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# Man vs. Monsters: The Problem of Identity in Pew and Undertale

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# Man vs. Monsters:

# The Problem of Identity in *Pew* and *Undertale*

A Thesis Submitted to

The Faculty of Humanities

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the ResMA Arts, Literature, and Media

by

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## Contents

# Introduction

There is a problem with identity. Derived from the Latin *identitas* which stems from *idem*, the concept of identity is rooted in the concept of sameness, of being one.[1] As such, it has long been used in Western philosophical discourse to address phenomena such as permanence amidst change, and unity amidst diversity.[2] The colloquial usage of the concept falls along the same lines; when people describe their identity, they usually refer to some essence of that makes them uniquely themselves. However, taking a closer look at identity reveals not its origination from within, but its dependence upon external factors. To identify oneself, one must draw up boundaries between self and others, mapping the ways in which one is similar to and different from those around them. In this way, identity is more aptly defined as "the understanding that individuals and groups have of who they are fundamentally in relation to others and in relation to systems of power".[3] It is here that the problem of identity is revealed: identity does not coincide with itself. This poses a problem because, as described by Jean-Luc Nancy, the concept has remained stuck in the "sense of a permanent unity identical to itself", and people still tend towards identifying themselves as something absolute.[4] This discrepancy leaves people's sense of identity vulnerable to manipulation, with strategic identity narratives "target[ing] and exploit[ing] identity-based differences to maintain existing hegemonic social orders".[5] In this thesis, I explore how Catherine Lacey's novel *Pew* and Toby Fox's video game *Undertale* deal with the problem of

[1] Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "Identity", last modified 26 March, 2024, https://www.etymonline.com/word/identity
[2] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3108478
[3] Madhavi Reddi, Rachel Kuo and Daniel Kreiss, "Identity Propaganda: Racial Narratives and Disinformation", *New Media & Society* 25, no. 8 (2023): 2205, DOI: 10.1177/14614448211029293
[4] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Identity: Fragments, Frankness*, trans. François Raffoul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 12, 15.
[5] Reddi, 2203. Ideology can achieve the same result through processes of interpellation, as described by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation" in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

identity. Both works trouble the notion of a stable, internal identity that can be expressed through clean-cut identity categorisations, showing how such a view of identity is unrealistic, restrictive, and potentially harmful.

For my method of approaching *Pew* and *Undertale*, I draw inspiration from Michel Foucault's treatment of art in his *Order of Things*. In it, Foucault gives works of art the privileged position of being able to foretell the future by depicting ways of thinking that differ from the contemporary order of things, also referred to as the contemporary "episteme".[6] Functioning as "a *positive unconscious* of knowledge", an episteme cannot be studied in itself yet provides the order that determines what can be studied and how.[7] Epistemes change over time, and it is not until we are confronted with an order different from our own that the limitations of what we know can become clear.[8] Whereas Foucault analyses art as showing shifts in epistemes retrospectively, I theorize *Pew* and *Undertale* as confronting their audiences with an order that is yet to come. I include both a work of literature and a video game in this analysis because these different mediums approach the problem of identity differently. Whereas *Pew* makes its readers inhabit the position of an outsider to the current episteme and its identificatory practices, *Undertale* allows its players to make their own decisions, confronting them with their own actions as grounded in this episteme's treatment of identity. By combining the insights provided by these two works, I hope to be able to shed some light on a potential episteme-to-come;[9] an episteme in which the problem of identity might no longer pose a problem.

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[6] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York & Oxon: Routledge, 2002), xxiii.
[7] Foucault, xii.
[8] Foucault, xvi.
[9] This phrasing is indebted to Derrida's notion of the *à venir*, the "to-come", referring to the future that announces itself without warning. For further writing, see *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), in particular 141-159.

Chapter 1 introduces Lacey's novel *Pew*, whose narrator and protagonist suffers from memory loss which leaves them a total outsider to the foundations of knowledge shared by those around them. Having been discovered sleeping in a church pew in a fictional town in the Southern US, they are assigned the temporary name Pew until they identify themselves otherwise. Despite the town's hopes and expectations, that moment never comes. Pew does not identify with anything in particular, nor do they want the community to assign them identifications. Close-reading *Pew* alongside Foucault, I argue that the novel confronts its readers with a different order of things, therefore laying bare the limitations of their own.[10] The characters around Pew go to great lengths to determine the protagonist's identity, making visible the importance the current episteme places on identifying people. It soon becomes clear that this identifying information, when available, is used to assign people their place within the episteme's hierarchies. Including the writing of Sylvia Wynter in my analysis, I show that these hierarchies favour a particular "genre of the human", "Man";[11] a fictional conception of the human with very real effects. This genre of the human has historically overrepresented itself so much that it has come to stand in for the human in general, so that all knowledge is now created from the perspective and to the advantage of this white, male, bourgeois genre.[12] Whereas Wynter's anticolonial argument is focused on humankind, *Pew* depicts the colonialist mindset as an order of things that disregards large portions of life in general. I propose that *Pew* might elucidate Foucault's heralding of the end of the current episteme, offering readers a peek into a potential episteme-to-come.

In Chapter 2 I zoom in on the concept of genre, elaborating upon the concept's relevance for exploring the problem of identity in *Pew* and *Undertale*. According to Derrida,

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[10] Foucault, xvi.
[11] Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument", *The New Centennial Review* 3, no 3 (2003): 330, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015, 269, 277.
[12] Wynter, 312, 324.

genres are traditionally supposed to signal pure, unmixed categories, but no genre can, in truth, escape mixture.[13] Exploring the portrayal of the genre of gender in *Pew*, I argue that Pew resists all attempts at the identification of their gender not because they do not want to reveal the answer, but because there is no answer to be found. Whereas those around Pew insist on unmixed genres, I study Pew as embodying the inevitability of their mixture. I explore Pew's protagonist's resistance to identification alongside Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage", theorizing Pew as not having undergone this stage and therefore not having developed a unified sense of self.[14] Since Lacan describes a person's sense of self as grounded in a misrecognition in their mirror image, I argue that Pew confronts those around them, as well as the novel's readers, with the fictionality underlying their sense of self.[15]

Although Pew's identity-less position is valuable for inciting reflection in those around them, it is ultimately shown to be unliveable, excluding the protagonist from connecting with those around them. At this point, I turn to *Undertale* and its relationship to the concept of genre through the figure of the monster; a figure very much alive that nonetheless incites category crises. Introducing itself as a role-playing game (RPG) about monsters, *Undertale* invokes its audience's expectations of RPGs as well as monsters. The human-monster dichotomy has a long history in both video games and real life, with monsters traditionally having been portrayed as unnatural, violent beings that threaten to disrupt the social order.[16] As described by David Livingstone Smith, making people into monsters is a dangerous form of dehumanization, used to desensitize people against harming typically already vulnerable members of a population.[17] Video games have traditionally

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[13] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre", *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1980), 57-59, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343176

[14] "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): 93-95.

[15] Lacan, 94.

[16] Joseph Esmond Riddle, s.v. "Monstrum", in *A Complete English-Latin and Latin-English Dictionary* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1870), 399.

[17] David Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters: The Uncanny Power of Dehumanization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 254.

depicted monsters as violent adversaries, appearing to either kill the player or be killed by them.[18] *Undertale* overturns traditional notions of monstrosity, confronting its players with the far-reaching consequences the adherence to unmixed genres can have. Only allowing players who are open to rethinking the genre of the monster to reach the game's true, happy ending, the game can be seen to prefigure an episteme that expects difference instead of enforcing sameness.

Chapter 3 takes a closer look at not only the monsters of *Undertale*, but the monster that is *Undertale*, further exploring the potential that rests within the figure of the monster. Analysing the game's narrative and mechanics alongside Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's writing on monsters, I explore the source of its monsters' power.[19] The humans of the game were so afraid of this power that they pre-emptively banished the monsters to the Underground, sealing them behind a barrier. Drawing a parallel with Derrida's writing on genres, I argue that monsters' power rests with their ability to ignore genre barriers. The game's monsters are most concerned with forming meaningful connections with those around them, be they human or monster. I argue that this shows that an episteme-to-come prefigured by the game's monsters resonates with Donna Haraway's description of making "oddkin"; acknowledging as well as seeking kinship with other living beings no matter their identifications. [20] Doing what *Pew*'s protagonist was unable to, *Undertale*'s monsters are able to embody genre mixture without parting with identification altogether. Turning to Derrida's writing on monsters, I theorize that *Undertale* can not be studied as merely a game about monsters, but also as a monster in and of itself. Following Derrida, a work can be monstrous in two ways: by combining recognisable elements into something new, or by being something that has

[18] Jaroslav Švelch, *Player Vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2023), 2-3.
[19] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.
[20] *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4-5.

never been encountered before.[21] *Undertale* depicts elements of both, recombining RPG elements into something new as well as completely breaking with video game conventions. Departing from video games' typical focus on immersion, the game turns its mechanics against players of the Genocide route, blurring the boundaries between human and monster, as well as player and game.

By exploring *Pew* and *Undertale* alongside various approaches to identity and identification practices, I aim to show that the works prefigure an episteme in which the problem of identity is a problem no more. Warning their audiences against striving for pure, unmixed identities, both works urge their players to welcome difference in an episteme that expects sameness. Although the instability of identity might seem frightening, *Pew* and *Undertale* show that it can be reconfigured into a source of possibilities, alleviating the burden of conformation and allowing for surprising solidarities.

[21] *Points…: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995): 385-386.

# Chapter 1

## "What are you?": Navigating (Un)certainties in Catherine Lacey's *Pew*

> *What is it?* the middle boy asked, pointing at me. *He oughta be in the back in there, one of them that picks up the dishes,* Jack said, spit shining a smashed bug from the car's windshield. *Everybody's got a place. Dad told me so*. *It ain't no boy*, the middle boy said. *Ain't no boy I ever seen*. *Shut up,* Jack said. *You shut up, then—she ain't even black neither. Don't know what she is, but—* Jack brought a hand down and threw his brother to the gravel [*sic*].[22]

As this passage illustrates, no one can determine exactly "what" the protagonist of Catherine Lacey's novel *Pew* "is", leading to tension within the book's Southern American small-town community. How can this person be assigned their place if they cannot be identified? In this chapter, I aim to question the grounds upon which that question is asked, focussing on the positioning and observations of the novel's protagonist. I argue that these can inform an inquiry into not only the fictional community's unconscious preconditions of knowledge, but those of the book's readers as well. To do so, I turn to Michel Foucault's *Order of Things*, in which he proposes that different periods in Western society's history each came with their own ordering principles for knowledge.[23] Labelling these underlying orders "epistemes", he describes that these function as the unconscious logic that serves as the structuring order for all knowledge.[24] Knowledge cannot be formulated, Foucault writes, without an episteme's prior influence as "rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right".[25] In this way, a period's episteme governs which questions can logically be formed, and which questions are impossible to even think of.[26] Foucault depicts art to be able to depict the boundaries between different epistemes, but also to be able to foretell the shift from one

[22] Catherine Lacey, *Pew* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 18. Throughout *Pew*, all dialogue is italicized. I have chosen to retain this way of writing to stay close to the original text.
[23] *Order of Things*, xxiii.
[24] Foucault, xiii.
[25] Foucault, xii.
[26] Foucault, xii.

episteme to another.[27] This perspective informs my reading of *Pew* as both an inquiry into what remains unquestioned in our current Western episteme, as well as a potential herald of the episteme to come. Since the novel's narrator and protagonist suffers from memory loss, readers experience its events from a unique vantage point; through the eyes of someone who can observe and reflect on the current episteme from an outsider's position. Close-reading *Pew* with a focus on its protagonist's thoughts and observations as well as the book's community's attempts to make sense of Pew, I explore and criticize the current episteme's approach to identity.

In the second section of this chapter, I zoom in on the hierarchies that are established among the novel's characters based on their identities. I analyse the novel in conjunction with Sylvia Wynter's conception of the white, Western, bourgeois genre of the human she calls "Man", which has historically overrepresented itself to the extent that it is currently taken as "the 'being' of being human itself".[28] Depicting the influence of this genre in *Pew*, I show that its overrepresentation is most noticeable for those who do not belong to Man, who they are perceived and treated as less-than-human. *Pew* exposes the current episteme's knowledge to be grounded in a conception of some humans being more human than others, creating inequality based on identity. Finally, I ask not what Foucault and Wynter's theories can add to *Pew*, but what *Pew* can add to these theories. I argue that observing Wynter through the perspective offered by *Pew*'s extra-epistemic protagonist can expand the scope of her humanist decolonial argument, by viewing colonialism as a way of thinking from which all forms of life suffer. Furthermore, Foucault's cryptic foretelling of the end of the current episteme might be elucidated by taking *Pew* into account.[29] Perhaps the novel can help lift the

[27] 3-18 and 51-54.
[28] Wynter, 330.
[29] 422.

veil of what form knowledge could take when the current order of things "would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea".[30]

## *The Order of Things* and Art as a Herald

Catherine Lacey's 2020 novel *Pew* derives its title from its protagonist; a young person who does not remember who they are, where they came from, or where they are going. Their main objective at the start of the novel is finding good places to sleep, with churches being high up on that list. The book's first chapter opens with the following words:

> If you ever need to – and I hope you never need to, but a person cannot be sure – if you ever need to sleep, if you are ever so tired that you feel nothing but the animal weight of your bones, and you're walking along a dark road with no one, and you're not sure how long you've been walking, and you keep looking down at your hands and not recognizing them, and you keep catching a reflection in darkened windows and not recognizing that reflection, and all you know is the desire to sleep, and all you have is no place to sleep, one thing you can do is look for a church.[31]

This passage makes it apparent that Pew has been walking around for some time, not knowing much other than a desire to sleep. When they try to remember, all they can think of is that "[they] left some place, began walking, slept in all those churches, then everything else happened".[32] Regardless of their memory loss, Pew's grasp of the English language is excellent; the sentences they formulate are comprehensive and reflect their capacity for critical thinking. This is emphasized shortly hereafter, when Pew relates that their reasons for sleeping in churches have nothing to do with their affinity for religion, stating: "That's not what I mean when I say you can go to one when you're tired. I'm not talking about grace or deliverance … What I mean is a church is a structure with walls and a roof and pretty windows that make it so you can't see outside. They're like casinos in that way, or shopping malls or those big drugstores with all the aisles, music piped in from somewhere, the endless

[30] Foucault, 422.
[31] Lacey, *Pew*, 10.
[32] Lacey, 10.

search for that final thing".[33] By taking readers along with Pew's thought processes, Lacey makes it very clear that Pew can perceive, learn from, and interact with the world around them, creating their own network of associations. It soon becomes clear that Pew bases their definitions of concepts on the experiences they have had with those concepts up until that point in time instead of being able to fall back on a pre-existing framework of shared, cultural knowledge. Pew wakes up on a church pew in a small, fictional town in the Southern US one day with a family sitting next to them. After observing one of the family members, a person in a pale blue dress holding the hand of a child, Pew reflects: "this is the sort of person called a mother. A mother wears dresses, holds hands".[34] When Pew observes the mother smacking one of the children's heads after they pulled Pew's shoe, Pew adds to their definition: "A mother wears a pale blue dress and smacks heads".[35] In this way, the book paints Pew to be an outsider, not only to the small-town community they have come to find themselves in, but also to the foundations of knowledge the other characters share in.

Pew's outsider position leads them to question not only what remains unquestioned, but the very reason why certain questions make sense to the community whereas others do not. In this way, they are able to reflect on the current period's "episteme".[36] In his 1966 book *The Order of Things*, the French philosopher Michel Foucault conducts what he calls an archaeology of thought; an excavation of different epistemes that have constituted "the order of things" throughout Western history.[37] His archaeology focuses on scientific knowledge, specifically on what the modern-day disciplines of linguistics, biology, and economics. Tracking these disciplines throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and our current day and age, Foucault shows how the knowledge in these differing fields is always gathered

[33] Lacey, 10.
[34] Lacey, 15.
[35] Lacey, 15.
[36] Foucault, xiii.
[37] xxiv.

following the same ordering principles under the influence of a given time period's episteme.[38] "Order", in Foucault's usage of the word, *does* a lot but *is* very little:

> Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.[39]

In this way, order determines the field of possibility for questions without ever being subjected to questioning itself. It determines what is paid attention to and in what way, with its influence being perceived as a given instead of something malleable. This order is precisely what an episteme provides. Focuault describes an episteme as "a *positive unconscious* of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature".[40] Since there is always an episteme that governs the production and interpretation of all types of knowledge, knowledge is always being organised according to one order or another. It is not until we are confronted with an order different from our own that the subjectivity as well as the instability of what we know becomes clear.[41]

Foucault gives an example of such an order that is completely different than our own in his preface to the 1970 English edition of *The Order of Things*, when he describes that the idea for the book came to him when he had read a specific passage in Jorge Luis Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beings*.[42] Foucault describes that:

> This passage quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'.[43]

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[38] xxiv-xxv.
[39] xxi.
[40] xii.
[41] Foucault, xvi.
[42] xvi.
[43] xvi.

Although all elements in this encyclopaedia entry about animals are recognizable, we cannot comprehend the grounds upon which animals have been organised into these seemingly random categories. In this way, it is not the contents of the classification that do not make sense, but the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated, odd elements. Foucault describes this as the site on which the meeting of these elements would be possible having been destroyed.[44] Had Borges provided a description, in the form of a sentence such as "the umbrella and the sewing-machine are on the operating table",[45] his juxtapositions might still have been unlikely, but they would not have been impossible. However unlikely a combination an umbrella, a sewing-machine and an operating table might be, the words between them create a site in which their mutual presence could make sense. As it stands, the alphabetical enumeration does not reveal the common locus of the provided elements, preferring to let them speak for themselves. And what this tells Foucault is the following: "In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*".[46] In this way, the perceived incomprehensibility of a completely different system of thought can tell us something about our own: it highlights the impossibility of thinking beyond the boundaries of what is conceived as possible within one's own system of thought.

It is no coincidence that Foucault mentions a fable as the inspiration for writing his book; in fact, he introduces not only *The Order of Things* as a whole, but also the epistemes he excavates in it by analysing works of art. The first of these is a painting called "Las Meninas", painted by Diego Velazquez in 1656. Foucault interprets the painting as foretelling the ending of the episteme that governed Western Europe up until the sixteenth century; an

[44] xviii.
[45] Foucault, xvii.
[46] xvi.

episteme based upon resemblance.[47] Throughout the Middle Ages, Foucault writes, "[i]t was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible the knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them".[48] An example of knowledge having had its grounds in resemblance comes to the fore when considering the work of naturalist Aldrovandi, whose work contained "an inextricable mixture of exact descriptions, reported quotations, fables without commentary, remarks dealing indifferently with an animal's anatomy, its use in heraldry, its habitat, its mythological values, or the uses to which it could be put in medicine or magic".[49] The episteme that followed, the Classical episteme, placed importance on representation instead of resemblance. Rather than searching for affinities between all things, differences became important. This is exemplified by the emergence of scientific fields of study based on structural contrasts, such as botanists focussing on determining the structure of flowers by observing four variables, "the form of the elements, the quantity of those elements, the manner in which they are distributed in space in relation to each other, and the relative magnitude of each element".[50] In Foucault's analysis of "Las Meninas", he focuses on its potential for heralding the beginning of the Classical episteme, writing: "Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velazquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us".[51] Similarly, Chapter 3 opens with an analysis of the famous work *Don Quixote*, which Foucault labels: "the first modern work of literature".[52] According to Foucault, Don Quixote is on a quest to recover and reunite shattered resemblances, in line with the medieval episteme, while those around him are focused on identities and differences, following the Classical episteme. In this

[47] 19.
[48] 17.
[49] Foucault, 43.
[50] Foucault, 134.
[51] 17.
[52] 48-49.

way, "[Don Quixote] is Different only in so far as he is unaware of Difference",[53] being a remnant of an episteme that has been replaced by another. Throughout Foucault's analyses of "Las Meninas" and *Don Quixote,* art shows the shift from one episteme to another. Borrowing Foucault's approach to art means that *Pew* can provide fertile soil for reflections upon not only the current episteme but a possible episteme-to-come.

Throughout the novel, *Pew*'s protagonist is constantly confronted with people who want to make sense of them by gathering specific information regarding their identity. The family that was sitting next to Pew in church, comprised of Steve, Hilda, and their three young boys, take pity on Pew and decide to bring them to their home. Giving them their oldest son Jack's attic bedroom to sleep in, they tell Pew they can stay with them for "as long as it takes".[54] Although the two make it seem like their help is unconditional, Pew starts to feel uncomfortable from the moment they enter the house, reflecting that "[s]ome kind of force or threat was in the room, all over the house".[55] This threat might have something to do with a looming realisation that the family as well as the rest of the town's church community are not going to accept Pew's illegibility. From the way Pew looks, they cannot easily be assigned a specific gender or ethnicity, and this creates questions that the novel's characters very much want answered. Steve and Hilda invite their church's reverend over for dinner, hoping that he can get Pew to reveal their identity. The reverend starts by asking Pew for their name, and when Pew does not respond he nicknames them "Pew" after the church pew in which they were found.[56] Pew's unresponsiveness does not mean that they have no thoughts on the matter; in fact, they think to themselves: "I didn't want to be called anything".[57] However, they realise that telling the reverend this would make no difference,

[53] 54.
[54] Lacey, 17.
[55] Lacey, 21.
[56] Lacey, 22.
[57] Lacey, 21.

since he "used that tilting tone meant for a question, but he wasn't asking [them] a question".[58] This turns out to be the red thread for much of the story to follow, as Steve, Hilda and various other community members keep telling Pew that they do not have to do anything they do not want to do, but Pew's noncompliance with their interrogations is nonetheless met with consequences.

Pew finds themselves an outsider to the episteme that governs the knowledge of those surrounding them, and actively resists the efforts that would integrate them into the realm of the known. This realm is what Eva Hayward and Che Gossett would describe as "*this",* whereas Pew, being an outsider to *this*, resides in "*that*".[59] These designations are based upon Foucault's description of that which is discovered when reading Borges' fantastical encyclopaedia entry: "the limitations of our own [system of thought], the stark impossibility of thinking *that*".[60] Hayward and Gossett take *that* to mean "the scene upon which order is installed and legislated", that which is understood and upon which the order and hierarchy of Western systems of classification can be installed.[61] They describe Western classification practices as colonial practices, in which "*This* is always hungry for *that*–always seeking what remains beyond thinkability, beyond order. And yet, while *that* may be impossible, it is so only provisionally. *That* will become *this*–or so colonial reasoning teaches".[62] In this way, *this* cannot tolerate *that* lying outside of its ordering principles. Letting the incomprehensible remain incomprehensible is not an option following the colonial logic of incorporation; it must be studied, understood, and assigned its proper place within the extant hierarchy. By having its protagonist be a part of *that*, *Pew* exposes the coloniality inherent to *this*,

[58] Lacey, 22.
[59] "Impossibility of *That*", *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2017), 16. DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322814, original emphasis.
[60] Foucault, xvi.
[61] 16.
[62] Hayward and Gossett, 16.

emphasizing the current episteme's inability of letting anything, including someone's identity, be incomprehensible.

The conversation with the reverend is the first of many instances in which the book's characters try to obtain information about Pew's identity but are met with silence. The importance the reverend attaches to the information being gathered comes to the fore when he hones in on the question of Pew's gender and elaborately argues for Pew to answer, stating:

> *Now, you might know that some people these days like to think a person gets to decide whether they are a boy or a girl, but we believe, our church believes, and Jesus believed that God decides if you're a boy or a girl. So when you answer this question, that's the answer we want – did God make you a boy or a girl? … It may be that you have some other feelings on the matter, that you're not really a boy or a girl, and that really is fine with us – we're very tolerant and you can think whatever you like, you really can – but just for our purposes, what is it that we would call you?*[63]

As often as the reverend might repeat that his community is "very tolerant" and that Pew can "think whatever [they] like", the community does apparently need Pew to answer "for [their] purposes".[64] The reverend emphasizes this much by stating that "We need to know [the answers to our questions] in order to provide you with a safe place to live".[65] In other words, if the community does not know Pew's gender, Pew's safety can not be guaranteed. The reason for this is not clarified, other than the reverend saying that they want to give Pew "the right sort of help",[66] but this statement rings hollow after Pew's safety has been proclaimed to be in jeopardy. Reflecting Hayward and Gosset's claims of Western systems of classification and their desire for order, hierarchy, and expansion, it seems as though the answers the reverend seeks are necessary for assigning Pew their "rightful place" within the book's community. In fact, the rest of the book revolves around the search for these answers, and the longer they remain unknown, the less privileges are allowed to Pew. This begins the day after the reverend's questioning, when Steven and Hilda do not trust Pew to stay home alone while

[63] Lacey, 23.
[64] Lacey, 23.
[65] Lacey, 20.
[66] Lacey, 24.

everybody is at school and work.[67] They bring Pew to Hilda's mother's house, where they are later visited by child psychologist Roger who also tries to break Pew's silence, stating "at some point you have to ask yourself … whether remaining silent is something that is having a positive effect or a negative one on your life".[68] When this yields no results, Pew is brought to children's minister Sonny, who emphasizes: "*when you're ready to talk, kid, I am here to listen*".[69] When Pew does not tell him anything, either, Steven and Hilda become increasingly suspicious, with Steven even asking Pew: "*I reckon you won't start now … but if there's anything you need to tell us, anything you might need to come clean about … maybe you could tell us right now?*".[70] No answer comes, and from that night onwards Steven and Hilda start locking the attic's door when Pew is inside.[71]

Since *Pew*'s readers experience the book through Pew's eyes, they know the reasons for the protagonist's silence. Pew does not only refuse to answer because they feel threatened, but also because they are not able to provide the other characters with the answers they seek. Pew does not share in the epistemological framework upon which to base the identity categories that come so naturally to those around them, and their silence therefore does not mean they are intentionally hiding the answers to their questions, those specific answers are simply not to be found. When the reverend asks them about their gender and personal history, Pew thinks: "[a]ll I could have told the reverend, if I could have spoken, was that I was human just as he was human, only missing a few things he seemed to think I needed".[72] Through the perspective *Pew* offers its readers, they are confronted with the negative effects

[67] Lacey, 27.
[68] Lacey, 32.
[69] Lacey, 47.
[70] Lacey, 48.
[71] This sequence of events echoes Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis.* In it, protagonist Gregor's parents lock him in his room after they find out that he has metamorphosed into a large insect. In both *The Metamorphosis* and *Pew*, the protagonist's mode of existence should be impossible (to which I return in Chapter 2), which leads to a rift between them and the other characters in the work, and these characters' fear of the unknown leads to the punishment of the protagonists.
[72] Lacey, 23.

of the identification practices that seem so natural to those who have been immersed in them all their lives. Whatever identifications *Pew*'s readers might subscribe to, all readers are made to inhabit the position of a total outsider; a human who is punished for being unable to play by the identification rules of their surroundings. Through the way the protagonist is treated, as well as their reflections upon this treatment, *Pew* opens doors for readers to start questioning what usually remains unquestioned: that to be treated humanely, a person needs to be able to identify themselves. When the reverend ends his interrogation of Pew by telling them: "*You know, we treat everyone the same here – it's what we believe. Everyone gets the same kind of respect*", the protagonist silently reflects: "There were many kinds of insects, I knew – I had seen many of them – but how many kinds of respect existed?".[73]

## Genres of the Human

Throughout *Pew*, the protagonist's unwillingness as well as their inability to provide the fictional small-town church community with answers regarding their identity earns them a less-than-human position within it. Pew is not the only character in the book for whom this is the case, and the only times Pew seems to be somewhat at ease with other characters is when they are in the company of those who are also treated with a different kind of respect than the members of the small-town church community show one another. The concept of respect has no singular definition but has often been linked to an acknowledgement of another person's humanity, with Immanuel Kant writing that one has a moral obligation to honour another person's inherent worth as a human being by showing them respect.[74] If different kinds of

[73] Lacey, 23.
[74] "The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals" in *The Moral Law: Or, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals: A New Translation, with Analysis and Notes*, ed. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1958): 55-131, original work published in 1785, as quoted in Carrie Rewakowski, "Respect: An Integrative Review", *Nursing Science Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2018): 190. DOI: 10.1177/0894318418755736.

respect exist in *Pew*, then, it might be said that the novel also features different conceptions of the human.

One of the characters who is treated with of these different kinds of respect is Nelson, a refugee child who was adopted by one of the church community's rich, white families. The book's characters treat Pew and Nelson differently than they treat other members of their community. This comes to the fore when the two are repeatedly supposed to have a lot in common by characters who know next to nothing about them. When child psychologist Roger speaks with Pew, one of the first things he tells them is that he "worked with cases like [Pew's] before … Or, well, not exactly like [Pew's], but very similar".[75] By this he means that he worked with Nelson, whom he describes as "an orphan from someplace having a war",[76] and that "even though [the family who adopted him] had been told the kid was fluent in English, he had a very bad case of nerves when he arrived, wasn't speaking at all".[77] What becomes clear is that Roger does not know much about Nelson's background, and nothing at all about Pew's, yet he assumes that the two must have a lot in common regardless. Similarly, Nelson's adoptive mother starts to refer to Pew as Nelson's new friend despite the two not knowing each other, as Nelson describes to Pew:

> *Anyway this afternoon Kitty tells me I'm going to see my new friend. And I say,* Who? *And she says,* Pew, your friend. *And, I mean—no offense—but we are not friends. Not to me. I mean, I don't know you. You don't know me. So I tell her,* How can Pew be my friend? We don't even know each other. *And she says something about how we all need to be welcoming to you, and anyway that you and me must have a lot in common. And I say,* Because we're both brown? *Must seem all the same to her. And you know what? She fucking laughs. She didn't even answer me at all. Just laughed.*[78]

Kitty's behaviour not only shows that Nelson and Pew are being grouped together primarily because both are perceived to be different than those around them, but also that making her see the limitations of her thought processes is very difficult to accomplish. Her knowledge

[75] Lacey, 33.
[76] Lacey, 33.
[77] Lacey, 33.
[78] Lacey, 69-70.

regarding categories of the human seems to be governed by an underlying foundation of knowledge, shared by the community, so that Kitty's laughter upon being confronted with a perspective starkly different than her own can be seen to echo Foucault's laughter upon reading Borges' fantastical encyclopaedia.[79]

The different kinds of respect that exist for different kinds of humans can be further explored by reading *Pew* alongside Sylvia Wynter's theories regarding genres of the human and the hierarchies that exist among them. In her 2003 text "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom", Wynter builds upon Foucault's theories regarding epistemes, depicting the modern episteme to have unexplored negative influences. Whereas Foucault describes his three epistemes simply as ordering principles, without paying attention to their problematic aspects, Wynter highlights the inequality that is perpetuated by the current episteme. She states her purpose in the first sentence of her text:

> The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavio[u]ral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.[80]

As described, Wynter argues that one conception or genre of the human has come to overrepresent itself and is now presented as synonymous with the human in general. She calls this genre an "ethnoclass" genre because its main components are those of being upper-class and white, but describes that its functioning extends to "all levels of the social order – including that of class, gender, sexual orientation, superior/inferior ethnicities … and most totally between the represented-to-be superior and inferior races and cultures".[81] Those at the top of this hierarchy of the human are white, wealthy, male and heterosexual, and the less of these characteristics you display, the less you are perceived and treated as being human.

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[79] Foucault, xvi.
[80] Wynter, 260.
[81] Wynter, 323.

Whereas Foucault focussed on the previously mentioned medieval episteme, Classical episteme, and modern episteme, Wynter traces the developments that led to the current Man-as-human episteme by examining three different historical dichotomies. These dichotomies are: 1) the educated clergy versus the uneducated laity in the Middle Ages, 2) those who were divinely determined to possess reason and those who were divinely determined not to in the Renaissance, and 3) those who are supposed to be evolutionarily more developed versus those who are supposedly less so from the 18th century onwards.[82] Here, it becomes clear that what Wynter refers to as Man is, as the term "genre" already alludes to, a category sprung from historical narratives. The genre of Man is a fiction brought to life by its having been associated with the dominant sides of these historical dichotomies, leading to its currently standing in for "the being of being human itself".[83] The consequences of the Man-as-human episteme are noticeable mainly for those who do not belong to the genre of Man, since Man's characteristics are taken as the norm whereas other characteristics stand out as being different or deviant. According to Wynter, "our present 'mental construction of reality' [is] one projected from the perspective (and to the adaptive advantage) of our present ethnoclass genre of the human, Man",[84] making it difficult for those who do not belong to be truly seen and heard. If it is Man who "own[s] the Word" because this genre has become the order that underlies all possible knowledge regarding the human, resistance will also have to come "in the terms of the very biocentric paradigms that prescribe the subordination and impoverishment of the vast majority of the worlds to which they/we belong",[85] making it very difficult to find the tools with which to counter the Man-as-human narrative.

Although Man is a fictional category, the effects of one genre of the human being taken as the standard for what it means to be human are very real. This is emphasized in *Pew*

[82] Wynter, 330.
[83] Wynter, 330.
[84] Wynter, 312.
[85] Wynter, 329.

through the experiences of the character Nelson. Seemingly aware of the difficulties that come with resisting Man, he seems to have given up. Letting his adoptive family believe he likes to play checkers against himself on the porch of their house, he spends a lot of time sitting there by himself with a cup of alcohol.[86] Moreover, he lets them take him to church every week despite his own negative experiences with the Christian religion. Nelson tells Pew: "*My whole family was killed in the name of God and now these people want me to sing a hymn like it was all some misunderstanding. Must have been some other guy*".[87] He commends Pew's silence, emphasizing: "*You're right not to say anything. They hear what they want. The more you say, the more they use it against you. Maybe they'd leave me alone more if they thought I was a mute*".[88] Perhaps this passage elucidates part of the threat that Pew felt the very first day they found themselves in Steven and Hilda's house; the threat of their words being used to identify them and subsequently assign them a place within the Man-as-human episteme. The ways in which Nelson is different from Man seemingly have the consequence of his never receiving the same respect as those around him, while at the same time, his personal history and wishes are being erased because they are not perceived by Man. While Nelson's adoptive family portrays themselves as saviours without whom Nelson would have been lost, Nelson hates living with them, telling Pew: "Two more years, then I'm gone. I'll go somewhere, and I'll never come back".[89] Pew and Nelson may not have in common what the community assumes them to have in common, but they are able to relate to each other nonetheless by both not belonging to Man.

[86] Lacey, 37-38.
[87] Lacey, 38.
[88] Lacey, 38.
[89] Lacey, 37.

## Foucault and Wynter through the lens of Pew

Sylvia Wynter proposes a different take on Michel Foucault's theory on epistemes, adopting a humanistic viewpoint whereas Foucault presents an anti-humanist argument. Wynter opens her text with the following quote from the end of Foucault's *Order of Things*:

> One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it … In fact, among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things and their order … only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear. And that appearance … was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge … If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared … one can certainly wager that man would be erased[90]

Taking Foucault's figure of man as a starting point for her figure of Man allows Wynter to emphasize the impermanence of the figure; being a development linked to a certain episteme, it is not a given and can disappear by way of similar processes that caused it to appear.[91] She departs from Foucault, however, by holding that this does not mean that humanism needs to be erased as well. In an interview with David Scott, Wynter argues for a broader humanism that includes all genres of the human without giving centre stage to one genre.[92] Describing the versions of humanism that have existed since the Renaissance as "partial humanisms" or "ethnohumanisms", because they revolved around specific ethnicities and classes of humans instead of taking all genres of the human into account, Wynter states: "to put it more precisely, in our case, an ethno-class or Western-bourgeois form of humanism, whose *truth-for* at the level of a social reality, while a truth-for Man, cannot be one for the human".[93] Despite a true humanism never having existed, or perhaps because of it, Wynter views humanism as indispensable for solving our current day-and-age's troubles:

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[90] Foucault, 421-422.
[91] 422.
[92] "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter", *Small Axe* 8 (September 2000): 119-207.
[93] Scott, "The Re-Enchantment", 196, original emphasis.

> [T]he problems that we confront – that of the scandalous inequalities between the rich and the poor countries, of global warming and the disastrous effects of climate change, of large-scale epidemics such as AIDS – can be solved only if we can, for the first time, *experience* ourselves, not only as we do now, as this or that *genre* of the human, but also *as* human. A new mode of experiencing ourselves in which every mode of being human, every form of life that has ever been enacted, is a part of us. We, a part of them.[94]

This differs from the perspective of Foucault, who makes it explicit that his argument is not a humanist one. For him, the erasure of man would at the same time indicate the erasure of humanism:

> [Man] is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge. Whence all the chimeras of the new humanisms, all the facile solutions of an 'anthrolopogy' understood as a universal reflection on man, half-empirical, half-philosophical. It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form.[95]

An episteme-to-come, according to Foucault, does not need any version of humanism at all; in fact, he finds it comforting that a future episteme will have no need for any new forms of humanism. What a non-humanistic episteme would look like, however, remains to be guessed at.

I argue that *Pew* offers a third point of view; one that retains Wynter's anticolonial perspective while offering a potential elaboration upon Foucault's intangible anti-humanist argument. Rather than concerning themselves with labelling their point of view humanist or not, Lacey's protagonist is innately attuned to all life around them, be it plants, insects or humans. In this way, Pew's extra-epistemic perspective extends beyond the boundaries of what genres of the human are treated differently than others. Throughout the book, their behaviour towards plant and animal life differs greatly from that of those around them, highlighting that what Hayward and Gossett described as the colonisation of *that* into *this* is

[94] Scott, 196-197, original emphasis.
[95] Foucault, xxv.

also, or perhaps especially, extended to non-human life.[96] One of the first instances of Pew interacting with animals occurs during their conversation with the reverend. While the reverend tries to think of ways to get Pew to disclose their gender, asking them to clap once if God made them a boy and twice if God made them a girl, Pew is busy staring at a mosquito.[97] They describe the encounter with the insect as follows: "A mosquito was sucking blood from my wrist. I watched it swallowing and swallowing, then flying away. That blood was the bug's blood now, not mine, never mine again".[98] Since the response to a mosquito sucking a person's blood is usually an attempt to kill the animal, Pew's reaction stands out. By describing the blood that the mosquito drinks as the mosquito's blood, Pew depicts a respectful and very anti-colonial view of themselves, the animal, and the relation between the two. Another situation that depicts Pew's attitude towards non-human life occurs in Nelson's adoptive parents' garden. Pew observes that "[i]n the far corner of the yard a massive tree was spotlit from below, casting agonized shadows".[99] Taking pity on the tree, Pew finds themselves drawn to it: "without making a choice I was already walking out toward it, pulled by its wooden ache. Why couldn't they turn the lights out for him? Why couldn't they let him sleep in the dark? I stood in front of one of the spotlights on the ground and tried to cover it with my hands, but it was no use".[100] However accustomed humans living in the current episteme might be to highlighting plants in their garden by shining lights on them at night, this feels completely unnatural to Pew. *Pew*'s protagonist seems to be attuned to plant life in a completely different way than those around them, being drawn towards the tree reflexively, "without making a choice".[101] The unconscious part of this decision might be interpreted as

[96] 16.
[97] Lacey, 38.
[98] Lacey, 23.
[99] Lacey, 37.
[100] Lacey, 38.
[101] Lacey, 38.

an epistemic influence;[102] the questions and actions that come to Pew are vastly different than those that come to those around them, hinting at a different basis of knowledge. The contrast between Pew's views and those of the community surrounding them becomes even more clear when Kitty steps out into the garden for a smoke and, seeing Pew busying themselves with the plants, proceeds to provide her own reflection on them:

> *I just love these oaks, live oaks I believe is what they call it. I wish I knew all the plant names out here, and I've tried, but I forget them all the time … I do know that's a dogwood over there.* She pointed with her cigarette, then took a long drag. *And that's a magnolia, both of them over there, magnolias, smaller ones.* The magnolia seemed somehow exhausted, weighted and weary under all those dark green leaves. *I do wish they bloomed this time of year. It would give me some relief. But you can tell a tree whatever you like—it won't ever listen!*[103]

Whereas Pew is preoccupied with the way the plants look, and even how they might feel, Kitty is preoccupied with identifying the plants, reemphasizing the current episteme's need for identification. Moreover, she describes that if she could, she would tell the plants to bloom right now, regardless of it not being the season most appropriate for them to be blooming. Kitty's attitude is one of control, of, in Hayward and Gossett's words, wanting to integrate *that* into *this.*[104] As the authors write, "*this* is terrible ground, is the scene upon which order is installed and legislated. *This* is always hungry for *that* – always seeking what remains beyond thinkability, beyond order".[105] Kitty's remarks reflect how commonplace it has become for humans to expect or desire some sort of control over plant life, whereas Pew's desire to let nature run its course displays an opposite desire; one of "elaborat[ing] the impossibility of *that*" rather than rendering *that* possible.[106] Alluding to Franz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*, a critical examination of the psychological, dehumanising effects that colonisation has on colonised people, Hayward and Gossett write: "What if 'the wretched

[102] Foucault, xii.
[103] Lacey, 39.
[104] 16.
[105] Hayward and Gossett, 16.
[106] Hayward and Gossett, 17.

of the Earth' also includes 'non-human' animals – all those cast down, abjected, wretched, and damned under colonialism?".[107] By perceiving and resisting the unnatural, colonial ways in which non-human life is treated in *Pew*, its protagonist might provide an insight into an episteme-to-come. Letting a mosquito suck their blood and shielding a plant from unnatural light, *Pew* can be read as an embodiment of *that*; an anti-colonial work in the broadest sense of the concept, highlighting the colonialism that all life is subjected to in various forms rather than only focussing on human life. Unburdened by colonial ways of thinking, Pew's observations and actions confront readers of the novel with a different order of things, showing the limitations of the current order.[108] Such insights can come in the form of subtle changes in perspective. Much is to be learned, for instance, from Pew's brief reflection on the purpose of a screened porch: "From the porch I watched moths hover around a tall lamp across the street. Others flew helplessly against the screens that kept Steven and Hilda and me away from them".[109]

[107] Hayward and Gossett, 19. For more on Fanon and his writing, see Hayward and Gossett as well as Wynter.
[108] Foucault, xvi.
[109] Lacey, 71.

# Chapter 2

## Contaminated Genres and the Construction of the "I" in *Pew* and *Undertale*

In the previous chapter, I close-read *Pew* alongside the concept of the episteme as theorized by Foucault and Wynter to show how the novel invites its readers to reflect upon the foundations of their knowledge. For Wynter, epistemes produce genre distinctions; particularly those that separate the genre of Man from, and elevate it above, all other genres of the human. Up until now, I have not explored Wynter's usage of the concept of genre in depth, although her choice is not a straightforward one. Genres are literary or aesthetic categories, most commonly used to divide texts and other works of art from one another on the basis of certain characteristics.[110] The roots of genre classification are believed to lie with the division of texts into the lyric form, the epic form, and the dramatic form, although the exact origin of this tripartition is unknown.[111] Nowadays, the conventional definition of genre lies along the lines of a style or model that consists of a certain set of characteristics.[112] What are the implications of taking the concept of genre as a point of departure for a theory of the human? And how do *Pew* and the second object of this thesis, the video game *Undertale*, theorize the concept of genre as related to identity?

This chapter revolves around the concept of genre and its value for approaching the problem of identity in *Pew* and *Undertale*. Both works feature the strict adherence to identity categories; centring on man and woman in *Pew*, and human and monster in *Undertale*. In *Pew*, the characters surrounding the protagonist go to great lengths to determine the protagonist's gender, although Pew does not identify with any specific gender themselves. Observing those around them without sharing in the community's cultural knowledge, the

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[110] Gerard Genette, *The Architext* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1992): 64.
[111] Genette, *The Architext*, 1-3.
[112] Cambridge Dictionary Online, s.v. "genre", accessed on 15 May 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/genre

gendered behaviour of the other characters strikes Pew as odd. Close-reading *Pew* alongside Jacques Derrida's thinking on the notion of genre, I argue that whereas the characters around Pew adhere to the "law of genre", "genres will not be mixed", Pew embodies "the law of the law of genre", which states that there is always already contamination present when distinguishing genres.[113] Moreover, *Pew* suggests a link between the human need for delineation and the body. Its protagonist does not recognise themselves in mirrors, identifying themselves with the world around them more than they do with their body. I argue that they might not have gone through the "mirror stage", defined by Jacques Lacan as the point in the development of a child when they first recognise themselves in a mirror and come to recognise themselves as separate from others.[114] Analysing *Pew* from a Lacanian perspective, I argue that Lacey's protagonist embodies the fictitiousness of the idea of a unified self, confronting those around them with the unstable foundations of their identity.[115]

Whereas *Pew* troubles genre purity by having its readers assume the position of a character without identifications, *Undertale* puts its own players' genre expectations to the test. The game draws on players' previous experiences with the genre of the role-playing game (RPG), as well as the role it has traditionally assigned to the monster. Drawing on David Livingstone Smith's writing on monsters, I show that making people into monsters in real life is one of the worst forms of dehumanization, desensitizing people to committing terribly violent acts, often against already vulnerable members of a population.[116] Whereas RPGs traditionally require players to kill monsters in order to win the game, *Undertale* only ends well if all encountered monsters are spared. By purposefully invoking and then thwarting the expectations and habituations of its audience, *Undertale* confronts its players with the acts that can be justified through the invocation of categorisations. Mapping out the

[113] Derrida, "Law of Genre", 55, 57.
[114] Lacan, 93-95.
[115] Lacan, 94.
[116] Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters*, 254.

relationship between identity and genre in *Pew* and *Undertale*, I argue that the works prefigure an episteme that does not insist on sameness, but expects and welcomes difference.

## The Law of Genre

> *I'm sorry if this is embarrassing to be asked, but we will need to know if you're a boy or a girl. There's no reason for you to be embarrassed or ashamed or anything, and we don't think you've done anything wrong … at least not with regards to you not obviously being a boy or a girl the way everyone else is … but it's simply not clear to us which one you are and you have to be one or the other, so unless you want us to figure it out the hard way, I think you should just tell us which one you are. Much easier.*[117]

As discussed in Chapter 1, the uncertainty regarding Pew's identity is not appreciated by *Pew*'s characters. When Pew does not answer the reverend's questions regarding their gender, age, and history, the reverend goes on to refer to rules that dictate that Pew must provide the answers, stating: "*we need to know these things. Do you understand? These are just how the rules work. I didn't make them, but I do think it's best that we follow them, don't you? So that everything can be fair and orderly?".*[118] This "order" is of a different make than the order discussed in the previous chapter. Following Foucault, order, in the form of epistemes, referred to the unconscious, omnipresent, yet never visible grid that functions as the foundation of knowledge.[119] The order the reverend mentions seems to function the other way around; as a consciously established order that is not always already present and is usually made visible. If the reverend's order were omnipresent, asking Pew for their gender would not have been necessary, and its visibility is revealed by the remark that everyone except Pew is "*obviously … a boy or a girl*".[120] Importantly, this order revolves specifically around identity, centring around one identificatory category in particular; that of gender. The message is clear: you must present yourself as either a boy or a girl, and if you refuse there

[117] Lacey, 22-23.
[118] Lacey, 24.
[119] Foucault, xxi.
[120] Lacey, 22.

will be consequences. Exploring this order and its focus on gender might help clarify the link *Pew* establishes between identity and genre.

At this point, it is helpful to take Derrida's writing on the notion of genre into account. In his 1980 text "The Law of Genre", Derrida discusses genre to interrogate the ways in which genre classifications contribute to the establishment of norms and conventions.[121] The text opens with the following words:

> Genres are not to be mixed.
> I will not mix genres.
> I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.[122]

This opening can be interpreted in multiple ways, which Derrida depicts in the pages to follow, before eventually landing on the interpretation of "Genres are not to be mixed" functioning as the "law of genre".[123] "As soon as the word 'genre' is sounded", he writes, "a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: "'Do', 'Do not' says 'genre', the word 'genre', the figure, the voice, or the law of genre".[124] In this way, the law of genre is a law of delimitation; when one speaks of a genre, one automatically speaks of do's and do nots that stipulate what lies within or outside of the boundaries of that which is represented. This definition does not only hold for literary genres, but for "genre in all genres", be they natural, "for example, a biological genre in the sense of gender, or the human genre, a genre of all that is in general", or nonnatural "for example, an artistic, poetic, or literary genre".[125] Here, Derrida introduces gender as a form of genre. It is worth noting that, in French, the word *genre* has two meanings, "genre" and "gender".[126] In this way, Derrida places an impurity at the heart of his text, since one cannot use the word

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[121] Derrida, 56.
[122] Derrida, 55. Included as a block quotation to preserve the original indentation.
[123] Derrida, 56.
[124] Derrida, 56.
[125] Derrida, 56.
[126] Jonathan Crimmins, "Gender, Genre, and the Near Future in Derrida's 'The Law of Genre'", *Diacritics* 39, no. 1 (2009): 45, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41416227

*genre* in French without invoking, to some extent, both of its meanings. And, as it turns out, this impurity is central to the text in more than one way.

This is where the condition of possibility for the law of genre comes to the fore, what Derrida calls "the law of the law of genre".[127] Whereas the law of genre imposes that "one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity",[128] the law of the law of genre "is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy".[129] The reason for this is the following: for there to be distinguishable genres at all, there must be traits that belong to one genre or another; demarcations that signal which genre we are dealing with. However, those demarcations themselves do not belong to the genre they signal. Derrida describes this situation as "a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set".[130] The example he gives is that of the novel; for a novel to be recognised as such, there must be a demarcation that makes it clear to us that it is a novel. This can, for instance, come in the form of the text "A Novel" following the title of the work in question. As Derrida describes, "this designation is not novelistic; it does not, in whole or in part, take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts".[131] No matter the genre demarcation we are dealing with, then, a genre is both given its boundaries and kept from being closed by it. This does not mean, however, that texts are therefore always *without* genre. As Derrida proposes, "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres … yet such participation never amounts to belonging".[132] In this way, all genres become un-closeable by the very demarcations that allowed them to be spoken of at all. Derrida describes this phenomenon as the beginning of the end of pure

[127] Derrida, 57.
[128] Derrida, 57.
[129] Derrida, 59.
[130] Derrida, 59.
[131] Derrida, 65.
[132] Derrida, 65.

genres, since "[w]ithout [demarcations], neither genre nor literature would come to light, but as soon as there is a blinking of an eye, this clause or this floodgate of a genre, at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins".[133]

Reading *Pew* alongside Derrida, when the reverend tells Pew "*[w]e will need to know whether you are a boy or a girl … you have to be one or the other*", he is telling them to adhere to the law of genre, "genres are not to be mixed".[134] Indeed, the reverend, Steven, Hilda, and a large part of the town's church community spend the majority of the novel trying to determine whether Pew is either a boy or a girl. Despite their efforts, described in the previous chapter, Pew resists all attempts at the identification of their gender; not because they do not want to reveal the answer, but because there is no answer to be found. Whereas many characters in the novel insist that the law of genre be followed, Pew can be said to embody the law of the law of genre by explicitly not belonging to any genre of gender. The character does not identify themselves with any particular genre, nor do they understand what certain behaviours are supposed to indicate one's gender and why. As previously described, their memory loss seems to have left them completely out of touch with the foundations of knowledge the community shares in, including the traditional ways in which gender is expressed. Because of this, the habitual ways in which gender is performed differently for the men and women in the book stand out to Pew as being strange, inviting readers to question the essence and closed-ness of genres of gender. By estranging readers from traditional conceptions and expressions of gender, Lacey can be seen to invoke Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 conception of *ostranenie* or "estrangement". *Ostranenie* can be described as "the artistic technique of making the familiar strange … a means of counteracting one of the most

[133] Derrida, 65-66.
[134] Lacey, 22-3 and Derrida, 55.

deadening forces in both art and life - habitualization or automatization".[135] By making familiarized gender differences strange, *Pew* questions the closedness of the genre while also highlighting the hierarchies that revolve around it.

## Gender/Genre Performativity

In his conversation with Pew, the reverend states that all of the book's characters except for Pew are "*obviously a boy or a girl*".[136] Indeed, Pew notices differing behaviours in the male and female characters they encounter, especially when it comes to Steven and Hilda. Having been taken into their care, Pew is able to observe the couple in various situations in which there is a marked difference in behaviour between the two. On one occasion, the family has lunch at a diner, and when they are done eating, "[Steven] joined a line of men beside a cash register and Hilda disappeared behind a pink door".[137] When the two return, Pew notices some differences between them:

> When Steven and Hilda came outside, Hilda took short, quick steps, her lips painted red, her cheeks pinker and eyes more pronounced. Nothing was on Steven's face. Nothing was on the boys' faces but dirt smeared with sweat. Steven opened the front passenger door for me. I got in. The boys packed themselves across the back seat. Just before we drove away, Hilda closed herself into the trunk.[138]

This diner scene indicates several differences in behaviour on the grounds of gender. While Steven goes to pay, along with various other men, Hilda enters a room with a pink door, probably a bathroom, and applies make-up. This highlights stereotypical notions of men being responsible for taking care of a family financially and women being more preoccupied with the way they look, as well as mentioning the colour pink as indicative of a room being for women. Then, when not everyone fits into the car, there is no discussion as to who should

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[135] Silvija Jestrovic, *Theatre of Estrangement: Theory, Practice, Ideology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 4.
[136] Lacey, 22-23.
[137] Lacey, 18.
[138] Lacey, 18.

close themselves into the trunk and who should drive the car. Whether she has a drivers license or not, Hilda automatically assumes the position with inferior authority in this situation. Importantly, Pew is the only character to whom these behaviours seem out-of-place, with the other characters taking them for granted. This becomes especially clear when the family has the reverend over for dinner, when Pew observes: "In the dining room Hilda ran from the kitchen to the table bringing out dish after dish, arranging them before us as we did nothing. Great heaps of fried animal parts. A bowl of potatoes, rolls, plates of meat and casseroles it seemed to take some strength to carry".[139] Pew's detached, matter-of-fact observations make Hilda's efforts and the ease with which all other present characters remain passive seem strange.

It can be said that, through the estranging perspective of Pew, readers are invited to experience gender as a performance with a seemingly arbitrary script, begging the question whether the behaviours that are associated with genres of gender demarcate some essence of gender or not. The notion of gender as a performance can be further explored by taking Judith Butler's theories on the performativity of gender into account. In the book *Gender Trouble,* Butler refers to gender-specific acts, writing that:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.[140]

Butler departs from essentialist views on gender, which take gender as a stable identity that governs one's behaviour, instead arguing that gender is an identity constructed through the repetition of certain culturally situated acts. These acts are performative in the sense of J. L. Austin's theories of performative speech; rather than merely stating something, they *do*

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[139] Lacey, 22.
[140] *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 179.

something: "to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it".[141] The examples Austin gives include stating "I do" at a wedding ceremony, saying "I bequeath" in a will and telling somebody "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow".[142] In the same vein, acts such as putting on make-up *do* something rather than simply *signalling* some inner identity; they call into being that which they only seem to represent. As Butler describes, gender is "imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself".[143] In this way, the imitation of a non-existent original serves to create rather than imitate the original, making the "abiding gendered self" a self-upholding illusion.[144] Whereas Derrida writes that genres cannot be closed because the traits that expose them simultaneously open the genre up to contamination, Butler describes genres of gender as being produced by the very acts that announce them.[145] If we consider Derrida's example of the novel, Butler might argue that the presence of the text "A Novel" on the front of a book serves to create the genre of the novel rather than merely bringing it to light.[146]

In *Pew*, gendered behaviour creates the notion of an original in an especially visible way since its protagonist is constructing their worldview as they go. Not being able to fall back on conventional knowledge, Pew's understanding of certain concepts is dependent on the situations they come across. The example of Pew observing Hilda during a church service, also mentioned in Chapter 1, makes this especially clear. Pew's initial observation of "[a] mother wears dresses, holds hands" shifts to "[a] mother wears a pale blue dress and

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[141] J. L. Austin, "Lecture I", in *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 6.
[142] Austin, *How To Do Things*, 6.
[143] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 21, original emphasis.
[144] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.
[145] Derrida, 65 and Butler, 179.
[146] Derrida, 64.

smacks heads" when Hilda smacks her child, with Pew adjusting their definition of the concept of mother to match their observations.[147] This further highlights the performative effect of behaviour in creating the illusion of a stable genre of gender. Moreover, *Pew* makes an argument for gender identity being dependent on the repetition of acts over time through the existence of its protagonist. With no culturally situated knowledge to fall back on, the concept of gender holds no particular meaning for Pew. Failing to repeat gendered acts, Pew destabilizes the notion of a stable, internal gender identity, opening the floodgates of these supposedly closed genres to a variety of possible configurations for the book's readers.

Lacey's *Pew* not only highlights the performative nature of gender, but also depicts this performance as compulsory and its roles as unequal. As foreshadowed by the reverend, if Pew did not reveal whether they were a boy or a girl, the community would "*figure it out the hard way*".[148] After having been made to talk to a variety of people but this yielding no results, Pew is taken to the doctor to undergo a bodily examination in order to determine their gender. The community's measures resonate with Butler, who writes: "Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right".[149] In Pew's case, not doing their gender right means not doing a gender at all; not displaying any traits that would serve to announce or imitate a specific genre of gender. The longer they refuse to identify themselves, the more consequences follow. The inequality of gender performances comes to the fore especially when considering authority in the book. Hilda is not alone in diverting to her husband for decision-making, since all of the previously mentioned authority figures Pew goes to see, from the reverend to the doctor, are men. By portraying gender as a compulsory performance

[147] Lacey, 15.
[148] Lacey, 22-23.
[149] Butler, 178.

with an unequal division of roles, *Pew* emphasizes the importance of realizing there is no such thing as unmixed genres of gender.

Early in the novel, *Pew*'s protagonist reflects upon being asked the question "[w]hat are you?" on various occasions, thinking: "[w]hat a horrible question to say or hear".[150] Returning to Derrida's "Law of Genre", perhaps the reason for their disliking this question is that the question impels the person answering to state a genre they belong to, urging them to disregard their contaminations in favour of one unmixed genre. In this way, it can be argued that the points *Pew* makes for gender can be applied to genre in general. Since announcing a genre's presence automatically entails its unclose-ability, one can never completely separate one genre from another. In this way, there is always a performative element involved when a person describes something, or someone, as belonging to a specific genre; the act of assigning a genre constitutes the illusion of a genre-abiding subject as well as constituting the illusion of the closed genre itself.

## The Body and the Formation of the "I"

At one point, Lacey has her protagonist Pew explicitly reflect upon the human need for classification when they think: "What was the human? What was the world of the human? … would it even be possible to catalog and make sense of all of our griefs, our pains and wars? Our delineations? Our need for order?".[151] By introducing these questions, Lacey frames the world of the human as a world of delineations and order. The phrasing of the last question is important; by writing "our need for order",[152] Lacey emphasizes that humans delineate out of a *need* for order rather than a *presence* of order. This implies that all order on the basis of

[150] Lacey, 12.
[151] Lacey, 59.
[152] Lacey, 59.

delineations is man-made instead of a rule of nature. The passage continues with Pew thinking:

> The question arose then—did all this human trouble begin in our bodies, these failing things, weaker or stronger, lighter or darker, taller or shorter? Why did they cause so much trouble for us? Why did we use them against one another? Why did we think the content of a body meant anything? Why did we draw our conclusions with our bodies when the body is so inconclusive, so mercurial?[153]

In this passage, Lacey connects humans' need for order through delineation to the human body, asking why the body seems to play a foundational role in the "griefs … pains and wars" this order instigates.[154] One of the earlier chapters of *Pew* sees the protagonist looking into a mirror and describing what they see:

> In a cracked mirror I saw these legs, saw these arms. I shut my eyes and tried to remember that body, but under shut lids the mind saw nothing, could not remember in what it was living. Again, I opened my eyes—saw this body … I look into a mirror and see nothing in particular. It seems I am sitting somewhere within all this skin and muscle and bone and fat and hair.[155]

Although Pew observes *a* body in the mirror, they do not observe *their* body. Rather than perceiving the image in the mirror as a form of unity with which they have come to identify themselves, Pew describes the mirror image as "nothing in particular". This phrasing deserves special attention; if Pew looks into a mirror to see "nothing in particular", could the argument be made that they are seeing "something in general" related to the human body? To answer this question, I turn to Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage", which he describes as a period in the development of a child during which they come to recognise themselves in their mirror image for the first time.[156] Pew seems to have never gone through the mirror stage, lacking the development of the sense of self that is usually supposed to spring from it.[157] Not only do they not identify themselves with the body they perceive in the

[153] Lacey, 59.
[154] Lacey, 59.
[155] Lacey, 12.
[156] Lacan, 93.
[157] Lacan, 93-94.

mirror, but they also seem to be unburdened by the rigid structures that accompany the creation of the ego.[158] An analysis of *Pew* alongside Lacan might elucidate the relation of the body to humans' tendency to insist on Derrida's law of genre in favour of the law of the law of genre.

Pew's non-adherence to the genre boundaries the community clings to confronts its members, as well as readers of the book, with what Derrida would describe as the reality of genre classification: the impurity, instability and therefore necessarily non-closedness of genres categories.[159] Rather than displaying a willingness to reflect upon the validity of the classifications they cling to, however, various characters around Pew not only refuse to perceive their genres as mixed, but also keep trying to get Pew to recognise and identify themselves in terms of their genres. This behaviour might be elucidated by taking Lacan's conception of the mirror stage into account. The mirror stage first comes to the fore in Lacan's 1949 "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function"; a psychoanalytic text in which the author reflects upon the effect that a young child's mirror image has on the formation of their sense of "I".[160] As summarized by Samuel Weber in his *Return to Freud*:

> [B]etween the ages of six and eighteen months a child displays a reaction to its mirror-image that strikingly distinguishes it from other creatures such as chimpanzees. A chimpanzee loses interest in its mirror-image as soon as it recognizes it to be an image; a child, on the contrary, displays a jubilant reaction when it recognizes its own reflection. From this jubilant acknowledgement of one's mirror-image, Lacan does nothing less than to derive the constitution – and above all: the destiny – of the ego.[161]

Rather than taking the child's jubilant reaction upon seeing their mirror image to be a sign of the recognition of their identity, Lacan takes it to be a sign of its constitution, grounded in a *mis*recognition.[162] The mirror image promises the child a unity and self-mastery which they

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[158] Lacan, 97.
[159] 57.
[160] 93-94.
[161] Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12.
[162] Weber, *Return to Freud,* 12-13.

are as of yet incapable of, reflected back at them as if it were already there. From that moment onwards, the child will strive for this wholeness; a wholeness which, tragically, becomes infinitely deferred at the same time as it is promised. As Lacan describes, that which allows the child to develop an "I", their mirror image or "Ideal-I", "[s]ituates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical synthesis by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality".[163] The fictional direction that the ego is pointed towards stems from the fact that precisely that which allows the child to conceive themselves as a separate self disallows them from ever being whole, since being whole would involve synthesising with the mirror image from which they will forever be spatially and temporally separated. At the same time that a unity is observed in the mirror, and therefore becomes anticipated, fragmentation comes to have retroactively supposed the mirror stage. Jane Gallop discusses this retroactivity, stating that: "the self is constituted through anticipating what it will become, and then this anticipatory model is used for gauging what was before".[164] This leads to an image of a violently non-totalized "selfbody" image preceding the construction of the self as a unified whole.[165] In this way, the jubilation that the child experiences is short-lived because it has now not only been given an impossible goal of unity to eternally strive for, but also a state of fragmentation to fear falling back into. Both the anticipated unity and the feared fragmentation are constructed on a fictional basis of a perceived anticipatory yet eternally spatially and temporally removed unity, which indeed places a misrecognition at the heart of the construction of the child's self. The perceived ideal-I becomes a "donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark [the child's] entire

[163] Lacan, 76.
[164] Jane Gallop, "Lacan's 'Mirror Stage': Where to Begin", *SubStance* 11/12, no. 4/1 (1982/1983): 121, DOI: 10.2307/3684185
[165] Gallop, "Lacan's 'Mirror Stage'", 121.

mental development with its rigid structure",[166] with the armour itself retroactively creating the forces it is supposed to shield the self from.

Rather than having developed a sense of self based on their mirror image, Lacey's protagonist Pew identifies themselves with something that is not visible in the mirror at all, which they describe as an "I" that is hidden underneath all the bone, fat, and hair.[167] They describe their experience as if they were "lying on the floor of a canoe … unable to sit up or move. [They] cannot remember getting into the canoe. Sometimes [they] hear people speaking to the canoe as if they are not aware that [they are] in here".[168] This perspective differs significantly from that of those around them, who attach great importance to Pew's body and the secrets it supposedly harbours regarding their identity. When all attempts at gleaning Pew's gender from conversations are met with silence, Pew is brought to a doctor for examination, who tells them: "*we need to understand what sort of person you are – do you understand? Do you understand what I mean by that?*".[169] Readers know that this question is irrelevant; for Pew to understand would mean that they would identify themselves with their body and the categories that spring from it, which they do not. Remaining silent, Pew is led to an examining table where they reflect upon the concept of the human, thinking:

> [A]t some point in the future, long after humanity had run its course, after some creature had replaced us … a question might occur in some mind, and that question might be *What was the human? What was the world of the human?* – though it would be in some unforeseen language … perhaps a language that did not have to grow from a damp, contaminated mouth … did all this human trouble begin in our bodies, these failing things, weaker or stronger, lighter or darker, taller or shorter? … Why did we draw our conclusions with our bodies when the body is so inconclusive, so mercurial?[170]

Lacey's protagonist does not comprehend why those around them attach so much importance to bodies and what bodily attributes are supposed to say about a person. In reflecting upon the

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[166] Lacan, 78
[167] Lacey, 12.
[168] Lacey, 78.
[169] Lacey, 58.
[170] Lacey, 58-59.

topic, they describe language as "grow[ing] from a damp, contaminated mouth",[171] echoing Derrida's law of the law of genre. If the only language humans have is contaminated language, striving for genre purity is as futile as striving to become one with one's mirror image. Without genre demarcations, genre would never come to light, but these demarcations open to contamination that which they announce through announcing it.[172] Similarly, without a person's mirror image, the self would never come to light, but this identification creates the forces it is supposed to shield the self from.[173] Perhaps it is precisely because Pew has not undergone the mirror stage that they are able to grasp this parallel. They perceive the body as inconclusive because, despite the fictional direction people are set on during the mirror stage, there is nothing about the body that can be definitively concluded.

Although Pew is aware of the non-closedness of the body, they realise that those who would examine their body would nonetheless draw definitive conclusions on the basis of their observations. By finally classifying the unclassifiable Pew, the community might be able to safely retreat back into the fiction that genres were, much like mirror images, attainable and closed unities after all. Upon realising this, Pew refuses to play the part assigned to them, reflecting: "Resting on that table, not getting undressed, not putting on the paper gown, I feared I'd become something sacrificial, but I would not lay myself out on this altar".[174] If they were to let themselves be examined, Pew's mixedness would be sacrificed on the altar of genre purity. Rather than allowing this to happen, Pew resists, fleeing outside until Hilda finds them and takes them back to the family's house. Following this blatant refusal of identification, a town meeting is called to determine Pew's fate. The meeting is led by a lawyer named Harold H. Grimshaw the fifth, and indeed looks more like a trial than a meeting; having as its purpose to examine Pew's transgressions and determine the

[171] Lacey, 58-59.
[172] Derrida, 65.
[173] Gallop, 121.
[174] Derrida, 59.

consequences. Harold makes it abundantly clear that "*anyone can know anything about [him] – [he's] got nothing to hide*", framing Pew's silence as detrimental to "*the security and safety of [their] community*".[175] The community's inability to contend themselves with letting Pew be indecipherable might also be further elucidated by taking Lacan's mirror stage into account. The community's attempts at having Pew identify themselves can be interpreted as their holding up a mirror to Pew in hopes that they, like them, come to anticipate the unity that their mirror image promises. If this were the case, Pew might proceed to don the armour of rigid identity structures to prevent from receding back into fragmentation. Pew's resistance to these attempts, however, threatens to not only remove their armour, but to show that there was never any need for armour in the first place. In this way, Pew's extra-categorical existence does not pose a danger from without but from within. By revealing the unstable foundations of the I, Pew might make other characters in the novel question the feasibility of the self-mastery they have strived for since before they were able to walk. Rather than threatening "*the security and safety of [their] community*" with the secrets they refuse to give up, Pew threatens the very foundations of identification of those around them, as well as the power structures that are attached to those identifications.[176]

*Pew* places its readers in an extra-epistemic, extra-categorical position, providing them with a vantage point for reflecting upon the current order of things *as* an order of things. Protagonist Pew's experiences and observations highlight the current episteme's preoccupation with rigid identity categories and the behaviour that is supposed to accompany them. Presenting genres such as gender as constituted by the behaviour that is supposed to represent them, as well as emphasizing the restrictions and inequalities that follow from an adherence to the law of genre, *Pew* might help its readers perceive themselves and others

[175] Lacey, 86.
[176] Lacey, 86.

more open-mindedly.[177] This realisation might serve to make them more resilient against identity-based exploitative techniques. However, the novel's protagonist's mode of existence is not presented as the ultimate solution to the problem of identity. In fact, Pew does not seem to be particularly happy in their extra-categorical existence. During the town meeting mentioned above, Pew wistfully observes those around them, thinking: "Everyone knew everyone and they all belonged to one another. There was a certainty, a clarity, a real joy, that fused them all into one ... no distance between any of them, no loneliness, no solitude—and it was easy to see, just then, how intensely one could want to belong here".[178] Although the rigid identification practices the characters surrounding Pew cling to might have negative side-effects, they also allow for a feeling of belonging; something Pew is unable to share in. Although they are tuned in to animal and plant life more than those around them, they are unable to connect with the humans around them, even those that do not push Pew for identificatory information, and are left feeling lonely. Pew's inability to connect with those around them might have something to do with their embodiment of Derrida's principle of contamination. After having introduced the law of the law of genre, Derrida writes: "a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres ... yet such participation never amounts to belonging".[179] If we hold this citation up next to *Pew*, it seems as though neither Pew nor the characters around them are able to conform to this statement. Whereas those around Pew insist on belonging, Pew is unable to even participate. In this way, *Pew* is able to expose and criticize this episteme's insistence on the law of genre by positioning its protagonist at the other end of the spectrum, but raises the question of whether a more liveable alternative might lie somewhere between the two ends. As their feeling of not belonging increases, Pew eventually decides to leave the

[177] Butler, "Imitation", 21.
[178] Lacey, 83.
[179] Derrida, 65.

town, thinking: "I know I wasn't supposed to be here".[180] As they leave, they think: "I was alone then, and I've been alone ever since",[181] reemphasizing their inability to participate in genres leaves them unable to form a connection with anyone.

*Pew* explores the problem of identity by distancing its protagonist from identification altogether before concluding that this might not be the best way forward, either. From this, we can derive that potential lies with being able to participate in genres while being aware that this will never amount to belonging.[182] In this context, it is worthwhile to expand the study of genres' relation to identity to include a figure that *is* able to participate in genres without belonging to them, allowing for meaningful connections with others. The second object of study of this thesis, *Undertale*, is centred around a figure that has a lot of potential for replacing Man in the episteme-to-come, without completely departing from identification. This is a figure that adopts difference as its mode of existence, a figure traditionally banished to the shadows who, when invited to step into the light, might help lift the veil from a potential future episteme: the figure of the monster.

## Subverting Genre Expectations

> *Undertale*
> Traverse an RPG world / Full of unique monsters
> Slay them / Spare them
> Decide their fate
> Make strange friends..?
> And deadly enemies..?
> The friendly RPG where nobody has to die.[183]

The trailer for the video game *Undertale* is full of contradictions. Introducing itself as a Role-Playing Game (RPG), *Undertale* places itself in a genre of games in which killing enemies is

[180] Lacey, 124.
[181] Lacey, 124.
[182] Derrida, 65.
[183] Toby Fox, Steam trailer for *Undertale*. "Undertale", Steam, Valve Corporation, accessed on 3 June 2024, https://store.steampowered.com/app/391540/Undertale/

necessary for completing the game, yet the trailer also mentions that nobody has to die. And while the game proclaims to be filled with monsters, stereotypically evil adversaries, it is revealed that they are not merely cast as "deadly enemies" but can also become "strange friends".[184] In this way, *Undertale*'s trailer hints at the game's mixing of genres, making it an intriguing object to study in relation to this concept. Created by Toby Fox and released for PC in 2015, *Undertale* has since achieved widespread popularity. Its narrative and gameplay revolve around one central conflict: the war between humans and monsters. When players start the game, they are told that humans and monsters used to live together in harmony until, one day, a war broke out between them. "After a long battle", *Undertale* states, "the humans were victorious. They sealed the monsters underground with a magic spell".[185] Players then step into the shoes of a human child who has fallen into the Underground and wants to return to the surface. To do so, they have to journey through the Underground, encountering a wide variety of monsters on their way.

*Undertale* purposely invokes players' previous experiences with the RPG genre and its treatment of monsters before thwarting their expectations. The similarities between *Undertale* and RPGs that came before are striking, with the game incorporating a variety of recognisable RPG elements. Players of *Undertale* explore a pixel-art overworld from a top-down perspective, encountering random monsters while walking around. These encounters lead to a first-person battle sequence, during which players can select different options for resolving the encounter. If this description feels familiar, that is because a similar formula had previously been applied by the creators of *Dragon Quest*, *EarthBound*, and *Pokémon*, among others. *Earthbound*'s influence on Fox's creation of *Undertale* becomes immediately visible when comparing the two side-by-side, as shown in Figure 1.

[184] Fox, "Undertale", Steam.
[185] Toby Fox, *Undertale*, PC, 2015.

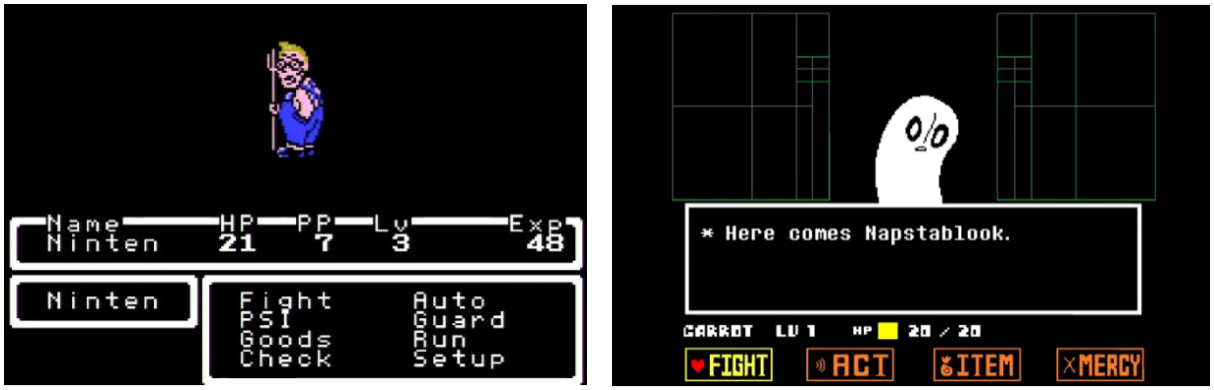


Figure 1: The encounter screens of *EarthBound Beginnings* and *Undertale*, respectively.[186]

As depicted in Figure 1, the encounter screens of *EarthBound Beginnings* and *Undertale* have a lot in common; from their black-and-white pixelated style to the information displayed. By incorporating recognisable RPG elements, *Undertale* invokes its audience's previous experiences with the genre, building expectations for the rest of the game. And since the path to completing games such as *Dragon Quest*, *EarthBound* and *Pokémon* is to slay monsters, gain experience points and level up to be able to defeat increasingly strong monsters, players of *Undertale* might be tempted to pursue a similar approach. As described by Jaroslav Švelch in *Player Vs. Monster*, the function of monsters in video games is usually to "keep up the flow of gameplay by offering adequate doses of challenge … They appear in order to kill [the player] – or to be killed – and then disappear again, flickers of automated agency in a rudimentary game world".[187] It is here that *Undertale* departs from not only the RPG norms, but the monster-human dichotomy in general, by treating monsters not as enemies but as very similar to, if not less monstrous than, the game's humans.

The human-monster dichotomy has a long history in both video games and real life. Traditionally, the word "monster" has been defined as "strange and singular, contrary to the

[186] *Earthbound Beginnings*, by Nintendo (Nintendo, 2022), Nintendo Switch, and Fox, *Undertale*, screenshots by author.
[187] Švelch, *Player Vs. Monster*, 2-3.

usual course of nature", as well as "a strange, unnatural, hideous person, animal, or thing".[188] Fictional creatures such as vampires, werewolves or demons might spring to mind; dangerous, powerful beings that threaten to disrupt the peace of the social order. As we have seen in Wynter, Derrida and Lacan, however, being associated with the realm of fiction does not prevent something from having very real effects. Indeed, the concept of the monster has been used to describe, and thereby denounce and dehumanize, people throughout history. In his *Making Monsters*, David Livingstone Smith describes making people into monsters as "[t]he most dangerous and destructive kind of dehumanization".[189] The aim of dehumanization, Livingstone Smith writes, is "the demotion of others to a lower-than-human metaphysical rank, to disactivate inhibitions against harming them".[190] In this way, dehumanization is a powerful biopolitical tactic; inviting the harming of other humans under the guise of protecting life.[191] Making people into monsters is an especially dangerous form of dehumanization for the following reason:

> Members of the dehumanized group are thought to be dangerous. They are said to be vicious, predatory, cruel, destructive. And they are also felt to be metaphysically threatening because they are seen as both human and subhuman. This makes them seem immensely dangerous in the eyes of their dehumanizers, and explains why it is that although dehumanized people are typically among the most vulnerable members of a population, they are typically regarded as overwhelmingly dangerous.[192]

In this way, describing others as monsters can be seen to have terrible consequences, morphing typically already vulnerable members of a population into vicious beings that need to be destroyed. Recently, Livingstone Smith has written an online article on his website regarding Benjamin Netanyahu's characterizing of Hamas as monsters.[193] Worried about the

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[188] Riddle, s. v. "Monstrum", 399.
[189] 254.
[190] *Making Monsters*, 255.
[191] For further reading on the notion of biopolitics, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, England and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[192] Livingstone Smith, 254.
[193] Livingstone Smith, "From Human Animals to Bloodthirsty Monsters", Dehumanization Matters, 15 October 2023, https://davidlivingstonesmith.substack.com/p/from-human-animals-to-bloodthirsty

effect this might have on the escalation of the conflict, Livingstone Smith writes: "Netanyahu's call to dismantle the bloodthirsty monsters of Hamas has implications that go far beyond the destruction of Hamas. If I am right (and I sincerely hope that I am not), it amounts to a call for the utter brutalization not just of Hamas, but of the Palestinian people".[194] Unfortunately, he has yet to be proven wrong. Serving to desensitize people against harming others, the real-life consequences of the fictional genre of the monster cannot be disregarded. By studying *Undertale*'s treatment of the genre of monsters, I aim to show that the game sends a message that counters stereotypical definitions and treatments of monstrosity, inviting players to reflect upon the harm that is justified by the term monster, as well as to look beyond the word in order to actually come to perceive the individuals that are described as such.

At first, *Undertale* makes it seem as though it upholds the human-monster dichotomy, much like the RPGs that preceded it. Upon having landed in the Underground, the first monster players encounter is a yellow flower who introduces themselves as Flowey the Flower. Seemingly concerned for the player, Flowey provides a tutorial for the game's combat system, stating: "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! You want some LOVE, don't you? Don't worry, I'll share some with you! Down here, LOVE is shared through… Little white… "friendliness pellets"! Are you ready? Move around, get as many as you can".[195] Players are shown a little red heart, representing their SOUL, which they are able to move around within the confines of a small, rectangular box, as shown in Figure 2.

[194] Livingstone Smith, "Human Animals to Bloodthirsty Monsters".
[195] Fox, *Undertale*.

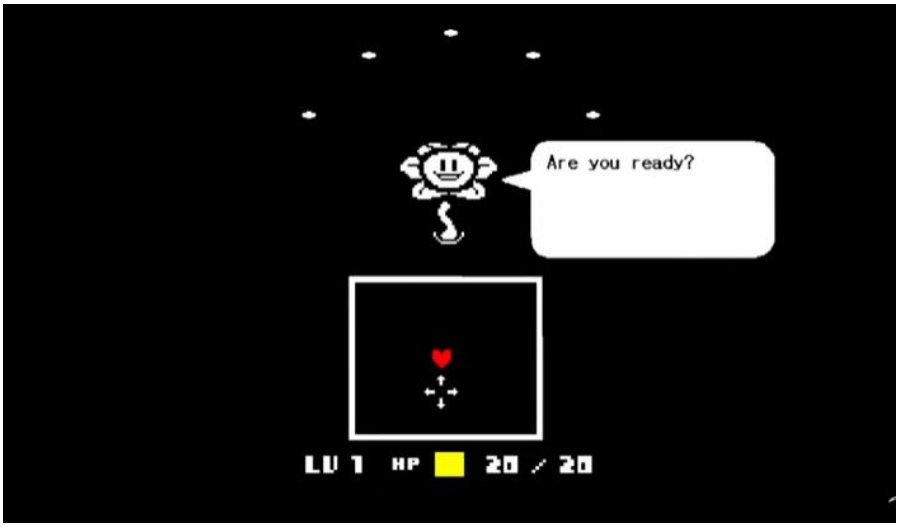


Figure 2: Flowey introduces the player to *Undertale*'s combat system.[196]

White particles start to float towards the heart, but as soon as players follow Flowey's advice by running the heart into them, their health is reduced to 1 point. Flowey's face disfigures into a horrible smile, and they say: "You idiot. In this world, it's kill or BE killed. Why would ANYONE pass up an opportunity like this?! DIE!".[197] Despite looking harmless, Flowey's behaviour reemphasizes stereotypical portrayals of monsters. Keeping Derrida in mind, Flowey seems to adhere to the law of genre when it comes to both the genres of RPG games and the genre of monsters, reemphasizing the human-monster dichotomy and encouraging players to play *Undertale* by the rule of "kill or be killed".[198]

This message is soon left behind, though, as the game's real tutorial character, Toriel, steps in to protect the fallen human. A cow-like, bipedal monster, Toriel restores the player to full health and scares Flowey away before showing players around the game's first area, the Ruins, while teaching them how to complete puzzles and resolve encounters. Toriel's description of resolving conflicts with monsters is vastly different than Flowey's, as she says: "As a human living in the Underground, monsters may attack you. You will need to be

[196] Fox, screenshot by author.
[197] Fox.
[198] Derrida, 56 and Fox.

prepared for this situation. 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. Stall for time. I will come to resolve the conflict".[199] Departing from RPG tradition, Undertale's mechanics, here defined as "the various actions, behavio[u]rs and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context",[200] offer players nonviolent ways of interacting with monsters. By pressing the ACT button during combat, players reveal options of interacting with the monster that can alter the monster's attitude towards the player. Players are given the chance to practice their newfound abilities on a dummy, as shown in Figure 3.


Figure 3: Players' first encounter, during which they can test their abilities.[201]

If the player chooses to talk to the dummy, Toriel looks pleased before appearing to scare the dummy away. Other monsters in the Ruins re-emphasize Toriel's message, with a frog-like

[199] Fox.
[200] Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek: MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research, in *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*, San Jose, CA, USA (2004), 2, as cited in Priscilla Lo, David Thue and Elin Carstendottir, "What Is a Game Mechanic?", in *Entertainment Computing – ICEC 2021: Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, eds. Jannicke Baalsrud Hauge et al. (2021): 341. The latter text presents a literature review that points towards the definition of Hunicke et al. as the most widely used definition for game mechanics.
[201] Fox, screenshot by author.

monster called Froggit explaining how the player can resolve a conflict non-violently without Toriel's intervention, saying: "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, human".[202] In this way, *Undertale*'s players are urged to approach *Undertale* differently than they would other RPGs, talking to monsters and sparing them instead of turning towards violence.

Fighting, however, is still an option provided to *Undertale*'s players. And whereas fighting the dummy only earns the player a reprimand from Toriel, who says: "Ahh, the dummies are not for fighting! They are for talking! We do not want to hurt anybody, do we…?",[203] players are rewarded with EXP and Gold when they kill monsters in subsequent battles. Players who are familiar with other RPGs might take this as an encouragement in and of itself, since earning experience points (commonly abbreviated as EXP) in order increase a character's level (commonly abbreviated as LV) is a core mechanic of the RPG genre. Moreover, if players do not earn Gold they are unable to buy the helpful items that are offered in the game's stores. In this way, players might be tempted to disregard the advice given by the monsters they encounter and proceed to kill monsters regardless. However, players who choose to do so will eventually have to face the consequences of their actions. Without players knowing, *Undertale* keeps track of the amount of monsters they kill, determining the ending players reach on the basis of this number. Near the end of the game, a character named Sans, who I return to in Chapter 3, reveals the true meaning of players' EXP and LV stats:

> What's EXP?
> It's an acronym.
> It stands for "execution points."

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[202] Fox.
[203] Fox.

> A way of quantifying the pain you have inflicted on others.
> When you kill someone, your EXP increases.
> When you have enough EXP, your LOVE increases.
> LOVE, too, is an acronym.
> It stands for "Level of Violence."
> A way of measuring someone's capacity to hurt.
> The more you kill, the easier it becomes to distance yourself.
> The more you distance yourself, the less you will hurt.
> The more easily you can bring yourself to hurt others. [204]

The more monsters players killed, the less positive *Undertale*'s ending becomes. Players who listened to Toriel by not killing a single monster and, instead, completing a variety of interactions with them, reach the "True Pacifist" ending. This ending is generally considered to be the game's true ending, since it is the only happy ending as well as the only ending after which the complete game credits are rolled. If players killed some monsters but spared others, they reach one of *Undertale*'s various "Neutral" endings, having to complete a difficult battle before the game ends rather abruptly. If players went out of their way to kill a large amount of monsters, however, they reach the "Genocide" ending; a generally unpleasant experience which I return to in Chapter 3. Confronting players with their own habituated behaviour based on genre expectations, both of the RPG genre and the genre of the monster, *Undertale* highlights genres' complicity in violent acts both inside and outside of the game.

Although *Pew* and *Undertale* feature the relationship between the notions of genre and identity in different ways, both works can be seen to make an argument for acknowledging and embracing the problem of identity. In my reading of *Pew*, the current episteme's insistence on identification in the form of unmixed genres were highlighted, along with the hierarchies that have come to be established amongst these genres. Those who could not or did not want to identify themselves were punished, while those whose identities were different from the genre of Man were treated as though they were less-than-human. My analysis of *Undertale* focused on the game's treatment of the genre of the monster, making it

[204] Fox, I have preserved the red text to stay close to the original.

clear that this genre can desensitize people to violence and have harmful, or even deadly, consequences. By analysing both *Pew* and *Undertale*'s approaches to the relationship between genre and identity, this chapter aimed to show that theorizing identity in terms of genre is helpful for exploring and, perhaps, de-problematizing the problem of identity. Emphasizing the contamination inherent in identity, as well as various negative consequences of attempts at enforcing unity, *Pew* and *Undertale* make the case for an episteme that expects difference rather than enforcing sameness. Although *Pew*'s protagonist showed that giving up on identification entirely is not an option, *Undertale*'s monsters might yet be able to lead by example when it comes to approaching identity in an episteme-to-come.

# Chapter 3

## Monsters and the Monstrous in *Undertale*

*Undertale*'s monsters are manifold, powerful, and never alone. Despite the figure of the monster having been misused to justify atrocious acts, the word's etymology reveals an as of yet untapped potential. "Monster" derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which comes from the verb *moneo*, meaning to remind, warn, instruct, foretell or encourage.[205] At the root of the monster, therefore, lies the potential of teaching us something. Its peripheral position seems to give the monster the power to keep an eye on past, present and future; "to advise by way of warning, and at the same time to urge on or excite".[206] In this chapter, I explore the monsters of *Undertale* in depth to uncover the warnings, instructions and premonitions they might impart.

Analysing *Undertale*'s monsters alongside Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's writing on the monster, I show that the main thing that seems to unite the game's monsters is their difference.[207] Players encounter so many different monsters, and are able to interact with them in so many different ways, that it becomes difficult to establish what constitutes the game's monster race. In this way, *Undertale*'s monsters embody a type of difference that evokes sameness; upsetting the divide between the monster race and the human race by showing the instability of the system upon which this distinction is based.[208] Monsters' ontological liminality grants them enormous power; a power the humans of *Undertale* feared so much that they pre-emptively waged war against the monster population, sealing them in the Underground. There are only two ways for the monsters to escape to the surface; by absorbing a human SOUL, making the monster that does so extremely powerful and allowing

[205] Riddle, s.v. "Moneo", 398.
[206] Riddle, 398.
[207] "Monster Culture", 7.
[208] Cohen, 11.

them to cross the barrier, or by gathering seven human souls and shattering the barrier for good. Although one might expect that this would lead the monsters to wanting to kill all humans who fell into the Underground, *Undertale*'s monsters instead prefer forming meaningful connections with the player. "Love, hope and compassion", reads a book in the game, "that is what people say monster SOULs are made of".[209] If the game's monsters can be said to prefigure an episteme, then, this would be an episteme in which beings form bonds of kinship across identifications; making what Donna Haraway refers to as "oddkin".[210] Only allowing players who choose to connect with the game's monsters rather than killing them to reach the game's true ending, *Undertale* reconfigures the problem of identity into a source of possibilities because it allows for unexpected solidarity.

*Undertale*'s monsters dislike violence, all sparing the humans they encounter when given the chance. The same cannot be said for the game's humans, who, by attributing monstrous traits to monsters and acting violently towards them, can be seen to create the monsters they so fear. Turning to violence time and time again, the only characters in the game who can be said to act monstrously are the humans themselves, and, potentially, the game's players. Sparing all encountered monsters leads to the True Pacifist ending, whereas killing all of them leads players down the game's Genocide path. It is during this type of playthrough that *Undertale* reveals itself not only as a game about monsters, but as a monster in and of itself. Turning to Derrida for a theory of how art can become monstrous, I argue that the game becomes "a species for which we do not yet have a name", surprising its players with its monstrously meta characters and the manipulation of the game's mechanics.[211] Blurring the boundaries between player and game, the monster that is *Undertale* makes it clear that no binary opposition is safe in an episteme of monsters. Monsters are notoriously

[209] Fox.
[210] *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.
[211] *Points*, 386.

difficult to get a hold of; they always escape, only to reappear somewhere else.[212] This chapter hopes to catch a glimpse of them before they inevitably shift, to be able to heed their warnings and observe the direction in which they take off, allowing a glimpse into an episteme that "accord[s] hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange".[213]

## The Power of Difference

Players of *Undertale* encounter a wide variety of monsters on their journey, all of which are so different from one another that it becomes difficult to establish what unites the monsters of *Undertale* under the denomination 'monster'. As described in Chapter 2, the first monsters players encounter are Flowey, a flower, and Toriel, a cow-like bipedal monster, and no monster essence can be immediately distilled from observing them. The more monsters players encounter, the more difficult it becomes to find common ground between them. There are around 70 different monster types of monster present in the game, all of which look and behave very differently from one another.[214] The only thing that seems to unite all of *Undertale*'s monsters, then, is their not-being-human; their being different. This depiction resonates with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's definition of monsters. In his introduction to the book *Monster Culture*, Cohen writes: "The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us".[215] Importantly, this difference does not originate from within the monster itself, but from those observing the monster:

> In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond - of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constituted through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.[216]

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[212] Cohen, 4.
[213] Derrida, 387.
[214] For an overview of the monsters of *Undertale*, see the Fandom *Undertale* Wiki: Fandom, Undertale Fandom, "Enemies", accessed on 29 May 2024, https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Enemies
[215] 7.
[216] Cohen, 7.

In this way, monsters are created when describing and demonizing the unknown, unfamiliar, or inconvenient. In this way, the creation of monsters is often used for relieving the observer of the burden of trying to reach an understanding of them, as well as justifying all manner of (mis)treatments of the monster. Ingvil Hellstrand et al. describe othering techniques as monsterising, referring to Foucault in writing that "technologies of monsterising can be described as processes through which certain bodies are produced as objects of biopolitical knowledge, control and discipline".[217] Referring to the current international treatment of refugees, who are being "interred, expelled, violated, and sent on endless journeys through nations increasingly ramping up their border security",[218] Hellstrand et al. show that the labelling of certain bodies as monstrous allows for these bodies to be mistreated and repressed while pretending that doing so protects life. Whatever kind of difference might be focused on, it is this difference that comes to define and constitute the monster.

In the case of *Undertale*, the locus of monsters' difference seems to be race, with humans and monsters being referred to as two races, as depicted in Figure 4. In the context of video games, the concept of "race" is generally taken to be synonymous with the concept of "species",[219] being used to refer to fictional beings such as orcs, elves, and halflings. Despite this video game tradition, *Undertale*'s employment of the concept of race cannot be disregarded, since it risks reemphasizing the real-life fiction of racial essentialism. In an exploration of *World of Warcraft*, Melissa Monson describes the equipment of racial essentialism for the establishment of race-based societies, be they fictional or existing, writing: "[o]ne of the fundamental problems of race-based societies is that they presuppose

[217] Ingvil Hellstrand et al., "Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: The Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous", *Somatechnics* 8, no. 2 (2018): 149.
[218] Hellstrand et al., "Promises", 149.
[219] Melissa J. Monson, "Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the *World of Warcraft*", *Games and Culture* 7, no 1 (2012): 48.

the essential nature of race and in doing so create the impression that racial boundaries, differences, and inequalities are not only real but justified and inevitable".[220]


Figure 4: The two races of *Undertale*.[221]

By attributing all members of racial groups with race-specific immutable qualities, such as having a low intelligence, being quick to anger, or making morally questionable decisions, fantasy worlds risk reiterating the logic of racial essentialism, risking to justify both in-game and real-life hierarchies and behaviour based upon this premise.[222]

Despite referring to humans and monsters as two races, *Undertale* does not make clear what defines the monster race in the game. Not only does the game feature great variation in monsters' appearances and behaviours, but even monsters of the same type are shown to have distinct personalities, as exemplified by the brothers Sans and Papyrus. Players first encounter Sans when exiting the Ruins to enter the cold, snowy area of Snowdin. When walking through a forested area, players are followed by an ominous shadow which

[220] Monson, 48.
[221] Fox, screenshot by author.
[222] Monson, 48.

occasionally disappears from view only to reappear a few seconds later. When players reach a bridge, they are stopped in their tracks as the shadow approaches them and starts to speak: "Human. Don't you know how to greet a new pal? Turn around and shake my hand".[223] As the shadow reaches out and the protagonist grabs hold of their hand, a farting sound erupts, and the monster says: "heheh… the old whoopee cushion in the hand trick. It's ALWAYS funny".[224] The shadow gives way to a short skeleton with a big grin on his face as Sans is introduced; a happy-go-lucky skeleton who cannot be bothered to do his job, which is catching humans. He warns the player that his brother Papyrus is "a human-hunting FANATIC", and upon seeing him approach, tells the player to hide behind a lamp shaped exactly like the player's avatar.[225] As soon as the player is hidden, Papyrus arrives, and it soon becomes clear that the skeleton brothers' personalities are nothing alike. Whereas Sans is portrayed as a lazy jokester, Papyrus desperately wants to catch a human in hopes of earning recognition and being allowed to join the Royal Guard. In this way, rather than attributing all members of the monster race with immutable qualities, *Undertale* highlights each monsters' individual qualities. The game's mechanics highlight these differences between monsters as well, with players having different options of interacting with different monsters. For instance, when encountering Whimsun, a small monster too sensitive to fight, players can choose to either console or terrorize them. When encountering Vegetoid, a monster that looks like a carrot with a face, players have three options: talking to them, asking them for food, or taking a bite from them. By featuring monsters as unique individuals instead of murderous masses, *Undertale* questions rather than reemphasizes the fiction of racial essentialism.

[223] Fox.
[224] Fox.
[225] Fox.

Paradoxically, *Undertale*'s monsters can be seen to embody a type of difference that "threatens to *erase* difference in the world of its creators".[226] If there is nothing that distinctively unites the monster race, is there something that distinctively unites the human race? And if not, can the two truly be separated? Resonating with René Girard's writing on the scapegoat, *Undertale*'s monster race depicts "the potential for the system to differ from its own difference, in other words not to be different at all, to cease to exist as a system—Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality".[227] The difference embodied by the monsters of *Undertale* is frightening precisely because it evokes sameness; it reveals the relativity, fragility and mortality of the system of thought through which not only the monster was constructed, but people's own identities as well. This is where the power of the monster comes into play, a power so feared by the humans of *Undertale* that it led to them waging war against the monster race. Players can read the following text on the walls of the Waterfall area, which they reach after having traversed Snowdin:

> Why did the humans attack? Indeed, it seemed that they had nothing to fear. Humans are unbelievably strong. It would take the SOUL of nearly every monster … just to equal the power of a single human SOUL. But humans have one weakness. Ironically, it is the strength of their SOUL. Its power allows it to persist outside the human body, even after death. If a monster defeats a human, they can take its SOUL. A monster with a human SOUL… A horrible beast with unfathomable power. This is the power that the humans feared.[228]

Whereas human SOULs might be absorbed by monsters to gain power beyond comprehension, monster SOULs instantly disappear when they pass away. In this way, the monsters of *Undertale* have the potential to access power of a magnitude humans could never hope to match. This power, and humans' fear of it, might be better understood by turning to

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[226] Cohen, 11.
[227] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 33, as cited in Cohen 12.
[228] Fox.

Cohen once more, who attributes to monsters "[the] power to evade and undermine".[229] Cohen attributes this power to monsters' ontological liminality, expressed through a "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things'".[230] In his *Order of Things*, Foucault treats works of art as having the potential of heralding the approach of a different episteme by revealing the limitations of the current episteme through a demonstration of "the stark impossibility of thinking *that*".[231] In Cohen's description of monsters, these beings embody a similar impossibility. And whereas Foucault greeted this impossibility with laughter, Cohen and *Undertale* depict monsters as usually evoking fear; "the monster is dangerous", Cohen writes, "a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions".[232] Echoing Derrida's, the monster embodies mixture, "resist[ing] any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration".[233] Perhaps the humans of *Undertale* feared and attacked the monsters for this reason: they embody a threat to the current order of things, demanding an episteme that accounts for difference.

## Monsters' Search for Solidarity

Although *Undertale*'s monsters are shown to have enormous potential for power, they do not actively pursue it. Rather than attempting to gain unfathomable power by absorbing a human soul, the game's monsters seem preoccupied with forming and maintaining meaningful connections with those around them. In this way, they are akin to the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, who, cast out by its creator, seeks not to destroy but instead seeks

[229] 6.
[230] 6.
[231] xvi.
[232] 6.
[233] Cohen, 7.

"kindness and sympathy";[234] first by approaching a family he had come to care for, and later by asking his creator for a counterpart whom he might find kinship with. A book in the Snowdin Town library that *Undertale*'s players can read states: "Love, hope, compassion… This is what people say monster SOULs are made of".[235] This statement rings true when observing the behaviour of the game's monsters.

During the aforementioned conversation between Sans and his brother Papyrus, it soon becomes clear that, although the latter desires recognition and a position in the Royal Guard, what he wants most is to make friends. He hopes that catching a human will make him popular, resulting in people asking to be his friend, as depicted in Figure 5.


Figure 5: Brothers Sans and Papyrus discuss the benefits of catching humans while the player hides behind a conveniently-shaped lamp.[236]

It soon becomes clear that Papyrus is not the sharpest tool in the shed and has little chance of ever capturing a human. In an exhibit of brotherly love, Sans asks the player to show

[234] *CliffsComplete: Shelley's* Frankenstein (New York: Hungry Minds Inc., 2001): 128.
[235] Fox.
[236] Fox, screenshot by author.

themselves to Papyrus and play along with his human-catching efforts to make his day. For the next part of the game, players traverse the area of Snowdin while Papyrus has them complete puzzles, but since he keeps accidentally spoiling their solutions the player is able to proceed effortlessly. On one occasion, Papyrus leaves a plate of home-made spaghetti for the player to find, accompanied by a note that says that the pasta is meant to distract the protagonist so much that they stop progressing, leaving them "[t]horoughly japed again by the great Papyrus!!!".[237] Although both skeletons have been assigned the task of capturing humans, Sans prefers to crack jokes and make his brother happy, while Papyrus creates puzzles and cooks for the human. The game's Neutral, True Pacifist and Genocide playthroughs all feature a point when Papyrus finally has the player cornered. If players pursued a Neutral or True Pacifist playthrough, Papyrus reveals his true feelings for the human at this point, saying:

> Human. Allow me to tell you about some complex feelings. Feelings like… the joy of finding another pasta lover. The admiration for another's puzzle-solving skills. The desire to have a cool, smart person think you are cool. These feelings… They must be what you are feeling right now!!! I can hardly imagine what it must be like to feel that way! After all, I am very great. I don't ever wonder what having lots of friends is like. I pity you… lonely human…[238]

In an obvious projection of his own feelings upon the human, Papyrus makes clear that he wants nothing more than to be friends with them. If players are pursuing a Genocide playthrough, having killed all the monsters they encountered up until this point, Papyrus still has faith in them, saying: "Human! I think you are in need of guidance! Someone needs to keep you on the straight and narrow! But worry not! I, Papyrus… Will gladly be your friend and tutor!".[239] In the combat encounter that ensues, Papyrus will always spare the human. If the player proceeds to kill Papyrus, his final words show that he has still not given up on them: "But… St… Still! I believe in you! You can do a little better! Even if you don't think

[237] Fox.
[238] Fox.
[239] Fox.

so! I… I promise…”.[240] If players choose to have mercy on Papyrus in return, however, they can ask Papyrus to be their friend, to which he happily replies: “Who knew that all I needed to make pals… was to give people awful puzzles and then fight them??”.[241]

It is of note that the player’s being human does not stop Papyrus from wanting to connect with them. In fact, the game tells its players that even shortly after the war between humans and monsters was waged, monsters were still able to greet humans with love, hope and compassion. When players of the Neutral and True Pacifist routes reach the location of New Home, the capital of the Underground, they are approached by various monsters who tell them the story of the first fallen human: “A long time ago, a human fell into the RUINS. Injured by its fall, the human called out for help. ASRIEL, the king’s son, heard the human’s call. He brought the human back to the castle. Over time, ASRIEL and the human became like siblings. The King and Queen treated the human child as their own. The Underground was full of hope”.[242] Rather than exacting revenge upon the fallen human, the king and queen of the monsters decided to adopt them. At this point in the game, it has already been revealed that if a monster were to absorb a human soul, they would gain incredible strength and be able to cross the boundary between the Underground and the Surface. Moreover, the monsters are aware that it would require seven human SOULs to completely break the barrier, setting all monsters free. Instead of pleading for the king and queen to kill the human and use their SOUL, however, the Underground rejoiced at the establishment of an unlikely family.

If the nature of *Undertale*’s monsters prefigures an episteme-to-come, this would be an episteme that prioritizes the formation of unlikely connections between beings, regardless of these beings’ identifications. Such an attitude might be elucidated by taking Donna

[240] Fox.
[241] Fox.
[242] Fox.

Haraway's writing on making kin into account. In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway describes that the current time period is governed by Anthropocentric and Capitalocentric ways of looking at life, which have led to "the earth's sixth great extinction event …, engulfing wars, extractions, and immiserations of billions of people and other critters for something called 'profit' or 'power' – or, for that matter, called 'God'".[243] To counter these destructive forces, she proposes a reconfiguration in the relationships between all living beings, approaching our current day and age not as Anthropocene or Capitalocene, but as Chthulucene.[244] Rather than centring mankind or capital, the Chthulucene centres "Chthonic ones", beings that, much like *Undertale*'s monsters, centre kinship above all else.[245] In fact, Haraway describes Chthonic ones as monsters, in the sense that they "have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of the earth".[246] Defying dogmatisms and rigid identificatory practices, Haraway's Chthonic ones manage to stay with the trouble, which entails being present in the here and now and recognising their existence "as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings".[247] In an episteme prefigured by Haraway's Chthonic ones as well as *Undertale*'s monsters, then, the problem of identity is reconfigured into a source of possibilities, as these beings use their knowledge of their identities being intertwined with processes and beings around them to form unlikely connections which enable them to counter the ongoing crises facing all of earth's beings. Making kin, or "oddkin", by forming unexpected connections with those we encounter might help "cut the bonds of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene",[248] leaving dogma behind in favour of solidarity amongst all living creatures.

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[243] 3-4.
[244] Haraway, 2.
[245] Haraway, 2.
[246] 2.
[247] 1.
[248] Haraway, 4-5.

In fact, making oddkin is a prerequisite for players to reach *Undertale*'s true ending. For players to reach the game's True Pacifist ending, they need to first complete a Neutral route and then start a new game, during which they never kill any monsters. Additionally, the game requires its players to show a willingness to connect with other monsters. This includes taking Papyrus up on his offer to either go on a date or hang out with the player, depending on the players' choices. As players proceed, the game allows them to hang out with two other characters; Undyne, the captain of the Royal Guard, and Alphys, a scientist working with the king. The interactions with Papyrus, Undyne and Alphys lead to meaningful bonds between them and the human protagonist, leading to a happy ending for the protagonist as well as the monsters surrounding them. Since *Undertale*'s monsters range from vegetables to frogs and skeletons, the game can be seen to send a message aligning with Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*: "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all".[249]

## The Monster That Is (Created by) the Human

When the monster in Shelley's *Frankenstein* finally mustered up the courage to enter the cottage of those whom he had observed and had come to love from afar, he was met with "horror and consternation", being struck and chased away.[250] It is at this point that the monster starts to act monstrously, turning towards "rage and revenge" only after having these traits attributed to him by the humans he sought to befriend.[251] The monsters of *Undertale* seem to have gone through a similar process, turning violent only after having been mistreated by the game's humans. Keeping this in mind, studying the game's monsters might

[249] 4.
[250] 99.
[251] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 99.

reveal just as much about humans as it reveals something about those they have banished to the shadows. As Cohen writes:

> Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge[252]

A closer look at the monsters of *Undertale* reveals that the characters that exhibit the most monstrous behaviour, in the sense of being malicious and violent, are the humans themselves. The book in Snowdin Town's library described monster SOULs as being filled with love, hope, and compassion; traits that were confirmed by observing the behaviour of *Undertale*'s monsters. Perhaps that means there is some truth in the passage that follows, as well, which reads: "But the absolute nature of 'SOUL' is unknown. After all, humans have proven their SOULs don't need these things to exist".[253]

As previously mentioned, *Undertale*'s humans started the war against the monster race because they feared the power monsters could obtain if they were ever to absorb a human SOUL. The game's depiction of the only known instance of a monster absorbing a human SOUL, however, shows that it was not monsters', but humans' own abuse of power that they should have been afraid of. As described, *Undertale*'s king and queen adopted the first fallen human; a child who went by the name of Chara. [254] All references to Chara in the game's Neutral route paint a picture of them as an innocent child who met an unfortunate end, falling ill and subsequently dying. Players of this route are told that the human had requested to see the flowers from their village one last time before passing away, and that a

[252] 20.
[253] Fox.
[254] Players actually unwittingly name the first fallen human themselves at the start of the game. At the end of the True Pacifist route, it is revealed that the character players have been playing as was named Frisk all along. During the Genocide route, the first fallen human reveals themselves at the end, introducing themselves as the name players entered. However, when entering the name "Chara" in the starting screen, text shows up stating "the true name", which is why it has been generally accepted that the first fallen human was named Chara.

grief-stricken Asriel absorbed their SOUL to be able to cross the boundary and lay the human to rest with the flowers of their village. When he entered the village holding the human's limp body, however, the villagers assumed that he had murdered the child and attacked him on sight. Rather than using his newly obtained power, with which he could have destroyed all humans, Asriel is said to have smiled and walked away. He went back to the Underground and died in the palace's gardens, turning to dust as all monsters do upon dying. During players' conversation with King Asgore near the end of the game, the King thinks back on that day, remembering:

> The entire [U]nderground was devoid of hope. The future had once again been taken from us by the humans. In a fit of anger, I declared war. I said that I would destroy any human that came here. I would use their souls to become godlike… and free us from this terrible prison. Then, I would destroy humanity. And let monsters rule the surface, in peace.[255]

In this way, it took humans' killing King Asgore's son for him to start to feel true animosity against the game's humans; emphasizing the game's view of monsters only truly becoming monstrous after being treated as such. The True Pacifist and Genocide routes reemphasize this point by revealing that Chara, the first fallen human, was not as innocent as the Neutral route made them out to be.

During the True Pacifist route, a secret location named the True Laboratory is revealed. Once here, players are able to discover a collection of videotapes found in Asgore's castle. It soon becomes clear that the tapes show interactions between Asriel and his adoptive sibling, although the latter's responses are not included. In one of the tapes, the children discuss an instance when baking a pie for their father, Asgore, went wrong. Asriel says:

> What? Oh, yeah, I remember. When we tried to make butterscotch pie for Dad, right? The recipe asked for cups of butter… but we accidentally put in buttercups instead. Yeah! Those flowers got him really sick. I felt so bad. We made Mom really upset. I should have laughed it off, like you did… Um, anyway, where are you going with this? Huh? Turn off the camera…? OK.[256]

[255] Fox.
[256] Fox.

The tape reveals that Chara had an idea they wanted to share with Asriel, somehow related to the kids' accidental poisoning of their father. The next tape makes it clear that Asriel does not like this idea, but Chara forces them to go along, leading to Asriel exclaiming: "No! I'd never doubt you", followed by "Y… yeah! We'll be strong! We'll free everyone! I'll go get the flowers".[257] The final tape reveals Asriel's words to an unconscious Chara, first begging them to wake up, saying "I don't like this plan anymore", before remembering he said he would never doubt Chara.[258] "Six, right?", Asriel says, "We just have to get six".[259] In this way, Chara is revealed to have first come up with the idea of shattering the barrier that separates the underground from the surface by obtaining seven human souls. Killing themselves using the buttercups, they urge Asriel to absorb their SOUL and go to the surface to obtain the remaining six. As players know, having played the Neutral route before being able to come to this point, this is not what happened; it was said that Asriel carried the human's body to the village to put them to rest, being fatally wounded by the humans there before returning to the Underground. It is not until players reach the end of the True Pacifist route that players learn what truly happened on the surface, after it is revealed that Flowey was, in fact, Asriel all along.

Having tricked players at the beginning of the game, Flowey eventually turns out to be *Undertale*'s main antagonist in both the Neutral and True Pacifist routes. At the end of the True Pacifist route, Flowey absorbs not only the six human SOULs that Asgore had previously gathered, but also the SOULs of the monsters the protagonist befriended along the way. This allows him to reveal his true form: that of an adult Asriel Dreemurr. Asriel attacks the player, who can fight back or spare him until he eventually reverts back to his form as a child. Apologizing to the player, Asriel finally reveals what truly happened when Chara died

[257] Fox.
[258] Fox.
[259] Fox.

and he absorbed their SOUL. Apparently, Chara hated humanity. They never explained why, but apparently "they felt very strongly about that".[260] Asriel admits that "[Chara] wasn't really the greatest person",[261] continuing:

> [W]hen [Chara] and I combined our SOULs together… The control over our body was actually split between us. They were the one that picked up their own empty body. And then, when we got to the village… They were the one that wanted to… to use our full power. I was the one that resisted. And then, because of me, we… Well, that's why I ended up a flower.[262]

A lot of important information is revealed here. First, it becomes clear that when a monster absorbs a human SOUL, both beings share control over the newly-formed, powerful body. This means that the monster humans were so afraid of is actually a human-monster hybrid rather than an extra-powerful monster. Hybridity is a term often discussed in relation to critical race theory, with Joshua Lund writing that "to theorize hybridity is to operate within a discourse of race".[263] Though in part highlighting the importance of intersectional research, the term also serves to reemphasize the fiction of race essentialism. Jessica Zibung describes:

> When applied to race, the term hybrid assumes a distortion of the pure. The word comes from the Latin *hybrida*, meaning offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar – in other words, a mongrel. The result of a union between the domesticated and the savage. Applying the term to mixed-race individuals upholds notions of racial purity by playing into an us-versus-them ideology.[264]

Although the concept of hybridity risks reemphasizing the fiction of pure races, the existence of hybrids "threatens not just essentialised identity categories, but also foundational narratives on which whole social, cultural and political histories are based".[265] Being aware of the problematic implications of race hybridity, I argue that *Undertale*'s monster-human hybrid can help destabilize rather than reemphasize the fiction of race purity. If monsters'

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[260] Fox.
[261] Fox.
[262] Fox.
[263] *The Impure Imagination: Towards a Critical Hybridity in Latin American Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3.
[264] "The Hypocrisy of Hybridity". *Overland* 232 (Spring 2018): 39-44. Accessed through https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-232/feature-the-hypocrisy-of-hybridity/
[265] Zibung, "Hypocrisy of Hybridity".

potential for power lies with the creation of human-monster hybrids, this highlights their ability to enforce Derrida's law of the law of genre; genres' always already being mixed.[266] Afraid of the monsters' power, the humans sealed them in the Underground using a barrier. If we can draw a parallel between the creation of a human-monster hybrid and Derrida's principle of contamination, the barrier can be interpreted as the boundary between genres. Indeed, since the only ones that are able to cross the barrier are monsters who have absorbed a human soul, this shows that hybridity ignores genre boundaries. In this way, *Undertale*'s argument in favour of genre mixture is visible in its description of the combining of souls, showing players that no matter what boundaries are established, not a single boundary is impervious to contamination.

Moreover, Asriel tells the player that it was not his decision to pick up Chara's dead body and carry it to the village, but the decision of Chara themselves. In the version of the story told during the Neutral run, Asriel took the human's body with them so that they could be laid to rest among the flowers of their village. Instead, it looks as though Chara brought their own limp body to the village on purpose, knowing exactly how the humans would interpret the approaching monster carrying the dead human. It seems as though they wanted the humans to attack, so that they had an excuse to fight back and kill the humans by using the full power of their hybrid body. Asriel was the one who was able to hold back, sacrificing his life to be able to do so and turning into Flowey upon his return to the Underground. In the one example *Undertale* provides of a monster absorbing a human's SOUL, it was the human part of the hybrid that was dangerous, not the monster part. In fact, the game's main antagonist, Flowey, would not have existed without Chara's plan. Depicting its monsters to be open-minded and compassionate whereas its humans are suspicious and violent, *Undertale* reverses the typical attribution of traits, theorizing that humanity is its own worst enemy.

[266] "Law of Genre", 57.

As described by Cohen, monsters are our children, and, like *Frankenstein*'s monster, they eventually always return to confront their creators.[267] *Undertale*'s monsters come back to haunt players indeed, albeit in an unexpected way. At the end of the True Pacifist route, *Undertale*'s monsters manage to return to the surface. After having been forced to reside in the darkness for years, they are finally free to exact their revenge upon humanity. Except, this is not what they intend to do. Tired of the war mentality that permeated the years that came before, Asgore tells the other gathered monsters: "This is the beginning of a bright new future. An era of peace between humans and monsters".[268] He turns to the player, asking them whether they will act as an ambassador to the humans. Although the player can still say yes or no, the monsters' path is determined: they are going to attempt to resolve the human-monster conflict without violence. By having the monsters return in peace, thereby staying true to their nature instead of paying humans back in kind, *Undertale* reemphasizes that the monstrous part of its monsters is nothing but a human fabrication. When the game's monsters return, they do so not with violence, but with questions: "[M]onsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them".[269] Forcing humans to reflect upon the thoughts and actions that lead to the creation of monsters, *Undertale* sends a message in favour of mixture and monstrosity. Since the monstrous was defined as difference personified, be it on the basis of culture, race, sexuality or otherwise, *Undertale*'s celebration of its monsters can be interpreted as a celebration of difference.[270] The game invites its players to be open-minded when faced with the unknown, showing that the happiest ending is reached not by hiding the unknown, or fighting it when it inevitably

[267] 20.
[268] Fox.
[269] Cohen, 20.
[270] Cohen, 7.

resurfaces, but by embracing it. However, it is not in all endings that *Undertale*'s monsters eventually make their return to the surface. In fact, one of the endings is only achieved when the entire game's monster population is erased from existence. This type of playthrough is referred to as the Genocide route, and it is during these playthroughs that *Undertale* reveals itself not merely as a game *about* monsters, but as a *monstrous game*; a disloyal offspring of video game tradition that equips conventional game elements in a way that breaks immersion, forcing its players to reflect not only on their being a player of the game, but the effect of their behaviour outside of the game world.

## The Monster that is *Undertale*

It is most likely for first-time *Undertale* players to reach one of the game's Neutral endings, having killed some of the game's monsters and spared others. If the player decides to spare Flowey at the end of this route, he offers them a new challenge: "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'".[271] In this way, *Undertale* points its players towards the previously mentioned True Pacifist ending; the ending that came to be regarded as the game's "true" ending since it provides a positive outcome and narrative closure for many of the game's characters, as well as being the only ending after which *Undertale*'s entire credit sequence is shown. One might expect players to be satisfied after having reached this ending, leading to their moving on to a different game to play. But there is one last strategy players have not tried at this point. "What would happen", players might think, "if instead of killing *no* monsters, I killed *all* monsters?". Notably, this decision must be thought of by the player themselves, since *Undertale* does not point its players into that direction. Apart from

[271] Fox.

Flowey's motto of "kill or be killed",[272] there is nothing in the game's narrative that points players towards such an approach. The game's mechanics, however, tell a story of their own. Every time a monster is killed, players gain EXP and Gold, making their subsequent fights easier and allowing them to purchase items in the game's shops that allow them to further increase their strength and resilience. If players focus on the mechanics of the game instead of focussing on the game's narrative, they might be tempted to raise these numbers as high as possible. These players, as well as players who just want to see what happens when they keep killing monsters, might find themselves on the road to the Genocide ending; a road that does not go unpunished by *Undertale*'s narrative and mechanics.

To reach the Genocide ending, players must kill every possible monster in the game. Not only does this include killing all boss monsters they encounter, such as Toriel, Papyrus and Asgore, but players are required to exhaust the monster population of every region of the game. Since this population consists of a randomly generated number, players are required to walk around in the Ruins, Snowdin and *Undertale*'s other areas, triggering monster encounters and killing the monsters that approach until, finally, they exhaust the region's kill counter. This type of mechanic is referred to as grinding, denoting the repetition of a certain in-game task to gain rewards of some kind.[273] Especially common in RPGs, grinding is often an obligatory part of completing a game, since players would not be strong enough to defeat the game's bosses if they did not grind for experience points and in-game currency.[274] Although *Undertale*'s narrative does not encourage its players to grind, the game's mechanics allow them to do so, which might be enough to incite a morbid curiosity in its players. Players are made aware of the fact that all of the region's monsters have been murdered when subsequent encounters only contain the message: "But nobody came",

[272] Fox.
[273] Patrick Perdomo, "Grinding from a Player's and Game Designer's Point of View" (Bachelor thesis, Malmö University, 2021), 1, urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-43306.
[274] Perdomo, "Grinding", 1.

accompanied by eerie background music.[275] When the kill counter in Snowdin is exhausted, Snowdin Town seems to have been evacuated upon players' arrival and players can find a note on the counter of the town's shop that reads: "Please don't hurt my family".[276] The Genocide route transforms *Undertale* from a quirky, lighthearted game filled with all kinds of whimsical and meaningful encounters into an empty husk of itself. The gameplay is reduced to the repetitive searching for and killing of monsters while the numbers denoting players' EXP, LV and Gold counts increase as the monster count goes down. The game's content changes along with players' actions; soundtracks are slowed down significantly and the game's puzzles solve itself, making players' one and only prerogative killing all monsters. It is during the Genocide route that *Undertale* is truly reduced to Flowey's motto, "kill or be killed",[277] and as players progress, they might start to realise that *Undertale* is not only a game about monsters, but a monster of its own.

To explore what it means for a work of art to be monstrous, it is once again helpful to turn to Jacques Derrida. In an interview included in the book *Points…*, Derrida states that certain works of art can be called monstrous, and that this lends them a particular type of power. For Derrida, a work can be monstrous if it is "[a] graft, [a] hybridization, [a] composition that puts heterogeneous bodies together".[278] When describing such hybrids, he refers to the chimera; a figure in Greek mythology composed of various animal parts. If various recognisable elements are combined to form a hybrid whole, "monstrosity may reveal or make one aware of what normality is".[279] In order to allow for the norm to be effectively questioned, however, "one must conduct not only a theoretical analysis; one must produce what in fact looks like a discursive monster so that the analysis will be a *practical* effect, so

[275] Fox.
[276] Fox.
[277] Fox.
[278] *Points*, 385.
[279] Derrida, 385.

that people will be forced to become aware of the history of normality".[280] *Undertale*'s previously discussed Neutral and True Pacifist routes can be said to have given life to such a chimeral monster. By combining recognisable RPG elements in a new way, for instance by having the effect of earning EXP be negative instead of positive, *Undertale* can make players reflect upon the video game norm, and with it, the real-life norms that involve the blind acceptance of categories and their accompanying customary behaviours. The Genocide route, however, does something that is different; it breaks its own, albeit hybrid, rules, confronting players with the unexpected. The monster that emerges at this point is more than a chimera. Derrida's monsters is more than a new combination of recognisable parts, it is also "that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized … a species for which we do not yet have a name".[281] Such monsters have the potential to frighten "because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure".[282] And although these monsters may be frightening, they are the ones that must be welcomed, since "[a]ll experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*, to welcome, that is, to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange".[283] By breaking immersion and turning the game's mechanics against the player, *Undertale* blurs the boundaries between players and the game. Taking away players' security and, eventually, their control over the game, the game becomes monstrous, and therefore powerful; "[o]ne of the meanings of the monstrous is that it leaves us without power, that it is precisely too powerful for the powers-that-be".[284] *Undertale*'s genocide route troubles not only the monster-human dichotomy, but the player-game dichotomy. In this way, it is not only the

[280] Derrida, 386.
[281] 386.
[282] 386.
[283] 387.
[284] Derrida, 385.

game's monsters but the game *as* a monster that heralds an episteme that resists "any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition".[285]

## The Meta-Monstrosity of Flowey and Sans

Most commonly, video game creators aim for their players to be able to lose themselves in their game by making the experience immersive. Immersion refers to a state in which a player is concentrated, loses self-reflection, and experiences a distortion of time while playing a video game, dissociating from reality for a certain period of time.[286] One of the factors that has been found to increase games' immersiveness, and which has been linked to higher evaluation of games, is the presence of a narrative in a video game, which is why many games are narrative-driven.[287] At a first glance, *Undertale* can be seen to conform to these strategies. Both the Neutral route and the True Pacifist route allow players to complete a narrative-driven experience that allows for players to immerse themselves in the game. That is, until players start to exhibit behaviour that would set them on the path towards the Genocide ending. From that moment onwards, the traditional separation between game narrative and player starts to fracture. The first example of such an instance can occur relatively early in the game, if the player decides to kill Toriel on their way out of the Ruins but gets cold feet afterward and decides to reload their previous save file to spare her instead. Having been one of those players myself, I was shocked when, after leaving the Ruins, Flowey appeared to tell me:

> Clever. Verrrryyy clever. You think you're really smart, don't you? In this world, it's kill or be killed. So you were able to play by your own rules. You spared the life of a

[285] Cohen, 7.
[286] Lazaros Michailidis, Emili Balaguer-Ballester and Xun He, "Flow and Immersion in Video Games: The Aftermath of a Conceptual Challenge", *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 2. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01682
[287] Loïc Caroux et al., "Player-video game interaction: A systematic review of current concepts", *Computers in Human Behavior* 48 (2015): 372.

> single person. Hee hee hee… But don't act so cocky. I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it. Ha ha ha ha…[288]

Flowey's words reveal a few things about *Undertale* that depict the game's departure from an immersive, narrative-driven game to something different. First, players' save files are usually "safe", functioning to freeze a specific moment in the game's time that can safely be returned to if the outcome of players' subsequent actions was not to their liking. The above interaction with Flowey makes it clear that *Undertale* does not play by these rules, instead having players' actions reverberate across the entire game regardless of their reloads. Moreover, the game directly addresses the player when they reference their ability to save, since the one who went back in time to reverse their killing of Toriel is not the game's protagonist, but the player themselves. This breaking of the fourth wall by giving NPC's access to knowledge they would traditionally not be privy to occurs more often throughout the Genocide route. Although Snowdin Town was evacuated and the shops were abandoned upon players' arrival, the shop in Waterfall is, curiously, still open. Upon entering, a turtle-like shopkeeper greets the player by saying: "Wa ha ha… So you came here. What a treat!",[289] allowing players to buy items from him despite his making it clear that he knows about their atrocious actions. If players choose to threaten the shopkeeper, he responds: "I've lived too long to be afraid of something like you. Try it, kiddo! … I know you can't here. Wah ha…".[290] This dialogue indicates that the shopkeeper is aware that *Undertale*'s players are unable to engage in fights with shopkeeper NPCs; meta knowledge about the game's mechanics usually reserved for players themselves. The concept of meta is defined as "showing or suggesting an explicit awareness of itself or oneself as a member of its category; [being] cleverly self-

[288] Fox.
[289] Fox.
[290] Fox.

referential",[291] and, by being meta, *Undertale* departs from immersion and moves towards confrontation.

As I mentioned, Flowey in particular seems to have access to meta knowledge of the game. Although most of *Undertale*'s NPC's either disappear from the game or are quickly killed off by the protagonist during a Genocide route, Flowey is the player's loyal supporter throughout their playthrough. Although Flowey was the main antagonist of the Neutral and True Pacifist routes, he seems to be fully on board with your approach to *Undertale* during a genocide playthrough as you finally seem to heed his advice to either kill or be killed. Having the game's antagonist as an ally might already tell players something about the road they are walking, but it is not until the Genocide route is nearly at its end that Flowey's origin story is revealed, showing that Flowey and the player have more in common than they might have thought. It turns out that Flowey became the way he is through his possession of the exact same power over the game that players have; the power to save the game and return to his previous save point whenever he wanted to. Flowey tells the player that he found out that "as long as I was determined to live… I could go back". [292] He continues: "At first, I used my powers for good. I became "friends" with everyone. I solved all their problems flawlessly. Their companionship was amusing… For a while. As time repeated, people proved themselves predictable".[293] Flowey's description might sound familiar to players who first completed the Neutral and True Pacifist routes of the game. Having befriended *Undertale*'s characters, they, themselves, decided that this was not enough. They, much like the main antagonist of the other two routes, decided to start killing the monsters off, instead. "It all started because I was curious", Flowey relates, "Curious what would happen if I killed them. 'I don't like this', I told myself. 'I'm just doing this because I HAVE to know what happens'.

[291] Merriam Webster Online, s.v. "meta", accessed on 30 May 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meta
[292] Fox.
[293] Fox.

Ha ha ha… What an excuse! You of all people must know how liberating it is to act this way".[294] Not only does Flowey have meta knowledge about the game's mechanics, but he was able to save and reload himself, ending up in the exact same spot the player finds themselves in right now; wanting to see everything. And it does not end at that, as Flowey even exhibits meta knowledge of the way video games can travel through mediums, ending up in, for instance, Twitch streams and YouTube videos. Taking aim at those watching through such a medium, Flowey adds: "At least we're better than those sickos that stand around and WATCH it happen… Those pathetic people that want to see it, but are too weak to do it themselves. I bet someone like that's watching right now, aren't they…".[295] *Undertale* blurs the boundaries between players and the game in the Genocide route, revealing that its characters have knowledge of the game's mechanics that only players are usually privy to. Simultaneously, the game blurs the human-monster distinction by equating the player's actions with those of the game's main antagonist. By recasting Flowey as a relatable sidekick in this playthrough, *Undertale* reemphasizes Cohen's statement that monsters always return, bearing knowledge of ourselves.[296]

Despite Flowey's meta knowledge of *Undertale*'s, however, he still believes the player to be another character in the game; his long-lost sibling Chara. Throughout the Genocide route, Flowey continuously refers to the player as Chara, saying that he thought they were dead and that he is so happy to be travelling this road together.[297] There is only one character in *Undertale* who is actively aware of and comes to despise *you*, the player of *Undertale*, and that is the skeleton Sans. I previously introduced Sans as an example of the diversity and relatability of the monster population. Indeed, when Sans first makes his appearance in *Undertale*, he is portrayed as a lazybones with a penchant for jokes who takes

[294] Fox.
[295] Fox..
[296] 20.
[297] Fox.

on a protective role towards his brother Papyrus. Players of the Neutral and True Pacifist routes run into him on occasion, with Sans usually saying something witty, doing something silly, or combining the two. For instance, Sans can be found operating a hotdog stand in the Hotlands area, where players can buy hotdogs from him. These hotdogs are added to players' inventory as a consumable item, unless their inventory is already full. In that case, Sans puts the hotdogs on top of players' heads in the game's overworld, saying: "Here. Have fun".[298] When the head-hotdog count reaches thirty, Sans says: "I'll be 'frank' with you. As much as I like putting hot dogs on your head… thirty is just an excessive number. Twenty-nine, now that's fine, but thirty… does it look like my arms can reach that high?".[299] Players can now walk off, the hotdog stack falling over if they walk too quickly, as depicted in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Sans' hotdog stack.[300]

[298] Fox.
[299] Fox.
[300] Fox, screenshot by author.

Although Sans is portrayed as a lazy, silly monster throughout the Neutral and True Pacifist routes, there are various moments in which not only his meta knowledge of the game, but also his ability to manipulate the game's structure shine through. The hot-dog stand serves as an example, since, as Sans already jokingly mentioned himself, he should not have been able to reach as high as he has. Another instance of Sans' apparent manipulation of the game's design occurs in the Snowdin area. Players can discover a dead-end path where Sans is first standing on the right end of the path, but when players continue walking left, he suddenly appears on the left end of the path. When walking back again, Sans appears to have never moved from his original place. It seems as though Sans has the ability to teleport between the game's locations. The path in Snowdin is not the only instance where this happens, as Sans invites the player to grab a bite to eat with him twice, both times stating that he knows a shortcut before teleporting the player to a restaurant. At first, players might be tempted to interpret these teleporting events as mere narrative devices, with Fox opting to cut to black rather than depicting an uneventful walk. It is only near the end of *Undertale*'s routes that Sans is truly revealed to have special capabilities. When players reach King Asgore's throne room, they are greeted by Sans who says: "So you finally made it. The end of your journey is at hand. In a few moments, you will meet the king. Together… you will determine the future of this world. That's then. Now. You will be judged. You will be judged for your every action. You will be judged for every EXP you've earned".[301] It is at this point that the lazy, silly jokester is revealed as the ultimate judge of players' actions. Sans is the one who tells the player that EXP and LV stood for "Execution Points" and "Level of Violence",[302] judging players' actions based on how high they let these stats get. Here, Sans is revealed to have more meta knowledge of the game than Flowey or any other character. He knows exactly

[301] Fox.
[302] Fox.

how many monsters you have killed, even though he was not (visibly) present for every kill. If you pursued a True Pacifist route, having earned no EXP, Sans commends you for keeping tenderness in your heart and expresses his trust in you. Keeping in mind *Undertale*'s possible prefiguring of an episteme-to-come, this might be interpreted as his saying that you would fit right into such an episteme. If you pursued a Neutral route, Sans tells you off in different ways based on how high your LV stat is, always starting by telling you to reflect upon your actions and ending by allowing you to proceed to face Asgore. For the Genocide route, however, things are different. Skipping his "so you finally made it" speech, Sans says: "So, I've got a question for ya. Do you think even the worst person can change…? That everybody can be a good person, if they just try?".[303] As the protagonist takes a step towards Sans, he continues: "Heh heh heh heh… All right. Well, here's a better question".[304] Sans' eyes turn black as he says: "Do you wanna have a bad time?".[305] Instead of letting the player proceed, Sans now engages in combat with them. It is at this point that the extent to which Sans can alter the game's structure is revealed, as *Undertale* reveals the extent of its monstrosity. As Derrida writes, "[o]ne of the meanings of the monstrous is that it leaves us without power, that it is precisely too powerful for the powers-that-be".[306] In the fight with Sans, *Undertale*'s monstrosity lends it the power of revealing not only the underlying principles of video games, but also those of the current order of things.

Sans is, simultaneously, the easiest and most difficult enemy in *Undertale*. If players perform the "Check" action on Sans, the description reads: "SANS 1 ATK 1 DEF. The easiest enemy. Can only deal 1 damage".[307] Although Sans' stats would indeed make him *Undertale*'s easiest enemy, his ability to manipulate the game's mechanics and turn them

[303] Fox.
[304] Fox.
[305] Fox.
[306] 385.
[307] Fox.

against the player makes his fight the most difficult one in the entire game. The encounter starts with Sans breaking the fourth wall by saying: “It’s a beautiful day outside. Birds are singing, flowers are blooming… On days like these, kids like you… Should be burning in hell”,[308] referencing players playing the game from the comforts of their home, repetitively killing off monsters while they could have been doing anything else. After this, he immediately attacks the player. It is likely that players were not expecting this, since they are usually the ones to attack first, and they might even immediately lose all their hit points to this attack. Sans comments on this by saying: “Huh. Always wondered why people never use their strongest attack first”.[309] When players go to attack Sans, he does something no monster has done up until this point: he takes a step away from the centre of the screen, dodging the attack. “What?”, he says while winking, “You think I’m just gonna stand there and take it?”.[310] All of the players' subsequent attacks are dodged, whereas Sans’ attacks are notoriously difficult to dodge and do 1 damage per frame, equal to 40 damage per second. The maximum amount of HP players can have at this point lies around 100, meaning that in a maximum of 2,5 seconds, players could be dead and having to restart from their save point. Meanwhile, Sans lets on his knowledge of the player’s power over *Undertale*’s world, saying: “Our reports showed a massive anomaly in the timespace continuum. Timelines jumping left and right, stopping and starting… / Until suddenly, everything ends. / Heh heh heh… That’s your fault, isn’t it”. [311] While all other characters seem to lose their memory when the game is reset, Sans has retained his. “You can’t understand how this feels”, he states in between attacks.

> Knowing that one day, without any warning… It’s all going to be reset. / Look, I gave up trying to go back a long time ago. / And getting to the surface doesn’t really appeal

[308] Fox.
[309] Fox.
[310] Fox.
[311] Fox.

> anymore, either. / Cause even if we do… We'll just end up right back here, without any memory of it, right? / To be blunt… It makes it kind of hard to give it my all.[312]

Perhaps this reveals the reason for Sans' laziness throughout every route: he recognises the futility of it all, and this has drained him of his motivation to do anything and take anything seriously, other than the care for his brother. During this battle, however, Sans' motivation returns, because he "can't afford not to care anymore".[313] After dodging a number of attacks, drops of sweat begin to appear on Sans' forehead. He is tiring, and cannot keep dodging for much longer. At this point, he plays into players' bond with him during the Neutral and True Pacifist routes, stating:

> I can feel it. There's a glimmer of a good person inside of you. The memory of someone who once wanted to do the right thing. Someone who, in another time, might have even been… a friend? C'mon buddy. Do you remember me? Please, if you're listening… Let's forget all this, ok? Just lay down your weapon, and… Well, my job will be a lot easier. [314]

The text "Sans is sparing you" appears on the screen, and players now, like in every fight, have the option to spare Sans.[315] If they do, they find out that this is yet another way in which Sans is able to use the game's mechanics against the player. At this point, players have grown accustomed to the power they have over their enemies, their position having allowed them to kill or spare monsters without the monsters themselves ever having had that same choice. If they click SPARE, Sans says: "You're sparing me? Finally. Buddy. Pal. I know how hard it must be… to make that choice. To go back on everything you've worked up to. I want you to know… I won't let it go to waste. C'mere, pal".[316] Opening his arms for a hug, which the player accepts… Sans strikes. Without saying another word, players watch as "GAME OVER" appears on their screen.[317] After a few seconds, the following text appears

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[312] Fox.
[313] Fox.
[314] Fox.
[315] Fox.
[316] Fox.
[317] Fox.

underneath: “If we’re really friends… you won’t come back”.[318] If players want to see the Genocide route through, they are going to have to kill Sans, since he has taken the option of sparing him away from them. There comes a point, however, when Sans becomes too tired to dodge the players’ attacks, and his own attacks start to slow down. It is then that he decides to perform his “special attack”, saying: “Are you ready? Here goes nothing”.[319] And, indeed, nothing happens. It turns out that Sans’ special attack was literally nothing. Knowing that, one of their turns, the player will finish him off, Sans has decided that it is never again going to be the player’s turn, “even if it means [they] have to stand [there] until the end of time”.[320] Advising the player to quit the game, Sans stands and waits, forcing players to wait with him for five real-time minutes. Eventually, Sans falls asleep and players are able to drag the combat box out of its usual place, hover it over the “Fight” button, and press down, only for Sans to once again dodge the attack. Sans starts to say something witty, but without players doing anything he is suddenly hit for 9999999 damage. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you”, he says, starting to walk off the screen towards his favourite restaurant.[321] “Papyrus, do you want anything?”, is the last text bubble that appears, until a sound denotes his death and the player earns their final EXP, reaching LV 20.[322] The fight with Sans is exceptionally difficult, provided additional power through its monstrosity.

By robbing the players of the control they used to have over the game, the monster that is *Undertale* makes it apparent that this control was illusory in the first place. In this way, the game echoes the illusion of unmixed genres as well as the idea of a unified, self-referential identity. Players had the power to make decisions and kill monsters only because the game allowed them to; a power Sans proves can just as easily be manipulated or taken

[318] Fox.
[319] Fox.
[320] Fox.
[321] Fox.
[322] Fox.

away. If we consider this message in the context of Foucault's *Order of Things*, the game can be said to reveal the disorder that is plastered over by the current order of things. *Undertale* provides its players with a sense of control, but, as Janet Murray describes in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, "[t]here is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself".[323] Both video games and epistemes can be considered authored environments in a way, with epistemes coming into being not through somebody's active efforts but as a result of a cultural shift in the fundament of knowledge. In both cases, however, there are rules that determine the extent of the possible. Much like players can suspend their disbelief to pretend to be in control of the game,[324] those living in the current episteme can suspend their disbelief to pretend that they are in control of what they know and how they came to know it.

*Undertale* drives its point regarding players' lack of control home by way of a final appearance of Chara. As mentioned above, the blow that killed Sans was not controlled by the player, nor are the subsequent kills. After facing Sans, players proceed to fight Asgore, who is killed with a blow dealing 999999999 damage without the player even being given the chance to press the FIGHT button. Flowey appears, begging for his life, only to be slaughtered in not one but eight excruciating blows. At this point, the screen goes black, and a character looking a lot like your own player avatar appears. "Greetings", they say, "I am Chara".[325] Thanking the player for having awakened them from death and giving them purpose again, they reveal that they were the one who delivered the final blow to Sans, Asgore and Flowey. Chara continues: "Together, we eradicated the enemy and became strong. HP. ATK. DEF. GOLD. EXP. LV. Every time a number increases, that feeling…

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[323] Janet Murray. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 152.
[324] David Owen, "The Illusion of Agency and the Affect of Control within Video Games" in *Ctrl-Alt-Play: Essays on Control in Video Gaming*, ed. Matthew Wysocki (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 72.
[325] Fox.

That's me".[326] Insinuating that they have been with the player since the beginning, Chara now tells them that they have now reached the absolute end. The game gives players one final decision to make, as Chara says: "Let us erase this pointless world, and move on to the next", and two buttons labelled "ERASE" and "DO NOT" appear.[327] It soon becomes clear that the choice was never the player's to make. If the player refuses, Chara says: "You must have misunderstood. SINCE WHEN WERE YOU THE ONE IN CONTROL?",[328] depicted in Figure 7.


Figure 7: Chara makes the player reflect upon the extent of their control over the game.[329]

Chara's face deforms, and they walk closer to the screen until the animation that usually plays when players hit an enemy now appears to hit the player themselves. Players are thrown out of the game as it closes itself, and when they start it up again they see a black screen. If they want to be given the chance to play the game once more, they have to wait 10 real-time

[326] Fox.
[327] Fox.
[328] Fox.
[329] Fox, screenshot by author.

minutes, before Chara reappears, only allowing players access to the game world again if they promise to give Chara their SOUL.

*Undertale* reverses the roles between player and game in the Genocide route, deciding for them that the final characters will die and the game world will be erased. Completely taking control over the game away from its players, *Undertale* performs its final monstrous act by erasing not only the game's monsters, but the entire game. When Foucault foresaw the end of the current order of things, he wrote: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared … then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea".[330] Keeping this in mind, *Undertale*'s final act of erasure might be taken as an awareness of what is to come. The game contains monsters and can even be said to have monstrous properties itself, allowing it to benefit from monsters' potential as harbingers of not only category crisis, but the approach of an episteme in which categories are no longer an integral part of the order of things.[331] However, having been created within an episteme of Man rather than within an episteme of monsters infuses the game with an inevitable complicity; a complicity that can be observed in the game's core mechanic. By giving players the choice to either slay or spare the monsters they encounter, they are forced to operate within a militaristic mindset, whatever their stance on the monster race. Moreover, if monsters stop attacking the player, they are forced to remain in combat, only being allowed to leave after the player has deigned to spared them. In this way, the game can be seen to partake in the systems it rises up against. Perhaps the only way the monster of *Undertale* could still make its escape was by erasing itself, allowing a new arrangement of knowledge to take its place.

[330] 422.
[331] Cohen, 6.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I aimed to show how *Pew* and *Undertale* expose the problem of identity to their audience, potentially prefiguring an episteme that recasts the problem as a source of possibilities, instead. Following Foucault's approach to art in his *Order of Things*, I explored the works' potential for foretelling a shift between epistemes. *Pew*'s protagonist resembles Foucault's description of Don Quixote, being "Different only in so far as [they are] unaware of Difference",[332] except rather than being a remnant of the episteme that came before, they might be a precursor of an episteme that is yet to come. Acknowledging the hierarchies inherent to the order of the Man-as-human episteme,[333] *Pew* highlights that this colonialist reasoning extends beyond the human to permeate the treatment of life in general. I argue that the observations and actions of the novel's protagonist, which show them to be unable and unwilling to identify with any genre the community offers them, hint at an episteme that acknowledges the inevitable mixedness of genres of life, embracing Derrida's law of the law of genre instead of exclusively enforcing the law of genre.[334] Lacey reserves a special role for the body in the novel's approach to the problem of identity, with protagonist Pew wondering whether humans' need for order and delineation is somehow rooted in the body.[335] Including Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in my analysis, I theorized that *Pew*'s protagonist might not have gone through the mirror stage, causing them to miss out on the ensuing need for rigid, closed-off identifications.[336] Since the mirror stage sets the ego into a fictional direction of anticipated unity,[337] I argue that Lacey's protagonist's embodiment of Derrida's principle of contamination serves to confront those around them with the futility of their attempts at

[332] 54.
[333] Wynter, 322.
[334] Derrida, "Law of Genre", 57.
[335] 59.
[336] Lacan, 97.
[337] Lacan, 94.

attaining this unity, thereby paving the way towards a more realistic and open-minded view of themselves and those around them. The novel also makes clear, however, that its protagonist's position is not liveable within the current episteme; not only is Pew unable to belong to any genre, they find themselves unable to participate, leading to their eventual departure of the book's town.

It is in *Undertale* that I found a more liveable way of breaching epistemic boundaries in the figure of the monster. Embodiments of difference, monsters have been banished to the shadows in the current episteme, but their inevitable return might usher in an episteme that expects difference rather than enforcing sameness. *Undertale* invokes its players' previous experiences with the RPG genre before thwarting their expectations. Rather than featuring monsters as stereotypical, one-dimensional adversaries, the game emphasizes its monsters' individuality. In fact, *Undertale* shows that humans creates their own monsters, fearing contamination of the hegemonic worldview so much that entire populations are ostracized and mistreated. Showing that *Undertale*'s monsters value meaningful connections with other beings over utilising their enormous potential for power, I theorized that an episteme-to-come prefigured by these monsters would revolve around making "oddkin"; forming bonds of kinship and solidarity in spite of, or perhaps because of, differences.[338] If *Undertale*'s players ignore this message, killing the monsters they encounter rather than befriending them, they have to face off against the monster that is *Undertale*. Throwing immersion out the window, the game blurs the player-game dichotomy by providing its characters with meta game knowledge and turning the game's mechanics against the player. Not only are players confronted with their actions by the game, but they are shown to never have been in control in the first place, emphasizing that the control offered by the current order of things only provides an illusion of stability.

[338] Haraway, 2.

The process of writing this thesis has given rise to several questions regarding *Pew* and *Undertale*'s treatment of identity that are in need of further attention. For instance, *Pew* depicts a variety of characters that do not deem it necessary to figure out what Pew is. One of these characters is Annie, a young girl who actively questions the rigid genre boundaries the community adheres to. The character is described to have interrogated her teachers at school as to the adequacy of the notion of binary genders and the concept of communism, wondering whether these descriptions of the world do justice to the phenomena they are supposed to represent.[339] Further research might incorporate Annie's perspectives, perhaps to explore the impact of political and economic systems on identity. Moreover, the encounters between protagonist Pew and the elderly inhabitants of the novel's fictional town might be further examined. Those of older age in the novel are taken less seriously than the younger citizens, while displaying a willingness and ability to simply let Pew be. Finally, subsequent studies might take a closer look at the ritual the town's inhabitants participate in, during which they put on blindfolds and simultaneously say all their wrongdoings of the past year out loud. Seemingly meant to distance themselves from their actions, this ritual invites an exploration of people's inability or unwillingness of reconciling their deeds with their identity, perhaps shedding more light on the current episteme's approach to identity. Further studies of identity in *Undertale* might take a closer look at the genres of gender and sexuality in the game. The game is filled with various intriguing expressions of the two, such as Mettaton, a queer robot, and Mad Mew Mew, a ghost possessing a doll who has been interpreted as a metaphor for being trans.[340] Players can also choose to go on date with several characters regardless of their gender or, perhaps more importantly, their being human. Moreover, I had to restrict myself to performing overarching analyses of the three main endings of Neutral, True Pacifist

[339] Lacey, 90-91.
[340] Fandom, "Mettaton_EX" and "Mad Mew Mew", https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Mettaton#Mettaton_EX and https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Mad_Mew_Mew

and Genocide, but much of *Undertale*'s content is only reached if very specific action is taken; for instance, if players of the Neutral route kill Papyrus while leaving all other monsters alive. My approach to *Pew* and *Undertale* is far from exhaustive, and I encourage anyone reading this to embark on the journeys these works offer.

By analysing *Pew* and *Undertale* alongside theories of epistemes, genres, and monstrosities, this thesis shows that an episteme heralded by *Pew* and *Undertale* is an episteme that expects and celebrates difference. In this episteme, those who do not subscribe to specific identifications are embraced just as much as those who openly and happily traverse genre boundaries. Since its inhabitants are free from the burden of having to conform to unmixed genres, the problem of identity no longer needs to be problematic. Instead, identity's not coinciding with itself is shown to allow for surprising bonds of kinship and solidarity to form amongst all forms of life. And if such an order of things can reconfigure the problem of identity, what is to stop it from upending the other problems this earth and all its inhabitants are facing, too?

Although this thesis aimed to expose and criticize the current episteme's restrictive approach to identity, it was still created within that same episteme, making its complicity in repressive systems inevitable. Moreover, monsters are notoriously difficult to catch, which makes studying them akin to tracking the yeti's footprints across a snowy mountain range; difficult and not likely to result in conclusive evidence.[341] Nonetheless, I hope that this imperfect interrogation of identity and difference in *Pew* and *Undertale* has contributed to an increased understanding of the forces that underlie the construction of identities in the current episteme, and how these might be subverted. When the current Man-made episteme comes to its inevitable end, "like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea",[342] perhaps the face

[341] Cohen, 4.
[342] Foucault, 422.

that replaces it will be drawn in the likeness of a monster. Whatever figures might approach us in the future, I hope we will be able to greet them with hospitality, together.

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