] *Dishonored* is the last game on this list before *Undertale*, and its lineage can clearly be seen in the *Thief* and *Deus Ex* games. It is a first person stealth game (see figure 1.18) with role playing elements, it includes NPCs whom you can converse with and who will react differently depending on how you play, and it includes an achievement for completing the game without killing anyone.[138] It builds on the nonlethal options introduced in the previous games by including completely different objectives for progressing nonlethally

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[137] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Dishonored," last modified July 21, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dishonored.
[138] "Clean Hands," *Dishonored Wiki*, last modified February 18, 2021,
https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/Clean_Hands.

(vs progressing lethally) and even has an ending that varies depending on how many enemies you have killed while playing through the game. However, even with this increased visibility and importance afforded to there being a nonlethal way of playing the game, narratively and mechanically it still frames this playstyle as being an alternative way of playing rather than the norm. It is, however, the first game on this list to wholly disconnect morality and pacifism: sparing your targets sometimes feels like the more morally questionable option, which shall be touched on later by looking at the Lady Boyle mission.

Figure 1.18: A screenshot from the tutorial area of Dishonored, showing Corvo holding a pistol and a sword, as well as giving a tutorial prompt on the pickpocketing mechanic.

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

The game opens with the PC, Corvo, returning home from somewhere, and introduces the stealth mechanics with an innocent game of hide and seek. Corvo is the bodyguard for Empress Jessamine, and her daughter Emily wants to play. This innocent play serves as the game's first

tutorial and roughly teaches the player how to hide. There is almost immediately some dissonance created when the first tutorial pop up appears, however. Note the drawn weapons and rigid postures in figure 1.19. This image, and the accompanying text, makes it clear that using the stealth mechanics to hide from Princess Emily is not what they will typically be used for. The drawn swords also imply a level of violence being tied to the stealth mechanics, though it's a little unclear who is wielding the violence: the player or the enemy NPCs.
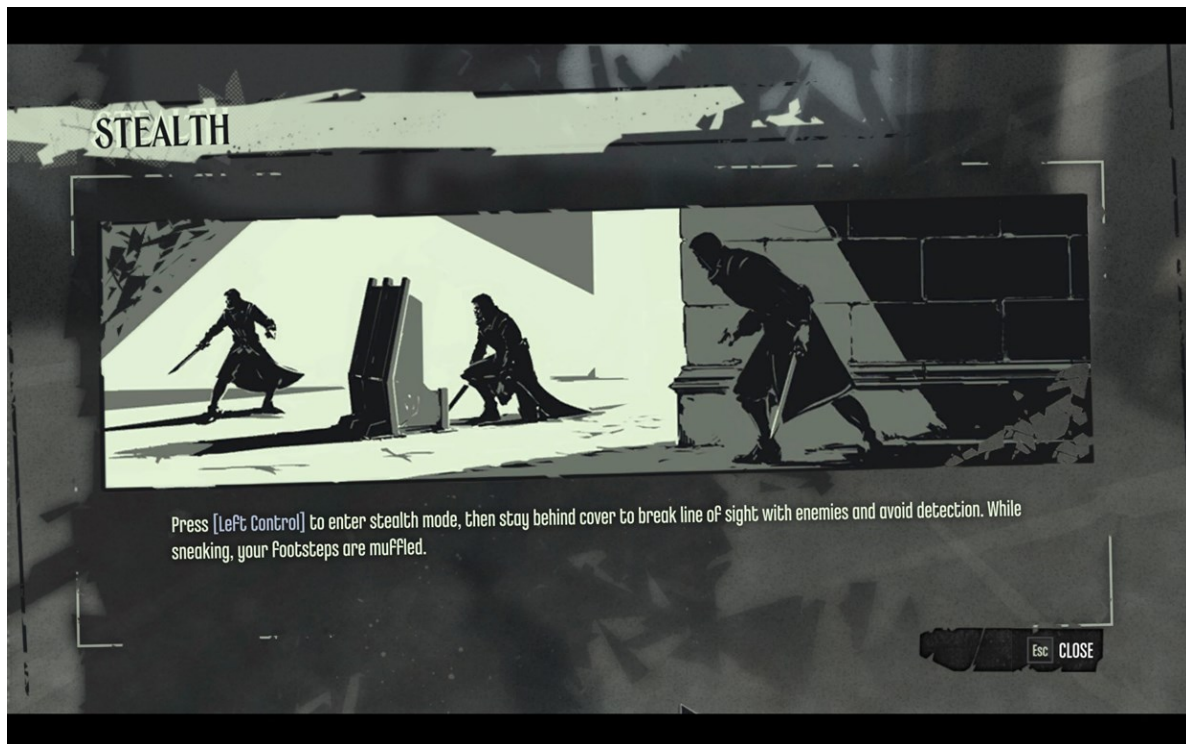
Figure 1.19: This tutorial message pops up in the middle of an affectionate game of hide and seek between you and Emily, in the opening level of Dishonored. Even with the innocent framing of a game of hide and seek, violent imagery is baked into the tutorial message.

Shortly after this, the empress and her daughter are set upon by assassins. With the game having already introduced your character as their bodyguard, fighting back seems to be the logical choice. However, the game provides no nonlethal options at this point,[139] already causing a conundrum for the pacifist player. I reasoned that killing these assassins would constitute a

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[139] Corvo pulls out a sword and pistol.

breach of a pacifist run, however this feels very narratively dissonant as your character's literal

job is the protection of the empress and her daughter. To the game's credit, it does allow the

player to focus only on blocking attacks until the assassin's teleport away.

Either way though, the 'do not kill anyone' requirement of the "Clean Hands"

achievement,[140] does not include the prologue assassins.[141] The killing of various animals such as

rats and wolfhounds also does not breach the rules for getting this achievement. This is a case of

the mechanical systems not intuitively aligning with the aesthetics of the situation, and contrasts

with the much more strictly defined Pacifist achievement in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

However, it also shows how pacifism in video games becomes its own strictly defined thing, as

per the logic of a game's systems, and has less to do with a player's personal beliefs. This does

not stop players from defining their own levels of pacifist play, of course, as covered earlier in

this chapter with *Doom* and *Thief*.

The assassins are ultimately successful in killing the empress and stealing her daughter;

Corvo is framed for the murder and locked away, thus beginning a prison breakout level. The

tutorial messages continue here, with the next one introducing "Assassinations and nonlethal

takedowns." After equipping a sword, the player is conveniently presented with a guard's back[142]

and given the option of quickly dispatching him with lethal means via left clicking the mouse or

knocking him out with the more complex method of holding a button down. Mechanically the

lethal method is faster and easier, though the tutorial popup does cryptically advise: "Using

stealth and the nonlethal approach has benefits: Fewer rats and weepers, some people react

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[140] *Dishonored's* version of a pacifist achievement.

[141] "Clean Hands."

[142] Something that a number of these games like to do.

favorably, and the final outcome is not as dark."[143] The last part is presumably alluding to getting a better ending if the player avoids killing people as much as possible.

Not killing anyone during the prison breakout level becomes something of an exercise in frustration however: there is exactly one nonlethal takedown option, and it needs to be executed from stealth on an unaware enemy. Players can instead elect to try to avoid enemies entirely, but this too requires a high level of proficiency. The very first area forces players through a location that is being overlooked by four guards and being spotted by any of them results in a situation that is virtually impossible to escape without employing lethal means or reloading a saved game and trying again. Running away isn't even as effective as it was in *Thief: The Dark Project*, as guards here seem to be as fast as the PC is, and are very persistent in their chasing.

In contrast, lethally stabbing everyone is quite easy. Even alerted enemies will go down in a few hits, and Corvo has numerous lethal tricks up his sleeve such as a counterattack, a pistol, and lethally dropping down on enemies from above. The game's systems, at least in this level, seem to go easiest on someone employing lethal force.

There are, in fact, numerous parallels with *Thief: The Dark Project*, beyond just the stealth requirement for nonlethal takedowns. *Dishonored* also includes a pickpocketing mechanic, making taking out enemies less of a requirement if the player is looking to maximize their resources. There are also plenty of locations where the player can sit and eavesdrop on guards to learn valuable information or even just narrative context for this world. In the sewer area immediately after escaping the prison the player even runs into traps that can be avoided via careful observation. Like in *Thief*, all these systems in *Dishonored* encourage players to move slowly and cautiously: to spend time watching and listening before acting.

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[143] Arkane Studios, *Dishonored*, Steam version, Bethesda Softworks, October 9, 2012, Microsoft Windows.

Once out of this tutorial area, Corvo is recruited into a resistance and explicitly called upon to perform assassinations. The game is very explicit in the framing of Corvo as a skilled assassin, who has been hired by the resistance to **be** an assassin. Information gleaned by listening in on conversations and reading various notes scattered around also reveals that Corvo does not have a history of "being nonviolent," resulting in a degree of ludo-narrative dissonance perhaps for those players choosing to play him as a pacifist.

Occasionally however, the game does drop little bits of dialogue that question whether, narratively, Corvo's role is limited to being a "Master Assassin." Such as that with Callista Curnow: "Campbell is going to poison my uncle. Do you think you could protect him? You used to do that, right? Before you had your current profession, before you became an assassin."[144] However these moments are rare and not usually part of the main story path.

Interestingly, right before embarking on their first assassination mission, players are granted supernatural powers that greatly empower the stealthy and pacifist approach. The ability to teleport is unlocked by default and enables not only circumventing areas that are under heavy watch by guards, but also enables climbing up into places where guards can't reach you should you be detected. Another neat trick is to immediately teleport behind a guard who has spotted you, which puts you back into stealth and the enemy back into a state where they are unaware of you, re-enabling the ability to perform a nonlethal takedown. Players also enter this level now equipped with a crossbow that can fire sleep darts, giving players another nonlethal takedown option. The level design opens up a tremendous amount as well, often enabling Corvo to find high up perches from where he can observe enemy movements and plan his next move. Stealth and evasion suddenly feel much more powerful.

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[144] Arkane Studios, *Dishonored*.

In contrast, the "charge in and start swinging your sword around" approach becomes increasingly difficult. Many more enemies are present in this first mission compared to the number that were in the prison area. In addition to this, many more of them are also armed with pistols or other ranged weapons of some kind, making coming out of stealth a far more lethal proposition for the player. All of this shifts the game much more towards rewarding stealth.

Still, the player has been given a mission to kill a particular person, and it is only shortly before reaching their target that players are put into a position to overhear some guards talking, which opens an "optional" nonlethal way of taking their target out. In this instance, players are informed that they can brand their target, Overseer Campbell, in order to have him permanently ejected from the enemy's ranks. Doing so requires a number of steps above and beyond what merely killing him requires, and while there are numerous opportunities and options for killing him, there is only the one nonlethal option. Upon completion of the mission the people who gave the player this mission in the first place do not acknowledge a nonlethal takedown in any way; killing Campbell and branding him a heretic to be cast out both result in the exact same, "Somehow you took down the High Overseer Campbell against the odds," line.

The way a nonlethal method of removing your target conveniently pops up mere moments before you need it, the way your handlers make no distinction between "dead" and "exiled," and the way killing is easier (both from a controls perspective and a mission layout perspective)[145] all serves to frame the pacifist route as an alternate route. Players are expected to fill the shoes of an assassin, but if they so choose there is something of an easter egg route where they don't have to kill anyone. This alternate route mentality can be seen in some quotes from the developers themselves. In an interview, co-creative director, Raphael Colantonio, stated that:

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[145] Right before meeting Campbell in the mission, the player is given an option to poison his wine glass, making a lethal assassination far more expedient.

[E]arly on in development, the fact that players could get through "Dishonored" without killing anyone was "almost like an Easter Egg. " It was possible, but it wasn't a driving priority. But as Colantonio and [Harvey Smith, co-creative director] told people about this possibility, they noticed something: People got *really* excited about it.

"We realized that it was something that people really wanted," Colantonio says. "And so then we made it a mandate to make sure that we approached the entire game with non-lethal options."[146]

This "alternate route" framing also crops up in some of the game's side missions: during the mission to assassinate Overseer Campbell the player can meet and interact with an NPC known as Granny Rags. Doing so unlocks a side objective, that ends with her asking the player to effectively infect a significant portion of the neighborhood with the plague by contaminating a local gang's black market plague cure. A mission clue on the objective screen even warns that, although ostensibly you are targeting the gang, anyone else who drinks their contaminated product will also be infected.[147] Although various guides point out that doing so does not invalidate a Clean Hands run, infecting people with the plague still seems antithetical to the idea of not killing them. This is essentially another case of the game's underlying mechanics arguing something that is at odds with what the aesthetic or surface level seems to be arguing.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming:

Attacking

As with all the first-person games coming before it, left clicking on the mouse causes the player to attack with whatever weapon they currently have equipped. *Dishonored*, similarly to

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[146] Winda Benedetti, "10 tips for playing 'Dishonored' without shedding a drop of blood," *NBC News*, October 9, 2012, https://www.nbcnews.com/technology/10-tips-playing-dishonored-without-shedding-drop-blood-1c6327490.
[147] Arkane Studios, *Dishonored*.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution, also has close range lethal and nonlethal takedown attacks but the execution of each varies. Where *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* uses the same button, *Dishonored* uses two different buttons and requires a different interaction for both. Killing is the default left-click, knocking out is holding down the ctrl key (by default; I rebound mine to a thumb button on my mouse) for a few seconds. There is also a lethal only variant of the takedown where Corvo drops onto enemies from above. Players also have access to numerous secondary weapons which can be fired by using the right mouse button. The first is a pistol which is loud and lethal. The second is a crossbow that has two lethal options (regular and incendiary bolts) and one nonlethal option (sleep darts). In addition to these two options, players also have access to lethal mines in the form of the "Spring Razor" and explosive grenades. And finally, players can unlock access to a number of supernatural abilities that can be used to lethal effect such as Devouring Swarm (summons a horde of rats to attack enemies) and Blood Thirsty (which empowers the player's melee kills).

Just by the numbers, the player has many more lethal modes of attack at their disposal than they do nonlethal ones. There also are a number of interesting powers that only have lethal applications such as those mentioned above but also Shadow Kill, an ability that only activates when an enemy is killed. The narrative framing of the PC as an assassin also encourages the player to be a little more lethal. All of this makes killing far easier to do, even if just by accident.

Mechanically, killing is penalized a little bit; as the tutorial message at the start of the prison level illuminates, killing will mean more rats and weepers and a darker ending. This can lead to a feeling of dissonance where the player is given all these lethal means for employing an attack mechanic, but then feels punished for using them by the end of the game. Ultimately the

game's systems make violence exciting while simultaneously encouraging players to keep the usage of it to a minimum.

Sparing

Similar to most of the other stealth games on this list, sparing can come in the form of nonlethal knockouts or avoiding enemies entirely. In the case of the former the game is somewhat like *Thief: The Dark Project* in that knocking out enemies is best accomplished from stealth. As mentioned under the attack section, the player has two nonlethal takedown methods at their disposal: sneaking up behind enemies and choking them out and shooting them with a sleep dart from a crossbow. Once players unlock access to their supernatural abilities they also gain powerful tools for employing a more avoidant style of play as well, such as the Blink ability enabling teleportation, or the Bend Time ability enabling the player to freeze time and move past enemies faster than they can notice you.

To play the game as a pacifist, perhaps more than any of the other games on this list, barring *Postal 2,* is to avoid the use of many of the game's mechanics. Most of the weapons you get only have lethal applications. Not only that but nonlethal knockouts start out feeling slightly finicky in comparison to their lethal versions. The requirement of holding down the button makes it take longer and it's also easier to mess up: letting go of the button early botches the attempt and results in the enemy immediately attacking you. Some enemies, such as the wolfhounds, don't even have a nonlethal knockout option when snuck up to, and must be either avoided or taken out with a sleep dart.[148] While many of the lethal methods of attack feel flashy and powerful, the nonlethal methods feel somewhat restrained in comparison.

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[148] Though as previously mentioned, killing wolfhounds does not void the Clean Hands achievement.

It is worth going over the Clean Hands achievement itself as its simple edict of "Complete the game without killing anyone"[149] is decidedly less clear than *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s Pacifist achievement, in practice. Reading the *Dishonored* wiki reveals a much more complex approach than what, "Complete the game without killing anyone,"[150] suggests. In addition to it being okay for Corvo to kill the prologue assassins, wolfhounds, and rats:

> Clean Hands does not consider <u>Corvo Attano</u> to have killed someone if a person is killed by someone other than Corvo. For instance, if naturally-occurring rats kill a <u>City Watch Guard</u>, it is not considered a kill, but using <u>Devouring Swarm</u> to kill a guard *does* count as a kill. Similarly, deaths resulting from a fight between guards and <u>weepers</u>, or <u>thugs</u>, are not counted as kills. Unconscious characters killed by naturally-occuring rat swarms do not count against this achievement[1], but unconscious characters killed by other means (*e.g.,* falling from heights) are considered killed by Corvo, and do prevent the achievement.[151]

Note that clarity with which each condition for getting or voiding the achievement is laid out, codifying the term "pacifism" here into an explicit rule set to be followed, with no flexibility.

Dishonored also becomes somewhat noteworthy when it comes to sparing its main assassination targets. Where most games in this chapter don't bother to make a huge distinction between "dead" and "knocked out," and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* forces all boss fights to end with the boss dead, *Dishonored* is the first to have vastly different requirements and objectives for sparing an assassination target versus killing them.

However, it is perhaps due to *Dishonored* trying to juggle this contradiction of being a nonlethal assassin that the pacifist route sometimes veers into morally dark territory. While most of the other games frame being nonlethal as being a good person (or at least, being a better person) *Dishonored* sometimes makes you question whether killing your target would've been

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[149] Arkane Studios, *Dishonored*.
[150] Arkane Studios, *Dishonored*.
[151] "Clean Hands."

the less questionable decision. This is perhaps best exemplified by the mission that sees the player tasked with assassinating the character of Lady Boyle. As with all the assassination quests, the "default" is reinforced by the mission being titled: "Assassinate Lady Boyle," and the player is given explicit instruction to kill her. The choice to deal with her nonlethally is framed as an optional objective, which shows up as a result of talking to Brisby at the party, much like how the option to not kill Overseer Campbell only shows up after eavesdropping on some guards. Ultimately, in a move that series co-creative director Harvey Smith regards as "regrettably dark,"[152] the nonviolent solution is to knock Lady Boyle out and hand her over to a man who is clearly obsessed with her. He promises that he will take care of her and that she will never be heard from again. The thought that you're selling someone into sexual slavery is not a huge leap in logic, leaving *Dishonored* the one game on this list where "sparing" someone's life can leave the player feeling unsure about the morality of their choice.

Still, there are plenty of elements to every NPC who isn't an assassination target that can make players feel like they're doing a good thing by sparing them. As in *Thief: The Dark Project*, the overheard enemy banter can add a degree of sympathy for the game's NPCs. The narrative framing of you being framed for the empress's death also serves to make it feel like many of the game's basic enemies are just regular people trying to survive. With the alternate route feel to sparing assassination targets, but the game punishing players with a bad ending for killing everyone, it really feels like killing the assassination targets but leaving everyone else untouched is the intended way of playing the game.

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[152] Andy Kelly, "The making of Dishonored's greatest mission, Lady Boyle's Last Party," *PC Gamer*, March 25, 2020, https://www.pcgamer.com/the-making-of-dishonoreds-greatest-mission-lady-boyles-last-party/.

Saving and loading, including quick save and quick load options, are again completely controlled by the player. The game also features an autosave system that saves when reaching certain level milestones.

Perhaps more so than any of the other games on this list, attempting to get past the tutorial prison area both nonlethally and without being spotted has save scumming almost as a requirement. There are frequently spots where players need to recognize when their windows of opportunity for rushing into a situation are. Enemies become alerted very quickly and are very hard to escape from. Much as it was in *Thief: The Dark Project*, success as a pacifist is heavily tied to always remaining in stealth.

The pickpocketing mechanic also encourages save scumming. Where in *Thief* pickpocketing was largely relegated to just a few guards with key items, here most enemies carry a resource players can use. For those trying to avoid even knocking anyone out but still maximize their resource gains, this can encourage the risky behavior of pickpocketing every single enemy. This behavior, in turn, is heavily facilitated by save scumming.

The acquisition of knowledge also continues to be a theme, as it was in the previous first-person stealth games as well. Coupled with how easy it is to kill targets, the temptation to wipe out all enemies in order to facilitate exploring the levels is very high. As frustration over constantly having to reload a saved game in order to continue their pacifist play mounts, players may also be tempted to engage in some cathartic murdering as well. Save scumming here enables players to engage with all the "fancy but deadly" attack mechanics that they have at their disposal, while still continuing on a Pacifist run. So long as players have a saved game from

before they murdered everyone, they can always load their saved game and effectively "erase" any misdeeds they've committed.

Conclusion

There are two interwoven streams that define pacifism in games: the emergence of player-defined pacifism in violent video games through emergent play, and developer-led initiatives of introducing nonviolent options in otherwise violent video games. It is in the former that the term "pacifist" gets picked up,[153] and it is in the latter that there is a push toward enabling less lethal methods. The developer-led pacifism takes many forms, emerging out of both a desire for more complex gameplay and as a response to player interest. *Ultima IV* springs from a moralistic perspective of a developer wishing to encourage more heroic behavior in his players. *Thief: The Dark Project* springs from a challenge perspective, playing with the idea that killing is too easy, and that players looking for a real challenge will avoid it. *Deus Ex* raises the idea of having the game's narrative react to your level of lethality, via its NPCs. *Postal 2*, a game unlike any of the others, includes a pacifist route as a tongue in cheek commentary on how video game violence is inherently fun. *Mirror's Edge* becomes one of the first games to incorporate a "pacifist" achievement in a meaningful way but is also a game in the first-person genre that makes running away from enemies rather than fighting them feel fun. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* continues what its predecessor *Deus Ex* started but also explicitly codifies its pacifist route, laying down rules for what a player is allowed and not allowed to do. And *Dishonored* does a lot to make its "nonlethal assassination methods" distinct from its lethal ones, as well as

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[153] In fact, in all of these games, and even into *Undertale*, is it still the fans who predominantly use the term pacifist to describe the nonlethal style of play.

having the ending branch based on how murderous players were. It also raises questions about how moral it is to avoid killing your enemies at times, such as with the Lady Boyle quest. In this back-and-forth negotiation, pacifist runs are often framed as alternative routes to a more conventionally violent one, and come to be centered around a lack of lethality more than anything else. Save scumming also becomes an increasingly important part of enabling the completion of these pacifist runs. The next chapter will explore *Undertale* in depth, and how it builds off of, and subverts, this definition of pacifism.

Chapter 2: Undertale Changes Everything

Undertale is a roleplaying game (RPG) developed almost solely by Toby Fox that hearkens back to RPGs from the 80s and 90s, especially those being developed in Japan, in which players would murder their way through vast swaths of enemies on their way to saving the world. Much like these JRPGs, *Undertale* has a low fidelity aesthetic and turn-based combat, and any player familiar with these types of games will be primed to play *Undertale* in a violent, combative way. And yet, *Undertale* completely subverts not only the conventions of its own genre but even previous conceptions of pacifism in video games. Almost immediately after starting the game, the narrative brings up this unique-to-the-genre idea of talking to your enemies instead of killing them; as the tagline on its Kickstarter page says: "A traditional role-playing game where no one has to get hurt."[154] *Undertale* borrows, bends, and even breaks many of the nonviolent game mechanics that games in the previous chapter defined and pioneered.

The game opens with a cutscene that very briefly summarizes the backstory of the game: "Long ago, two races ruled over Earth: HUMANS and MONSTERS. One day, war broke out between the two races. After a long battle, the humans were victorious. They sealed the monsters underground with a magic spell."[155] The player plays a human child (the details of the child, such as age and sex are kept purposefully vague) who only "speaks" when the player makes a choice for the character to say.[156] The game starts when this child falls into "The Underground," the area to which all monsters in the world have been banished. The central conflict of the story is about

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[154] Toby Fox, "UnderTale," *Kickstarter*, last updated February 1, 2017, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1002143342/undertale.

[155] Toby Fox, *Undertale,* Steam version, September 15, 2015, Microsoft Windows, art by Temmie Chang.

[156] For example, early on the player is asked if they prefer cinnamon or butterscotch, and they are given an option to choose one of the two words.

how the monsters dream of returning to the surface one day, but thus far they have been unable to break the magic spell sealing them underground with their own power. They have been taught that humans are scary adversaries who must be hated, but many of them have never seen a human before. The introduction of you, a human, is something that disrupts the status quo and gives them a greater chance of breaking the spell and accomplishing their dream. It is important to note that the game does not attach any sort of moral attribute to the monsters (declaring them inherently evil, for example) and instead chooses to portray them much like regular human people just going about their daily lives.

The game plays out with the player moving their PC through the world, solving puzzles and running into random encounters[157] with monsters, and it is in these encounters that *Undertale* introduces its fairly unique twist on this type of RPG. Although every monster can be fought and killed in a fashion typical to the genre, every monster can also be convinced to stop fighting in a nonviolent way as well. The significance of this change to players may have even skewed Google searches; figure 2.1 shows Google search data from 2005 to 2020, specifically incidences of searches including the word "pacifist."[158] The scale has been normalized from 1-100, with 100 representing the highest number of searches per year over the entire time period. The dot circled in red is September 2015, the month that *Undertale* was released — a correlation perhaps, but what a correlation! Searches including the word "pacifist" spiked right after the release of *Undertale*, illustrating why *Undertale* is an extremely important milestone in the evolution of pacifist runs in video games.

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[157] "[A] feature commonly used in various role-playing games whereby combat encounters with non-player character (NPC) enemies or other dangers occur sporadically and at random, usually without the enemy being physically detected beforehand." - *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Random encounter," last modified January 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Random_encounter.

[158] "Pacifist," *Google Trends*, accessed March 23, 2021, https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=pacifist.
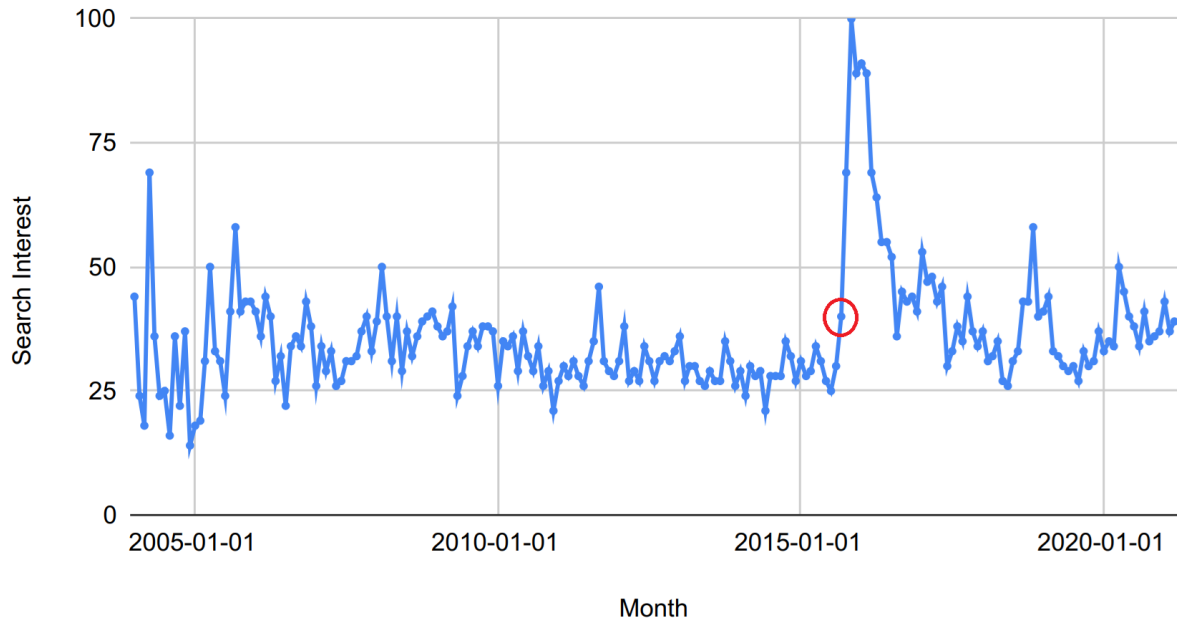
Figure 2.1: Google search data from 2005 to 2020 showing searches for the word "pacifist." The approximate date of Undertale's release has been circled in red.

The Game

To understand *Undertale*, it is important to introduce the main narrative structure and a few major characters. Narrative-wise, there are three main endings. It is largely the player's choice to kill or spare all the monsters (NPCs) in the game, which determines the eventual game ending. Generally, not killing any monsters typically leads to what the fans have dubbed the "True Pacifist Route," killing all the monsters leads to the "Genocide Route," and doing something in between (killing some monsters but not all, for example) leads to a number of different "Neutral Routes."[159] The true pacifist route is, understandably, what makes *Undertale*

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[159] "Endings," *Undertale Wiki*, last modified December 20, 2020, https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Endings.

relevant to this thesis. It requires players to not only kill no monsters (and thus gain no experience and never level up), but also befriend the monsters via optional side quests. This route is the most emotionally fulfilling ending, with the PC and all the befriended monsters returning to the surface. It is also the only ending with credits that include the names of prominent Kickstarter backers, lending it more of a sense of finality.

The genocide route serves as a foil to the pacifist route and also subverts players' expectations regarding RPG gameplay. In simplified terms, players pursue the genocide route by seeking out and killing everyone, a behavior related to grinding[160] in other RPGs. This route plays heavily with the completionist mindset; for example a kill counter that is heavily reminiscent of *Doom*'s kill percentage score is added to each level in order to indicate how many monsters are left to kill in order to achieve 100% kills. The route itself arguably exists as completionist bait; one character even accuses the player of pursuing it purely because the option has been presented to them. There are a couple of extremely difficult boss fights that only occur during this route, also serving to incentivize those players who wish to beat every challenge that *Undertale* has to offer. The ending is abrupt: the player destroys everything leaving no future NPCs' interactions. There are no credits. And finally, restarting the game after a genocide playthrough requires additional steps and permanently[161] alters every subsequent playthrough such that an untainted pacifist playthrough is no longer possible.

Character-wise there is Frisk, the protagonist; Chara, the default name for Frisk's human predecessor; Flowey and Toriel, mentors to new players; and Sans and Papyrus[162], two animated

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[160] Grinding refers to "repetitive tasks, usually for a gameplay advantage or loot but in some cases for purely aesthetic or cosmetic benefits." - *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Grinding (video games)," last modified July 8, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grinding_(video_games).

[161] Permanently, unless players do some complicated technical chicanery such as deleting files out of their cloud saves on Steam, or even purchasing a whole new copy of the game under another account.

[162] Yes, they are named after fonts.

skeleton brothers who play roles as friends to the player. Frisk and Chara (a.k.a. the name that players input at the start of the game) are noted here largely to highlight that they are distinct characters, as this fact becomes an important plot point late in the game. Toriel fills the role of a well-meaning parental figure who is largely unaware of the broader picture, while Flowey ultimately serves as the primary antagonist of the game. It is revealed that Flowey used to have the power to SAVE and LOAD reality before the player showed up,[163] and used this power to both gain tremendous insight into how *Undertale* works as a game, but also to toy with the inhabitants of the underground for his own amusement. Upon arrival of the player, Flowey loses this power, but is still able to notice and remember when the player uses it. Sans is portrayed as jovial, laid back, and arguably lazy, however this front belies an incredible level of savviness. Although he is unable to manipulate the game like Flowey and the player can (saving and loading) he is nonetheless aware that there are people who have that power, and he takes direct action against the player during the genocide playthrough, serving as the final boss. And finally, Papyrus does not possess any of Sans's savviness and instead is a boisterous but earnest and kind-hearted soul who seeks to make friends with everyone, even his enemies.

Tutorial, First Level, and NPC Reactions

The first character you meet in the game is Flowey (see Figure 2.2), a seemingly friendly figure who shows up to tell you how to play the game. It's only a minor encounter, but it provides the first hint that *Undertale* is not a traditional JRPG. Even though his appearance and demeanor are nonthreatening, he intentionally misleads the player in his explanation of the battle

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[163] Where in most games the ability to save and load the game are seen as meta-mechanics that work outside of the narrative, in *Undertale* they are presented as being an important part of the narrative.
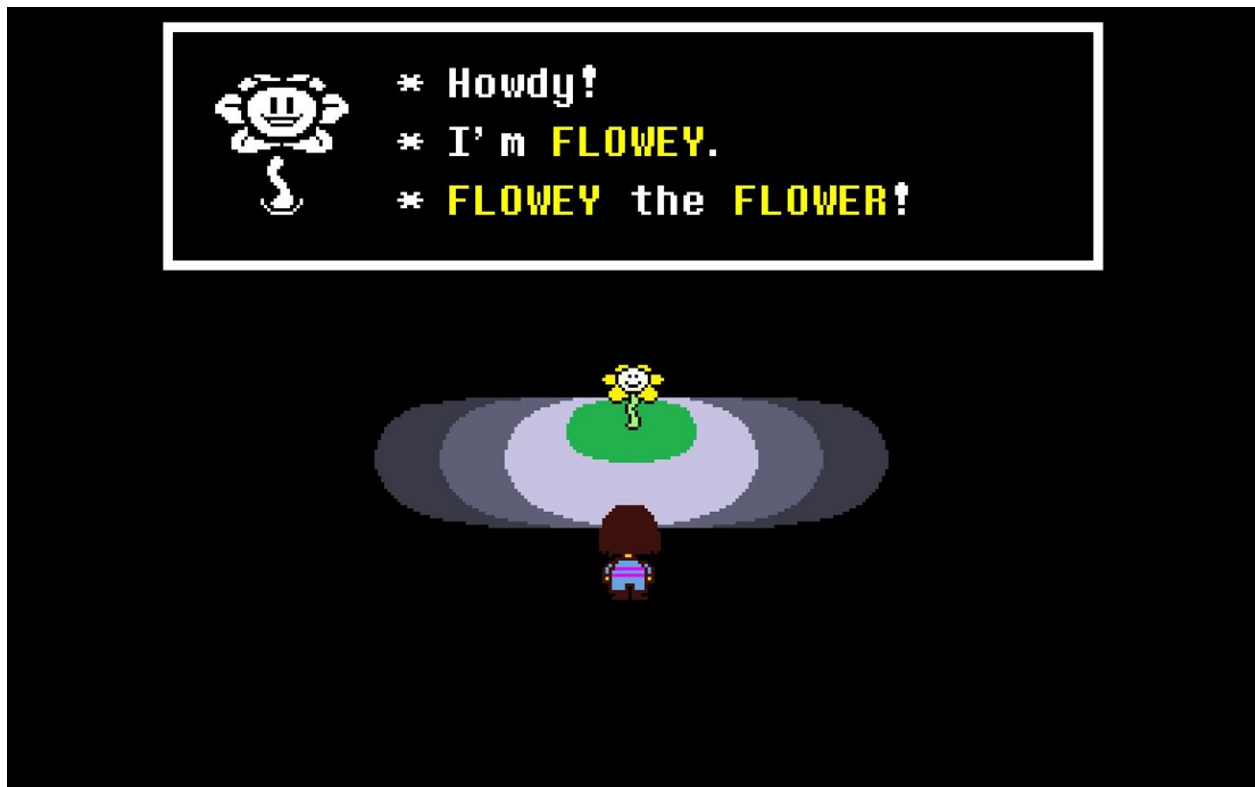
Figure 2.2: The introduction of Flowey, the first character you meet in Undertale.

Figure 2.3: Flowey, showing his true colors in Undertale.

mechanics: "Your SOUL starts off weak, but can grow strong if you gain a lot of LV. What's LV stand for? Why, LOVE of course! [...] Down here, LOVE is shared through... Little white... 'friendliness pellets.'"[164] Should the player continue to follow what Flowey tells them to do, and attempt to catch the "friendliness pellets," Flowey's true persona is revealed (see Figure 2.3). The player's "HP" is reduced to one point, and Flowey, taking on a much more menacing appearance, berates the player for being an idiot, further adding: "In this world, it's kill or BE killed."[165]

Just when it appears that you're going to be killed immediately after starting the game, however, the gloating Flowey is scared away by the second major NPC you encounter in the game: Toriel (see Figure 2.4). Toriel identifies herself as the "caretaker of the RUINS"[166] perhaps lending her a degree of authority here. Because she is introduced saving the player character's life, players will likely find themselves more predisposed to trust her as well. She can be said to take on the role of a parental figure, both due to the tone of her interactions with the PC (taking them to her home, making them a pie, and giving them a room of their own), but also explicitly with some dialogue options.[167] Essentially, she is a stark contrast to Flowey as a tutorial mentor.[168] While Flowey actively misinforms you in order to try and trick you, Toriel seems to be genuinely trying to help both the player and the PC navigate the game. Where Flowey tells you, "It's kill or be killed," Toriel tells you to avoid violence: "As a human living in the UNDERGROUND, monsters may attack you. You will need to be prepared for this situation.

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[164] Fox, *Undertale.*

[165] Fox, *Undertale.*

[166] Fox, *Undertale.*

[167] While talking to her via a cell phone, the player can choose to call her "mom."

[168] It is worth mentioning here that Toriel's name is a reference to the word "Tutorial."

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Figure 2.4: Toriel, after knocking Flowey away with a fireball in Undertale.

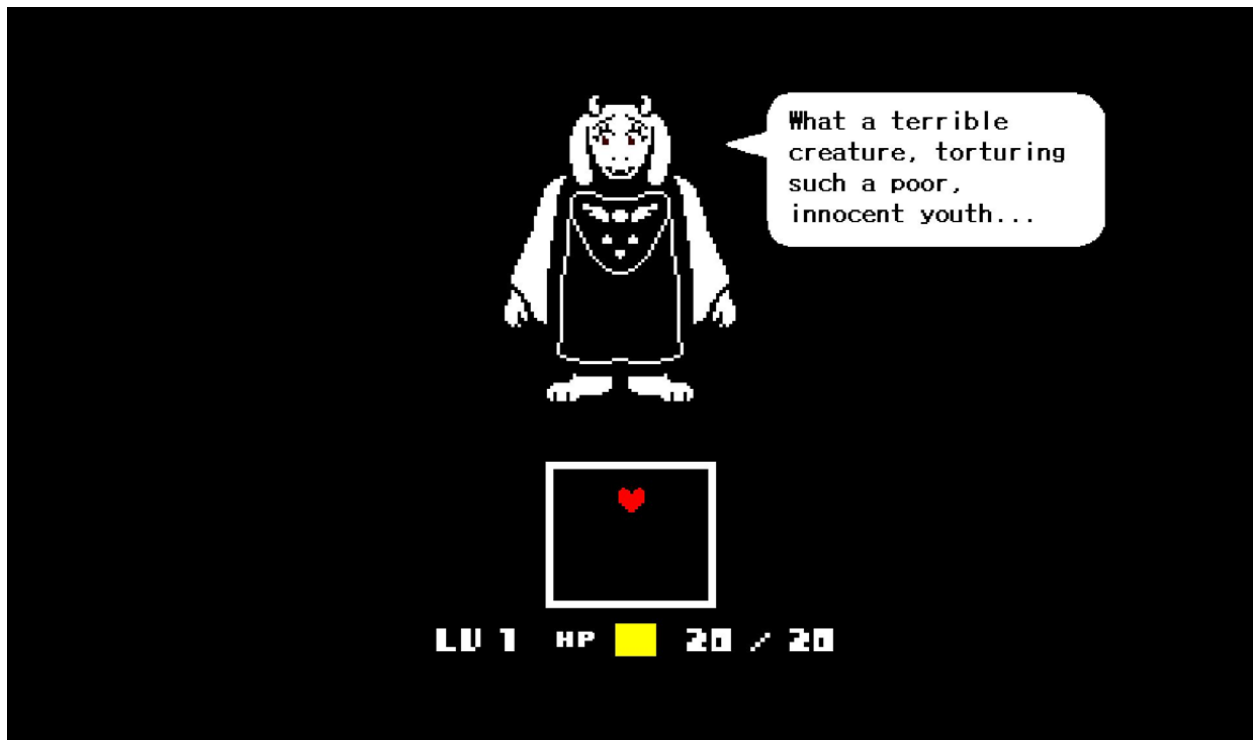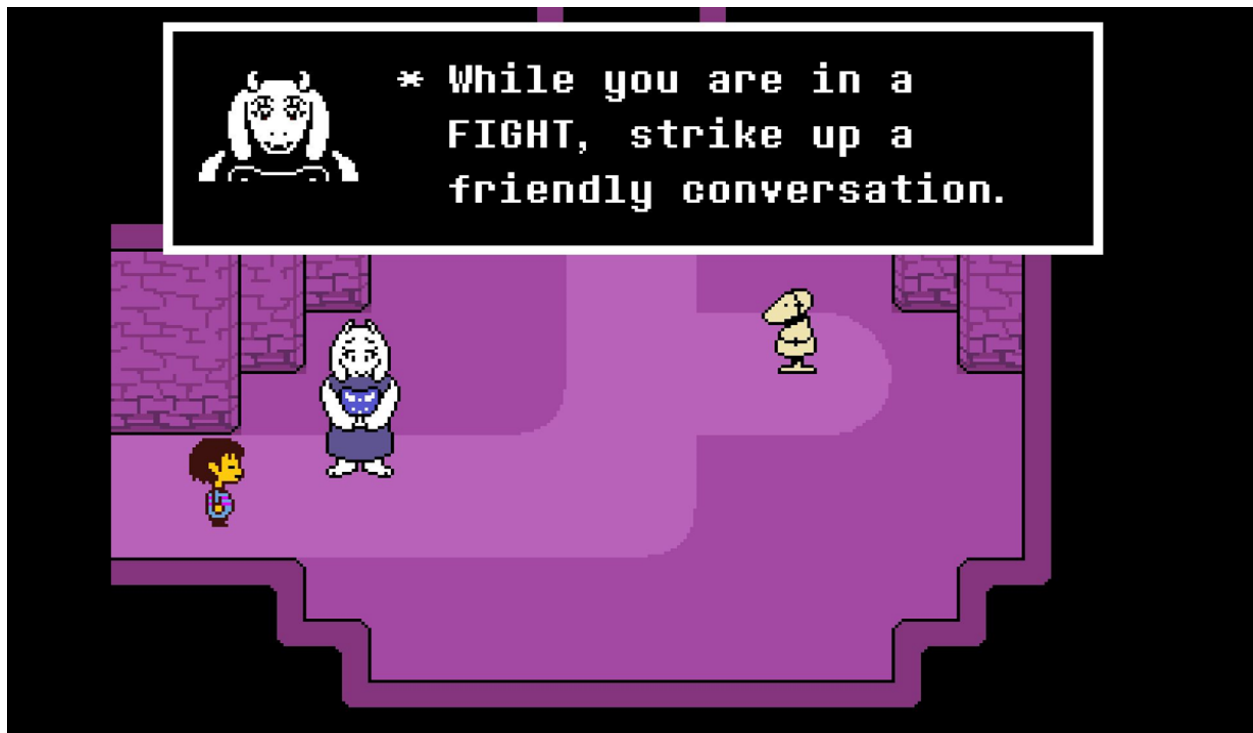*Figure 2.5: Undertale's Toriel instructing the player how to deal with being attacked by monsters. Also note the combat dummy on the right side of the screen, which Toriel wants you to practice talking to.*

However, worry not! The process is simple. When you encounter a monster, you will enter a FIGHT. While you are in a FIGHT, strike up a friendly conversation"[169] (see Figure 2.5). While Flowey gives you a very brief combat "tutorial" that basically shows you what **not** to do, Toriel gives you your first "full-fledged" combat tutorial and explicitly tells you to "strike up a friendly conversation" with a combat dummy. This advice is at odds not only with expectations of the genre but even with the setup of the combat screen itself. "FIGHT" is the very first option on the menu of player options while in combat, and it is always the highlighted option, lending it the feeling of being the default choice. Despite these things, Toriel encourages you to look under the ACT option. There you will find a "Check" option (which gives you some rough details on your adversary, often hinting at how you might pacify them non-violently) and a "Talk" option. Select the Talk option and you get the rather humorous note that "It doesn't seem much for conversation."[170] but the game further notes that, "TORIEL seems happy with you."[171] After this you are told that you have won the encounter, earning 0 EXP and 0 gold,[172] and taken back out of the combat encounter screen.

At this point in the game the player has little reason not to trust Toriel's version of how combat should be played out, and it is arguably only players who are familiar with the RPG genre who would have reason to think that combat should involve violence. Still, even though Toriel's overbearing desire to protect the PC from any danger might eventually cause her to be viewed as an unreliable mentor/tutorial figure, there is another (minor) NPC, met during the tutorial, who further reinforces Toriel's approach toward combat. They offer the following

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[169] Fox, *Undertale.*

[170] Fox, *Undertale.*

[171] Fox, *Undertale.*

[172] It is worth noting here that destroying the dummy **also** yields 0 EXP and 0 gold, so the game does not mechanically reward either approach (violent or nonviolent).

advice/request: "Excuse me, human. I have some advice for you about battling monsters. If you ACT a certain way or FIGHT until you almost defeat them... They might not want to battle you anymore. If a monster does not want to fight you, please... Use some MERCY,[173] human."[174] In the tutorial area of *Undertale*, you soon learn that every monster can be spared by first doing some action and then choosing the "Spare" option under Mercy. One blob monster can be spared immediately with no other actions required. One monster requires that you "Don't pick on it" (which it telegraphs by asking you not to pick on it during the fight). Another monster tags along in groups of monsters and can only be spared when the rest of its cohorts have been removed from the fight, either through defeat or sparing. This area teaches you a rough guideline that will serve you for virtually all future encounters: do some specific action and then spare the monster, and you can walk away from every encounter without having committed any major violence.

Eventually, at the end of the tutorial area, you arrive at an area merely titled: "Home," and the player is forced to make a decision. Going in you are greeted by a cozy looking living area and Toriel saying, "I want you to have a nice time living here."[175] A player could perhaps decide to stop playing the game here and declare that their PC decided to live out the rest of their lives peacefully with Toriel, but there is no such explicit choice within the game itself. Players knowledgeable in video game literacy recognize that they must find a course of action that will progress the game's narrative. In this case, players must confront Toriel and her desire to keep them safe.

Upon revealing a desire to leave, Toriel stands in the PC's way and tells them they must prove to her that they are strong enough to survive the harsh world outside of her home, initiating

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[173] The emphasis on the word mercy is an explicit reference to the MERCY option, which can be seen in Figure 2.8.
[174] Fox, *Undertale.*
[175] Fox, *Undertale.*

combat. This "prove yourself to me in order to proceed" gating is actually fairly common in video games, especially with tutorials. Developers can use it to test if players have gained enough experience, whether in the form of player experience or in-game numerical experience, in order to move on to the rest of the game. A player savvy in the genre of video games, and especially RPGs specifically, will likely see this as the fight where you wear down your opponent's health to almost zero, while avoiding death yourself, in order to prove that you are indeed strong enough to progress to the rest of the game. Oddly, this fight seems to break the convention that has been established thus far that there is always a way to avoid using the FIGHT command entirely. There is only one action (other than the default "Check" option that every monster has) and that is to "Talk." But talking never seems to change Toriel's disposition toward you and, in fact, if you use it enough times the game tells you directly, "Ironically, talking does not seem to be the solution to this situation."[176] Choosing the spare option merely results in Toriel responding with an ellipsis, and doesn't appear to do anything either. However, attacking Toriel ultimately leads to her death because the game does not call an end to the fight before a mortal blow can be struck, as is the convention in other games. Progressing through the door that Toriel was blocking, the player again runs into the flower named Flowey from before (see Figure 2.6). He taunts the player, reiterating that, "In this world, it's kill or be killed,"[177] and that Toriel died foolishly thinking she could avoid this "rule." Flowey disappears, the player continues out of the area, and the title screen appears. The player has finished the prologue/tutorial area.

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[176] Fox, *Undertale.*
[177] Fox, *Undertale.*
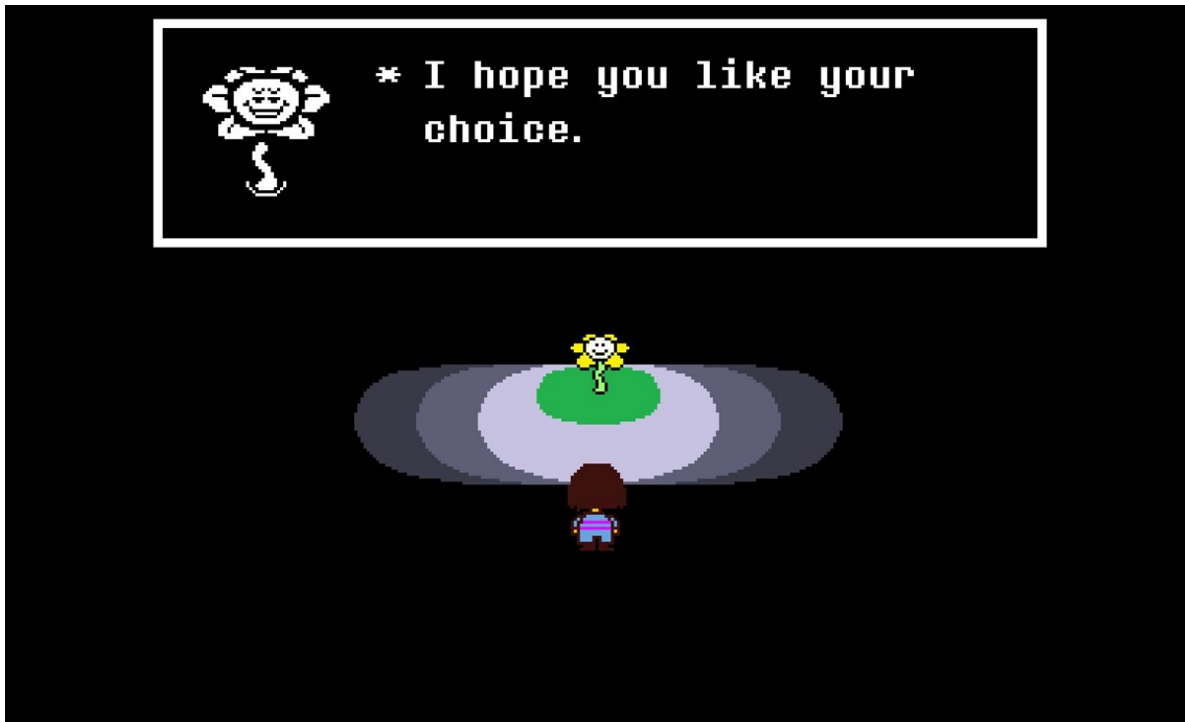
Figure 2.6: The character Flowey confronts the PC and player over their murder of Toriel in Undertale.

Figure 2.7: "You thought about telling Toriel that you saw her die." A line of dialogue from Undertale that only appears if the player kills Toriel, reloads to a save point before doing so, and then selects the Talk option.

Although the player can continue forward in the game at this point, and will be well on their way toward the neutral ending, the game seems to expect that at least a few players will try reloading their last save and redoing the fight, as there are multiple instances of dialogue that call out the player for doing this (see Figure 2.7). The first of which is Toriel remarking that the PC looks like they've "seen a ghost."[178] If the player figures out what they need to do in order to end the fight without killing Toriel (selecting the Spare option just over 20 times), Toriel relents and lets them pass. This time players are greeted by a smirking Flowey who congratulates you on your cleverness in avoiding the "kill or be killed" rule. However, he also points out that he knows you killed Toriel and then reloaded your game, explicitly calling out the player for save scumming. In summary, this first area of the game (including the purposefully unintuitive boss fight) teaches the pacifist player that Toriel's guidance of nonviolence is a trickier but possible way forward through the rest of the game, even if the player only arrived at it by exploiting their ability to load a saved game to undo something that they did.

Attacking, Sparing, SaveScumming

Attacking

The mechanic of attacking monsters happens within the context of combat, by selecting the "FIGHT" option and then performing a second timed button push to actually hit the monster. This always works the same way in every combat scenario, making it a very straightforward mechanic to use and understand. The separation of combat and exploration somewhat mirrors how the two were separated into different contexts in *Ultima IV* as well, though in *Undertale* you

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178 Fox, *Undertale.*

do not have a button dedicated to initiating combat with NPCs while in the exploration context. "FIGHT" is the easiest option to pick as it is the first option on the list and the default one to be selected. This hearkens back to not only the expected affordances of how turn based combat works in the RPG genre, but also the running premise of violence being the default option, as brought up in the discussion of *Doom*, but also later games such as *Deus Ex* and *Dishonored*.

Utilizing the attack option on monsters enough ultimately lowers their HP to the point of killing them, which, as per the RPG genre in general, results in the acquisition of money and EXP.[179] Money lets you buy better equipment: better weapons that do more damage and better armor that lets you absorb more damage. EXP, in turn, makes your LV[180] go up. And your LV going up, in turn, is a rough approximation of having your character get stronger in an RPG. Mechanically speaking, in *Undertale*, this means that HP[181] and DF[182] increase, allowing Frisk to absorb more damage in combat before receiving a gameover; and AT[183] increases, allowing Frisk to do more damage to enemies, and thus end combat faster. This means the more killing you do the better at it you become, a staple of the RPG genre. However, killing any monsters in this way makes getting the true pacifist ending, the narratively most fulfilling one, impossible. It is worth noting that killing monsters is the only form of violence that voids the true pacifist ending, once again furthering the pattern seen in the previously discussed games where video game pacifism is defined primarily by the avoidance of killing and not an avoidance of violence entirely.

Although it may seem odd to count narrative as a mechanic, a lot of the subversion of mechanics comes through *Undertale*'s narrative, so it is worth discussing the dynamic that the

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[179] Usually short for **EX**perience **P**oints in the RPG genre but, in *Undertale*, is short for **EX**ecution **P**oints.

[180] Usually short for **L**e**V**el in the RPG genre but, in *Undertale*, is short for **L**evel of **V**iolence.

[181] **H**it **P**oints.

[182] **D**e**F**ense.

[183] **AT**tack.

mechanic of attacking and killing monsters has on the narrative. In every single playthrough of the game, the player will ultimately find themselves being "judged" by the character Sans. He has many different lines based on different amounts of EXP acquired, and this encounter is arguably the most pointed that the game gets in calling out murderous players. One of his most interesting conversations comes about if you have killed his brother Papyrus.

The fight with Papyrus is one of the first instances where the game is very clear about not having to kill him. Not only is Papyrus portrayed as a somewhat likeable character, but after trading blows with him in combat for a while, Papyrus will (in his usual display of unearned bravado) claim that he cannot possibly kill you and that he will spare your life. It is at this point, with your adversary refusing to fight you any longer, that the player chooses between finishing Papyrus off, or ending the fight peacefully as Papyrus suggests. If the player chooses to kill Papyrus, then, when they get to Sans, he asks the following question: "sometimes… you act like you know what's gonna happen. like you've already experienced it all before. [...] if you have some sort of special power… isn't it your responsibility to do the right thing?"[184] The question is clearly breaking the fourth wall and is being directed not only at the PC, but also at the person playing the game. The player is able to answer yes or no and, although nothing changes beyond a few lines of response, the question is meant to inspire reflection in the player themselves regarding how responsible they feel for actions taken within a fictional game world.[185] It speaks to one of the core messages of *Undertale*: given the power to always come back from any failure, from any death, are you obligated to use that power to be kind beyond what would realistically be possible? Do you, the player, believe that *Undertale* being fictional absolves you of all

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[184] Fox, *Undertale.*

[185] Of course, the developer of the game bears some responsibility for the subject matter they choose to include in their game, but this discussion of responsibility could be an entire thesis unto itself.

responsibility for your choices? It is not a question that *Undertale* has an answer for, but it is one it wants the player to think about all the same.

The genocide route, as a direction the narrative can take, can only be triggered through extensive usage of the attack mechanic. It is perhaps most closely aligned to how a player might, at least mechanics-wise, play a typical RPG. As previously mentioned, it plays off of a video game completionist mindset quite heavily: including things like the kill counter informing you how many monsters are left to kill in each area to achieve 100% kills. It must be doggedly and purposefully pursued; every condition for achieving it must be met or else the game reverts to a neutral route. Many of the NPC interactions play out quite differently, such as Papyrus not even trying to fight you. Instead, he merely offers to become your friend if you agree to turn away from your path of genocide. He can be dispatched in one hit. Other NPC interactions are framed as if they are the hero, and you are the villain. The town, usually full of NPCs to chat to, is empty. The music in each area also becomes creepier sounding, slowed down versions of the music heard during the other two routes.

In many ways the genocide route reduces the game down purely to a challenge to be beaten, using video game mechanics like the kill counter, but also by relegating the two hardest boss fights to this route: one in the form of a character named Undyne and the other against Sans. The fight with Sans is especially notorious amongst *Undertale* fans for being an extremely hard fight, and it is something of an accomplishment to say that you have beaten him.[186] It is easily the most challenging, mechanically interesting, and perhaps even narratively interesting fight that *Undertale* has to offer. Sans displays an understanding of the combat systems that

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[186] prancerhood, "How hard is the battle with Sans compared to any other infamous boss battles in video games?" *reddit: r/Undertale*, November 12, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/3sjxim/how_hard_is_the_battle_with_sans_compared_to_any/cwxvmcj/.

previously only the player had and exploits this understanding at every opportunity. For example, at one point he tries to stop you by taking his turn (the combat being turn based afterall) and then refusing to attack, effectively not ending his turn and denying you from getting any subsequent turns. It is also during this fight that he again breaks the fourth wall and accuses the player of only doing this route out of a sense of completionism: "i know your type. you're, uh, very determined, aren't you? you'll never give up, even if there's, uh... absolutely NO benefit to persevering whatsoever. if i can make that clear. no matter what, you'll just keep going. not out of any desire for good or evil... but just because you think you can. and because you 'can'... ... you 'have to.'"[187]

In terms of provoking emotions in players, there is a fascinating dissonance at play with the Sans fight. The game has overt messages about pacifism, but "rewards" players on the genocide route by putting the most interesting combat scenario in it. It is unlikely that Fox wanted to disallow violent/murderous play, or that he put in the genocide route with the expectation that no one would play it; from the work put in alone it can be said that he designed the genocide route with the expectation of it being played. And indeed, there are plenty of YouTube videos of people recording themselves fighting Sans. One could see this as an irony — this game about pacifism has encouraged a lot of performance art of the genocide route — but this dissonance is almost certainly on purpose, seeing as the game regularly plays with dissonant mechanics and narratives.[188] I would speculate that Fox wanted to make something that would encourage people to reflect on their experience, and feel something while experiencing it.

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[187] Fox, *Undertale.*

[188] For example, the way FIGHTing is always easier mechanically and more appropriate to the genre, despite the game pushing a more pacifist approach.

Although the fight with Sans is rewarding from a perspective of mastery over systems, it is completely devoid of any emotional victory. Sans is the last obstacle faced before one gets the rather bleak denouement that is the genocide ending. After killing every NPC they can, the player meets Chara. Given that Chara will be named whatever name the player gave them at the start of the game, and given that many players choose to use their own names, one could perhaps see this character as sort of a twisted version of the player themselves.[189] Chara claims that the player woke them up from death by doing the genocide route and acquiring power. Chara then also comments on the game and the player's completion of it as if from a completionist mindset: "HP. ATK. DEF. GOLD. EXP. LV. Every time a number increases, that feeling... That's me. 'Chara.' Now. Now we have reached the absolute. There is nothing left for us here. Let us erase this pointless world, and move on to the next."[190] The game itself is then "destroyed" (read: it closes) via a fourth wall breaking attack from Chara. Upon loading the game up again, the player is presented with a black screen and a howling wind; there is nothing left. You have "completed" everything in the game, killed everyone and everything off and it argues, through Chara, that there is no reason to return. Where most every other game would allow you to simply start a new game with a "clean slate", *Undertale* leaves the 100% completion player with virtually nothing. It is only by trading one's "soul" to Chara that the player is allowed to reset the game back to its original state. However, as previously mentioned, this has lasting consequences; every subsequent playthrough makes tiny references to this soul transaction, and fans have dubbed these new routes as "soulless" versions.[191]

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[189] Or perhaps they are a convenient in-game narrative explanation for why Frisk (as controlled by the player) felt compelled to murder everything.

[190] Fox, *Undertale.*

[191] "Endings."

The attack mechanic, leading to killing monsters and the accrual of EXP and money, can make a player feel more powerful by virtue of making their avatar more powerful mechanically. It is the easiest option to pick and execute on as well, requiring reflexes rather than the constant experimentation that the nonviolent options do. However, your first real mentor in the game also advises you not to choose it and, should you use the attack mechanic to kill any monsters, you are locked out of getting the true pacifist ending. As a result of this, finishing a neutral playthrough where the player played the game more like a typical RPG can lead to a feeling of having gained power at the cost of a narratively fulfilling ending. The genocide route, meanwhile, not only results in a dark and narratively unfulfilling ending, but has also been called something of a chore to complete.[192] Getting to 100% kills in each area means grinding is required: an activity that is not commonly referred to as fun by RPG players. The genocide route uses the attack mechanic, but requires it to be taken to an obsessive level: a commentary perhaps on grinding in RPGs. However, there is still clearly some gaming capital to be gained amongst *Undertale* players, by being able to claim that you have defeated the mighty Sans, with there perhaps being video proof on YouTube.

Sparing

In *Undertale*, sparing is its own discrete mechanic during combat encounters; under the MERCY option there is an option explicitly labeled "Spare." However, unlike the FIGHT option it requires some extra steps in order to effectively do anything. Where FIGHT can be repeatedly

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192 UnknownPeter123, "Is it just me or is Genocide the most boring of all routes?" *reddit: r/Undertale*, April 20, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/66gnma/is_it_just_me_or_is_genocide_the_most_boring_of/; lionhart280, "[Spoiler] Was anyone else let down by the Genocide route?" *reddit: r/Undertale*, January 10, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/40avzn/spoiler_was_anyone_else_let_down_by_the_genocide/; TheRealDylanator, "[SPOILERS] I HATE genocide run, not because of the feels..." *reddit: r/Undertale*, March 19, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/4b4h1d/spoilers_i_hate_genocide_run_not_because_of_the/.

chosen until the monster runs out of HP, Spare will generally not work until the player does some other actions first, usually found under the ACT option. These other actions are often unique to each monster and include a wide range of things such as: flirting with the monster, getting extra close to the monster's attacks while still dodging them, sparing/defeating the monster's friends first, and even running away from the monster. When Spare is chosen, all monsters that have had their spare requirements met are removed from the fight. Spared monsters yield money to the player, but not EXP, and therefore the pacifist player cannot level up. *Undertale*'s spare mechanic is somewhat unique compared to many of the previous games covered in that it requires direct confrontation and resistance, as opposed to something like *Thief* (avoiding confrontation) or *Mirror's Edge* (fleeing from confrontation).

As with the mechanic for attacking, it is essential to consider the dynamics that sparing has with the narrative as well. As previously mentioned, the narrative puts players into conflict with Toriel at the end of the first section of the game, and many players might end up thinking that fighting her is the correct way to advance. As Alexandra Müller and numerous others have argued, "Sparing Toriel is not intuitive"[193] and, "it is therefore extremely likely, that at least during their first play through, many players end up killing her."[194]

Whenever it is that players crack how to save Toriel, be it through save scumming, a second playthrough, or even just sheer determination on their first, the fight is all about practicing nonviolent resistance. It is only in being willing to face the possibility of "losing" the fight that players will likely figure out how to spare Toriel. When the PC only has two HP remaining, Toriel begins to purposefully miss you with all her attacks. This affords players the

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[193] Müller, "Undertale: Violence in Context," 29.
[194] Müller, "Undertale: Violence in Context," 29.

freedom to experiment without the fear of suffering a gameover and needing to reload their game. It is now that the average player likely feels that they can afford to repeatedly hit the Spare option to see what happens. This kind of simulation of using nonviolent resistance to resolve a conflict is something that even previous games covered in this thesis haven't delved into.

Toriel is also worth calling out as a character for the same reason that Paul Denton was worth calling out in *Deus Ex*: both serve the role as an early mentor figure, both take on a familial role (Paul is your brother, Toriel is a surrogate mother), and, most importantly, both strongly encourage the player to use nonlethal means to overcome their adversaries. They are also both mentor figures preaching nonlethal approaches in genres that are otherwise known for their violence; their presence at the very start of their respective games reinforces the importance of their roles in teaching the player right from the very beginning to think more critically about how they might (or might not) employ violence. And they both also have different reactions that change depending on how much violence the player employs: both chastising violent players and encouraging nonviolent ones. They are both excellent examples of the game's NPCs reacting to the player's usage of lethal/nonlethal mechanics.

At the very end of a neutral route, the player is given the option to kill or spare Flowey, the neutral and pacifist routes' primary antagonist, and sparing has one big noticeable benefit. Killing Flowey can certainly afford the player catharsis, and in fact Flowey continually goads the player into doing so, threatening to make both the player and their friends suffer if left alive. However, when choosing the spare option, the player is rewarded with game knowledge; if spared, Flowey leans heavily on the fourth wall and gives you explicit hints about what you need to do to achieve a pacifist ending. He speaks to the player from the perspective of an experienced *Undertale* player, albeit a twisted one. If the player has killed any monsters he tells them, "Hey.

Since you defeated me. I've been thinking. Is killing things really necessary? I… I honestly don't know anymore. I have a request for you. Prove to me… Prove to me you are strong enough to survive. Get here from the beginning. Without killing a single thing… … and I won't kill the king. Then you'll have your so-called 'happy ending.' So, what will it be? Will you prove yourself? Or will I get to watch you suffer…? Either way, I'm interested!!! Hee hee hee…"[195] If it turns out that the player hasn't killed anyone, and is merely missing some side quests, then Flowey provides hints for completing those instead. If killed, Flowey doesn't do any of this, and there are not even any hints that the player missed this conversation.

The True Pacifist ending meanwhile, which is accomplished only by extensive use of the spare mechanic, is easily both the most narratively fulfilling ending and the most comprehensive. Frisk and the rest of the monsters escape to the surface world, which addresses and resolves the central conflict to the story. Toriel can be fully embraced as a surrogate mother figure. In contrast to *Dishonored*'s gray morality pacifism, *Undertale*'s pacifist route and ending is also very clearly the morally superior option, and everything about this ending is extraordinarily upbeat. It also contrasts with *Ultima IV*'s black and white morality system — where some monsters are evil and need to be killed — by having everyone, even the villain, be a redeemable character, unworthy of death. Even minor things such as how this is the only ending to include all the game's credits, including the Kickstarter backers, lends this ending a feeling of being the proper or true ending. It is one of the only games covered in this thesis to have such a drastically different outcome based on following a pacifist playstyle. This all serves to frame the pacifist route as the main or intended route, as opposed to games such as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* or *Mirror's Edge*, which framed pacifist routes more as alternative styles of play.

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[195] Fox, *Undertale.*

The RPG genre, especially the turn-based battle sub genre, isn't particularly known for its pacifism, which sets up an interesting dissonance almost immediately. As with *Ultima IV* before it, *Undertale* is clearly aiming to subvert the usual "kill things to acquire power (and therefore become better at killing more things)" core gameplay loop of most RPGs, or at least add some nuance and encourage players to think more critically about it. *Undertale* promotes a pacifist message right from the start of the game; even before the game's release, the tagline of its Kickstarter project was: "A traditional role-playing game where no one has to get hurt."[196] In spite of this, the procedural rhetoric of the game's basic combat mechanics, combined with conventions of the genre, push the player toward using the FIGHT option. FIGHT is the first option selected in every combat encounter — effectively making it a default of sorts — while sparing involves a more complicated puzzle of discerning the correct options to choose under the ACT menu, and then selecting Spare under the MERCY menu. Choosing to actively avoid the fighting mechanics, as the characters and narrative encourage, could also cause a degree of cognitive dissonance in long-time RPG players, who are used to the primary means of progression in RPGs being fighting and killing things in order to get stronger. However, players might also feel inspired by the challenge of beating an RPG without ever leveling up. Or they might find the different framing for combat encounters — puzzles to be solved rather than opponents to be beaten into submission — fresh and interesting.

Choosing to focus on the spare mechanic can perhaps be viewed as taking short term losses in order to get long term gains. Players not utilizing the attack mechanic to kill monsters will feel disempowered mechanically and probably feel under equipped for most of the confrontations in the game (regardless of *Undertale*'s balance, the RPG genre convention is that

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[196] Fox, "UnderTale," *Kickstarter*.

combat gets harder as one progresses). Pacifist players also do not get the satisfaction of seeing numbers go up, which is another form of progression often seen as integral to the RPG genre. However, the choice to effectively refuse to empower their PC mechanically can ultimately feel quite empowering, as it is a choice rewarded with a much more narratively fulfilling ending.

Savescumming

Saving in *Undertale* is accomplished using save points that are found scattered throughout the game.[197] Players can only have one saved game at any time, and it is overwritten every time players use a save point, which also means that there can only be one game of *Undertale* in progress as well. However, there is another layer of saving that *Undertale* does that is largely invisible to the player and outside of their control; there are a certain number of variables that *Undertale* also keeps a record of, which are automatically saved as the player progresses. (For example, the flag that determines whether a player has completed a genocide route or not.) Players have limited options for save scumming, but they can still quit the game without saving to drop back to whatever their last save was, and there is also a reset option in the main menu that wipes their save (but not the extra layer of variables) to let players start a new game without completing their old one first. And finally, upon completing a true pacifist route, players can select what is known as a True Reset to wipe their save and most[198] of the extra saved variables as well, largely returning the game to its pre-played state.

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[197] Save points were a common fixture of older console JRPGs where memory constraints were an issue, which is a genre that *Undertale* is drawing heavily from. Save points are interactables in the game world that save the player's game when interacted with.

[198] As per the game's wiki, there is one line in the undertale.ini file that is not cleared, and the flag indicating completion of the genocide route is also not cleared. - "SAVE," *Undertale Wiki*, last modified April 8, 2021, https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/SAVE.

The overt save mechanic works in a familiar fashion for anyone who's played video games with the ability to save your game before. As with video games in general, this makes experimentation and risk taking easier than in real life because a life-ending failure is merely an inconvenient setback of a couple of minutes, and one is free to reload a previous save, while keeping any knowledge gained, and try something new. On death the game even encourages you to not give up and to keep trying, providing a narrative reference to the ability to save scum as well. The saving that occurs automatically and invisibly to the player, however, is used to subvert players' expectations of save scumming, enforcing a situation where some things cannot be undone via save scumming. Here, saving and loading are contextualized to a degree that many other games do not bother with. The player character is said to be "filled with determination," and it is because they are the "most determined" character in the underground, that they can save and load their game, as well as "come back to life" after being defeated in battle. This serves to make saving and loading a part of the reality of the game world as well, as opposed to merely being meta-mechanics that assist in playing the game.

Many fights in the game rely, at least implicitly, on the player having the ability to save scum. The Sans fight during the genocide route is perhaps the most obvious; the majority of players will not survive their first encounter with him, and it is only through memorization of his attacks that they can beat him. The Toriel fight also provides an instance of how it's important to remember that the death of the PC is not irreversible or something to be avoided at all costs. The player likely has to be okay with the idea of their PC dying in order to discover that Toriel goes out of her way to avoid killing you when you are at low health. In fact, due to how most monsters will attack you, practicing a total form of pacifism in this game practically relies on the knowledge that you can come back from any death. The neutral ending for *Undertale* explicitly

tells you what you need to go back and do in order to get a true pacifist ending; the game

pointedly acknowledges that saving/loading is an integral part to you being able to achieve that

particular ending. After finishing a true pacifist route, the character Flowey breaks the fourth

wall and asks the player directly not to reset their game and take everyone back to a less happy

time. This incorporates save scumming as a practice into the game's narrative in a way that most

games do not; in *Undertale*, a gameover is not quite the immersion breaking event that it is in

many other games.

As with the attacking and sparing mechanics, the dynamic that save scumming has with

the narrative is important and is arguably the most necessary to cover when it comes to

subverting players' expectations of how save scumming is supposed to work. The ability to save

is contextualized within the narrative as an ability your PC, Frisk, has as well, and not merely a

meta-mechanic that only the player has access to. Within the narrative of the game, it is

explained that because your PC has high levels of determination, they are able to manipulate

time. It is also revealed that Flowey used to have this power but lost it upon your arrival.[199] One

of the first moments where *Undertale* subverts how the mechanic of save scumming usually

works is during and immediately after the fight with Toriel. As previously mentioned, if the

player kills Toriel, reloads their last saved game, and then spares Toriel the second time, Flowey

calls them out for this. Though he starts out by congratulating you on your cleverness in avoiding

the "kill or be killed" rule, he also points out that he "knows what you did"[200] and that "[y]ou

murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it"[201] (see Figure 2.8). He further

adds that he knows you have the power to SAVE and that he used to have that power but that

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[199] It is worth noting that he briefly regains it at the end of a neutral route, and the player loses their ability while he
has his, suggesting that only one character in the game is allowed to possess this power at any one time.
[200] Fox, *Undertale.*
[201] Fox, *Undertale.*

your ability to do so now seems to be overriding his. This dialogue with Flowey calling out your ability to SAVE only occurs if the player goes through the Toriel fight multiple times, such as by killing her once and then reloading their game to spare her the second time. Because it adds so much context to the character of Flowey, one could argue that going through the Toriel fight multiple times, either via direct save scumming or the more indirect method of starting a new game, is how the developer intended players to experience the game. The aforementioned unintuitive method of sparing her also lends credence to this theory.

The most dramatic instance of the game subverting save scumming behavior is in the completion of a genocide route. Players are required to trade their "soul" to Chara to reset the game after a genocide route, an act that forever alters every future playthrough.[202] Although players who are willing to go the extra length and do some file editing can remove this permanent mark on their *Undertale* record, there is no way to reset this within the confines of the game itself. This subversion of save scumming is a commentary on the nature of video game pacifism itself: you might kill NPCs in a video game, purposefully or otherwise, but you can always load a saved game before the murder in order to undo it and maintain your pacifist run.

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[202] For example, at the end of the true pacifist route, Frisk is shown to be "possessed" by Chara, and the game ends with a photo of them with their monster friends, except all the monsters' faces are crossed out. The implication being that Chara murdered everyone after your happy ending. - Fox, *Undertale.*

Figure 2.8: Flowey taunting the player by "remembering" that they killed Toriel, regardless of whether they undid the murder by save scumming or restarting the game. Here Undertale is also subverting your ability to "erase" all transgressions by loading your game or restarting.

On a smaller scale, *Undertale* disrupts this convention by having Flowey "remember" the player killing Toriel, regardless of whether the player save scummed or not. While *Undertale* acknowledges that being able to load a saved game is often an integral part of any pacifist run, it also deliberately problematizes this behavior by having the player unable to fully undo a kill that they performed, even if only accidentally.

> Interesting. You want to go back. You want to go back to the world you destroyed. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led the world to its destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequences.[203]

On the larger scale we have completion of the genocide route. The line from Chara above, delivered just before resetting the game from a genocide route, challenges traditional

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[203] Fox, *Undertale.*

game pacifism approaches that position the player as above consequences. Still, it is only in doing the genocide route, whether for curiosity, for challenge, or for gaming capital, that one's game is forever marked. Aside from completion of a genocide route, however, the game is not that punishing toward pacifist save scumming, short of cheeky dialogue from Flowey that can always be reset with a True Reset. Only completion of the genocide route is remembered permanently.

This subversion of how save scumming usually works even problematizes the idea that completing all the game's content (one hundred percenting) is desirable and without consequences. It raises the stakes for what is required to consider oneself a pacifist player: in order to maintain their "true pacifist status", in order to not be labelled, as the fans would say, as soulless, the player must leave content in the game unplayed. In something like *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* a player might try a variety of runs with varying levels of lethality employed in order to get achievements. In contrast, *Undertale* forces the player to leave an entire route of the game unplayed if they wish to maintain their pacifist status.

Conclusion

Undertale is a power fantasy, but not in the typical sense. *Undertale* addresses the idea of saving and loading as an intrinsic power of the PC, and asks: what if you used your power to come back from death and applied it toward combating intolerance with love and acceptance? Though unorthodox as far as video game power fantasies go, it is nonetheless a power fantasy in both senses of the term. It is empowering to be given the choice to disempower oneself in order to "do good" in a game. And it is a fantasy in that it is a level of self-sacrifice and persistence paying off that just isn't feasible in real life. No one can come back from being killed in the line

of practicing pacifism, and allowed to try it again but better. With respect to the Toriel fight, the player must be prepared to die/fail in order to discover the way through. The pattern repeats for many of the fights where the decision to spare enemies is not nearly as straightforward as just killing them.

While initially a player will likely feel emboldened to experiment, as with other games, when *Undertale* first subverts how save scumming usually works, with Flowey remembering things, it can make the player think more critically about actions having lasting impacts and consequences. Although *Undertale* doesn't explicitly warn the player that completion of a genocide route will have a permanent effect on their game (at least not until it's too late to change it) players also do not end up pursuing the genocide route by accident. Being hit with permanent consequences perhaps causes players to reflect on whether doing everything a game will allow them to do is really worth it. The pacifist route is played out as the "true" route, and has a happy ending, while the completionist, "play it like a usual RPG" route is the alternate, empty route. Sans, another of the characters in the game, who acts as a judge for your actions, even accuses you of playing the genocide route "just because it's there."

One of the most interesting things about *Undertale* is the intentional disconnect of the game's rhetoric. The mechanical systems themselves are built around lethal combat. The genre it comes from is built around using lethal combat to "make oneself stronger" — get experience points, earn level ups, become better at fighting. But the narrative systems punish that mentality. Finding fun and challenge (with a few exceptions) are encouraged in the pacifist or neutral routes, not the genocide one. *Undertale* swaps the alternate and normal routes mentality around on its head. Here, the neutral route is the limbo one, the one that you get if you didn't do enough to achieve either the pacifist route or the genocide route. Indeed, the neutral routes present clear

hints for how to complete the pacifist route on the player's next playthrough. Through all of its subversion of expected game mechanics, and even the concept of pacifist runs as championed by other games, *Undertale* pushes the envelope of what pacifism can look like in a violent video game.

Conclusion

Pacifist runs arose out of the *Doom* speedrunning community. Pacifism in the Undertale community manifested differently. *Undertale* has been identified as explicitly queer in several ways (for example, the ungendered protagonist) by scholars such as Bonnie Ruberg.[204] These queer readings are often ignored in favor of reframing the game under a straight, masculine lens. Of particular interest to this thesis is how Ruberg points out that many of the discussions about playing the pacifist route frame pursuing kindness as the more difficult option:

> By emphasizing the technical challenge of being good in *Undertale* — that is, simultaneously ethically good and good at the game — reviews such as this one sidestep the progressive and arguably even queer potential of the game's morality system and instead recast it as an opportunity to perform oneself as a particularly masterful and by extension masculine gamer.[205]

This framing of pacifism as being about the challenge is nothing new. What is new is how *Undertale* itself subverts that rhetoric. The pacifist route is not nearly as difficult as the genocide route and so, although some of the community rhetoric has not changed, *Undertale*'s perspective of it certainly has. This is not *Thief* where pacifism is explicitly tied to the game's difficulty levels.

Undertale fans have earned something of a negative reputation for their often rabid insistence that *Undertale* can only be played a particular way. Chloe Spencer, writing for Kotaku in 2017, talks about how the *Undertale* fandom earned a reputation as toxic after a number of incidents, especially in how frequently its fans police other fans for playing the genocide

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[204] Bonnie Ruberg, "Straightwashing Undertale: Video Games and the Limits of LGBTQ Representation," in "The Future of Fandom," special 10th anniversary issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 28 (2018), http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516.

[205] Ruberg, "Straightwashing Undertale."

route.[206] Many YouTube content creators, for example, received a multitude of comments telling them how to play the game and/or berating them for not playing the game correctly when they pursued a genocidal route through the game. As one streamer put it: "I'm not having fun making these videos because I know that no matter what I do, everyone will think I'm wrong."[207] Many members of the community aggressively promote a pacifist playthrough as the only right way to play the game (apparently unironically). I myself noticed this reputation to still be in effect in 2021. In February, a number of VTubers[208] working for a Japanese talent agency called Hololive Productions began playthroughs of *Undertale*. Though most of them speak Japanese as their first language, with only minor understandings of English, the comment sections on their videos described the pressure these players faced to play as a pacifist: "[T]he notorious backseat gaming in the Undertale community is just ridicilous [*sic*]. I'm glad Marine decided to play this game without looking at the comments so much. [...] I really like Undertale, but I don't like this part of the Undertale community."[209] From another: "For once I am glad there is a language barrier. English commenters gave up pretty quickly when they realized they could not backseat Pekora

[206] Chloe Spencer, "The Undertale Drama," *Kotaku*, August 21, 2017, https://kotaku.com/the-undertale-drama-1798159975.

[207] Spencer, "The Undertale Drama."

[208] Short for "Virtual YouTuber." Usually a content creator of some sort who uses an animated avatar. These avatars are often anime inspired, and the identity of the person behind the avatar is kept secret.

[209] Yampiey, "Love your blind Undertale run, Senchou! But as always, the notorious backseat gaming in the Undertale community is just ridicilous," February 2021, comment on Marine Ch. 宝鐘マリン, "【Undertale】はじめてのアンダーテール#1【ホロライブ/宝鐘マリン】," February 15, 2021, YouTube video, 4:43:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbbRRPTMkuc&lc=Ugx0DzhjZd9OI9QQDMh4AaABAg.

lol. Behave!"[210] And from a third: "I like how she doesn't care what chat says and just plays the

way she wants, just like the game intended."[211]

This mentality of there only being one proper way to play is at odds with not only

Undertale's own purposeful dissonance between its systems and pacifist messaging, but also the

origins of pacifist runs. Toby Fox himself has tweeted, "Please be mindful and don't spoil the

game for anyone."[212] As Spencer succinctly puts it,

> The problem is that going into *Undertale* blind makes it likely that players will kill an
> enemy, much like they would in any other RPG — a design choice that creates a
> conundrum for anyone who wants to get a "good" ending, but also wants to jump in fresh.
> It's no wonder that the culture that arose around *Undertale* was so focused around how to
> play the game: in a way, players were trying to save others from a bad experience.
> Somehow, though, fans just traded one bad experience for another.[213]

There is an irony that pacifist runs arose in the community as a form of emergent play — that is

to say: playing against the intentions of the developer — and yet in *Undertale* there are militantly

pacifist fans who insist on a specific, progressive form of play. Here, video game pacifism has

become mainstream within video game discourse.

Undertale itself is a game that is seemingly purposefully designed to create dissonance. It

uses combat-centric systems, similar to previous RPGs, yet narratively encourages PC

disempowerment and pacifism. The genocide route is a tedious grind, and yet players do it

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[210] Jeanice Hoffing, "For once I am glad there is a language barrier. English commenters gave up pretty quickly when they realized they could not backseat Pekora lol. Behave!" February 2021, comment on Pekora Ch. 兎田ぺこ ら, "【Undertale】アンダーテイルやってみる！ぺこ！【ホロライブ/兎田ぺこら】," February 18, 2021, YouTube video, 2:50:47,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPIGKLsF7S4&lc=Ugxe2H8y_Ms01I29veV4AaABAg.
[211] Michasz, "I like how she doesn't care what chat says and just plays the way she wants, just like the game intended," February 2021, comment on Rushia Ch. 潤羽るしあ, "＃１【Undertale】完全初見！！アンダーテー ル！！！【潤羽るしあ/ホロライブ】," February 16, 2021, YouTube video, 3:54:26,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcnx02mNVCM&lc=UgwOr3-TIRkZ7rtd0yN4AaABAg.
[212] Toby Fox (@tobyfox), "Please be mindful and don't spoil the game for anyone," Twitter, September 15, 2015, https://twitter.com/tobyfox/status/643837835259330560.
[213] Spencer, "The Undertale Drama."

anyway in order to defeat Sans, who, in turn, calls them out for their completionist mindset. It subverts players' understanding of how saving and loading work, by remembering things they did even after reloading a saved game. This subversive dissonance feels like the subversive dissonance of *Ultima IV*: an RPG that attempted to make being a good person the primary goal rather than the acquisition of power. And yet *Undertale* has also advanced so much since *Ultima IV* in terms of incorporating nonviolence into its mechanics. Whether building upon this sort of pacifist progression seen in the signpost chapter was intentional on the part of the developer, or whether it was a progression more felt by players looking for opportunities for pacifism, this progression is there.

Future Work

There are a multitude of different directions I have in mind for this work. One of the simpler additions would be to add interviews with developers, with a focus on their perspectives on pacifist runs and how successful they felt their games were at adding opportunities for pacifism. Although this thesis very purposefully sidestepped the issue of morality, future work could also consider the moral versus challenge angle as well. Genre, and how and why some video game genres lend themselves better to pacifist runs, also bears further investigation. In terms of more ambitious and divergent directions, I would like to devote further study toward developers coding opportunities for altruism into their games. In a 2016 *Rolling Stone* interview with developer Ken Levine, interviewer Chris Suellentrop asked him why there were no systemic consequences for choosing to save or harvest the little sisters in *BioShock*. Levine stated that he had wanted players who don't harvest to feel low on resources, but their publisher had pushed back. "It's sort of anathema to game design, where you have a path for the player that is just

harder – where it's worse for the player. The conventional wisdom was on their side. It was not

like I could say to them, 'Oh, you're just absolutely wrong. Here are 15 examples.'"[214] While this

may have been true in 2007, there have been a number of indie releases since then that have

played with allowing the player to disempower themselves for altruistic reasons, *Undertale*

included. *Undertale*'s massive success, despite its humble origins, perhaps speaks to a growing

desire among gamers for more altruistic kinds of power fantasies, as opposed to the usual video

game power fantasy of being the best at killing things.

I would also like to see video game developers continue to push the envelope in terms of

incorporating opportunities for pacifism and nonviolence into their video games. While not every

video game needs opportunities for pacifism,[215] role-playing games in particular are a genre that

seem well suited to exploring the concept more, especially those role-playing games that feature

morality systems and heavily emphasize player choice. In 2019, the video game world saw the

release of *Disco Elysium*, an indie RPG that discarded combat as a central mechanic entirely.[216]

It was very well received, both by players and other developers alike, so there is definitely a

growing interest in moving RPGs away from being centered around lethal combat. Pacifist routes

in video games have gone from demonstrations of emergent gameplay on the part of *Doom*

speedrunners; to subversive game design (such as in *Thief* and its subversion of the *Doom*

formula); become somewhat codified to mean "no killing" in games such as *Deus Ex*, *Mirror's*

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[214] Chris Suellentrop, "Inside the Making of 'BioShock' Series With Creator Ken Levine," *Rolling Stone*, September 14, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20170719100714/https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/we-were-all-miserable-inside-bioshock-video-game-franchise-w439921.

[215] Sometimes I just want to play *Doom* and murder vast swathes of demons in the most brutal ways possible, and that's okay.

[216] Andy Kelly, "Disco Elysium review: A cop adventure inspired by classic RPGs," *PC Gamer*, October 15, 2019, https://www.pcgamer.com/disco-elysium-review/.

Edge, and *Dishonored*; to again be explored in subversive ways in *Undertale*. I look forward to

seeing what video game developers do to push the concept forward in the future.

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