



University
of Glasgow

Bertram, Joanna (2026) *Revoicing Undertale: how digital fan communities use vocal performance to transform game texts*. PhD thesis.

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/85954/>

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk



PhD in Music

REVOICING UNDERTALE: HOW DIGITAL FAN COMMUNITIES USE VOCAL PERFORMANCE TO TRANSFORM GAME TEXTS

Joanna Bertram

University of Glasgow
College of Arts
September 2025



Abstract

The following thesis investigates how digital communities use game sound to transform game texts via gameplay on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, using Toby Fox's Undertale (2015) as a case study. Undertale was chosen for its large and dedicated fan community, with one of the primary topics of discussion within it being what the characters would sound like if the game had voice acting. By combining findings from game studies, fan studies and voice studies literature, this research analyses how fan-produced voice acting affects how the original Undertale text is transformed through online gameplay. Using a survey distributed among Undertale fans, alongside three specific playthrough case studies, this thesis investigates if and how these imagined voices were realised in online shared gameplay. Ultimately, I argue that adding voice acting to Undertale in online gameplay presentations plays a significant role in transforming the game's text to new mediums.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
List of Figures	5
Glossary	9
Introduction	14
Online Gaming	22
<i>Undertale</i>	23
Fan Studies and Voice Perception.....	27
The Survey and Case Studies.....	29
Literature Review	33
Individual vs Shared Gameplay	34
Ludomusicological Studies of Individual Gameplay.....	34
The Temporal Nature of Game Sound in Individual Play Sessions.....	36
Existing Ludomusicological Studies of Shared Gameplay	38
Performativity	40
Performativity and Ludomusicology.....	41
Performativity and Shared Gameplay	43
Fan Culture Studies	46
Broad Fan Studies Literature.....	46
Fan Culture in Ludomusicology Literature.....	51
<i>Undertale</i>	54
Voice Acting & Perception	59
Historical Context: Gamergate and COVID-19	65
Gamergate	65
COVID-19.....	67
Paratexts	69
Conclusions.....	72
Methodology	75
Chapter 1: Survey Analysis - Fandom Questions	80
How long have you been involved in the <i>Undertale</i> fandom?.....	82
1.	82
2. How involved would you say you are in the <i>Undertale</i> fandom?	83
3. Are you aware of all the different ways <i>Undertale</i> can be played, e.g. Pacifist (sparing all enemies), Genocide (killing all enemies) and Neutral (killing some enemies and sparing others)?	85
4. Which of the aforementioned routes have you played/watched via YouTube Let's Play or Twitch stream?	86
5. From a narrative perspective, do you prefer <i>Undertale</i> 's Pacifist, Genocide or Neutral route?	90

6. From a gameplay perspective, do you prefer <i>Undertale</i> 's Pacifist, Neutral or Genocide route?	94
7. Writing for Kotaku in 2017, Chloe Spencer argues that <i>Undertale</i> fans are very passionate about the game being played in a certain way and can be very vocal about this. Would you agree with this assessment?	98
8. Are Spencer's conclusions on <i>Undertale</i> fan community behaviour reflective of your own experiences in the <i>Undertale</i> fandom?	104
9. In <i>Undertale</i> , monsters (a minority) were defeated by the humans (a majority) and are now forced to live in the Underground. To what extent do you agree that the players sympathise with the monsters in <i>Undertale</i> , as marginalised communities, and are therefore less willing to kill them?.....	108
13. Bonnie Ruberg's 2018 article on queer readings of <i>Undertale</i> highlights Mettaton's potential status as a trans or non-binary character. Do you agree with this assessment?	112
Conclusions.....	115
Chapter 2: Survey Analysis - Voice Acting Questions	117
10: Scenario: <i>Undertale</i> is being made into an animated TV series, and you get to cast it. What kind of voices would you give to the following characters? (Participants were given the option of describing either a voice type or a particular person's voice).	119
Toriel	121
Papyrus	123
Sans.....	126
Undyne.....	129
Alphys	132
Asgore	136
Flowey/Asriel	138
Frisk/Chara.....	142
Mettaton.....	145
Miscellaneous Characters	148
11: Do you watch <i>Undertale</i> being played online, for example in a YouTube Let's Play or Twitch stream?.....	150
12: If 'yes', have you ever encountered players creating their own voices for the characters and performing them for an audience?.....	151
Conclusions.....	154
Chapter 3: Case Study 1 - Jacksepticeye	156
A Sense of Self: Connections between the imagined voice and fan identity	157
McLoughlin and <i>Undertale</i> : An Overview.....	162
McLoughlin and The <i>Undertale</i> Fandom: A Reciprocal Relationship.....	167
Influence by the Fandom: Finding Sans's Voice.....	170
Influence on the Fandom: Papyrus's Skeletor Origins	174
On "The Normies"	177
McLoughlin and The Research Question.....	188
Conclusions.....	189

Chapter 4: Case Study 2 - Fry 64	191
An Overview of the Fry 64 Playthrough	192
Twitch Streaming: A Community Within a Community	196
The Primary Goal of the Fry 64 Stream	202
The Immediacy of Feedback	204
Jenkins and Fry 64	206
Thornton and Fry 64	212
Ruberg and Fry 64: Voice Acting	218
Evolution of <i>Undertale</i> Fandom Norms	223
Interactivity in the Fry 64 Stream, and the Expanded Role of the Spectator	225
Paratext in the Fry 64 Stream	228
Games as Social Foundations: After COVID-19	229
Conclusions	231
Chapter 5: Case Study 3 - The Cinematic Dub	234
An Overview of <i>The Cinematic Dub</i>	236
Completion	238
Interactivity	242
Gameplay vs Watching	245
Film Music Studies and Ludomusicology	245
Music and Sound Design: Game vs Cinematic Dub	248
The Degree of Separation: Aesthetic and Structural Changes	250
The Narrator	254
Fan Meaning-Making Activities	256
Fan Labour	264
Conclusions	270
Conclusions	272
Research Outcomes	272
The Survey Results	272
Case Study 1: Jacksepticeye	273
Case Study 2: Fry 64	275
Case Study 3: <i>The Cinematic Dub</i>	277
Future Research	279
References	280

List of Figures

Figure 1: Data demonstrating that 26% of surveyed adult 'gamers' in the US watch at least 3 hours of YouTube gaming content a week	16
Figure 2: Data demonstrating a high amount of overall live Twitch.tv watch time from 2020 onwards, with the peak in May 2021 at 2,307,473 hours	16
Figure 3: Reddit post on r/Games from 2012 inquiring about the popularity of online gameplay	17
Figure 4: Comment on above Reddit post providing reasons for watching online gameplay, including costs of buying games and console exclusivity	18
Figure 5: Additional reply to above Reddit post providing additional reasons for watching online gameplay, including the costs of buying video games	18
Figure 6: Reddit post in r/gaming from 2025 asking for additional input on those who watch online gameplay	18
Figure 7: Comment on above reddit post citing costs of games as a reason for watching online gameplay	19
Figure 8: Additional comment on above Reddit post citing console exclusivity as a reason for watching online gameplay	19
Figure 9: A Steam community forum post asking how fans interpret voices for Undertale characters	21
Figure 10: A reply to the above forum post providing detailed input on particular imagined voices.....	21
Figure 11: An additional reply to the above forum post which, like the previous reply, brings up Skeletor in relation to the character Papyrus	21
Figure 12: An image of Undertale's combat encounter interface	25
Figure 13: Responses to survey question 1	82
Figure 14: Responses to survey question 2	83
Figure 15: Responses to survey question 3	85
Figure 16: Responses to survey question 4	86
Figure 17: Responses to survey question 5	90
Figure 18: Responses to survey question 6	94
Figure 19: Responses to survey question 7	98
Figure 20: Responses to survey question 8	104

Figure 21: Responses to survey question 9	108
Figure 22: Responses to survey question 13	112
Figure 23: Vocal descriptors assigned to Toriel	121
Figure 24: Vocal descriptors assigned to Papyrus	123
Figure 25: A Reddit post from 2018 discussing the popularity of a Skeleto- esque voice for Papyrus in voice-acted Undertale projects	124
Figure 26: A Reddit post from 2015 describing the Skeleto voice for Papyrus as 'typical', and suggesting it has grown popular enough to be redundant .	124
Figure 27: Vocal descriptors assigned to Sans.....	126
Figure 28: Vocal descriptors assigned to Undyne.....	129
Figure 29: Vocal descriptors assigned to Alphys	132
Figure 30: Vocal descriptors assigned to Asgore	136
Figure 31: Vocal descriptors assigned to Flowey only	138
Figure 32: Vocal descriptors assigned to Asriel only	138
Figure 33: Vocal descriptors assigned to both Flowey and Asriel	138
Figure 34: Vocal descriptors assigned to Frisk only	142
Figure 35: Vocal descriptors assigned to Chara only	142
Figure 36: Vocal descriptors assigned to both Frisk and Chara	142
Figure 37: Vocal descriptors assigned to Mettaton.....	145
Figure 38: Responses to survey question 11	150
Figure 39: Responses to survey question 12	151
Figure 40: A comment discussion under a Pacifist instalment of the Jacksepticeye playthrough	164
Figure 41: A reply to the above comment thread providing additional potential context for the original comment.....	165
Figure 42: Comment exchange defending McLoughlin's original use of a Patrick Star voice for Sans	167
Figure 43: Comment thread complimenting McLoughlin's Papyrus voice in particular	167
Figure 44: Reddit post inquiring about emotionally charged discussions of Undertale characters' genders from August 2025.....	179
Figure 45: Reply to the above post discussing the potential misgendering of Frisk and Chara	180

Figure 46: A Reddit post expressing dissatisfaction with the current state of gender discussion regarding Undertale characters from August 2025	180
Figure 47: Responses to the above post showing mixed reactions to it	181
Figure 48: A Reddit post discussing the nature of Mettaton's potential presentation as a trans character	181
Figure 49: Responses to the above post questioning Mettaton's trans status.	182
Figure 50: Additional responses to the above post citing personal experiences in interpreting Mettaton	182
Figure 51: Fry 64's pop-up 'Chat Rules' message	197
Figure 52: Ninja's pop-up 'Chat Rules' message.....	197
Figure 53: Fry 64's 'Chat Rules' in the channel's 'About' section.....	197
Figure 54: A Reddit post from 2021 proposing the implementation of voice acting into Undertale	207
Figure 55: Comment replying to the above post	207
Figure 56: Comment replying to the above post	207
Figure 57: Comments replying to the above post	208
Figure 58: A Reddit post from 2023 expressing concerns that new players are being 'spoiled' by carelessly formatted r/Undertale posts	213
Figure 59: Responses to the post in Figure 58 expressing varied viewpoints on the matter	214
Figure 60: A Reddit post from 2015 arguing that prior knowledge of multiple endings and the 'MERCY' gameplay mechanic is itself a spoiler	214
Figure 61: A continuation of the post from figure 60, abridged for brevity ..	214
Figure 62: Responses to the Reddit post from figures 60-61	215
Figure 63: PlotlinePlus announcing their decision not to adapt the Genocide route in the comment section of the final video.....	237
Figure 64: PlotlinePlus elaborating in response to a comment on the previous announcement	237
Figure 65: Comment thread on the first instalment of TCD speculating that the narrator is Chara.....	258
Figure 66: Another comment thread on the first instalment commenting on how vocal performance was a key factor in determining that Chara was the narrator to this viewer	258

Figure 67: Social media post from the narrator's voice actress confirming she performed the narrator as if they were Chara	259
Figure 68: Reddit comment speculating that Chara is not beyond redemption, likely referring to the end of Pacifist where the main villain is redeemed	260
Figure 69: Reddit comment musing on the role of fan theories in endearing Chara to Undertale fans	261
Figure 70: Gameplay footage of Chara's narration before the final boss of Genocide, from McLoughlin's Undertale series	262
Figure 71: Excerpt from a lengthy blog post from nochocolate proposing that the narrator is Chara in all possible runs of Undertale.....	263
Figure 72: Comment on the first instalment expressing preference for Toriel's vocal performance in Undertale the Musical, but not disappointment at the difference.....	267
Figure 73: Comment on the fifth instalment expressing brief confusion that the voice actor for Mettaton in Undertale the Musical did not reprise his role, but again no vocally expressed disappointment.....	267
Figure 74: Comment thread on the second instalment praising the lack of Skeletor voice for Papyrus and referencing Undertale the Musical	268
Figure 75: Comment musing on the popularity of Darby due to his vocal performances in the past as Papyrus	269

Glossary

Avatar - The character that the player controls in a video game.

Backseat gaming - The practice of observing gameplay and offering advice to the player.

Bits - A form of currency on Twitch that can be used by viewers to boost a stream's visibility.

Boss battle - An in-game combat encounter that usually acts as the conclusion of a level (or area), and is more difficult than regular combat encounters.

Chat rooms - Refers to the virtual space that viewers can use to communicate with each other and a live-streamer on Twitch.tv.

Choice-based game - In this thesis, refers to games in which the player's decisions throughout the game changes the outcome of the game's narrative.

Combat encounter - A term used in this thesis to describe instances where the player must fight an enemy (or potentially figure out how to spare them, in the case of *Undertale*).

Console exclusivity - In this thesis, this refers to instances in which a game is available only on certain consoles; for example, following its release, there was a window of time where *Undertale* was only available to play on Windows PCs.

Cult fan - Describes a fan with a high level of personal investment in a fan community, to the point where it becomes central to their sense of self.

EXP - Experience points, which are collected by defeating enemies in certain RPG titles and used to level up. In *Undertale*, EXP is an acronym for 'execution points'.

Fan communities/Fandom - Terms that refer to groups of people who gather to discuss or create fanmade content for a person or a media franchise that they are fans of. This thesis largely concerns online fandom.

Fan hierarchy - A term which describes the position of fans in their communities in relation to the amount of subcultural capital they possess.

Fan labour - Refers to creative projects undertaken by fans that can boost their subcultural capital.

Gamergate - An online movement that began in 2014 that resulted in the harassment of female game journalists and resistance towards games including content representing 'otherness' e.g. female characters or queer relationships.

Imagined voice - A term in this thesis which refers to the way fans imagine *Undertale* characters to sound.

Items - A blanket term used in this thesis to describe virtual objects found by the avatar that can replenish health or aid in combat encounters.

Let's Plays - YouTube videos in which an online personality plays a video game for an audience that viewers can interact with via a comment section. These are recorded by the player and then released afterwards.

Level grinding - The act of repeating the same in-game actions over and over (e.g. fighting enemies) to increase one's in-game level.

Level up - A term that refers to increasing the player's in-game 'level' in certain RPG titles, which begins at 1 and can be raised through collecting EXP. The higher the level, the more adept a player becomes in combat encounters. In *Undertale*, a player's level is referred to as LV, an acronym for 'level of violence'.

Livestreams - Gaming sessions that are showed to an audience in real time which can be commented on by viewers via a live chat room.

Mod DB - A website where video game fans practise modding, or 'modifying' a game through making small changes to enhance the experience of playing it.

Moderators - In this thesis, refers to participants in online communities (mainly Twitch chat rooms) that are also able to enforce rules and (to a degree) control behaviours in said communities.

Normies - Shorthand for a person who adheres to expected social and cultural standards that may find fan behaviours confusing or abnormal.

NPC - An acronym for 'non-player character' that refers to any character in a game that a player does not directly control during gameplay.

Paratext - Material that is related to or surrounds the main text: for example, a Twitch stream showcasing a game can be paratextual to a game's text.

Participatory culture - Refers to spaces where the barrier for entry is very low and everybody is, in theory, able to participate. This is used to describe fan communities in certain literature, as there is no prerequisite for joining fandom discussions or creating/distributing fanmade content.

Performative play - Throughout this thesis, this refers to performing voice acting for voiceless characters during a Let's Play or Twitch stream.

Powerless elite - A term coined by John Tulloch (1995), which Jenkins uses to describe the limited abilities of fans; fans have much control over how media is received, but no control over the text itself nor the ability to change it.

Reddit - A social media platform consisting of discussion forums on a wide range of topics, where some data on *Undertale* fan behaviours was collected.

RPG - Acronym for role-playing game. A term for a narrative video game in which the player takes control of an avatar and makes decisions while performing as them.

Social capital - A term coined by Pierre Bourdieu in 1986 referring to an individual's power within or over a group of people depending on their social position and status.

Spectator - A term coined by Karen Collins in 2013 which refers to a person who is not playing a video game, but can still interact with it through watching, listening and reacting to gameplay.

Spoilers - Refers to knowledge of narrative events that could spoil someone's experience with a story if they are made aware of them before encountering them in the text.

Sprite - An in-game image of a character that represents their appearance.

Steam Community - A subsection of the gaming store Steam's website, where players can discuss video games they have purchased or want to purchase. Some data on *Undertale* fan behaviours was collected here.

Subcultural capital - A term coined by Sarah Thornton (1995). In fandom communities, this acts as a type of currency that allows a person to ascend a fandom hierarchy. This can manifest as having created fanmade content for an object of fandom, or perceived closeness to an object of fandom.

Text sounds - Refers to sound effects that accompany character dialogue when it appears on screen. In *Undertale*, the sound effects can vary depending on character.

Textual poaching - A term coined by Henry Jenkins (1992) to describe the rewriting of a text by fans for the purposes of 'correcting' it.

TTS - An acronym of 'text to speech', describing an artificially generated voice type.

Turn-based combat - A style of combat encounter in video games where players take turns. During the player's turn, they can usually attack, use an item or choose to leave the combat encounter. During the enemy's turn, the player must withstand an attack from the enemy, or evade it entirely.

Tutorial - An early section of a video game where the player is introduced to the game's mechanics.

Twitch.tv (or Twitch) - One of the most popular and prolific platforms for game livestreaming. While the platform has since expanded to include musical performances and 'just chatting' streams, it still largely hosts gaming livestreams.

VOD - An acronym for 'video on demand', and in the context of Twitch refers to video archives of past streams.

Introduction

This thesis investigates how digital fan communities use vocal performance to transform game texts. The topic was initially formulated through an interest in individual versus shared gameplay and how sound is presented through both. Since the inception of game sound studies (arguably the late-2000s, solidified by KC Collins' seminal work *Game Sound* in 2008), there have been many studies investigating the relationship between the individual and game sound (van Elferen, 2011; Hart, 2014; Summers, 2016). In particular, this includes studies investigating how individuals engage performatively with game sound (Hart, 2014; Cheng, 2014). There are also existing studies on the relationships between game sound and communities, for example studies carried out regarding how music is engaged with in multiplayer games (Cheng, 2014; Sweeney, 2015; Thompson, 2017; Tatlow, 2020).

These studies set an important foundation for further research, and in this thesis I am particularly interested in focusing specifically on digital audiences of and communities surrounding shared online gameplay. I will primarily be focusing on Let's Plays on YouTube and livestreaming on Twitch.tv (also referred to as Twitch throughout this thesis). Let's Plays refer to pre-recorded videos in which a person plays a video game for their audience, usually while providing commentary. Viewers can leave comments on these for the player to peruse once the video has been shared to YouTube. Twitch livestreams refer to gameplay that is streamed live for an audience on the platform Twitch.tv which can be temporarily archived on the user's account as VODs (short for video-on-demand). During these livestreams, audiences can interact with the streamer and each other in chat rooms. I argue that these platforms allow for game soundtrack presentation to be altered in a significant way for those that watch them.

When playing a video game as an individual, it is very difficult to replicate the soundtrack of a play session in the same way twice due to all the variables of game sound including score, sound effects, voice acting and ambience that can be

triggered by the player intentionally or otherwise (Collins, 2009; Medina-Gray, 2016). I argue that online video such as Let's Plays and Twitch VODs allow not only for immortalisation of gameplay, but the ability to potentially replicate it. If someone records or streams their gameplay and releases it for an audience, viewers that have not played the game themselves have the potential to hear the game's audio assets in the same arrangement that the player did by watching their recording or stream of it. Viewers cannot directly trigger game sound via a controller in the way the player can, but the player's unique arrangement of audio cues can now be heard by a larger potential audience. I argue this allows for an evolution of how we understand game soundtracks: for individuals, they can be fleeting and near impossible to replicate. For groups, they can be preserved and shared amongst each other to the point where the player's experience with a game and its soundtrack can also become how the viewer experiences it.

The prevalence of watching online video of gameplay can be observed through statistical analysis. Additionally, testimony from online discussions on gaming reveals potential reasoning behind watching it. Below are statistics regarding consumption of online video on YouTube and Twitch as well as screenshots of discussion threads from Reddit¹ showing the longevity of this phenomenon.

¹ Reddit is a social media site where users largely communicate through forums dedicated to specific interests.

Weekly time spent on watching gaming content on YouTube among gamers in the United States as of January 2025
(in hours)

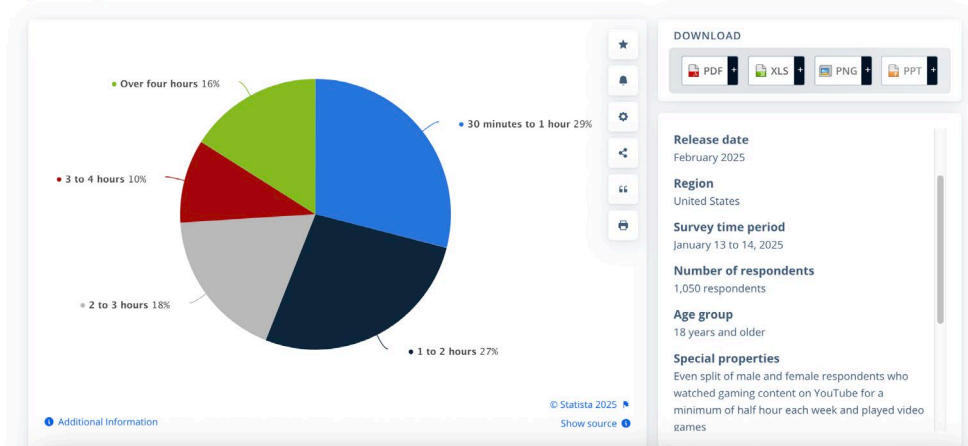


Figure 1: Data demonstrating that 26% of surveyed adult 'gamers' in the US watch at least 3 hours of YouTube gaming content a week²

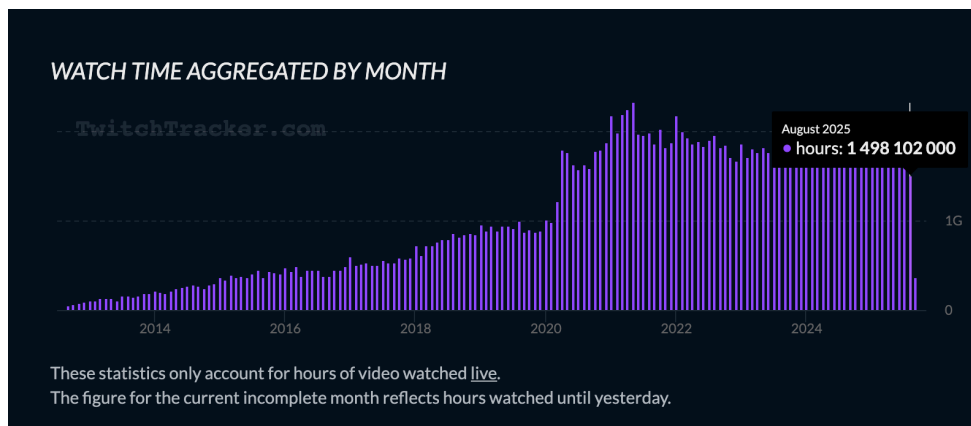


Figure 2: Data demonstrating a high amount of overall live Twitch.tv watch time from 2020 onwards, with the peak in May 2021 at 2,307,473 hours³

This data indicates the prevalence and growth of online shared gameplay in recent years. Figure 1 presents data from a survey distributed to 1,050 people in the US who both played video games and watched them being played online, and was designed to gauge weekly watch time. The data shows that as of 2025, 26% of them watched at least 3 hours of online shared gameplay per week. The data is not clear on the nature of the online gameplay being watched; for instance, it is not known whether respondents are watching online gameplay for game help if they are stuck on a specific level or strictly for entertainment. However, this data is shown largely to indicate the prevalence of online video in general gaming

² Statistics accessible here: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1607918/us-time-spent-watching-youtube-gaming-content/>

³ Data available here: <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics/watch-time>

spheres and why it is important to consider it in academic studies surrounding video games. The prominence of online video in recent years is corroborated by statistics from TwitchTracker, showing the growth of online shared video views on Twitch.tv since 2014. Figure 2 shows a steady growth in the platform's early years, a sharp spike in the 2020s and relatively steady viewing figures since then. As will be discussed later, the 2020s spike was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as Twitch provided an avenue for social interaction during lockdown periods (Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov, 2022; Chae & Lee, 2022). However, after the lockdowns ended, Twitch appears to have retained its popularity, and the viewing figures have not receded to where they were pre-pandemic. Coupled with the data regarding weekly gameplay watch time, I argue this demonstrates that online video will remain relevant in popular gaming spheres outside of extraordinary circumstances like COVID-19 lockdowns, and therefore it is pertinent to study their effects on how game sound is presented and received by audiences and communities.

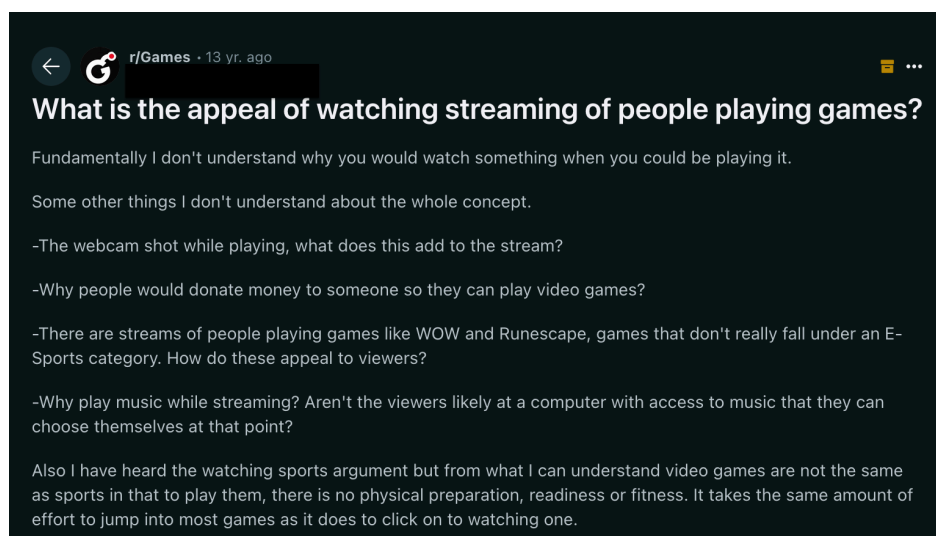


Figure 3: Reddit post on r/Games from 2012 inquiring about the popularity of online gameplay

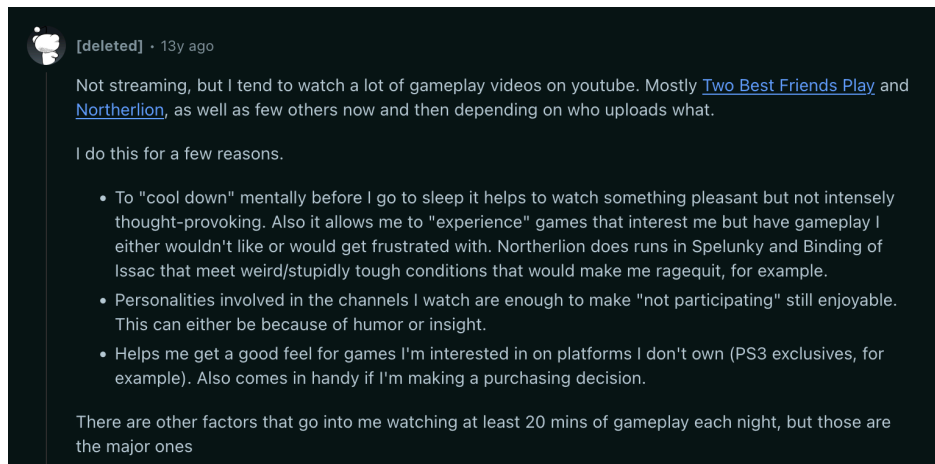


Figure 4: Comment on above Reddit post providing reasons for watching online gameplay, including costs of buying games and console exclusivity

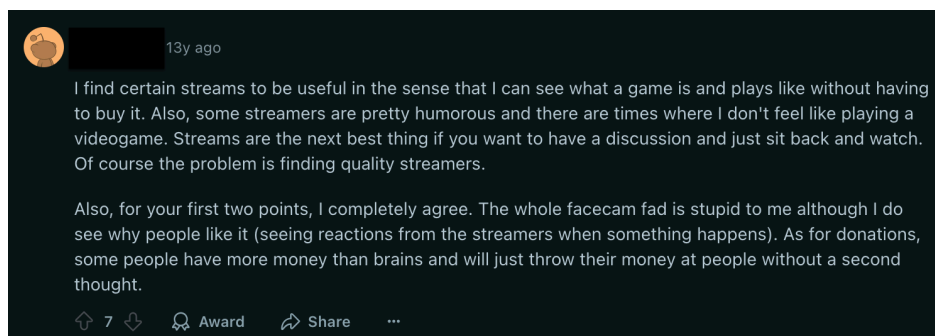


Figure 5: Additional reply to above Reddit post providing additional reasons for watching online gameplay, including the costs of buying video games

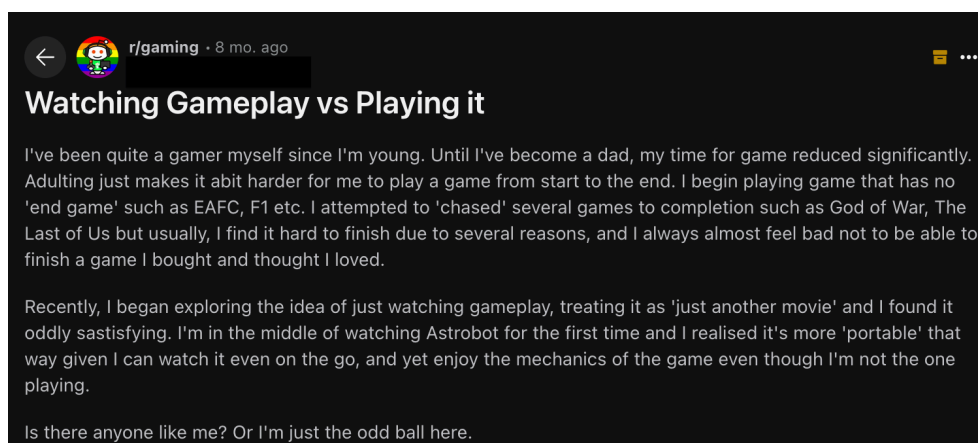


Figure 6: Reddit post in r/gaming from 2025 asking for additional input on those who watch online gameplay



Figure 7: Comment on above reddit post citing costs of games as a reason for watching online gameplay



Figure 8: Additional comment on above Reddit post citing console exclusivity as a reason for watching online gameplay

Figures 3 through 8 show discussions on Reddit in spaces dedicated to games discussion regarding reasoning behind the popularity of online shared gameplay. In both 2012 and 2025, when gaming communities were asked questions about why they watched games being played online instead of (or potentially as well as) playing them themselves, answers interestingly remained similar. For example, in figures 3 through 5 showing discussion from 2012, respondents cited issues of console exclusivity and the cost of games that made watching a game being played a good alternative to playing it themselves, whether they weren't willing to pay a high price for a game or couldn't play it on consoles they owned. In figures 6 through 8, when a similar question was posed in 2025 in a different gaming forum, these reasons were once again provided: respondents cited the high prices of games and the issue of console exclusivity in choosing online video over playing the game themselves. According to this data, these issues have apparently been present in gaming communities for at least 13 years now. I argue that this shows the longevity of the perceived need for online video of gameplay and the reasoning behind the growing demand for it as shown in the above TwitchTracker statistics.

Based on the above evidence, I argue that online gaming is prominent enough to justify more empirical research on how it affects one's relationship with game sound, and how game sound can be distributed and delivered to groups of people

at once. However, given the broadness of online gaming, I decided to focus on one specific game soundtrack's presentation via online gaming that was relevant to my research goals. I settled on the 2015 title *Undertale* for three reasons. One is that *Undertale* has been played for an online audience very frequently over the years, and fans of the game engage with these presentations, so there was plenty of online video to consult over the course of this research (Spencer, 2017; Seraphine, 2018). Another is that *Undertale* has a very large and even notorious fan following that often post their thoughts on the game and the people who play it in public online spaces, making data on fan reactions to these gameplay presentations relatively easy to find (Spencer, 2017; Ruberg, 2018).

The third and most important reason *Undertale* was chosen for this research was due to a unique feature present in online gameplay surrounding it: as will be seen in the later case studies, people who play *Undertale* for an audience will often perform their own interpretations of voices for the characters, as *Undertale* has no voice acting. Instead, each main character is given a unique 'text sound' (as I will refer to them throughout this thesis) which accompanies their dialogue as it appears on screen. This gives players room to not only perform their own voices, but also come up with their own interpretations. Alongside this type of voice-acted *Undertale* playthrough (often referred to as 'performative play' throughout this thesis), and arguably as a partial result of it, *Undertale* fans began to discuss and formulate their own ideal voices for each of the characters which could then be judged alongside fully realised vocal performances on YouTube or Twitch. This is the most crucial element of *Undertale* playthroughs that led to it being the focal point of the research: the addition of voice acting that did not previously exist in the game creates another layer of the playthrough's soundtrack, which can further impact how someone can experience a game's soundtrack solely through someone else's gameplay.

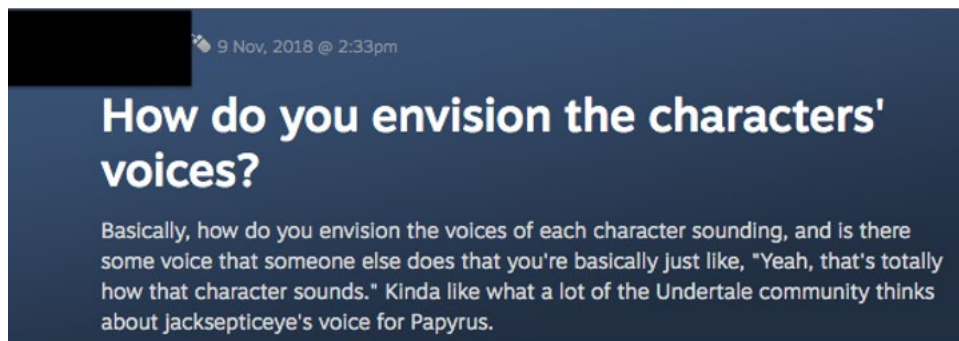


Figure 9: A Steam community forum post asking how fans interpret voices for Undertale characters

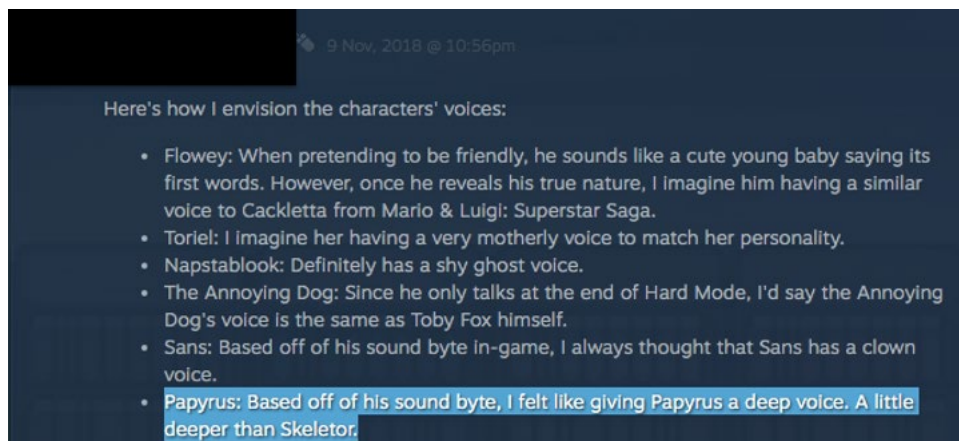


Figure 10: A reply to the above forum post providing detailed input on particular imagined voices



Figure 11: An additional reply to the above forum post which, like the previous reply, brings up Skeletor in relation to the character Papyrus

Figures 9 through 11 are from the online forum Steam Community in which a user poses a question about preferred imagined *Undertale* voices. The responses include in-depth descriptions of what commenters interpreted *Undertale* voices to sound like (more of which will be observed later in the thesis that both agree and disagree with the above bulleted list). There are also mentions of how the character Papyrus should sound in particular: he is mentioned in all three figures with one commenter even saying that if Papyrus is not considered to have a voice akin to the cartoon character Skeletor, the person interpreting his voice is 'doing it wrong'. Fan and online player interpretations of Papyrus's voice as well as each main *Undertale* character will be properly unpacked throughout the thesis, but for

now, I will draw attention to two key observations that can be made from these figures. The first is that *Undertale* fans appear to have a pre-existing consensus on how characters should sound - the 'Papyrus as Skeletor' is brought up by each participant in the discussion (the referenced Jacksepticeye also uses a Skeletor-esque voice as will be discussed in the relevant chapter), showing the prevalence of this interpretation in fan communities. The second is the notion brought up in figure 11 of somebody 'doing it wrong' if characters are not envisioned in a certain way. Fan adherence to particular *Undertale* voice interpretations will be investigated throughout this thesis, as well as reactions to performances of these interpretations if they did not align with popular consensus on how *Undertale* characters should sound.

The inclusion of *Undertale* playthroughs and fan communities in answering this research question of course expands the scope of this research. This research largely concerns game sound, but it will be important to investigate how other disciplines of relevance to the research question relate to game sound in this instance. It will also be imperative to have at least some knowledge about the game that will serve as this research's overall case study in order to follow discussions surrounding it. Therefore, in this introduction, I will be including brief overviews of online gaming, *Undertale*, fan studies and voice perception and their relationship to the research question before outlining the main chapters of the thesis.

Online Gaming

Online gaming is important to consider as there are a number of ways a game's sound may be altered in the context of a public environment as opposed to a private gameplay session. For example, in the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), the lone player is urged to wear headphones before the initial menu screen. This is for two reasons; the first being that *Hellblade* makes use of binaural audio which is best appreciated with headphones. The second is that the protagonist, Senua, lives with psychosis, and therefore with voices only she can

hear. If a player wears headphones, they will be the only one who can hear Senua's voices both in-game and in the real world. This serves to recreate what Senua hears and feed it directly to the player, allowing the player a stronger and possibly more empathetic connection with her. If this same game were to be played on Twitch, for instance, this would change; whether the player wears headphones or not, they will not be the only one who can hear Senua's voices; their digital audience will hear them too. This does not mean engagement with *Hellblade's* sound design has been negatively affected by the presence of an audience, but rather it has been altered to accommodate a different gameplay environment.

There are cases in which this recontextualization of game sound may be taken even further, as is the case with *Undertale*. *Undertale* features character dialogue but no voice acting, so when it is the centrepiece of a Let's Play or a Twitch stream, the player can opt to perform their own voice acting for particular characters. In some cases, if a player has a large community that regularly tunes into their content or a game is widely known enough to garner a large fandom, audiences and communities may discuss which voices they feel are best for specific characters in a voiceless game, and how well certain players seem to capture the voices in mind. In the case of *Undertale*, fans have been known to often have strong opinions on how online gaming personalities engage with *Undertale* as a whole (Spencer, 2017; Seraphine, 2018), which will be further examined in the upcoming survey results. I will now provide a brief background of *Undertale* and its fan community so that fan opinions on how *Undertale* is engaged with can be better understood in upcoming survey results analysis and case studies.

Undertale

Undertale is a 2015 2D role-playing game that allows players the option of progressing through the game without destroying any of the enemies they encounter. This is a rarity in role-playing games (RPGs), where progression usually depends upon a player fighting and defeating enemies, as well as being successful in 'boss battles' against particularly strong foes. For example, games of popular

RPG franchises such as *Final Fantasy* (1987-present) cannot be completed without defeating or killing enemies. Additionally, franchises like *The Elder Scrolls* (1994-present) not only have quests that require violence for progression, but also offer player rewards such as trophies or achievements for completing optional quests that culminate in additional boss fights, therefore giving the player an incentive to do so. The *Undertale* player is not required to be non-violent as they play, and they may not even realise that non-violent participation is an option. During the game's fundraising campaign, *Undertale* was originally advertised by its creator as "a traditional role-playing game where no one has to get hurt" (Fox, 2013)⁴. However, the game itself does not directly explain this to the player, so without prior knowledge of the game's original promotional materials, a player may well progress through the entire game without realising that they didn't have to fight any enemies. In any case, the presence of the possibility of total non-violence was relatively unique to *Undertale* at the time of its release. It also allows for three particular ways of playing the game: the 'Pacifist' route in which the player completes the game without killing a single opponent, a variety of 'Neutral' routes that are undertaken by killing some enemies and not others, and a 'Genocide' route in which the player destroys all enemies that they encounter (Spencer, 2017). All possible ways of playing lead to different narrative and gameplay outcomes; for example, each route has different boss battles and endings.

⁴ Accessible here: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1002143342/undertale>

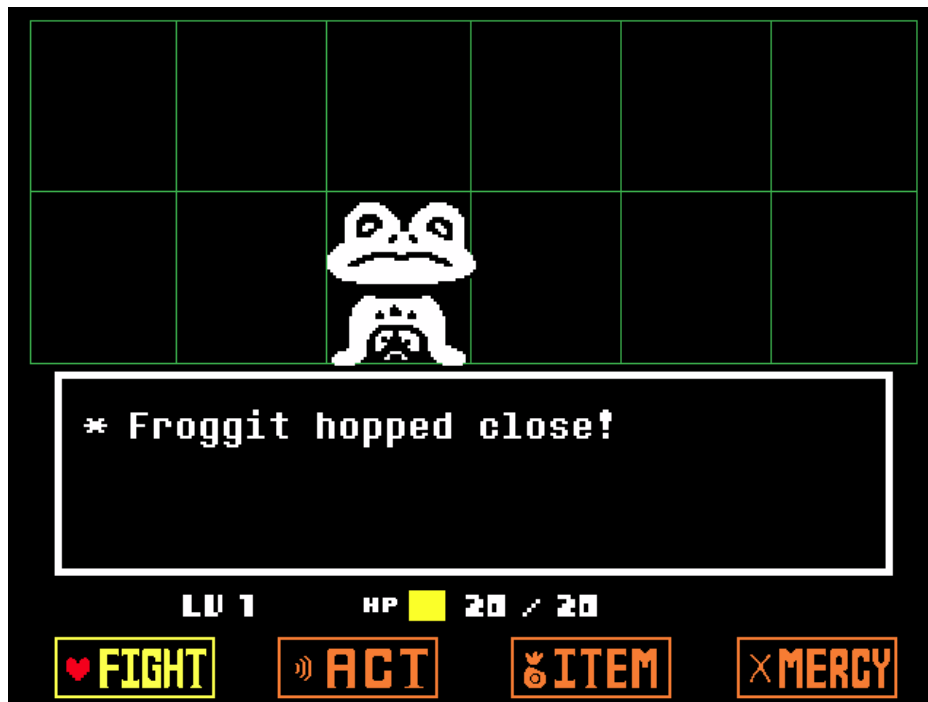


Figure 12: An image of *Undertale*'s combat encounter interface

Figure 12 shows *Undertale*'s battle interface taken from the fan wiki⁵. It has much in common with other RPGs like *Pokémon* (1996-present) and early *Final Fantasy* titles, but there are some key differences, namely the 'ACT' and 'MERCY' menu screens which facilitate a Pacifist playthrough. The ACT menu offers the player a series of non-violent choices specific to the enemy in question that can be performed in order for them to meet the criteria to be 'spared', an option in the MERCY menu. After a battle scenario concludes, the player can be awarded EXP to increase their LV⁶ if they defeated a monster, gold that they can spend on health items and weapons (gold is usually rewarded in higher amounts in Pacifist playthroughs) or both. In the game's tutorial levels, the player meets monsters that encourage the player to 'show mercy', directly referring to the ability to spare monsters in the MERCY menu, but it is not always made clear how to do this, or even if a monster is able to be spared. Specific instances of this will be investigated further in the literature review.

⁵ Accessible here:

https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Encounter?file=Enemy_Approaching_soundtrack.png

⁶ These usually stand for 'experience points' and 'level' in most RPGs, but in *Undertale* they are later revealed to be acronyms for 'execution points' and 'level of violence'.

Of course, it is entirely possible to play the game without strictly abiding by the rules of a Pacifist or Genocide playthrough, but in the past this has been strongly discouraged by some fans of the game as detailed by Kotaku journalist Chloe Spencer in “The *Undertale* Drama” (2017). Spencer’s article studies the nature of the *Undertale* fandom and how the community came to garner a somewhat negative reputation, largely due to “the pervasive thought that there was only *one* way to play the game” (Spencer, 2017). According to interviews with *Undertale* fans carried out by Spencer, the Genocide route was not well regarded amongst *Undertale* fans during the height of the game’s popularity between 2015 and 2017 and it was apparently believed by some that those who chose to play the Genocide rather than Pacifist route were not only bad people in-game, but also in real life. Little evidence exists to suggest that real-life violence is connected to virtual violence (Dillio, 2014; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019; Suziedelyte, 2021; Johannes et al, 2022), so therefore it would be very difficult to prove that those who choose to play the Genocide route are inherently violent or murderous people. Even so, this was a popular belief that led to some *Undertale* fans insisting that online shared gameplay should present the game solely in a Pacifist way (Spencer, 2017).

Results from the survey carried out for this research will examine the relevance of Spencer’s findings to current *Undertale* fandom (hereafter ‘UF’ where appropriate) to create a fuller picture of the current state of the fandom. This is done to present the fan community fairly over the course of this thesis. However, something of even greater relevance to this research is the UF’s relationship to what I refer to as the ‘ideal imagined voice’ (or simply ‘ideal voice’ or ‘imagined voice’) for certain *Undertale* characters. As discussed in the subsequent survey results and case studies and seen in figures 9 through 11, *Undertale* fans have always had particular ideas for what characters should sound like. I will argue that these voices both shape and are shaped by the aforementioned online video, using relevant case studies to illustrate this. Though since this research will largely concern both issues of fan community norms and how ideal voices are constructed and assigned, a brief overview of the relevant disciplines is necessary and will be carried out now.

Fan Studies and Voice Perception

In addition to game studies disciplines, namely ludomusicology and online gaming studies, two fields that were important to consult for this research were fan studies and voice perception studies. A proper examination of these disciplines in relation to this research will be carried out in the literature review and when relevant in the case studies, but for now, there are a few important things to note at this introductory stage of the thesis. Firstly, this thesis will examine *Undertale* fan communities in relation to existing fan studies terminology like participatory culture and textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2006), ownership (Kelly, 2004) and fandom hierarchies (Edlom & Karlsson, 2021).

In particular, this thesis will investigate subcultural capital's (Thornton, 1995) role in constructing ideal imagined voices in *Undertale* fan spaces. Thornton coined the term 'subcultural capital' specifically when talking about clubbing cultures, which she argues is a subculture that does not utilise 'social capital' in the way Bourdieu (1986) defines. Here is how Thornton differentiates subcultural capital from social capital:

Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition 'white label' twelve-inches and the like). Just as cultural capital is personified in 'good' manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. (Thornton, 1995, p. 27)

To summarise, while subcultural capital may not elevate one's status in the wider world, it will in subcultures such as club cultures or, for our purposes, fandom cultures. Since Thornton's coining of the term in 1995, subcultural capital has faced scrutiny in fan studies, in particular due to its lack of attention to social and symbolic capital, and potential disregard of sociological analysis (Hills, 2002;

Jensen, 2006). However, I consider the term to be useful when discussing *Undertale* fandom in particular relation to how subcultural capital can be used as currency within the space. Throughout this thesis, I investigate how subcultural capital is accumulated in *Undertale* fan spaces and how it is then potentially used to ascend hierarchies within these communities. I argue that access to the imagined voice (via performance or having the ‘correct’ interpretation) carries a lot of subcultural capital in *Undertale* fan spaces, and is essential to ascending fandom hierarchies. However, this is quite a nuanced matter, and the complexities of it will be investigated in the upcoming case studies. For now, however, it is important to note that while the *Undertale* fandom is not being considered wholesale as a ‘club culture’ like those studied by Thornton. In terms of defining the *Undertale* fandom as a community through current literature, the closest term would be ‘cult fandom’; fan communities that are “a project of the self which is primarily and significantly emotional” (Hills, 2000, p. 73). This can be seen in later case studies, where Undertale fans are seen to draw on their own experiences and sense of self to decide which voices are ‘wrong’ for certain characters. However, the model of subcultural capital is being borrowed to analyse how the Undertale fandom operates in terms of what behaviours within it are preferred and how these can change.

Additionally, this thesis will use research in voice perception studies that has been carried out with the goal of understanding cultural assumption related to voicings and the importance of the ‘perceived voice’. For example, existing voice perception studies point out that although assumptions made about the voice can affect perceptions around the person speaking, there is no claim being made about the accuracy of said assumptions (Kreiman, Vanlacker-Sidti & Gerratt, 2007; McAleer et al., 2014). This will be useful when studying common vocal archetypes assigned to *Undertale* characters over the course of this research - namely, how do fans come to agree on what a particular character ‘should’ sound like? Additionally, I will investigate voice studies and fan studies as one in the context of *Undertale*, namely to investigate how and why *Undertale* fans are so protective over interpretations of the imagined voice in particular. Research suggesting strong protectiveness over the inner voice in relation to one’s sense of self (Cox, 2018)

and studies linking fan identity to one's sense of self (Felschow, 2010) hints towards a potential link between the two in the case of *Undertale* fans.

Literature relevant to both of these areas will be further investigated and analysed in the literature review, so I will now outline the main chapters of this thesis and how they will be presented to answer the overall research question.

The Survey and Case Studies

This thesis consists of five chapters, each of which provides details and results of survey questionnaire and case study research methods in order to answer the overarching research question. Details on the justification as well as the strengths and weaknesses of these methods and their implementation will be discussed in the methodology section.

The two initial chapters of this thesis will be an analysis of a survey I distributed among the official *Undertale* fan Discord server⁷. The survey consisted of questions regarding the current state of the UF as well as what fans considered to be 'ideal' voices for the primary characters of *Undertale*. The former was done due to a lack of current data on the UF's current state, as will be seen in the literature review. The latter part concerning voices was done in order to get a clearer idea of what *Undertale* fans considered to be the 'ideal' voices for *Undertale* characters which could then be considered in the context of later vocal performances presented in the case studies. After these two chapters, readers should have an understanding of current UF norms and practices (particularly regarding the ideal voice) to better understand their relationship to the content of the case studies.

The final three chapters consist of case studies each relating to voice-acted presentations of *Undertale* online, each of which will assist in assessing how digital fan communities use vocal performance to transform game texts. One is a YouTube

⁷ Discord is an instant messaging platform that also allows voice chat where communication takes place in "servers", a private space that requires a virtual invitation.

Let's Play, the second is a Twitch livestream, and the final case study is a fan project that adapts *Undertale* into a voice-acted web series. Three different types of *Undertale* presentations were consulted so the question could be considered from a variety of angles to allow for more robust conclusions.

The first case study is of a YouTube Let's Play carried out by Jacksepticeye (real name Sean McLoughlin) between 2015 and 2016, very shortly after *Undertale* was released and when its fan community was in its infancy. This playthrough was chosen due in part to its popularity and how many people had seen it; the first video of the playthrough has 24 million views as of August 2025, and the playlist containing all the videos has 52 million. The apparent reach of this playthrough would make fan reactions to it much easier to come by in the research process. It was also chosen because since the playthrough's release, McLoughlin has posted additional videos on his YouTube channel reflecting on how his audience and fans of *Undertale* responded to his playthrough, as well as the voices chosen for the playthrough when performing the characters. This makes introspection on the initial playthrough from McLoughlin easier to come by without pressing need for additional primary data on this. Furthermore, in the upcoming survey, participants frequently cited this playthrough as a favourite or at least one they were familiar with, and in figure 9 in particular, fans have cited this playthrough as one they used to determine ideal *Undertale* voices. The prominence of this playthrough in UF circles regarding its influence on constructing ideal voices makes it appropriate to study it in this context.

The second case study is of a Twitch livestream which took place in 2022 carried out by Fry 64 (real name unknown). Given the length of time between this playthrough and the Jacksepticeye one, this playthrough was selected partially to observe any potential evolutions in *Undertale* fan opinions regarding playstyle choices and vocal performance since the fandom's inception. Additionally, this playthrough was selected for having a rather unique approach to performing voices for *Undertale*: as opposed to having one person (the streamer) perform all of the

voices, voices were provided on a volunteer basis by the stream's moderators⁸ and audience members. This group approach to voice acting is fairly novel in *Undertale* online gameplay. Therefore, this stream was selected for case study to examine this approach to voice performance in *Undertale* through the lens of investigating how digital fan communities use voice acting to transform game texts. The audience size for this stream was very small, as will be observed in the case study itself, which could understandably raise concerns regarding how audience reactions can be studied through the documentation of this livestream. However, I argue in the relevant chapter that what the Fry 64 playthrough reveals about how streaming communities and fan communities interact with each other to transform the text of *Undertale* makes it a worthy candidate as a case study for this research. An advantage to studying a smaller community in this instance is that relationships between different participants can be more easily observed. There are fewer interactions between a smaller group of people that can therefore be more easily observed over time, compared to a larger stream where interactions between streamer and audience would be more fleeting due to the volume of them. However, given that this is a small community in the grand scheme of *Undertale* fan spaces and online gameplay, I will clarify that the goal of this case study is not to generalise fan groups or generate a universal theory that should apply to all fan groups and audiences of online gameplay. It is to understand the specific workings of this particular small group and what can potentially be learned about these wider communities through it.

The final case study of this thesis is of *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub*, a fanmade project that adapts *Undertale* from a game into a web series with voice-acted characters. This was chosen as a case study because it provides insights into the outcome of fans attempting to perform ideal voices for themselves as opposed to discussing how they should be performed by others in online discussions. Additionally, given that fans would be performing these voices for other fans, I was interested to observe how such performances would be received given that the performers were now 'insiders' of the community, so to speak. This case study is

⁸ Moderators refer to individuals that enforce the rules during a stream, e.g. warning against undesirable behaviour or banning chat participants that break the 'rules'.

not online gameplay in a traditional sense, as it is designed to function more like a web series than filmed gameplay, and will therefore have to be considered in a different way from the previous case studies. For example, given the absence of a visible or prominent player in these videos, the way Twitch-relevant literature will be discussed in relation to *The Cinematic Dub* will differ from previous chapters. Despite this difference and potential complexity, I argue that it is pertinent to include this particular case study in the thesis as it provides further insights into the UF's relationship with the ideal imagined voice. Also, I later argue that this case study in particular showcases the transformative nature of voice-acted gameplay presentations in *Undertale* fan spaces.

Following the survey analysis and case study discussions, I will argue that voice-acted playthroughs of *Undertale* serve to transform the game's text, and fan communities play a crucial role in informing these playthroughs. Following this, I will recommend avenues for further research of this kind.

Literature Review

This literature review will cover research from a variety of academic disciplines, which have been grouped together as necessary. The three key areas of research that have been consulted for this thesis concern game studies (mostly game sound studies), fan culture studies and voice perception studies. However, these areas each contain subcategories that have been organised as follows.

Firstly, I will review literature pertaining to game sound studies, as well as wider game studies. The first section covers individual vs shared gameplay and how current ludomusicological literature tackles both types of engagement with video games. Next, I will examine performativity in game studies literature, as this applies to individual and shared gameplay. As such, this section will include an overview of current literature on Let's Plays and Twitch.tv streams, the two most prominent methods of sharing gameplay online for an audience.

Next, I will review literature pertaining to fan culture studies. This will include research on broad fandom culture as well as fan culture in game sound spaces. Connected to this, I will also include a section discussing existing literature on *Undertale*, both in terms of how the game has been spoken about generally in existing literature and what has already been discussed about its fan communities. From here, I will include a section on historical context in general gaming spheres surrounding the UF, which will be important to be informed about when discussing the upcoming case studies.

Afterwards, once I have provided a solid understanding of game sound studies and fan studies, I will discuss how voice studies will inform this research. Given the importance of vocal performance to this research, it was necessary to consult research from this field to gain a better understanding of how voice acting is usually approached and how certain voice types are perceived. Finally, I will include a section covering paratexts, which given the application of the term in a variety of academic fields, is better understood in the context of this research

once all previous disciplines have been discussed. Paratexts will be important when defining the case studies that appear in this research in terms of the role of performative play within them and how it helps to transform game texts.

Individual vs Shared Gameplay

The following section largely concerns ludomusicological studies that investigate how a player may engage with game sound in individual, private play sessions, with some concerned with how game sound is engaged with in shared environments like group play or online gameplay. In comparison to the much larger pool of studies of individual relationships with game sound, fewer papers as of now have specifically investigated the relationship between game sound and groups of people. This is not due to any negligence on the part of current scholars, but is more likely due to the young age of the field of ludomusicology, as well as the very recent developments of shared online gameplay environments like those found on YouTube and Twitch. However, existing ludomusicological literature concerning the individual will be highly valuable to this research. By having a thorough understanding of how an individual engages with a game's soundtrack, it can then be used to analyse how it can be engaged with by groups of people. There are several texts of importance pertaining to individual and shared gameplay sessions, as can be highlighted through the following literature.

Ludomusicological Studies of Individual Gameplay

To highlight the prevalence of studies concerning the relationship between a lone player and a video game, I will now give a brief overview of existing literature in this area. Among the first to study the relationship between individuals and video game sound was KC Collins, whose seminal 2008 work *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* provides the foundation for many ludomusicological studies through its thorough exploration of the history of game sound. This text is also notable for introducing terms that have since become essential to game sound analysis (e.g. “interactive”

and “adaptive” audio and its subcategories). Another book examining the relationship between the individual and game sound is Tim Summers’ 2016 book *Understanding Video Game Music*, which offers an individual analyst guidance on how to interpret game sound according to a variety of critical perspectives and analysis methods. These works serve as an important foundation for most research concerning game sound, as do the edited collections highlighted below.

Since the late 2000s, there have been a number of edited books featuring several authors’ perspectives on video game music and how the lone player engages with it. These include *From Pac-Man to Pop Music* (Collins, 2008), *Music in Video Games* (Donnelly, Gibbons & Lerner, 2014), *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music* (Kamp, Summers & Sweeney, 2016), *Music in the Role-Playing Game* (Gibbons & Reale, 2020), *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* (Fritsch & Summers, 2021), and *Music and Sonic Environments in Video Games* (Galloway & Hambleton, 2025). In the individual chapters of these books, an author usually uses between one or three games to investigate a player’s potential relationship to the soundtracks of those games, like Steven Reale’s analysis of the player’s potential role as a musical performer in select video game titles in *Music in Video Games* (2014). In other instances, authors will propose new models for analysis of game sound from the individual’s perspective, for example Isabella van Elferen’s proposal of the ALI model in *Ludomusicology* (2016) that takes a player’s musical literacy and personal interactions with a soundtrack into account. While these books do include references and even full studies of group and community relationships to game sound as will be covered later, most of the chapters within them largely concern the individual’s relationship with a soundtrack.

Once again, the larger overall focus on individuals over groups in game sound analysis is not due to any oversight on the part of existing research: the study of game sound is simply a young academic field, with most early research taking place between the early and late 2000s. Much of this research focused on defining key concepts that apply to individual gameplay, like in the work of Collins, and exploring these in a general sense using case studies to do this, such as the cited edited books above. These solid foundations are necessary in order to carry out

research on groups and communities, through which I will be contributing to this wider research field. The contributions of the research in this section made the following thesis possible, as there is now a strong understanding of how individuals interact with game sound which can be adapted and applied to community engagement with game soundtracks.

The Temporal Nature of Game Sound in Individual Play Sessions

Of additional importance to ludomusicological research concerning individual and shared relationships with game sound is the temporal nature of game sound in individual play sessions. Collins, in her 2009 paper “An Introduction to Procedural Music in Video Games”, was among the first to discuss the temporality of player-activated video game music soundtracks. Collins argues that due to the highly variable nature of game sound considered under both “interactive” and “adaptive” audio events, it is very difficult to hear a game’s soundtrack in the exact same way in two separate individual play sessions playthroughs, if not impossible (Collins, 2009, p. 6). This plays out differently in shared gameplay: someone can upload or stream their gameplay for an audience, preserve it online and have what is usually a fleeting and individualised experience be replicated for a potentially large number of viewers. Therefore, what was once a fleeting and personal experience can be seen by many, and in some cases, any time a person likes. This sentiment has been echoed in further game studies research, with Summers pointing out in *Understanding Video Game Music* that each play round will be “slightly different”, and therefore the soundtrack will be difficult to replicate across repeat playthroughs (Summers, 2016, p. 25).

When further exploring the temporal nature of game sound, it is pertinent to consider the work of Elizabeth Medina-Gray. Medina-Gray (2016) points out the modular nature of game sound and how it directly contributes to the impossibility of replicating an in-game soundtrack during individual play sessions. Modularity in this context refers to the separation of a game’s soundtrack into individual modules which can be triggered at random by a player, and are therefore unlikely

to be heard in the same arrangement more than once. However, since public gameplay is easy to preserve on sites like YouTube and Twitch, this allows for certain combinations of modules to live on in video form and be listened to as many times as a person would like. Collins' and Medina-Gray's research is important in understanding the relationship between an individual and their gameplay, but their findings do pose an intriguing question when considered in the context of shared gameplay: how does game sound potentially change when experienced as a group?

When exploring this question, we may consider certain types of game sound that have been studied in the context of individual relationships with game soundtracks. For instance, in 2011, van Elferen discusses the "musical GPS" as it applies to video games: "Just like the GPS system in a car, the musical GPS addresses itself directly to players and gives them directions" (p. 34). In other words, music can act as a navigational aid during gameplay. van Elferen also alludes to game sound's ability to provide hints to the player, using the game *Resident Evil 4* (2005) as an example: in this game, enemies are often heard before they are seen, and players are alerted that they are about to enter a combat scenario both through musical changes and spoken dialogue telling the player that an enemy has spotted them. This type of game sound is discussed in particular relation to individual and private play sessions. Literature like this will be useful when applying ludomusicological research concerning the individual to online, shared gameplay and how audiences and communities receive gameplay in such environments. For example, how does the musical GPS unfold in a shared setting? In livestreams, can audience and community members tell a player what a certain sound means if they are having trouble deciphering its meaning? Is musical GPS necessary in situations where a player's chat room is telling them how to progress? How do audiences and communities receive and react to the musical GPS, since they are not the ones playing and may not need to hear it as urgently? Questions like this will allow us to consider terminology coined with individual gameplay in mind in the context of shared gameplay and further fill the research gap between these two types of engagement with game sound.

Existing Ludomusicological Studies of Shared Gameplay

There are multiple studies on shared gameplay, as will be covered more extensively in the sections discussing literature on Let's Plays and Twitch streams. For now, I will be focusing on existing studies of shared gameplay through a ludomusicological lens to fully define my research gap. At this point, it's pertinent to know that although the primary focus of game sound literature is usually on an individual's relationship with sound, communities and groups are still taken into account in a number of studies. For example, groups and communities are considered in Collins' 2013 book *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games*. This book more thoroughly explores the relationship between the individual and a game's soundtrack, with particular regard to the different ways individual players can interact with game sound and the different categories they may fall into. In the final chapter, Collins also touches upon community interaction with game sound through an analysis of 'modding' communities. Through analysis of these communities, Collins concluded that games and their soundtracks can become mediators for social interaction beyond the game, which is a topic of importance to this research. Collins' work shows that community interaction with game sound has been considered in previous studies, but as of writing this thesis, there haven't been as many large-scale projects discussing shared gameplay in the interdisciplinary context of fan studies, voice studies and ludomusicology, a gap this research aims to fill. Collins' existing work in ludomusicology will be vital in bridging this gap.

Another text that explores the nature of the relationship between an individual and a game's soundtrack is William Cheng's 2014 book *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination*. This text is divided into a series of case studies, each exploring a particular game and the ways a player can engage with it in an imaginative or performative way. Performativity will be essential to consider during this research and later in this literature review due to its importance to voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs, and Cheng's work provides context and foundations for such analysis moving forward. The case studies primarily focus on individual relationships with game sound in the initial chapters, but Cheng also

considers community interaction through a case study of how online gaming communities engage with *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007) (hereafter 'LOTRO') and its musical performance system. Cheng uncovered that this system unveiled some contention between those who used the musical performance system for fun and those who used it to demonstrate real-life musical skill, as well as a desire among players to only play music in keeping with the game's environment. Cheng's work also demonstrates that there is perhaps an effort in game-related communities to demonstrate real-world values and skills in their gameplay, a crucial trait of early *Undertale* fan spaces.

Additionally, it is notable that although the aforementioned edited books largely study individual relationships with game sound, there are some chapters that include studies of communities and game sound. For example, in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* (2021), Ryan Thompson writes about communities dedicated to reimagining video game music through fan-made remixes and covers, mainly OverClocked ReMix. In this study, Thompson consults fan studies literature like the work of Henry Jenkins to study this community, in much the same way this research will do when discussing *Undertale* and its fandom. Thompson's conclusions call for further research into fan community relationships with game sound and also draws attention to how these community interactions allow new meaning to be assigned to existing game texts through sound. This is also relevant to *Undertale* fan communities, who assign new meaning and interpretation to *Undertale*'s text through the imagined voice.

The above texts and their conclusions demonstrate that community engagement with game sound is being considered in current literature but could go further than it has so far. I argue that by expanding upon current research on community engagement with game sound with a sharper focus on how game sound changes when performed for a community via online video, the field will benefit from a stronger understanding of the multiple ways game sound can be engaged with, or perhaps even expanded upon via voice acting.

Performativity

Performativity is a complicated subject in game studies, and its complexity has been acknowledged in work by Hart (2014) and Fritsch (2021). In the former work, Hart argues that interactivity in video games is performative by nature, and uses J.L. Austin's (1955) definition of performativity to do this. As paraphrased by Hart, the three stages of performativity can be describes as follows:

According to Austin, an utterance, or speech-act, involves the following:

1. A 'locutionary act': the uttering of an expression that has a meaning.
2. An 'illocutionary act': the invoking of what is conventionally invoked by an expression.
3. A 'perlocutionary act': the achieving of an effect. (p. 280)

Hart goes on to describe each of these stages as actions, the goals of these actions, and the effects that they have, and argues that interactive instances within a video game unfold in a similar way. Given discussions in this thesis regarding the nature of interactivity in fixed gameplay presentations and how performativity manifests when a player presents their gameplay (and themselves) to an audience, this is the definition and explanation of performativity that will be relied upon throughout this thesis.

The performativity literature that will be referred to over the course of this research will be taken from a variety of fields (ludomusicology and Twitch.tv studies in particular) and will concern both individual and shared gameplay, since performativity can manifest in both. Since performativity is inherent in interactivity in video games according to Hart, I argue that it is important to have an overview of performativity and how it manifests when playing video games by oneself or for an audience so it can then be examined in relation to how *Undertale* fans and players interact with the game through the addition of voice acting.

Performativity and Ludomusicology

Iain Hart's 2014 article "Meaningful Play: Performativity, Interactivity and Semiotics in Video Game Music" introduces useful concepts that will be considered in this thesis when discussing the intersection of performativity and game sound. This article discusses how a player's personal background and circumstances may inform how they play and react to a game's sound, and how players behave within and react to the game as a result. Hart uses the term 'experience potentials' to assist in describing this phenomenon, which he describes as "a set containing the kinds of things that may be experienced" (Hart, 2014, p. 281). Put simply for brevity's sake, this applies to the multiple ways a game can be experienced based on a player's own background. Hart gives an example of this in his work: the video game *L.A. Noire* (2011) utilises jazz music extensively in its soundtrack. Depending on a player's own past experiences with jazz (positive, negative or neutral), the player's reaction to this soundtrack has the potential to influence how they play the game, and how they perform through their interactions within it. Hart focuses primarily on the relationship between the individual and the game soundtrack in this paper, though I argue that there is value in considering Hart's findings alongside shared gameplay environments. For instance, the example Hart provides regarding *L.A. Noire* is interesting to consider when discussing how game sound is received by groups. What might happen, for example, if a player and an audience member have conflicting past experiences that influence their potential interpretation of game sound? How might that affect the gameplay and how it's received? More specifically in *Undertale*'s case: what happens if a player and an audience member have conflicting views on how a character should sound based on pre-existing experiences and assumptions surrounding the voice? Hart's work will be useful in answering this question, and this article in particular will be of relevance during *The Cinematic Dub* case study.

Performativity has also been discussed in the ludomusicological studies in previous sections of this review. Revisiting Cheng (2014) once again, in chapter one he

recounts his experience playing *Fallout 3* (2008) and how he noted his own performative actions during a private play session; for example, timing his actions to particular music and sound cues to create a dramatic or satisfying audiovisual experience. Considered alongside Hart's paper on elements of and reasons for performativity in private play sessions, we can see that performative play is not exclusive to shared gameplay and has been practiced in individual play sessions before the rise of online gaming showcases like Let's Plays and Twitch streams.

Another ludomusicology text that examines performativity is the 2016 book *Understanding Video Game Music* by Tim Summers. This book guides the reader through the titular process of understanding and analysing game sound. For our purposes, Summers' analysis of "reactionary play" is of particular interest when considering performativity in the context of public gameplay like Let's Plays and Twitch streams. Summers describes "reactionary play" as a tool for game sound analysis; essentially, playing in a way that is not necessarily suggested or recommended by a game's developers in order to observe parts of a game that may not be easily discovered in ordinary gameplay sessions (p. 35). In recent years, reactionary play has been adopted by some online gaming personalities as a tool for entertainment; essentially, constantly asking 'what happens if I do something outrageous, e.g. attempt to shoot my NPC companion or choose the cruellest possible dialogue options?'⁹. This not only allows audiences and communities to observe the consequences of such actions that they may have been reluctant to carry out in their own playthrough (due to fear of failure or moral objections), but may also serve as a recognisable attribute for one's performative persona that is relatively unique to their content. Reactionary play can also highlight the differences between a person's real-life personality and their online performative persona; seeing what will happen if heavy weaponry is used on a harmless NPC on a whim in a game doesn't necessarily translate to the same sudden violent tendencies in real life, for example. This would align with research by Johnson and Woodcock (2019), in which Twitch streamers point out differences between the online persona that the audience sees and the private personality

⁹ An example of this is YouTube gaming personality Call Me Kevin, who often chooses violent in-game actions in games that allow these choices for the purpose of observing the outcome.

that exists in reality. The performativity of reactionary play will be relevant to consider in the context of presenting game sound to digital audiences and communities.

Performativity and Shared Gameplay

In addition to ludomusicology, performativity has also been examined in literature regarding Twitch streams and Let's Plays. Performativity is shown to be important to Twitch audiences in the work of Altmeyer, Krüger & Lessel (2018), who concluded through primary research that the audience's ability to interact with streamers and be integrated into the stream was important to the audience, but not if it came at the expense of the streamer's in-game performance. Altmeyer et al. (2022) confirmed this was still the case four years after this study, and additionally, that the amount of influence an audience member expected to have over a stream depended on the type of stream. For example, participation and interaction was more expected in streams prioritising conversation with the audience than streams featuring competitive gaming where the streamer's performance was the primary draw. The impact of this viewer participation has also been acknowledged by Jodén & Strandell (2022), who argue that viewer participation via live chat aids a stream's engagement while also influencing the content of the stream, e.g. persuading a player to take a certain in-game action. This particular study also points out the community aspect of Twitch streaming, and argues that communities are formed via rituals not dissimilar to the ones used in real-world community building, as per Collins' (2004) models of ritualistic interaction. Considered together, these studies help to characterize Twitch audiences and the expectations that are had by them during shared gameplay sessions.

Research concerning the streamer's perspective has also been carried out in recent years. For example, Johnson & Woodcock have published several studies concerning Twitch.tv streamers and their audiences, but perhaps most pertinent to this research is their 2019 article "The Affective Labor and Performance of Live

Streaming on Twitch.tv". This article considers the personas that Twitch streamers choose to portray for their audiences. There is a wide range of potential personas, from streamers who consider their online persona to be only a slight exaggeration of their real self and those who consciously and deliberately portray a character that is separate from their own personality on their livestreams. Johnson and Woodcock's interviews with Twitch streamers draw attention to the necessity for streamers to perform, whether this performance be an exaggerated form of one's own personality or a different character entirely. When summarising their findings in this regard, Johnson & Woodcock conclude, "it is no longer adequate to just be one's self, as one must shape the kind of subject one appears to be on stream" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019, p. 818). Johnson & Woodcock categorise this as a form of labour in their work. As such, the thesis will seek to investigate the perceived necessity for performativity both as it applies to one's persona among Twitch streamers (as discussed in Johnson & Woodcock's 2019 article) alongside the performativity gamers partake in when playing a game alone (as discussed in Iain Hart's 2014 article). Then, it may be observed whether or not this combined performativity may have an effect on how audiences and communities engage with game sound through online public gameplay.

In terms of Let's Plays, research has been conducted regarding the nature of Let's Plays as a method of generating income, with Boomer, Harwood & Garry (2018) highlighting that the social capital accrued by Let's Players among their audiences is just, if not more, important than financial gain, which is not always guaranteed. Research also exists that investigates Let's Plays as a meaning-making activity, through which players can share their interpretations as they play and reflect on others' interpretations left in their comment sections, such as Burwell & Miller's work. In their 2016 article "Let's Play: Exploring literacy practices in an emerging video game paratext", they discuss how Let's Players can provide commentary on the game as they play it, providing opinions on it which can then be adopted by a viewer, potentially influencing their own interpretation of the game. However, Burwell & Miller point out instances in the same article of the reverse: through comment feedback, viewers can also share their interpretations of the game with the player, which can then influence the player's engagement with the text.

Research by Johnson and Woodcock (2019) suggests that online gaming personalities value feedback rather highly, given that some Twitch streamers stated in interviews that they moved from YouTube to Twitch specifically to gain feedback quicker. This supports Boomer, Harwood & Garry's (2018) conclusions that the opinions of audiences are of high importance to producers of shared online gameplay content. It may be argued that feedback from a player's own community or from a fan community based around a game can inform how the player progresses through a game, and therefore how they encounter and interact with game sound. This can also relate to texts from Collins (2009), Medina-Gray (2016) and Summers (2016) that argue that it is very difficult to replicate a game soundtrack in the exact same way in individual play sessions. This text suggests that it is not only possible to preserve and share gameplay and its soundtrack for viewers to experience before or even instead of playing a game themselves, but that that particular gameplay and soundtrack can be informed and altered by people who are not playing the game but are providing feedback through comment sections and live chat rooms. This thesis takes particular interest in how this affects a game's soundtrack in particular.

Relating to the overall conclusions drawn by this thesis, there is also existing literature regarding the transformative nature of broadcasted shared gameplay. In 2018, T.L. Taylor published the book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Live Streaming* concluding that Twitch.tv has the potential to transform games into audiovisual media, and could even be considered alongside traditional fixed audiovisual media like film & TV. Furthermore, Garretson, Hamilton & Kerne (2014) proposed that Twitch streams for audiences act as "virtual third places, in which formal communities emerge, socialise and participate" (p. 1315). The social nature and potential of Twitch.tv and video games in general is also supported by Consalvo (2017), who argues that through this platform, even single-player games become potential avenues for social interaction. This is of relevance to the community focused aspect of this research, and also points out the multifunctional nature of a Twitch stream: it is a participatory space, but also a space for social interaction to be facilitated, as will be noted in later historical context sections of this literature review as well as in case studies.

Fan Culture Studies

Audiences and communities that are drawn to particular online gameplay can come from a variety of fan spaces. For example, if an online gaming personality has cultivated multiple regular viewers, it may be assumed that their audience is, at least in part, there specifically for them and not necessarily for the game being played. On the other hand, if an online gaming personality is playing a game with an established fan community, viewers may watch particular gameplay for the game rather than for the person playing it, regardless of who it is. Therefore, it can be assumed that the audience for a playthrough can comprise many different people who participate in a variety of fan communities. Papers and studies concerning the norms and behaviours of fan communities are important to consult for this research. This is because audience and community feedback to public and shared gameplay is likely to have shaped instalments of particular case study playthroughs, and an understanding of the fan communities that inform online behaviours can help us to understand such feedback, and how it may affect the presentation of game sound in shared, performative play. The following research has been considered important to this thesis in this regard.

Broad Fan Studies Literature

There is a lot of existing fan culture literature to be found, from Henry Jenkins' 1992 book *Textual Poachers* that examines participatory culture and television fandoms to more recent works like *Understanding Fandom* by Mark Duffett (2013) and the edited book *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Booth, 2018). Over the years, fan studies has been best understood in three waves, which are explained well by Sandvoss, Gray & Harrington (2017). I will summarise their explanations here for the sake of brevity. The first wave of fan studies research is concerned with exploring the 'power' of fans, or indeed the lack of power they had. Fans are portrayed in first wave fan studies as lacking power in the real world, for example being part of marginalised groups that experience

discrimination, who could gain power in their fan communities through engagement with and potential re-interpretation of the text. This is the wave scholars like the aforementioned Henry Jenkins would belong to, who acknowledged the 'power' fans sought by reinterpreting the text via projects like fan fiction that they perhaps could not obtain in real life. This wave is highly concerned with portraying fandom as a positive and almost utopian endeavour. While a sympathetic view of fan spaces was rare at the time of Jenkins' initial 1992 work, it is arguably overcompensation to imply that fandoms are free from any kinds of issues. Therefore, the second wave of fan studies is concerned with questions of hierarchy and social capital in fan spaces, such as the work of Thornton (1995): now that fans had created their own way of obtaining 'power', what did they do with it? This wave is concerned with investigating how fans created hierarchies based on tastes and engagement with the object of fandom in a way that arguably echoed the real-world hierarchies they sought to avoid. This wave represents a more nuanced view of fandoms, but as pointed out by Sandvoss, Gray & Harrington, it was still largely concerned with fandoms as a collective and not so much with the individual motivations of fans. The third wave of fan studies is subsequently focused on discussing fans as individuals in order to produce nuanced understanding of the different types of fans, which can arguably be lost when strictly studying fandom as a collective entity. All three waves of fan studies will be of relevance to this thesis in some capacity. While the overall focus of my research is to study how game sound is interpreted by communities rather than individuals in a way that is reflective of first wave fan studies, it was important to me during the research process to collect perspectives from individual *Undertale* fans. This was done to avoid generalisation and acknowledge nuance when discussing ideal imagined voices among fans. This approach is closer to research described in third wave fan studies. However, as noted in the introduction, the question of how subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) is utilised in the construction of *Undertale* fan hierarchies is discussed throughout this research. Therefore, second wave fan studies is also of relevance to this research.

Fan studies is a wide research field, and so I have attempted to narrow existing literature down to what is most useful for the research in question. A useful article

in this regard has been “Keep the Fire Burning: Exploring the hierarchy of Music Fandom and the Motivation of Superfans “ by Edlom & Karlsson (2021). This article draws from a variety of existing and relevant texts defining and exploring fan community cultures, discussing the roles that exist in fan communities that contribute to a hierarchy of sorts. It largely concerns how fans behave in and interact with those involved in the music industry, but elements of this study can be applied to fan communities in the gaming industry; in short, industries and businesses benefit from hierarchies that exist in fan communities, which does not necessarily only apply to the music industry. Throughout this thesis, I am interested in exploring a possible link between fan community behaviours and gaming industries, in particular the business of livestreaming games for audiences in YouTube Let’s Plays and Twitch streams. The case studies in this thesis do indeed find that fan communities can alter how Let’s Players and Twitch streamers behave in during their gameplay, indirectly altering their content in accordance with how fans would prefer them. However, while Edlom & Karlsson found fan behaviours towards musicians to be mostly beneficial to the music industry, existing literature surrounding the UF suggests this may not be the case in livestreamed gaming cultures. For example, Ruberg (2018) and Spencer (2017) respectively argue that fan behaviours can not only negatively affect perception of the original text by ignoring its feminist and queer themes but also have adverse effects on livestreamed *Undertale* content through demanding behaviours regarding how the game is played. This thesis aims to further investigate this problem and discover how fandoms such as *Undertale*’s contribute to the performative livestreaming sphere, through the lens of both works like Edlom and Karlsson’s as well as the work of Twitch scholars like Consalvo (2017), and Johnson & Woodcock (2019).

This thesis will discuss fan behaviour in relation to the reception of online, shared gameplay, and therefore studies that address why some fans behave in the way that they do will inform discussions of how fans receive and discuss sound in shared gameplay. Of particular importance is Henry Jenkins’ 2006 work *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age*. Jenkins’ work is vital to forming an understanding of *Undertale* fan communities and his work will be relied upon throughout the thesis. In particular, Jenkins’ use of the term ‘participatory

culture' will be useful when discussing the UF's characteristics. In Jenkins' terms, participatory culture refers to a space in which there is a low barrier of entry for participation, and in theory, everyone in it can participate equally. For fandoms, this would mean that everyone is technically able to participate: all anyone would need to share fan-made art on social media or opinions in discussion forums would be an internet connection. As pointed out in the above discussion of fandom waves, however, participatory culture is perhaps a naïve term to apply to fandoms in general given the discussion of hierarchies and subcultural capital in second wave fan studies that can mirror real world inequalities. Additionally, *Undertale* fan communities potentially complicate the principles of participatory culture: according to Spencer (2017), while everyone is still able to participate in the creation of *Undertale* adjacent material like voice-acted livestreams, perhaps not everyone can participate equally. For example, Spencer details cases in which some live streamers received such backlash for not performing the 'right' voices for characters that they had to cease their *Undertale* playthroughs altogether. While in a literal sense there was nothing stopping them from continuing their playthroughs, the demanding nature of fan feedback can potentially make people feel so unwelcome in fan spaces that they feel they can no longer participate. This potential evolution of participatory culture will be further analysed during the Jacksepticeye case study.

Issues of 'textual poaching' and 'powerless elite' will also be of importance in this research. 'Textual poaching' refers to the act of taking certain desirable elements from a text for the purpose of remaking it into something fans might prefer to the original, and 'powerless elite' describes fan communities as groups of people that lack control over the actual copyrighted object of fandom but have a lot of control over how it's received (Jenkins, 2006). In the UF, 'textual poaching' is taken a step further: fans do not take from the text for the purposes of reforming it but instead add to it via voice acting to enhance the text. Additionally, 'powerless elite' in this context could indeed apply to *Undertale* fan communities' relationship with the imagined voices they create for the game's characters. Fans have the power within their communities to decide upon the most popular choices for character voice types and can create video content where these voices are realised, but like

Jenkins describes, they do not have any power over the game itself or the ability to implement voice acting into the actual game text. This research will consider these terms when discussing fan communities for interactive texts like video games such as *Undertale*.

This research also considers possible reasoning for fan behaviours in *Undertale* communities, partly in relation to the work of Laura Felschow. In 2010, Felschow carried out a case study of fan communities centred around the CW television show *Supernatural* and discussed the ‘othering’ fans can be subjected to in the real world. Felschow, in first wave fan studies tradition, suggests that people who are drawn to fan communities often suffer bullying or marginalisation in their real lives, and being part of a fan community can give them a sense of belonging, or perhaps even power if they are highly regarded in their fandom spaces and contribute to their own sense of self and identity. Felschow finds this to be especially pertinent in *Supernatural* fandom spaces, as the main characters of the show are also subjected to othering and believe themselves to be outsiders, much like fan communities might feel like outsiders to the real world. This sense of self can relate to voice perception studies in this thesis, as Cox (2018) argues that the inner voice is deeply connected to one’s sense of self. Furthermore, *Undertale* also has potential themes of othering (e.g. the monsters being banished to the Underground and having their history erased by humans), and surveys carried out with *Undertale* fans aimed to understand this potential element of the UF more using Felschow’s work as an example.

When further investigating *Undertale* fan norms and behaviours, Sarah Thornton’s coining of the term ‘subcultural capital’ in 1995 will be useful. Subcultural capital, drawn from Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’ (1986), refers to how highly one is regarded in a subculture like fandom communities, or in this case the *Undertale* fan community. Capital of this kind described by Bourdieu and Thornton as it is applied to fandom has become complicated in recent years, as pointed out by Bertha Chin (2018). Chin’s work acts as a useful collection of academic viewpoints on social capital and subcultural capital in fandom spaces, which she ultimately concludes by pointing out how complex the terms have become in relation to fan

communities. For example, she points out the potential fleeting nature of having subcultural capital, and that it is not necessarily “permanent” depending on a person’s continuous output of fan labour that got them their status in the first place (p. 251). Furthermore, Chin points out that this kind of social reverence in one fan community is not transferable to another: behaviours that elevate one’s status in Thornton’s club cultures may not be what gains subcultural capital in digital *Undertale* fan communities, for example. While there is truth to this, Chin’s continuous references to fan output being a key factor in how one accumulates subcultural capital in fan spaces in general will indeed apply to the case studies regarding *Undertale*, demonstrating a similarity between fandom spaces as a whole.

Similarly to most subcultures of its kind, there are ways of gaining subcultural capital within *Undertale* fan communities, and rising in the ranks of ‘fandom hierarchies’ as Edlom & Karlsson (2021) may refer to them. This research will investigate subcultural capital as it applies to *Undertale* fan spaces, namely what can be done to achieve it and how fans go about trying to claim it in their fan spaces. Additionally, I argue that in the UF, we see an example of the changeable nature of the rules that are followed in order to obtain subcultural capital. This can be further observed in the later discussed *Undertale* related literature as well as survey results analysed in later chapters.

Fan Culture in Ludomusicology Literature

This research is not the first ludomusicological study to consult fan studies when drawing conclusions. Previous ludomusicological research studying fan culture includes research on the aforementioned ‘modding’ communities (Collins, 2013; Freitas, 2021) and the practice of creating fan-made covers of a game’s soundtrack (Smith, 2020; Nunes, 2022). Of particular note regarding fan music works, Melanie Fritsch carried out a case study featured in *Ludomusicology: Approaches to video game music* (2016) of *Super Mario Bros.* in relation to fans adding their own lyrics to existing game scores and creating musical performances out of them. Fritsch

concludes the chapter by pointing out the participatory nature of video game remixes and covers online; namely, anyone with a YouTube account can create and upload them. However, Fritsch also points out that in order to gain legitimacy with an audience that is likely to be largely comprised of video game music fans, a decent amount of game music literacy is necessary (p. 111). This aspect of game music fandom will also be apparent in later *Undertale* case studies; while everyone technically can participate, perhaps not everyone can participate equally.

Additionally, investigating how something as interactive as game sound is transformed into fixed media like a YouTube cover is expanded upon in case studies in this research, particularly when discussing the YouTube video series *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub* and its approach to sound in a new, fixed audiovisual medium. Fritsch's work will also be useful to consider in this research as a whole, as this thesis is certain to investigate fandom culture when discussing shared gameplay. This is because it is common for livestreams and Let's Plays to draw the attention of fan communities centred around a game being played, as will be seen in the Jacksepticeye case study. When this occurs, a player may adapt their gameplay to suit the desires of that fan community, therefore altering their playstyle and how the rest of their audience experiences and engages with the game's sound through that gameplay. Therefore, studies of fan communities in gaming culture like Fritsch's will be relevant to this thesis as it progresses.

Further examining ludomusicological research and its relationship to fan studies, Collins (2013) is once again relevant here. A throughline of Collins' book is the importance of the player to 'finishing' the interactive game text, a sentiment echoed by Hart (2014): both believe that engagement with the text is necessary for a fully realised version of the game to exist. However, 'completion' (while a much sought after goal in UF activities, as revealed in upcoming survey results analysis), is hard to obtain in practice as there are so many possible routes in *Undertale* that cannot all be engaged with in a single playthrough. Therefore, 'completion' will be considered in this thesis not in terms of how and if it can be obtained, but how important it is to fan communities and how fanmade content is produced in pursuit of this. Collins and Hart's work will both be considered when

discussing and discovering how ‘finishing’ an interactive text works in the context of fan community goals, and if completion can or should be obtained at all.

Collins and Hart will also be important to consider in the research as a whole, in two primary ways. In the first instance, this research will expand upon the vitality of a player to a game by also considering their role in presenting game sound to others who may only experience a particular game’s sound through their gameplay. Secondly, this research will investigate fandom norms and attributes when game sound is considered beyond the game; for example, when game sound is presented to game communities, how then is it received, and how do fandom behaviours inform these interpretations? Therefore, this literature is important to this research in its relation to both studies of individual and shared gameplay (as elaborated upon in a previous section) and its investigations of fan communities in gaming circles.

We can also consider William Cheng’s (2014) LOTRO case study when discussing digital audiences and communities in relation to game sound. In chapter 4 of his book, the behaviours of the player community are discussed in relation to how they engage with the music they are able to either perform themselves or hear others perform. In LOTRO, Cheng describes two types of musical performance players can engage with: freestyling, where they use their keyboards to ‘play’ their musical instruments on real time, and ABC files, where players select pre-coded musical performances for their avatars to play. Freestyling is seen as more dignified among LOTRO players, with ABC being seen as the lesser of the two and “lacking performative engagement because it requires no player-input beyond an initial text command” (Cheng, 2014, p. 118). Cheng brings up social capital in this regard, highlighting that real-life musical skill is highly regarded in this game’s player community, and those that are perceived to lack it are criticised. This chapter is useful to my research on two accounts; firstly, since this thesis concerns performativity and music, musical performance in shared spaces is closely related to this research’s topic of how game sound is received in public gaming spaces, and therefore can inform its conclusions in a useful way. Secondly, fandom community norms and behaviours will inform this research when considering how game sound

is received through the gameplay of online gaming personalities (both by the fan community surrounding that personality and also the community built around the game being played). This will be particularly pertinent when discussing what these audiences and communities do with their interpretations of another player's game sound. As this chapter concerns a case study of a particular gaming community reacting to each other's created sound, it can serve as a useful foundation when considering audience and community reactions to sound in public play.

Undertale

There is a wealth of existing literature studying *Undertale* from a wide range of perspectives, including research discussing its music and sound. In 2024, Stephanie Lind published *Authenticity in the Music of Video Games*, a book which included an analysis of *Undertale*'s score in terms of its retro influences. Lind argues that “many elements within the game satirize and subvert the expectations of adventure/RPG games and 1980s-era gaming, the time period established by this retro aesthetic, and *Undertale*'s music is no exception” (pp. 151-152). She supports this through an analysis of tracks like ‘Ghost Fight’ which includes musical cultural references to past game soundtracks, as well as ‘Your Best Friend’, a track that largely subverts expectations typical of retro soundtracks that underscores moments of fourth wall breaking within *Undertale*'s narrative. Lind completes her analysis by arguing that *Undertale*'s soundtrack is not intended to be a faithful recreation of a retro soundtrack, but rather pay homage to the games that came before it while relying on player nostalgia. Additionally, research on *Undertale*'s sound has included analysis of the communities that form around it. Christopher Cayari, for example, conducted a 2023 study of YouTube-published covers of music from *Undertale*'s soundtrack and the community around them with the goal of providing music teachers with resources for teaching students about music publishing and networking in their chosen industry. This study is somewhat related to this thesis in terms of studying how game sound is engaged with by a group of people, in this case groups of musicians interpreting the soundtrack.

The most common type of study associated with *Undertale* involves research concerning the game's relationship with themes of violence and morality (Müller, 2015; Marzahn, 2017; Seraphine 2018; Oja, 2021). *Undertale* centres morality very strongly in its gameplay, so this is unsurprising. For example, one of the final scenes in all playthroughs features the player receiving a "judgement" based on how many monsters they killed or spared. However, some scholars argue that *Undertale*'s morality system is somewhat flawed, and can even lead to some scenes being fairly uncomfortable when viewed through a critical lens. For example, Perez (2017) argues that *Undertale* lacks nuance in its approach to killing and sparing characters. Perez points out that a number of primary *Undertale* characters (such as Toriel, Papyrus and Undyne) spend a good amount of each route trying to cause harm to the player, respectively by manipulating them, trying to capture them or even trying to kill them. So in this instance, perhaps a player can be forgiven for trying to defend themselves against these characters in combat situations and shouldn't be harshly judged for doing so. Marzahn (2017) echoes this viewpoint through the True Lab section of the game. Marzahn argues that the 'spare everyone' approach becomes muddled in this section, as the player is encouraged to spare the monsters they come across that are in constant pain due to unethical scientific experiments and might be better off put out of their misery. While this thesis has no interest in determining the most humane approach to situations like this, I share the opinion that *Undertale*'s morality system is perhaps lacking in nuance. *Undertale* does not offer the player the opportunity to interrogate whether the game's approach to morality is actually the most ethically sound one, which I agree makes for a somewhat flawed judgement system.

Regardless of the state of *Undertale*'s moral stances, past research indicates that fans of *Undertale* have very passionately followed *Undertale*'s guidance for morality. The text itself perhaps even encourages these stances by eliciting guilt from the player (Oja, 2021). In terms of specific game sound techniques used to do this, Alexandra Müller draws attention to Gibbons' (2014) study highlighting the use of silence in video games to allow for a player to reckon with their actions after defeating an enemy, specifically in the video game *Shadow of the Colossus*. Müller argues that this same technique is used in *Undertale*'s Genocide route, as

there is often a long silence following the defeat of a boss battle character and then further silence as the player progresses to the next area (Müller, 2015). There are also instances of enemies being humanised in a way that is intended to elicit player guilt in the Genocide run, such as a flower being placed on Muffet's remains following her boss battle to draw a link between monsters' and humans' traditions surrounding mourning the dead (Müller, 2015). *Undertale* also hints at its moral stance through the musical score: the soundtrack changes to a more sinister tone during Genocide runs by massively slowing down the score to make it seem unnatural and eerie, and it will only return to 'normal' if the player aborts their Genocide route (Perez, 2017). For example, before the player reaches Snowdin Town in a Genocide run, the piece 'Snowy' that underscores this area will be played much slower than it appears on the soundtrack or in Pacifist or Neutral runs. If the player reaches Snowdin Town having killed all the monsters in this area, the 'Snowdin Town' track will be slowed down in a similar way. If the player reaches Snowdin Town without having killed all the monsters in the previous area, 'Snowdin Town' will be played at its usual speed. This perhaps provides a player with warning to cease playing the game in this way. Since no such warning exists in Pacifist or Neutral runs, it can be argued that the game is actively discouraging in-game violence despite offering the choice to carry it out (Perez, 2017; Marzahn, 2017).

However, it is pertinent to note that *Undertale* is not always entirely clear about what must be done to adhere to its moral standards. For example, while the player is given instruction from NPCs to 'show some mercy [if a character's name appears in yellow]' if they choose to engage in conversation with them, there are some boss battles where the player may not know *how* to show mercy. For example, the character Toriel must be spared several times while her name is not yellow to avoid killing her, and the player must choose to run away from Undyne to save her instead of selecting the 'spare' option (Leinonen, 2023). So while the game makes it quite clear to the player that killing monsters is the wrong moral choice to make, there are instances where the player may not know that sparing is an option and end up killing a monster, especially in Toriel's case as some players may mistakenly believe that defeating her will weaken her rather than kill her

(Marzahn, 2017; Seraphine, 2018). This lends more validity to the argument that *Undertale*'s morality system perhaps lacks nuance, as the player is not being given proper instruction on adhering to its morality before making them feel guilty for not doing so.

Regardless of the validity of *Undertale*'s morality system, its effectiveness on *Undertale* fan communities can be observed through the relevant literature. Seraphine (2018) highlights the effectiveness of the strategies *Undertale* uses to elicit guilt: his research surveying *Undertale* fan communities at the time showed that *Undertale* fans mostly preferred to watch Genocide runs online rather than play them themselves, indicating a lack of willingness to perform the acts necessary to complete a Genocide run in their own playthroughs due to the 'harm' that befalls the characters in this route. The game makes a player feel as though they are the character, and therefore that the actions they carry out could be reflective of their real-world morality (Marzahn, 2017). We can see these sentiments come to fruition in news articles published around this time concerning *Undertale* fan communities: of particular importance to this thesis is Chloe Spencer's "The *Undertale* Drama", written for the gaming news outlet Kotaku in 2017.

This article serves as an important document to consult when tracing the origins of *Undertale* fan communities. Spencer's article was published on the popular gaming news outlet Kotaku and therefore had a much wider reach than the academic studies discussed so far, and was therefore the most accessible point of reference for someone unfamiliar with UF norms and behaviours. It was also written two years after *Undertale*'s release at the height of the game's popularity and includes case study research and interview data to depict the *Undertale* fan behaviours of the time. Spencer's research suggests that early *Undertale* fans were very passionate about playing *Undertale* the 'right' way: in particular, fans insisted that new players engage with the Pacifist route first, and some even going as far as to say that Pacifist should be the only route played, as they felt engagement with the Genocide route could be indicative of real-life violent tendencies. Demonstrating a balanced approach to the research, Spencer's article includes interviews with fans

who do not feel this way and refute both the notion that there is a ‘correct’ way to play *Undertale* and the assertion that the way one plays a game aligns with their real-world morals. However, the article still paints a picture of a fan community that can behave in a very demanding way, especially in the sections concerning fan reactions to voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs of the time. Going into this research, one of my main questions was how and if *Undertale* fan communities have changed since Spencer’s research, and answering that question was a primary motivation behind this research’s primary data collection. Notably, there were also some academic articles studying *Undertale* fan communities, like Seraphine’s (2018) study that gathered information about how *Undertale* fans engaged with each of the different routes. Seraphine found that there were indeed some fans that found engaging with all routes including Genocide to be a valid way of playing the game, and some survey participants even stated that while they enjoyed the Genocide route the most, they felt that the Pacifist route was the correct way to play the game (Seraphine, 2018). When asking survey participants about how times had changed since the early days of the UF, I chose to ask about Spencer’s work only so as not to overwhelm participants with too much literature and also due to the easy accessibility of a news article versus an academic outlet for the typical survey participant. However, Seraphine’s findings will still be useful to this research, especially when comparing his survey data to my own.

Further research into *Undertale* fan spaces shows how the online communities surrounding it changed as they grew over time. Bonnie Ruberg (2018) argues that as *Undertale* fan communities grew bigger, they attracted the attention of those who perhaps did not experience real life ‘othering’ described by Felschow (2010), who then proceeded to ‘straight-wash’ the source material. Ruberg defines this as erasure of a piece of media’s queer or queer-coded content in the name of making it more palatable to mainstream audiences. Ruberg’s research is singled out for close analysis here because the behaviours they describe align with attitudes that were common during and after an event called Gamergate, an online movement beginning in 2014 that encouraged criticism of feminist and queer readings of video game texts. This will be covered more extensively later in the historical context section of the literature review, but for now, I will draw attention to the

fact that Gamergate happened throughout the inception of the UF, and therefore had quite a big effect on it, as seen in Ruberg's research. While Ruberg's research convincingly shows that there was indeed some 'straight-washing' in *Undertale* fan spaces through their ethnographic approach to portraying the UF at the time, since a significant amount of time has passed since both Ruberg and Spencer's research, I argue it is necessary to carry out more comprehensive research about the current state of the UF. This has been done in the opening chapters of this thesis, which analyse and interpret data from surveys carried out in online *Undertale* fan communities. Literature like Spencer's and Ruberg's will continue to be relied upon during case study analysis when discussing early and evolving UF behaviours.

Voice Acting & Perception

This thesis relates to the discipline of voice studies as a branch of sound studies. Voice studies is a large and rich research field, and interest in the voice in sound studies has been prevalent for decades. For example, early studies on the voice were carried out by Roland Barthes, whose perspective in works such as *The Grain of the Voice* (1985) has been the subject of rigorous study and occasional critique in the years that followed (Dunsby, 2009; Ffrench, 2015; Boutin, 2016). Current sound studies scholars such as Salomé Voegelin, Brandon LaBelle and Nina Eidsheim's work is also worth acknowledging here, given their research interests in sound (and the voice's) relationship with the wider world and contemporary life (Voegelin, 2023; LaBelle, 2010; Eidsheim, 2019). While these are all important to consider in voice studies (and sound studies in general), this thesis is specifically concerned with studies of perception of the voice and how the voice is imagined based on appearance and existing stereotypes surrounding the voice, so will largely focus on texts directly related to this.

Considering the importance of voice acting as a craft to this research question, research concerning voice acting and perceptions of voices was consulted. The voice has been considered in literature intended for actors and performers, for example Gillett & Gutekunst's 2021 book *Voice into Acting: Integrating Voice and*

the Stanislavski Approach. This book considers the role of the voice in the broader art of performance and not just acting that only requires the voice. Additionally, the book largely focuses on the physicality of incorporating voice acting into performance, with particular attention paid to how an actor uses their whole body when voice acting. While this is perhaps only tangentially related to the topics covered in this thesis, it is useful to consider these materials when discussing the amateur voice acting that is presented to and by *Undertale* fan communities.

In terms of considering voice acting as its own specific art, the 2024 seventh edition of James R. Alburger's *The Art of Voice Acting* is useful to consult. Alburger's work is very comprehensive, providing advice for vocal warm-ups and overall voice health as well as how to perform for different mediums like narrating audio books or providing voices for characters. Indeed, Alburger provides insights on performing characters for video games and animation projects, which is relevant to this thesis's case studies. In this section, he provides a series of 'tips' on providing voices for video game characters, presented as a bulleted list. These include but are not limited to understanding the story and character well before providing a voice, using visual references to assist in finding a character's voice, experimenting with tone and pitch to discover a character's voice and being consistent in performance once the character's voice has been found (Alburger, 2024). Given the amateur nature of *Undertale* voice performance in the thesis's case studies, it is unlikely that Alburger's work was consulted by everyone involved in the case studies, but considering it in the context of performative playthroughs is still interesting to consider. For example, in the Jacksepticeye case study, voices are performed improvisationally, as the player is experiencing the game for the first time meeting these characters as they proceed. This is in contrast to Alburger's advice on voice acting for characters in games, where he specifically advises familiarity with the story and characters before performing. Notably, however, people who play *Undertale* (including Jacksepticeye, as will be seen in the relevant case study) are very dedicated to avoiding 'spoilers'¹⁰, so this avoidance of familiarity is likely intentional. In contrast, there are other instances

¹⁰ 'Spoilers' in this instance is an umbrella term referring to information about text's story, characters or gameplay that a person may wish to avoid until they have engaged with that text themselves.

in which players unknowingly follow Alburger's advice. For example, considering the Jacksepticeye playthrough again, there is a lot of experimentation with tone and pitch as voices are found as well as a reliance on visual representation of characters to decide on a voice. When considering Alburger's work, there is adherence to some aspects of professional voice acting, while others are strayed from. Therefore, I argue that in this instance, people who engage in performative play of *Undertale* take something of a 'textual poaching' (Jenkins, 1992) approach to voice acting standards: taking some techniques from the practice while disregarding others to fit the purposes of their playthrough. However, as will be seen in the Jacksepticeye case study, if an *Undertale* voice is performed improvisationally without prior knowledge of the text, those that did have familiarity with the text tended to react quite strongly if the performed voice was perceived to be 'wrong'.

Other than Alburger, a substantial amount of voice acting research concerns the vocal health of voice actors and how it can be maintained (Davies & Jahn, 2004; Beeman, 2016; Gaskill & Hatzel, 2017; Sataloff, 2017; Acevedo & Fernandez-Fresard, 2021). While this is largely focused on actors in general, research exists that mainly concerns the vocal health of video game voice actors (Aiken et al, 2022). There has also been wider focus on video game voice acting in relation to the effects of SAG-AFTRA strikes on recasting voices in popular game series (Švelch & Švelch, 2020). While this is important research, it is outside the scope of this thesis to engage in detail with it. However, an area of voice research that is of interest to this thesis is how voices are perceived, and what people assume about a person from their voice and vice versa.

Existing research examines what can be concluded (or perhaps assumed) about a person's emotional state from their voice, such as Belin et al.'s 2011 study "Understanding Voice Perception". However, later research expanded upon this by studying what could be learned about someone's personality and status by their voice: or rather, common assumptions that are made about a person based on their voice (Mitrenga et al, 2019). At this point, it's important to note that the research that will be relied upon regarding voice perception (and more specifically common

voice-related stereotypes) does not describe assumptions based on voice as accurate, but rather aims to discover common assumptions that are made about certain voice qualities and how they come to be. For example, in 2014, a study was published by McAleer, Todorov & Belin that asked a group of people to derive first impressions from samples of novel voices. The conclusions of this study found that there were high levels of agreement about what was ascertained about a person from voice alone. However, it is important to note that no claim was made in the conclusions of this study regarding the accuracy of these common impressions. Rather, a conclusion was drawn that many different people had the same assumptions and that there are potential avenues of research to be explored from that point.

Additionally, *The Handbook of Speech Perception* (2007) proved to be a valuable resource for this research, in particular the chapter 'Perception of Voice Quality' by Kreiman, Vanlancker-Sidti & Gerratt. This chapter features tables detailing common assumptions made about a person's appearance based on their perceived vocal quality (in relation to physical, physiological and social characteristics), which is the reverse of what happens in *Undertale* fan communities wherein voices are chosen based on appearance. While these tables are useful in providing terminology for specific voice qualities, overall the authors conclude that much more work needs to be done in this field to understand the relationships between a person's voice and how it is perceived, though understanding existing stereotypes is an important step forward. Additionally, and crucially, authors in this field often clarify the frequent inaccuracies of these assumptions. Importantly, when these inaccuracies occur and the person making the assumptions is proven incorrect, they may experience surprise at their imagined version of a person's appearance based on their voice being at odds with what they actually look like. Given that Spencer (2017) portrayed early *Undertale* fans as very demanding about how characters' voices were performed and frustration when these expectations were not met, this chapter provides a possible explanation for these reactions: a sense of disorientation at assumptions being challenged. The arguments made in this chapter will be considered alongside data collected from surveys and case studies as the research progresses.

Trevor Cox's 2018 book *Now You're Talking* supports the argument that assumptions made about a person's appearance based on voice are often inaccurate, stating that the reverse can also be true: it is very difficult to correctly guess what a person sounds like based on their appearance. However, while not a scientific process by any means, Cox points out that the frequency of certain assumptions, for example the notion that a tall person has a deep voice or a short person has a high-pitched voice. Additionally, and critically for our purposes, Cox argues that one's inner voice (or perhaps imagined voice) is deeply linked to one's sense of self. As will be observed in the following section, identity and the self can be very important to those involved in fan community activities, and could perhaps explain the UF's aversion to the 'wrong' voice being performed for their beloved characters. Furthermore, this could further explain the 'surprise' described in the previous source: perhaps it is caused by a brief but visceral disconnect from one's sense of self at hearing a performance that does not align with one's inner voice. The sense of self and identity described by Cox and given further context in *The Handbook of Speech Perception* are important to understanding how *Undertale* fans interact with and choose imagined voices for the characters. Voice perception studies also relates to fan studies literature in this way, in which research suggests that a sense of self is not only important when considering one's inner voice, but their fandom identity as well.

Voice perception has also been engaged with in existing studies related to both game sound and virtuality in general. For example, in Grimshaw & Garner's 2015 book *Sonic Virtuality: Sound as Emergent Perception*, the authors spend the later chapters of the book discussing sound imagined for largely recreational purposes (not dissimilar to the imagined voices provided for *Undertale* characters by fans) and this kind of imagined sound's place in wider sound studies. There is also scholarly interest in sound used to represent voice in video games, for example in Elizabeth Medina-Gray's 2024 article "Engaging with abstract and realistic representations of voices in video games" for the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*. This will be useful to consider when discussing *Undertale*'s 'text sounds' later in the thesis. In terms of other ludomusicological studies engaging with the

voice, Cheng (2014) dedicated a chapter of *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* to how fans of video games engage with the imagined voice, or rather the imagined singing voice. Cheng examines a sequence in *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) that utilised 8-bit sound to convey an operatic vocal performance. Cheng draws attention to the potential of online fandom to retroactively create a stronger sense of community for fans of older media and their sound, with nostalgia playing a role in this. When discussing comment sections of YouTube uploads of the *Final Fantasy VI* aria, Cheng writes:

Of course, admirers of this (or any) YouTube video are a self-selecting group to some extent, comprised of individuals seeking out specific clips for a nostalgia fix and the companionship of like-minded viewers. In a sense, long-term fans of the FFVI aria might come to its YouTube recordings in part to make up for lost time—that is, to redress the fact that online expressions of fandom were just barely possible when the game first came out in 1994. For even though FFVI players back then could assume that there were millions of others like themselves around the world, it wasn't as easy to receive explicit, hypervisible testimonies of collective enthusiasm. What YouTube and other online sites offer modern fans of old-school media, therefore, is not simply a sense of contemporary community, but also the retroactive verification that they have been a community *all along*. (p.75)

This is valuable commentary on games fandoms regarding how the internet makes their expansion possible, and also draws attention to the role of nostalgia in enjoyment of older games and their music. This has been investigated in other ludomusicological studies such as Jessica Kizzire's chapter in *Music in Video Games* (2014) that includes a case study of the music in *Final Fantasy IX* (2000) and its relationship with nostalgia. However, for the purposes of this research, I am interested in expanding upon these findings regarding vocal performance that isn't necessarily musical. For example, during the data collection phase of this research, I noticed a tendency from fans to base their ideal imagined voices for *Undertale* characters on the small 'text sounds' that accompany on-screen dialogue, and that deviation from these sounds could result in rejection of certain

performed voices in voice-acted playthroughs of *Undertale* (Spencer, 2017). Cheng's existing work examining fan reception to video game performances outside of the game itself therefore serves as a useful foundation for this research going forward.

Additionally, there is existing research that studies the role of the voice in video games in general. In *Music in the Role-Playing Game* (2020), William Gibbons discusses 'part-talkie' video games with partial voice acting, and touches upon how the introduction of voice acting in video games impacted potential player habits of imagining, or even performing, voices for themselves. Further exploring existing voices in games, Jennifer Smith (2020) considers the role of the voice in worldbuilding for role-playing games, both in terms of informing the environment and culture of the game's world and the different types of characters the player can meet within it. Some research has also focused on the role of the voice in influencing emotions in the player, and contributing to immersion in the game through such influence (Stingel-Voigt, 2020). Existing research like this concerning the role of the voice in video games will be important to consider when drawing upon fan voicing traditions specific to the *Undertale* fandom.

Historical Context: Gamergate and COVID-19

In the case study portion of this research, two events that impacted gaming industries and social spheres will be of importance to discuss: Gamergate and COVID-19. Gamergate is important as it occurred at the inception of *Undertale* fan spaces and arguably influenced the community's behaviours and subsequent reputation, and COVID-19 is important as it impacted not only the gaming industry, but also the growth of online gaming platforms like Twitch. This section will provide an overview of literature relating to each topic as it is relevant to this thesis.

Gamergate

For our purposes, the most important thing to know about Gamergate is that it marked a clear before and after for the video game industry and its related digital fan communities. It changed how games are spoken about, and in particular, how minorities are spoken about both as prominent figures in gaming industries and as characters in video games (Ruch, 2025). However, some context is required to understand what exactly Gamergate was and the effects it carries today.

Gamergate is not brought up to investigate its origins or the reasoning behind it, as the following literature has already done that: it is brought up to clarify why exactly fans of *Undertale* in the years between 2015 and 2017 may have been especially passionate about how their game was received or played for audiences.

Gamergate began in August 2014 as a reaction to Zoe Quinn, a games developer, being accused of exchanging sexual favours for a positive review of their video game *Depression Quest*. This allegation was later proven to be false, but it did serve as the catalyst for a string of online harassment against women (particularly Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu) in the games industry that included the distribution of personal information and threats of extreme violence (Braithwaite, 2016; Chatzakou et al., 2017; O'Donnell, 2022). The people involved in Gamergate (hereafter 'Gamergaters') claimed that their actions were in service of drawing attention to 'ethics in games journalism' and trying to avoid games journalism being overwhelmed by feminist rhetoric rather than any misogyny on their part (Braithwaite, 2016 & Knight et al, 2022). Given the false nature of the original accusation and the low number of games journalism articles that mentioned misogyny or feminism at the time, this is debatable (Ramsay, 2015 & Bezio, 2018). However, my concern is not with deciphering the intentions of Gamergaters or judging if they were right or wrong in their actions, especially since the cited scholars have already done this in detail, but rather with the effects of Gamergate on other gaming communities like *Undertale*.

Regardless of whether somebody is supportive of or opposed to Gamergate, the effects of it are undeniable in recent literature. Some studies argue that Gamergate not only changed how games are spoken about and interacted with (particularly by women), but also acted as a precursor to the rise of right-wing

movements in recent years (Bezio, 2018; Blodgett, 2020; O'Donnell, 2022). Furthermore, this event that caused such a cultural shift began in 2014, just one year before the release of *Undertale*. Gamergate was still ongoing at the inception of *Undertale*'s fan communities, and in the relevant case studies, I argue that it had some influence over fan attitudes of the time. If Gamergate influenced how people behaved in *Undertale* fan spaces, it therefore also influenced how fans interacted with imagined *Undertale* voices, and is therefore relevant to this thesis.

COVID-19

Given the recency of COVID-19, studies examining its impact on the gaming industry and related organizations and communities are few. However, findings from these studies are useful when contextualizing the evolution of the UF and presentation of *Undertale*'s text in digital spaces.

While Twitch saw a rise in growth during the COVID-19 lockdowns, video games have been considered an avenue for social interaction since long before the pandemic, which has been facilitated in recent years by the internet and online play, including via platforms like Twitch (Youngblood, 2022; Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov, 2022). Chae & Lee (2022) additionally point out that following major traumatic incidents such as the September 11 attacks and the 2005 London bombings, healing from such trauma via community engagement is usually a major factor in recovery from such events. They also point out that COVID-19 is unique in its nature as a massive worldwide trauma that specifically prohibits the community interaction that could be essential to healing from it, and that online spaces were vital in allowing people to congregate when physical interaction was not permitted. Twitch being a space for online interaction in real time as well as a space primarily known for video games, another potential social activity, made it a perfect place for people to go during lockdowns to either stream games or watch them being played.

Some recent studies have analysed Twitch's growth as a platform during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov (2022) carried out a study examining several different areas of engagement on Twitch such as viewers per stream, the number of unique streamers and the types of content that became popular on the platform and how they were affected by COVID-19 lockdowns. The primary finding of the research of relevance to this thesis is the type of games that saw a rise in play and watch time on Twitch: 'nostalgic' games (games that utilise retro aesthetics, for example), games with a real-life setting (simulation games like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* in particular) and games with a survival setting (like the survival shooter *Rust*, which saw a massive growth in engagement immediately following the initial COVID-19 outbreak). This is corroborated by Bensch et al. in a 2020 interview carried out with curators of The Strong Museum of Play in New York, who also highlighted the popularity of simulation games like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as well as multiplayer games like *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* and *Among Us*.

COVID-19 lockdowns also saw a rise in demand for a certain kind of aesthetic on Twitch streams, namely spaces that were deemed "cozy" and "wholesome", as they are referred to by Youngblood (2022). In this study, Youngblood proposes these terms to describe Twitch streamers who embrace a certain kind of aesthetic while streaming: pastel colours and fairy lights in their backgrounds, for example, as well as the kind of games they play. As described by Youngblood, the type of game that could qualify as "cozy" and "wholesome" include simulation games like those described in the above literature.

As previously noted, studies on COVID-19's impact on gaming industries and particularly Twitch streaming are few. However, they will be useful when considering case studies that followed COVID-19 and what can potentially be learned in the future from studying Twitch streams' relationship with game sound in a post-pandemic context.

Paratexts

When defining the nature of the case studies used to examine the UF's relationship with the imagined voice, the term 'paratext' will be of particular importance. Gérard Genette coined the term 'paratext' in 1987 to describe materials that surround a main text. Genette separates paratexts into two categories: peritexts (materials that are contained within a text, like a book's front matter or appendices) and epitexts (materials related to a work that are not included within it, like interviews or conversations about a book). In his exact words, the purpose of a paratext to a text is to "surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to present it" (Genette , 1991, p. 261). In this thesis, I argue that 'paratext' can be used to describe the case studies that will appear in the following chapters. Each one is an audiovisual presentation that presents *Undertale* while surrounding and prolonging it. For now, however, I will provide an overview of how the term 'paratext' appears in wider media studies and what this means for the case studies that will follow.

Since Genette's original defining of the term, it has since seen an expansion in what counts as a paratext, as seen in fandom studies in particular. This got to a point where in 2017, Martin Barker proposed a revisitation of the term in conjunction with close readings of Genette's original definition of the word. In particular, Barker observes that the term has since expanded to include most types of fan-made creations that perhaps have less to do with the text than any 'official' content that surrounds and presents the text such as visual advertisements for a piece of media like posters or trailers. Notably, Barker does not necessarily condemn the term's expanded use. In fact, he finds it inevitable in fan studies. Barker notes that Genette's distinction between what made an effective paratext and what did not was its relationship to the author's original intent, and that authorial intent is of little importance to those who create and study fan works, hence the term's evolution. Nevertheless, Barker concludes his article by offering a "tentative redefinition" of paratextuality as it is currently used by fan studies scholars and encourages them "to look again at our uses of the term and think about the implications" (p. 247). My view is that while the term has seen some

departure from Genette's original meaning, there is still some usefulness in applying it to the fan-made content observed in this research's case studies. As defined by Genette, these case studies surround *Undertale* by being embedded in its gameplay, prolong it by inspiring further discussion and fan labour around the text and present it both to *Undertale*'s audience and potential new fans. Therefore, I will be using the term 'paratext' in its expanded definition as utilised in fandom studies.

In fan studies, there are many materials that are considered under the umbrella of what constitutes an epitext. For example, Werber & Stein (2023) point out the nature of digital fan forums discussions of ongoing narratives as a form of epitext, proposing the term "paratextual negotiation" to define their role and impact on ongoing popular narrative media (p. 1) . While *Undertale* is not an ongoing narrative, such public fan discussions will be considered in the thesis to properly understand how *Undertale* fans engage with the text in terms of the imagined voice. Fan studies also examine fan memory as a potential form of epitext and its value in reconstructing lost texts. In 2017, Hills & Garde-Hansen examined the *Doctor Who* fandom's work in reconstructing 'lost' episodes through existing visual and sonic records and their own memories of watching episodes that are now lost when they aired on TV. This sets a precedent for what the UF are seen to do throughout this thesis: constructing ideal imagined voices for characters and bringing them to fruition through providing guidelines for how they should be performed or by creating their own voice-centric fanmade adaptations of the text.

As noted by Barker and seen in the above research, fan studies engages with paratexts very broadly, and there are many fan-oriented activities that can be categorized as both peritexts and epitexts. There are some wider fan studies research that is useful to consider when discussing *Undertale* fan spaces such as Werber & Stein's (2023) and Hills & Garde-Hansen's (2017) work, but to avoid veering too far away from the topic of this thesis, I will now turn my attentions to how paratexts have been engaged with in game studies.

Game studies (and game sound studies) have also engaged with both peritexts and epitexts. Research in ludomusicology has often explored paratextuality, in terms of how it may be used as a tool in analysing and understanding video game music as well as the paratextual status of public and shared gameplay in relation to the text of a video game. Investigating the paratextual nature of such gameplay allows an understanding of how audiences and communities consider public and shared gameplay in relation to a video game by itself, and therefore how they may engage with the sound they hear in such gameplay. The following texts will be of importance when considering the potential paratextual nature of the case studies featured in this thesis.

An example of a text that examines paratextuality in relation to game sound is Michiel Kamp's chapter "Suture and Peritexts: Music Beyond Gameplay and Diegesis" in the 2016 book *Ludomusicology: Approaches to video game music*. This chapter concerns subcategories of paratexts, how they relate to games and how game sound may exist and evolve beyond video games. Kamp also briefly touches upon paratextual materials surrounding how games are advertised and presented to audiences, such as the box art for a game or a game's reviews. The ludomusicological angle of this work is to call for wider scholarship surrounding paratextual game sound within a game, such as main menu themes or loading screen music. This thesis will take things a step further, covering the ways in which audiences and communities build upon game sound beyond a game, with particular reference to how it is engaged with when heard in another's gameplay such as a Let's Play or a livestream. This could indeed be considered under paratexts Kamp describes as texts that circulate the main text like advertisements, considered under 'epitexts' (Kamp, 2016, p. 75). Therefore, this chapter will serve as a useful foundation for investigations considering the paratextual nature of online, shared gameplay and its possible status of text depending on how it is consumed by audiences and communities.

Mia Consalvo's 2017 article "When paratexts become texts: de-centering the game-as-text". considers the paratextual nature of Twitch streams, and whether or not they may be considered paratextual to a game. For example, if an audience or

community member were to engage with a Let's Play or a Twitch stream specifically for a particular online gaming personality's playstyle, commentary or performative persona, would the game being played then be considered paratextual to the gameplay and the person carrying it out? Considering the potential paratextual nature of online, shared gameplay (or lack thereof) will be useful to this research when investigating how game sound is received by audiences and communities when engaging with online gaming personalities, as it may reveal how certain Let's Plays and livestreams are viewed. Are games seen as paratextual to a certain player's streams and if so, how is the sound from that game received by a viewer? Texts like Kamp and Consalvo's will be important to consider when discussing the transformative nature of performative play in *Undertale* fan communities, or how as Consalvo says, the paratextual can become textual.

Going forward, the paratextual nature of each case study will be considered, with Consalvo's research on the slippery nature between text and paratext in game studies being given particular consideration in the case studies concerning online showcases of gameplay. Additionally, it will be important to consider how paratexts are engaged with in terms of fanmade content, which will be relevant to the final case study regarding *Undertale* fans' own dubbed adaptation of the original text.

Conclusions

This thesis will use a variety of texts from multiple disciplines to investigate how digital fan communities use vocal performance to transform game texts. Through investigation of literature from game studies (and game sound studies), voice perception studies, fan culture studies, I have identified the following research gaps that this thesis will address.

Ludomusicology and general game studies literature have thoroughly examined the relationship between the individual and the game they play (and indeed the game soundtrack they both create and interact with), but fewer empirical studies have

been carried out regarding shared gameplay or, in other words, gameplay that is experienced as a group. I argue that the best way to do this now is through a study concerning how game sound is interacted with in online gameplay environments like YouTube and Twitch.tv, given not only their growing popularity but also their rising prominence in academic literature.

Studies regarding online gameplay like Let's Plays and Twitch streams have investigated the performativity involved in such gameplay presentations via the player, though I am interested in exploring how this performativity manifests concerning game sound specifically. I argue that a good avenue for exploring this is the rising prominence of voice-acted gameplay and how certain voices for certain characters are received. Though approaching the research in this way would require knowledge of how voices are perceived or assumed to be based on appearance, which is where voice perception studies come in.

Fan studies literature was consulted from three angles: general fan studies literature that could apply to most or potentially all fan communities, fan studies literature that related specifically to ludomusicology and fan studies literature that also used *Undertale* as a case study. All texts outlined in these areas provided a large amount of potential reasoning for fan behaviours surrounding the imagined voice, but this research is interested in taking these findings further. For example, what can the general fan studies literature tell us about *Undertale* fan communities in particular, and what can then be discovered about fan engagement with game sound? Additionally, while ludomusicological fan studies literature investigates how the game's score is engaged with in fan content, how does the voice fare in these fan creations? Additionally, quite a bit of time has passed since the initial case studies on *Undertale* were carried out: has anything changed since? How can existing literature on *Undertale* and its fan communities inform research on these potential changes?

The goal of voice perception studies, by the admission of scholars that take part in the discipline, is not to provide accurate assumptions that can be made about a person's voice based on their appearance or vice versa. It is to understand which

assumptions are the most common based on particular vocal or physical traits and how they come to be. With this understanding in mind, this research can then utilise a case study method to investigate how voices are decided upon in a particular game. *Undertale* was chosen due to the large amount of voice-acted gameplay that exists online, as well as the seemingly quite strict rules for how voices are decided upon. These rules appear to be created by *Undertale*'s strong online fan community presence: in order to understand the *Undertale* fan community and how they decide upon voices, an investigation into fan studies literature had to be conducted.

Considering all these questions and the literature that provoked them will be beneficial in exploring how digital fan communities use vocal performance to transform game texts through upcoming survey analysis and case study discussion.

Methodology

This thesis was carried out using a combination of desk-based research, case study analysis and a mixed methods survey distributed among relevant parties. The desk-based portion of this research considered perspectives from a variety of academic disciplines, including game studies (and game sound studies), fan studies literature and voice studies literature. This was done to more specifically define and address a gap in current research and to inform the construction of the following research question: how do digital fan communities use vocal performance to transform game texts? While desk-based research was useful, for several reasons detailed below, it was necessary to supplement it with primary research, particularly concerning fan communities surrounding this thesis's case study, *Undertale*.

I personally am not and have never been involved in *Undertale* fan communities, but I did have a small amount of awareness of them through time spent observing the growth of Twitch streams and YouTube Let's Plays in my early academic career. This awareness largely came from some of the subjects of the upcoming case studies (particularly Jacksepticeye) as well as articles from the literature review such as Chloe Spencer's 2017 Kotaku article "The Undertale Drama". These documents are what sparked my interest in studying the *Undertale* fandom further in the context of the imagined voice and encouraged me to seek out more recent perspectives through primary research. This would allow me to present the community fairly given my own lack of involvement in it and have a well-informed account of it that I could then report on in this thesis.

The primary research consisted of a survey that concerned both fan studies issues (the current state of *Undertale* fan communities and how it compares to past literature on the UF) and questions relevant to game sound studies (imagined voices for *Undertale* characters). This is because when researching current *Undertale* fan behaviours and perspectives on the imagined voice, very few articles or public online forum posts were available, with the exception of Chloe Spencer's "The *Undertale* Drama" from 2017 and Bonnie Ruberg's "Straight-

washing "*Undertale*": Video games and the limits of LGBTQ representation" from 2018. Not only is this a small number, but both articles are over five years old and may no longer reflect a relevant picture of current *Undertale* fan community behaviours and preferences for the imagined voice.

I also did not deem online forum posts and discussions relating to *Undertale* fan behaviours and voice preferences to be the ideal foundation for investigating current *Undertale* fan communities. Many of the posts and comments were very old and may no longer reflect the opinions of the people that made them. Also, not everybody that wants to share insights on their experiences will do so in public forum online, and such perspectives could be (and indeed were) of value to this research.

It was decided that the best way to gain insights into the current *Undertale* fandom was to create an online survey and distribute it in the *Undertale* fan Discord server (with permission from its moderators). Discord was chosen as the site of distribution as it was a lot easier to reach a lot of *Undertale* fans specifically in this way versus, for example, posting on a public forum like Reddit. As of January 2023 when the survey was launched, the server had over 60,000 members. Given the invite-only nature of Discord, it was more likely that everyone in the Discord server receiving the survey was an *Undertale* fan. When posted on public forum, anyone could take the survey, and I wanted to keep responses largely to those who considered themselves *Undertale* fans. Additionally, in the *Undertale* Discord server, moderators were able to send notifications to all members regarding the survey to ensure everyone was aware of it, and keep it in a dedicated viewable channel that only mods could post in for transparency that could be seen and taken at any time by members no matter how much time had passed. This is in contrast to public forum, where posts can be drowned out rather quickly the older they are.

Draft questions, a consent form and a plain language statement explaining the nature of the research project were prepared and shared with the community's moderators, who then approved the survey's content and shared it amongst its

members. All collected responses were anonymous in order to comply with university guidelines regarding data collection; personal information from participants was not needed, and therefore it was not collected. The survey was created on Qualtrics and consisted of 13 questions, some of which included optional text boxes for participants to elaborate on their answers. The structure and general content of the questions presented in the survey is as follows:

- The first two questions asked participants about the longevity of their involvement in *Undertale* fan communities and how much they felt they ‘contributed’ to the fandom, in order to gauge later whether there was a connection between a fan community member’s perceived involvement in the fandom and their opinions on community behaviours and imagined voice.
- Questions three to six aimed to gauge fan understanding of Pacifist, Genocide and Neutral routes in the game and investigate whether there was still a passionate preference for Pacifist above all else (as depicted in Spencer’s research), and which routes were currently preferred and why.
- Questions seven and eight gathered current fan perspectives on Spencer’s findings regarding UF behaviours and norms and whether they were still relevant or applicable today.
- Question nine’s purpose was to test a hypothesis regarding fan attitudes towards ‘the other’ posed by Laura Felschow’s (2010) research in online TV fandoms, like the *Supernatural* fan community, and see if it was a useful explanation for fan attitudes in *Undertale* fan communities.
- Question ten was designed to give participants a chance to cast ideal voices for *Undertale* characters through either existing voice actors or descriptions of imagined voices, which could then be compared to see if there was a connection between how long someone had been in the UF and which voices they prefer, and if there was an overall consensus for certain characters on a specific voice type.
- Questions eleven and twelve’s purposes were to gauge *Undertale* fan community knowledge of voice-acted playthroughs and any preferences for

these, in order to gather information on the most popular ones which could then be considered for case studies.

- Question thirteen's purpose was to gather information on Ruberg's research and if/how fan behaviours and opinions described in her research have changed. At the time, the Ruberg question was left until last because it did not entirely fit with Spencer and Felschow's research regarding fan attitudes towards *Undertale*'s different routes. If the survey were to be repeated, I would be more likely to group all three together to make the survey flow better.

The survey was open for 16 months and received 63 responses up to May 2024 (when it closed). Participants were given the choice to skip any questions they wanted and to leave the survey at any time, so not every participant answered every question. This was done to accommodate the perspectives of as many fans as possible for whom all the questions may not be relevant, e.g. someone who wants to share insights on *Undertale* fandom evolution but perhaps has less to share on imagined character voices. By accommodating and including the views of a wide range of fans in this way, the survey intended to gather a more up-to-date picture of current *Undertale* fan community behaviours and ideal voice preferences.

Ethics clearance was obtained for both interviews and questionnaires, but interviews did not take place. For all three case studies, a primary reason for this was that everything of interest and relevance to the research goals was presented in the playthroughs themselves (and sometimes in additional content released providing retrospective on the original playthroughs), and therefore there was no need for interview. Additional reasoning behind the lack of interview data as is relevant to all three case studies is as follows.

For the Jacksepticeye case study, interviews were not sought out as any questions relevant to the research were answered in videos released by McLoughlin after the original *Undertale* playthrough that reflected on fan reception of his playthrough and any retrospective views towards his chosen *Undertale* voices. There is, of course, the question of whether these videos present an authentic picture of

McLoughlin's views on this which perhaps could have been further clarified via interview, but this could have perhaps led to an undesirable situation where interview content largely consisted of asking McLoughlin whether he was being truthful in public statements. I worried this could have led to a situation where the interview subject was made uncomfortable, potentially leading to psychological harm which would not have aligned with the university's ethics principles.

This was a similar situation to the Fry 64 case study. Ultimately, I decided that interviews were unnecessary, as all that was needed for analysis was present in the playthrough itself. The only things I would have wanted clarification on regarded what happened in the sections that were edited out or during conversations that were muted so the audience couldn't hear them in case there was anything that pertained to vocal performances within them. However, I had concerns that this would potentially lead to a perceived invasion of privacy and therefore it wasn't worth setting up interviews just to ask about those aspects of the Twitch stream, especially if there didn't end up being anything relevant to the research in those moments.

In the case of *The Cinematic Dub*, the person who constructed that project, PlotlinePlus, was reached for comment, but there was no response. The questions they would have been asked pertained to casting choices, their role in *Undertale* fan communities prior to *The Cinematic Dub*'s conception and how intentional the implementation of fan theories was in their work. While answers to these questions could have potentially strengthened analysis in the relevant case study, the research still draws solid conclusions without them.

Chapter 1: Survey Analysis - Fandom Questions

The following two chapters of this thesis will analyse survey results collected for this research. To better organise my findings, one chapter will detail survey results relevant to fan studies and the other will be more focused on imagined voices and voice acting performances in the UF. The reasoning behind the questions posed to participants and what information they aimed to gather is detailed in the methodology, and the effectiveness of this data gathering will be analysed throughout these next two chapters. There were two particular goals for these chapters. The first was to gain a more up-to-date account of *Undertale* fan communities, as well as a more comprehensive one, as literature regarding how the fandom interacts with game sound and imagined voice specifically is limited. This will allow for more reliable and robust discussions during case study chapters concerning UF norms both immediately following the fandom's inception and in the present day. The second was to further investigate the UF in relation to fan studies and voice perception. In other words, these chapters will unpack how *Undertale* fan behaviours of the past and present relate to wider literature studying fandom norms and traditions. Additionally, I will examine how the UF perceives imagined voices, and how they compare to literature on voice perception as well as real-world examples of voice casting based on appearance.

For clarity, this chapter deals only with questions concerning fandom involvement (questions 1-9 & question 13), while the next chapter has a more detailed focus on questions relating to imagined voices for *Undertale* characters. The purpose of the fandom involvement portion of the survey, in short, was to better understand past and present UF behaviours in terms of playstyle in order to have a fair view of the community when examining their reception to and behaviours when participating in subsequent case studies. In this chapter's conclusion, I will examine how effectively this outcome has been achieved in relation to the stated goals in the methodology and the results of the survey in practice. To do this, this chapter will draw upon relevant literature. As well as Spencer (2017) and Ruberg (2018) who appear in the questions themselves, Sarah Thornton's (1995) subcultural capital

will be discussed when touching upon how *Undertale* fans achieve status within their social circles, and Seraphine's (2018) study of the UF's relationship with the different *Undertale* routes will be useful when examining current UF norms.

1. How long have you been involved in the *Undertale* fandom?

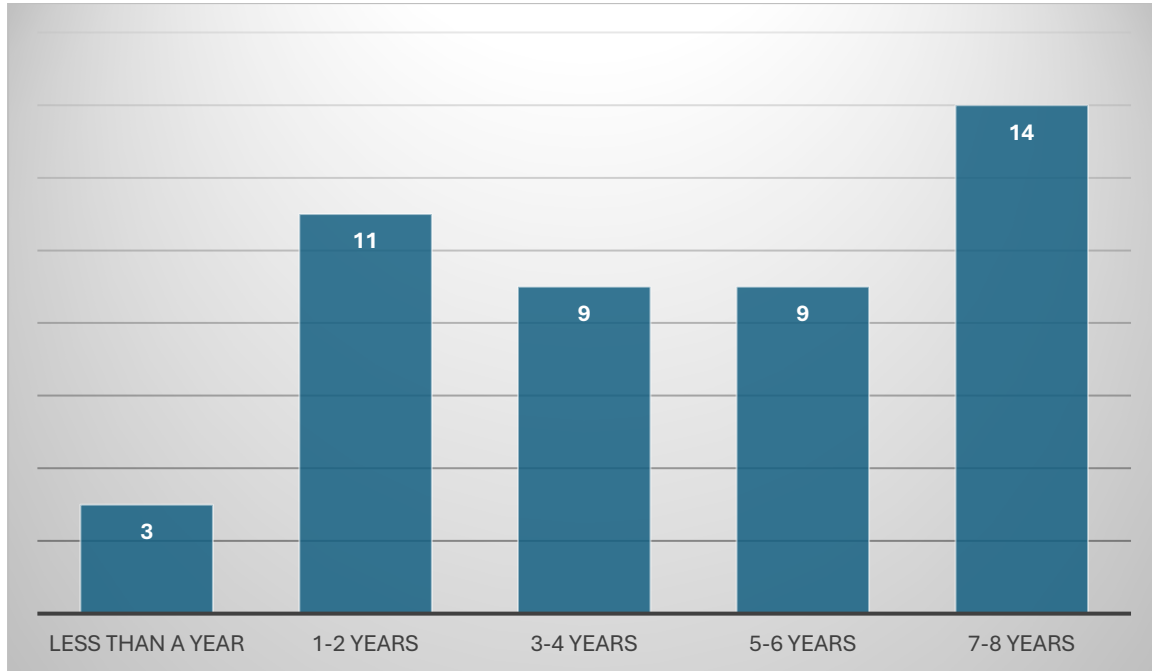


Figure 13: Responses to survey question 1

Participants were asked this question to determine whether there were any common perspectives amongst people who have been in the UF for the same amount of time. Data relating to the length of time spent in the UF was gathered in order to compare it to the results of questions 7 and 8 concerning Chloe Spencer's 2017 Kotaku article. This was to determine whether there was any obvious correlation between how long a person has been in the UF and whether they had encountered fan behaviours described by Spencer based on qualitative fandom research she carried out in 2017. For example, if people involved in the UF for less than a year to 2 years encountered these behaviours less frequently, does that mean they're less common now than they were in 2017?

As seen in the above chart, the two most selected options for this question were "7-8 years" and "1-2 years", meaning later questions benefitted from perspectives from fans with a variety of different experiences. In later sections of this chapter concerning questions 7 and 8 in particular, I will unpack how answers to this question informed later survey results specifically concerning Spencer's research.

2. How involved would you say you are in the *Undertale* fandom?

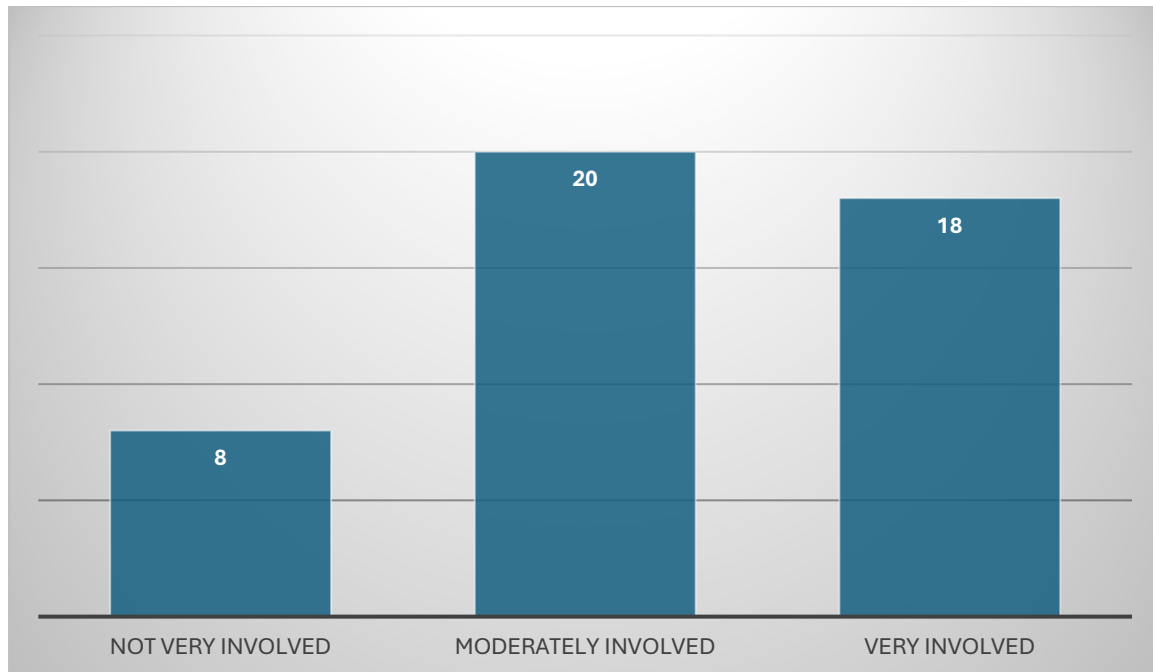


Figure 14: Responses to survey question 2

At 43%, the most commonly chosen answer to this question was ‘moderately involved’, though the text box for elaboration yielded some intriguing results that reveal some of the UF’s relationship with fandom hierarchy and fan labour.

For example, participants that chose ‘very involved’ could be separated into two categories based on their text answer elaboration: the first is involvement via communication with other fans and sharing fan-made content on their own social media. For example, one participant who selected ‘very involved’ said, “I’m active in *Undertale* fan communities, Reddit threads, forums and servers. I share a lot of fan art on social media too”. The second category is involvement via content creation around *Undertale*; for instance, one participant selected ‘very involved’ and cited modding activities as their example. This is perhaps an indication of how subcultural capital is currently obtained within UF spaces: by participating in fandom discussions and creating fanmade content for the UF.

Additionally, some participants claimed to be ‘moderately involved’, but would then detail activities that suggested a quite high level of community involvement. For example, one participant chose ‘moderately involved’, but then said that they “wrote two fics, engage in RP and moderate a community”¹¹. The caveat that was occasionally added in such answers was that while they created a lot of content for the UF and contributed to fan forum management, they did not engage in discussions with other fans regularly. This could also be the case in reverse: some fans chose ‘moderately involved’ that engaged with other *Undertale* fans regularly, but rarely created *Undertale* fan content. For instance, one participant said that while they don’t create fan content themselves, they are familiar with “every detail” of the game text. This could further indicate how subcultural capital is accumulated in the UF: social engagement and fan labour are both important, but for some fans, both must be done in order to consider oneself highly involved.

Answers to this question made me consider how a study like this might be repeated and improved upon. In this question, for instance, I did not include specific examples of what might constitute a high or low level of fan community involvement in the question itself in order to avoid overly leading questions, but perhaps this element of the research might have benefitted from including examples in the question itself. For example, having an additional multiple choice selection of common fan activities (e.g. attending fan conventions, creation of fan art or fan fiction) where fans could choose which activities they carried out and then compare it to how involved they considered themselves to be could be useful. This addition to future research may improve results and help researchers gain a stronger understanding of fan activities when carrying out interdisciplinary research such as this.

In any case, the results of this question highlight two key qualities required to ascend *Undertale*’s fan hierarchy: fan labour and fan discussion. These are two key UF activities that will be especially relevant when discussing later case studies, and their importance is highlighted in responses to this question.

¹¹ In this instance, “fics” refer to fan fiction and RP refers to role-play of *Undertale* characters.

3. Are you aware of all the different ways *Undertale* can be played, e.g. Pacifist (sparing all enemies), Genocide (killing all enemies) and Neutral (killing some enemies and sparing others)?

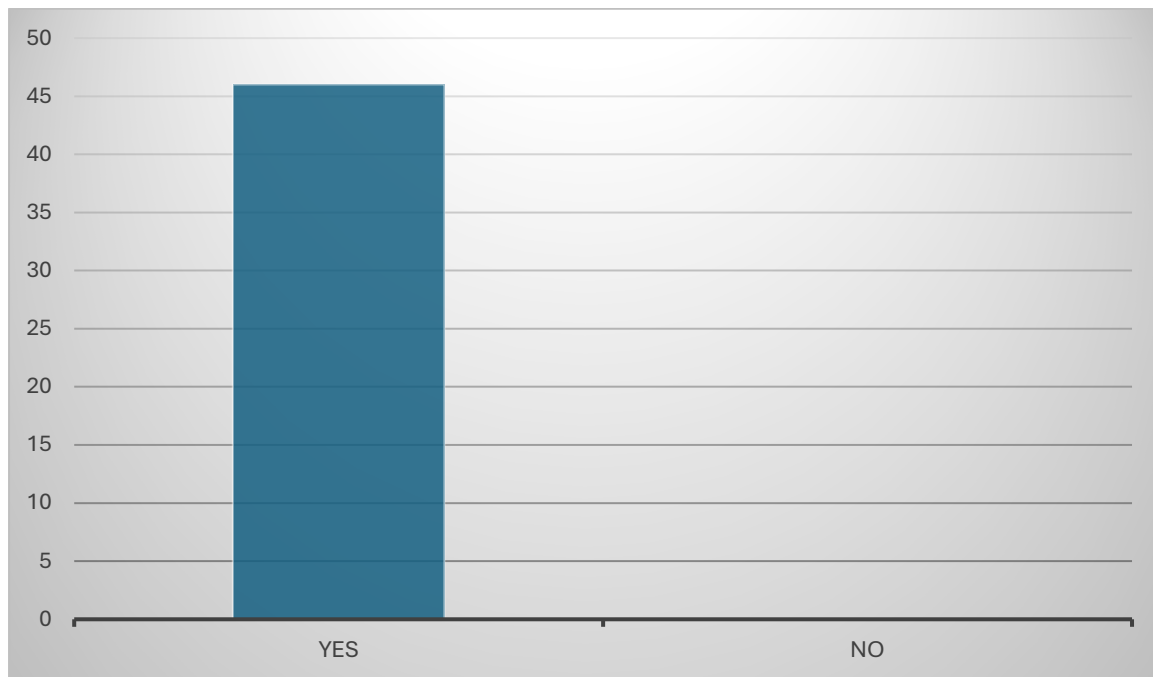


Figure 15: Responses to survey question 3

All 46 participants that answered this question voted “Yes”, and nobody voted “No”, signalling complete awareness of the different playstyles amongst *Undertale* fans no matter how casually they engage with fandom activity. The purpose of this question was to make sure participants were aware of Pacifist, Genocide and Neutral playstyles before they were asked about them.

Responses to this question indicate that knowledge of different playstyles is widespread, and one does not need to have been involved in the UF for a long time to know about them. Additionally, this suggests that fans are likely to be aware of them regardless of how often they participate in common UF activities, as fans of all perceived levels of involvement selected ‘yes’ to this question, including those that selected ‘not very involved’.

4. Which of the aforementioned routes have you played/watched via YouTube Let's Play or Twitch stream?



Figure 16: Responses to survey question 4

Survey results confirm that the preferred way to engage with *Undertale* is to play or watch all the routes, as 'all [routes]' was the most popular choice with 40 out of 46 participants who answered this question selecting it. This will be relevant to later discussions in case study chapters regarding how knowledge gained from different playstyles informs the preferred imagined voice for each character (for example, Sans has multiple preferred voice types due to different presentations of the character in Pacifist and Genocide routes).

Results in this question and the next two questions hint at favouritism towards the 'Pacifist' route, like in Spencer's (2017) and Seraphine's (2018) findings. However, there are some nuances to be found here, as shown in the second highest single category 'Other'. Two participants said that they only played Pacifist, while no participants only played Genocide or Neutral. In the 'Other' category, four

participants detailed some different experiences. One participant said that they had only engaged with Pacifist and Neutral routes, another had played Pacifist and Neutral and watched gameplay footage of only parts of the Genocide route, one said they had only engaged with the Pacifist route and ‘aborted’ an attempted Genocide playthrough, and finally one said that they engaged with Pacifist and Neutral routes (unclear on whether they played or watched) and watched gameplay footage of the final boss fight in Genocide. The ‘other’ category indicates some potential improvements to this question in future research: it may be worth having separate questions indicating whether participants played or watched certain routes to identify nuances in the results, as well as perhaps including more potential answers to choose from e.g. ‘Pacifist and Neutral’ or ‘Parts of [Route]’ as the ‘other’ category indicates a potential need for them.

In any case, while Pacifist still appears to be the most popular choice as it was in 2017 when Spencer wrote her article (all participants indicated that they have engaged with it in one way or another), survey results show that most *Undertale* fans now like to take all possible routes into account. This shows a difference from Seraphine’s (2018) findings as well: in Seraphine’s research, it was found that while some fans had a personal preference for non-Pacifist routes, they still considered Pacifist to be the most valid and best way to play. Pacifist is still as highly regarded as it was then, but now it appears there is more of a willingness to consider other routes when participating in fan activities.

It is not surprising that participants began Genocide playthroughs and then aborted them, as Genocide requires quite a lot of patience from the player. In a Genocide run, it’s not enough to simply kill every monster you come across, you must actively seek them out and kill all of them. This can take a very long time, as enemies can only be encountered randomly while walking around the game’s map. Why walk around a map you’ve traversed several times over to kill one last monster when you could progress through the game and discover new areas and characters?

Also, Genocide is unlikely to be the only route played due to how rare it is for a new player to complete it by accident. There are no in-game instructions that specifically tell the player, “You need to kill every single monster in every level to get the Genocide ending”. Information on a successful Genocide run can only be found in online game guides or in fan communities. This contrasts with Pacifist and Neutral routes where players are urged by in-game characters to “show some mercy” for the best possible ending; while this doesn’t directly tell the player how to complete a Pacifist run, it does provide more hints for route completion than in a Genocide run. Therefore, it would be very rare for somebody’s first and only playthrough of *Undertale* to be Genocide, as a new player has no indication that such a route even exists.

On the other hand, it is somewhat surprising that no participants only completed or watched a Neutral run of the game. Neutral is logically the most likely route a first-time player would take in *Undertale*, as once again there is little in-game instruction that advises a player of the ‘spare everyone’ and ‘kill everyone’ routes. Removed from online guides and fan community discussions, it would seem likely that a new player with no knowledge of *Undertale* would do a Neutral run. However, the Neutral route’s final moments do imply to the player that there is more to the game than just that route. Neutral features a concrete ending to the story (Sans calls the player character once they have escaped the Underground and tells them all the consequences of their choices), but after that, Flowey appears on screen and tells the player that they should consider going back to their save file for a ‘better ending’. While this is treated more as a light suggestion than a command to the player, survey results indicate that if Neutral was indeed their first *Undertale* route, many players took Flowey’s advice and eventually achieved the Pacifist ending.

The primary conclusion of this data is that most *Undertale* fans have a solid understanding of all the possible outcomes of player choice in *Undertale*. I argue this demonstrates the UF’s dedication to knowing everything there is to know about all aspects of the game, and the importance of having such knowledge to UF spaces. According to survey results, part of being an *Undertale* fan is familiarity

with all its potential routes. I argue that this is evidenced both in the unanimous “Yes” response to the previous question, as well as select testimony from participants. For example, when responding to a later question about preferred routes, one participant stated that “You need an understanding of all routes to fully articulate Undertale’s plot”. While answering the same question, one participant stated that while Genocide was their favourite, they only considered it to be the best route “if you have done a neutral or pacifist playthrough before this route, as it makes you bond with the characters a lot more”. The importance of having significant knowledge of the game’s lore will be important to later chapters concerning fan discussions. Later, I will argue in the that extensive knowledge of all *Undertale*’s possible story and character beats is the UF’s version of subcultural capital; the more knowledge someone has, the more well regarded they become in *Undertale* fan spaces (Thornton, 1995). In some cases, this also translates to the imagined voice: the more subcultural capital one has in the UF, the more likely their interpretation of character voices is to be accepted by wider UF communities. This will be explored more thoroughly in the upcoming case studies.

5. From a narrative perspective, do you prefer *Undertale*'s Pacifist, Genocide or Neutral route?

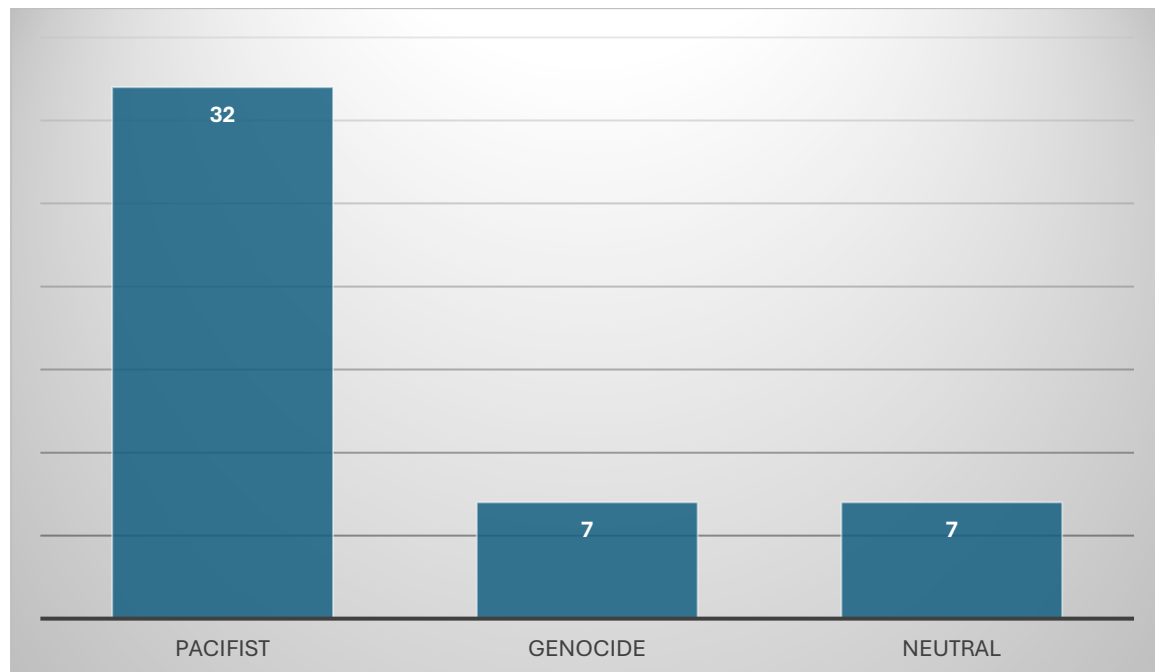


Figure 17: Responses to survey question 5

In terms of narrative, Pacifist was the most popular choice amongst survey participants with 32 votes, with Neutral and Genocide both receiving 7 votes each. Participants were given the option to describe why they preferred one playthrough's story over the other, and many of them did. However, it was often mentioned by people who voted for Neutral and Genocide that the narrative impact of their chosen routes was most effective when engaged with along with all the other routes, signifying current fandom preference for engaging with all playstyles in equal measure. This supports my previous argument; knowledge of every possible *Undertale* narrative is essential for participating in fan activities and therefore gaining subcultural capital in UF communities.

Answers to this question also showed that *Undertale* fans consider “completion” to be an important factor in their enjoyment of video game narratives. Pacifist voters cited the “complete” nature of the story as a key reason they favoured their chosen route. One participant stated that the Pacifist ending felt the most “complete”, with an epilogue showing what happened to all the characters after

being freed from the Underground, while other endings with all the monsters either still trapped or dead didn't feel as satisfying. "Completion" is a complicated concept in both ludomusicology and fan studies disciplines, in terms of completing all a game's levels and completing a narrative text in a meaningful way.

"Completion" will be more thoroughly explored in chapter 5 of this thesis concerning *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub*. For now, however, we can note the importance of "completion" to current UF communities through these results.

Participants that voted for Pacifist also appreciated the character driven aspects of the Pacifist route. Since no-one dies in a Pacifist route, the player character can spend a lot more time with the characters than they would otherwise. One participant cited that this time with the characters allowed them to learn as much as they could about *Undertale's* world and lore, with another stating that this added to the enjoyable nature of Pacifist's ending; since the player has potentially grown attached to all the characters and came to know them better, they're even happier when the characters are all "[living] their lives" away from the Underground at the end of the Pacifist route. This indicates that there are some traces of Spencer's research still present in current UF communities, particularly a fondness for the characters leading to a preference for Pacifist. However, these preferences are communicated in a much more measured and less confrontational way than they were in Spencer's research. For example, in Spencer's original article, she interviewed an *Undertale* fan who had witnessed people in fan communities who preferred the Genocide route over Pacifist being compared to real-life murderers and child abusers, which is quite a logical leap based on assumptions. The survey results show a departure from such attitudes, with participants listing their reasons for their preferences without hinting at any sort assumptions made about fans of other playstyles. While Pacifist is still preferred, fans appear to be more likely to enjoy Pacifist on its own terms, and as we will now observe, fans of other playstyles appear much more confident in sharing their preference without fear of such backlash detailed in testimony in Spencer's research.

Neutral voters noted appreciation of the realistic nature of the route, with one participant pointing out that if a human child really did fall into a new world filled with monsters, it's unlikely they would try to either befriend or kill all of them; they'd simply do what was necessary to survive and escape, leading to a mixture of sparing and killing. Neutral voters also cited the variety and simplicity of the narrative when describing why they enjoyed that route the most. One participant stated that they enjoyed the large number of endings available to them in a Neutral run, and another wrote that they felt Neutral routes served as a good introduction to the game's mechanics and lore before diving into potential Pacifist or Genocide runs. The latter answer suggests that to get the best narrative experience with Neutral, this participant believes that it should be considered alongside Pacifist and Genocide. This view was also present amongst votes for Genocide: 2 out of 7 people who voted for Genocide also expressed the view that it was most effective when played alongside the other routes.

Additionally, Genocide voters cited the 'disturbing vibe' of the route as a reason they enjoy it, and one voter stated that they found Genocide's narrative highly effective in eliciting guilt from the player for killing everyone. Genocide voters stated that while Genocide was their favourite *Undertale* narrative experience, it was best enjoyed after playing through either a Pacifist or Neutral run. One participant said that after getting to know all the characters through Pacifist and Neutral playthroughs, Genocide "hits your heart in a way I have rarely seen done". Participants who voted for Pacifist or Neutral routes would sometimes mention the "interesting" nature of Genocide, considering it important even if it wasn't their preferred way to enjoy *Undertale's* story.

In summary, Pacifist voters indicate strong attachment to the characters and a preference for narrative 'completion', Neutral voters enjoyed the realism and variety of that route and Genocide voters admired the effective ways in which the game elicited guilt from the player. However, it is notable that participants did not write off other routes entirely when discussing their favourite. One participant stated that while they "get the most out of" a Pacifist playthrough, they felt it was important to play through all routes to fully experience the story of

Undertale, once again showing an evolution from data gathered on the UF in Seraphine's (2018) research. Therefore, we can argue that completion isn't just important to Pacifist voters: some participants consider an experience with *Undertale* incomplete without all possible routes being played or watched, as the plot cannot be 'fully articulated' without having engaged with them all as argued previously. The concept of 'completion' as it applies to *Undertale*, game sound studies and fan community studies will be more thoroughly examined in later case studies.

6. From a gameplay perspective, do you prefer *Undertale*'s Pacifist, Neutral or Genocide route?

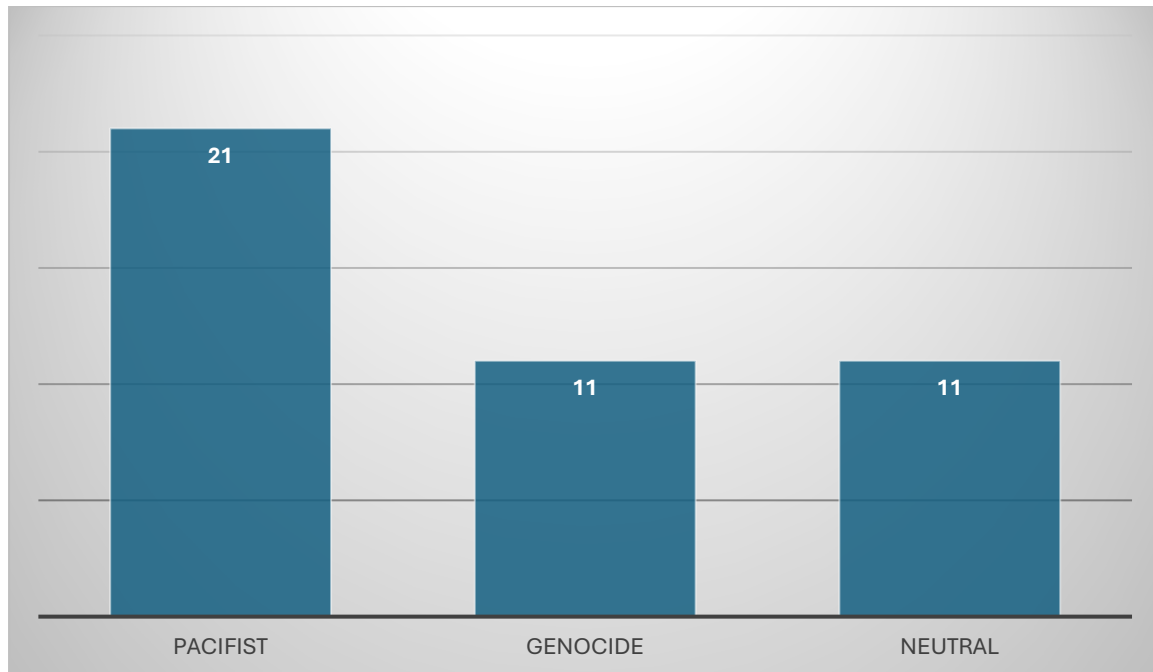


Figure 18: Responses to survey question 6

While Pacifist is still highly favoured here as it was in the previous question concerning narrative preferences, the votes for Genocide and Neutral routes are higher when choosing a favourite path from a gameplay perspective. Comparing these results indicates some nuances in route preference, too - out of 43 participants that gave answers for both questions five and six, 23 participants had different answers for preferred narrative and gameplay experience. A recurring theme was a preference for Pacifist's story but Genocide's gameplay, with 8 participants selecting these choices. In optional testimony, players enjoyed the 'feel-good' story of the Pacifist run but the more challenging boss fights in Genocide, particularly against Undyne the Undying and Sans. This potentially indicates a further departure from fan attitudes collected by Spencer in 2017, with fans openly enjoying opposing routes in different ways and playing them in tandem for their personal favourite *Undertale* experience. This also indicates evolution from fandom attitudes discussed by Seraphine (2018), in which fans were asked similar questions but were much more rigid in their choice of route, e.g. admitting to enjoying Genocide more on the whole but insisting that Pacifist is the correct

way to play, implying that personal preference doesn't matter. Here, fans are much more open about their personal preference and rarely mentioned what route people 'should' take.

Those who voted for Pacifist enjoyed discovering the unique ways in which they could spare enemies throughout that route; in *Undertale*, monsters can only be spared by carrying out actions unique to them; the sorrowful Napstablook, for example, can only be spared if the player cheers him up during battle, while insecure teenage comedian Snowdrake can only be spared if the player laughs at his jokes, and cleaning enthusiast Woshua must be cleaned himself if the player is to pass him. Participants found this preferable to "attacking everything that moves" as it allowed them to consider a variety of new approaches that were not characteristic of typical RPG battle scenarios. Pacifist voters also remarked that the gameplay was a lot easier than in other routes, as they only had to avoid attacks and could bypass some of the more difficult boss battles that were only present in the Genocide run. However, it is also worth noting that some participants found Pacifist to be rather challenging; since the player cannot level up from killing monsters as they can in Genocide and Neutral routes, they are considerably weaker during battle scenarios and therefore more at risk of being killed by opponents. In short, Pacifist voters enjoyed the ingenuity of the gameplay in a Pacifist route and its easy/challenging nature, depending on participant perspective.

Like in the narrative-focused question, Neutral voters enjoyed the variety of the route in terms of gameplay. Participants claimed that since players have the option to either figure out how to spare a character or engage in battle with them, they had much more choice in how to engage with the gameplay mechanics and a much more exciting experience with the game because of that. Additionally, one participant cited Neutral routes as a perfect middle ground between Pacifist and Genocide in terms of gameplay; they felt Pacifist was too dialogue heavy and didn't have enough for the player to do, and that Genocide had too much walking around looking for enemies to kill, while in Neutral players have the freedom to

talk to other characters as often or as little as they liked while only engaging in battle when they wanted to.

Other Neutral voters found this to be true in terms of difficulty as well; with Pacifist generally being considered the easiest and Genocide the hardest, Neutral can sit somewhere in between these two extremes. Neutral was also cited as the best experience for those who wanted a taste of both Pacifist and Genocide playthroughs, as players could spare any characters they'd grown attached to and kill any others to gain boosts in LV. One participant also noted that the guilt of killing characters that is usually present in a Genocide route was lessened in a Neutral one, as they could simply remind themselves that killing at least one monster was a prerequisite for completing Neutral but that didn't mean they had to kill everyone.

Genocide voters frequently cited the challenging boss battles as an advantage of the route. The most frequently cited boss battles were against Undyne the Undying and Sans, both of which can only be played in Genocide routes and have high difficulty levels. While such battles can be frustrating, participants felt a great sense of achievement and fun in completing them. Genocide voters also felt that Genocide simply had 'more gameplay' to it; of all the routes, Genocide is the most similar in gameplay to combat-heavy RPGs that players may be used to, and therefore favoured by those seeking a familiar experience. Given that those who favour Genocide in terms of gameplay cite high difficulty and 'more gameplay' as points in the game's favour, it may be surprising that it has historically been less popular than its Pacifist counterpart in *Undertale* fan spaces.

This begs the question: how important is skill when obtaining subcultural capital in *Undertale* fan spaces? Referring back to Cheng's discussion of LOTRO from the literature review, skill was seen as an important factor in gaining social capital in LOTRO communities, in particular the ability to perform potentially difficult virtual instruments in real time (Cheng, 2014). However, skill is not spoken about by participants as something that is of importance when gaining favour with the wider *Undertale* fan community, and is framed largely as something that related to

personal satisfaction. This lack of reverence towards skill in video games among *Undertale* fans is potentially explained by Nicholas A. Hanford (2018)'s work discussing the connection between the social capital of skill in certain gaming spaces and typical gender roles. Hanford explains that completing difficult games (or games set to a high difficulty) is considered an important skill by some gaming communities. In particular, it is seen as an endeavour that requires "hard work and effort", which Hanford argues are at the heart of the construction of masculine identities (p. 154). Referring back to discussions on Gamergate from the literature review, masculinity is indeed very important to some gamers. However, as will be seen throughout this thesis, *Undertale* fans have little interest in such ideals, and are often directly at odds with those that do. This will be most obvious in the Jacksepticeye case study chapter, where the UF's relationship to Gamergate is discussed. For now, however, participants' responses demonstrate that skill is not widely considered important in the collection of UF subcultural capital, in contrast to other gaming communities.

Voters continued to be respectful of other routes when choosing a favourite. For example, one participant who voted for Pacifist found Genocide to be 'gruelling and boring', but did not dismiss it as totally unenjoyable and stated they believed that Genocide had to be that way to lampoon the modern necessity of killing NPCs when progressing through a video game. These results indicate further departure from the fan behaviours described by Spencer. In Spencer's article, fan preferences are described as very rigid with little room for nuance: Pacifist above all else. These results indicate a shift in those beliefs, with participants showing variety in their perspectives: namely, participants were able to recognise that their narrative and gameplay preferences were different across routes and that the narrative and/or gameplay of some routes were enhanced by engaging with other less preferred routes.

7. Writing for Kotaku in 2017, Chloe Spencer argues that *Undertale* fans are very passionate about the game being played in a certain way and can be very vocal about this. Would you agree with this assessment?

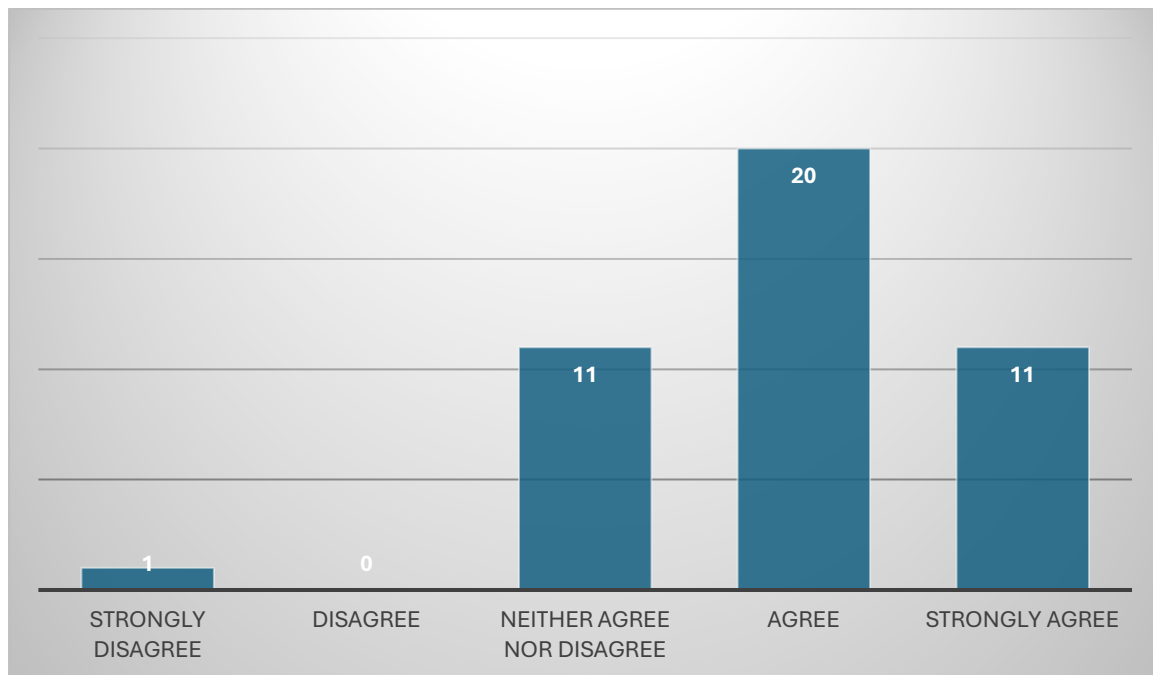


Figure 19: Responses to survey question 7

Out of 43 participants, 31 agreed with Spencer in some capacity, with no participants selecting 'disagree' and only one selecting 'strongly disagree'. However, it is worth noting that the person who selected 'strongly disagree' left a comment expressing approval of Spencer's conclusions and citing examples of the referenced behaviour in current fandom activities, so it is likely that this was a mistake, and they meant to select 'strongly agree' instead.

The mixed methods approach to this survey proved to be beneficial for the next two questions regarding Spencer in particular, as when considered together, both the qualitative and quantitative elements of these questions yielded some very nuanced results. For example, the above results indicate that Spencer's conclusions are indeed still considered to be resonant among *Undertale* fans, though when observing the testimonies given alongside these answers, fans are

shown to have more complex views of Spencer's findings than the numbers alone would suggest. For example, 5 participants who selected some variant of 'agree' added some sort of caveat to their answer, whether it be making it clear that they do not condone the behaviours described by Spencer (in particular making demands about how *Undertale* should be played by others and admonishing them if these are not followed) or that they encountered these behaviours in the past but now no longer do. Additionally, no-one who selected 'agree' appeared to hold the beliefs described in Spencer's findings themselves, at least not willingly as detailed later in the section. I argue that this data suggests a shift in fan attitudes since the time of Spencer's article; while her findings appear to still resonate with current fans as shown in the survey results, the behaviours described by Spencer are no longer the popular or preferred way to conduct oneself in the UF.

Additionally, I argue the nuances discussed below demonstrate Thornton's findings in action in the UF; during her time studying club subcultures, she found that the criteria for gaining subcultural capital can always change, and it can change quickly (Thornton, 1995, pp. 154-155). The data collected here demonstrates that this can be true of other subcultures, like online communities such as the UF. Preferred behaviours can always change in a fan community, and they can change very quickly. In other words, the road to gaining subcultural capital within a fandom space can always change, like it has in the UF.

Of the participants who selected 'strongly agree', one participant made it clear that while they agree that strong reactions to other people's chosen playstyles exist within the UF, they do not condone the behaviour. This is demonstrative of a certain attitude seen throughout the comments left in this survey; current *Undertale* fans wish to distance themselves from the attitudes described in Spencer's Kotaku article. Another participant answering this question who selected 'neither agree nor disagree' even described the act of forcing others to play *Undertale* in their own preferred way as "immoral". This separation can also be observed in answers to the questions regarding preferred playstyles; participants would give a reason for their chosen playstyle but also draw attention to the positive qualities of playstyles they don't personally enjoy. For example, a

participant who selected Pacifist as their favourite *Undertale* narrative experience described the other routes as ‘nice’ but not as narratively satisfying as Pacifist and went on to further describe the positive qualities of Neutral runs in particular in the gameplay question.

Only one participant (who selected ‘agree’) admitted to holding the same beliefs as *Undertale* fans in Spencer’s article, though was much less proud of it than fans described in Spencer’s or Seraphine’s research were. While the participant respected the choices of individual players, they couldn’t help but privately feel confused and frustrated by those who chose to play Genocide before any other route. If a player completes the Genocide route on their first playthrough of *Undertale*, the characters will remember the player’s previous actions and trust them less if the player then chooses to do a Pacifist route (Spencer, 2017). New players may not know this when beginning a Genocide run, and therefore it can be frustrating for long-time fans to see new players accidentally tarnish any potential Pacifist runs. This participant’s sentiments are echoed in the answers to the questions on preferred playstyles; those who cited Genocide as their favourite narrative experience emphasised the importance of playing it after a Pacifist run, therefore this participant’s opinion is not an uncommon one. However, this participant expressed no desire to force anyone to play *Undertale* in their own preferred way, and said that when participating in fan spaces, they mostly keep these feelings on other people’s playthroughs to themselves.

One participant referred to the *Undertale* fans described by Spencer as a “vocal minority” and expressed both empathy and exhaustion with them: “[Telling other players exactly how to play the game] comes from a good place, wanting the player to experience everything the game has to offer, but it’s led to some extremely irritating backseat gaming from a few people”¹². Another participant even offered an alternate explanation for the behaviour described in Spencer’s article; in the Kotaku article, Spencer displays several negative comments from Markiplier’s early *Undertale* videos that express dissatisfaction with how he chose

¹² Backseat gaming in this instance refers to spectators to someone else’s gameplay offering advice or help to the player.

to play the game. Considered altogether, it reads like an organised campaign to force him to change his playstyle. However, this participant suggests that “quite a lot of people will just voice their objections once instead of continuously pestering the person doing the route”. This perhaps suggests that *Undertale* fans weren’t quite as hung up on other people’s playstyles as the Kotaku article implies, but the volume of individual comments made it seem like they were at the time.

A key conclusion drawn from the answers to this question is that this behaviour was prominent at the time of Spencer and Seraphine’s research and traces of the described past beliefs remain in some capacity today (especially through love of the Pacifist route). However, certain attitudes and behaviours perhaps are not quite as common to encounter as they used to be. One participant who selected ‘agree’ stated “When *Undertale* first came out it was like that, but now it’s not like that”, and another proposing that the young age of *Undertale* fans at the time of the game’s release was a contributing factor in such behaviour in 2017; “People just don’t care [about how other people play the game] anymore. Everyone grew up”.

Now that the answers to this question have provided a clearer picture of previous and current states of the UF in different years, I argue that fan behaviour may have influenced how a person played the game online for an audience depending on the year the playthrough was released or streamed. Therefore, this could also have affected how voices were performed and how imagined voices were decided upon. We can consider this when engaging with later case studies.

In terms of comparing this data to results gathered in question 1 concerning the amount of time participants had been involved in UF, further nuances were discovered. Of the 12 participants who have been involved in the UF for 7-8 years that responded to this question, 10 selected a variant of ‘agree’, while 2 selected ‘neither agree nor disagree’. However, when analysing results from the 8 participants who selected ‘5-6 years’ and responded to this question, answers were much more varied, with only 3 selecting ‘agree’ and 5 selecting ‘neither agree nor disagree’, with additional testimonies from the latter category affirming that

while the attitudes described by Spencer were prominent specifically in the first year following *Undertale*'s widespread release, such behaviours quickly calmed down, perhaps demonstrating the beginning of a shift in *Undertale* fan behaviours and attitudes even around the time Spencer's research was published.

Interestingly, the rest of the results shows a noticeable spike in those who agreed with Spencer's conclusions: for fans that chose '3-4 years', 8 out of 9 participants chose a variant of 'agree'. For those that selected '1-2 years', 8 out of 11 chose a variant of 'agree'. And finally, all 3 participants that selected 'less than a year' that also responded to this question chose 'agree'. On the surface, this suggests a potential return of the attitudes described by Spencer, but the testimony from these participants provides further nuance. For example, a participant that has been in UF communities for 3-4 years agreed with Spencer's conclusions, but elaborated that they specifically agreed with Spencer's findings that Pacifist is the most popular playstyle, not necessarily about fan attitudes of the time. A participant who selected '1-2 years' chose 'agree' for this question, but clarified that they had not personally encountered such behaviours in current fandom, only that they knew such incidents had occurred. Additionally, when a participant that had been involved in the fandom for less than a year that chose 'agree' provided an example of attitudes described by Spencer, they gave an anecdote detailing heated arguments over the correct genders of certain characters where it is not explicitly stated in the text. This is certainly an example of how discussions in the UF can get heated, but is not necessarily indicative of fans exhibiting demanding behaviours regarding playstyle in current UF communities. Ergo, those that agreed with Spencer's conclusions still provided examples of how behaviours and attitudes have changed since the time of the article's publication.

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from this question indicate that Spencer's findings were and remain resonant among *Undertale* fans, and that certain elements of Spencer's findings may still be found in current fandom activities, for example preferences for Pacifist playstyles. However, survey responses show that fandom behaviours and attitudes surrounding preferred playstyles have since changed: only one participant admitted to holding beliefs

held by fans described by Spencer, and expressed a very nuanced view of them. Fans that experienced the behaviours around the time of Spencer's research being published acknowledge them but strongly suggest they want to move past them. There are further nuances to be discussed in the next question, where participants speak specifically about their own experiences in the UF in terms of Spencer's research.

8. Are Spencer's conclusions on *Undertale* fan community behaviour reflective of your own experiences in the *Undertale* fandom?

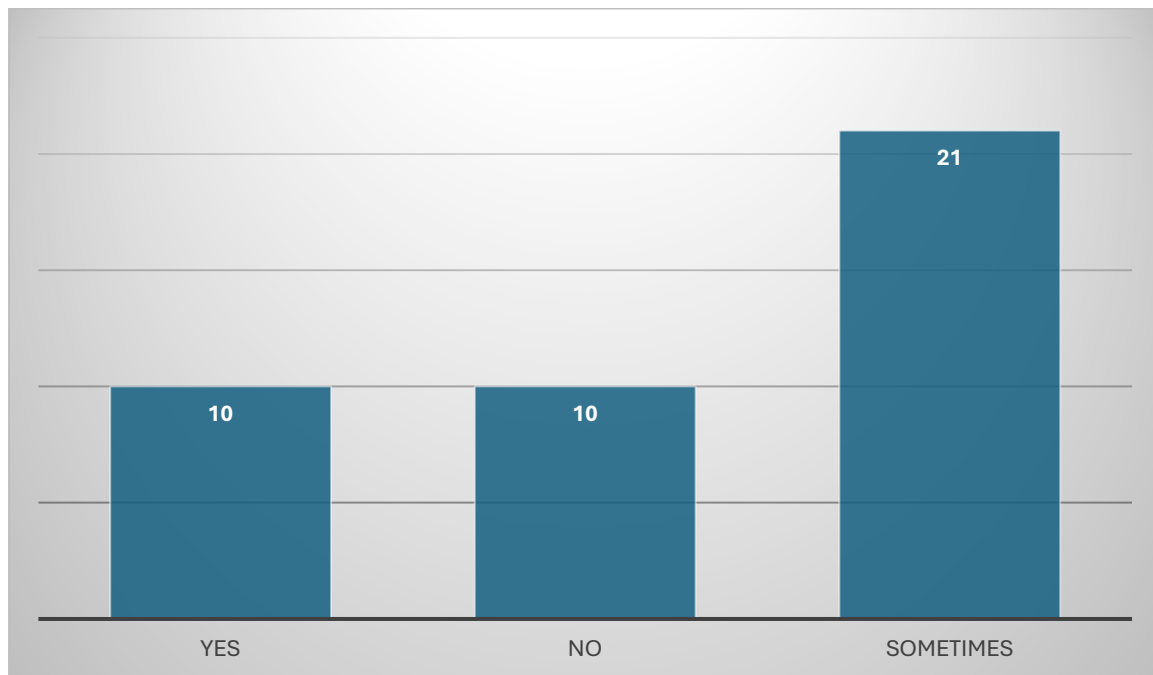


Figure 20: Responses to survey question 8

This question served as a companion to the previous one and was intended to shed further light on the current resonance of Spencer's findings. Of the 41 participants that answered this question, a combined total of 31 reported experiencing the behaviours described by Spencer in some capacity. The most selected answer was 'sometimes', with over half of the participants choosing this answer, which on the surface already suggests that while *Undertale* fans acknowledge the resonance of Spencer's findings, it does not always translate to their own individual experiences. When considered together, and combining participants answers to different questions, we can further reveal the nuanced nature of Spencer's findings as they are currently relevant to the UF.

For example, observing combinations of answers to questions 1, 7 and 8 reveal intricacies in individual UF experiences. Of the 10 people who have been involved in the UF for 7-8 years who selected 'agree' for the previous question, 1 chose not

to answer this question, 3 chose 'yes', 4 chose 'sometimes' and 2 chose 'no'. With only 2 participants out of 10 having reported to have never experienced these behaviours, this data indicates that Spencer's findings do indeed align with the experiences of individual fans at the time of Spencer's findings. However, there are still some nuances here: the category with the highest amount of overlap here (4) is people who have been involved in the UF for 7-8 years who agreed with Spencer's findings but only sometimes found them to be reflective of their own experiences in the UF. This further demonstrates what was said in testimony detailed in answers to the previous question: while *Undertale* fans acknowledge Spencer's findings, they do want to make nuances apparent and stress the importance of acknowledging the change in attitudes and behaviours over the years.

In the '5-6 years' category, one of the more divisive groups from the previous question, similar nuances are shown: from the 3 participants in this category that chose 'agree', one of each chose 'yes', 'no' and 'sometimes' for this question, while from the participants that chose 'neither agree nor disagree', 3 chose 'sometimes' and 2 chose 'no'. This further suggests, along with data from the last question, that there were some potential shifts in attitude and behaviour among *Undertale* fans even around the time of Spencer's 2017 research. Indeed, Spencer's own research supports this theory too: although the testimony collected from fans details instances of fans believing the game should be played in a certain way, the fans Spencer interviews hold no such beliefs. This indicates that even at the time of Spencer's research, there were plenty of fans who did not behave in a demanding or accusatory way when discussing other fans' playstyle preferences.

However, data from other categories potentially signals that while attitudes and behaviours relating specifically to playstyle have evolved over the years, passionate debate remains. For example, out of the 3 participants that chose 'less than a year' and 'agree [with Spencer]' for previous questions (none chose 'neither agree nor disagree', 2 chose 'yes' and 1 chose 'sometimes' when answering question 8. However, it is worth noting that testimony provided by these participants details fandom arguments specifically relating to the genders of

certain characters, not necessarily which playstyles should be strictly adhered to and which should be avoided. This suggests that while lively debate is still common in UF spaces, the topic of playstyle appears to not be as popular a discussion anymore.

It appears that there are complexities in the UF regarding individual experiences with the issues described by Spencer. While fans largely agreed that Spencer's findings were relevant to the UF as a whole, when discussing their own unique experiences in the UF, instances of encountering such behaviours themselves were more rare, and participants who did encounter them believed that those that held such beliefs regarding playstyle were a 'vocal minority'. Spencer's findings reflected the UF's character very well at a certain point in time, but as the fandom evolved, it seems such attitudes have become less prevalent, or at the very least, that passion has been directed elsewhere e.g. discussions of characters' gender identity.

It is notable here that while the topic of discussion has changed in this instance (survey participants are less interested in defining the 'right' way to play than fans Spencer encountered), knowledge of the game and its necessity when taking part in fan discussions still appears to be vital when taking part in Undertale's fan communities. As will be seen in answers to question 13, when fans are giving reasoning for their interpretation of an *Undertale* character's gender identity, they will often cite textual evidence, or character lore that supports their interpretation. Therefore, while the discussion no longer centres around how the game should be played, current discussions still hinge on how much knowledge one has about the game, which appears to be as vital as ever in having a place in the fandom's hierarchy. Consider, for example, testimony from earlier in the chapter where a participant argues that engaging with all playstyles is necessary to "fully articulate *Undertale's* plot". Arguably, being able to fully articulate *Undertale's* plot is a condition that should ideally be met in order to hold one's own in fandom discussions about the game, and therefore this knowledge could be considered a form of subcultural capital in Undertale fandom. In other words, while the fandom has evolved to be more inclusive of different playstyles, fan discussion and having

extensive knowledge of *Undertale* appears to be just as important as it was in the fandom's early days.

It should be noted that the assumption made prior to this research that people who have been in the UF the longest will be the only people to have experienced these behaviours is not universal in reality. Indeed, as noted above, some people who have been in the fandom for a shorter length of time report experiencing these behaviours long after they supposedly died out, and some people who have been in the fandom for a longer amount of time claim that they themselves never experienced the behaviours described in Spencer's article in an altered context. This adds to the complexity of the topics covered in Spencer's article and suggests there might have been more nuance to the situation than was portrayed even back then.

9. In *Undertale*, monsters (a minority) were defeated by the humans (a majority) and are now forced to live in the Underground. To what extent do you agree that the players sympathise with the monsters in *Undertale*, as marginalised communities, and are therefore less willing to kill them?

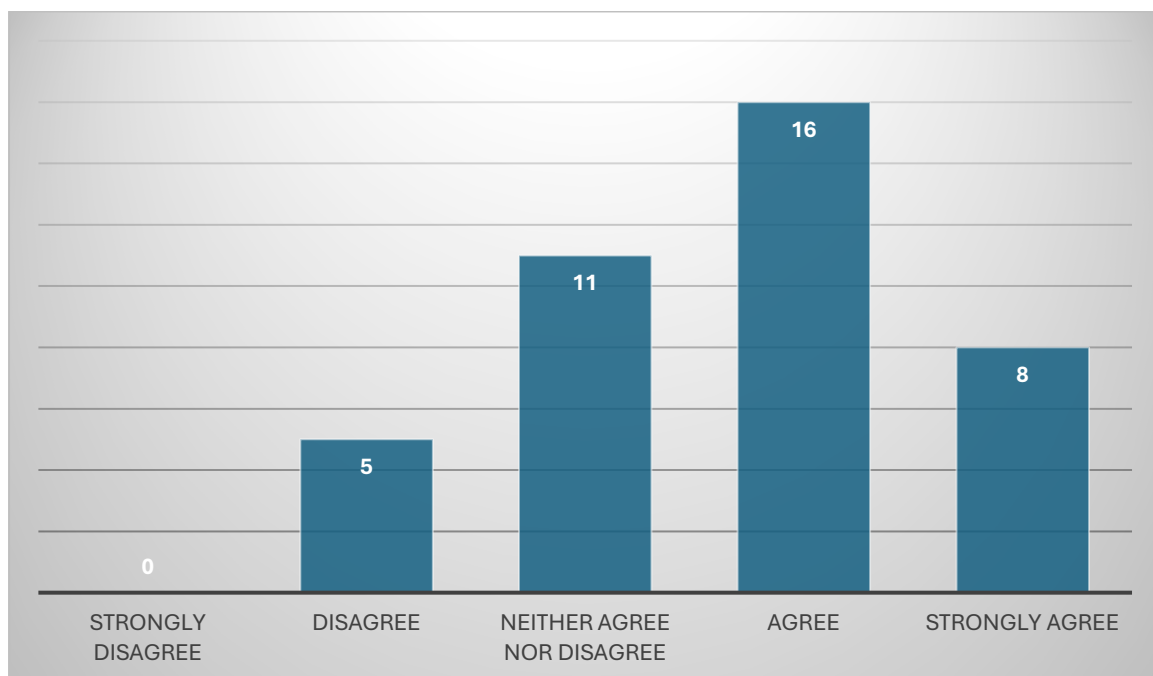


Figure 21: Responses to survey question 9

This question was intended to test a hypothesis formed from reading Laura Felschow (2010)'s work. Felschow proposes that cult fans are drawn to characters that are othered in some way; cult fans of *Supernatural*, for example, will find themselves defensive of the two principal characters because they relate to their othered status. In *Undertale*, monsters are portrayed as victims of a 'history is written by the victors' narrative. The opening cutscene before *Undertale*'s title screen details a war between the humans and monsters in which both sides were equally equipped to fight and defend themselves, and the monsters lost the war

fairly. However, when exploring the Waterfall area of the Underground, the player can uncover documents that claim the monsters were ambushed by the humans and were not prepared to fight. Monsters were then cast out of their homes and into the Underground, where they remain trapped and silenced. The monsters are therefore ‘othered’ by the humans. Othered individuals being attracted to texts like *Undertale* is supported in Bonnie Ruberg’s 2018 article on queer readings of *Undertale*. They argue that *Undertale*’s queer themes and characters attract queer people to the game, who historically have been treated as an othered community. Combining ideas and arguments from the Ruberg and Felschow papers with the narrative of *Undertale*’s war between humans and monsters, I was interested to see whether *Undertale*’s fans’ potential othered status might influence their sympathies towards the game characters, as well as the passionate behaviours described by Spencer.

24 out of 40 participants agreed in some capacity with the hypothesis, and the comment box provided a variety of relevant responses that provided additional insights. Participants that chose some variation of ‘agree’ noted that strong fandom preference for Pacifist playthroughs supported this hypothesis, with one participant noting the tendency of *Undertale* fans to put monsters ‘on a pedestal’ by ignoring or justifying instances of morally grey behaviour. This is corroborated in academic literature pointing out the potentially flawed nature of *Undertale*’s morality system, as it tends to ignore questionable acts from the monster characters towards the player (Perez, 2017; Marzahn, 2017). Participants point out that some monsters intentionally try to harm the player character Frisk, who is a child, but that does not stop some fans from encouraging players not to kill the monsters, not even in self-defence. Participants state that this can also be observed through fan works, claiming that *Undertale* fan fiction tends to ignore human characters such as Frisk or Chara and focus exclusively on the monsters. These participants acknowledge that this behaviour is very likely influenced by sympathy for the monsters as othered individuals. One participant who selected ‘neither agree nor disagree’, however, pointed out that sympathies for the monsters may vary depending on their actions, citing Undyne as an example. In all playthroughs including Pacifist, Undyne is introduced as a warrior who makes no

secret of wanting to kill the player character. This may compel the player to defend themselves, in contrast to a character like Toriel, who acts as a mother figure to the player and does not want to hurt them during her boss fight (Toriel's attacks will often intentionally miss the player to illustrate this). Therefore, while a player may be reluctant to kill the maternal and defenceless Toriel, they may be more inclined to fight back against Undyne, who is much less sympathetic when we meet her, regardless of monster status.

A notable sentiment amongst those who chose 'disagree' is well summarised by this comment left by a participant; "I think most people do sympathise with the monsters, but that doesn't mean that we are less willing to kill them". This highlights an important element of gaming: fighting your way through NPCs is essential for progress, which usually takes precedence above all else when playing a video game. This argument can be seen in practice in games other than *Undertale*; for example, in a video by Girlfriend Reviews video covering *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), we are shown an instance of the player fighting against a character called Abby.¹³ The player does not want to fight Abby due to their fondness of her and puts their controller down. However, when this happens, the player dies and cannot progress through the game. The player then decides to fight Abby, choosing progression over her life. This is not a heartless move as some fans described in Spencer's article may be led to believe (e.g. believing that killing characters in *Undertale* is akin to advocating for real life murder), it is simply a part of gaming, as the participant points out. This attitude may also further highlight the importance of 'completion' in UF spaces. Spencer's research and answers to this question confirm a fondness for *Undertale*'s characters, and in the past this led to an avoidance of Genocide routes altogether. However, current *Undertale* fans now appear to prioritise 'completion' more than they did before, specifically completion of a Genocide route perhaps taking precedence over any unwillingness to kill off *Undertale*'s monster characters, as implied in the aforementioned survey response. 'Completion' and its importance to UF projects relating to voice acting will again be further analysed in case studies.

¹³ Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1pA4mFLyvU>

Data from this question reveals that while Felschow and Ruberg's conclusions about othering and cult fans have some relevance in the UF, there are some nuances in the conversation. For example, returning to previous questions about preferred playstyles from both narrative and gameplay perspectives, Genocide still enjoys popularity among *Undertale* fans. 15% of participants selected Genocide as their favourite narrative route, while 25% of participants selected Genocide as their favourite gameplay route. These statistics suggest that while there is evidence that many *Undertale* fans do not want to kill off the monster characters, many fans still recognise the importance of Genocide playthroughs and even consider it their favourite version of the story, and previous questions on Spencer's article reveal that *Undertale* fans aren't quite as unwilling to engage with the more violent routes as they used to be. This is further corroborated by Seraphine (2018), who found that there was preference for Genocide routes among *Undertale* fans, though they were less inclined to admit that. The primary difference between the UF now and the UF at the time of Seraphine's research appears to be that fans are now more open about their preference for Genocide. It is no longer frowned upon as described in Spencer's research, and is considered a component of 'completion'. To conclude, while most participants agree that sympathies for the othered monsters could be a contributing factor in not wanting to kill them, they also suggest that the reason players don't want to kill the monsters is simply because they have grown attached to the characters regardless of minority status, and that attachment to the characters will not necessarily override the desire to complete all the possible gameplay routes.

13. Bonnie Ruberg’s 2018 article on queer readings of *Undertale* highlights Mettaton’s potential status as a trans or non-binary character. Do you agree with this assessment?

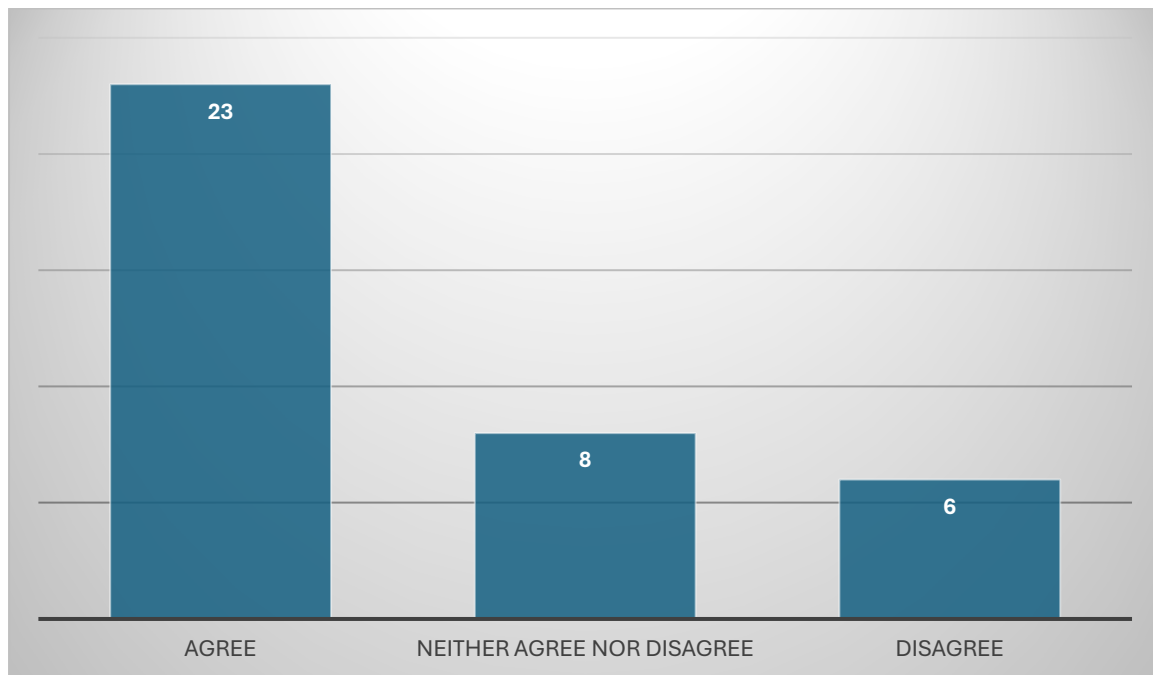


Figure 22: Responses to survey question 13

This question was asked to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of the UF in relation to existing literature, particularly Bonnie Ruberg’s work. Ruberg’s article was published in 2018, and therefore I wanted to see if their conclusions regarding how the UF communicates regarding queer identities was still resonant before conducting further analysis of fandom behaviours. Of the 35 participants that answered this question, 23 chose ‘agree’, 8 chose ‘neither agree nor disagree’ and 6 chose ‘disagree’.

While participants largely agreed, no matter what they chose, they usually had strong opinions on this matter in the text box. One participant who chose ‘disagree’ declared that they believed that Mettaton was “heterosexual and male”, which is somewhat surprising as Mettaton’s heterosexuality or lack thereof was never in question. No other robots appear in the game for Mettaton, so it is difficult to determine his sexual preferences from the *Undertale* text alone.

Nevertheless, the assessment that Mettaton is ‘male’ was not surprising, as Mettaton is referred to as a ‘he’ throughout the game.

Those that chose ‘agree’ expressed surprise that there were *Undertale* fans who didn’t believe Mettaton was intended to be portrayed as transgender, with one participant saying “It’s not even really subtext. It’s like, abovetext”. This statement aligns with Ruberg’s research, who argues in the below quote that Mettaton’s final boss fight is particularly queer-coded in its presentation, with particular reference to drag balls and performances.

Some of the obstacles that the player dodges in the "bullet hell" minigame are high-heeled boots [...] and a spinning disco ball, calling to mind a nightclub scene or a drag performance. Mettaton himself can clearly be seen voguing—moving his arms and legs into quick, dramatic poses that reference drag balls like those depicted in the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990). (Ruberg, 2018)

Those who chose ‘neither agree nor disagree’ largely cited their own personal reading of the character, saying that they personally had never thought about Mettaton’s gender identity but if other people thought Mettaton was trans, “good for him, I guess”. While the 6 participants that chose ‘disagree’ respectfully preferred a cisgender interpretation of Mettaton like the *Undertale* fans described by Ruberg, the survey results demonstrate a noticeable shift in discussions about LGBT themes in *Undertale*. For example, the 23 participants that selected ‘agree’ did indeed see Mettaton as a queer-coded character as Ruberg described, and those that disagreed didn’t dismiss LGBT interpretations for the same reasons as were observed in Ruberg’s research. For example, one participant who chose ‘disagree’ said that, “Fans enjoy projecting their own identities onto their favourite characters. There have been several flamboyant celebrities who weren’t LGBTQAI+ in any way. He seems like an artsy idol with a big personality”. The participant did not appear to take any issue with fans ‘projecting identities’, and seemed to simply disagree with identifying someone as LGBT simply because they had a flamboyant persona. Also of note, “Mettaton is a robot” was used both to

justify ‘agree’ votes and ‘disagree’ votes, highlighting the uniquely intricate nature of discussing the gender identity of a nonhuman personality.

As was the case with Spencer’s article, it seems the UF has evolved since Ruberg’s research was published, with fans being more accepting of queer readings of *Undertale* than they were before. This also shows a departure from Gamergate-esque attitudes around queer characters in games that were prevalent during the birth of the UF and in Ruberg’s work, as discussed in the literature review and will be dissected further in case studies. Additionally, the data received from this question supports a previous participant’s report of modern UF arguments largely centring around the gender identities of the more androgynous characters (such as Frisk and Chara) rather than how the game should be played; no matter what participants chose for this question, they usually had rather strong opinions on the matter.

Answers to this survey suggest a potential shift in current fandom discussions, or the current ‘hot topic’ so to speak. This is also supported by fan testimony previously detailed question 7 regarding Spencer’s research, when one fan described current heated discussions amongst *Undertale* fans as being more focused on gender identity in *Undertale* characters than preferred playstyle. Participants appear to have long moved past discussions of how *Undertale* should be played, with some expressing exhaustion with the topic altogether in the same question. Answers to this question, however, are much more varied and passionate, indicating a shift in focus from enforcing ‘correct’ fandom behaviours to engaging with ‘fan theories’, as are discussed in more detail in case studies.

Conclusions

Firstly, this portion of the survey gathered data on the popularity of each playstyle in terms of both narrative and gameplay and determined the playstyle, and subsequently the soundtrack, that players are most likely to encounter when playing or watching *Undertale*, which may then influence their chosen imagined voices as detailed in the next chapter.

Secondly, a more detailed picture of the UF has been formed through the results of this survey through data collection on existing UF literature. It seems that Spencer's findings were relevant at the time of the article's publication and continue to be, but attitudes have since evolved and focus is less on determining a perfect playstyle and more on engaging with all possible playstyles. Furthermore, existing academic literature on *Undertale* demonstrates this shift, as seen in responses to Seraphine's (2018) survey versus mine regarding route preference. This is now how *Undertale* fans seem to interact with the text of the game; learning everything there is to know about it and using it to fuel fan interaction via discussions of the game's lore. This tells us that Thornton's aforementioned musings on the fleeting nature of subcultural capital can indeed apply to the UF: criteria for subcultural capital can change, and it can change very quickly. These results will assist in providing an informed view of the UF from its inception up until now, and how voice-acted playthroughs in case studies were received or performed depending on the year of release.

This chapter also touched upon the relevant literature detailing early *Undertale* fan behaviours and gathered data to determine their current resonance among *Undertale* fans. Questions 7, 8 and 13 were all intended to give fans the chance to comment on this literature and provide more context to it from their own experiences in the UF. Additionally, since these questions were based on previous scholarship, the answers were theoretically informed, which allowed for an understanding of the fan community framed by previous work in fandom studies and queer game studies. The literature's findings were shown to hold significant weight within the UF, with participants reporting having either encountered the

attitudes and behaviours described in these articles or having them themselves. However, it is important to note the effort to distance themselves from the more negative behaviours and attitudes described in this literature, and the insistence that fan communities have since grown from these behaviours. This indicates that there is a lot more nuance to such discussions than the existing literature might suggest. This helps us have a fair idea of what the UF was and is like going forward and gives context to fan reception of performed voices in the later case studies.

In the next chapter, survey data primarily concerning imagined voiced for *Undertale* characters will be analysed. Now that this chapter has provided an account of the more popular *Undertale* playstyles and therefore which versions of the characters are more likely to be encountered (as further detailed in the following chapter), we are now in a better position to analyse preferred voices for *Undertale* characters and how these voices may be decided upon based on character sprites, 'text sounds' and existing voice-acted playthroughs.

Chapter 2: Survey Analysis - Voice Acting Questions

This chapter describes and analyses responses to survey questions 10, 11 and 12, which were specifically concerned with voice acting in the UF. These questions were asked to gain an understanding of imagined voice preferences for *Undertale* characters and how fans react to these voices being performed.

In question 10, fans were asked to provide casting choices for a potential animated TV show adapting *Undertale*, and were given the choice to either cast an existing voice actor or describe a preferred voice type for a list of main characters. There was also an option to provide voices for any minor characters in an additional text box question. Through this, a wide range of imagined voices were proposed, and I found some characters had a more universal imagined voice than others; for example, fans often had similar voice in mind for characters like Toriel and Papyrus, while characters like Sans and Undyne had more varied imagined voice types. This could then be compared to *Undertale* voice acting in practice: how are these voices realised in performative spaces, and do they align with imagined voices chosen by fan communities? If so or if not, how do fans respond to these performances, and how do the performers respond to the feedback? These are questions that are considered later in the thesis, and the following survey data provides a foundation for this part of the research. Answers to this question also provided insights into subcultural capital in the UF, by revealing the exact imagined voices that are arguably necessary to obtain it.

In question 11, fans were also asked about whether they watched playthroughs of *Undertale*, and question 12 asked about awareness of voice-acted playthroughs. Question 12 additionally provided the option for fans to describe any voice-acted playthroughs that they particularly enjoyed. This was helpful for this research in two ways: firstly, it helped to identify and narrow down potential case studies that appear later in this thesis, and secondly, when participants offered their own opinions on voices chosen for characters based on their own imagined voices, these

findings could then be compared to relevant literature on voice studies to further examine video game fandom's relationship with imagined sound, specifically imagined voices. This is especially relevant in discussions of question 12 when discussing research on speech perception in relation to fan feedback on performed *Undertale* voice acting.

The findings detailed in this chapter will provide wider context for the subsequent case study chapters when discussing preferred voices. Additionally, this data will also support future discussions in this thesis surrounding the evolution of preferred voices in UF communities and the role of subcultural capital in this evolution.

10: Scenario: *Undertale* is being made into an animated TV series, and you get to cast it. What kind of voices would you give to the following characters? (Participants were given the option of describing either a voice type or a particular person's voice).

The following question was designed to allow fans to be as descriptive as they liked regarding preferred voice types for *Undertale* characters in order to gather as much data as possible on preferred imagined voices. This would then allow me to form a general idea of how imagined voices are constructed in the UF, what each character is preferred to sound like overall in the UF and compare them to the voice acting performed in the upcoming case studies.

Participants provided descriptions of imagined voices for eight main characters and given the option to offer additional imagined voices for minor characters. Overall, it was found that characters who were presented the same way throughout all possible *Undertale* routes had similar preferred voice types across the fandom (like Toriel and Papyrus), while characters who were portrayed differently depending on playstyle had more varied preferred voice types (like Sans and Undyne).

Below, discussions are organised into sections for each of the main characters and an additional section for 'miscellaneous characters', summarising key findings from each. Each section provides a short description of how each character appears in the game across playstyles (some characters are portrayed differently depending on the player's chosen route) and then how characters assign imagined voices according to these portrayals. Word clouds have been used to provide a visual representation of how often certain vocal descriptors appeared when participants were asked to describe their imagined voices for each character. This was done rather than using charts because sometimes one person would provide multiple vocal descriptors for one character, or someone would provide descriptors for some characters and not others, making it difficult to measure purely through charts.

Therefore, numbers have been integrated into discussions when appropriate and word clouds were selected to present the data visually. In some cases, similar vocal descriptors were grouped together into one for easier presentation: for example, for Alphys, the words ‘soft-spoken’, ‘weak’ and ‘quiet’ were grouped together into ‘soft-spoken’. In instances where participants cast a particular voice actor or existing character in their imagined voice, this was included solely in the discussion unless it was cited multiple times so as not to overcrowd the word cloud and make the visual data appear overwhelming. An online word cloud generator was used to create the word clouds¹⁴. After trying multiple, I found that the selected generator was the one that had the best options for how I wanted the data to be presented: it allowed me to present the words in simple black and white with no unnecessary colour that may confuse readers, and to have words spaced out for easier reading. These word clouds will present collected data on voice preferences visually in a concise way, and will be used to support written discussion on answers to this survey question.

¹⁴ Available here: <https://wordcloudgenerator.org/#tool>

Toriel

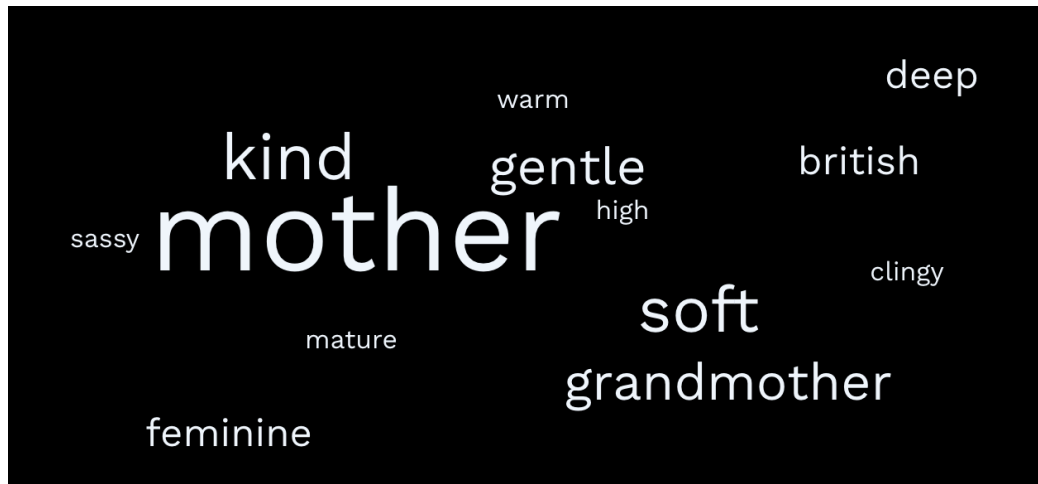


Figure 23: Vocal descriptors assigned to Toriel

In *Undertale*, Toriel's role is simple; she guides the player through the game's tutorial levels, hence her name sharing phonetic similarities with the word 'tutorial'. She expresses intent to raise the human child as her own and becomes frustrated when they ask to leave the Underground, as she fears they will get hurt if they progress any further. She ultimately engages in a reluctant battle with the player to stop them from leaving the safety of her home. The player will bypass her no matter what, but whether Toriel survives is up to them.

When describing ideal voices for Toriel, key words amongst participants included 'gentle', 'deep' and 'motherly'. Variants on the words 'mother' and 'grandmother' appeared a total of 11 times, the most out of any other vocal descriptor assigned to Toriel, with 'feminine' appearing an additional 2 times. This indicates a preference among some fans for Toriel's maternal qualities to be reflected in her voice as well as through her onscreen depiction. When casting existing voices for her, participants proposed Meryl Streep and Mary Jo Catlett¹⁵. Meryl Streep is often known for her motherly roles in films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) and *Mamma Mia!* (2008), so casting her for the 'motherly' Toriel seems appropriate. Furthermore, Mary Jo Catlett - known for her role as Mrs Puff in *Spongebob*

¹⁵ Of note: the participant who suggested Mary Jo Catlett, the voice actress for Mrs Puff in *Spongebob Squarepants*, suggested voice actors from said cartoon for almost every other character.

Squarepants - shares a somewhat similar role to Toriel in her own text. Mrs Puff, as the titular character's driving instructor, guides a potentially wayward individual as they navigate a new skill; in the player's case, learning how *Undertale*'s battle interface works.

Participants somewhat agree on what Toriel should sound like, as can be seen in the word cloud: words like 'gentle', 'soft' and 'kind' appeared frequently, with variants on 'gentle' appearing 3 times and variants on 'soft' and 'kind' each appearing 4 times. Opinions on the pitch and the tone of voice can differ (some participants suggest that Toriel should sound 'clingy' or 'sassy', in potential contrast to 'gentle' or 'soft'), but a maternal quality is often imagined to be present in Toriel's voice. It is not surprising for fans to be somewhat united on what Toriel should sound like; while *Undertale* is a choice-based game and characters may be presented differently according to a chosen playstyle, Toriel's personality largely remains the same in Pacifist, Genocide and Neutral routes. She is always portrayed as someone who wants to take care of the player, for better or for worse, which explains the universal notion that Toriel's voice should sound 'motherly'. Since Toriel is largely portrayed in the same way across playstyles, her imagined voice rarely differs among participants, with 'maternal' and 'gentle' among the most referenced vocal descriptors.

Papyrus



Figure 24: Vocal descriptors assigned to Papyrus

Like Toriel, Papyrus's personality remains largely the same throughout the different *Undertale* playstyles. Papyrus first appears in a Pacifist run to the player as quite an incompetent adversary, and not a very threatening one either. He expresses a desire to capture the player character as this will grant him membership within the Royal Guard, but otherwise does not seem all that interested in harming the player in any way. In fact, Papyrus grows quite fond of the player throughout failed attempts to capture them and can even become their friend and ally. Papyrus features as the game's second boss fight after Toriel, and if the player chooses to spare him, he will occasionally make some humorous returns as he makes some well-intentioned blunders while trying to help the player.

Common vocal descriptors suggested for Papyrus's imagined voice were 'high-pitched', 'loud' and 'expressive'. The character Skeletor from the *Masters of the Universe* franchise was also cited rather frequently here as a potential Papyrus voice type, with one participant specifically referencing Frank Langella who voiced Skeletor in 1987 *Masters of the Universe* film adaptation. Skeletor is included in the word cloud rather than just in the discussion due to the frequency in which it appeared in the results. The number of times Skeletor himself or a Skeletor-esque voice was recommended (for example, a specific person whose voice type is similar to Skeletor's) was 7, the second most cited vocal descriptor behind 'high-

pitched’, which was referenced 8 times. The prevalence of Skeletor in these results is unsurprising given its discussed popularity in public forum, as will be observed now.

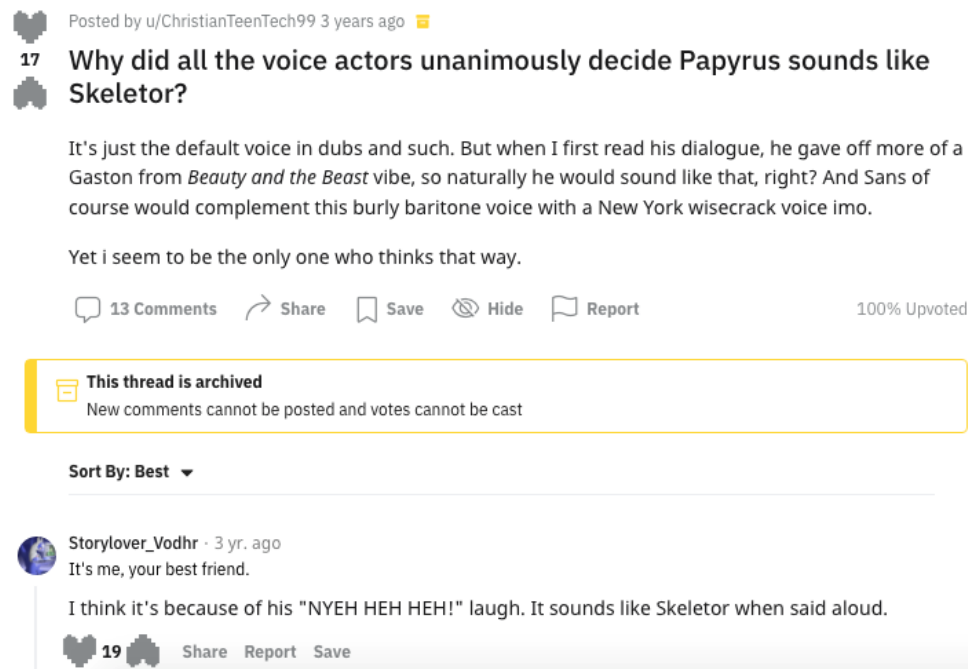


Figure 25: A Reddit post from 2018 discussing the popularity of a Skeletor-esque voice for Papyrus in voice-acted Undertale projects



Figure 26: A Reddit post from 2015 describing the Skeletor voice for Papyrus as ‘typical’, and suggesting it has grown popular enough to be redundant

Figures 25 and 26 above demonstrate that the ‘Papyrus as Skeletor’ interpretation is quite prominent, with each of these posts citing the ‘unanimous’ popularity of it from 2015 to 2018. The above screenshots of course also show confusion at the choice to perform Papyrus with a Skeletor-esque voice or even dislike of it, but both show that the imagined voice of Skeletor as Papyrus among *Undertale* fans

was prevalent enough to comment on at these different points in time. Papyrus and Skeletor are both tall skeletal creatures who wear capes, so players drawing a comparison between them both isn't entirely out of left field. Furthermore, like cartoon villains such as Skeletor, Papyrus can indeed be defeated by the power of friendship in battle scenarios. As seen above, some fans lament the prominence of Papyrus's Skeletor voice in Let's Plays and fan dubbing projects and wishing for more variety, implying that Papyrus's imagined Skeletor-esque voice is widespread enough to warrant significant pushback in fandom discussions. The 'Papyrus' voice will have relevance in all three case studies, and will feature in discussions regarding pressure *Undertale* fans feel to stick to this voice lest they disappoint other members of their community.

Sans



Figure 27: Vocal descriptors assigned to Sans

The most commonly attributed vocal descriptor for Sans was ‘deep’ with 7 mentions, but also of interest was the amount of accents recommended for Sans, with New York and Boston both mentioned three times. There are also a few potentially contradictory terms in the word cloud, with ‘goofy’ and ‘serious’ both being mentioned. This is unsurprising given how Sans is presented in different routes. In a Pacifist run, Sans only appears occasionally to give the player advice after the tutorial levels, usually while cracking jokes and playing harmless pranks on the player. By the end, Sans acts as a supportive guardian to the player, telling them he’s “rooting for them”. However, even in Pacifist, a darker nature is hinted at; towards the end of the game, Sans tells the player he’s glad they didn’t choose to kill anyone, or they’d be “dead where [they] stand”. Sans’s more formidable side is shown in Genocide; when the player meets Sans in a Genocide run, he almost immediately tells them that he knows what is going on, that the player plans to kill all the monsters, and that the player is not who they say they are (“[Papyrus would] really like to see a human. So, y’know, it’d really help me out... if you kept pretending to be one.”). Sans also alludes to the player “having a bad time” in the future if they choose to continue the Genocide route, with Sans making good on this promise by serving as the Genocide route’s extremely difficult final boss. This is a far cry from the version of Sans that was “rooting” for the player during the Pacifist run. Sans is multifaceted across different playstyles, and this reflects in the imagined voices that participants chose for him in the survey.

Although Sans's imagined voice could vary among participants, there were some commonalities between descriptions. Common words attributed to Sans's imagined voice include 'deep' and 'carefree' (the latter being mentioned 3 times), so while participants had a wide variety of answers for this question, there remained some similarities between the different imagined voices. In terms of the 'deep' and 'low' descriptors, it is perhaps unusual that Sans is considered by players to have a low voice and Papyrus a high one given certain voice perception literature. In chapter 3 of Trevor Cox's *Now You're Talking* (2018), he proposes that tall people can be assumed to have low voices while short people can be assumed to have high voices. This is the opposite in the case of Sans and Papyrus's imagined voices, as Papyrus is tall and thin, and Sans is short and round. However, other voice perception studies argue that a 'deep' or 'low' voice for Sans perhaps holds more weight than one might think. For example, Kraus, Freyburg & Morsella (2002) point out that speakers can (sometimes accurately) be assumed to be 'large' based on their deep voice. Sans is much stockier than Papyrus, though he is shorter, so in terms of being potentially 'large' through body mass rather than height, assigning a deep voice to Sans arguably has basis in previous voice perception literature. The correlation between low voices and assumptions of 'largeness' was also discussed by Pisanksi et al. (2017), who found that spatial location was an important factor in perceiving physical attributes based on voices. In other words, perception of voice could change depending on where both the speaker and the listener were situated. I argue this study emphasises the highly variable nature of how voice can be perceived. So once again, this discussion makes no claim to the 'accuracy' of Sans being given a low voice, but given the findings of these studies, there is arguably a precedence for the assumptions made around it. Additionally, the tendency to assign a 'deep' or 'low' vocal descriptors to Sans likely comes from the 'text sounds' that are triggered when his character dialogue appears on screen. This is supported by a participant who said of Toriel's imagined voice, "I really have no idea how to describe any of [the characters' voices]. Though somewhat resembling how low or high their notes are in the game". This shows that the 'text sounds' can influence how fans perceive a character's speaking voice to sound. Sans's 'text sounds' are indeed very low, while Papyrus's are much higher, giving us insight into how ideal imagined voices are decided upon in the UF.

The prevalence that text sounds are given in UF spaces is supported by recent literature - for example, Elizabeth Medina-Gray's work argues that text sounds (or "abstract representations of voices") produce meaning and provide the player with information about a character's internal and external traits (Medina-Gray, 2024, pp. 816-817). Therefore, it is unsurprising that they would hold such prevalence to the UF when deciding upon human performed imagined voiced for the characters.

In terms of differing responses to the question of what Sans should sound like, this sometimes manifested in survey results as somewhat contradictory answers, or so they appear to be at first. One participant said that Sans should sound "goofy but also serious", which on the surface seems like an oxymoron, but isn't a very surprising answer given the two contrasting sides to Sans seen in Pacifist and Genocide. If someone were looking for an imagined voice that encapsulated both sides of the character, this would be one way to describe such a voice - and as established in the previous chapter, *Undertale* fans like to consider all playstyles when engaging in discussions of the game.

Two common but differing voice types attributed to Sans were Patrick Star from *Spongebob Squarepants*, and a Brooklyn (or 'New York') accent, both mentioned 3 times each. Patrick Star is included in the word cloud instead of only included in the discussion in this instance due to the frequency in which it appeared in results, and also due to its relation to 'deep' and 'goofy' voice types. These are also the two voices used for Sans in Jacksepticeye's *Undertale* Let's Play, one of the earliest *Undertale* Let's Plays to feature voice acting. There is no indication that these voice types were chosen based on specific influence from Jacksepticeye's playthrough; the participants that proposed either of these voice types said that they watched *Undertale* playthroughs in question 11, but none specifically cited Jacksepticeye as a playthrough they particularly enjoyed when given the option to in question 12. This is not to say the Jacksepticeye playthrough did *not* influence these chosen voice types, there is a possibility that this is the case and it was simply not mentioned by participants, but it is something to consider for later chapters when discussing the influence that fans can have on *Undertale* voice-acted playthroughs and vice versa.



Figure 28: Vocal descriptors assigned to Undyne

The most commonly cited vocal descriptors for Undyne were variants of ‘raspy’, ‘powerful’ and ‘tomboyish’, each mentioned 4 times each. Undyne, like Sans, appears slightly differently across playstyles. In all playstyles of *Undertale*, she is the captain of the Royal Guard and is determined to free monsters from the Underground at all costs. The difference manifests in her relationship to the player. In a Pacifist run, Undyne is introduced while she is hunting down the player to take their soul to facilitate the monsters’ escape from the Underground, but she can later be spared and befriended. Following her boss fight, players can find her again and she will appear as a much more comedic character as she tries to understand friendship through her interactions with Frisk. The comedy here stems from Undyne’s inability to step outside of her cold and violent warrior exterior to connect with others, making her a much more endearing character than she was when she was trying to kill the player. In a Genocide run, Undyne is still trying to kill the player, but she is portrayed in a much more noble way. When players encounter Undyne in Genocide, all the monsters are very afraid of them at this point, and Undyne appears to fight the player to stop them from hurting anyone else. In short, Undyne begins each playstyle wanting to harm the player, but the framing and outcome of this can change depending on a Pacifist or a Genocide run.

These differences are reflected in imagined voices for Undyne. Some participants described her voice as ‘firm’, ‘powerful’ and ‘deep’, reflecting her persona when

she appears as an ironclad warrior here to stop the player's violent quest once and for all. However, others described her as 'tough, but has a sweet side' and 'confident and cocky, but is supportive', likely to align with how Undyne appears later in a Pacifist run. Participants also suggested pre-existing characters in children's cartoons to reflect Undyne's voice; one was Sandy from *Spongebob Squarepants*, a benevolent character who is prone to comical fits of rage, similar to Undyne in Pacifist playthroughs. Another was Jasper from *Steven Universe*, a character who began their arc as a villain but eventually became an ally to the main character, much like Undyne in a Pacifist run. Jasper also has a 'raspy' voice, as Undyne is often imagined having as shown in the word cloud. The answers to this question are quite similar to how participants imagine Sans's voice: there is a lot of common ground in answers (for example, a 'deep' voice for Sans and a 'raspy' voice for Undyne), but also some quite varied responses, likely due to the differences in each character across playstyles.

At this point, a pattern can be observed: there appears to be a desire among *Undertale* fans to hear familiar voices from popular culture when certain characters are performed. This was particularly prevalent in previous discussion surrounding Papyrus and Skeletor-esque voices, and has now emerged again with Undyne. Possibly, this is due to the wording of the question alluding to an 'animated TV series', therefore potentially inviting comparisons to existing ones. Additionally, however, I argue there are two other potential reasons for this. The first is that it is easy for fans to point to existing vocal performances as a reference point for what they want to hear from a character rather than constructing an imagined voice from scratch. This makes providing instructions for a performer of these voices much simpler than using vocal descriptors alone. However, the second potential reason is that having pre-existing pop cultural voices to refer to when providing instruction on performance allows for a greater degree of control over how voices are perceived and performed. Take Undyne again for example: words like 'aggressive' and 'raspy' are specific enough to evoke a particular voice and personality, but still leave room for interpretation. However, if a performer was told that their Undyne voice had to sound like Jasper from *Steven Universe*, that leaves a lot less up to the imagination, as performers would

then be trying to perform an impression of an existing character rather than providing their own vocal interpretation of the character. In later discussion on Fry 64, it will be observed how even *Undertale* fans grapple with this when performing Papyrus and feel a pressure to abide by Skeletor impressions rather than provide a unique voice.

Another point of interest surrounding Undyne's imagined voice is how fans consider her voice in terms of gender expression. Survey participants are often careful to accentuate Undyne's feminine qualities when discussing their chosen voice types for her. Participants use words like 'tomboyish' to describe her chosen voice, implying that she is still to be played by a woman although her voice type has stereotypically masculine qualities such as 'deep' or 'tough'. Undyne's feminine identity is of equal importance in the text itself; notably, the friendlier Undyne is towards the player, the more feminine her body appears. She stops wearing heavy armour that hides her entire body and begins wearing tight-fitting tank tops and leather jackets that reveal a more typically feminine physique. This potential side of Undyne's character is reflected in the participants' answers, with one stressing that while Undyne should be boisterous, loud, and tough, she should also have 'a sweet side'. *Undertale* fans have always had lively conversations about gender roles and how they appear in the game, as shown in Ruberg's (2018) research and in the final question of this survey from the previous chapter, and here we see how it affects imagined voice types. Undyne is assigned vocal descriptors like 'tomboyish' and 'deep', traits often associated with masculinity, but some participants add caveats like 'a sweet side' when describing these traits that imply femininity is important when assigning her imagined voice too. This can be considered when discussing Gamergate's effect on the UF in the Jacksepticeye case study, and how gender presentation like Undyne's was discussed in the UF and explored through players performing her voice.

Alphys



Figure 29: Vocal descriptors assigned to Alphys

Alphys is not a character whose imagined voice type varies too much in survey responses, because unlike the previously discussed characters, she only appears to the player in a Pacifist or Neutral run. If the player chooses a Genocide playthrough, Alphys is only mentioned as having been the one to evacuate all the monsters from the Hotland area before the player could kill any of them and does not confront the player directly. In Pacifist and Neutral, Alphys is a highly respected scientist who is considered to be very intelligent and trustworthy by her peers and adept with technology through her engineering of the robot Mettaton. However, it can be revealed that Alphys's intelligence is exaggerated, as most of her knowledge of the human world largely comes from fictional properties such as Japanese anime, leading Undyne in particular to believe that humans historically wielded swords twice their size in battle.

Alphys also appears to be extremely shy and socially awkward, displaying nervousness through in-text stuttering around the player character. This is because Alphys has been observing the player throughout the game before they meet her in the last third of the Pacifist or Neutral playstyle, and she has grown to idolise them through witnessing their journey. Alphys is shown to be very helpful towards the player, even though she sometimes fails to protect them from harm, which leads to bouts of extreme self-criticism. However, when the player goes back to their save file to finish a Pacifist playthrough following the defeat of Omega Flowey, they discover that Alphys previously experimented on monsters in the

Underground at the request of King Asgore which went horribly wrong and permanently damaged their consciousness. Alphys is shown to deeply regret her actions, and players seem to forgive her, as this darker side to her personality is not reflected in the imagined voices for her.

Participants largely agree on what Alphys should sound like, with similar voice descriptors that perhaps hint at a nervous personality ('nerdy', 'stuttering', 'timid') being assigned to her. This level of agreement makes sense as she is only seen in Pacifist and Neutral runs, so there aren't many possible variations to her character between playstyles as there are for Sans or Undyne. Common words to describe Alphys's voice include 'high-pitched', 'nasal' and 'stutter[ing]'. Casting high-pitched and/or nasally voice types for characters of a nervous disposition is not uncommon in video games. For example, the character Dusa from the 2020 video game *Hades* shares personality traits in common with Alphys, and she too has a nasally and high-pitched voice type. In *Hades*, Dusa is the house custodian who greatly admires the player character to the point of extreme anxiety whenever they are close by, and shows great fear of making a mistake in her work. This is not dissimilar to Alphys, who descends into a spiral of self-loathing at the smallest mistake and takes pride in her work as Dusa does.

However, as pointed out by Danielle Burrell-Kim (2023), it is rare for characters of Alphys's intelligence to be represented by stuttering voices in video games. According to Burrell-Kim's observations via case studies of speech disorder representation in video games, speech impediments are frequently used in video game voice acting to signal a lack of intelligence in certain characters. Burrell-Kim points out that this is indicative of real-world ableist stereotypes being adopted into vocal performance. However, Alphys is not a character who lacks intelligence; while her knowledge of human history is somewhat exaggerated for comedic effect, she is still a highly regarded scientist by other characters and is capable of carrying out difficult and complicated medical procedures within the text. The disastrous results of the experiments described earlier are not framed as a logical failure on her part, but rather a reflection of how impossible the experiments were if even Alphys could not complete them. Basis for Alphys's stutter among *Undertale*

fans appears to be that on-screen text confirms the presence of one, as seen in her introductory dialogue: “H-h-hiya! I’m Dr. Alphys. I’m ASGORE’s royal scientist! B-b-but, ahhhh, I’m not one of the ‘bad guys’!”. Additionally, the character Dusa in previous discussion surrounding *Hades* also stutters a lot, but only in the presence of the player character. Therefore, Dusa is stuttering out of nervousness, and it is not a constant vocal trait for her. This is not unlike Alphys, who is revealed to have a high level of reverence for Frisk and is similarly anxious around them. Coupled with Alphys’s textual intelligence, I argue that the presence of a stutter in Alphys’s dialogue and vocal performance does not contribute to the flawed representation discussed by Burrell-Kim (2023), and is there to indicate nervousness rather than lack of intellect.

Participants also suggested pre-existing character voices for Alphys. One participant suggested Lara Jill Miller, known for her voice work as Chirithy from the *Kingdom Hearts* series. Chirithy fulfils a similar role to Alphys, as both characters are shown to possess immense wisdom that they wish to share with the player and express a desire to become the player’s friend. Both Chirithy and Alphys act as guides to the player, with Chirithy being a tutorial character and Alphys assisting the player in solving puzzles in the Hotland area. Another participant suggested Kristen Schaal, an actress with a notably high-pitched and nasally voice who performed the role of Mabel in the cartoon *Gravity Falls*, a young girl shown to be highly enthusiastic about the media she consumes: in Mabel’s case this is pop music, and in Alphys’s case anime and comic books. While not quite as prevalent as the casting of Skeletor for Papyrus, for example, these are once again examples of the UF relying on existing vocal archetypes when casting voices, as discussed in the previous Undyne section.

Perhaps surprisingly, participants did not describe any voice types that would suggest Alphys has a dark side, but they did in Sans’s case. In a Genocide run, the worst thing Sans does is seek revenge against the player for killing every single person he knows and leaving him alone in the Underground. In a Pacifist run, Alphys is revealed to have committed extreme medical malpractice that left her test subjects with irreversible mental and physical damage. Participants never

mention Alphys's wrongdoings but appear very conscious of what Sans is capable of. Perhaps players are more willing to overlook what Alphys did because she is not shown to stand by her actions, and they do not directly affect the player. Sans takes revenge on the player directly and serves as the game's most challenging boss battle across all playthroughs. It is not uncommon in a Let's Play of *Undertale*'s Genocide run for players to have less sympathy for the characters they kill the longer they must fight them. For example, in Jacksepticeye's Genocide playthrough, after killing Undyne he is not initially sad because he is too thrilled at finally having overcome her difficult final boss fight. This may be similar to opinions on Sans; players who have experienced his boss fight will be wary around them because they know that Sans will turn against them if they cross him. Alphys will not harm the player in any run of *Undertale*, so while there were some disturbing revelations about her in the Pacifist run, players aren't as likely to feel threatened by her like they do with Sans.

In short, Alphys perhaps shows a certain bias towards particular characters in the game, which affects the imagined voice chosen for them. Alphys commits serious wrongs, albeit never anything that directly affects the player, but this darker side to her personality is never shown or portrayed in voice acting. Sans only commits wrongs against the player specifically, and therefore fans notice his darker side more and wish to see it portrayed in voice acting. As described above, there are nuances to this, but it does present an interesting insight into how imagined voices are assigned to specific characters. In this sense, survey results suggest that participants take the way they personally are treated by *Undertale* characters in-game into account when deciding on voice types for the characters.

Asgore



Figure 30: Vocal descriptors assigned to Asgore

Asgore is the king of all monsters who the player must defeat at the end of a Neutral run, or in a Pacifist run before returning to their save file before the ‘true’ ending. Asgore is described by other monsters extensively before the player meets him in Neutral and Pacifist runs; Toriel tells the player that Asgore is ruthless and that she wants to protect the player from him (she also tells the player this in Genocide runs), Papyrus describes him as a ‘softie’, and Undyne tells the player that while Asgore is very physically strong, he does not enjoy violence and only engages with it when he deems it to be necessary.

This is reflected by one participant describing Asgore’s imagined voice as “deep, intimidating, but fatherly and really just a goofball”. These voice descriptors may sound contradictory in isolation, but together, they are reflective of how Asgore is described in-game by the aforementioned characters. The player is introduced to Asgore in his castle; when they arrive, Asgore is gardening while humming to himself and is delighted to have a guest. He is then devastated to learn that the visitor is a human and that they are here to fight him to escape the Underground. The player and Asgore engage in an intense battle, before which he says, “Human. It was nice to meet you. Goodbye”, demonstrating his polite but ruthless nature. So, while the participant may give voice details that appear to be contradictory such as ‘intimidating’ and ‘goofball’, it makes sense given the different sides of Asgore the player is exposed to up until they meet Asgore at the end of their journey. Another participant described their imagined Asgore voice simply as “dad

voice”, which is reflected both in the eventual reveal in Pacifist runs that he is Asriel’s father, as well as in Asgore’s post-battle demeanour. After defeating Asgore, the player can choose to spare him in the end, and therefore choose to stay in the Underground. Asgore is delighted by this, promising to adopt and care for the player as his own before Flowey materialises and ‘kills’ him (this can be undone if the player is doing a Pacifist run).

In short, the most prominent vocal descriptors for Asgore were pitch based, with variants of ‘deep’ and ‘booming’ being the most referenced descriptors. Some contradictory terms were given by the same participants, which is unusual for a character like Asgore who appears in much the same way across playstyles, but is reflective of the type of character that is presented in each.



Figure 31: Vocal descriptors assigned to Flowey only



Figure 32: Vocal descriptors assigned to Asriel only



Figure 33: Vocal descriptors assigned to both Flowey and Asriel

Three word clouds are used in this instance to visually represent the provided vocal descriptors, as some were stated with the caveat that they only applied to

either Flowey or Asriel. Therefore, there is one for Flowey, one for Asriel, and one for vocal descriptors that apply to both characters. While Flowey and Asriel are the same character, they are shown very differently across all playstyles. As is the case in all playstyles (but is only explicitly revealed in Pacifist), Flowey is the soul of Asriel trapped in a flower and is immune to feeling love, while Asriel is the original form of Asgore and Toriel's son who died before the events of the game. While they are the same character, they both have different character sprites and 'text sounds' despite being the same person. In Pacifist and Genocide, Flowey is a devious little daisy who first appears to the player at the very beginning of the game as an antagonist who tries to kill them before Toriel appears to help them. Flowey appears to be very fond of violence; this will only be a problem for the player if they are playing Pacifist or Neutral, however, as Flowey will express desire to help the player if they are doing a Genocide run. In Pacifist (before the player goes back into their save file) and Neutral, Flowey appears to the player as the final boss after killing Asgore. In a Pacifist run, Asriel appears at the end in a monster form as the final boss but is spared by the player and restored to his original form as a monster child. Due to the potentially different appearances of Flowey/Asriel across playstyles, participants usually had different imagined voices for the character depending on whether he appeared as 'Flowey' or as 'Asriel'.

Flowey in particular is an interesting character to discuss in terms of imagined voice, because he is one of only two characters to have a very small amount of voice-acted dialogue in the game itself (the other being Mettaton). In a Genocide run, following the defeat of Toriel, Flowey appears before the player and happily suggests that they team up to destroy the world together. After this, the dialogue box disappears and Flowey says, "That's a wonderful idea!" out loud before disappearing. The voice is high-pitched, which is aligned with participants' imagined voice for Flowey, though is spoken with a southern English accent, which is not mentioned as a preferred quality by participants. In fact, the only accent mentioned in reference to Flowey or Asriel's imagined voices is an 'American' one for Asriel specifically.

Interestingly, survey participants do not mention this spoken voice line when describing their ideal voices for Flowey or Asriel. This voice line is also not taken into account in later case studies when players are selecting voices to perform for the characters. This is perhaps due to the fact that it is spoken in a Genocide run, which a large number of *Undertale* fans would have likely played after already completing a Pacifist run according to earlier discussions in survey results chapters. By this point, *Undertale* fans will already have an idea of how they imagine Flowey to sound based on both text sounds and how they have come to interpret the character and therefore may not want to change it. Additionally, in early *Undertale* fandom, some fans did not play Genocide at all, and may have been altogether unaware that Flowey has spoken dialogue at all (Spencer, 2017). This could also be the case in the Jacksepticeye playthrough studied later; since Flowey's voice was already established in the Pacifist playthrough (and, as discussed later, had already received positive fan feedback), there may have been little desire to change it after the fact. This may reveal a reluctance in *Undertale* fandom to change one's imagined voice for a character once it has been conjured, even if it is at odds with in-game vocal performance.

Of note in the survey results, Flowey and Asriel are imagined having similar voice types (participants tend to agree that they should both be portrayed by child or teen actors), but different tones or qualities of voice. Flowey is often imagined having the more sinister voice of the two, with Flowey's voice being imagined as 'maniacal' (reflected in the word cloud under 'disturbing') and Asriel's as 'sweet' by one participant. Three participants cast a young Macaulay Culkin for both Flowey and Asriel, with some particularly pointing out his portrayal of Kevin McAllister in the film *Home Alone* and its first sequel (this is represented by 'kevinmcallister' in the word cloud). This is quite apt for both Flowey and Asriel. While Kevin is portrayed as a loveable prankster like Asriel, some of his contraptions are rather dangerous and pose quite serious threat to life, hinting at a darker nature like Flowey's. Asriel's voice is also imagined to be 'similar to Toriel's' by participants, which is unsurprising given Asriel's physical resemblance to his mother and the widespread tendency of male child roles to be voiced by adult women in animated projects, as is the case in *Fullmetal Alchemist*:

Brotherhood (the youngest Elric brother Alphonse is voiced by the adult voice actress Maxey Whitehead) and *Ouran High School Host Club* (childlike teen Honey is voiced by adult voice actress Luci Christian).

Flowey and Asriel's imagined voice types shows the importance of visuals and 'text sounds' in influencing imagined voice types for *Undertale* characters. Flowey and Asriel are the same character, but through their different visual sprites and 'text sounds' in the game, they are very rarely perceived to have the exact same voices, and this is seen both in the answers to this question and in the later case study chapters.

Frisk/Chara



Figure 34: Vocal descriptors assigned to Frisk only



Figure 35: Vocal descriptors assigned to Chara only



Figure 36: Vocal descriptors assigned to both Frisk and Chara

Like the previous section, three word clouds are once again used here: one for Frisk only, one for Chara only, and one where vocal descriptors were applied to both characters. Frisk and Chara are the potential 'player characters' in Pacifist

and Genocide runs. At the end of a Pacifist run, the player character reveals to Asriel that their name is Frisk before leading all the monsters out of the Underground. At the end of the Genocide run, it is revealed that the player character was being encouraged to commit acts of violence by a malevolent spirit of a human child named Chara, the first human to enter the Underground, who needed the player to kill to be resurrected. It is also implied throughout Genocide that Chara is directly possessing the player. Other characters such as Papyrus ask the player why they have such a “creepy smile”, which is revealed to be part of Chara’s character sprite at the end of the Genocide run. Chara is also referenced in a Pacifist run and is revealed to have played a key role in Asriel’s journey to becoming Flowey, but does not influence or interact with the player in any way. Neither Frisk or Chara speak throughout their run, except for a monologue from Chara at the end of the Genocide run thanking the player for their actions. Neither Frisk nor Chara has a stated gender.

Participants often chose not to give Frisk or Chara voices, with ‘voiceless’ being the most popular characteristic assigned to Frisk only and both Frisk and Chara together. This isn’t surprising as neither Frisk nor Chara have many defining characteristics nor any ‘text sounds’ to base potential voices on as they don’t speak at all. Those who did offer vocal characteristics used words like ‘normal’ or ‘regular’ but did not specify what this meant. Again, this is not surprising, as the player character could certainly be described as ‘normal’ or ‘regular’ in the face of all the quirky monster characters they encounter. Some participants suggested a ‘generic kid’s voice’ for the characters, which makes sense as Frisk and Chara are both referred to as ‘child’ by Toriel or ‘kid’ by the Monster Kid in the Waterfall area. It is, however, unclear what ‘generic’ means in the context of a child’s voice, perhaps again owing to the vagueness of the player character’s personality in the game and their lack of dialogue.

Notably, ‘voiceless’ was not the most popular characteristic for Chara, who players more often imagine as having a ‘childlike’ or ‘menacing’ voice. Given Chara is referred to as a child in the game text, this is unsurprising. ‘Menacing’ also likely comes from the speech Chara makes at the end of a Genocide run, which

essentially takes the form of a villainous monologue in which the player is thanked for killing everyone in the Underground. ‘Childlike’ was also a characteristic for both, as was ‘androgynous’, likely due to the ambiguous nature of the player character’s gender. These differences show that there is nuance between how fans imagine voices for the player character depending on the chosen route, and that fans often consider these two iterations of the characters to be separate to the point of having different voices assigned to them.

The strong presence of the ‘voiceless’ descriptor in the results also shows the influence of text sounds and visual character presentation in choosing imagined voices for *Undertale* characters. The player character has no dialogue in either run, and therefore no ‘text sounds’, and their sprites are not very expressive (and even if they were, most of the game has them facing to the side or with their back to the camera). The lack of these features make it difficult for fans to decide upon a voice for the character(s), even abstaining from choosing one at all. Therefore, it can be argued that fans need ‘text sounds’, some sort of visual reference and character dialogue to form an idea of what they would like a character to sound like. Imagined voices based on these ‘text sounds’ will be further explored in the upcoming case study concerning Jacksepticeye. That chapter will also further discuss Trevor Cox (2018) in relation to the role of visual characteristics in constructing an imagined voice.

Mettaton

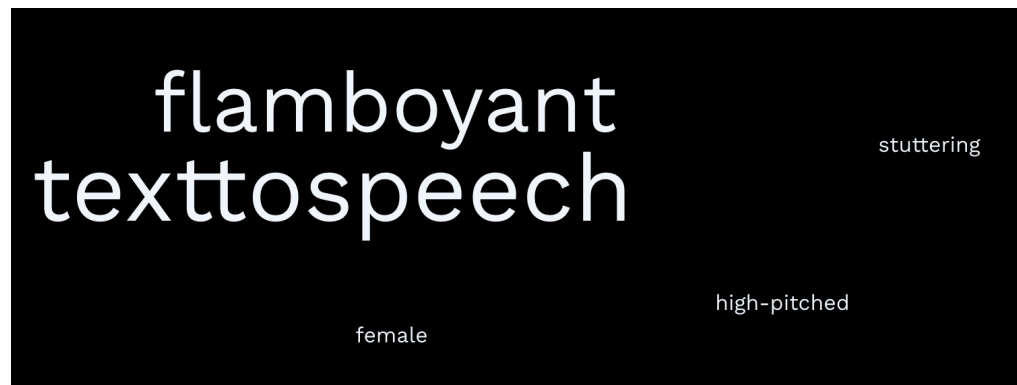


Figure 37: Vocal descriptors assigned to Mettaton

In *Undertale*, Mettaton is a fame-seeking robot with a taste for the theatrical, engineered by Alphys. Mettaton appears as a late-game boss battle in all playstyles. In Pacifist and Neutral runs, Mettaton forces the player character to complete several life-threatening puzzles for the sake of their ‘studio audience’, which suffers from low viewership that he’s still very grateful for. Mettaton, like Flowey, has two different character sprites in the game, but they are both shown in all routes. Throughout the Hotland area (where he appears less frequently during Genocide), Mettaton appears as a square shaped robot with a multicoloured keypad for a stomach. During his boss fight, Mettaton transforms into an androgynous, curvy figure resembling a human pop star who pulls off elaborate poses and refers to himself as ‘the idol everyone craves’.

As previously mentioned, Mettaton is one of two characters that has a spoken line of dialogue in the game. During the transformation that occurs during his boss fight in Pacifist runs, Mettaton is heard declaring “Oh yes!” before his new form is revealed. Like Flowey, this voice line is heard quite a while after being introduced to Mettaton and his text sounds, therefore there’s a possibility that players will already have an imagined voice in mind for the character by the time they hear it. However, in the survey responses below, imagined voices for Mettaton are sometimes much more closely aligned with his minimal spoken dialogue than Flowey’s are.

Both of Mettaton's aforementioned character sprites appear to be considered in survey participants' answer to this question. There were eight instances of participants proposing voice types that reflect Mettaton's robot form, such as 'TTS (text-to-speech)' and 'artificially generated' voice types, reflected in the word cloud by 'texttospeech'. This also matches Mettaton's initial 'text sounds', which are a series of highly synthesised sounds designed to emulate the robotic nature of the character. However, seven participants suggested voice types that reflect Mettaton's theatrical nature, such as 'flamboyant in a performer type way' or 'energetic, like a show host', reflected in the word cloud by 'flamboyant'. The reference to showmanship in particular is pertinent, as Mettaton is introduced in Pacifist and Neutral runs forcing the player into a general knowledge quiz show where the consequences of answering a question wrong are deadly. One participant also said that Mettaton should have a "very theatrical and flamboyant voice", which aligns with how the "Oh yes!" line is delivered in-game; it is very drawn out and enthusiastically delivered. This suggests that there is some influence from in-game voices on imaged voices held by survey participants.

Interestingly, participants tended to assign one voice for Mettaton regardless of form. Of 12 participants that chose to give Mettaton a voice, only 2 gave different voices for Mettaton's different appearances, in contrast to Flowey and Asriel who players largely agreed should have different voices for their different character sprites. The rare nature of assigning Mettaton two separate voices is also reflected in the upcoming case studies: there are two voices for Mettaton in the Jacksepticeye playthrough, and only one in the Fry 64 playthrough and *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub*. In the case of survey participants that chose to only assign Mettaton a robotic voice, this could be indicative of initial imagined voice taking precedence over the in-game voice; there is very little of Mettaton's in-game vocal performance, and it is heard long after he is introduced. That may be a contributing factor to some participants only having a text-to-speech voice in mind for Mettaton for the duration of the game.

Both chosen imagined voices make sense for either form. For example, while Mettaton appears to be human post-transformation, he is still a robot, so a

synthesised voice for both forms would make sense. Additionally, Mettaton is just as high-energy and performance oriented in his robot form as he is in his human form, so an 'energetic game show host' voice would make sense for both forms too. Furthermore, it is possible for a synthesized voice to appear as flamboyant and energetic in vocal delivery, so perhaps a more 'robotic' voice could work for Mettaton post-transformation, too.

Answers to this question indicate the mixed perceptions fans have of Mettaton, as discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the prevalence of 'text sounds' in choosing a voice type. While Mettaton's personality and dialogue was certainly taken into account when choosing a voice for him (e.g. the participants assigning a showmanship-like quality to his imagined voice), many participants chose text-to-speech voices for Mettaton, extremely similar to his 'text sounds' as well as to his soundtrack theme song, Metal Crusher, that features synthesised sounds almost identical to his 'text sounds'. This further argues that concrete sound from the game plays a large role in influencing the imagined sounds of the characters' voices, such as in the cases of Sans and Papyrus.

Miscellaneous Characters

As well as the main characters listed above, participants were given the option to cast voices for any characters not referenced in the survey thus far. There were some characters that were assigned imagined voices by only one person, so to prevent this chapter from becoming too descriptive, I have limited analysis to miscellaneous characters who were commented on by two or more participants. This was done so that comparisons could be drawn between imagined voices and a stronger consensus on what characters should sound like could be reached. Here are some examples of what they said:

Five participants offered potential voice types for Muffet, the queen of the spiders who traps the player in a web and challenges them to a boss battle before the final confrontation with Mettaton in the Hotlands. Two participants highlighted Muffet's upper-class matriarchal nature, with one participant stating she should sound like a "rich, prim and proper woman" and another saying she should sound like Melanie Lynskey, who is most well known for her role on the television show *Yellowjackets* as Shauna Shipman, who is (among other things) an upper middle class no-nonsense mother of a teenage girl who once had a leadership role similar to Muffet's. Lynskey also has a rather high-pitched voice, as another participant said Muffet should have. One participant noted that Muffet should have a voice that sounds like the synthesised giggle the player hears before Muffet's sprite is revealed, which is also high-pitched and tuneful but 'sinister' in nature, which matches the final participant's imagined voice of "sweet yet sinister". This is quite similar to how participants chose voices for Undyne and Mettaton: participants referred to actors known for voicing distinctive cartoon characters on existing TV shows quite frequently when describing their imagined voice type for Undyne, and text sounds proved to be quite pivotal in deciding upon one of Mettaton's more frequently suggested voice types: the text-to-speech voice.

Two participants offered potential voices for Napstablook, a depressed and socially awkward ghost encountered in the Ruins area. Napstablook accidentally attacks the player by crying tears that turn into projectiles. They are also one of the only

enemies that cannot be killed in Genocide; when the player tries, Napstablook expresses confusion that the player seems unaware that ghosts cannot be killed. Participants said that Napstablook should have “a very echo-y voice” and should communicate in “shy whispers [and a] depressed tone”. These voice types align with what the player is told about Napstablook during their playthrough: Napstablook is a ghost and therefore could have an “echo-y” voice, and their socially awkward nature may indeed lead them to communicate largely through “shy whispers”.

Two players offered imagined voices for Grillby, the owner of the Snowdin Town bar and restaurant Grillby's, who appears (only in Neutral and Pacifist runs) as a human-esque bartender in most respects, except he has a ball of fire where his head should be. One participant said his voice should be ‘low’ and ‘crackling’ to resemble a literal crackling fire, while another said he should be a ‘silent character [who] makes a set of noises to speak’. Monsters being silent characters was an idea posed by another participant, who said that ‘most of the monsters should have pretty random voices, with monsters like Froggit not talking, but only making sounds’. ‘Monsters like Froggit’ likely refers to monsters that only appear in passing or in non-boss battle combat situations that do not communicate using words. Grillby is one such character, never speaking, just constantly cleaning the bar and taking food and drink orders from other monsters.

The responses to this portion of the question allowed fans with a more extensive approach to assigning imagined voices to *Undertale* characters a space to share their interpretations. While it didn't provide insights into every single possible side character in the game and how their voices are perceived by fans, it did allow for understanding of imagine voices for characters outside of the main cast when proceeding with case studies.

11: Do you watch *Undertale* being played online, for example in a YouTube Let's Play or Twitch stream?

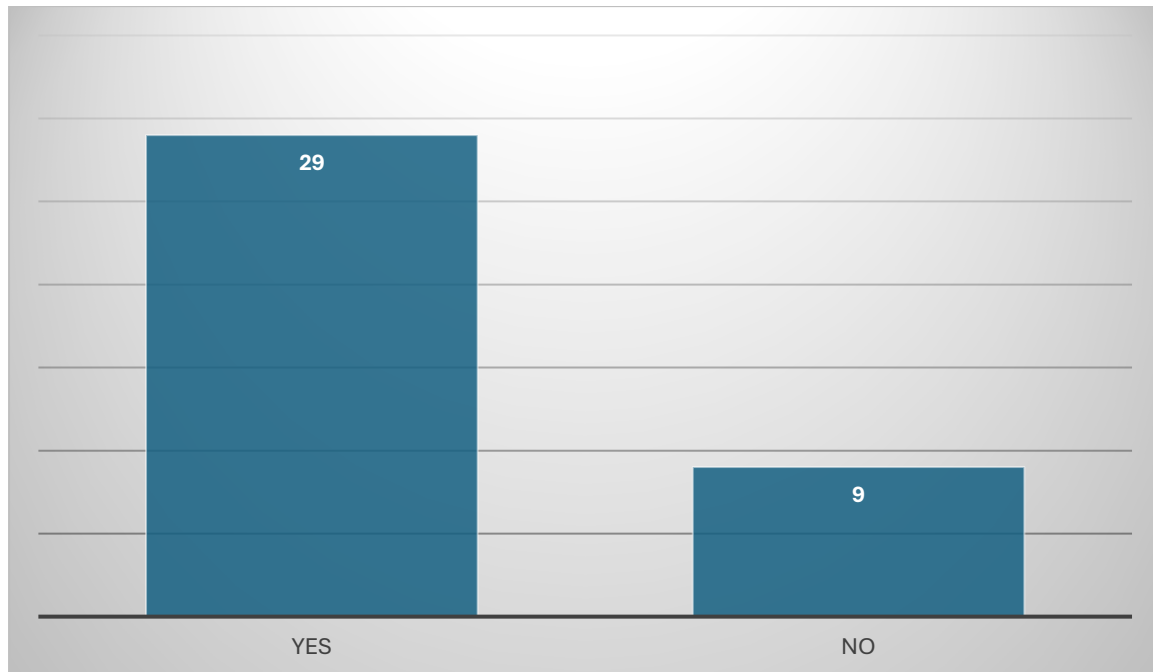


Figure 38: Responses to survey question 11

Of 38 participants that answered this question, 29 said ‘yes’ and 9 said ‘no’. It is not surprising that large amounts of *Undertale* fans watch the game being played as well as or instead of playing it. Let’s Plays and Twitch streams are excellent tools to learn about all the different ways one can play *Undertale*, so it stands to reason that fans would use them for this purpose. This is corroborated by Seraphine (2018), whose data collection confirmed that *Undertale* fans make use of online gameplay to ‘complete’ their experiences with Genocide runs. Furthermore, as discussed previously, online video sharing is an effective tool to experience video games if one cannot play them themselves for whatever reason, in particular due to console exclusivity. *Undertale* is now available on selected PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo consoles, but at the time of release it was largely only available to play on PC. Therefore, there was a time where if someone could not play *Undertale* on a PC, online video sharing was the next best thing.

12: If ‘yes’, have you ever encountered players creating their own voices for the characters and performing them for an audience?

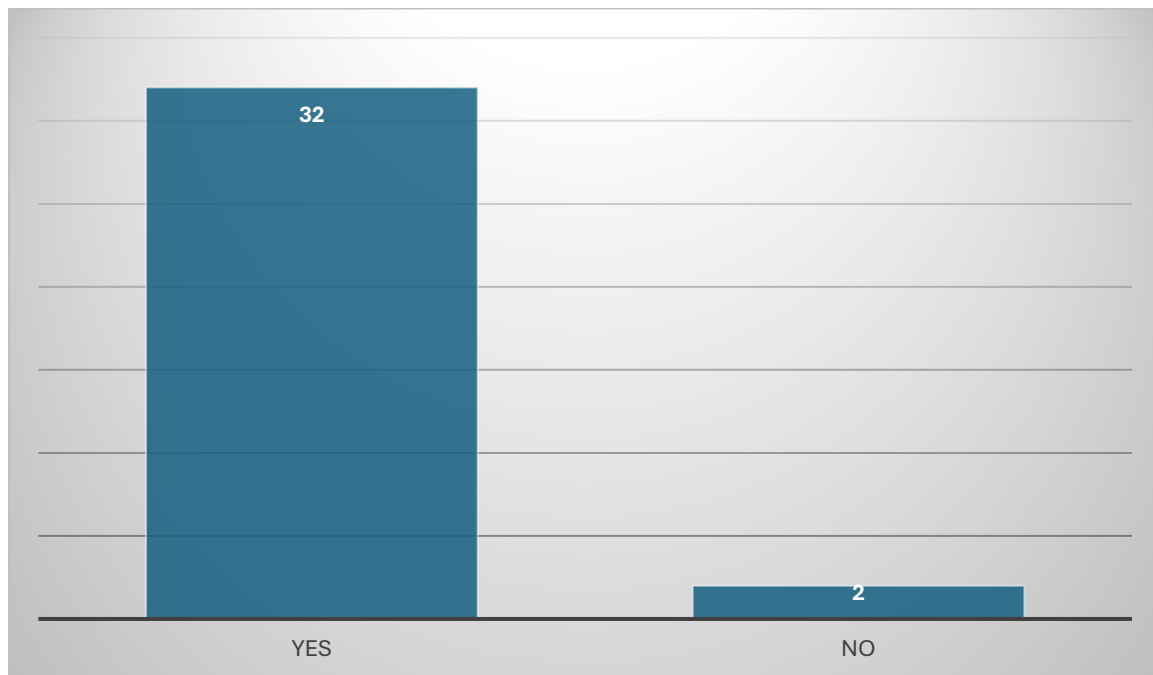


Figure 39: Responses to survey question 12

This question revealed insights on the prevalence of voice-acted playthroughs in the UF. For example, while there were participants that answered ‘no’ in the previous question when asked if they watched online playthroughs, they still answered ‘yes’ when asked about their awareness of voice-acted playthroughs, meaning *Undertale* fans do not have to seek out these playthroughs to know about them, highlighting these videos’ prolific nature in the UF.

The purpose of this question was to identify the audiences of *Undertale* voice-acted playthroughs. When browsing the comments of an *Undertale* voice-acted Let’s Play, it can be difficult to determine if the people watching are engaging with it because they are fans of *Undertale* or if they are there to watch that specific person play the game. Of the 34 participants that answered this question, 32 selected ‘yes’ and 2 selected ‘no’. *Undertale* fans that took the survey show a high awareness of voice-acted playthroughs, indicating that a sizeable portion of

people who watch voice-acted playthroughs of *Undertale* are watching them specifically because they are fans of the game. Later case studies reveal that these voice-acted playthroughs are also watched specifically because of the person playing them, so combined with these results, it can be confirmed that audiences of voice-acted playthroughs comprise fans of the game and fans of the player.

Participants were given the option to provide examples of voice-acting playthroughs that they preferred, and 17 participants did. The most frequently mentioned person to have done a voice-acted Let's Play was Jacksepticeye, who was also discussed in Spencer's Kotaku article and by participants casting voice types in the previous questions (one participant in particular didn't cast any characters except Papyrus, describing Papyrus's imagined voice type as just 'Jacksepticeye'). Participants also brought up comic dubs (the art of providing voice acting for fan-drawn comic strips) and *Undertale the Musical*, a YouTube fan project that took individual musical tracks from *Undertale*'s score and added lyrics to them, employing a variety of different vocalists to sing for each character. Fan projects that bring imagined voices for *Undertale* characters to fruition like this will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5 of the thesis.

Two comments were of particular interest to me; one was a participant highlighting Vargskelethor's playthrough, saying that he "is Swedish and speaks with a fairly heavy accent, but his enthusiasm for the characters' dialogue and the world they inhabit is contagious and shows very evidently in his voice". This shows that accuracy to the UF's collective imagined voices is not of the utmost importance to the modern *Undertale* fan as perhaps suggested by Spencer in the previous chapter, and it is just as important that the voice actor clearly enjoys the game content as much as the fans do. Another was a participant discussing voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs in general; "Most players do the monsters' voices right. Although, there are some exceptions - my ears literally (not really) hurt when I hear a person doing it 'wrong'." This aligns with findings from *The Handbook of Speech Perception*: according to the authors, if a person's voice does not align with how someone else imagined them to sound, it can cause some disorientation and, seemingly in the case of *Undertale* fans, some discomfort

(Kreiman et al, 2007, p. 338). However, the participant putting quote marks around 'wrong' suggests that they are aware that there is no incorrect way to perform an *Undertale* character's voice (perhaps demonstrating further evolution from fan attitudes described by Spencer in 2017), but they still prefer their own imagined voices and it can cause a significant amount of stress when they hear someone perform the characters' voices in a way that contradicts them.

The answers to this question indicate two things: audiences of voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs are significantly comprised of people who sought them out because they are fans of the game and not just the person playing, and again how Spencer's findings remain relevant to the UF despite having evolved. The above participant admits to experiencing negative feelings towards what they perceive as 'the wrong' voice in voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs, but still recognise that there is no real 'wrong' way to perform an *Undertale* voice, showing that potentially the UF's position on voice acting has evolved into a more nuanced stance than in 2017.

Conclusions

In accordance with the goals outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the results described and analysed above is intended to gather data on popular imagined voices as well as data on familiarity with voice-acted playthroughs of *Undertale*.

The gathered data from these survey responses offered extensive insights on imagined voices for the characters in *Undertale*, for the main characters and for side characters with significance to certain participants. Fans often agreed on particular voice types, but this was usually dependent on how a character was framed in the text. For example, characters like Toriel and Papyrus whose personalities remained consistent throughout all playstyles were usually assigned the same vocal descriptors, while characters like Sans and Undyne who are presented differently depending on playstyle had more variety. Additionally, fans would often assign existing character voices from pop culture to *Undertale* characters, which arguably adds a degree of control over how *Undertale* fan voices are perceived and performed. These findings will be useful foundations for analysis of subsequent case studies in this thesis. Chosen voices by performers in the following projects can be compared to imagined voices that *Undertale* fan communities somewhat collectively agree upon, and then reception to these voices can be analysed.

The data also revealed that *Undertale* fans do consume playthroughs of *Undertale* as part of their fan activities and have significant awareness of voice-acted playthroughs. This helped determine that audiences for these playthroughs are both there for the game being played and the person playing it (the latter being revealed more concretely in the upcoming case studies), which was difficult to determine from comment sections alone. The option to highlight specific voice-acted playthroughs enjoyed by *Undertale* fans helped to narrow down case studies, too. For example, given the apparent popularity of the Jacksepticeye playthrough shown in text box questions like 10 and 12, and its description by Spencer (2017) as a significant piece of voice-acted *Undertale* history, it was selected as a case

study for this thesis, and will be the first one discussed to trace the origins of this phenomenon and how it evolved with changing fan attitudes and later voice-acted projects.

Chapter 3: Case Study 1 - Jacksepticeye

This first case study chapter will be an analysis of Jacksepticeye's (real name Sean McLoughlin's) voice-acted YouTube Let's Play of *Undertale*'s Pacifist and Genocide routes, released between October 2015 and January 2016, very soon after *Undertale*'s initial release in September 2015. This playthrough was chosen as a case study for a two key reasons. Firstly, McLoughlin's playthrough was mentioned repeatedly in the survey results when participants were asked about voice-acted playthroughs they enjoyed and imagined voices they had for the characters, demonstrating how McLoughlin's playthrough and voices have generally been embraced by *Undertale* fan communities. Secondly, Chloe Spencer's 2017 Kotaku article studied in the survey results chapters briefly mentioned McLoughlin's playthrough when detailing early *Undertale* Let's Plays, but for the purposes of her research did not include it as a case study when discussing early *Undertale* fan spaces. I find it pertinent to do that here, not only because of its apparent impact on current *Undertale* fandom according to survey results, but also because it is one of the earliest and most popular voice-acted Let's Plays of *Undertale*. It began shortly after the game's release and boasts millions of views, with the first Pacifist video holding 24 million in total as of August 2025. The prolific nature of this playthrough, and the fact that it was one of the first voice-acted playthroughs of *Undertale*, has a significant influence on how *Undertale* fans would eventually imagine voices for the characters and decide upon the "correct" voice for each one, as we will observe by comparing McLoughlin's chosen voices to survey results.

In this chapter, I will use McLoughlin's gameplay to observe the UF's infancy, initial reactions to early voice-acted gameplay, the consequences of it within and outside of the UF and potential reasoning behind these reactions. Firstly, I will use existing literature in voice perception studies and fandom studies to discuss how fans potentially use both voice and fandom involvement to construct personal identity and a 'sense of self', which will provide a foundation for further analysis of McLoughlin's playthrough.

From there, I will propose a reciprocal relationship between McLoughlin and the *Undertale* fanbase: first, how McLoughlin influenced imagined voices for *Undertale* characters through his performance of Papyrus and second, how the UF influenced his chosen voices through his performance of Sans. Finally, I will discuss the relationship between *Undertale* fans and ‘the normies’. In testimony given since McLoughlin’s original playthrough, he has proposed that a potential reason for the more vitriolic *Undertale* fan behaviours described by Spencer (2017) may be due to fear of ‘normies’ (defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “a normal person, who behaves in the same way as most other people in society”¹⁶) entering fandom spaces and altering them for the worse. In this final section, I argue that through Bonnie Ruberg (2018)’s findings and events coinciding with *Undertale*’s release at the time (namely Gamergate), it is perhaps understandable for *Undertale* fans to have had these concerns at the time.

The primary goal of this case study is to explore the survey results in practice, in particular the evolution of preferred imagined voices in *Undertale* fan communities and how they are brought to life by players both within and outside of fan communities. A secondary goal is to set a solid foundation for later case studies that take place later in the UF evolution and to provide further insight into potential reasonings for early *Undertale* fan behaviours, using McLoughlin’s retrospective on his playthrough and existing game fandom literature to argue these points. Finally, I will argue that the playthrough discussed in this case study provides an early example of voice acting by *Undertale* fans being used to transform the game text.

A Sense of Self: Connections between the imagined voice and fan identity

Something that will be of relevance throughout this chapter is the role of both fan identity and the imagined voice’s role in constructing one’s sense of self. Through

¹⁶ Available here: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/normie>

discussions of both, I aim to understand the motivations behind early *Undertale* fan behaviours as they apply to performative play and game sound. To begin with, I will investigate literature studying early *Undertale* fan communities. As discussed by Chloe Spencer in “The *Undertale* Drama”, fans could get quite accusatory and emotional during discussions of how the game should be played and how characters within it should be perceived. According to interview testimony collected by Spencer, some fans would criticise those who played Genocide to the point of accusing them of real-life abuse and harm, and this would cause upset amongst the accused who played Genocide and already felt “immensely guilty for doing so” (Spencer, 2017). This is not brought up in an attempt to settle this particular argument or to dissect the real-world morality of *Undertale* fans; it is mentioned to draw attention to how discussions among fans regarding ideal playstyles could get quite heated, and there were arguably some very strong emotions behind these reactions. In this section, I aim to unpack where these emotions might come from in terms of fan identity and existing voice studies.

Existing ludomusicological studies have previously considered players’ emotionality in relation to fan identity and imagined voice. This includes William Cheng (2014) in his *Playing with Sound: Video Games and the Musical Imagination*: in chapter two, he discusses online fan discussions surrounding the opera sequence from *Final Fantasy VI*. As referenced in the literature review, Cheng argues that the online fandom surrounding the opera sequence specifically offered validation to people who had an appreciation for it before fandom became more easily accessible via the internet. In Cheng’s words, “what YouTube and other online sites offer modern fans of old-school media, therefore, is not simply a sense of contemporary community, but also the retroactive verification that they have been a community *all along*” (p. 75). This is arguably a cathartic experience, and perhaps even a moving one. The role of vocal performance and imagined voices in existing video game fandom lays a key foundation for studying fan reactions to performed *Undertale* voices: the emotionality that is attached to it by fans.

In terms of emotional connection to the voice in a more individualistic sense in broader voice perception studies, we can consider Trevor Cox’s 2018 work *Now*

You're Talking, a book examining the relationship to one's 'inner voice'. In chapter 3 of this text, Cox discusses two things of note: the "unnerving" experience of not believing that somebody's appearance matches their voice, and the importance of the inner voice to one's sense of self. In the case of the former, Cox agrees that while it can be disorienting when somebody's voice does not match what another individual imagined it would sound like, such assumptions are only based on stereotypes that hold little scientific value. Cox contends that stereotypes are often relied upon when people imagine a person to sound a certain way based on appearance alone, and while they can "hinder accurate judgements", he bears no ill will against those who make such assumptions, and even admits to doing it himself (Cox, 2018, p. 86). According to Cox's findings, while imagining voices for people based on appearance alone is not an accurate science by any means (citing that such assumptions are generally only correct 60% of the time), it is a practice we are all likely to engage in. I argue that the mismatch of appearance and expected voice described by Cox reveals another side to the emotional connection to vocal performances interpreting game sound he proposes in his book: a sense of disorientation and perhaps even shock when a performed voice does not match the imagined one. As will be discussed later in the chapter, this type of emotional response is key to understanding the roots of the reactions to imagined voices perceived as 'wrong' in early *Undertale* playthroughs.

Additionally, Cox's work also supports *Undertale* fans and players' tendency to assign imagined voices based on external characteristics. According to both the survey results and McLoughlin's playthrough, it is common practice to rely on external factors when deciding upon a voice for the characters, similar to the 'stereotypes' mentioned by Cox. These external factors are usually the character's appearance or their 'sprite' as they appear in game. However, it is also important to note that fans also considered existing sonic representations of the characters to be important when assigning imagined voices. In the survey results, it can be observed how 'text sounds' affect chosen voices for *Undertale* characters. In answers to question 10, one participant said that while they did not feel able to describe their imagined voices for the characters, they tend to refer to "how low or high pitch[ed] their notes are in the game" - the 'notes' in question referring to

what I call ‘text sounds’ throughout this thesis. In a similar vein, when participants were asked what type of voice they would give Frisk, 10 out of the 18 participants expressed a wish for the character to be ‘voiceless’ in a screen adaptation of *Undertale*, likely owing to both a lack of dialogue and a lack of text sounds to base a voice on. Furthermore, survey participants never brought up the few instances of spoken dialogue in the game when considering imagined voices, instead opting to use the text sounds as foundations for their choices. Considering this, I argue that in-game sound representing voice is held in high regard by video game fans, and therefore is used as a deciding factor among *Undertale* fans when selecting an ideal voice for the characters. As per Cox, McLoughlin’s playthrough also highlights the importance of appearance in assuming what someone’s voice sounds like, as will be seen in later sections discussing how Papyrus and Undyne’s voices were found (or struggled to be found) through reliance on physical characteristics.

Cox’s work also brings an interesting notion into question: *Undertale* fans could react strongly to imagined voices perceived as being the ‘wrong’ voices through a combination of disorientation and defensiveness over a sense of self. In *Now You’re Talking*, Cox describes the experience of hearing journalist Julie Burchill’s voice for the first time and experiencing disorientation because he did not expect her to sound so “high-pitched [and] childlike” based on her appearance and “extremely provocative [articles that] set out to shock” (Cox, 2018, p. 86). We could be seeing this disorientation in action when *Undertale* fans hear vocal performances of *Undertale* characters that do not match their imagined voice. It is easy to say that somebody’s vocal performance of a fictional character is the *wrong* voice because it’s not how one imagined the character to sound. However, this is where we can turn our attentions to another idea in Cox’s book: the inner voice connected to the sense of self. Cox tells the story of Dr Jill Bolte Taylor, who was unable to hear her internal voice for five weeks following a stroke. Taylor describes a loss of her sense of self during this period, even going as far as to say she “died” that day (Cox, 2018, p. 91). While this is a quite extreme example of the loss of a sense of self that is not entirely comparable to fans being displeased with a disagreeable interpretation of an *Undertale* character’s voice, Cox does point out the strong emotional connections one can have with their inner voices, and distress that can

occur when it is challenged. This emotional response to the ‘wrong’ voice in performative *Undertale* spaces can perhaps be even further explained when taking fan studies into account.

For example, when writing for *Transformative Works and Cultures* in 2010, Laura Felschow argues that fandom experiences can be closely linked to one’s identity and sense of empowerment. Her article on fans of the TV show *Supernatural* proposes that people who have felt ostracized throughout their lives often find solace in fan communities, as they are characterised by being ‘the Other’. This suggests that in real life, one may experience othering, but in fan communities, such people can instead be celebrated. This is further corroborated in *The Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (2018), where Lori Morimoto points out that while fandoms can have their own problems with issues such as racism, fandom can potentially act as a refuge for those that are marginalised in their day-to-day lives. This also suggests that a sense of community is also important in fan spaces, as part of the ‘refuge’ described by Morimoto involves finding solace with people that are more like oneself and less likely to engage in othering. In the UF, members of fan communities are unlikely to be aware of a person’s real life social status and are therefore likely more interested in how well they can keep up with fan discussions and how closely aligned their chosen voices are with popular consensus. Given Felschow’s findings, participation in *Undertale* fan spaces could be how some members of the fandom reveal their ‘real selves’, so to speak, free from the norms and expectations of real life. Of course, there are still rules to follow in fandom spaces if one is to gain subcultural capital, but these are much more optional than real world social norms: no one *has* to participate in fandom, but they choose to. For an ‘othered’ person, fandom rules are arguably easier to follow than the rules of the real world, which leads to more plentiful social capital in such online spaces, as well as an emotional connection to what can be described as their ‘refuge’.

Participation in *Undertale* fan spaces could heighten protectiveness and perhaps even defensiveness of one’s sense of self, and the addition of imagined voices would amplify these feelings. If the inner voice is so connected to the self, I argue

that some fans who may already be protective of their sense of self may feel similarly defensive of their inner voice, particularly those imagined for the characters. Articles like Spencer's (2017) help us understand how *Undertale* fan attitudes of the time shaped fan reception to voice-acted playthroughs, but combining her findings with other academic work like Cox and Felschow's research can help us understand why such attitudes existed. Given the previous literature, I argue that the combination of imagined voice and fan identity in constructing one's sense of self is a factor that led to fierce protectiveness over playstyles in early *Undertale* fandom. Additionally, this could be why some fans lashed out at content creators for not following the fandom 'rules' regarding these playstyles: their sense of self, or perhaps even sense of community, felt threatened.

Now that a stronger understanding of the potential reasoning behind early *Undertale* fan behaviours has been explored, I will now give a fuller context to McLoughlin's playthrough, which I will use as a foundation for further analysis on what I believe to be a reciprocal relationship between McLoughlin and the UF when it comes to imagined voices.

McLoughlin and *Undertale*: An Overview

McLoughlin's original *Undertale* playthrough is split into two parts: he first released ten video recordings all documenting a Pacifist playthrough, and then four showing a Genocide run beginning the week after the Pacifist run. Videos range from 49 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes long. The Pacifist playthrough is presented in its entirety with very few edits, with its final runtime being approximately 11 hours long. If anything happens offscreen that McLoughlin deemed not interesting enough for the audience (for example, level grinding¹⁷ or exploration for missed in-game items), he is sure to summarise his offscreen actions for the viewer. Otherwise, almost everything McLoughlin does in a Pacifist run is available for the audience to see. The Genocide playthrough is much shorter

¹⁷ Level grinding is the act of repeating the same actions over and over e.g. engaging in combat with optional enemies to reach a higher level.

at approximately 4 hours in length, as McLoughlin only keeps game events that are exclusive to Genocide in the videos as those are the parts of the game that would be of interest to his audience, who have already seen the story play out in a Pacifist playstyle. Genocide is also very short as much of a Genocide run involves the player walking around an empty map hoping to find the last few monsters in the area, which McLoughlin acknowledges can be rather tedious to watch and therefore it can be cut.

McLoughlin's playthrough is unique amongst the chosen case studies in this thesis, as it is the only one to provide an additional playthrough of Genocide following the completion of Pacifist. McLoughlin stated at the end of his Pacifist run that he would not be returning to the game to complete a Genocide run but uploaded the first Genocide video a week later due to high demand for it. This is not entirely surprising; while Genocide was not a popular playstyle among early *Undertale* fans in terms of playing the game by oneself, it was still watched online regularly by fans (Seraphine, 2018). I argue that this is because watching *Undertale*'s Genocide run saved the player from having to do it themselves; as previously stated in the survey results chapter, Genocide is not played as often as Pacifist by *Undertale* fans in part due to its repetitive and difficult gameplay. Also, since completing a Genocide run permanently alters all potential future playthroughs of Genocide for a player, there is further reluctance for fans to play Genocide themselves and would naturally seek out content of other people playing it to discover Genocide's contents (Spencer, 2017). It makes sense that McLoughlin experienced high demand for a Genocide run as, in many ways, he is the ideal person to play *Undertale* for an audience; at least, from the perspective of an early *Undertale* fan.

This is because the tone of McLoughlin's videos of *Undertale* can be characterised in one key way: he is utterly overjoyed to be playing the game. Each of his *Undertale* videos (especially during the Pacifist run) brim with excitement and wonder, with McLoughlin showering the game with praise and gleefully discussing the game's content. McLoughlin laughs hysterically at the game's dialogue and hums and dances along to the game's soundtrack while declaring it to be one of the best video game scores he's ever heard, very rarely having a bad word to say

about the game. McLoughlin's high energy persona is not directly caused by *Undertale*, as he shows similar levels of excitement about almost everything he comes across. For example, at the beginning of the fourth Pacifist video, he gives a very enthusiastic review of the Studio Ghibli film *My Neighbour Totoro* (having watched it for the first time before beginning recording), before directing praise towards *Undertale* for the next hour. This would naturally be very appealing to *Undertale* fans; to have a popular YouTube personality have such high praise for a game they have built a community around would likely be very gratifying, and perhaps even provide a feeling of being understood by the masses. As described in previous fan studies literature (particularly first wave fan studies), this could be a rare occurrence for fans in general.

McLoughlin's choice of playstyle also potentially explains why so many early *Undertale* fans gravitated towards his playthrough in particular. McLoughlin never once tries to attack any of the monsters encountered in *Undertale*, and at the end of the first Pacifist video declares that he intends to spare every single monster. He also says that he is open to advice on how to accomplish this, and apologises profusely in advance if he cannot achieve this goal for whatever reason. *Undertale* never directly tells the player that every monster can be spared, although promotional materials discussed in the introduction did, so the comment section expresses surprise and happiness that McLoughlin figured out the game's sparing mechanics so quickly. This is demonstrated in the following exchange in the comment section of McLoughlin's first Pacifist video:



Figure 40: A comment discussion under a Pacifist instalment of the Jacksepticeye playthrough

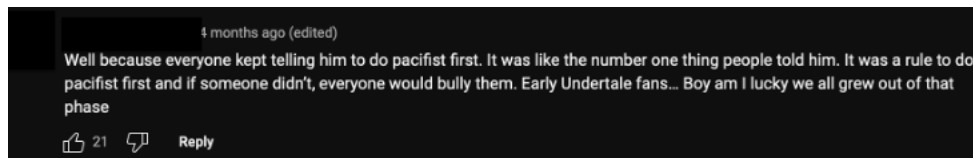


Figure 41: A reply to the above comment thread providing additional potential context for the original comment

The speculation put forth in figure 40 that McLoughlin figured out the sparing mechanic from promotional materials seems more likely than fan demands dictating his initial playstyle. McLoughlin's later videos reflecting on his experience playing *Undertale* do not mention any huge waves of demand that he play the game in a Pacifist style. For example, in the first Genocide video, McLoughlin mentioned that while he received gentle advice to play Pacifist before Genocide, very few forbade Genocide altogether, in potential contrast to Spencer (2017) and Seraphine (2018)'s findings. Furthermore, when revisiting the game in 2020 as part of his annual Nostalgia Week video specials, he discusses the UF's period of demanding the game be played in a certain way, but does not feel this happened to him, most likely because McLoughlin's playthrough began so early in *Undertale*'s life that the fandom had yet to gain the reputation they now have.

As discussed by Spencer, this would change quite quickly: in November 2015, just months after McLoughlin's playthrough began, YouTuber Markiplier (real name Mark Fischbach) began playing *Undertale*, but ended up quitting his playthrough after only releasing two videos due to fan demands for a Pacifist run to be strictly adhered to. Fischbach would later return to playing *Undertale* in October 2016, and would be quite critical of *Undertale* fan attitudes during his playthrough (for example, if he ever made a small error when collecting items, he'd laugh and sarcastically say that now he had no choice but to commit to a Genocide playthrough, an apparent reference to the UF's all-or-nothing approach to playstyles at the time). It is interesting to see such differing reactions to McLoughlin and Fischbach's playthroughs at approximately the same time, as both players were and remain relatively evenly matched in terms of popularity and viewership. As of August 2025, McLoughlin and Fischbach have 31 million and 37 million subscribers respectively. It is currently difficult to gauge how close these numbers were at the time of early *Undertale* fandom due to the limitations of

YouTube statistics tracking sites like Social Blade (which only shows subscriber growth up to 3 years prior). However, Fischbach's *Five Nights at Freddy's* playthrough that began in 2014 boasts millions of views much like McLoughlin's *Undertale* series from 2015, with the first instalment of it having 124 million views as of August 2025, so it can be argued that both creators had large viewerships at the time of *Undertale's* early fandom years. I argue this shows the role of subcultural capital in different circles, and how non-transferable it can be (Chin, 2018). In this instance, for example, it doesn't matter how popular you are in YouTube gaming circles, the UF is only interested in how well the rules of its community are followed. In this instance, Fischbach did not follow the rules for gaining subcultural capital and arguably did not gain any among *Undertale* fans.

It is possible that McLoughlin's playthrough happened too early in the UF's life to experience the pushback that Fischbach did, but even so, their playthroughs both began only months apart. This could perhaps be a testament to how quickly the UF evolved and solidified its consensus on the 'correct' way to play, but there could also be another reason: I argue that McLoughlin's playthrough, perhaps without realising it, simply aligned very well with how early *Undertale* fandom wanted the game to be played. The complexities of this possibility will be investigated in more thorough detail when discussing the reciprocal relationship between McLoughlin and the UF, but for now I will point out that McLoughlin's videos were well received back when they were being released and remain popular today. This is evidenced by the many comments in each of McLoughlin's videos throughout the past eight years. Comment sections on each of the videos reveal a great deal of appreciation and support for McLoughlin's playthrough, with the more recent comments complimenting and occasionally defending McLoughlin's gameplay choices and character voice selections (as seen in figures 42 and 43 below). McLoughlin also responds to much positive fan feedback directly in videos, revealing that while there was some pushback from early *Undertale* fans regarding voice selection (this will be discussed in more detail during the discussion of Sans's imagined voice), initial and current reception of McLoughlin's playstyle was largely positive both from his own audience and fans of *Undertale*.



Figure 42: Comment exchange defending McLoughlin's original use of a Patrick Star voice for Sans

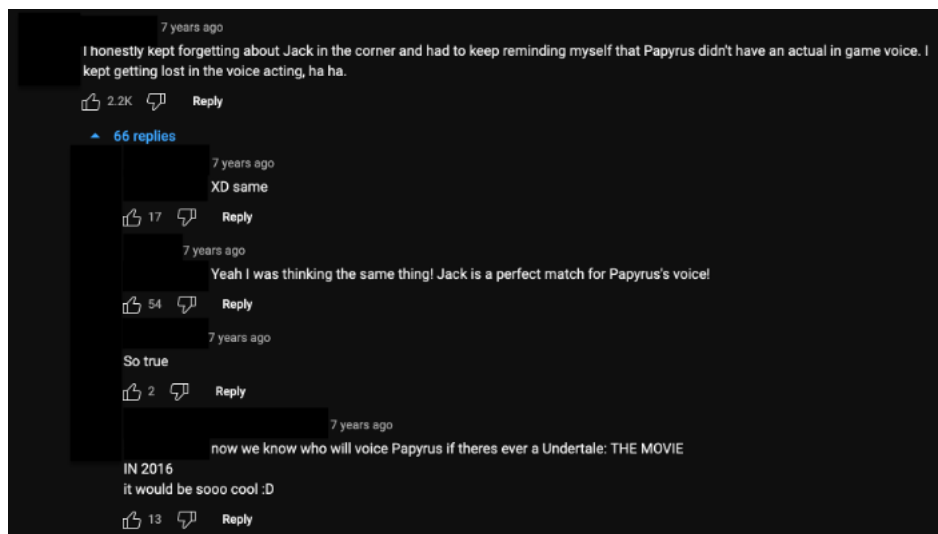


Figure 43: Comment thread complimenting McLoughlin's Papyrus voice in particular

Now that we have an understanding of the contents of McLoughlin's playthrough as well as insights on *Undertale* fan reactions to it, I will now investigate what I perceive to be a reciprocal relationship between McLoughlin's playthrough and the UF's early imagined voices. I will argue that each one had an impact on the other when informing current imagined voices the *Undertale* fans have for characters as detailed in the survey results.

McLoughlin and The *Undertale* Fandom: A Reciprocal Relationship

In terms of chosen voices, fan reception to McLoughlin's choices were received mostly positively, and are now quite celebrated in fan communities. This is evidenced by McLoughlin's comment sections and survey participants citing

McLoughlin's character voices as their favourites. Out of 17 participants that chose to give examples of voice-acted playthroughs they enjoyed, 7 mentioned McLoughlin's playthrough, and it was the most cited playthrough out of any others mentioned by participants in responses to this question. This is likely because McLoughlin's *Undertale* playthrough was one of the first to include voice acting, so at the time, there were few other provided voices to prefer McLoughlin's to. Today, a quick YouTube search reveals several videos of YouTube users providing dubbed voices for *Undertale* fan comics, a full fan made *Undertale* musical and the *Undertale* "Cinematic Dub". McLoughlin released his videos very soon after *Undertale*'s release, so this wide range of voice-acted *Undertale* content did not exist to be compared to. Let's Plays such as Fischbach's were initially released in the same year as McLoughlin's, and by then, so much online content existed of *Undertale* voice acting that Fischbach was apparently criticised for his voices¹⁸, evidencing just how quickly *Undertale*'s popularity and fan communities grew after its release (Spencer, 2017).

Something noticeable about *Undertale*'s rapid rise in popularity is how participatory culture unfolded in fan spaces. Jenkins (2006) proposes fan communities as participatory cultures: for our purposes, spaces that anyone can contribute to and be a part of with little barrier for entry. This is technically true of early *Undertale* fandom, but in the early years, there were still 'rules' for how people participated when it came to the imagined voice. Take Fischbach for example: while he was free to keep posting videos using voices that the UF did not imagine for the characters, he instead chose to stop due to the criticism he was facing. This perhaps shows another side of participatory culture: while nothing actively prohibits participation in fandom spaces, players run the risk of upsetting fans if they participate 'wrongly' per se, and this may be its own potential barrier for entry. Everyone can participate, but this does not mean fans won't make it known if you participate incorrectly.

¹⁸ In the first instalment of Fischbach's second *Undertale* playthrough, he describes instances of *Undertale* fans claiming that he was performing the voices "wrong" and should instead perform their "right" versions of the characters' voices. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rvY7uvZhtw&t=186s>

McLoughlin's early videos, albeit unintentionally, may have contributed to this potential addendum to participatory culture in fandom spaces. While McLoughlin's videos were largely well received by early *Undertale* fan communities, the content of the videos could have set an unfortunate precedent when it came to how fans expected future Let's Play content creators to react to *Undertale*. As previously noted, McLoughlin was very open to fan feedback when it came to making the necessary choices to spare all the characters, and instantly wanted to play the game in a Pacifist style, which would become the massively preferred way to play the game by *Undertale* fans (Spencer, 2017). McLoughlin even talks in a way that arguably encourages later *Undertale* fan behaviour during his Genocide playthrough. In the first Genocide video on the Jacksepticeye channel, McLoughlin muses that "if you played the true Genocide route on your first try, you'd miss so much!" and generally puts forth that *Undertale* is best experienced by playing it in a very specific way. While this is innocently put and is by no means phrased as a command for viewers to only play *Undertale* the way that he does, it does perhaps unintentionally communicate to *Undertale* fans that the behaviour described by Spencer is somewhat justified. When coupling this with the extreme willingness to abide by existing fandom norms (e.g. completing a Pacifist route above all else), we can see a potential other side to an argument made earlier. While McLoughlin's alignment with the fandom norms of the time arguably made him an ideal person to play *Undertale* for an audience, his unintentional parroting of fan demands to not play Genocide to a large audience arguably didn't do much to prevent future instances of fans getting strict with other players about how to engage with the game.

In addition to this, McLoughlin's videos would be at least partially influenced by fan feedback, which was welcomed by McLoughlin throughout his playthrough. The best way to observe this influence is through reception to McLoughlin's chosen voices, and how those voices went on to influence imagined voices in *Undertale* fan communities.

Influence by the Fandom: Finding Sans's Voice

A reciprocal relationship in terms of influence can be observed between McLoughlin and the UF. In videos since the completion of McLoughlin's *Undertale* series, McLoughlin has stated that the size of both the UF and his own audience largely increased around halfway through the completion of his initial Pacifist run, perhaps suggesting that his playthrough influenced his own fans to join *Undertale* fan spaces as well as attracting *Undertale* fans to his own audience (McLoughlin, 2021). It is again difficult to verify this growth in numbers due to statistics tracking limitations, but we can at least further observe this apparent reciprocal relationship in terms of how *Undertale* fans would go on to engage with imagined voices. Sometimes the UF would influence McLoughlin's chosen voices, as suggested by Spencer (2017) and as seen in survey results, but McLoughlin's chosen voices for certain characters would go on to become the 'definitive' voices for *Undertale* characters, and he would even be asked to perform them in real life at fan convention events (McLoughlin, 2016). We will now observe this reciprocal relationship through McLoughlin's voice performances for both Sans and Papyrus, beginning with Sans.

In the survey results, Sans's voice is not collectively agreed upon by participants. This is likely because Sans is the character that can appear the most differently between playthroughs. This has been noted in the survey results chapters: Sans will usually either be a wisecracking sidekick (Pacifist) or the antagonistic final boss (Genocide). Survey participants acknowledge both of these sides to Sans's character, with some imagining a friendly and funny voice for Sans but still wishing for his more dangerous nature to be acknowledged through the vocal performance. In terms of specific voice types, some participants wish for Sans to have a voice not unlike Patrick Star from *Spongebob Squarepants*; a deep, loud and boisterous voice. However, others imagine Sans as sounding like a New Yorker, specifically from Brooklyn. Interestingly, both voices were used for Sans in McLoughlin's own gameplay. Both McLoughlin and the UF at large continue to have a difficult time deciding upon which one they preferred throughout the playthrough, a debate

which has been brought up as recently as 2020 on McLoughlin's YouTube channel in the aforementioned Nostalgia Week special.

In McLoughlin's Pacifist run, Sans is introduced to McLoughlin the same way he introduces himself to every *Undertale* player regardless of chosen playstyle. Sans approaches the player from behind while cloaked in shadow, demanding that they shake his hand out of respect, and then when they do, he reveals that he was playing a classic "whoopee cushion in the hand trick" while chuckling to himself. Sans's character sprite is revealed, and he is a short, stocky skeleton with a perpetual smile. The sounds that accompany his dialogue are even clipped to sound like a laugh, while upbeat music plays in the background. McLoughlin reacts to this the way he reacts to most *Undertale* gags: with laughter and praise. This introduction to Sans could even serve as foreshadowing for the division to come; Sans is introduced ominously, even frighteningly, hinting at the Sans we may eventually discover in Genocide who is all powerful and incredibly difficult to defeat. However, after giving the player a good scare, he reveals his love of practical jokes and laid-back nature, revealing that he has no interest in capturing the player and wants to introduce them to his beloved brother Papyrus. These two conflicting interpretations of Sans can also be observed in the rather different imagined voices for him by both the UF and McLoughlin himself.

Similarly to survey participants, McLoughlin chooses a voice for Sans based on the 'text sounds' that accompany Sans's dialogue. Before performing Sans's voice, McLoughlin says, "wait, what does [Sans's text noise] sound like?". Upon listening to it for a moment, he declares with some amusement that "he sounds like Patrick Star!". And so, Sans would go on to sound like Patrick Star for the remainder of the video, which ends after meeting Papyrus for the first time. In the 2020 Nostalgia Week video on *Undertale*, McLoughlin would reveal that this was his preferred voice for Sans. However, McLoughlin would change the voice for Sans in the second Pacifist video due to viewer feedback and the difficulty of performing the Patrick Star-esque voice for long-form videos. The second voice for Sans is intended to resemble a "New Yorker", as McLoughlin says that comments have been left telling him that that's what Sans should sound like. A certain level of indecision over how

Sans should sound is present in the UF to this day, as demonstrated by previously discussed survey results. However, the swiftness in Sans's voice change and McLoughlin's admittance to basing Sans's voice on comment feedback is indicative of the UF's influence on McLoughlin's playthrough.

In videos since the original *Undertale* playthrough, McLoughlin has been more open about his personal imagined voice for Sans. While McLoughlin insists several times in the third Pacifist *Undertale* video that he prefers the New York accent for Sans and continues to use it right through until the end of the Genocide playthrough, in the 2020 *Undertale* Nostalgia Week special he says that he never liked the second voice he chose for Sans that he performs for most of the original *Undertale* videos. He also expresses both mild annoyance and satisfaction with the recent revelation that Toby Fox possibly sampled Sans's text sounds directly from a snippet of dialogue from Patrick Star, suggesting that his first instinct was 'correct' all along despite negative backlash to it. This is not a proven claim, and comes from a selection of fans posting video and audio clips comparing a sample of Patrick Star's voice to Sans's in-game text sound in 2019.¹⁹²⁰ Notably, while they do sound remarkably similar, there is no evidence that this is actually where Sans's text sound comes from. In any case, McLoughlin includes this new fan theory in the Nostalgia Week special as evidence that he was "right all along" when providing a Patrick Star-esque voice for Sans (McLoughlin, 2022). While authorial intent has been shown to not be of the utmost importance to fans (for example, as seen in Jenkins' studies of textual poaching), it is interesting to explore this idea of the Patrick Star voice being the 'correct' one. Indeed, the notion that this has been the 'correct' voice all along appears linked to the origin of Sans's text sounds. Since the text sound is found to have possibly come from an audio snippet of Patrick Star, some fans (including McLoughlin) could argue that is the character that should be imitated when performing Sans voices. This arguably further emphasises the importance of taking text sounds into account to both McLoughlin and to fans when performing *Undertale* voices, which harkens back to survey

¹⁹ Available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFgwSP-GN0M>

²⁰ Available on Soundcloud here: <https://soundcloud.com/undertale-recreated/undertale-bonus-track-sans-voice-recreation>

testimony where fans state that they consider text sounds when selecting an ideal voice.

McLoughlin elaborates further on his experiences pleasing the UF in the Nostalgia Week special, saying that while he is proud of his *Undertale* playthrough and enjoyed playing it while the fandom was so large and thriving, he does acknowledge that there were and still are problems with *Undertale* fans demanding the game be played or voiced in a certain ‘correct’ way. While McLoughlin faced little pushback on his chosen playstyle, he did face some negative feedback on voices in particular, as observed with Sans.

Though as proposed in earlier discussions of Cox and Felschow, I argue we may be seeing protectiveness of *Undertale* fans’ sense of self in action: while opinions of Sans’s voice are split, these opinions are important enough to fans that they felt the need to immediately correct McLoughlin on his chosen voice at a point in time when the game and performances of the characters in it were still very new. As per the previous discussion regarding Cox, I argue that this came from a place of disorientation at having one’s potential sense of self disrupted, given the connection Cox points out between inner voice and one’s sense of identity. Combined with Spencer’s findings regarding the degree of defensiveness some *Undertale* fans had over their interpretations of the text and Felschow’s arguments regarding the importance of a sense of self to fan communities, I argue these sentiments are present in pushback to McLoughlin’s chosen voices. Therefore, I argue that the importance to fans of *Undertale* fandom identity and the imagined voices for the characters played a role in the swiftness and frequency of critique McLoughlin (and Fischbach) experienced in the early days of *Undertale* fandom.

Additionally, the original playthrough and the Nostalgia Week special reveal quite an interesting juxtaposition to McLoughlin’s opinions on the UF. In the original, there is an eagerness to please *Undertale* fans; McLoughlin will not only give the characters voices approved by the fandom, but he also performs certain in-game actions to please fans even if these fans appear to be in different camps. An example of this is McLoughlin going to great offscreen measures to obtain the Temy

Armor, a special item that can only be bought through a lot of grinding, due to fan requests for it. After he'd retrieved it, a presumably different set of fans admonished him for using it because it made the game too easy. McLoughlin doesn't appear annoyed at this contradiction or at all the time wasted on getting the Armor only to not use it, and throughout the rest of the series continues to follow fan requests when completing the game, such as discovering extra Mettaton lore towards the end of the Genocide run (which is quite a time-consuming endeavour that involves pausing the main story). McLoughlin appears more critical of *Undertale*'s more demanding fans during the Nostalgia Week special, however, saying that the fandom "went to shit for a while" at the peak of *Undertale*'s popularity, in reference to certain members of the fan community being very particular about how the game should be played and voiced. However, like survey participants, McLoughlin acknowledges improvement in fan behaviour as time went on. Further changes in McLoughlin's attitude towards fans can especially be seen through McLoughlin's journey choosing a voice for Sans, which judging by the Nostalgia Week special, still appears incomplete.

While McLoughlin's original *Undertale* videos and 2020 Nostalgia Week special detail a long and complicated road towards finding Sans's voice, there was another character whose ideal voice was found immediately by McLoughlin and embraced enthusiastically by the fandom; Sans's eccentric skeleton brother, Papyrus.

Influence on the Fandom: Papyrus's Skeletor Origins

While *Undertale* fan communities did have some influence over McLoughlin's original *Undertale* gameplay, McLoughlin's *Undertale* playthroughs had significant influence over how some fans believe *Undertale* characters can sound. This is particularly notable through Papyrus's voice. As noted in the survey, many *Undertale* fans believe that Papyrus should sound like Skeletor from the *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* franchise (see chapter 2 for more information). One of the first people to publicly voice this opinion was McLoughlin himself, who

gave Papyrus a Skeletor-esque voice immediately upon meeting him and kept it the same throughout the whole series.

Notably, at the time of McLoughlin's original Pacifist playthrough, he was not the only person performing voice-acted gameplay for *Undertale*. Other players include the aforementioned Fischbach and YouTubers Vargskelethor (began in September 2015) and PressHeartToContinue (began in October 2015). McLoughlin's playthrough was simply one of the more famous at the time and continued to be as the years went by. In the second video of the Pacifist run, McLoughlin engages with comments that express fascination with the fact that almost every player they know of who has met Papyrus has immediately given him the same voice; the best possible Skeletor impression that the player in question can provide. McLoughlin provides possible explanation for the collective agreement that Papyrus sounds like Skeletor amongst *Undertale* fans by referencing Papyrus's physical appearance and dialogue. Papyrus's character sprite is a skeleton in a cape, not unlike Skeletor, and he ends most encounters with the player by laughing, "Nyeh heh heh!". McLoughlin finds this to be very similar to Skeletor's portrayal in most *He-Man* media, and therefore is not surprised that most people tend to agree that Papyrus's imagined voice is so similar to the character.

Throughout the following episode of the Pacifist run, during which McLoughlin faces Papyrus in 'battle' in order to progress past Snowdin Town, McLoughlin dives deeper into how he feels about the voices he has assigned Sans and Papyrus. He expresses dissatisfaction with his Sans voice, feeling that the Patrick Star voice was too silly for Sans but reiterates that the Papyrus voice is perfect, and that no changes are necessary. Why? According to McLoughlin, "because he looks like Skeletor". Papyrus's Skeletor voice has persisted over the years in fandom spaces as the prevalent imagined voice for the character, as noted in previous chapters, largely due to his resemblance to Skeletor in both appearance and dialogue.

The reliance on pre-existing characters like Skeletor in finding voices for characters shows again the relevance of Cox when considering McLoughlin and the UF's relationship with the imagined voice. As noted by Cox, appearance can play a

large role in constructing an imagined voice, to the point where disorientation can occur if a person's real-life voice does not match what they were imagined to sound like based on the way they look. Appearance is often considered in this way when McLoughlin provides voices for the characters, and the absence of it can even create difficulty in settling on a voice. Returning to Undyne, she is discussed often before we meet her. As the player progresses between the Ruins and Snowdin Town, Papyrus mentions her frequently, presenting her as an exceedingly strong and capable woman in charge of the Underground's Royal Guard, who really wants to capture a human. By the way her competence is discussed, it seems she poses a much larger threat to the player than Papyrus's human hunting tendencies did. In terms of appearance, one nameless resident of Snowdin Town describes her as a "fish lady". However, when the player finally meets Undyne (during many small segments in which she tries to skewer the player with a spear as they progress through Waterfall), she is dressed in a heavy suit of armour that obscures her appearance. Her first voice lines appear when she is dressed in this way, which McLoughlin says makes it difficult for him to choose a voice for her. McLoughlin gives her a gruff voice (which fluctuates in pitch as he struggles to remember her gender) and interrupts himself while reading the dialogue to lament the lack of visual reference which would help him provide a satisfactory voice for her. This moment shows how important McLoughlin finds character appearance when choosing a satisfactory voice for the characters, which is reflected in his choice for Papyrus; Papyrus looks like Skeletor, ergo he must sound like Skeletor too.

Undertale fans strongly agreed with McLoughlin's chosen voice for Papyrus, and its popularity extended outside of online spheres. In the second Genocide video, McLoughlin details encountering fan convention attendees who would ask him to perform his Papyrus voice during convention appearances. Furthermore, he has been told by viewers that they now imagine McLoughlin's provided Papyrus voice whenever encountering the character in-game or in fan media. This is corroborated by online discussions shown in the introduction (figures 9 through 11) that mention McLoughlin when discussing how Papyrus should sound. This demonstrates McLoughlin's influence on the imagined voices for *Undertale* characters when it comes to the Papyrus voice in particular, and we can see that

the influence remains in modern fan spaces through survey participants citing McLoughlin when casting their own voices for *Undertale* characters.

This perhaps sheds further light on the UF's relationship with participatory culture, and how participating in the 'right way' can get you much further than if you stray from the imagined voices of early *Undertale* fandom. For example, McLoughlin described real life encounters with fans of the game in which he is asked to perform his voices from his *Undertale* playthroughs. McLoughlin describes this encounter with a sense of pride, and perhaps in terms of fan studies literature, he should. Earlier analysis of Jenkins and Spencer in tandem proposed that the punishment for straying from the imagined voice perhaps introduces something of a barrier to participatory culture, which usually has very little barriers for entry, and implies that there are consequences for participating 'wrong'. However, McLoughlin's testimony reveals that there is also a reward for participating in the 'right' way: celebration in real life fandom spaces as opposed to just online ones.

As fans of *Undertale* reflect on McLoughlin's chosen voices in the survey results, McLoughlin has also released several videos since his original *Undertale* playthrough reflecting on how his videos were received, with particular regard to the voices. In one such video, McLoughlin reveals an especially pertinent detail on how *Undertale* fans reacted to him playing the game for his own audience, which in turn provides some further insight into how fan identity and the imagined voice are connected through *Undertale* fandom. Furthermore, this musing from McLoughlin perhaps reveals that while early *Undertale* fandom behaviours were not ideal, there might have been a more solid reasoning behind them than meets the eye.

On "The Normies"

Towards the end of the Nostalgia Week video, McLoughlin discusses *Undertale* fan reactions to his first videos on *Undertale*, which are rather different to current fan reception of them. Survey results show that nowadays *Undertale* fans are quite

celebratory of McLoughlin's *Undertale* playthrough; he is cited frequently as an online personality that fans enjoy seeing play the game in question 12. However, McLoughlin says in the Nostalgia Week special that some *Undertale* fans were initially uncertain about his videos, worrying that "normies [who] didn't get [the game]" would enter *Undertale* fan communities after seeing his videos and change them for the worse (McLoughlin, 2020). This is perhaps indicative of McLoughlin's large audience at the time, and how they were perceived by *Undertale* fans. McLoughlin's audience could perhaps be considered a fan community themselves as they are fans of McLoughlin, but according to this statement by McLoughlin in 2020, they were still arguably perceived as 'normies' by *Undertale* fans. Given this protectiveness and resistance to 'normies', I argue that being an outsider to the mainstream is a key component of some *Undertale* fans' sense of self, as discussed previously. To better understand this, I will now focus the wider relationship between *Undertale* fans and 'normies' and how it may have been affected by the general online environment at the time of the UF's inception.

Potential divides between *Undertale* fans and the 'normies' can be observed in discussions of Mettaton. Ruberg cites Mettaton as an example of a queer-coded *Undertale* character, due to his transformation from a bulky square shaped robot into a curvy figure visually representative of a human woman, perhaps alluding to a gender transition. Mettaton's gender identity remains a source of much debate in *Undertale* fan communities and has at least partially replaced discussions on the best way to play the game out of the three possible playstyles. As noted in the survey results chapters, discussions of gender identity in *Undertale* characters appears to be one of the most popular discussion topics now, if not the most popular. In chapter 1, participants expressed some amount of exhaustion with questions regarding the UF's early reputation for demanding the game be played in a certain way by online content creators, with most claiming that such behaviours are a product of a bygone era. However, when asked about Spencer's Kotaku article, one participant claimed that the most heated fandom discussions these days are centred around the gender identities of the characters. This can also be observed in responses to the survey's final question about Mettaton, where opinions tended to be the strongest on each side of the discussion.

Figures 44-47 below show additional examples of public discussions of *Undertale* characters' genders from 2025, with figure 47 in particular including calls to think of how the characters would feel hearing their identities spoken about dismissively and also to consider the feelings of trans and non-binary fans when discussing gender. While I have little interest in taking a side on this matter in this thesis, for our purposes we can infer that this corroborates survey testimony that gender identity in *Undertale* characters is now a matter of importance among its fan community. Additionally, as seen in figures 48-50, discussions of Mettaton's gender identity appear to be much less emotionally charged than discussions of the gender identities of the playable characters Frisk and Chara, as well as the playable protagonist of *Undertale's* sequel game *Deltarune* called Kris. For example, in discussions of the playable characters, there appears to be an unspoken agreement that there is a correct way to address Frisk and Chara despite their lack of stated pronouns in-game, and not doing so is disrespectful both to the characters and to fans that share their gender identity. In discussions of Mettaton, who is not a playable character, discussions are slightly less rigid; not everyone necessarily holds the view that Mettaton is representative of a trans character, but are not vocally opposed to it either. This perhaps suggests a degree of closeness *Undertale* fans feel to the playable characters in particular, and I argue that, in defending the playable characters' identity and sense of self, fans may very well also feel that they are protecting their own.

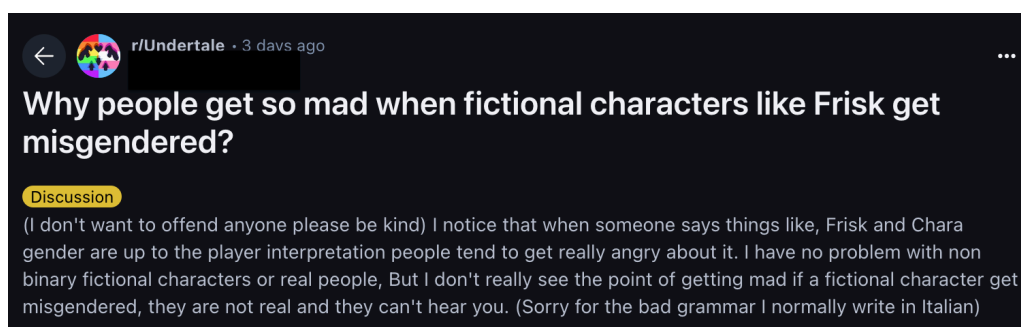


Figure 44: Reddit post inquiring about emotionally charged discussions of *Undertale* characters' genders from August 2025

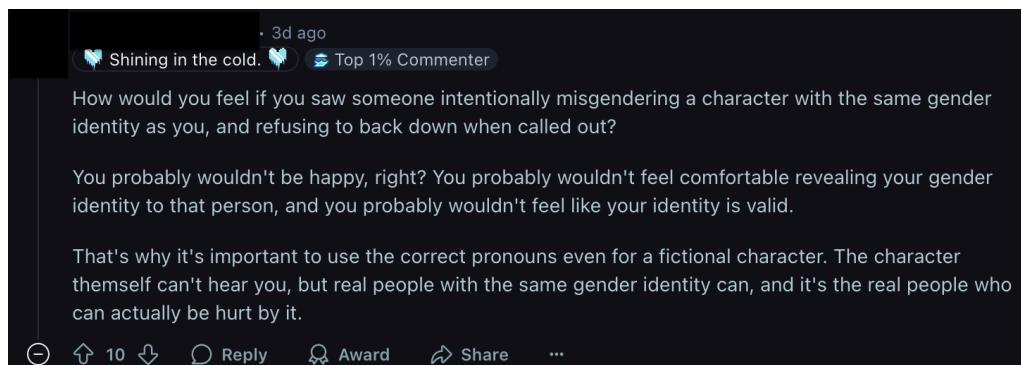


Figure 45: Reply to the above post discussing the potential misgendering of Frisk and Chara



Figure 46: A Reddit post expressing dissatisfaction with the current state of gender discussion regarding *Undertale* characters from August 2025

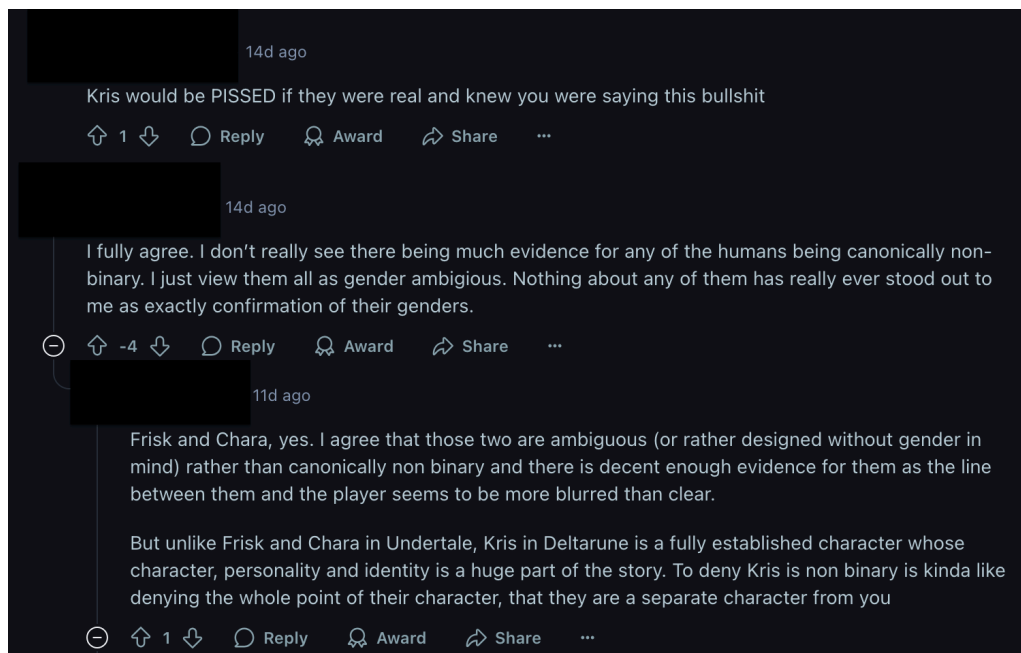


Figure 47: Responses to the above post showing mixed reactions to it

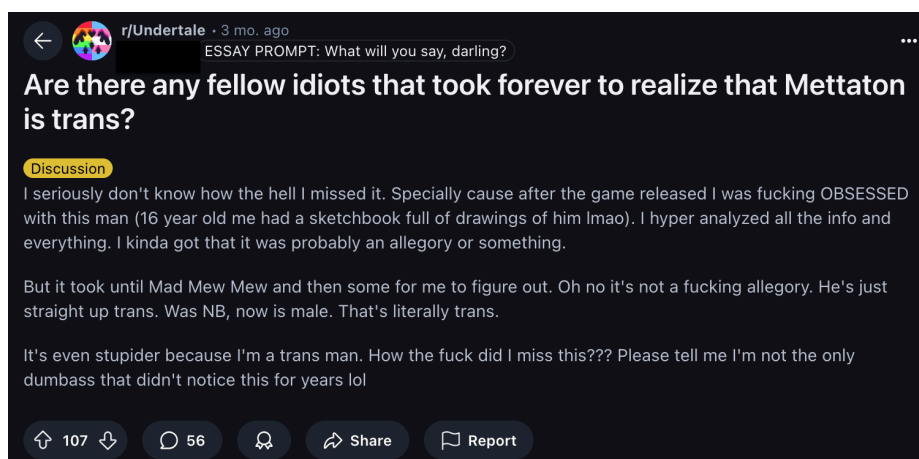


Figure 48: A Reddit post discussing the nature of Mettaton's potential presentation as a trans character



Figure 49: Responses to the above post questioning Mettaton's trans status

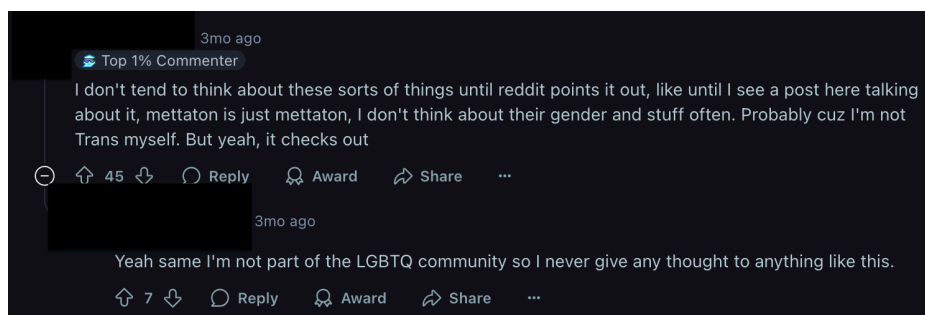


Figure 50: Additional responses to the above post citing personal experiences in interpreting Mettaton

Varied opinions of Mettaton in particular also spill over into imagined voice territory, with survey participants naming two potential voice types for Mettaton with little overlap: an obviously computer-generated voice to emphasise his robotic nature, or an energetic and flamboyant human voice to emphasise his showmanship. Both of these voice types feature in McLoughlin's playthrough (which is rather rare as previously discussed in chapter two), but at the time of McLoughlin's *Undertale* playthrough, the more human voice was apparently preferred overall. When McLoughlin initially gave Mettaton a monotone, robotic voice, fans were apparently displeased at the lack of exuberance given to Mettaton's voice (according to McLoughlin's testimony in the original *Undertale* videos). As seen in the survey results, preferences are now much more split, perhaps due to some additional influence from McLoughlin; giving Mettaton a robot voice didn't appear to be a very popular choice before McLoughlin's videos. A common argument made in survey results regarding Mettaton's gender identity was

that Mettaton is primarily a robot, and therefore it is nonsensical to assign human gender roles to the character - this can also be seen briefly in figure 49.

McLoughlin could be said to have a similar view, in that above all else, Mettaton is a robot and should be voiced as such.

Notably, McLoughlin's playthroughs are unique among the case studies in this thesis, as he is the only one to assign Mettaton a strictly robot voice while Mettaton is in his robot form. McLoughlin's choice of voice type for Mettaton also has interesting effects on a musical sequence in the game that parodies an opera performance from *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) in which Mettaton sings. Mettaton's in-game singing is provided by MIDI and not by an actual voice actor while lyrics are provided onscreen. In the two case studies following this one, the performer for Mettaton opts to sing the lyrics along with the MIDI in a tuneful and energetic way befitting of an opera performance by a human. McLoughlin, however, chooses to remain robotic and monotone while speaking the lyrics aloud, arguing during the song that this makes the performance more humorous as Mettaton attempts to sing like a human but cannot overcome his robotic limitations to do so. This rigidity towards the robotic performance could indicate potential reasoning behind early *Undertale* fans fearing an influx of 'normies' from McLoughlin's playthrough; Mettaton, despite his transformation and queer-coded nature as indicated by Ruberg, is being given limitations via vocal performance that do not allow him to 'sing' properly due to his status as a robot. While this was likely not McLoughlin's intention, this potentially means that Mettaton (in the eyes of early *Undertale* fans at least) was denied an opportunity to express his true self.

Of additional note, while McLoughlin is the only performer in the thesis's case studies to give Mettaton a robotic voice, he is also the only one that changes his Mettaton voice depending on what form Mettaton is in. McLoughlin changes his voice during Mettaton's boss battle immediately following the transformation to be more in line with the spoken "Oh yes!" line (a drawling, boastful voice), but states that the main reasoning behind this voice change is that Mettaton now looks human, and should sound like one. This can be interpreted in one of two ways, or perhaps even both: firstly, Mettaton's transformation has been recognised and

accepted by McLoughlin, given his lack of hesitation to change his vocal performance the moment Mettaton's new form was shown onscreen. However, there is also an insinuation here by McLoughlin that vocal type must match appearance. For instance, McLoughlin addressed calls from fans for a more human-like Mettaton voice before the transformation took place, and explained that he would not be changing his Mettaton voice because Mettaton was still a robot. However, the moment Mettaton changed his appearance during his boss battle, McLoughlin says, "now he has a human body, so now I can talk like a person" in apparent response to these fans. There is an implication here that voice should strictly match appearance, or at least, match what is expected to be heard from one's appearance, which is arguably a 'normie' view held by McLoughlin that fans were resistant to in initial *Undertale* fan spaces.

It is of course possible that McLoughlin did not register the queer references in Mettaton's presentation (the visual allusions to *Paris is Burning* referenced in chapter 1 are much more subtle than something like Undyne and Alphys's romantic relationship, which is made very obvious in a Pacifist run) and therefore did not intend to 'straight-wash' Mettaton (Ruberg, 2018). However, this could lend credence to early *Undertale* fandom fears that McLoughlin could lead 'normies' into their space; if Mettaton's primarily robotic identity is a 'normie' opinion, and it didn't gain much traction until after McLoughlin's playthrough, in this sense McLoughlin's playthrough could indeed have invited 'normies' into *Undertale* fan spaces who 'wouldn't get it' ('it' in this instance being Mettaton's ideal voice at the time).

Ongoing debates regarding Mettaton's voice also link back to Trevor Cox once again, and the reliance on outside factors to assume what a person sounds like. Mettaton's more flamboyant voice could be attributed to the queer-coded aspects of the character, as well as being largely based on how the character looks post-transformation and their status as a celebrity game show host. So while there is textual justification for giving Mettaton a standard robotic voice (Mettaton's text sounds suggest that this could indeed be what the character sounds like), giving Mettaton a robot voice could also be seen by early *Undertale* fans as an erasure of

the character's personality and potential queer identity: as per Ruberg, a case of 'straight-washing' via voice acting brought about by McLoughlin bringing 'normie' attitudes into *Undertale* fan spaces. Regardless of whether the fear of 'normies' in fan spaces is justified, however, we can use this musing by McLoughlin to potentially link fan studies and the imagined voice, and how these fields of research could combine in the case of *Undertale*.

Furthermore, *Undertale* is not exactly a "normal" Western video game, with its unique battle system and sense of humour that requires at least a basic knowledge of media that is not in the cultural mainstream such as Shonen anime and dating simulation video games (Ruberg, 2018). A normie may not be able to fully appreciate these things, and perhaps write *Undertale* off as merely an average game, when of course longtime fans of *Undertale* do not feel like this is the case. A normie may also play *Undertale* for the first time, go through the entire game without knowing that all characters can be spared, get a Neutral ending, and never return to the game again, never knowing about all the lore and multiple endings. For an early *Undertale* fan, this is potentially quite upsetting: in this instance, the ideal route (Pacifist) would be ignored by this potential normie player. Without experiencing that story route, that person wouldn't 'get' what made the game so special to the fan community. These things may explain the UF's early aversion to normies in their space via McLoughlin's videos in some capacity, but perhaps it can go further; fan spaces, as we can observe through existing fan community research, have never been characterised by what is considered normal.

Felschow proposes that people that have felt othered throughout their lives often find solace in fan communities, as they are often characterised by being 'the Other'. Felschow discusses the strange place a cult fan occupies in the world; they may feel superior to other fans due to their high-ranking position in their community, but in the real world, the activities they carry out to keep their position as a cult fan can ostracise them from non-fandom spaces that contain people who view them as strange. This same attitude can be observed in *Undertale* fan communities quite broadly; fans revel in holding the knowledge that allows them to play the game in the 'correct' way and in the past have proven eager to

share this knowledge with others, but at the same time they are hesitant to allow normies in their spaces who may not understand, appreciate or even want this knowledge. More recently, *Undertale* fans appear reluctant to engage in the behaviours that made the fandom more widely known through online artefacts such as McLoughlin's videos or Spencer's Kotaku article. They don't want to be judged for their fan behaviours by those who would not "get it". Indeed, in the survey results, one participant said that they still did not enjoy watching people play *Undertale* in a way they felt was incorrect, but that they did not want to share these feelings by telling others how to play. Such reactions to an individual's personal *Undertale* playstyle may have been seen as normal before Spencer's Kotaku article, perhaps, but the survey participant appears aware that it is no longer the accepted way for *Undertale* fans to behave. However, the feelings remain, and it can still apparently be difficult for *Undertale* fans to see someone misunderstanding their game. As Felschow discusses, misunderstanding the object of a fandom, to fans at least, can be equated to misunderstanding the people in the fandom as well, leading to some potential emotional distress. Felschow's article reveals to us a potential reason *Undertale* fans didn't want McLoughlin indirectly inviting normies into their spaces: they wouldn't understand the game or the people who were fans of the game. Fans' protectiveness over their sense of self can be extended to the imagined voice as well, as we have seen in the work of Trevor Cox.

As previously noted, Felschow details how involvement in fandom can be strongly connected to one's sense of self, giving those that feel like 'the other' a place to feel they belong and can engage with their interests as much or as little as they want without judgement. This can explain why early *Undertale* fans were so concerned about McLoughlin bringing *Undertale* to the attention of "normies". Not only would they not know about the fandom's preferred playstyles, but they would also not understand something even harder to explain and justify: the fandom's imagined voices. While there is no such thing as giving an *Undertale* character the 'wrong' voice, people performing *Undertale* voices are very likely to contradict someone else's imagined voice, provoking that person to react in order to protect their sense of self and offset the disorientation of hearing the 'wrong' voice. Cox

spends much of his book studying the phenomenon of assigning imagined voices to people based on personality and appearance, and even he admits it's not an exact science. As noted in the literature review, this is by design; voice perception studies aim to study the origins and frequency of certain assumptions that can be made about the voice, not the accuracy of them. This is further corroborated by Kreiman, Vanlancker-Sidti & Gerratt (2007), whose study aimed to find commonalities between assumptions of voices rather than the accuracies of such assumptions. If scholars of voice studies acknowledge the flawed practice of assigning imagined voices, it would be even more difficult for the average *Undertale* fan to explain their voice preferences to 'normies', perhaps leading to more resistance to such people in their fandom spaces.

However, there is another factor that I argue contributed to early *Undertale* fan attitudes, in particular a resistance to 'normies' in fan spaces. At the time of *Undertale*'s release, Gamergate was taking place, which was a significant event in games studies history that continues to affect discussions surrounding video games. As noted in the literature review, Gamergate was a major turning point in gaming circles that now marks a clear before-and-after regarding how marginalised groups are spoken about both in the games industry and in terms of fictional representation in games (Ruch, 2025). With Gamergate in mind, I will now discuss how circumstances surrounding *Undertale*'s release combined with Ruberg's research reveal that *Undertale* fans were potentially justified in their concerns regarding 'normies'. *Undertale* is a game that not only features female characters in prominent roles, but also several instances of queer-coding, which I argue could have potentially made it a target for Gamergate (Ruberg, 2018).

Gamergate began in 2014, and *Undertale* was released in 2015. Gamergate has been brought up in previous *Undertale* research, for example by Alexandra Müller in *Undertale: Violence in Context* (2015). This paper was written during Gamergate, and investigates *Undertale*'s unique position as a game positively received by Gamergaters despite having content that was at odds with their preferences like prominent female and queer characters. Little was said about *Undertale*'s fandom, likely because in 2015 when the paper was published,

Undertale was still very young and perhaps hadn't been as affected by Gamergate as it perhaps was by the time of Ruberg's research. Now that an appropriate amount of time has passed to carry out a retrospective analysis of Gamergate's effect on *Undertale* fandom, I will now investigate this further.

Given the circumstances, I argue that the 'normies' McLoughlin claims *Undertale* fans were so afraid of weren't just people who had little experience in the role of 'the Other'. They could also have been people involved with Gamergate, or at least people with similar views to those involved with Gamergate who felt empowered by the prominence of the discourse, who could seek to harass *Undertale* fans out of their own spaces. Returning to Ruberg's work, in their article they describe pushback in *Undertale* fan spaces that could align with attitudes found in Gamergate circles. This is not to say the people cited in Ruberg's article as being resistant to queer and feminist themes in *Undertale* were directly involved in Gamergate, but through Ruberg's article we see can see the potential effects of Gamergate on *Undertale* fan spaces. Gamergate represents a turning point in how fans interact with video games, and indeed how they interact with each other in video game fan spaces (Wells et al., 2023). The straight-washing, or reluctance to acknowledge minorities in *Undertale*, as critiqued in Ruberg's work is arguably a ripple effect from Gamergate. Therefore, the "normies" in question that early *Undertale* fans were so worried about did indeed alter fandom spaces as was initially feared. If this is the case, early *Undertale* fans, while somewhat overzealous as portrayed in Spencer's work, were arguably justified in their concerns about their fandom being exposed to a wider audience at a particularly hostile time in gaming history. Insistence upon characters sounding a certain way may have had less to do with a need to control how others played the game and how others performed the voices, and more to do with having control over how the game was perceived during a time where marginalised people were under threat of harassment for their participation in gaming spaces.

McLoughlin and The Research Question

Now that a stronger understanding of early *Undertale* fan attitudes, the motivation behind them and their effect on imagined *Undertale* character voices has been uncovered, I will now refer back to the primary research question. In the case of the Jacksepticeye playthrough, how has the text of *Undertale* been transformed through bringing imagined voices to fruition? Put simply, the text of *Undertale* has been altered by McLoughlin's addition of voice acting as informed by both in-game sound like text noises and fan feedback, and has subsequently gone from being a game to a series of videos. This is obvious, of course, but is being brought up now to properly set the stage for further investigations into how the *Undertale* text is transformed in the later two case studies. Additionally, I argue that the discussions had in this chapter regarding early UF norms shed light on how exactly *Undertale* is transformed through performative play. *Undertale* fandom norms played a role in how exactly the text was transformed through pre-existing notions of how each character should sound. Fans provided feedback for how characters like Sans should sound, and McLoughlin took it on board. So, while McLoughlin is the one that transformed the text in this instance, existing *Undertale* fandom norms and practices played a role in how exactly it was transformed. Further observations on how the text of *Undertale* is transformed through the addition of voice acting for a digital community will be made in the two case studies following this one.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to investigate early *Undertale* fandom in the context of a relevant case study. This has been done through analysis of McLoughlin's playthrough, and when combined with relevant literature and previously described survey results, we see the following conclusions.

Firstly, reception to McLoughlin's playthrough as well as relevant literature from voice studies and fan studies disciplines reveals that a potential reasoning behind early *Undertale* fan behaviours was a strong connection to one's sense of self, and reactions to disorientation when it felt disrupted. Furthermore, when considered alongside survey results, we can see that *Undertale* fans could not only influence

how the game was played, but people outside the fandom playing the game could also influence imagined voices the fandom held for certain characters, as was the case with McLoughlin's performed voice for Papyrus.

Additionally, McLoughlin's retrospective on his *Undertale* playthrough and subsequent comments about the UF at the time presents an as of now seldom considered perspective on the UF: a fear of 'normies' taking over fandom spaces, and how the coinciding of *Undertale*'s release and Gamergate may have given *Undertale* fans justification in this fear of 'normies'. Potential justification for the fear of 'normies' finding the Undertale fandom through McLoughlin's playthrough in particular has been investigated through analysis of McLoughlin's chosen voices for Mettaton and the reasoning behind them.

For future studies in this vein, I would recommend further insight into the influence of Gamergate on gaming fandoms and how discussions of game sound potentially change in this regard (as discussed above in the case of Mettaton when considered alongside Ruberg and Cox). For now, this case study has helped provide examples of the UF's early interactions with the wider gaming sphere through imagined voice, and given a stronger foundation for upcoming chapters exploring *Undertale* fans providing their own voices for playthroughs. Additionally, the nature of the Jacksepticeye playthrough acts as a basis for future discussion in this thesis regarding the transformative nature of voice-acted gameplay, which will be investigated further in the next two case studies.

Chapter 4: Case Study 2 - Fry 64

The following case study acts as both a companion and in contrast to the Jacksepticeye case study through focusing on both live Twitch streams and current *Undertale* fandom to gain a more substantial understanding of voice-acted gameplay and the evolution of game fandom communities' relationships with game sound.

The playthrough chosen is Fry 64's Twitch streams, aired in 2022. There is no shortage of *Undertale* playthroughs on Twitch, but this one was selected for its unique approach to voice acting for *Undertale*. Usually in voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs, the player provides all the voices (Spencer, 2017) but in Fry 64's playthrough, the player (Fry 64) knows nothing about the game, and the stream moderators (BluMusic, Worx4Tips & ArtNerdProductions) and some audience members provide voices for the characters via a Discord voice call during gameplay.

This playthrough was chosen for its unique approach as well as what this particular style can tell us about the evolution of the UF since playthroughs like Jacksepticeye's. For example, now that multiple people are providing the voices, it is pertinent to observe how they will be decided upon in relation to *Undertale* fandom norms. In other words, how will a performer's familiarity with the UF's customs (or lack thereof) affect their vocal performance and how it's received by the audience? This is something that will be investigated throughout the case study. Additionally, this playthrough will be used to explore how the UF's relationship to the imagined voice has evolved over the years. In particular, I will examine if imagined voice types from early *Undertale* fandom are still adhered to, and to what extent if they are.

Additionally, I am interested in how past research on Twitch streams and paratextuality applies to this playthrough, particularly Mia Consalvo's work. Consalvo (2017) considers past research in game studies that define the game

alone as text and anything that surrounds it (including Let's Plays and Twitch streams) as paratexts. However, Consalvo points out that games can be considered paratextual to other forms of media, for example if a video game is based on a film series. From this 'de-centring' of the text, she argues that Let's Plays and Twitch streams could be considered texts, and the games being played during them could be paratextual to them. This is arguably a simplistic way of viewing paratexts, and in Consalvo's own work she acknowledges the complexity of paratexts, though I do think there is value in considering the placement of text and paratext when it comes to Let's Plays and Twitch streams in this context. For instance, in Consalvo's work, she argues that Twitch streamers with particularly strong or performative personalities can become the focus of a stream, with the game being played serving as a foundation to showcase a streamer's antics. Genette originally defined paratexts as something that "surrounds and prolongs" a text (Genette, 1991, p. 261), which is something Consalvo argues that games do for streamers' content and careers (Consalvo, 2017, p. 182). This will be unpacked further later in the chapter in relation to Fry 64's stream specifically.

Furthermore, the context of the Fry 64 stream is of interest: this playthrough was broadcast in 2022 and is the only case study in this thesis to have been released *after* the COVID-19 pandemic. According to research published since then, Twitch played a pertinent role in facilitating digital community spirit during a time where real-world gatherings were discouraged or prohibited altogether (Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov, 2022; Chae & Lee, 2022). It is relevant, therefore, to examine the Fry 64 playthrough in this context and consider how much this contributed to the game's transformation from a video game text to a combined livestream watching experience and backdrop for a social gathering.

An Overview of the Fry 64 Playthrough

The Fry 64 playthrough is a series of Twitch streams aired in 2022 that provided voice-acting for *Undertale* in a rather unique way: the streamer, Fry 64, played through the game and invited viewers of his stream onto a Discord voice call where

they could provide the voices for *Undertale* characters. These voices were usually performed by three other individuals: Twitch users BluMusic, Worx4Tips and ArtNerdProductions, who were also moderators on the channel. The goal of the gameplay was to achieve a Pacifist ending. The streamer had never played *Undertale* and therefore did not know the specific steps to take in order to achieve this. However, voice chat participants did and guided him towards this objective, all the while trying not to ‘spoil’ the game (with mixed results, as shall be observed later).

The player, moderators and viewers all appeared to be a rather tight knit community: when viewers participated in the chat room, the streamer and moderators sometimes addressed the viewers by a nickname. This suggested familiarity with each other that is likely made possible by the small number of people involved in this stream, as the larger a Twitch audience gets, the more difficult interaction with individual chat participants can become (Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov, 2022). Fry 64’s small audience was evidenced by exaggerated celebrations by participants whenever the streaming viewing figures approach double digits. This was a much smaller audience than the one Jacksepticeye played *Undertale* for and was made up of fans from 2022 rather than 2015, which survey results suggest means that behaviours will differ greatly.

On a surface level, we can arguably see the original meaning of Jenkins’ (2006) participatory culture in this streaming environment. In the previous chapter, the nature of participatory culture in *Undertale* fan spaces was brought into question; while everyone can technically participate in *Undertale* fan spaces with little barrier for entry, early fan behaviours could be demanding regarding how the game is engaged with, discouraging people from participating altogether (Spencer, 2017). Observing the initial videos covering Fry 64’s stream, an environment much closer to the culture described by Jenkins can be observed; not only can anyone participate in the chat room, but audience members can also potentially participate as voice actors. All that person would need is access to the Discord voice call and permission from the moderators/streamer. There is nuance to this, however, as later videos demonstrate that while everyone can join the call and

provide a voice, the ‘rules’ of the *Undertale* fan community’s imagined voices are still adhered to quite strongly, but with less risk of encountering the behaviours described by Spencer.

As well as providing an example of how participatory culture can work in modern *Undertale* fan spaces, Fry 64’s playthrough further demonstrates the transformative nature of performative play and the imagined voice proposed towards the end of the previous chapter. *Undertale* is not only transformed into a series of videos documenting a Twitch livestream, but it is also (for the people involved and viewing in real time) transformed into a foundation for a social gathering. Throughout the stream, the voice actors and the player interacted with each other as one would in a casual social gathering between friends, making jokes and discussing the game while responding to chat room messages and making light-hearted self-deprecating jokes about their low viewership. This is made possible by the inclusion of voice chat and creates a different environment from the ones observed in Jacksepticeye’s playthrough.

The Jacksepticeye playthrough features a player performing voices and talking about them to an audience, but during the gameplay he is talking in real time only with himself, and the hypothetical audience cannot answer him via comments until he has edited and uploaded his gameplay to YouTube. By contrast, the Fry 64 playthrough acts as a filmed social gathering between friends and acquaintances that viewers can drop in on at any time and contribute to in the chat room. With the addition of Fry 64 lowering the barrier for entry in terms of voice acting and letting audience members contribute to the performative aspects of the playthrough, a transformation of the *Undertale* text can be observed. The text not only becomes the backdrop for a social gathering, but also an improvisational performance space, using both the game and imagined voices by *Undertale*’s fan community to facilitate this.

This transformation also lends itself to discussions on interactivity in this new development of the voice-acted *Undertale* playthrough. In terms of interactivity, this too is amplified through the introduction of a Discord voice call for providing

feedback. In Twitch chat rooms, feedback is immediately received by the player, but the player does not have to interact with it and can simply read it and move on. Feedback and gameplay advice is much harder to ignore when it is being spoken directly into a player's ear with no room for plausible deniability over whether the player heard them. Therefore, the introduction of Discord voice call may indirectly pressure the player into following feedback and gameplay advice in a way that does not necessarily apply in Twitch chat rooms. Chat messages from the Fry 64 stream have not been archived online and therefore it is difficult to tell if certain chat feedback was ignored while spoken feedback was followed and further test this hypothesis in practice. However, in future studies like this that includes interactivity with a streamer through both voice call and written chat messages, it would certainly be useful to consider.

Additionally, Twitch as a streaming platform also lends itself to more opportunities to interact with the soundtrack of a playthrough than through fixed mediums like Let's Plays. In Twitch streams, not only can chat participants influence what the streamer says, viewers can also insert sound effects into the stream through stream alerts. In Twitch streams, streamers are often given a sound alert when they receive a new follower, subscriber, donation or a viewer uses "bits" (virtual Twitch currency) to support the streamer. These are customizable and can lead to some interesting or even humorous instances of influencing a playthrough's soundtrack as will be seen later in the chapter.

Something of particular note when it comes to Twitch streaming is that communities of viewers can form around a particular streamer, and members of those communities can also be participants in online fan spaces surrounding the game being played. In Fry 64's case, there is the community that gathers around the stream, but there is also a presence of *Undertale* fans within that community that influences how the game is engaged with. I will now discuss how this 'community within a community' functions in practice.

Twitch Streaming: A Community Within a Community

The Fry 64 playthrough studied in this chapter is a series of YouTube highlights of a live Twitch stream. Due to the unpredictable availability of Twitch VODs (Twitch only retains VODs for 60 days or less depending on the streamer's status as a Twitch Partner), I chose to use the slightly more permanent videos that were uploaded to the Fry 64 YouTube channel that have no such time limit. Although the videos used to study the playthrough were of a non-live nature, I will be largely discussing the Fry 64 stream as a livestream using recorded documentation to facilitate this. I argue that the liveness of the Fry 64 stream is the most interesting way to discuss the events of the stream, and this will be most evident when proposing the Fry 64 stream as an opportunity for real-time social gathering and improvisational performance.

Livestreaming significantly differs from YouTube Let's Plays like Jacksepticeye's playthrough. While spectator interactivity with a player's gameplay is possible in Let's Plays (a spectator can leave a comment with gameplay advice and the player can act on it in a later instalment), it is heightened in Twitch streams through the chat room feature. During Twitch streams, viewers can gather in the streamer's chat room and leave advice for the player which they can then immediately act upon. Most streamers tend to have a team of moderators (or 'mods') active in their chat room to keep conversations respectful, on topic and, in Fry 64's case, spoiler-free. In streams such as Fry 64's moderators can act as agents for forming communities, as they enforce the 'rules', so to speak. When opening a particular streamer's Twitch chat for the first time, chat participants can be met with a pop-up message that briefly summarises the rules that the moderators will enforce. Usually these are quick and occasionally vague requests to be cordial to each other when participating in the chat room, with more popular streamers asking viewers not to use their chat room to promote their own Twitch channels to the rest of their audience. Examples of this can be seen below: figure 51 is Fry 64's pop-up 'chat rules' message, and figure 52 is Ninja's, the 5th most subscribed channel on Twitch as of August 2025. While Ninja's rules don't get much more specific on his own channel, on Fry 64's channel, there is a slightly more comprehensive set of

rules in the 'About' section as shown in figure 53, which include requests to be kind to each other in the chat room and to not engage in 'teabagging' when playing multiplayer games together on stream²¹.

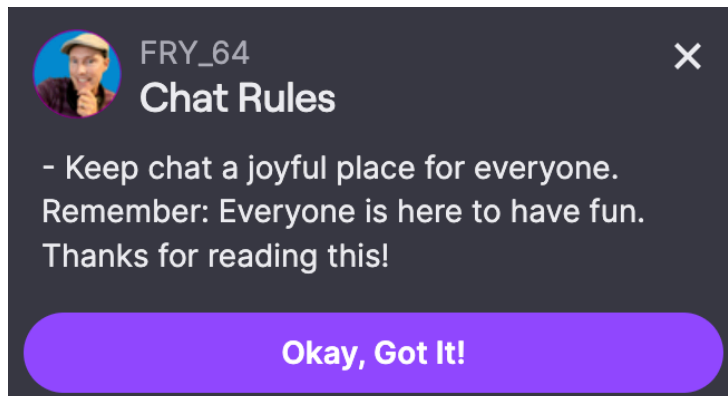


Figure 51: Fry 64's pop-up 'Chat Rules' message

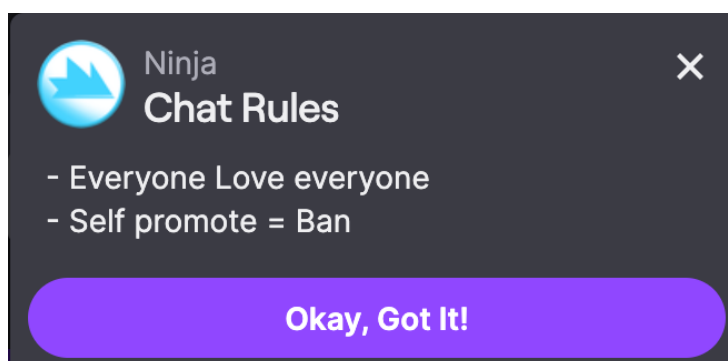


Figure 52: Ninja's pop-up 'Chat Rules' message

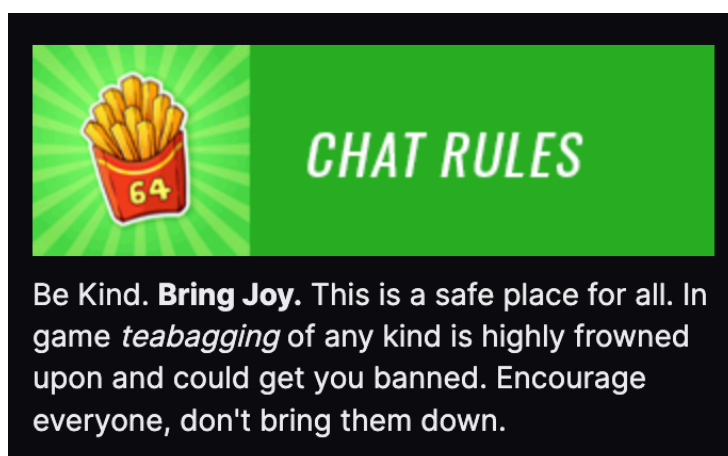


Figure 53: Fry 64's 'Chat Rules' in the channel's 'About' section

²¹ 'Teabagging' in this case refers to the act of making one's virtual avatar crouch up and down on another's when they are defeated, mimicking a sexual act.

These sets of rules are quite vague, and in Fry 64's case, that is arguably because rules can change depending on the game being played. For example, the strict 'no spoilers' rule applies to Fry 64's *Undertale* stream (as will be unpacked later), but would likely not apply in streams that lack narrative like *Mario Kart World*, which is also played by Fry 64. When live, streamers can add these game-specific rules underneath the feed in the forms of 'tags'. An example of this is the 'No Backseat Gaming' tag, which alerts viewers that the player does not want any in-game help whatsoever. Once rules are made clear by the streamer through information on their channel, pop-up messages in chat or through 'tags' during their stream, moderators enforce them. I argue that in regulating chat rooms, moderators act as community forming agents: they communicate to audiences what is required in order to avoid a ban from the channel and remain in the streamer's community. If one follows these rules and returns to streams regularly, they have the opportunity to become familiar with the streamer, the moderators, and others in the chat room. This is not dissimilar to how fans of media obtain subcultural capital, particularly in the UF. While *Undertale* fans cannot 'ban' people from their community, they can strongly discourage people from taking part in it if they do not follow the 'rules', like in the case of Fischbach in the previous chapter. I am interested in the similarities between communities that surround media like *Undertale* and communities that surround Twitch streamers, but for the purposes of this research, I am mostly intrigued by how these communities interact with each other.

Through the real-time communication afforded by Twitch, I argue communities can form around the streamer more quickly and easily than they can among Let's Play audiences. The rapidity of communication and its ability to quickly form communities is cited as a reason among streamers for choosing livestreaming over pre-recorded video (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). As discussed in the previous section, a community has indeed formed among participants of the Fry 64 stream and their audience, some of which include members of *Undertale*'s fan communities. Therefore, it is useful to keep in mind the 'community within a community' aspect of Twitch streams. In Twitch streams, participants in the chat can become 'regulars' through frequent appearances in a player's livestream and

can become acquainted not only with the player but with other chat participants. Therefore, a second community can form within a community. In this case, *Undertale* fans can come together to watch a Fry 64 playthrough, and become members of the Fry 64 community. This can also work in reverse: ‘regulars’ at Fry 64’s streams can be introduced to *Undertale*, and then subsequently become members of the *Undertale* fan community.

When investigating these two communities, it is useful to consider the hierarchies that potentially exist within both so that interaction between these two communities can be better understood. Recent studies discuss difficulties in defining fan hierarchies broadly; for example, Shiyu Sharon Zheng (2025) found that while fan labour remains important in gaining subcultural capital and respect among fellow fans, some fan communities find consumption of the object of fandom to be enough to qualify oneself as a fan on the same level as someone who writes a lot of fan fiction, for example. As seen in survey results, when defining their involvement in fan communities, some *Undertale* fans did indeed use fan labour such as creating fan fiction as an example of high fan community involvement. However, as previously concluded in chapter 1, fans usually only considered fan labour an important qualifier of high involvement in *Undertale* fan communities if it was coupled with engagement in fan discussions. Given how differently communities value certain fan activities when constructing fan identity, I will now define potential hierarchies in the *Undertale* community and the Fry 64 community separately so we can observe how they interact with each other.

Undertale fan hierarchies were discussed at length in the survey results chapters, particularly in the opening questions. Fans were asked to disclose how involved they felt in *Undertale* fan communities, and gave examples of activities they undertook within the UF to justify their answers. Based on answers to this question, involvement in *Undertale* fan communities took two forms: the creation of fan labour (fan art, fan fiction, etc) and taking part in discussions about the *Undertale* text with other fans. In this instance, we can use the term ‘involvement’ in a similar way Thornton (1995) used ‘subcultural capital’ - the more involvement one has in a fandom, the higher the place they occupy in the

fan community's hierarchy. As will be seen most prominently in the final chapter of this thesis, the ability to perform character voices approved by the UF is also an indicator of a high position in *Undertale*'s fan hierarchy. For example, in *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub* (the case study in the next chapter), the voice actor for Papyrus ('Darby') does not abide by the Skeletor-esque voice preferred by the fandom. However, fans in the comment section of this project (as explored more later in the relevant case study) are willing to dismiss that based on Darby's previous contributions to *Undertale* fan projects. Darby arguably has quite a lot of subcultural capital within the UF, both due to high levels of involvement in *Undertale* fan projects and even connections to *Undertale*'s creator Toby Fox. Darby is a contributor on the YouTube channel 'Man on the Internet', which has produced the aforementioned *Undertale the Musical* as well as several other short videos surrounding *Undertale*, which usually include Darby as Papyrus. These videos boast high numbers of views, with the *Undertale the Musical* playlist having 39 million views as of August 2025 and other *Undertale* related videos on the channel ranging between 200 and 600 thousand views. Additionally, following *Undertale the Musical*, Darby became a contributor to Materia Collective, a video game music record label which also features Toby Fox as a musical artist. This label in particular distributes *Undertale*'s own soundtrack. With this level of contribution to the UF specifically largely concerning vocal performance that resulted in a level closeness with the text's creator and its music, it can be argued that Darby occupies quite a high position in *Undertale* fandom hierarchy and has enough subcultural capital to bypass rules surrounding the imagined voice entirely. In this sense, I argue that one of the highest positions one can occupy in the UF is the ability to perform voices for the characters, an ability so revered that fans do not seem to mind if it's used to perform voices outside of fandom norms.

In terms of lower hierarchy tiers, I will now refer to fan labour and fan discussions. I argue that fan labour in the UF's case is positioned slightly higher on the hierarchy than taking part in discussions. For instance, the creator of *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub* ('PlotlinePlus') receives very little pushback on their casting decisions, even if they do not align with popular fandom consensus on what a character should sound like, for example in the aforementioned case of Papyrus. As

is seen in more detail in the following case study, the simple act of creating *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub* and taking part in fan labour to co-ordinate the project is seen as incredibly valuable among *Undertale* fans, and PlotlinePlus therefore gains subcultural capital from it. In this case, the need for ideal imagined voices to be realised once again is given more flexibility than is afforded to those without UF subcultural capital, like Fischbach from the previous case study chapter. I therefore argue that fan labour is seen as more valuable in the UF than taking part in fan discussions because in fan discussions, not as much flexibility is afforded in terms of interpretation. For example, consider figures 44 through 47 from the previous chapter which showed discussions surrounding the gender identities of Frisk, Chara and Kris. Fans were much more vocal about when they disagreed with each other, and it appeared that no-one was given exemption from being disagreed with. This is likely because everyone participating in these discussions had an equal amount of subcultural capital. This is a departure from what is seen in how fans who perform voices and participate in fan labour are treated, as they are sometimes given the ability to bypass fandom 'rules' regarding ideal imagined voices entirely. I argue there is a three-tier system for current *Undertale* fan communities: those who participate in discussions surrounding the text; those that create fan projects for *Undertale*; and those that have the ability to perform voices for *Undertale* characters.

On the other hand, the Fry 64 community differs from the *Undertale* community in a key way: everyone in the community interacts with each other, including the creator of the fandom object. I did not include Toby Fox in the *Undertale* fandom hierarchy as he does not participate in the UF. He does not interact with fan discussions and (to my knowledge) does not create any kind of fan project for the community. I argue the most important distinction here is that Toby Fox does not interact with fans, at least not in the same way they interact with each other. However, in the Fry 64 stream, the streamer, moderators, voice actors and chat participants interact with each other at a similar level of frequency, and therefore I will include these groups when deciphering the hierarchy as they all contribute a fairly equal amount to the community. I will define the Fry 64 community hierarchy by how much control one has over the stream, given it is the object

around which the community revolves. Therefore, the person at the top of this hierarchy would be the streamer himself, Fry 64. As the person playing the game and the person streaming it from his device, he has the most control over the content of the stream. Next, I will rank the moderators of the stream. While they do not have direct control over the gameplay or the physical streaming of the gameplay, they do have control over the chat rooms and over who gets to participate within them. Lastly, I will rank the participants in the Twitch chat room. While they can have a degree of influence over the gameplay if their advice is followed, they have no direct control over the content of the stream or who gets to participate in the chat room. In the Fry 64 stream in particular, chat participants can have control over vocal performance, but access to this must first be provided by the streamer and moderators. This hierarchy becomes quite changeable when playing *Undertale*, however, as will be explored in later discussion.

Now that these hierarchies have been defined, discussion of how these hierarchies in separate communities can be facilitated later in the chapter. Participants in the Fry 64 voice chat are familiar with *Undertale* on varying levels and occupy different levels of the *Undertale* fan hierarchy as will be seen later in the chapter, but are also familiar with each other through their participation in Fry 64's livestreams. There is a sense of familiarity as previously discussed, with participants on all levels of the Fry 64 hierarchy greeting each other by name and interacting equally with each other. I argue that this sense of community is strengthened through the use of voice chat in Fry 64's livestreams, as it allows for a more intimate and instant connection than via chat text alone. According to literature on Twitch streaming, this is desirable amongst streamers, as will be discussed below.

The Primary Goal of the Fry 64 Stream

In terms of existing literature on Twitch streaming, Mark Johnson & Jamie Woodcock have done extensive research on the origins and subsequent evolution of

Twitch, from the 2010s onwards. Of particular interest to this research is their work studying affective labour and performance in Twitch streams in 2019. Twitch streamers often perform a persona when livestreaming, usually a heightened and more energetic version of their real selves to keep their audiences entertained during long play sessions. According to interviews carried out by Johnson & Woodcock, streamers likened the experience of performing their personas to character acting in terms of both effort and the difference between their personas and their real-life demeanours. Fry 64's persona is stated clearly in their Twitch channel description: "a Nintendo fan with a happy, positive vibe". It is likely that the player's choice of *Undertale* route was influenced by this persona; Pacifist is the route that most matches a happy and positive vibe, while Genocide and Neutral routes may be difficult to play while maintaining an uplifting atmosphere amongst viewers.

Johnson & Woodcock suggest that connecting with audiences is important to Twitch streamers, and that developing a 'closeness' with their community is a key goal of livestreaming. In interviews conducted by Johnson & Woodcock for their research, streamers state that this is the main reason they stream games on Twitch rather than upload Let's Plays to YouTube, as they weren't able to communicate as quickly or as instantly with their audience on YouTube as they could on Twitch (2019). The Fry 64 stream certainly demonstrates closeness between the streamer and the audience; not only does the streamer refer to each viewer and voice actor by name and appears to be familiar with his viewers' own Twitch channels and streaming content, he feels comfortable enough for his viewers to join him on a Discord voice call and directly speak to him, which is likely facilitated through the small size of the community and the ability to build these one-to-one connections (Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov, 2022).

I argue, therefore, that the primary goal of Fry 64's stream is not just to showcase voice acting talent, but to showcase the community around Fry 64's livestreams. The voice actors on the Discord call contribute just as much to the stream as the player does, if not more so; they offer opinions and advice on the game, they provide almost all of the voices, and crack jokes throughout each instalment of the

playthrough. The player appears to be content to take a backseat, persona-wise, playing the game as they are advised to and allowing the vocal performances to take the spotlight. Perhaps in this stream, the player is not under as much pressure to perform a persona or even perform well in the game, as the voice actors on call with them are the ones that are mostly performing and directing the player in how to play the game in a Pacifist style. So, in this particular case, the goal is not to showcase a persona or showcase gameplay skill, but to showcase the stream's regular spectators in their gameplay knowledge and voice acting talent.

This shows a complexity in the previously outlined hierarchies regarding Twitch streams. While it is true that the streamer creates the rules for a channel, the moderators enforce them and the audience follows them, in the case of Fry 64's *Undertale* stream, the hierarchy appears to be altered. It's arguable that the voice actors are actually the ones in charge of this stream, in a few respects. Not only are they at the centre of the stream as the ones providing the voice acting, the primary draw of the stream, they are sometimes the ones dictating playstyle. While Fry 64 wants to complete a Pacifist run and does not seem to have been persuaded into it, the voice actors (especially ArtNerdProductions) are the ones telling him how to get there. As they are the ones that hold the information required to carry out the streamer's preferred playthrough as well as the ones performing the desired 'ideal voices', on this particular stream, the voice actors are arguably at the top of the hierarchy. This indicates the nuances of communities within communities. In the Fry 64 playthrough, the presence of *Undertale* fans in the stream along with their reverence of playstyle knowledge and voice acting ability has temporarily altered typical streaming hierarchies.

The Immediacy of Feedback

Johnson & Woodcock (2019) further argue that Twitch streamers chose that platform, rather than uploading edited gameplay to YouTube, due to the appeal of instant feedback from and connection with their audiences. Streamers found that the chat room feature of Twitch allowed for a more immediate connection to their

audience than the comment section of a YouTube video, and this can be seen in Fry 64's stream: the player and moderators all respond to comments as they appear in the Twitch chat room in real time.

However, the Fry 64 playthrough takes this even further by allowing select audience members to provide voices for the *Undertale* characters as the game is played. In addition, when they are not voice acting, they discuss the game, the gameplay and what should be done to achieve a Pacifist ending over the Discord channel. This means that not only can the player get feedback more quickly from spoken word rather than written chat messages, but feedback becomes much harder to ignore. The immediacy of feedback through the voice rather than text also allows for voice actors to act more explicitly as a guide for the player, which is especially noticeable in ArtNerdProductions' case. All voice actors discuss how best to play the game with the player throughout the playthrough, but ArtNerdProductions appears to be the participant with the most *Undertale* knowledge and the most time spent in *Undertale* fan communities. In the first episode of the playthrough, ArtNerdProductions is the only voice actor present and will often (with permission from the player) offer guidance not only on achieving a Pacifist ending, but on 'secrets' (e.g. hidden items that may be helpful later) that can be located in each area. While she does this, however, she is insistent that the player should still feel free to complete the game however they want, and that she is just here to offer guidance. As the playthrough progresses and more voice actors join, however, there is some contention over how much guidance should be offered as game help could constitute 'spoilers' in the minds of other performers present in the voice call.

In the early stages of the Fry 64 playthrough, ArtNerdProductions' contributions can give us a glimpse into the current state of *Undertale* fan communities in terms of attitudes towards the 'correct' way to play, consensus on ideal imagined voices and what constitutes a 'spoiler' of the game. This will be discussed more thoroughly later in the chapter. However, in order to properly contextualise this, I will now discuss fan studies (mainly the works of Jenkins and Thornton) in relation

to the UF, and in particular how it relates to *Undertale* fan practices that are relevant to the Fry 64 stream.

Jenkins and Fry 64

Jenkins' (2006) concepts of "textual poaching" and "powerless elite" are particularly relevant to this case. I will therefore begin this section by defining and unpacking "textual poaching" as it applies to *Undertale* fan community activities in this context, and then doing the same with "powerless elite".

Jenkins uses "textual poaching" to describe the act of writing fan fiction within fan communities (using *Star Trek* fandoms as a case study), producing fan writing that rewrites or even seeks to correct the original text. Jenkins describes textual poaching as a labour of love; fans that take part in it are "reluctant poachers who steal only those things that they truly love, who seize televisual property only to protect it against abuse from those who created it and who have claimed ownership over it" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 59). So, when fans take part in rewriting of the text in any capacity, they may do it because the people who own copyright of the original text are believed to not understand the characters or the world like the fans do, and therefore the fans consider it their duty to correct this.

The literal rewriting of *Undertale*'s text through fanfiction is, of course, outside the scope of this thesis, but we can still consider other activities in the UF that relate to the game's sound as a form of "textual poaching". In terms of the game's sound, the UF's version of "textual poaching" could present itself as the addition of voice acting. To be clear, fans are not necessarily criticising the game for lacking voice acting, and as evidenced below, some would prefer that the game itself not have any voice acting as fans prefer assigning their own voices to the characters, and also feel that the fandom at large would not be wholly satisfied with whatever voices were chosen.

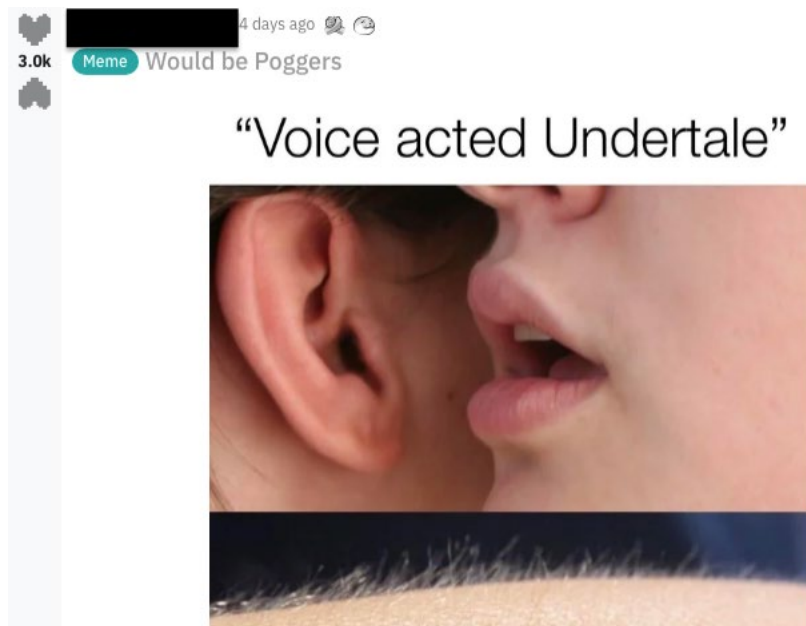


Figure 54: A Reddit post from 2021 proposing the implementation of voice acting into Undertale

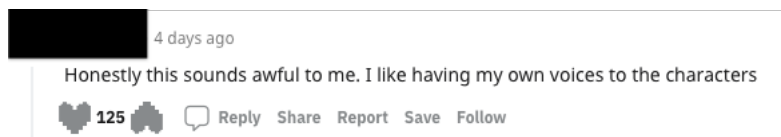


Figure 55: Comment replying to the above post

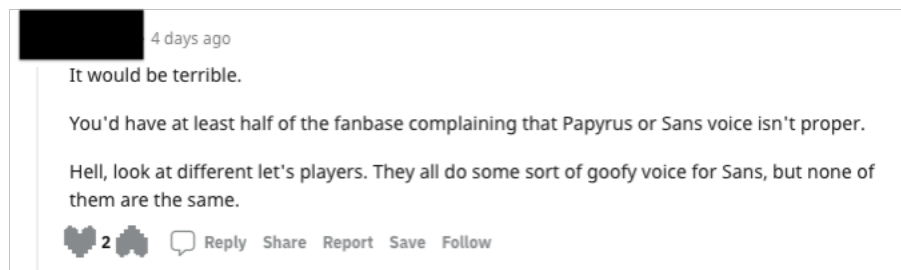


Figure 56: Comment replying to the above post



Figure 57: Comments replying to the above post

Figures 54 through 57 show a Reddit conversation reacting to the idea of a version of the *Undertale* text that features voice acting for each of the characters. Figure 56 in particular sees a fan voicing concerns that an official voice-acted version of *Undertale* would only lead to arguments about the ‘right’ voices. Despite the apparent reverence afforded to the ability to perform ideal imagined voices for the characters, it appears that the notion of a version of the *Undertale* game featuring voice acting is not something universally desired by fans. Therefore, I argue that implementing voice acting into *Undertale* playthroughs and fan projects isn’t necessarily a correction of the game, but more of an opportunity for fans to further play with the text and create their own versions of it through conversations discussing ideal voices and performing voices themselves. Though over the course of the *Undertale* fan community’s life, there have been discussions about the ‘right’ way to perform *Undertale* voices as observed by Spencer (2017) and in survey results, and we again see them embodied in the Fry 64 playthrough.

Throughout the stream, the player and the voice actors insist upon the importance of making vocal performances “your own” when reading lines for *Undertale* characters, perhaps to combat the UF’s widespread uncompromising reputation. In surveys carried out with *Undertale* fans, this reluctance to play into fandom

stereotypes was also present, with many seeking to distance themselves from the fan behaviours described by Spencer. However, we can see that some traces of old fan conventions remain in terms of the ideal voice, or the correct way to carry out textual poaching. For example, there is a lack of confidence in some of the vocal performances. ArtNerdProductions, for instance, enthusiastically volunteers to voice characters like Toriel and later Mettaton, but then delivers her vocal performances in a somewhat reserved and hushed way. Given their apparent expertise in ideal voices for *Undertale* characters as well as *Undertale* fandom conventions as a whole, this hesitance when actually performing them could be seen as surprising. Returning to previous discussions on fan hierarchies, we can perhaps see why those that can perform *Undertale* voices (especially if they are close to what is envisioned as an ideal voice) are held in such high regard. Arguably, there is an acknowledgement that voice acting is difficult to do, and attempts to recreate imagined voices are therefore appreciated at any skill level, but are most revered when they are performed to a high standard as will be observed in the next case study. However, when considering the previous case study, we can ask ourselves: what about the case of Fischbach? If attempting voice acting for *Undertale* is enough to gain favour with its fan community, why didn't it work for him? I once again argue that he did not have enough pre-existing subcultural capital to justify the departures he took from the imagined voices at the time of his playthrough, since as discussed in chapter 3, he was not playing the routes 'correctly' due to lack of prioritisation of the Pacifist route. The aforementioned Darby and ArtNerdProductions solidified their involvement in the UF before providing voices for their respective projects, and were therefore given more flexibility in the quality and accuracy of their performances in terms of the ideal imagined voice. Fischbach was seen as an outsider, and therefore his vocal performances were largely rejected by *Undertale* fans. It is difficult to say how much fan capital ArtNerdProductions holds in the wider *Undertale* fan community, as the Fry 64 community includes people who are not familiar with the game or its fandom. However, her evident knowledge of the game and her attitude towards the different playstyles (particularly distancing herself from past fandom behaviours that encourage Pacifist above all else) is enough for other participants in the stream familiar with *Undertale* (like Worx4Tips) to vouch for her advice

throughout the stream, Therefore, I argue that ArtNerdProductions is given permission to perform voices in a perhaps amateurish way, because she has proven herself to hold a position in *Undertale*'s fan hierarchy through her extensive knowledge of the game and her admittance during the stream to creating fan art for the game. In other words, she is arguably being given unspoken permission to carry out textual poaching as she sees fit due to her position on *Undertale*'s fandom hierarchy.

However, there is an additional question here: is there a particular reason that ArtNerdProduction's performance is as reserved and seemingly nervous as it is? This perhaps sheds some light on the shift from fan to performer in *Undertale* fan communities. Usually, in voice-acted *Undertale* streams, the fans are the spectators; they only provide feedback, not the performances themselves. In the Fry 64 playthrough, fans are given the opportunity to perform their own versions of the voices and may be exposed to the reality that vocal performances are harder than they appear to be. Fans can have an idea of what they would like each character to sound like but may have a hard time bringing their specific imagined voice to fruition, whether it be through lack of voice acting experience or the nervousness that comes with being in front of a real-time virtual audience you are not used to having. This could reveal another side to textual poaching: while it is easy to know what you want from a text, fans may find it difficult to bring these preferences to fruition themselves.

So why might ArtNerdProductions in particular be facing these difficulties? A potential explanation is the lingering presence of old *Undertale* fan customs that permeate the stream as a whole. For example, in the first video of the playthrough, ArtNerdProductions repeatedly informs the player that they should be free to play the game however they want in an apparent attempt to distance herself from fan behaviours described by Spencer (2017) and Seraphine (2018). However, that is not strictly true; Fry 64 is aiming for a Pacifist ending of the game, and therefore is not really able to play however he wants. There are very specific rules to follow to gain this ending, so there is arguably not as much freedom to play however one wants in this instance as ArtNerdProductions

suggests. This somewhat false freedom is also present when voices are discussed. For example, there are instances of Worx4Tips (Papyrus's voice actor) expressing concerns about the quality of their Skeletor impression, and being reassured by others that there is no need to abide by the Skeletor-esque voice and is encouraged to 'make it [their] own'. Despite this, Worx4Tips continues to attempt to replicate a Skeletor-esque voice for the remainder of the playthrough. This pressure could also explain the hesitance displayed by ArtNerdProductions in her performance; while she seems aware that there should be no pressure to perform perfectly, the pressure may well still be there due to past *Undertale* fandom customs. This suggests that influence from early *Undertale* fandom remains strong, even when current fans vocally reject it. In this case, we see a very nervous form of textual poaching, and perhaps even a reluctant one, as fans are not always used to being in the role of the performer themselves.

Another term of interest to the soundtrack of Fry 64's playthrough of *Undertale* is the nature of fan communities as a "powerless elite", originally coined by John Tulloch (1995) and redefined by Jenkins (2006) for a gameplay context. In short, the "powerless elite" nature of fan communities refers to the fact that while fans have much control over how media is received, and how fans *should* receive it, they cannot change or control the original copyrighted text (Jenkins, 2006, p. 138). In the Fry 64 playthrough, we can observe the nature of the "powerless elite" within fan communities, and within even smaller communities surrounding these.

During the Fry 64 stream, the player and voice actors often make jokes about the small size of their audience, playfully rejoicing when the viewer count hits double digits and joking that mainstream fame and success is sure to follow this milestone quickly. The Fry 64 community are aware of their small size and reach in gaming communities; there appears to be an agreement between all involved that they are largely there mostly to entertain themselves and anyone who happens upon the stream, not to create a definitive *Undertale* voice acting project, which is likely beyond the scope of their influence.

However, even in such small communities like the Fry 64 one, there is still a potential to become part of an “elite”, despite the acknowledgement of perhaps not having “power” in a traditional sense in streaming or *Undertale* fan communities. Referring back to the previous discussion on hierarchies, we can see the potential for an “elite” to form between streamers and moderators which a general Twitch audience may not be privy to. We can perhaps expand the definition of a “powerless elite” as it applies to communities within communities when it comes to fan-provided or fan-directed voice acting. We can consider those who have the power to perform ideal voices and those that have an idea of the most “ideal” voice are elite within *Undertale* fan communities, and small communities involved with *Undertale* like the Fry 64 one, but are powerless to actually implement voice acting into the game itself. While this is not an *Undertale* fandom goal, it does align with Jenkins’ definition of a “powerless elite”.

Thornton and Fry 64

In the Fry 64 stream, we can also see the rapidly changing criteria for obtaining subcultural capital in action (Thornton, 1995). In the UF, preferred behaviours have changed drastically in the short time since the fandom’s inception. For example, in the fandom’s early years (as detailed by both Spencer and the survey participants), general fan behaviours were shown to be quite strict, with fans deciding on ‘ideal’ ways to play *Undertale*, as well as ‘ideal’ ways to interpret and perform character voices. As evidenced by survey responses, in more recent years there has been an effort to move away from these behaviours, though traces of it remain in some testimonies given by survey participants; some say they still encounter such behaviours, but much less frequently than they did in the mid-to-late 2010s. One fandom convention that is shown to still be evolving is how the fandom deals with ‘spoilers’.

As early as the Jacksepticeye playthrough, there has been contention in *Undertale* fan spaces regarding what constitutes a spoiler. Spoilers were inevitably rampant

in the early days of the UF; since fans were telling people how to play, they'd therefore have to tell them what to do. These could perhaps be called 'gameplay spoilers'. Furthermore, fans would often detail story and character elements players would miss out on if they didn't take a certain gameplay route, potentially spoiling the experience of revisiting the game later and discovering new things about the text via the different routes. This might constitute a 'story spoiler'. In the Jacksepticeye playthrough, McLoughlin was very strict about not being exposed to spoilers and would warn those that shared them in the comment section that they would be banned from his YouTube channel for doing so. However, it is not clear exactly what he meant by this: gameplay spoilers (advice on game completion and puzzles), story spoilers (details on characters and future plot elements), or both? Indeed, based on the discussions below, it is still hard to tell what constitutes a 'spoiler' in *Undertale* fan communities, and how seriously they should be taken.

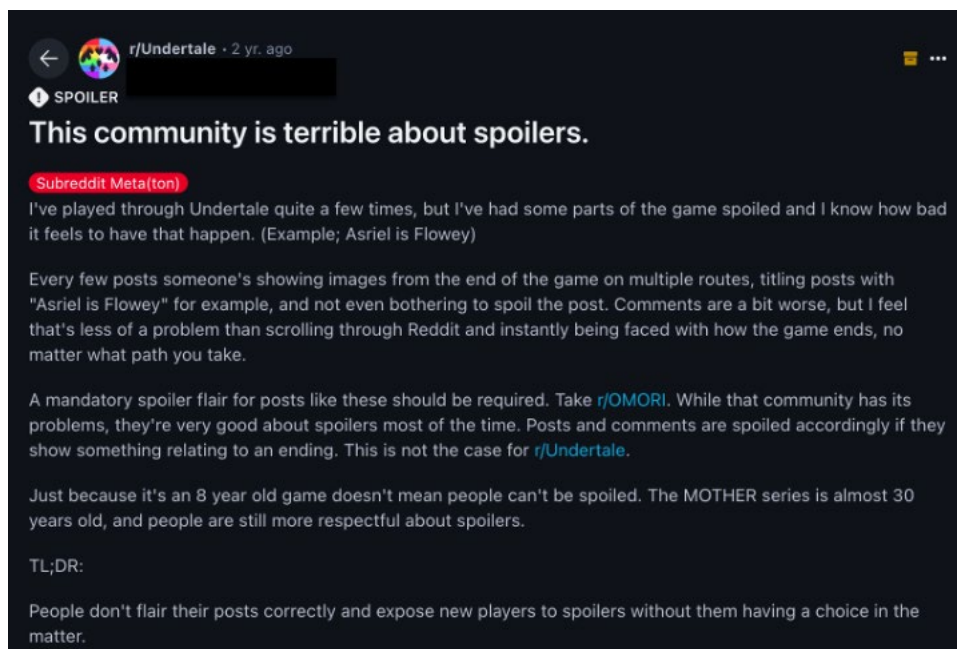


Figure 58: A Reddit post from 2023 expressing concerns that new players are being 'spoiled' by carelessly formatted r/Undertale posts

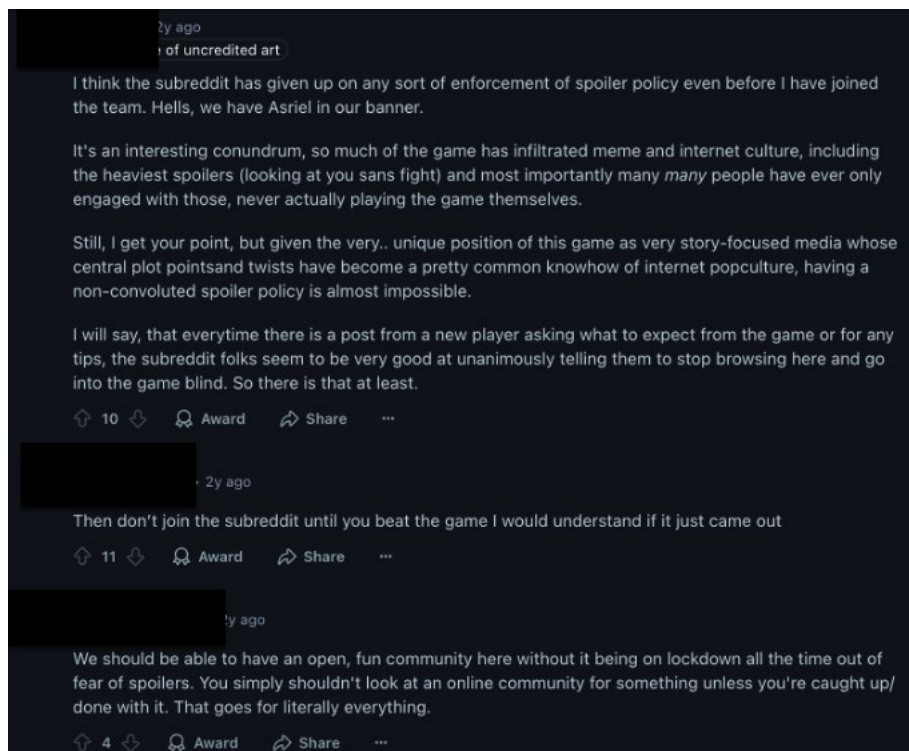


Figure 59: Responses to the post in Figure 58 expressing varied viewpoints on the matter

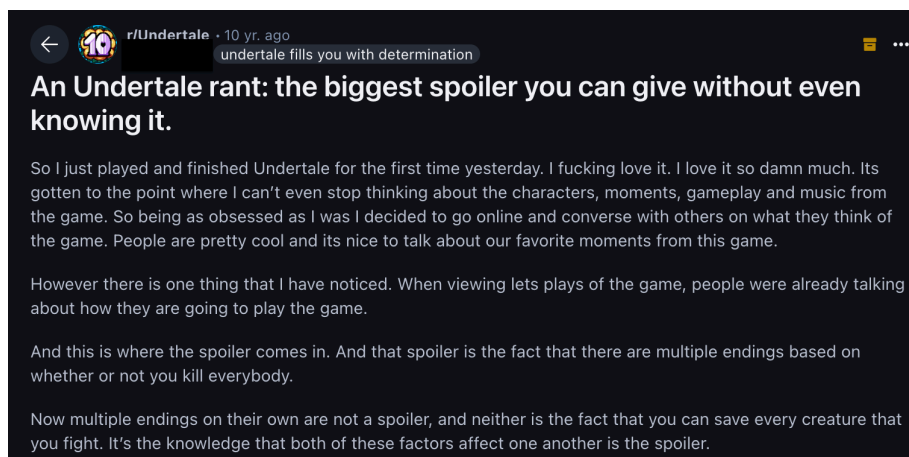


Figure 60: A Reddit post from 2015 arguing that prior knowledge of multiple endings and the 'MERCY' gameplay mechanic is itself a spoiler

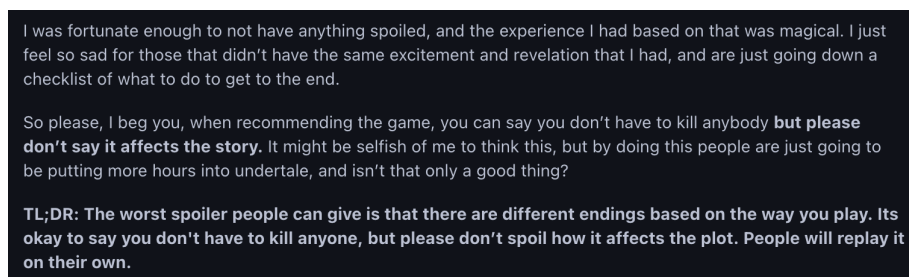


Figure 61: A continuation of the post from figure 60, abridged for brevity

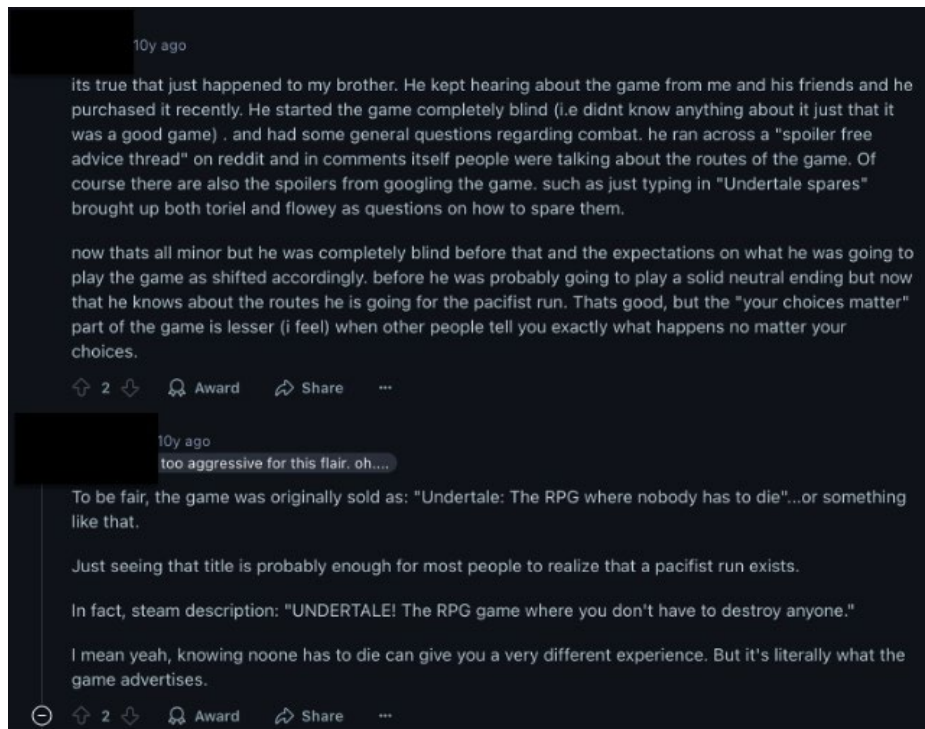


Figure 62: Responses to the Reddit post from figures 60-61

Figures 58 and 59 show a discussion from 2023 discussing how spoilers should be handled on the *Undertale* subreddit, with some arguing that they should be properly labelled so new fans can avoid them and others arguing that the game is old enough now that new players should expect to be spoiled. This argument does not reach a conclusion or consensus. Figures 60 through 62 show a thread from 2015 following the game's initial release discussing how much prior knowledge one can have of the game before a player consider themselves to have been exposed to spoilers. The original poster argues that knowing about the multiple endings and how they are obtained is a spoiler in itself, while others in the comment section argue that since non-violence was strongly hinted towards in the game's promotional materials, this knowledge does not count as a spoiler. Like the 2023 discussion, this does not reach a solid conclusion either.

This uncertainty regarding what constitutes a spoiler continues into the Fry 64 stream. For example, ArtNerdProductions uses their extensive *Undertale* knowledge to hint at Easter eggs in the gameplay to heighten the player's enjoyment of the game. An example of this is pointing out that Toriel's name is a pun, as she is named after a 'tutorial', the introductory level that she guides the player character through. ArtNerdProductions also alerts the player when it's okay

to move on from a certain area during gameplay, saying that “I would have told you if there were secrets here” during a section in the Ruins when the player is exploring the area before progressing. This would indicate that ArtNerdProductions is perhaps quite liberal when it comes to spoilers, as they appear willing to share gameplay and character details that are not immediately obvious to the player, but later instalments of the stream suggest that this is not entirely the case.

During a later boss battle, a participant in the stream chat hints that this particular combat encounter will be relevant to a character’s backstory later, and ArtNerdProductions gently discourages them from providing spoilers and designates herself the spoiler police of the stream. This suggests a somewhat changeable definition of what constitutes a spoiler, and that only certain kinds of ‘spoilers’ are allowed. The confusing nature of the definition of ‘spoiler’ in the UF and among Fry 64 stream participants is further revealed when the voice actors discuss amongst themselves what a spoiler is. During the discussion, ArtNerdProductions states that it’s not a spoiler if they are helping with game progress (which may contradict their statement regarding chat spoilers), and Worx4Tips argues that gameplay help constitutes a spoiler and should be avoided. This argument never reaches a solid conclusion.

From this discussion and the previous Reddit discussions, we can surmise that knowledge of what does and does not constitute a spoiler is a standard in *Undertale* fan communities, and perhaps currency in obtaining subcultural capital. In the Fry 64 playthrough, ArtNerdProductions is knowledgeable enough about *Undertale* to be trusted with the role of ‘spoiler police’. Although their definition of what a spoiler is may be somewhat confusing to those outside of *Undertale* fan spaces, it is a role she is assigned because of her understanding of *Undertale* fandom norms. However, we can also see the definition of a spoiler challenged in real time in the Fry 64 playthrough, when Worx4Tips (who is also an *Undertale* fan) gently disagrees with ArtNerdProductions’ definition of what constitutes a spoiler. Therefore, in the Fry 64 playthrough, we can see Thornton’s argument that subcultural capital conditions can change rapidly in fandom spaces in action, as

the definition of what a spoiler is seems to change with every new instalment of the playthrough.

Since what constitutes a spoiler during the Fry 64 stream is largely enforced by moderators (no matter how shaky the definition may be), we can perhaps consider their role in regards to subcultural capital at this point. Thornton (1995) also dissects ‘club cultures’ and states that in these cultures, “bouncers” are of the utmost importance in deciding who gets into clubs and who does not (p. 42). In Twitch terms, we might see the ‘moderator’ as acting as the ‘bouncer’. Moderators, in general online spaces such as Twitch streams and online forums, decide who gets banned and who doesn’t, set the rules for behaviours in Twitch chats and enforce them during livestreams. In the Fry 64 stream, the moderators double as voice actors, giving them an additional degree of control over the online fandom space cultivated during Fry 64’s livestreams; they set the rules for behaviours during the stream, and provide the vocal performances during *Undertale*. As will be discussed in the next case study, having the ability to provide the ideal imagined voices for *Undertale* characters through real world performance affords a person much social capital in *Undertale* fan spaces. In this instance, subcultural capital can also make you a ‘moderator’; the more respected a member of the Fry 64 community is, the more likely they are to be a moderator, perhaps because members of a community are more likely to listen to someone they already know and respect.

In the case of Fry 64, being a moderator not only allows your definition of what constitutes a spoiler to carry more weight than, for example, a chat room participant, it also allows you to partake in voice acting. While the voice acting aspect of the Fry 64 stream was open to all viewers, it was largely moderators that took part, with only one audience member briefly taking part to voice a small role (the Dummy that appears halfway through the Waterfall section). We may now examine how the voice actors on the Fry 64 stream engaged with interpretations of the *Undertale* characters: as will now be observed, this particular group ended up taking an intriguing approach to gender in vocal performance.

Ruberg and Fry 64: Voice Acting

The Fry 64 playthrough is a vital artefact in studying the UF's relationship with the imagined voice as an example not only of a recent voice-acted *Undertale* gameplay, but of a post-Gamergate playthrough. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Undertale* fans circa 2015 were very concerned about “normies” coming into *Undertale* fan spaces and misinterpreting the text, perhaps leading to fans being othered in spaces they had cultivated for self-expression. Ruberg's article demonstrates that *Undertale* fans were perhaps justified in their concerns, as circa 2018, there were some instances in fan forums of people in *Undertale* fan community discussions denying the presence of content that represents the ‘other’ in *Undertale*'s text, e.g. denying that there is any feminist or queer content in *Undertale* because, according to them, *Undertale* should simply be considered a ‘good’ game (Ruberg, 2018). The Fry 64 playthrough allows us the opportunity to see how things have changed in *Undertale* fan spaces and how receptive fans are to textual content outside of a ‘normie’ perspective. It is therefore important to consider whether Ruberg's arguments are still applicable.

In terms of the Fry 64 gameplay soundtrack, the voice actors share Ruberg's view that *Undertale* plays with gender roles and expectations through the presentation of its characters. There is some adherence to typical expectations of gender presentation in wider voice acting spheres in the Fry 64 playthrough; it is generally agreed upon that ArtNerdProductions, the only female voice actor among the Discord voice chat cast, will not only voice all the female characters, but also selected child characters who are often male or display ‘feminine’ qualities. This is quite common in mainstream animated media: as pointed out in chapter 2, it is relatively common for women to provide voices for male children and adolescents in animated media. Therefore, it is not surprising when ArtNerdProductions volunteers to provide the voice for Monster Kid in the Waterfall sections. She does voice doubts over Monster Kid's gender while she does this, but Worx4Tips assures her that it doesn't matter and her voice suits the character regardless, likely because of the many instances in the past of female voice actresses providing voices for male child characters in mainstream media.

Additionally, Flowey is assigned to ArtNerdProductions despite no indication of age (though ArtNerdProductions is likely aware that Flowey is a male character).

Flowey is named after his physical appearance: that of a flower, suggesting a soft and feminine voice could be appropriate for the character. Having a high-pitched, childlike voice like the one ArtNerdProductions provides also adds to the comedy when Flowey suddenly turns villainous and tries to kill the player in the game's tutorial, all the while sporting the appearance of a daisy with comically demonic facial features. In both the cases of Monster Kid and Flowey, we see the Fry 64 stream defying gender expectations by having a woman voice male characters, but in a way that there is a precedent for in pre-existing professionally voice-acted projects.

Throughout the stream, there are other moments that provide some insight into how modern *Undertale* fans consider performances of the ideal voice. At one point in the stream, ArtNerdProductions is absent and there is some debate over who should voice Onionsan, a minor character in the Waterfall portions of the game who has no set gender but who Worx4Tips asserts should have a “high-pitched voice”. This is perhaps in accordance with pre-existing fandom norms or simply because Onionsan is presented in a rather feminine manner, with big round eyes, defined eyelashes and pink blushes on their cheeks. ArtNerdProductions does not have a particularly high-pitched voice naturally, so it is somewhat surprising that she is assumed to be the first choice for all characters considered to have a high-pitched voice. This suggests that for the purposes of this stream, having a feminine voice or a high-pitched voice (or at least the ability to perform one) is considered a somewhat interchangeable quality, so ArtNerdProductions is instantly assigned any roles that appear feminine. It is perhaps interesting, then, that ArtNerdProductions doesn't possess features typical of a “feminine” voice in terms of previous voice perception research. In 1980, Murry & Singh carried out a study evaluating perception of male and female voice samples, and found that hoarse voices were assumed to be ‘male’ by participants and nasally voices were assigned to being ‘female’. ArtNerdProductions does not have a particularly nasally natural speaking voice, and leans more towards being hoarse. However, her performed

voices tend to sound quite nasally, in particular Muffet and Alphys. In relation to Murry & Singh's findings on the perception of gendered voices, ArtNerdProductions may not naturally possess the stereotypical 'female' vocal qualities, but does adopt them when performing for female *Undertale* characters. So, while there are instances in the Fry 64 stream of gender roles not being strictly adhered to (these will be examined more closely later in the chapter), certain gendered expectations like a nasally voice are still abided by during the stream.

Perhaps the most interesting instance of voice actor changeability in terms of adherence (or lack thereof) to gender roles is the case of the Royal Guards. In the Hotlands section, the Royal Guards are two male characters that block the players' path and will only allow passage to the next section when the player assists them in discovering that they have feelings for each other. ArtNerdProductions initially voices these characters, presenting quite the departure from the 'rules' that have so far defined voice selection: that ArtNerdProductions voices all female characters, or any characters with feminine qualities. The Royal Guards appear to be quite masculine characters, with broad, muscly physiques and a tendency to call each other 'bro'. So it is surprising that ArtNerdProductions is voicing them given her usual relegation to feminine roles. This perhaps carries an implication that these characters are being considered feminine because of their later declarations of love, or perhaps a less charitable interpretation could be that these characters are being viewed as feminine because of their sexualities.

However, this may not be the case, as Worx4Tips later jumps in to voice the Royal Guards during the boss fight where they reveal their feelings. There is no explanation as to why this is done, though it is notable that the voice change happens after one of the Royal Guards removes his armour and is revealed to be quite muscular, so perhaps a switch to a male voice was done to accommodate this. Of further note is that Worx4Tips uses his regular voice to portray the Royal Guards, while ArtNerdProductions was considerably lowering her voice to portray the guards. There is no such effort on Worx4Tips's part, or at least not a noticeable one. This raises an interesting question: in the pursuit of the ideal voice, how do *Undertale* voice actors approach consistency when different voice actors are

portraying a role? The answer to this question can be explored when considering how the Fry 64 stream handled Muffet's voice.

The Royal Guards are not mentioned frequently in discussions of the ideal voice, not in any currently known public forum or in the survey results, but there is another character who has two different voice actors in this stream who is assigned ideal imagined voices by the *Undertale* fan community: Muffet, a boss battle character from the Hotlands with a spider-like appearance. In the survey distributed amongst *Undertale* fans, some recommended characteristics of ideal imagined voices for Muffet: this included "sweet but sinister", "high, a bit louder than normal" and "like a rich, prim and proper woman". Another participant stated that Muffet's voice should "sound like her laugh", which is a high-pitched giggle heard before her boss fight that would align with some of these characteristics. In the Fry 64 playthrough, ArtNerdProductions again voices Muffet, but not before Worx4Tips fills in for her as she is absent during Muffet's introduction.

During a portion of the stream where ArtNerdProductions can only participate in text chat and not the voice call, Worx4Tips performs as Muffet in her vocal absence. Worx4Tips's provided voice for Muffet is indeed high-pitched, and has a lilt that would suggest that she is intended to be portrayed as a "prim and proper woman", which is how a survey participant described their preferred voice for Muffet. This shows some adherence to the imagined voice and indeed to gender roles in this instance: Worx4Tips is attempting to make his voice sound more feminine for this character. When ArtNerdProductions returns to the voice call, Worx4Tips hands over the remainder of Muffet's lines to her. He says this is because ArtNerdProductions had said before in a private conversation that she wanted to voice Muffet, though she seems quite surprised at being offered the role after someone else had already been performing it. Regardless, she takes over and provides a voice that is similar in pitch to Worx4Tips. The primary difference is that Worx4Tips, while giving Muffet a 'prim and proper' inflection, spoke in his own American accent for the role. ArtNerdProductions, however, adopts an accent that is more akin to a southern English accent. This is perhaps in service of the

same goal: to make Muffet sound like a “prim and proper” woman. This demonstrates a lack of consistency in terms of perfectly replicating the tone of the previous voice actor, but both voice actors are still adhering to the same ‘ideal voice’ suggested by survey participants. While this is perhaps inconsistent in terms of vocal performance, it is in accordance with the goal of ‘making the voices your own’, something that has been reiterated throughout the stream. In this instance, however, since both voice actors are working towards the same ideal voice imagined by the fandom, ‘making the voices your own’ could perhaps translate to ‘make the voices your own while still sticking closely to existing fandom norms’.

In any case, this example demonstrates a certain flexibility when it comes to gender presentation that perhaps wasn’t present during Ruberg’s (2018) observations of the UF; one might expect a reluctance on the part of male voice actors to provide the voice for a female one but this is not the case in the Fry 64 stream. This shows a lack of adherence to strict gender roles as seen in historic fan behaviours, and this disregard for them is further demonstrated in *Undertale* fan surveys where participants generally agreed with Ruberg’s view that Mettaton is strongly implied to be a trans or non-binary character.

Mettaton, too, is experimented with in terms of gender presentation in the Fry 64 playthrough. ArtNerdProductions, despite usually voicing female characters, enthusiastically volunteers to voice Mettaton for two reasons: her personal fondness for the character, and her belief that “Mettaton sounds like a girl”. Though when she says this during the stream, it is confidently stated as an accepted fact of *Undertale* lore, or at least popular fan interpretation. This indicates a shift from Ruberg’s observations on fan reception to the ‘other’ in *Undertale* from the late 2010s. As well as the Fry 64 community’s willingness to experiment with gender roles in their vocal performances, previous survey results analysis also shows a more positive view of representations of ‘the other’ in *Undertale*. Therefore, we can conclude that the current *Undertale* fandom has perhaps moved on from a Gamergate-esque view of feminist and queer themes in video games, or it is at least not as prominent as it was before.

We can also observe this in the vocal performances; gender roles are disregarded when substituting voice actors, even at the expense of the ideal voice as shown when a male actor voices Muffet and a female actor voices the Royal Guards. This shows further evolution of the UF: the pursuit of the ideal voice, a staple of early *Undertale* fan discussions, is not as strictly adhered to depending on the circumstances of voice actor availability when streaming live. Traces of these rules remain, but individuality is now encouraged more in voice-acted *Undertale* spaces, as seen in the similarities and differences between the Muffet voices in the Fry 64 playthrough. We can ask ourselves at this point: has anything else changed since the Jacksepticeye playthrough, and how is this observed in the Fry 64 livestream?

Evolution of *Undertale* Fandom Norms

Writing for Kotaku in 2017, Chloe Spencer painted a picture of an *Undertale* fandom that was uncompromising about how people played the game; it was generally accepted that the ‘proper’ way to play was by sparing all of the enemies and it was frowned upon to kill any of them, often to quite an extreme degree that would lead to accusations of real life cruelty if one engaged in video game violence (Spencer, 2017). The Fry 64 playthrough shows some evolution from such rigid perspectives, but traces of it remain.

Throughout the playthrough, the player insists that he wants to play a Pacifist route of the game and the voice actors give him advice to help him achieve this goal. The player does not indicate that they were forced into a Pacifist playthrough, but rather chose that route when his community made him aware before streaming of all the different ways *Undertale* could be played. The player also generally has a reluctance to kill any characters he doesn’t have to, often responding to the monsters with statements like, “how could anyone kill these things?!”. So, while a preference for Pacifist is prevalent in the Fry 64 community, it does not seem as if any guilt tactics were involved in getting him to play that way, and it largely came down to the player’s choice as well as external encouragement from trusted associates from his own Twitch community.

The existing *Undertale* fans present in Fry 64's stream also appear to be eager to present themselves in a way that is contradictory to past perceptions of *Undertale* fan communities. For example, previously discussed instances of ArtNerdProductions making it clear that *Undertale* should be played however one wants hints at a desire to distance herself and the community at large from its past reputation as being a demanding group of people that claimed *Undertale* could be 'played wrong' in terms of route preference and that some imagined voices 'sounded wrong'. However, the Fry 64 community is still seen to follow some of the 'rules' of old *Undertale* fandom, and still obey them to a certain extent. This also extends to the voice acting; despite encouragement from the player for each of the voice actors to "make [the vocal performances] their own", some voice actors are still concerned about sticking close to the imagined voices chosen by early *Undertale* fans that have remained popular since. For example, while voicing Papyrus, Worx4Tips expresses concerns that their performance doesn't sound enough like Skeletor, the preferred voice type for Papyrus among *Undertale* fans. This has some interesting implications in terms of fan communities: the idea that fans are themselves bound to the rules they create for other people.

In *Undertale* fan circles, fan goals and common consensus have rapidly evolved in the nine years since the game's release, and this is shown in changing fan reception to Papyrus's imagined Skeletor voice. There are forum posts from *Undertale* fans as far back as 2016 signalling fatigue with Skeletor impressions for Papyrus, as seen in figures 24-25 in chapter 2. Furthermore, in projects like *The Cinematic Dub* voice actors are praised for portraying Papyrus without resorting to Skeletor impressions. So, while fans themselves challenge the idea that Papyrus must sound like Skeletor within fandom spaces, there is still a pervasive notion that an effort should be made to accomplish this, which extends to the Fry 64 stream. While everyone agrees a Skeletor impression is not required, attempts are still made to pacify that past version of the fandom by Worx4Tips in his performance. This tells us that while fandom rules do evolve (and are not followed

without question, as seen in figures 24-25), remnants of them remain and fans often still follow them.

Interactivity in the Fry 64 Stream, and the Expanded Role of the Spectator

The Fry 64 playthrough also massively expands the role of the spectator in Twitch gameplay, as the player in question seems quite happy to not be at the centre of attention at all and is more interested in spotlighting members of his community through voice acting. This lends a transformative element to the role of the spectator and suggests that the way spectators are discussed in literature can be expanded upon through examination of the Fry 64 playthrough.

The spectator is a role in gameplay outlined by KC Collins in *Playing with Sound*. Collins defines the spectator as “[someone] who may be watching (and listening) as a game is played but who are not physically interacting with the game” (Collins, 2013, p. 90). Physical interactions, in this case, refer to the act of using a controller to feed input into a game. Collins outlines three primary types of spectator: active, interactive, and passive. The type of spectators present in the Fry 64 stream can be considered to be somewhere between an active spectator and an interactive spectator. An active spectator is someone who is “actively watching and listening and perhaps creating their own meanings from the activity”, and an interactive spectator “actively [helps] the player in accomplishing goals by drawing maps, keeping track of objectives” (pp. 90-91). These are two roles that a participant in a Twitch chat can fill. Passive spectators who “might be watching or listening [to the gameplay] while doing something else” (p. 90) may of course have been present in the Fry 64 livestream chat, but since their potential involvement is somewhat invisible when watching the stream unfold and is therefore difficult to comment on, this discussion will primarily centre around active and interactive spectators present in the livestream.

We may consider participants in a Twitch chat room to be active spectators, who are paying attention to the gameplay and commenting on it with their thoughts that the player can then read and respond to, though I would consider the voice acting participants to be closer to interactive spectators. Throughout the playthrough, the voice actors provide hints as to how monsters can be spared, combat tactics and even hints to the game's lore, all in the name of helping the player obtain an ideal Pacifist playthrough. In this way, I argue the voice actors assist in "keeping track of objectives"; in this case, the objective is to complete the game without killing any monsters and achieving a Pacifist ending.

In terms of gameplay soundtrack, however, I'd argue everyone involved in the stream is more interactive than active in some capacity, especially in terms of contributing to the stream's unique soundtrack. When players stream their gameplay on Twitch, their gameplay is immortalised in a specific way. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to replicate a single person's playthrough of a game in the same way twice, including its soundtrack (Collins, 2009). Online gameplay makes it possible to not only immortalise gameplay, but to share it with others and allow spectators to interact with it via comment sections and chat rooms. So far in this research, the most obvious way a spectator can impact a playthrough's soundtrack is by interacting with one of these two elements of online gameplay; comment sections for YouTube Let's Plays and chat rooms for Twitch streams. Spectators leave feedback through one of these two communication channels, and the player can choose to act on it, and then the spectator has indirectly influenced the gameplay and therefore its soundtrack.

However, in Twitch streams, there is another much more direct way players can impact the soundtrack of a stream and the gameplay being showcased within it: through stream alerts. On Twitch, a streamer can allow small sound bites to play when they receive new followers, new subscribers, donations or "bits" from viewers (virtual Twitch currency that can boost a stream and make it more visible to others). These sound bites can be customised however a streamer sees fit, and if a viewer were to become familiar with the sounds that accompanies each of

these actions, they can manipulate a stream's soundtrack, and therefore the immortalised gameplay's soundtrack.

This is true in the Fry 64 stream; a spectator present in the chat room learns that if they give a certain amount of bits to the streamer, they can trigger fart noises. They use this knowledge to repeatedly trigger these sounds as the player progresses through *Undertale*, leading to much laughter amongst the streamer and the voice actors. This further adds to the general atmosphere of the Fry 64 stream; one that is primarily concerned with community socialising through the game and its voice acting. It also reveals some unique aspects of Twitch gameplay: through community engagement rather than an individual player engaging with a game, spectators can both indirectly (through commented feedback) and directly (through stream alerts) influence not only the gameplay soundtrack, but the soundtrack of the live Twitch stream itself. This is something unique to Twitch as of 2025, but not unique to gameplay of *Undertale*, and is perhaps something that can be considered in future research of this kind when considering the soundtrack in performative play on Twitch.

In any case, Twitch's system of bit gifting and the sounds that accompany them expands the role of the spectator in terms of a stream's soundtrack. The role of the spectator differs in the Fry 64 stream depending on involvement in voice acting (chat room participants are closer to active participants while voice call participants are closer to interactive ones), but everyone in the stream is able to contribute to the soundtrack of the stream regardless of whether they are a player or a spectator. This perhaps levels the playing field, so to speak, and further complicates the potential hierarchies laid out earlier in the chapter.

Also of note when considering how the Fry 64 stream engages with existing fandom norms and community expectations such as hierarchies is the stream's status (or lack thereof) as a paratext. I will now investigate this element of the stream through the lens of Consalvo (2017).

Paratext in the Fry 64 Stream

Consalvo (2017) proposes that in Twitch streams, games being played can become paratextual to the persona of the person playing them. In the Fry 64 playthrough, I argue this is taken a step further: *Undertale* has not become paratextual to the streamer in this particular playthrough, but it has perhaps become a paratext that ‘surrounds and prolongs’ the main point of the Fry 64 stream: the vocal performances.

In Consalvo’s example, Twitch streamers use games as a foundation for character performance or analysis of the gameplay, and viewers attend such streams primarily for the person playing the game rather than the game itself. This could certainly be the case for Fry 64, as the *Undertale* playthrough confirms that the player has a handful of regular viewers who watch his streams primarily because he is the one playing them. In his *Undertale* playthrough, though, he takes something of a backseat to the central characters of the stream: the voice actors. In Consalvo’s work, she cites Twitch streamers with very strong performative personas, or Twitch streamers that provide a lot of commentary alongside their gameplay, as examples of transformative agents that shift their streams from ‘paratext’ to ‘text’. Neither of these qualities describe Fry 64: it is the vocal performers on stream that are largely providing performance and commentary on the game. Therefore, per Consalvo’s argument, *Undertale* is now paratextual to the vocal performances of this stream rather than to the player.

The player, Fry 64, is the one in control of the *Undertale* player avatar but he is taking a lot of direction from the community, who are also doubling as voice actors. Not only that, but he very rarely opts to take part in the voice acting himself, allowing stream spectators to do them instead over his gameplay. In this stream, therefore, we see an expansion on Consalvo’s argument; Fry 64 does not make his persona the central theme of the stream, or the ‘text’. The main purpose of the stream is to showcase the community, specifically community voice acting. This is potentially surprising given the hierarchies outlined earlier: while the streamer does have the most control over the stream, it is not used here. I argue

that during the *Undertale* stream, Fry 64 gives up their position at the top of the hierarchy, relinquishing control of the game and control of the voices to their audience and moderators.

With everything that has come before - the casual nature of the voice acting and the familiarity each person involved in the stream has with each other - I argue that a primary goal of the Fry 64 stream was to act as a social space, with *Undertale* providing a foundation for that and the voice acting being an activity for people to do together. In a way, *Undertale* becomes paratextual to the people playing with the text; in this instance, the voice actors. When considering this stream as a social space first and a game showcase second, it is pertinent to analyse it in the context of the time it was released. The Fry 64 stream took place in 2022, immediately following a time where Twitch was a vital avenue for social interaction: the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

Games as Social Foundations: After COVID-19

When discussing *Undertale*'s transformation from a video game to a foundation for social interaction for digital communities, the context of Fry 64's playthrough is of significance. This case study is not only notable for its unique approach to performing *Undertale* voice acting, but it is also the only case study in the thesis that was released after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. During the worldwide lockdowns that followed this event, Twitch saw a massive rise in engagement particularly in its Just Chatting and Music categories, which do not necessarily involve video games and are largely dedicated to interacting with chat messages and musical performance (Youngblood, 2022). This reflected a need for community and connection at the time, which could be provided through streams like Fry 64's due to both the nature of the stream's content and the size of the audience.

In the literature review, a type of game identified as popular to play on Twitch during COVID-19 lockdowns was 'nostalgic' games (Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov,

2022). *Undertale* could fall under the category of ‘nostalgic’ game due to the retro gaming aesthetics present in its character and level design as well as its musical score, though any sort of huge growth in people playing or watching *Undertale* was not reported in Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov’s findings. This is not totally unsurprising, as *Undertale* has been a very popular game for online players since its release in 2015, and the games that did were reported to have experienced high watch times post-COVID on Twitch were brand new, like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* released in April of 2020 (Bensch et al., 2020). Popular post-COVID games also included titles that were not hugely popular to begin with and were boosted by established popular online gaming personalities. This was the case with *Rust*, a 2013 game that was put on viewers’ radars by the streaming group OfflineTV in January 2021 (Kappe, Pirker & Scerbakov, 2022). So, it is more likely that *Undertale* simply stayed as popular as it has always been throughout the pandemic due to its already massive following and ‘nostalgic’ aesthetics.

While Fry 64’s content is not characterised or particularly influenced by the COVID-19 outbreak, the demand for content like Fry 64’s has certainly gone up in the years since the pandemic began as demonstrated by the aforementioned literature. However, Fry 64’s channel (according to TwitchTracker.com) saw no notably major growth in followers or regular viewers post-outbreak. This is to be expected given Kappe, Pirker and Scerbakov’s found that while there were a lot more people watching Twitch during the initial lockdowns, there were a lot more new streamers too, which cancelled each other out somewhat so few channels saw a major rise in viewers or following. However, as also pointed out, there were still many new Twitch streamers following the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, perhaps streamers that are not dissimilar to Fry 64: small audiences gaining familiarity with each other and cultivating social spaces that perhaps surpass the draw of whatever game is being played for an audience. In other words, perhaps during COVID-19 lockdowns, the game being played was not so much the centrepiece of the stream as it was a backdrop to social interaction.

Though of course, the Fry 64 playthrough is not simply an instance of friends gathering to watch a game being played: this is a stream where friends also offer

advice in accordance with the game's fandom rules and, of course, provide vocal performances for the characters. Kappe, Pirker and Scerbakov (2022) point out that video games have always been an avenue for social interaction even before the COVID-19 outbreak, and indeed, voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs have existed long before then, too. However, this is a rare *Undertale* playthrough in that the spectators are also voice actors, and it is happening after a worldwide health crisis that made social interaction more necessary yet harder to come by. Social interaction is heightened in this stream, lines are blurred between different levels of spectatorship, and conversation that would normally be had in comment sections or via chat messages is now being had in real-time on voice call. The influence and perhaps impact of COVID-19 on streams like this could certainly benefit from further study. In this instance, does centring the voice via voice call participation or creating improvisational vocal performance spaces perhaps strengthen the nature of gaming as a social space, especially in a post COVID-19 context? As pointed out earlier, gaming has always been a social space in some capacity, but COVID-19 arguably transformed gaming into one of the only social spaces available to some during lockdown periods. Given that it has only been a short time since these lockdowns ended, it would be beneficial to observe the potential longevity and evolution of this transformation in future research. The Fry 64 stream's improvised community voice acting was and remains quite a novel idea in the UF, so if this trend were to continue in our current post-COVID environment, further concurrent study of both post-COVID streaming and vocal performance on Twitch would contribute significantly to both game sound studies and general online gaming studies.

Conclusions

I will now address the Fry 64 playthrough in terms of the research question as a whole and the sub-questions proposed in the introduction. In terms of the overarching research question, in the Fry 64 playthrough, *Undertale* fans have indeed used voice acting to transform the text into a new medium and context. Like the Jacksepticeye case study, the Fry 64 playthrough transforms *Undertale* from a

game into viewable media, though the project's livestreamed nature adds additional layers to this, in a way that transforms the game into a social space driven primarily by playing with sound. So, in this case, through the voice acting utilised by digital fan communities, the text has specifically been transformed both into a series of videos documenting a playthrough and (for live participants) a social and performance space.

There is also the question of using the Fry 64 playthrough to observe how the UF has evolved over the years in terms of voice performance preferences, and how it has stayed the same. Participants in the Fry 64 playthrough show a willingness to both adhere to and depart from voice acting norms (in terms of the world of voice acting and what is expected from early *Undertale* fandom), reflecting the casual nature of the stream and its primary goal as a social space rather than creating a perfect performance of ideal *Undertale* voices. The nature of *Undertale* playthroughs provide a pre-packaged activity for the Fry 64 stream participants to do together: perform voices as the game is played. The chosen voices by the stream participants demonstrates that while traces of old *Undertale* fan conventions remain in terms of performing a voice to pre-existing fan expectations, there is a willingness among fans to distance from this and encourage voice actors to 'make the voices their own'. This shows an evolution in *Undertale* fan behaviours and how the voice is expected to be utilised and engaged with in voice-acted streams.

In terms of the question surrounding paratext in the context of Consalvo's (2017) work, I argue that Fry 64 demonstrates a new development of how paratexts can become texts in Twitch streams. In Consalvo's work, the streamer is argued to be the new text, and the game being played becomes paratextual to their performed personality. In Fry 64's case, the streamer voluntarily takes a step back from showcasing their own personality and even their own playstyle, allowing their moderators and audience to both provide voice acting for the characters and give instructions on gameplay. This not only transfers control of the gameplay and soundtrack from the streamer to the moderators and the audience, but also changes the nature of paratexts as they apply to *Undertale* streams. *Undertale* is

no longer paratextual to the streamer: the voice acting audience to the stream has arguably become the text instead.

Finally, I suggested future areas for research regarding online gameplay in the context of COVID-19 and its aftermath. The Fry 64 stream used the *Undertale* text as a backdrop for social interaction, which after COVID-19 became a very common way for video games to be used, particularly in Twitch streams. Twitch showed substantial growth during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as new types of gameplay presentation like Fry 64's improvised community voice acting streams. I argue that gameplay like this should be observed over time to further study COVID-19's impact on shared gameplay, and the new types of gameplay that are occurring in its aftermath.

On the whole, the Fry 64 not only showcases the transformation and evolution of the UF in the years since the Jacksepticeye playthrough, but how fans use voice-acted playthroughs to transform the text in a number of ways, both as a live performance and social space and as series of recorded videos after the fact. In the context of COVID-19, this could be a pertinent and necessary avenue to explore in future research. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the primary conclusion drawn is that the Fry 64 playthrough transforms the original game text into a foundation for a social interaction and performance space through the addition of voice acting.

Chapter 5: Case Study 3 - *The Cinematic Dub*

The following chapter is a case study of *Undertale: The Cinematic Dub* (hereafter TCD throughout this chapter), an *Undertale* fan project that adapts the Pacifist route of the game as a series of YouTube videos with ‘cinematic’ elements (sonically, aesthetically and structurally) and voice acting for all the characters including the narration. This series was chosen as a case study due to its more direct relationship with *Undertale* fan communities than Let’s Plays and Twitch stream presentations. Namely, this project was created specifically by fans of *Undertale* for other fans of *Undertale*, unlike previous case studies where the person producing the gameplay was not considered part of the UF at least at the time of their gameplay. As demonstrated in the previous case study chapters, being knowledgeable about the ‘correct’ voices for *Undertale* characters carries much subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) in *Undertale* fan communities, and TCD serves as an example of fans casting the *Undertale* voices themselves. This chapter investigates fan reception of voices in an *Undertale* fan project, and how pre-existing ‘rules’ are potentially bent if a fan carries enough subcultural capital.

This chapter considers the importance of ‘completion’ of *Undertale* as a text to the game’s fans. The chapter begins with a review of recent literature regarding the ‘completion’ of interactive texts and how TCD contributes to this ‘goal’ both in terms of game studies and the UF itself. There is also the issue of determining what kind of text TCD is. In terms of game studies, it is not interactive in the same way that a game is (no direct input from the viewer via a controller), but in fan studies contexts, it could be considered an interactive text (fan labour and fan meaning making activities being incorporated into the final text of TCD). Therefore, much of this chapter will be dedicated to discussions of existing literature from both game studies and fan studies disciplines to define TCD’s interactivity and how we may consider it in the context of using it to transform the text of *Undertale*.

After establishing definitions of completion and interactivity in this context, I will consider three key aspects of TCD's place in the UF. First, the complex differences between playing a game and watching it being played, or in this case, watching it as a narrative series of YouTube videos. This will commence with a discussion of current relationships between film sound studies and game sound studies and how they apply to this discussion. Additionally, TCD is quite a unique project in this thesis as it is a fan adaptation of *Undertale*'s story as opposed to a Let's Play or a Twitch stream of *Undertale*, therefore I will also be discussing how TCD compares to such texts when transforming *Undertale* for a new medium. In this section, TCD will be discussed in the context of gameplay vs watching in three key areas: music and sound design in the videos vs the game, aesthetic and structural changes made in the change between media, and how voice acting changes the nature of the *Undertale* text through the role of the narrator.

Second, the role of the narrator in TCD in terms of meaning-making activities in the UF will be discussed. *Undertale* fans often engage in the practice of 'fan theories' (discussions proposing explanations for potentially unanswered questions posed by the text) which can be considered an indirect method of interaction with TCD; fans create theories regarding the nature of certain characters or story elements, and they are then adopted into TCD. The role of the narrator is especially pertinent in this respect: specifically through voice acting, the narrator acts as a platform for fan theories in TCD and makes them part of the series' text. The fan meaning-making activities discussion of this chapter will investigate how this element of TCD contributes to the transformation of the text.

Finally, the third discussion will centre around the importance of fan labour in *Undertale* fandom circles and how it applies to TCD. Fan labour is a method *Undertale* fans use to accumulate social capital within their spaces; the more fan work one produces, the more recognised and celebrated they become in their fandom space. This was observed in the previous case study chapter through discussions of Darby in relation to subcultural capital in *Undertale* fan spaces, which will be expanded upon in this chapter. We see this in the voice acting elements of TCD. Some voice actors in TCD do not perfectly adhere to the

preferred voices for *Undertale* characters as observed in the previous chapter, but due to subcultural capital these voice actors have accumulated through fan labour in *Undertale* fan spaces, the reception of these performances is still largely positive. Through this, an intriguing phenomenon can be observed; under very specific circumstances, fans are willing to relinquish their ideal voices.

By the end of the chapter, I will have successfully investigated concepts of completion and interactivity as they apply to TCD and how *Undertale* is transformed through the pursuit of completion and interactivity by fans.

An Overview of *The Cinematic Dub*

The Cinematic Dub is a web series consisting of 16 videos ('episodes' as they are referred to in the titles) adapting *Undertale*'s Pacifist route released between 2017 and 2022 on the PlotlinePlus YouTube channel. The series features more complex and realistic sound design than is heard in the game, 'remastered' character sprites (as they are described in the video descriptions) and voice-acted performances of all onscreen dialogue, including the in-game narration. The series is directed by YouTube user PlotlinePlus, and is a highly collaborative effort. The foundational gameplay footage and 'remastered sprites' were provided by Mod DB user Michael King and almost every character had a voice actor unique to them, apart from cases where one person voiced a main character and assorted side characters, or different voice actors performed for one main character.²² The collaborative nature of TCD as well as the wider cast of voice actors sets this project apart from other efforts to provide voice acting for *Undertale*, though the series shares something in common with other voice-acted *Undertale* projects: a preference for Pacifist runs of the game.

The series adapts the entirety of the Pacifist route of *Undertale* but does not cover the Genocide playstyle or any story/character beats encountered in the many variations of Neutral. This is unsurprising given the popularity of the Pacifist

²² This was the case with Undyne, whose voice actress changed from episode 11 onwards.

playstyle over Neutral and Genocide (as evidenced in survey results, with Pacifist being the most preferred playstyle both in terms of gameplay and narrative), and the fact that Pacifist is the most suitable *Undertale* playstyle to adapt for a project like this that is mainly concerned with voice acting, given the word ‘dub’ is in the title and is a defining factor of the series. Pacifist has the most character interactions, given that all the characters are alive to interact with, and therefore the most dialogue to be ‘dubbed’. Neutral routes can be done in several different ways, none of which are seen as definitive by *Undertale* fan communities²³, and Genocide was avoided as PlotlinePlus felt it would not be entertaining enough to maintain viewer interest if it were adapted into fixed audiovisual media, as can be seen in the comments below left under the final Cinematic Dub episode.

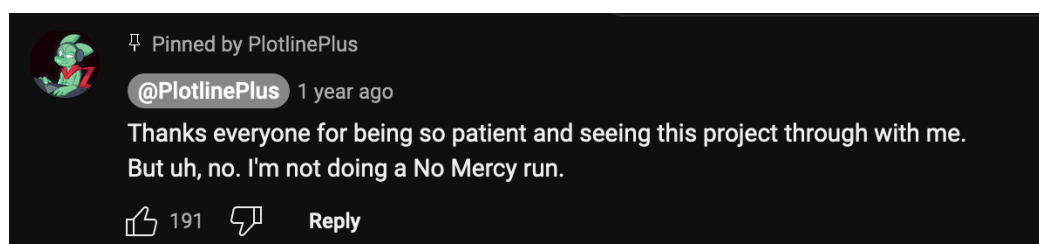


Figure 63: PlotlinePlus announcing their decision not to adapt the Genocide route in the comment section of the final video

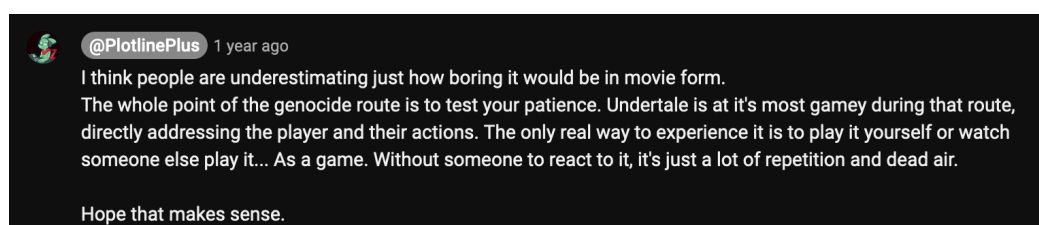


Figure 64: PlotlinePlus elaborating in response to a comment on the previous announcement

At this point in the chapter, the choice to only adapt Pacifist raises two pertinent points for discussion; in the eyes of the UF, is the *Undertale* text able to be ‘completed’ through telling only one version of the story? Furthermore, in this version of the story, the player’s interactivity is significantly altered in a new way: what does this tell us about the transformative nature of performative play?

²³ As observed in survey results, neutral playthroughs are usually preferred by fans who value the variety of different endings one can achieve, and there are so many variables that contribute to a Neutral ending it would be impossible to consider them all to be definitive.

To answer these questions, I will now define ‘completion’ and then define ‘interactivity’ as they apply to the intersecting academic disciplines relevant to this chapter.

Completion

Before this section begins, I will clarify that arguments related to ‘completion’ throughout this chapter are not intended to make any kind of declaration on the necessity of ‘completion’ to video games as texts, which is a complicated question to answer that I consider outside the scope of this research. They are simply brought up to investigate the importance of ‘completion’ to *Undertale* fans, not necessarily whether or not there should be a completed version of *Undertale* (or if it’s even possible at all).

Indeed, ‘completion’ is quite a broad term in game studies; it can be defined as a ‘goal’ in some games, but not in others. For example, at the 13th International Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Cardona-Rivera, Debus & Zegal (2019) argued that there are three potential ‘goals’ outlined by certain types of video games. There are games where the primary goal is ‘to win’ (refers to multiplayer or competitive games), to ‘finish’ (refers largely to story-based games), or to ‘prolong’ (refers largely to MMOs or mobile games). Based on this, it may seem that *Undertale* should fall under ‘to finish’ given its nature as a narrative game. However, given the amount of narrative choices that can be made in multiple playthroughs, and apparent fan willingness to carry out these playthroughs in order to experience everything, it could also be argued that a goal of *Undertale* is ‘to prolong’, which arguably stands in contrast to ‘finishing’. In terms of fan goals within the *Undertale* text, I argue that the answer is somewhere in between: a fan wants to ‘finish’ all possible routes of *Undertale*, and then ‘prolong’ the experience by discussing them with fans and uncovering additional lore about the story and characters that they may not have discovered during their own playthroughs.

In further research, ‘completion’ can refer to two things: the ‘completion’ of a game in terms of completing all of the levels, or the ‘completion’ of a game as in a complete and cohesive story rife with meaning. Both versions of ‘completion’ are addressed in ludomusicological literature by Karen Collins and Iain Hart in particular. These texts argue that a video game is an incomplete text altogether until someone plays it. A video game with no participants means that “[there is no] text to study”, according to Hart (2014, p. 280), as there is no player to impart their own meanings and interpretations of the text onto the game. Hart argues that a player’s own intentions and actions shape the text of the game, even in the most linear story driven games of all. Collins also explores completion in *Playing with Sound*: “Interactive texts are inherently unfinished because they require a participant with whom to interact before they can be realized in their myriad forms” (Collins, 2013, p. 12). This rings especially true of *Undertale* as a game; *Undertale*’s three main stories (“myriad forms”) can only unfold if the player engages with the game, and the player’s choices inform what the story and the relationships between the characters will be. Therefore, in ludomusicological terms, *Undertale* is arguably incomplete without a player.

In this sense, Let’s Plays and Twitch streams can serve as a completed form of *Undertale* for fans, but perhaps not an ideal one. Indeed, in early *Undertale* fandom, a primary point of contention was that the people behind these presentations were not playing the game ‘correctly’ (Spencer 2017). A universally satisfying completed form of *Undertale* is almost impossible, with so many variations of playstyles that fan preferences are bound to misalign. However, online video remains an important way for *Undertale* fans to work towards their goal of completion (Seraphine, 2018), and one that TCD could assist in achieving. As noted in the introduction, online gameplay is very likely to be the only way some people experience certain video games. Due to console and game affordability, and console exclusivity, some people simply will not be able to play certain games for themselves, and therefore freely accessible online video is one of the best alternatives to this. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider Collins’ notion of a ‘completed’ interactive text to TCD, as it may be somebody’s only

exposure to the *Undertale* text at all. In TCD, the text now has a player in the form of the credited Michael King, but the ‘participant’ referred to by Collins is more applicable to the role of the viewer as the text of TCD was designed for an audience rather than a player.

However, completing the *Undertale* text is not just a matter of adding a ‘participant’, in gamer or viewer form. Since there are so many ways of playing *Undertale*, ‘completing’ the text through fixed audiovisual media becomes rather complicated. One might play *Undertale* once, get a Neutral ending and consider their experience complete. However, as previously noted, this is not the case for *Undertale* fans. McLoughlin said himself in the previous chapter that *Undertale* had to be played in a certain way to have the ‘correct’ experience (Pacifist before Genocide, or “you would miss so much!” [McLoughlin, 2015]). Some survey participants don’t consider singular playthroughs of the game to have ‘completed’ the *Undertale* text in terms of narrative: 40 out of 46 participants stated that they had engaged with all possible playstyles of *Undertale* in either video game or online video form, with only one participant having not engaged with all possible playstyles (only Pacifist and Neutral). Along with survey testimony from chapter 1 suggesting that all routes are necessary to “fully articulate *Undertale*’s plot”, this indicates a desire among *Undertale* fans to engage with all possible playstyles for a ‘complete’ experience with the story. Collins is not wrong to assert that a player is necessary to complete a game’s interactive text, but the conclusion is certainly complicated by choice-based games like *Undertale*, especially if one considers a game incomplete until all possible story beats across all playthroughs have been uncovered.

Some survey participants note that they found online video to usually be necessary for completing their experience with the *Undertale* text, even if they have played the game themselves. For example, when given the option to elaborate, two participants stated that they had played both the Pacifist and Neutral routes on their own but relied on online video for Genocide. This was also the case in Seraphine (2018)’s research, who found that *Undertale* fans were more likely to watch the Genocide route than play it. This could be for two main reasons.

Genocide can take a very long time, and much of the time spent on it is simply walking the avatar around each area looking for the next enemy to kill. This is even noted by PlotlinePlus as a primary reason they did not adapt a Genocide version of TCD. Let's Plays such as McLoughlin's cut these parts out and just show the Genocide-specific story beats and boss fights, which is a much quicker experience than an entirely new playthrough. Additionally, a Genocide playthrough permanently alters future playthroughs of *Undertale* due to the characters remembering your actions and sometimes shunning you for them, and some players wished to avoid being remembered badly by characters they had grown to love (Spencer, 2017). Therefore, this is where online video comes in; someone else plays Genocide so the *Undertale* fan need not tarnish their relationships with the characters they'd become so fond of during their Pacifist runs. In short, online video showcasing *Undertale* gameplay is not the only way some will experience the game but is shown to be very helpful in completing the text for hardcore *Undertale* fans.

We may also consider the opinions of early *Undertale* fans, and indeed some fans in the survey results: for some, Pacifist is the definitive way of playing *Undertale*. Spencer's article and survey results show that Pacifist is by far the most popular playstyle of the game, both in *Undertale* fan communities and online video creation. When an online video creator plays through *Undertale*, they will usually either only play Pacifist, or play a Pacifist run with heavily edited Genocide gameplay afterwards. Pacifist is the playthrough that is almost always played in its entirety with few edits, and the one preferred by survey participants on the whole. So, some *Undertale* fans may not need to uncover the other playthroughs and consider Pacifist to be a satisfying and 'complete' experience on its own. In this sense, TCD can potentially serve as a perfectly acceptable 'completed' form of *Undertale* to fans that hold such opinions.

Either way, it is almost certain that online video will play a role in 'completing' the text of *Undertale* for a fan or newcomer at some point. This is usually done by way of watching a Let's Player or Twitch streamer play *Undertale*, sometimes with their own unique voice acting. This case study, however, focuses on a fixed

audiovisual document of *Undertale* of a different kind: TCD is not one person playing the game and providing their own voices as they go, it is a video production featuring pre-recorded voices from a wide cast of characters that aims to tell the story of *Undertale* as if it were a ‘cinematic’ experience. Although, while TCD is unquestionably less interactive than the game itself, we can consider how interactive it is in other forms: for example, how interactive is it as an online artefact, or as a product of fan labour? With these questions in mind, I will now define interactivity as it applies to the TCD.

Interactivity

In game studies literature, interactivity is often defined through a cybernetic lens in three stages; the player uses a controller to input their behaviour, a computer must interpret said input and then the data is transferred back to the person via onscreen gameplay (Saltz, 1997, p. 118). In more recent game studies literature, there have been arguments criticising the widespread use of the term ‘interactivity’. For example, Sarah Stang (2019) argues that this term is overused; being able to interact with a game’s text does not necessarily indicate agency over it, as players can have little control over narrative. Stang goes on to argue that true interactivity comes from the player’s own interpretation of the text, the meaning they assign to it and the engagement they have with fan communities surrounding the text. This notion of true interactivity coming from fan engagement rather than a game itself will be useful to consider when studying the interactive qualities of TCD.

In ludomusicology, interactivity is often considered a performative act; as noted in the literature review, Hart (2014) considers all interactivity in video games to constitute performative acts. Performativity of the musical soundtrack is considered a unique aspect of interactivity in games; a game’s soundtrack may have so many variables and can be interacted in so many ways, it can never be heard in the same way twice (Collins, 2009). This performativity becomes layered when playing games for others via Twitch streams. For example, the player

performs both as their avatar and as the performed persona they are presenting to their viewers as an entertainer (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). This performativity is again complicated by voice-acted *Undertale* playthroughs; the player performs the game as their avatar while performing their public persona for their audience with the added task of providing vocal performances for each individual *Undertale* character, like in the previous chapter's Jacksepticeye case study. In other words, when combining literature from game studies, a potential link between performativity and interactivity can be observed when playing video games by oneself or for an audience.

Ludomusicology often considers interactivity to be a key component of a video game experience that separates it from other forms of audiovisual media like film. In ludomusicological terms, if we have no direct control over the game being played, we are not interacting with the text (Hart, 2014). Collins differentiates and draws similarities between 'interacting with' something and 'listening to' something (or, for our purposes, watching something). According to Collins, "when we interact with, we are a participant in an action, whereas when we listen to, we are external to the action taking place", though a listener can "consciously attend" to sound and interact with it in a less direct way (Collins, 2013, pp. 3-4). Although, when viewing instead of playing a game, interactivity still exists, but is significantly altered. We can refer back to Collins' definitions of 'spectator' from the previous chapter here. As discussed then, Collins refers to someone who is watching gameplay while offering help to the player as an "interactive spectator" (Collins, 2013, pp. 90-91). This is what we'd call an *Undertale* fan in the comments of a McLoughlin video or in the live chat for a Twitch streamer; regardless of whether their feedback is responded to or not, they are still acting as an interactive spectator. We may consider such spectatorship as an example of Jenkins' participatory culture, prominent in both online gaming and *Undertale* fandom.

When fans create content for their communities, they are engaging in participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). In the case of the UF, participatory culture includes deciding upon an ideal voice for each of the *Undertale* characters. TCD

not only aims to abide by the rules the fandom has set for the ideal voice for *Undertale* characters, but it also engages directly with prominent fan theories, examples of which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. TCD adopts these fan theories into its text, and by participating in fandom, fans who have engaged with such activities have influenced TCD, interacting with it in a similar indirect fashion to viewers of Let's Plays and Twitch streams. This is supported by Stang (2019) who argues that in its current form, game interactivity largely stems from the way fans interact with each other in game community fandoms while creating new meaning from the text. Therefore, while *Undertale* fans have not interacted with the text in terms of ludomusicological literature, they have by standards of fan studies literature.

Another way in which *Undertale* fans interact with the text is through the proposal and implementation of ideal voices for the characters. TCD's chosen voices often match the ideal voices described by survey participants in chapter 1, such as a maternal, softspoken voice for the mother figure Toriel and a brash, raspy voice for the boisterous Undyne. While demand for Let's Players and Twitch streamers to sound a certain way when voicing *Undertale* characters has faded in recent years, the actual ideal imagined voices for *Undertale* characters have remained largely the same: for example, in the survey results, some fans express a desire for characters to sound much the same way they were performed by McLoughlin in 2015. Therefore, I argue that it is highly likely that voices in TCD were chosen through observation of preferred voices in the UF, or through vocal preferences that the TCD creators had being *Undertale* fans themselves. So, while viewers had no direct say over the content of TCD, it is possible that their involvement in fan spaces before TCD contributed to the voices chosen for the videos.

Through discussion of interactivity, we are now in a position to explore three key components of interactivity as it applies to TCD: its nature as an audiovisual presentation rather than a video game, how fan meaning making activities alter the meaning of interactivity from how it would usually apply in games studies, and the role of fan labour in transforming the text to a new medium. I will begin with analysis of gameplay vs watching and what can be learned from TCD in this regard.

Gameplay vs Watching

In this section, I will discuss how *Undertale* changes in its adaptation to a new medium. In particular, I am interested in how its presentation is altered when the text is transformed from an interactive one (a game) to a fixed one (series of YouTube videos). Along with the addition of voice acting, PlotlinePlus altered several sonic and aesthetic aspects of the game when adapting it for a fixed audiovisual medium. This leads to some instances in which the original tone of certain *Undertale* moments from the game is altered, creating new meaning. To this end, I will also examine TCD's position in video game paratexts; current literature such as the work of Burwell & Miller (2016) and Consalvo (2017) argues that certain Let's Plays and Twitch streams evolve from paratextual to a game to their own text that centre the player's persona over the game being played. I argue at the end of this section that the narrator's role in TCD serves a similar purpose to the role of the Let's Player or Twitch streamer; to act as the player's guide and provide a degree of separation between the viewer and *Undertale*'s story, perhaps transforming the text through a limiting of interactivity.

Film Music Studies and Ludomusicology

In TCD, voice acting is not the only sonic alteration to the game's text. PlotlinePlus adds additional sound design to certain parts of the game, for example sound effects of water drops falling on rocks while Frisk explores the Ruins, allowing a viewer to imagine a dark and damp cave, not dissimilar to how the Ruins appear in-game. Additionally, while PlotlinePlus will occasionally use music from *Undertale*'s soundtrack to underscore certain scenes (particularly in Hotland sections), they more often incorporate fan-made musical covers of the score into the videos. An example of this is during the Undyne boss fight. In the game, Undyne confronts the player by standing dramatically on top of a mountain and promises to tell them the tragic history of the conflict between monsters. She then humorously cuts herself off by yelling "SCREW IT!", insults the players' "goody-

two-shoes” act and runs at them with her spear, with ‘Spear of Justice’ (a musical cue from the game that underscores Undyne’s boss battle at the end of the Waterfall section) immediately beginning upon the declaration of “SCREW IT!”. This tonal shift is amplified in TCD, where PlotlinePlus uses different fan-made versions of ‘Spear of Justice’. When Undyne begins her sombre introduction to the history of humans and monsters, she is underscored by the opening of Sully Orchestra’s ‘Spear of Justice Cover EPIC ORCHESTRA’, which features orchestral elements as the title would suggest. When she cuts herself off with more confrontational language, the score suddenly switches to RichaadEB’s ‘*Undertale*: Spear of Justice - Metal Cover’, a version of Undyne’s battle theme in the style of a heavy metal band. The sudden shift from a gentle traditional orchestra to a loud and abrasive electric guitar and drums supports the shift in tone in Undyne’s monologue in a way that is unique to TCD: the music can be cleanly edited to fall perfectly in line with the voice acting in a way that would be difficult to achieve in game scores.

These fan-made covers do not feature looping as the game-score does, and include definitive musical endings as opposed to fading out as a looped score does on a soundtrack recording. The covers appear in game with certain dramatic musical beats corresponding to significant moments in *Undertale*’s text; for example, at the end of the Papyrus boss fight, PlotlinePlus utilises a fan-made cover of Papyrus’s boss battle track ‘Bonetrousle’, which ends dramatically at the exact moment Papyrus chooses to spare the player. While players are known to time their in-game actions to certain musical cues in video games if they are familiar enough with the game and its score (Cheng, 2014), such events require forward planning and player input. PlotlinePlus edits both the musical score and the in-game events to synchronise without consumer input, making the use of these fan-made *Undertale* score covers much closer to the presentation of film music than game music. However, it is important to note that while the presentation of sound in film music and video games differs greatly - as observed in the previous discussion - both media have been considered in tandem quite frequently in both film and video game literature over the years.

Discussions of film music in relation to game sound can assist in understanding the adaptation of *Undertale*'s score from an interactive medium to a fixed one; while TCD is not a film, the presentation of its sound is arguably intended to evoke one, as evidenced by the word 'cinematic' in the project's title. In the edited book *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, Roger Moseley and Aya Giki point out modern efforts to compare film and video games, which they view as being a consequence of some modern video games (like *Heavy Rain* [Quantic Dream, 2010] or *Alan Wake* [Remedy Entertainment, 2010]) making aesthetic efforts to emulate cinema (Moseley & Giki, 2014: pp. 51-52). Steven Reale adds to this in the same volume:

In many video games, the musical score functions in the manner of typical film scores: once finished, a game world is adorned with a soundtrack designed to amplify, heighten the intensity of, or provide emotional or ironic commentary on a narrative unfolding in a pre-constructed tableau. (Reale, 2014, p. 77)

Reale refers to a 'finished' soundtrack here, relating to *Undertale* fan goals of 'completing' *Undertale* in some way. Additionally, comparisons are made between film and video game soundtracks, which is relevant to TCD: a game score is being adapted to fixed media, which relates to the transformative nature of TCD. TCD adds new or at least additional meaning to the *Undertale* specifically through changes made to its soundtrack, both through voice and through fan covers of the score as previously discussed.

However, scholars like Hart encourage a separation of film studies and game studies analysis to "identify where innovation or a departure from established practices" are necessary (Hart, 2014, p. 274). Film music is often intended to contain emotional meaning, as previously stated by Reale, while that need not be the case in video game music, especially in arcade titles that hold no emotional narrative in the same way *Undertale* does (Donnelly, 2014). In 2011, Isabella van Elferen highlighted key differences between sound as it appears in video games and sound as it appears in fixed audiovisual media like film; in video games, sound does not only exist to accompany the game's cinematic elements (e.g. cutscene

underscore), it is partially there to guide the player via audio cues signalling what is to be done next and whether the player has succeeded or failed a gameplay goal. While the differences between film music and video game music are important to acknowledge in ludomusicological texts such as these, the distinction becomes blurred in projects like TCD. In these videos, the game score is adapted into a film score, in a way: it is not there to guide a player, but to immerse a viewer into what they are seeing rather than playing.

Music and Sound Design: Game vs Cinematic Dub

In the *Undertale* game, all music is presented in a retro 8-bit style and was made through the music production software FL Studio according to the official *Undertale* website. Chiptune music like this has a long history of association with video games and is the style most associated with the medium (Collins, 2008). Such music would be strange in a “cinematic” project – if one were in a cinema watching a film and the score sounded like a video game from the early 1990s, it may raise some eyebrows without narrative justification for the choice. Therefore, PlotlinePlus uses the opportunity to pepper fan-made covers of *Undertale*’s score throughout the videos, usually featuring real instruments evocative of film music.

Another way such fan-made covers evoke film music rather than game music is that they do not loop. Traditionally, video game music is presented as relatively short pieces of music that can be repeated for as long as a player stays in a certain game location or situation (e.g. a boss fight) to facilitate the player taking as long or as little as they need to complete a certain task (Collins, 2008). This is quite unique to video game music; most other genres and styles of music are usually presented as fixed, with a clear ending to the piece in question, including film music. Fan-made covers featured in TCD adapt the *Undertale* score (which heavily relies on loops) have clear endings that align with the end of a scene, as opposed to simply fading out, switching abruptly to a different theme or stopping suddenly as they would in a video game. The inclusion of fan-made covers not only serves to adapt an interactive soundtrack to a more linear structure, but it also adds

another layer of interactivity for fans not directly involved in the project. People that made fan content for *Undertale* in the form of musical covers could indeed have their work used in TCD, regardless of if it was made specifically for that purpose or not. This serves as an example of participatory culture adding interactive elements to TCD's score and making the score interactive from the point of view of a fan if not a player.

Along with the score, PlotlinePlus also alters the way sound design is received by a TCD viewer vs an *Undertale* player. Van Elferen's (2011) work remains pertinent when discussing the role of sound design in *Undertale* and TCD. In *Undertale*, sound provides hints to the player and alerts them of what must be done next to progress the game. For example, when a player is navigating the Underground and is about to encounter a monster, the screen cuts to black momentarily and a 3-note alarm sound is heard, cutting off the overworld music. The battle interface is then shown, and the corresponding battle music starts. Over time, as described in Hart's (2014) work, the player may come to associate this sound with entering battle, and the sound adopts the meaning: 'you are about to enter combat'. In Hart's terms, experience potentials for such moments will differ (for example, the combat alert sounds will mean different things to a Pacifist or a Genocide player: 'I'm about to spare this monster' vs 'I'm about to kill this monster'), but broader meaning of the sound remains the same for all players: 'I am about to enter combat'.

This is not the case in TCD. While the combat alert sounds are still there before Frisk encounters monsters, the function and meaning of them is altered, as the player is hearing the sound in a less interactive medium. When a viewer hears the combat alert sound from the game in TCD, they no longer think, 'I am about to enter combat', they think, 'Frisk is about to encounter a monster'. The experience potentials are also removed, as the player has no choices to make regarding whether they will fight or spare the monster. There is no player, the consumer is a viewer now, and PlotlinePlus is going to choose how to handle this combat encounter. Therefore, the change from playing a game to watching a YouTube video has altered the role of the sound design in *Undertale*.

Sound design is also embellished at various points in TCD. For example, during an interlude in which the player and Sans go for lunch at a restaurant in Snowdin Town, Sans suggests switching plates. In-game, no sound is heard during this exchange other than Sans's dialogue sounds and the game's underscore. In TCD, the soundtrack features a lot more sounds, such as the clinking of crockery when Sans is switching his plate with Frisk and chatter from bar patrons, each with their own individual voice. There are several instances of sound effects being added to scenes which previously had none, such as the sound of a sword against metal when Undyne's spear hits the player's shield during her boss fight or the sound of something being knocked over in surprise whenever the player inadvertently says something that surprises Dr Alphys. Sounds like this don't necessarily have to be there, but do potentially serve to retain a viewer's interest with more complex sound design than is usually heard in a filmed gameplay presentation.

The Degree of Separation: Aesthetic and Structural Changes

There are also some slight aesthetic and structural changes in TCD that become more frequent and prominent as the series continues. I argue these changes create a degree of separation between the game and TCD in much the same way a streamer can act as a degree of separation between a player and a game, further altering the text of TCD and perhaps making it more textual than paratextual.

In one of many articles by Jamie Woodcock and Mark R. Johnson exploring Twitch and its userbase, they discuss the labour and performativity of Twitch streaming, comparing streaming to character acting due to the preparation and performance necessary to entertain an audience over the course of a livestream (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Burwell and Miller's work argues that this is the case for YouTube Let's Plays as well, voicing similar conclusions to Johnson and Woodcock: "for producers [of Let's Plays], game-play becomes a public performance that includes creating a persona, building an audience, and making decisions about tone, language and narrative as they play" (Burwell & Miller, 2016, p. 113). Through such

performance, online gameplay becomes more about the public persona by a Twitch streamer than the game being played. We may connect these findings to discussions of online gameplay and its nature as a paratext to the game being played, or its emergence as its own text through the persona of the player. Writing for *Critical Studies in Media Communication* in 2017, Mia Consalvo discusses the complex nature of online gameplay's role in gaming culture. Consalvo argues that in the cases of particular Twitch streamers, the games being played often become paratextual to the personality of the player, who then becomes the central figure of their video content, which subsequently becomes its own text.

Through this literature, I argue that a gamer who presents their gameplay for an online audience provides a degree of separation between the viewer and the game that is not present in gameplay. As previously noted by Collins (2013) and Hart (2014), there is little separation between a player and a video game, with a direct connection being forged through the presence of a controller. In online gameplay, in lieu of a controller, the onscreen player acts as the viewer's connection to the game. The viewer's control over what happens in the game is much more limited when watching a game being played as opposed to playing it themselves. I argue that the personas described above that have the power to transform paratexts into texts act as a degree of separation between the viewer and the game, and that this degree of separation is also present in TCD through a series of aesthetic and structural adjustments to the text.

Aesthetically, the gameplay footage features 'remastered' character sprites that appear next to character dialogue, as they are referred to in video descriptions. These are redrawn versions of the game's character sprites that are smoother in appearance (in other words, less pixelated) and in colour. This makes sense for a project that refers to itself as 'cinematic', as pixelated black-and-white characters are more commonly found in video games than film or television. These serve to remind the viewer that while they are currently engaging with *Undertale*, it is a different text from the game, and one that aims to be more 'cinematic' in style as the name of the project would suggest.

The structural changes are obvious; the story of *Undertale* in TCD is presented in a series of YouTube videos (referred to as numbered episodes in the video titles) rather than in a series of play sessions that can be started and ended as a player chooses. Most episodes begin with a short recap segment showing what happened in the previous episode, akin to a ‘previously on’ recap in television programs. This new format provides another contribution to the degree of separation between a viewer of TCD and the original video game, with a reminder at the beginning of some episodes that this version of *Undertale* is more akin to a fixed audiovisual presentation like a television programme than a directly interactive text like a video game.

There are also some small adjustments to the presentation of the text through the change in medium that serves to separate the viewer from *Undertale* the game and immerse them in this new version of the text. PlotlinePlus occasionally takes advantage of the shift from interactive video game text to fixed audiovisual medium for some comedic moments. For example, when the player visits Temmie Village in the game, they may encounter a mushroom-like monster dancing while the text displayed on screen reads, “Mushroom dance, mushroom dance, what could it mean?”. When this event plays out in TCD, a deadpan voice from nowhere suddenly proclaims, “it means this video is over” and the video abruptly ends. This is something unique to TCD that aligns with the original game’s tone; *Undertale* the game would often break the fourth wall via the characters of Flowey and Sans discussing the player’s ability to save and reset their game, and PlotlinePlus has found a way to continue to break the fourth wall while also retaining *Undertale*’s offbeat brand of humour.

However, some comedic moments from the game that only succeed through the absence of voiceover are altered so they lose their original punchlines. For example, in the game, Napstablook is introduced to the player with “zzzzzzzz” in his dialogue box. It is revealed by the narration that this was not onomatopoeia to alert the player that Napstablook is sleeping; Napstablook is literally saying the letter ‘Z’ over and over to feign sleep and avoid interacting with the player. In TCD, Napstablook is introduced repeating the letter ‘Z’ via voice acting so when

the narrator points out that this is what he is doing, it becomes observation of what the viewer already knows rather than a witty reveal to the player. I argue that instances like this serve to at least partially transform *Undertale*'s original text; meaning that could only be achieved through a game with no dialogue is now altered through the addition of voice acting.

Despite these moments of transformation, PlotlinePlus is very clear that TCD should not be seen as a replacement for the original text, adding a disclaimer to the beginning of the very first video urging viewers to experience the story as a game first before watching their videos. This is arguably similar to sentiments expressed throughout the Fry 64 playthrough: moderators repeatedly insisted that all performers should 'make the voices their own', but performers would still end up adhering to existing *Undertale* fandom norms during their vocal performances. There is a sense here that the performers involved in the Fry 64 playthrough from chapter 4 were trying to appease all possible *Undertale* fans with this: those that wanted to hear the fan-assigned ideal voices and those that didn't want to associate with older fandom behaviours, both of which could be seen among survey responses. I argue that TCD is doing something similar here: creating a project to please fans that would like some degree of voice acting present in the original game, but making it clear that they have no desire to replace the original beloved text so as not to upset fans who want it to remain unchanged.

TCD may be considered a voice-acted Let's Play without a distinct constructed persona to guide us, instead lending its performative aspects to the *Undertale* characters themselves: these videos still act as a 'public performance', but of a different nature from those described in Consalvo (2017) and Burwell & Miller (2016). PlotlinePlus showcases the game rather than their own personality (in fact they personally do not appear at all except to reply to comments), but in a way, the game becomes paratextual to the vocal performances being showcased. The project is titled '*Undertale: The Cinematic Dub*', drawing attention to two qualities *Undertale* as a game does not possess: cinematic elements (or non-interactive elements) and voice acting. In this sense, TCD arguably becomes a text rather than a paratext, providing what the game does not.

Additionally, one major aspect of TCD that is unique to its version of the text is the inclusion of a narrator. In Let's Plays and Twitch streams, the narration of *Undertale* (descriptions of the player character's reactions to the world and of the enemies' movements in combat scenarios) is usually provided in the player's own voice, like in McLoughlin's playthrough. In TCD, the narration becomes a narrator, someone with unique character and personality provided specifically through vocal performance and delivery. The narrator does not only provide an additional and important degree of separation between the viewer and the game, but as we will see later in the chapter, plays a significant role in fan reception to TCD.

The Narrator

A unique feature of TCD that is not present in most Let's Plays or Twitch streams (that were discovered during research, at least) is that the narrator is a unique character in *Undertale*. In TCD, the narrator is a performed character who expresses wonder, exasperation, and fear throughout Frisk's journey, groaning at the puns in the game's script and voicing apprehension when the player is facing a difficult boss battle.

Not only is the narration spoken aloud by one unique voice, but the narrator also reacts to events and characters in *Undertale* and even gets emotional at times. For example, the narrator expresses fear and apprehension when encountering boss battles such as against the fearsome and ruthless Undyne, and relief when sparing the gentle and softspoken characters like Toriel. As we will unpack later in the chapter, the transformation from disembodied narration to a characterised narrator transforms the text substantially between the game and this new fixed audiovisual medium and led to much debate among *Undertale* fans as to the identity of the narrator within the story of TCD, using clues from the vocal performance to support their arguments. For now, I will discuss the narrator's role in transitioning the text of *Undertale* from a video game to a fixed audiovisual medium.

The narrator fills a similar role to the narration in the game, acting as the player's guide through the world and an informative source of Frisk's reactions to the world around them. This can be seen when Frisk enters Toriel's house in the Ruins and finds a selection of children's toys. In the game, text appears onscreen that reads, "Look at all these cool toys! They don't interest you at all". This is a humorous way of encouraging the player to move on and interact with something else to progress the story but is slightly altered in TCD. In TCD, the narrator excitedly exclaims, "Look at all these cool toys!", and then her enthusiasm quickly drains, and she says plainly "They don't interest you at all". This quick shift in attitude towards the toys retains the humour of the original text while changing the intention of the narration: the narrator is not there to urge the viewer to progress, because the video will do that for them. The narrator is there to communicate Frisk's thoughts and feelings to the viewer, as Frisk is now a separate entity from the person engaging with *Undertale*. Now that Frisk is the voiceless protagonist of a non-interactive text, they need someone to speak for them: this is where the narrator comes in. The narration serves as an additional degree of separation in this regard, as they are no longer describing the player's actions, they are describing Frisk's, a character the viewer has no control over in this new text.

The presence of the narrator does slightly complicate the viewer's role in the proceedings; since the narration is read word for word as it appears onscreen, the narrator still refers to Frisk as 'you'. In TCD, the viewer is not the one controlling Frisk, so it may come across as odd when they are referred to in this way. This may have been kept so there was no need to alter the onscreen text, which might have complicated things when presenting pre-recorded gameplay. There is also a possibility that this was done to remind viewers that they are watching an audiovisual adaptation of the video game. Therefore, the narrator's constant referral to Frisk as 'you' reminds the player that the game is the main source of *Undertale*'s story and encourages them to play it as well as watch TCD, as each video description includes a disclaimer that this series is not intended to replace the experience of playing *Undertale* for oneself. So, while *Undertale* has been

transformed into a new text, constant reminders exist both directly from the creator and within the text itself that this is strictly an adaptation.

Not only does the narrator play a significant role in altering the text of *Undertale* between mediums of storytelling, they are also heavily involved in fan meaning-making activities as they apply to TCD. The next section will explore this, in particular relation to fan interpretations of the character of Chara and how they are vocally portrayed as a result.

Fan Meaning-Making Activities

Through TCD, we can observe the UF creating an audiovisual artefact based on their fan meaning-making activities. Meaning-making is important in both game and fan studies and can be seen taking root in *Undertale* fan communities through the creation of ‘fan theories’ regarding the nature of the more ambiguous characters in *Undertale*, particularly Chara, the first ‘fallen human’. These activities are then adapted into TCD, and I argue that their inclusion assists in transforming *Undertale*’s story for a new medium.

Before discussing how specifically the UF engages with meaning-making in TCD, I will provide a brief overview of meaning-making in game studies and fan studies as it applies to this chapter. Meaning making in games studies is quite a complex discussion; as noted by Arjoranta (2015), textual meaning and interpretation in video games is nuanced due to the different kinds of video games that exist. For example, Arjoranta points out that narrative games are best utilised in discussions around meaning in texts, as scholars may struggle when deriving textual meaning from non-narrative puzzle games like *Tetris*. Therefore, it is not surprising that additional meaning-making literature regarding games and their sound usually focus on narrative games. For example, in terms of ludomusicology, Hart considered ‘experience potentials’ to play a key role in meaning-making in video games: essentially, a player’s potential interpretation of a game’s soundtrack (and subsequently, a game as a whole) often hinges on their own personal experiences.

Hart uses the narrative detective video game *L.A. Noire* (2011) as an example of this: the game utilises jazz music in the underscore, which players will use to create their own interpretation and meaning of the score based on their potential experience with jazz music (Hart, 2014). Fan studies scholars have also investigated meaning-making in terms of the labour undertaken by fans. Vinney & Dill-Shackleford (2016), when undertaking a study regarding the specific content of fan fiction works, found that fans not only use fan fiction to make changes to the original text (close to Jenkins' 'textual poaching' (2006)), but also to analyse specific characters and consider perspectives on them that are perhaps not present in the original text.

In terms of meaning-making in the UF, fan reception of each character will largely depend on their own experience with the game, as Hart says. For example, fans who only meet Sans in a Pacifist run will view him as quite silly, but a supportive and unthreatening ally. However, fans that are aware of Sans's status as the incredibly difficult and merciless final boss of a Genocide run will be much warier of the character, and both interpretations can be observed in the survey results. This is especially true of Chara, who only appears once across all playthroughs in a menacing way at the very end of a Genocide run, which fans will sometimes forgo playing themselves and will have perhaps watched online instead (Seraphine, 2018). Chara is only mentioned in the Pacifist run as the first human to ever enter the Underground, a child who became Asriel's adopted sibling who met an unfortunate end before the events of the game. Chara physically appears to the player at the end of the Genocide route and reveals that they had been secretly hoping for the player to kill all monsters rather than spare them, as that was the key to their resurrection. Chara thanks the player for their actions and then goads them into 'erasing the world' (starting a new game, but now all the characters will remember what the player did before and trust them less).

Despite the character's canonical villainous appearance, fans tend to view Chara in a sympathetic way, even theorising that the kind, empathetic but exasperated narrator in TCD is secretly Chara, acting as Frisk's guide through the Underground. This is close to Vinney & Dill-Shackleford's observation that fan meaning-making

activities involve considering different perspectives on characters that may be at odds with their presentation in the text. Several comments on TCD's first episode theorise that the narrator is in fact Chara and delight in this possibility. The voice actress for the narrator even confirmed an intentional portrayal of Chara on her part on social media when promoting the final episode of TCD. These can be observed below in figures 65-67.

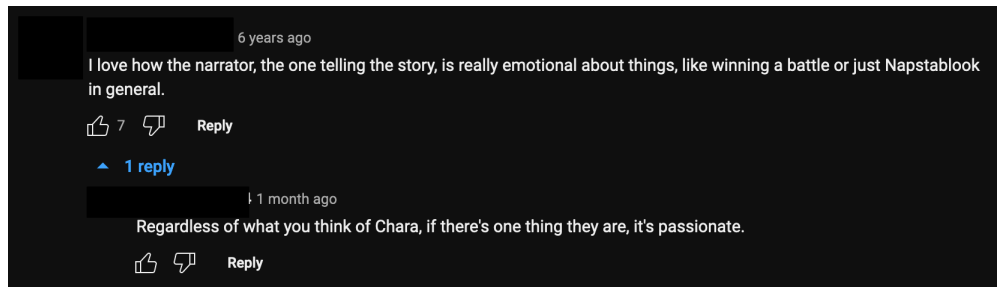


Figure 65: Comment thread on the first instalment of TCD speculating that the narrator is Chara

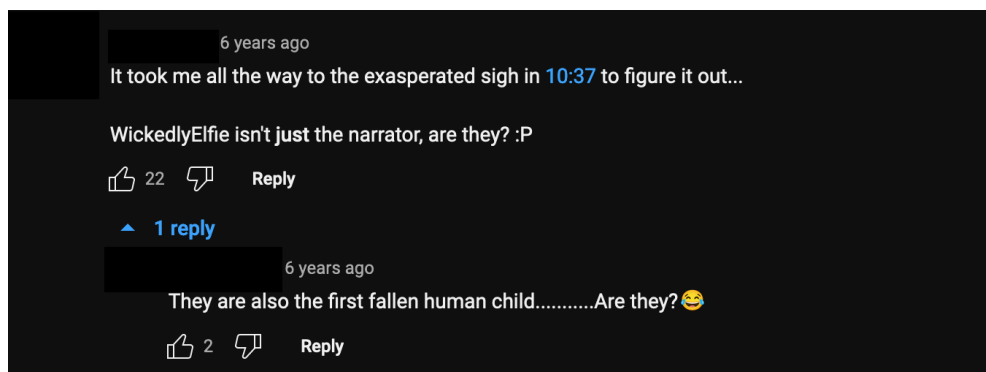


Figure 66: Another comment thread on the first instalment commenting on how vocal performance was a key factor in determining that Chara was the narrator to this viewer

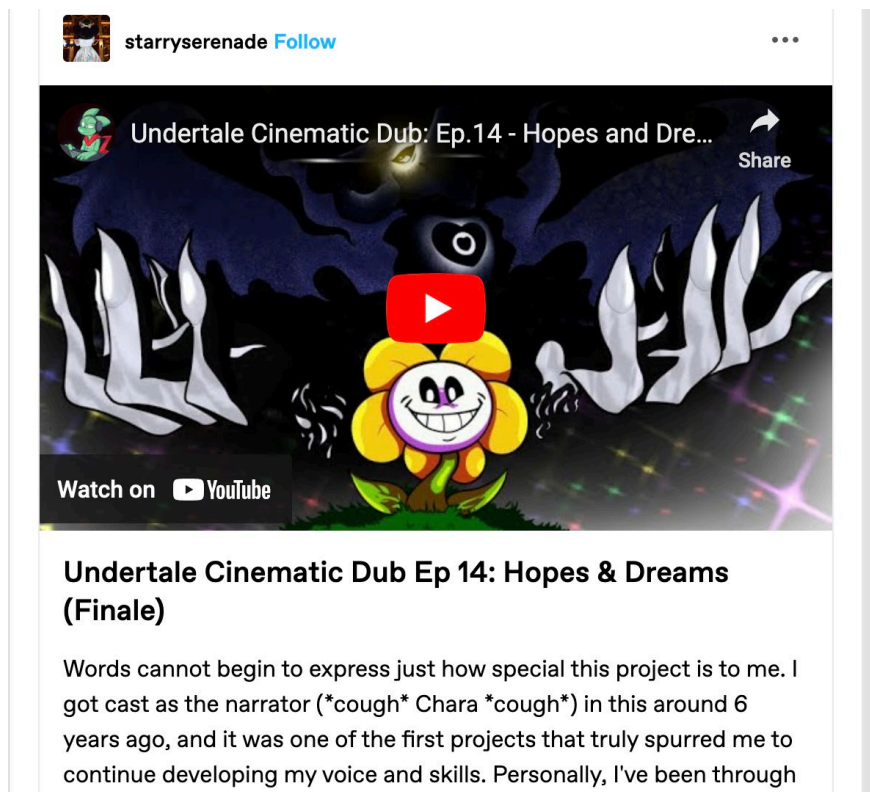


Figure 67: Social media post from the narrator's voice actress confirming she performed the narrator as if they were Chara

This fondness for Chara and desire to encounter them in the Pacifist run is unsurprising, as *Undertale* fans are more likely to have watched Chara's only appearance in video form rather than encountering the character during their own gameplay. Gameplay is considered an important element in shaping a player's perception of a character. In *Playing with Sound*, Collins explains the empathy that players feel toward their avatars through the physical connection forged by controllers (Collins, 2013, pp. 39-42). According to survey results and existing literature by Spencer (2017) and Ruberg (2018), *Undertale* fans feel this empathy with almost every character, rarely having a bad word to say about any of them. It appears this same empathy has been extended to Chara, despite their sinister appearance in the text. Since Chara's villainy is very rarely experienced in game form by fans, since Genocide is more likely to be watched than played (Seraphine, 2018), the direct empathetic connection forged by controllers is missing, and fans will not register Chara as a threat. Why would they? Chara only threatened the person playing the Genocide route, and in some cases, that won't be the fan in question. Chara didn't do anything to *them*, why should they consider Chara to be

menacing? Empathy and even sympathy towards Chara can be observed through the popular *Undertale* fandom meaning making practice of producing fan theories.

Undertale fan communities often wish to learn everything they possibly can about the text in all its potential forms, specifically through sharing ‘theories’ on information not made available through the game itself. An example of this is fan speculation surrounding Chara. In short, fans theorise that Chara is a character to be sympathised with and even endeared by. Some fans see Chara as an innocent child that fell into the Underground and while they may occasionally misbehave and be exasperated by the ways of the monsters at times, they are not overtly evil as they are presented in the Genocide run.

Figures 68-69 show images from two Reddit discussions pertaining to fan opinions on Chara. The commenter in figure 68 expresses a sympathetic view of the character that was arguably not encouraged by the original text, but is argued by the commenter to be in line with *Undertale*’s themes. This is likely a reference to every character receiving redemption in a Pacifist run including the primary antagonist (Flowey), and therefore it would be strange to not extend that same opportunity to Chara despite their malicious textual actions. The commenter in figure 69 acknowledges individual interpretations of Chara as well as how protective fans can get over them, which is unsurprising given previous discussion on early *Undertale* fan reactions to performances of the ideal voice. Importantly, this comment also acknowledges the role of fan theories, and therefore fan meaning-making activities, in *Undertale* fans’ efforts to redeem Chara outside of the text.

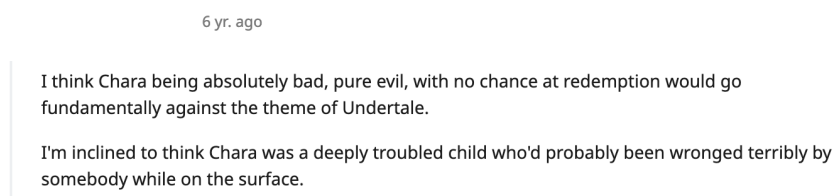


Figure 68: Reddit comment speculating that Chara is not beyond redemption, likely referring to the end of Pacifist where the main villain is redeemed

Chara's a complicated character to talk about because of how open to interpretation they are. I notice that whenever there's a discussion about Chara's character, people sometimes tend to feel a bit sensitive to the topic.

Ever since the formulation of the Chara Narrator Theory (which is a really fun and entertaining to read!), a lot of people have changed their disposition towards Chara from that of a malicious entity to that of the player's helper and ally. For many, it's an idea that gives Chara the ability to redeem themselves during the events of the game.

But for many others, it's the complete opposite. The thing is about Chara, is that their character and personality is implied to be malicious. With Asriel calling Chara "not the greatest person" that hated humanity (plus their behaviour during the genocide run), it's makes complete sense to interpret Chara as a troubled and irredeemable child (not to mention the one specific tape asking Chara to do their "creepy face", plus their plan that resulted in both theirs and Asriel's deaths).

Personally from the way I see it, Chara's desires are *our* desires (that is, during the game). There's no such thing as *the* Chara, but our own *individual* Charas whose interpretations are exclusive to that of ourselves. Sometimes, people try to force their own interpretations of Chara towards others, which causes others to feel upset because it makes the implication that everyone else's interpretation of Chara is wrong except theirs. And that's no good because it makes us forget that we as a community share the same love for Undertale and its characters.

Figure 69: Reddit comment musing on the role of fan theories in endearing Chara to Undertale fans

Of note to this discussion is the 'Chara Narrator Theory' referenced in figure 69. Some fans speculate that in all playstyles, Chara is secretly the narrator of *Undertale*. This is certainly the case in the Genocide run, as it is all but confirmed in-game. At the very start of the game, the player is asked to 'name the fallen human'. In RPGs, it is conventional to give the player's avatar a name of the player's choosing, and at the beginning the player will likely assume that this is what is happening. In both Pacifist and Genocide runs, it is confirmed that the player is actually naming the first human who ever fell into the Underground; Asriel's best friend, Chara. While the player can decide upon Chara's name for themselves, if a player inputs 'Chara' as their chosen name, text will appear on screen that reads, 'the true name'. As a result, fans mostly refer to this character as 'Chara', the *Undertale*'s fan wiki page refers to them as 'Chara'²⁴ and the character of the first human to fall into the Underground is almost always referred to as such in fan discussions.

This is how it is confirmed in-game that Chara is the narrator of the Genocide run. At several points in the Genocide run, the text will turn from white to red and begin using first-person instead of the usual second-person. This is especially apparent towards the end of the Genocide run, where the player visits Asgore's

²⁴ Available here: <https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Chara>

castle and encounters all of Asriel and Chara's old things. When interacting with objects in the environment, red text like '[this is] my drawing' appears as opposed to the usual second-person description of items in Pacifist and Neutral runs, and indeed in Genocide towards the beginning of the game (as seen in figure 70). Since the narration is referring to Chara's belongings and history as their own, the game confirms that in the Genocide run, when red text appears, it is Chara speaking.

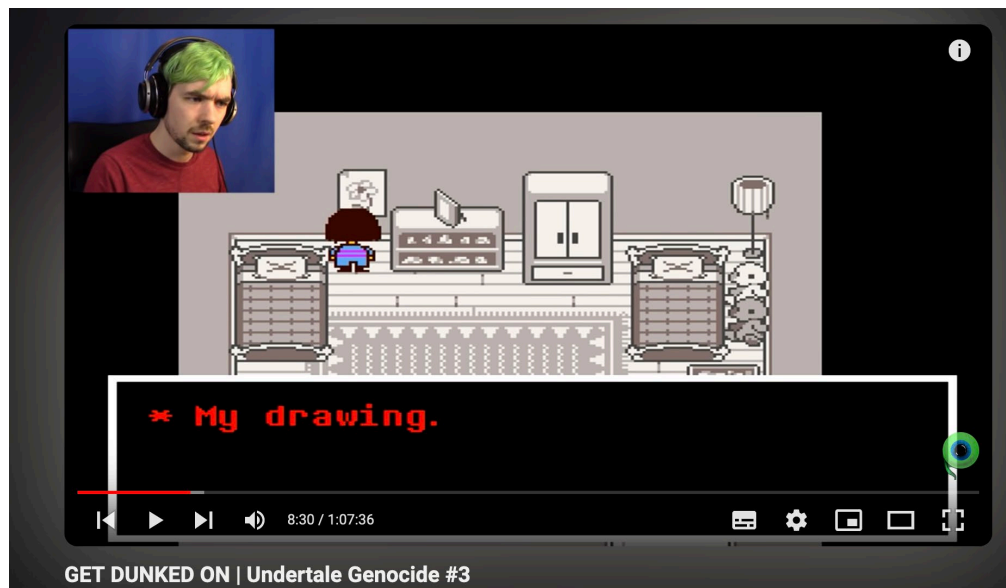


Figure 70: Gameplay footage of Chara's narration before the final boss of Genocide, from McLoughlin's *Undertale* series

Fans of *Undertale* theorise that this can be taken a step further, and that white text narration is also Chara's own ghostly voice and reactions to Frisk's journey. The *Undertale* fandom blog nochocolate on Tumblr which is dedicated to discussing fan theories and "hard facts" about *Undertale* (according to their blog description) has a public blog post providing several instances of in-game narration to draw parallels between the more innocuous white text narration and Chara's untimely death, potentially confirming Chara's status as the narrator regardless of text colour. An excerpt from this blog post can be seen in figure 71, where the author theorises that the narrator of the Neutral run is indeed Chara based on obscure references to Chara's death made by the narration.

CHARA'S BED

for example, the left bed in asriel's room is revealed to be chara's bed in the genocide route. while not as explicit, this fact is also alluded to in the neutral route.

GENOCIDE ROUTE



* My bed.

NEUTRAL ROUTE



* (What a comfortable bed.)
* (If you laid down here,
you might not ever get up.)

the game heavily implies that **chara died of buttercup poisoning**. the neutral route narration suggests "my bed" was quite literally chara's deathbed.

Figure 71: Excerpt from a lengthy blog post from *nochocolate* proposing that the narrator is Chara in all possible runs of *Undertale*

The theory that Chara is *Undertale*'s narrator regardless of playstyle was adopted into TCD. In TCD, the disembodied and disconnected narration becomes a personified and involved narrator; a high-pitched, intelligent, and very emotional voice, as opposed to the impartial narration of the game which, while humorous, rarely offered its own opinion. This is not the case in TCD, with the narrator showing exasperation with the ridiculousness of *Undertale*'s world (such as the frequent appearance of pun humour) and becoming tearful during the battle against Asgore (Chara's adoptive father). Fans theorise in comments that the narrator was portrayed this way to reflect Chara's personality (comments from figure 66 show viewers 'figuring out' the narrator is Chara through the narrator's exasperated reactions to the Underground's silliness), with Chara's voice actor confirming this in their aforementioned social media post in figure 67. In this way, *Undertale* fans have created new meaning, both those involved and observing TCD.

Through fan theories and vocal performance, fans have interacted with the TCD's text and transformed the way Chara appears in *Undertale*'s story. Therefore, those that only experience *Undertale* through TCD will potentially share this more sympathetic and involved take on the character of Chara, and fan meaning making activities have provided a new interpretation of the text through voice-acted narration.

Along with fan meaning-making activities, fan labour contributes greatly to TCD's place among *Undertale* fandom hierarchies. Fan labour is a method through which *Undertale* fans gain subcultural capital and recognition in their fan spaces, and even elevates fan projects like TCD in terms of what they can get away with. For example, as we will see in the next section, the voices provided in TCD don't always match the pre-existing ideal voices for the character described in survey results. However, due to the subcultural capital accrued by fan labour by individuals involved with TCD, this isn't always frowned upon by fans viewing the series.

Fan Labour

In terms of the UF, fan labour and social capital go somewhat hand-in-hand. According to survey results, fans sometimes only consider themselves to be noteworthy participants in fandom if they have been involved in multiple fan projects or create a lot of content for their fandom in the form of fan-art or fan-fiction. Much like in fan communities described by scholars like Jenkins, the more one creates or leads in their fan community, the more respected they become in it and the more subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) they gain. The greater the fan labour, the more respected a person becomes in *Undertale* fandom. This is especially true of fan projects involving the ideal voice for *Undertale* characters, as I will discuss now.

In their 2021 article 'Keep the Fire Burning: Exploring the Hierarchies of Music Fandom and the Motivations of Superfans', Edlom and Karlsson use existing fan

studies literature to create something of a reference guide to fan studies terminology, using pop star Robyn as an example. The UF is not so different from the fan culture described in the article: Edlom and Karlsson argue that a goal of the Robyn fandom is “closeness” with the object of the fandom, perhaps through physically meeting Robyn and talking to her (p. 129). This is how hierarchy is formed in Robyn’s fan communities: the more access a fan has to Robyn, the more subcultural capital they accumulate and the higher they rise in the esteem of other fans, or in the ‘hierarchy’ of Robyn fandom.

In this case, we can replace access to Robyn with access to *Undertale*, or at least having the most respected interpretation of *Undertale*. An avenue for this is access to ideal imagined voices, whether this be through the ability to perform them or having the correct opinion on them (though as per the previous chapter, being able to perform carries more subcultural capital). Certain ‘famous’ fans in *Undertale* circles gain their notoriety and respect from other fans through vocal performance; for example, in comments on TCD shown later, *Undertale* fans recognise the voice actors featured in the videos from other voice-specific *Undertale* projects and are thrilled about their presence, and some express confusion that ‘unknown’ actors were cast to play certain characters, proposing that a different and more well-known fan voice actor should have taken the role. These comments show great admiration for the fans that can perform the ideal voice and demonstrate that fan labour plays a key role in ascending the *Undertale* fandom hierarchy.

In *Undertale* fan spaces, we can consider the desire for access to the ideal voice as a type of ownership. W.W. Kelly (2004) suggests that in fandom, there is an idea of ownership over the object of the fan community, as well as a desire for ‘intimacy’ with the object of their fandom, for example meeting the person the fandom revolves around. In *Undertale* fan communities, I argue the ‘intimacy’ aspect largely applies to the characters in the text. In survey results, participants that chose Pacifist as their favourite route expressed desire to keep *Undertale* characters happy and alive in their playthroughs. Additionally, early fandom resistance to the Genocide playthrough at least partially stemmed from *Undertale*

characters not being as close to the player following a completed Genocide run, which fans did not want (Spencer, 2017). Therefore, for *Undertale* fans, intimacy potentially takes the form of having the virtual friendship and approval of *Undertale* characters, which cannot happen if they're dead. Ownership also appears to take the form of having an ideal way of voicing the characters and playing the game (though the latter is much less prominent now). There is also the issue of fandom hierarchies (Edlom & Karlsson, 2021), discussed in the previous chapter and elaborated upon in the context of TCD below.

Despite the reverence surrounding the ideal voice for *Undertale* characters, imagining an ideal voice for a character does not necessarily mean that one will be able to perform it as they imagine it. This is through no fault of the performer; the imagination can perform voice in a way an untrained real voice cannot (Cox, 2018). *Undertale* fans may post online all day about their ideal voices and describe them in as much detail as they like, but it is unlikely that they will be able to bring every single voice to fruition on their own. Naturally, the next best thing is to get someone else to do it, perhaps on a Let's Play or Twitch stream. This would prove difficult, as the Let's Player or Twitch streamer in question may not be involved enough *Undertale* fan spaces to be aware of the ideal voices assigned by the UF. This is where TCD comes in; the project was created by *Undertale* fans who are very likely aware of the ideal voices, and casts fans that can recreate at least one of those voices in the appropriate roles. This is an incredible feat in the eyes of the *Undertale* fan: not only has someone understood the 'ideal' voice, but they also have 'ownership' over the ability to perform it. Therefore, we can surmise that being able to perform the UF's ideal voice - in a way, 'owning' that voice - gives one great social capital within the UF, which is why TCD boasts such glowing reviews from fans in its comment sections.

There are some cast members in TCD who have gained their subcultural capital from involvement in other *Undertale* fan projects. An example of this is *Undertale the Musical*, created by the YouTube channel Man on the Internet on YouTube and boasting almost 5 million views on the platform. Much like TCD, *Undertale the Musical* utilises a cast of characters as opposed to one person providing all the

voices. However, a key difference between TCD and *Undertale the Musical* is that the latter is a sung-through performance of the game's score, adding lyrics to each track and turning it into a musical, as the name would suggest. TCD is much more focused on spoken vocal performances and capturing the ideal voices for the characters as constructed by fans over the years. *Undertale the Musical* is brought up here, however, as social capital gained from involvement in the project plays a role in how the vocal performances in TCD were received. Some members of the cast of TCD enjoy pre-existing reverence within the UF, as they were previously involved in *Undertale the Musical*. Some performers in *Undertale the Musical* are seen to have 'ownership' over an ideal character voice, and in lending their talents to TCD, they also lend subcultural capital to the latter project. This can be seen in the below comments reactions to certain casting choices in TCD as they relate to *Undertale the Musical*: some commenters express preference for the voices they are already familiar with from *Undertale the Musical*, but notably are still complimentary towards the new voices as seen in particular in figure 72.

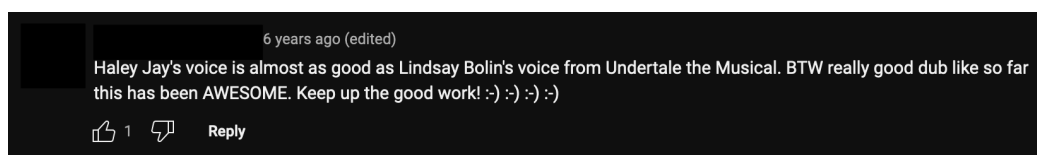


Figure 72: Comment on the first instalment expressing preference for Toriel's vocal performance in *Undertale the Musical*, but not disappointment at the difference

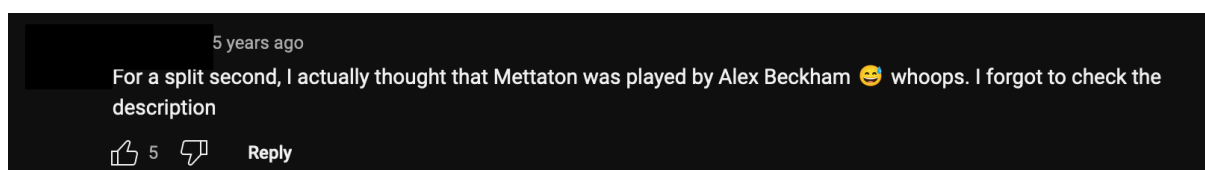


Figure 73: Comment on the fifth instalment expressing brief confusion that the voice actor for Mettaton in *Undertale the Musical* did not reprise his role, but again no vocally expressed disappointment

Existing subcultural capital among cast members of TCD can also be seen through how Papyrus is presented in TCD. Papyrus is voiced by Darby Cupit, who is very beloved in the comments of TCD because he previously voiced Papyrus in *Undertale the Musical*, so therefore fans were already familiar and likely accepting of Cupit's interpretation of the character due to the popularity of that project (see figures 74 and 75). In addition to previous discussion of Darby from the Fry 64

chapter, comments suggest that Cupit has gained some social capital within the fandom due to his previous performance as Papyrus; very few are critical of his performance, and most are thrilled that he has reprised his role from *Undertale the Musical*. This explains why nobody seems to mind that Cupit did not abide by the fandom rule discussed in the previous chapter: that Papyrus should sound exactly like Skeletor.

Figures 74 and 75 show comments on the second episode of TCD (covering Snowdin Town, aka the first appearances of Sans and Papyrus) praise Cupit for going beyond the ‘typical Skeletor impressions’, echoing sentiments expressed on the *Undertale* subreddit that wonder why Papyrus having a Skeletor voice is so universally agreed upon (as seen in the Jacksepticeye case study). The answer as to how the Skeletor voice came about was very likely to at least be partially due to Let’s Play creators like Jacksepticeye who assigned him that vocal archetype very early in the UF’s life, but as for those saying he should not sound like that at all, that is a much greyer area. We cannot say what Papyrus sounds like; he doesn’t have a voice and never did. The voices selected for the characters are done so by fans, not anyone with any official connections to *Undertale*. Regardless, survey responses and adherence to fandom rules regarding voice acting in the previous chapter indicate that fans still believe Papyrus should sound like Skeletor, all these years later. However, Cupit’s Papyrus voice is highly acclaimed in TCD’s comment section, and it does not sound like Skeletor at all.

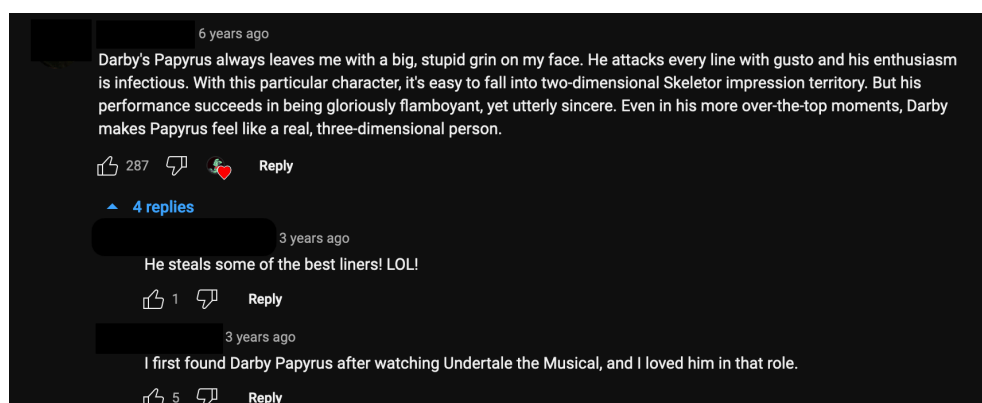


Figure 74: Comment thread on the second instalment praising the lack of Skeletor voice for Papyrus and referencing *Undertale the Musical*

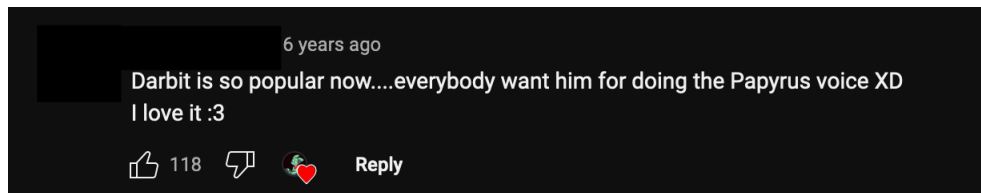


Figure 75: Comment musing on the popularity of Darby due to his vocal performances in the past as Papyrus

Darby's Papyrus voice is characterised by its energetic and somewhat pompous delivery, which while performed in a high pitched southern English accent rather than a Skeletor-esque voice, does reflect survey participants' views that Papyrus should come across as silly and bursting with energy. Darby is apparently so well respected in *Undertale* fan circles due to previous involvement in *Undertale the Musical* that fans do not mind relinquishing ownership of the imagined voice. Since Darby has prior experience voicing Papyrus in previous fan labour, he is given freedom by the fandom to provide a new voice type for Papyrus, even one that does not match the seemingly ironclad fandom rule that Papyrus should sound like Skeletor.

Some comments in the initial videos of TCD compare *Undertale the Musical's* cast to TCD's, particularly in the case of Toriel and Mettaton as seen in figures 72 and 73. Such comments are not posed in a disapproving manner, though such behaviours may be expected from the way reporters like Spencer (2017) describe the early *Undertale* fandom. Spencer describes *Undertale* fans as being quite vocally upset when a Twitch stream or Let's Play of *Undertale* featuring voice acting, particularly in the case of Markiplier's original *Undertale* Let's Play which was discontinued due to negative fan feedback. In the comment section of TCD, we see fans occasionally express surprise that the voices are not as they imagined based on their experiences with the beloved fan project *Undertale the Musical*, but very rarely the vitriol described by Spencer. I argue this is due to PlotlinePlus gaining social capital within the fandom purely through the act of creating a fan project like TCD.

In chapter 3, I discussed fan resistance to McLoughlin's initial *Undertale* playthrough; fans were worried that the "normies" would enter their fandom spaces and misinterpret the game and its characters, who would then perhaps

judge fans in *Undertale* communities. In this chapter, we see another possible reason for initial resistance to McLoughlin's playthrough: *Undertale* fans value the input of other fans far more than they value the input of seemingly random content creators. Over time, McLoughlin's *Undertale* videos have become acclaimed in fandom circles, likely because McLoughlin himself became a fan and stated as much several times in both his original *Undertale* playthroughs and subsequent videos revisiting the game on his channel (McLoughlin, 2021). In contrast, most Let's Players and Twitch streamers often visit games casually, playing them once for the first time for their audience but rarely venturing deeply into fan activity (Spencer, 2017). Therefore, in *Undertale* fan communities, online personalities have to 'prove themselves' in a way, showing off the correct attitudes and vocal performances before they can be fully accepted by the fandom at large. PlotlinePlus's work was always treated kindly by the UF because it was always presented as a project by fans, for fans, and therefore the apprehension for McLoughlin's work would never have to be overcome because it was never there. PlotlinePlus is involved in the UF, and therefore will be forgiven if a voice does not perfectly match a viewer's ideal voice, as the simple act of producing a fan project (participating in fan labour) has given them subcultural capital among the fandom. Even if TCD is not 'complete' by fandom standards of including all possible playstyles or performing the ideal versions of all the characters' voices as predetermined by the UF, it is still accepted as a worthy version of *Undertale* by the fandom at large despite significant transformations to the text.

Conclusions

TCD transforms the text of *Undertale* in a number of ways. The largest and most obvious change is that now it is a series of videos rather than a game, but when investigating what has changed in terms of sound and how fans reacted to it, we can more clearly see how digital fan communities surrounding *Undertale* use voice acting to transform the game's text.

TCD is arguably an incomplete text to some *Undertale* fans: it only features one route, and in some small ways, context is altered in a way that changes meaning from the original game. Given the apparent importance of having a ‘complete’ experience with *Undertale* to fans, it could be assumed that projects like TCD that transform the text in this way would not be well received. However, fans forgive these transformations due to the nature of the text in particular regard to its new interactivity (or lack of it, in some areas) and how sound is altered. TCD is a product of fan labour, and therefore any decisions made during it that would not usually align with *Undertale* fandom norms are forgiven. This also extends to vocal performances: if voices do not align with an *Undertale* fan’s preferences, or if an unexpected performer appears in a role that has previously been assigned to a more ‘famous’ fan, this is overlooked due to the reverence TCD enjoys due to its existence as a fanmade project.

A major component of how TCD acts as a transformative text is through its use of vocal performance to incorporate fan meaning-making activities into its text. Chara as the narrator in a Pacifist run was something only theorised by fans previously, not something that the game confirmed to be true. In TCD, the narrator’s voice actress confirmed that she intentionally performed the narration as if it were Chara in adherence with this fan theory, transforming fan meaning-making activities into a new version of the *Undertale* text largely through sound, in this case vocal performance. Therefore, the implementation of voice acting in TCD assists in transforming the text for a new medium while incorporating fan meaning-making activities into the text.

Conclusions

The intention of this research was to investigate how game sound is interacted with by groups of people, as the majority of current game sound research focuses on an individual's relationship with a game's soundtrack. Given the broadness of that area of interest, it was narrowed down to cover performative play and how digital fan communities utilise it to transform game texts through voice acting. In this section, I will cover the primary outcomes of the research and how future research could expand upon its findings in the wider scope of how game sound is engaged with by groups.

Research Outcomes

This research found that fans of *Undertale* and those that engage in performative play surrounding the game use voice acting to transform the text, and that fan activities involving knowledge of the game's lore and various fan theories can assist in this. Each of the three case studies investigated different perspectives and realities around fan culture's role in how game sound is engaged with in performative online spaces, but when considered altogether, the transformative nature of each case study can be observed.

The Survey Results

The survey results chapters' purpose was largely to provide context for the case studies regarding the UF, namely current behaviours and dynamics as well as current preferred voices. However, these chapters were also essential in understanding the UF's relationship not only with game sound, but with wider fan culture. The nature of obtaining subcultural capital can be considered in this regard. For example, chapter 1 found that *Undertale* fans are no longer interested in determining the 'correct' way to play the game, and discussions have since shifted to gender identities for the characters. The object of discussion has

changed, but discussion itself remains an important factor in accumulating subcultural capital. This indicates that prerequisites for obtaining subcultural capital can change while the means of achieving them remains the same.

Additionally, chapter 2 provided specific characteristics of the ideal imagined voices constructed by *Undertale* fans. This laid a foundation for analysing how these voice types were engaged with by the UF and beyond in the case studies. In the case of the Jacksepticeye case study, it was found that these interpretations by fans could be influenced by certain players outside of the UF in the community's early days, but only if that person accumulated an appropriate amount of subcultural capital by playing the game 'correctly'. In the Fry 64 case study, it was found that even years later when fans were no longer interested in determining the 'correct' way to perform imagined *Undertale* voices, fans still stuck closely to the original interpretations of the early *Undertale* fandom. This demonstrated an adherence to the original mode of gaining subcultural capital via the 'correct' vocal performance long after it had supposedly died out. In *The Cinematic Dub* case study, this is taken a step further: the ideal voice can be sidestepped altogether if one accumulates enough subcultural capital by another means, for example taking part in multiple fan projects relating to *Undertale*. Chapter 2 of the survey results were important in determining what these imagined voices actually were, and later how they were adhered to (or dismissed) in later case studies.

With context provided by the survey results, the transformative nature of voice-acted performative play by digital communities surrounding *Undertale* could be more clearly observed, as discussed below.

Case Study 1: Jacksepticeye

The Jacksepticeye case study investigated early *Undertale* fandom in the context of existing literature and primary data, and found some nuance to the state of *Undertale* fandom in its early years. This case study found that while previous

arguments that early *Undertale* fandom exerted influence over how streamers played the game and provided voices for the characters remains relevant, there was some complexity to it. Primarily, the relationship between fans and streamers when it comes to interpreting imagined voices was and remains reciprocal, with each group having some degree of influence over how the other interprets or performs these voices in their own projects. Therefore, when examining how game sound is delivered to digital audiences and game communities, it is pertinent to consider two key things. Firstly, as per prior research, it should be noted that fans have a degree of influence over how players perform the sound. However, as discussed in the Jacksepticeye chapter, it is equally important to consider how the player can potentially influence how fans interpret the imagined voice.

An additional conclusion drawn from the Jacksepticeye case study is the importance of the influence of wider online socio-political happenings on how imagined sound is constructed and received by digital audiences and communities. Namely, in this case study, the likely influence of Gamergate on fan communities was discussed. As per Ruberg's (2018) findings, this had an eventual impact on how the text of *Undertale* was examined in online spheres, in particular how discussions of queer and feminist themes were treated with a level of disdain immediately following Gamergate. However, we can also consider another perspective: since *Undertale* fan spaces were founded in the midst of Gamergate, there was a certain resistance to accepting people within them who fit the role of a 'normie' who 'wouldn't get it'. This is not necessarily a new objection within fan spaces, with Felschow (2010) pointing out that cult fans find community that they otherwise wouldn't within fan spaces due to not feeling accepted in more traditional spaces. However, I argue that the ongoing hostile presence of Gamergate at the time of early *Undertale* fandom gave these fans more reason to be paranoid, and this became a factor in *Undertale* fans initially being resistant to people outside of fan community spaces providing insight for the game. Therefore, interpretations and performances of imagined voices were also met with resistance, and the environment of the time contributed to this.

Regardless of reasoning behind certain paranoid behaviours in early *Undertale* fandom, I argue it's clear that the environment of the community's infancy allowed for rules to be set around subcultural capital that would go on to influence how *Undertale* fans went on to engage with the imagined voice. For example, the Jacksepticeye case study shows the initial formulations of specific ideal voices for characters, and how McLoughlin even came to influence these voices himself. The ideal voices discussed in this chapter would remain relevant to the UF even as attitudes toward playstyle preferences changed, and being able to perform them would remain a primary way to obtain subcultural capital in Undertale fan spaces.

Ultimately, the Jacksepticeye case study aids in future case studies in providing an early example of how voice-acted playthroughs can transform game texts. The text has been transformed from a video game into a series of gameplay videos primarily through the addition of voice acting, with the player and the audience both influencing this new version of the text in different ways. The case study also reveals some nuances in how the delivery of this sound is received and why, which are important to consider in the subsequent case studies as well as future research examining the relationship between game sound and communities.

Case Study 2: Fry 64

The Fry 64 case study showed a more recent version of the UF and how fans continue to transform the text since the game's release, this time by turning *Undertale* into a new medium as well as an avenue for social interaction. The latter is especially pertinent given that the Fry 64 playthrough was being released in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns, which hugely expanded upon video games' existing role in facilitating social interaction. Like in the case of Jacksepticeye, examining external factors like the effects of Gamergate and COVID-19 on gaming and fan community spaces proved to be fruitful during this research, and would be useful to consider in future research.

The small size of the Fry 64 community also allowed for some pertinent observations around fan communities within communities, and how their interactions can cause alterations in fan community hierarchies. As noted in the Fry 64 chapter, *Undertale* fan communities tend to rank ability to perform ideal character voices (or at least knowledge of what these voices are) at the top of the hierarchy. In Twitch communities, the streamer usually takes the top hierarchy spot. However, due to a mingling of *Undertale* and Twitch communities in the Fry 64 playthrough, this changes. In the Fry 64 playthrough, the streamer is not the one performing the voices, and therefore willingly hands their spot over to the voice performers on stream. In the Fry 64 playthrough, we see not only the potential for transformation in changing a game text to a backdrop for social interaction, but the potential for community hierarchies to transform when they mingle.

The Fry 64 playthrough also demonstrates the rapid transformation that fan communities can undertake in just under 10 years, and how perceptions and performances of the imagined voice evolve in that time. Voice acting conventions from the early years of *Undertale* fandom remain, but there is a concentrated effort throughout the playthrough to encourage both participants and viewers alike to take an uninfluenced and original approach to performing ideal voices for *Undertale* characters. Given that many fan communities surrounding games and their soundtracks are now at a point where they have existed for ten years or more, I argue that now is an excellent time for future academics to study these fandoms and their engagement with game sound. In the Fry 64 playthrough, it is observed that the UF has changed greatly in just ten years, and therefore future studies could benefit from examining other fan communities surrounding games and how they engage with sound in an evolving digital landscape.

Another pertinent observation is that the Fry 64 playthrough also transforms *Undertale* into a live performance space as well as into a new audiovisual medium. All three case studies transform *Undertale* into a performance in some way, but this one is notable for the liveness of it. Out of all three case studies, this one is the most improvisational in terms of voice acting, making *Undertale* as a text a

foundation for an improvisational performance space. This demonstrates another potential transformation that can occur through the addition of voice acting: one that allows said community to become participants in a performance space.

Case Study 3: *The Cinematic Dub*

The Cinematic Dub case study was a unique case in that it did not constitute online gameplay in the traditional sense. However, given its nature as a fan labour project that incorporates fan meaning-making activities to transform its text, I argue it is a pertinent case study to include here. In terms of game sound, it is especially essential to consider the role of fan interpretations of voice and character in transforming the text in this instance, especially when considering the narrator. This project is one of the few to not only include a voice actor for the narrator, but to construct the performed personality and voice type of the narrator around fan interpretations of the narrator's identity. In this instance, fans have transformed the text of *Undertale* through vocal performance, both in terms of being a fanmade project and incorporating fan meaning-making activities from the wider community.

The Cinematic Dub also reveals how the text can be transformed when the community that would usually have sound delivered to them become the performers of the imagined voice. In this instance, *Undertale* is transformed into a fixed audiovisual media series with little room for interaction from the audience. This differs from previous case studies, where audience members had more opportunities to alter the text in YouTube comment sections, Twitch chat rooms and (in the case of Fry 64) through live voice calls.

However, it should be noted here that 'little' interaction is possible, not no interaction at all. The series of videos itself is fixed and cannot be changed, but the text is influenced by existing fan interpretations of it, and subsequently so is the sound. The vocal performances provided by fans are heavily based on existing interpretations of what *Undertale* characters should sound like, and are directed

by a fan. So, in this instance, the *Undertale* text is transformed into something fans should, in theory, find to be the most suitable version of the text. But even then, this is complicated, as *The Cinematic Dub* begins with a disclaimer by its creator that the project should not be viewed as a substitute for engaging with the original *Undertale* text. So in this instance, while the text is transformed, it is done somewhat reluctantly so, as fans consider the original text to be the primary way *Undertale* should be experienced.

Therefore, in this case study, the UF's relationship with 'completion' was examined. Having a 'complete' experience with the game is important to *Undertale* fans; namely, experiencing all possible routes and encountering all possible story and character beats along the way. Whether or not a 'complete' version of *Undertale* is possible is up for debate, but I argue that in academic terms, it is not of great importance to obtain a 'complete' version of *Undertale*, or any game. 'Completing' a game is very complicated, and there can be many different interpretations of it, and defining them is outside the scope of this research. So, for our purposes, 'completion' is primarily discussed because of its importance to *Undertale* fans and how the pursuit of it leads to transformative texts like *The Cinematic Dub*. Therefore, in summary, the *Undertale* text in this instance has been transformed by fans into a version of the text that is suitable to fans via the imagined voice, but it is still considered imperfect in fan communities.

Considering the conclusions on each case study, I argue the construction of the imagined voice and attempts to perform it within digital fan communities assist the transformation of *Undertale's* text from one medium to another. This new medium can take many different forms, but in each one, the original text usually ends up being adapted or transformed in some way. Additionally, since the draw of each case study is the performative voice acting aspect of them, I argue that game sound is what acts as a transformative core in adapting each text into their new mediums.

Future Research

I argue that this research has demonstrated the transformative potential of voice acting in performative play when fan communities engage with game sound, and that there are multiple potential avenues for future research in this vein.

Community engagement with game sound has yet to be explored thoroughly in game sound research and is perhaps more pertinent now than ever. For example, as shown in the Fry 64 playthrough in particular, the necessity of video games in facilitating social connection and community interaction has rapidly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, so future studies would benefit from examining how and if game sound has been affected by this.

Furthermore, this thesis was largely focused on a singular case study, so further research focused on different games and different fan communities surrounding them would be beneficial in creating a more complete picture of how game sound is interacted with in groups. For example, are there any other games where sound is engaged with in a performative way by either online personalities, fan communities or both? How do they compare to *Undertale* fan community engagement with sound? By comparing them, what else can be discovered about this research field?

Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of this research, while necessary for answering the research question, meant that some areas could not be explored as thoroughly as future studies might be able to. For example, future studies solely focused on fan engagement with game sound or streamer engagement with game sound could go even deeper in exploring this area of game sound studies and further academic understanding of the relationships between digital fan communities, performative play and engaging with game sound through them.

References

Acevedo, K. & Fernandez-Fresard, G. (2021). Voice Performance Chart: A Pedagogical Tool to Enhance Vocal Expressive Ability in Acting Students. *Journal of Voice*. 38(3), p.797.e1–797.e10. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2021.10.020>

Aiken, P., Madill, C. & Rumbach, A. (2025). Listening to Video Game Voices: A Call for Action for Research into the Vocal Health of Video Game Voice Actors. *Journal of Voice*. 39(2), pp.563.e21-563.e31. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2022.09.009>

Alburger, J. (2024). *The Art of Voice Acting: The Craft and Business of Performing Voiceover*. 7th ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Altmeyer, M., Krüger, A. & Lessel, P. (2018). Viewers' Perception of Elements Used in Game Live-Streams, *Mindtrek*. University of Birmingham, 10-11 October.

Altmeyer, M., Krüger, A., Sahner, J. & Lessel, P. (2022). Streamer's Hell - Investigating Audience Influence in Live-Streams Beyond the Game. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*. 6(CHI PLAY), pp.1-27

An Undertale rant: the biggest spoiler you can give without even knowing it.

(2015). [Online]. Reddit. Available at:

https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/46zgmj/an_undertale_rant_the_biggest_spoiler_you_can/

Are there any fellow idiots that took forever to realize that Mettaton is trans?

(2025). [Online]. Reddit. Available at:

https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/1l7q60k/are_there_any_fellow_idiots_that_took_forever_to/

Arjoranta, J. (2017) *Real-Time Hermeneutics: Meaning-Making in Ludonarrative Digital Games*. Master's Thesis. University of Jyväskylä.

Barker, M. (2017). Speaking of 'paratexts': A theoretical revisitation. *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 5(3), pp.235-249. [Online]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.5.3.235_1

Barthes, R. (1985). *The Grain of the Voice*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Beeman, S. (2017). Perceptions of Voice Teachers Regarding Students' Vocal Behaviors During Singing and Speaking. *Journal of Voice*. 31(1), p.111.e19-111.e28. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2016.02.007>

Belin, P., Bestelmeyer, P., Latinus, M. & Watson, R. (2011). Understanding Voice Perception. *British Journal of Psychology*. 102, pp.711-725. [Online]. Available at: [10.1111/j.2044-8295.2011.02041.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2011.02041.x)

Bensch, C., Borman, A., Parnett-Dwyer, M. & Ricketts, N. (2020). Play and Curation During the COVID-19 Pandemic An Interview with Christopher Bensch, Andrew Borman, Michelle Parnett-Dwyer, and Nicolas Ricketts. *American Journal of Play*. 13(1), pp.21-32.

Bezio, K. M. (2018). Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a precursor to the rise of the alt-right. *Leadership*, 14(5), 556-566. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793744>

Blodgett, B. M. (2019). Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged. *Television & New Media*, 21(2), 184-200. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879918>

Boomer, J., Harwood, T. & Garry, T. (2018). Value Transformation in the 'Let's Play' Gaming Subculture. *Journal of Creating Value*. 4(2), pp.229-242.

Booth, P. (2018). *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). "The Forms of Capital." pp. 241-258 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.

Boutin, A. (2016). Roland Barthes' grain of the voice: from mélodie to media. *Romance Studies*. 34(3-4), p.163-173. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2017.1307630>

Braithwaite, A. (2016). It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity. *Social Media + Society*, 2(4). Available at : <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672484>

Burrell-Kim, D. (2023). "Stuttering Matt": Linguistic ableism and the mockery of speech impediments in video games. *Game Studies*. 23(2), p.1. [Online]. Available at: <https://gamestudies.org/2302/articles/burrellkim>

Burwell, C. & Miller, T. (2016). Let's Play: Exploring literacy practices in an emerging videogame paratext. *E-Learning & Digital Media*. 13(3-4), pp.109-125.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (n.d.). *NORMIE | English meaning*. [Online]. Cambridge Dictionary. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/normie>

Cardona-Rivera, R., Debus, M. & Zagal, J. (2019) On the Ultimate Goals of Games: Winning, Finishing, and Prolonging. *The 13th International Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*, pp. 1-11. St Petersburg.

Cayari, C. (2023). The music of *Undertale*: Participatory culture, video game music, and creating covers for YouTube. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 24(22). <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea24n22>

Chae, S. & Lee, S. (2022). Sharing emotion while spectating video game play: Exploring Twitch users' emotional change after the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Computers in Human Behavior*. 131(1), pp.1-11. [Online]. DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2022.107211

Chatzakou, D., Kourtellis, N., Blackburn, J., De Cristofaro, E., Stringhini, G., & Vakali, A. (2017). Measuring #Gamergate: A Tale of Hate, Sexism, and Bullying. *26th International Conference on World Wide Web Companion* (pp. 1285-1290). Republic and Canton of Geneva, CHE: International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee.

Cheng, W. (2014). *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chin, B. (2018). It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom. In: Booth, P. (Ed). *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.. pp.243-256.

Clement, J. (2025). *Weekly time spent on watching gaming content on YouTube among gamers in the United States as of January 2025*. [Online]. Statista. Last Updated: 27 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1607918/us-time-spent-watching-youtube-gaming-content/>

Collins, KC. (2008). *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*. London: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Collins, KC. (2008). *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Collins, KC. (2009) 'An Introduction to Procedural Music in Video Games', *Contemporary Music Review*, 28(1), pp. 5-15. DOI: 10.1080/07494460802663983.

Collins, KC. (2013). *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Consalvo, M. (2017) When paratexts become texts: de-centering the game-as-text. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 34(2), pp.177-183

Cox, T. (2018). *Now You're Talking Human Conversation from the Neanderthals to Artificial Intelligence*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press.

Davies, D.G. & Jahn, A.F. (2004). *Care of the Professional Voice A Guide to Voice Management for Singers, Actors and Professional Voice Users*. New York: Routledge.

Dillio, R. (2014). A Critical Miss: Video Games, Violence, and Ineffective Legislation, *First Amendment Studies*, 48(2), pp. 110-130, DOI: 10.1080/21689725.2014.950496

Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W. & Lerner, N. (2014). *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. New York: Routledge.

Donnelly, K.J. (2014). Lawn of the Dead: The Indifference of Musical Destiny in Plants vs Zombies. In: Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W. & Lerner, N. (Eds). *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. New York: Routledge. pp.151-165.

Duffett, M. (2013). *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.

Dunsby, J. (2009). Roland Barthes and the Grain of Panzéra's Voice. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. 134(1), pp.113-132.

Edlom, J. & Karlsson, J. (2021). Keep the Fire Burning: Exploring the Hierarchies of Music Fandom and the Motivations of Superfans. *Media and Communication*. 9(3), pp.123-132.

Eidsheim, N.S. (2019). The race of sound: listening, timbre, and vocality in African American music. Durham: Duke University Press.

Felschow, L. (2010). "Hey, check it out, there's actually fans": (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in "Supernatural". *Transformative Works and Cultures*. 4. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0134>

Fox, T. (2013). *UnderTale*. [Online]. Kickstarter. Available at: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1002143342/undertale>

Freitas, J. (2021). Kill the Orchestra: On Music, Mods, and Immersion in The Elder Scrolls on the Nexus Mods Platform. *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*. 2(2), pp.22-41. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2021.2.2.22>

Ffrench, P. (2015). Barthes and the Voice. *L'Esprit Créateur*. 55(4), pp.56-69.

Fritsch, M. (2016). "It's a me, Mario!" - Playing With Video Game Music. In: Kamp, M., Summers, T. & Sweeney, M. (Eds). *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*. Sheffield: Equinox. pp.92-115.

Fritsch, M. & Summers, T. (2021). *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fritsch, M. (2021). Game - Music - Performance: Introducing a Ludomusicological Theory and Framework. In: Fritsch, M. & Summers, T. (Eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.238-262.

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 01. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APR53bnbNBI>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 02. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXXTt_pRiVc

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 03. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhrRmxBQ_Js

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 04. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngaSrlelnMc>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 05. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4HWIPd-MWI>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 06. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tOTOgbqtwo>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 07. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=or3A1TS0juA>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 08. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ld_MaVjYEPA

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 09. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcHetYRXNnc>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 10. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etkocsp-0Ns>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 11. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwcfzhiEgy8>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 12. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ubqx_Fy_UbpQ

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 13. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6T3GnSlT1w>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 14. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wb5ctWRhXqE>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 15. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJgsXc-jjD8>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 16. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz8MvY1H1Bo>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 17. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njlz944ZdCc>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 18. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRMORx3Ym48>

Fry 64. (2022). Undertale Long Play With Voice Acting - Episode 19. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fL15bveydQ0>

Galloway, K. & Hambleton, E. (2025). *Music and Sonic Environments in Video Games Listening to and Performing Ludic Soundscapes*. New York: Routledge.

Garretson, O., Hamilton, W. & Kerne, A. (2014). Streaming on Twitch: Fostering Participatory Communities of Play within Live Mixed Media, *CHI*. Interface Ecology Lab, April 26-May 1.

Gaskill, C. & Hetzel, A. (2017) Managing “Vocal Dose” and the acting voice: how much is too much?, *Voice and Speech Review*, 11(3), pp.262-278, [Online] DOI: 10.1080/23268263.2017.1389811

Genette, G. (1991). Introduction to the Paratext. *New Literary History*. 22(2), pp.261-272.

Gibbons, W. (2014). Wandering Tonalities: Silence, Sound, and Morality in Shadow of the Colossus. In: Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W., & Lerner, N. (Eds). *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. New York: Routledge. pp.122-137.

Gibbons, W. (2020). Song and the Transition to "Part-Talkie" Japanese Role-Playing Games. In: Gibbons, W. & Reale, S. (Eds). *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies*. New York: Routledge. pp.9-20.

Gibbons, W. & Reale, S. (2020). *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies*. New York: Routledge.

Gillett, J. & Gutekunst, C. (2021). *Voice into Acting: Integrating Voice and the Stanislavski Approach*. London: Bloomsbury.

Girlfriend Reviews. (2020). Reviewing The Last of Us Part II | Girlfriend Reviews. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1pA4mFLyvU>

Grimshaw, M. & Garner, T. (2015). *Sonic Virtuality: Sound as Emergent Perception*. New York: Oxford Academic.

Hanford, N.A. (2018). At the Intersection of Difficulty and Masculinity: Crafting the Play Ethic. In: Taylor, N. & Voorhees, G. (Eds). *Masculinities in Play*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. pp.149-164.

Hart, I. (2014) Meaningful Play: Performativity, Interactivity and Semiotics in Video Game Music, *Musicology Australia*, 36(2), pp.273-290

Hills, M. (2000). 'Media fandom, neoreligiosity, and cult(ural) studies', *Velvet Light Trap*, 46, pp. 133-148.

Hills, M. (2002). *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge.

Hills, M. & Garde-Hansen, J. (2017). Fandom's paratextual memory: remembering, reconstructing, and repatriating "lost" Doctor Who, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(2), pp.158-167, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2017.1293276

How do you envision the characters' voices? (2018). [Online]. Steam Community. Available at:

<https://steamcommunity.com/app/391540/discussions/0/1750106661709193544/?ctp=1>

I don't like the fanon Papyrus voice. Does anyone have examples of "non-traditional" papyrus voices? (2015). [Online]. Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/433kpy/i_dont_like_the_fanon_papyrus_voice_does_anyone/

Is Chara really a bad person? (2017). [Online]. Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/72zm6n/is_chara_really_a_bad_person

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press.

Jensen, S.Q. (2006). Rethinking subcultural capital. *Nordic Journal of Youth Research*. 14(3), pp.257-276. [Online]. Available at: 10.1177/1103308806065820

Jodén, H. & Strandell, J. (2021). Building viewer engagement through interaction rituals on Twitch.tv. *Information, Communication & Society*. 25(13), pp.1969-1986.

Johannes, N., Vuorre, M., Magnusson, K., Przybylski, A. (2022). Time Spent Playing Two Online Shooters Has No Measurable Effect on Aggressive Affect. *Collabra: Psychology*. 8(1), pp.1-12. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.34606>

Johnson, M. & Woodcock, J. (2019). The Affective Labor and Performance of Live Streaming on Twitch.tv. *Television & New Media*. 20(8), pp.813-823.

Kamp, M., Summers, T. & Sweeney, M. (2016). *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*. Sheffield: Equinox.

Kamp, M. (2016). Suture and Peritexts: Music Beyond Gameplay and Diegesis. In: Kamp, M., Summers, T. & Sweeney, M. (Eds). *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*. Sheffield: Equinox. pp.73-91.

Kappe, F., Scerbakov, A. & Pirker, J. (2022). When a Pandemic Enters the Game: The Initial and Prolonged Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Live-Stream Broadcasters on Twitch. DOI: 10.24251/HICSS.2022.391.

Kelly, W.W. (2004). Introduction: Locating the Fans. In: Kelly, W.W. (Ed). *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan*. Albany: State University of New York Press. pp.1-16.

Kizzire, J. (2014). "The Place I'll Return To Someday": Musical Nostalgia in Final Fantasy IX. In: Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W. & Lerner, N. (Eds). *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. New York: Routledge. pp.183-198.

Knight, T., Steinmetz, K.F., Navarro, J. & Clevenger, S. (2022). "We Declared a Consumer Revolt, So They Declared a Cultural War": The Development of Shared Narratives among Supporters of the #Gamergate Campaign", *Victims & Offenders*, pp. 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2022.2146823.

Kraus, R.M., Freyburg, R. & Morsella, E. (2002). Inferring speakers' physical attributes from their voices. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 38, pp.618-625.

Kreiman, J., Vanlancker-Sidtis, D. and Gerratt, B.R. (2005). Perception of Voice Quality. In *The Handbook of Speech Perception* (eds D.B. Pisoni and R.E. Remez). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470757024.ch14>

LaBelle, B. (2010). *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Leinonen, M. (2023) *Subversion of the Player's Expectations of Violence in Undertale*. Bachelor's Thesis. Tampere University.

Lind, S. (2024). *Authenticity in the Music of Video Games*. London: Bloomsbury.

Marzahn, E. (2017) .““Don’t You Have Anything Better to Do?” : A Care-Focused Feminist Analysis of Undertale”. *Women's and Gender Studies: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*.

McAleer, P., Todorov, Aa & Belin, P. (2014) How Do You Say ‘Hello’? Personality Impressions from Brief Novel Voices. *PLoS ONE* 9(3): e90779. DOI :10.1371/journal.pone.0090779

McLoughlin, S. (2015). SHOW SOME MERCY | Undertale #1. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNV2TOF2PC0>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). SPOOKY SCARY SKELE-BROS | Undertale #2. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2H73mhAiLuc>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). DATE WITH A SKELETON | Undertale #3. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IndKnRM5M>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). HOI, I'M TEM! | Undertale #4. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvbYF7wmBbA>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). UNDYNE THE BADASS!! | Undertale #5. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKY6NG5rlbY>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). IT'S GETTING HOT IN HERE | Undertale #6. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUUIHNF7Kps>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). LITTLE MISS MUFFET | Undertale #7. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjCStU6Ol4>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). IT'S A POSE-OFF! | Undertale #8. Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lg88w_2_6A

McLoughlin, S. (2015). KILL OR BE KILLED | Undertale #9. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cattq0csbel>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). I DON'T WANT TO BE ALONE! | Undertale #10 (END).

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsizh2kljka>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). BECOMING A MONSTER | Undertale Genocide #1. Available

at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlbkpzDwfJU>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). THE TRUE HEROINE | Undertale Genocide #2. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTm-8sYHPYI>

McLoughlin, S. (2015). GET DUNKED ON | Undertale Genocide #3. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGJeksEaV1Q>

McLoughlin, S. (2016). ERASE THE WORLD | Undertale Genocide #4 (ENDING).

Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYbb0-Z_cHA

McLoughlin, S. (2018). Jacksepticeye Reacts To "Watchmojo's Top 10 Jacksepticeye Videos". Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYd-aNyn2qk>

McLoughlin, S. (2020). NOSTALGIA WEEK | Undertale. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnZVqcn6Pg8>

McLoughlin, S. (2021). These Are The Greatest Games Of ALL TIME. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvcRWSm04CY>

Medina-Gray, E. (2016). Modularity in Video Game Music. In: Kamp, M., Summers, T. & Sweeney, M. (Eds). *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*. Sheffield: Equinox. pp.53-72.

Medina-Gray, E. (2024). Engaging with abstract and realistic representations of voices in video games. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*. 9(1), pp.11-31. [Online]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1386/jivs_00087_1

Mitrenga, K.J., Alderson-Day, B., May, L., Moffatt, J., Moseley, P., Fernyhough, C. (2019), Reading characters in voices: Ratings of personality characteristics from voices predict proneness to auditory verbal hallucinations. *PLoS ONE* 14(8): e0221127. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221127>

Morimoto, L. (2018). Ontological Security and the Politics of Transcultural Fandom. In: Booth, P. (Ed). *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp.257-276.

Moseley, R. & Giki, A. (2014). Nintendo's Art of Musical Play. In: Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W., & Lerner, N. (Eds). *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. New York: Routledge. pp.51-76.

Müller, A. (2015) *Undertale: Violence in Context*. Master's Thesis. Maastricht University.

Murry, T., & Singh, S. (1980). "Multidimensional analysis of male and female voices". *Journal of Acoustical Society of America*, 68, pp.1294-1300.

nochocolate. (2015). *The Narrachara Theory: Proof*. [Online]. Tumblr. Available at: <https://nochocolate.tumblr.com/post/134759853195/the-narrachara-theory-proof>

Nunes, A. (2022). A Link between Worlds: Nostalgia and Liminality in Musical Covers of *The Legend of Zelda*. In: Aksoy, C., Pozderac-Chenevey, S. & Rone, V.E. (Eds). *Nostalgia and Videogame Music: A Primer of Case Studies, Theories, and Analyses for the Player-Academic*. Bristol: Intellect. pp.128-143.

O'Donnell, J. (2022). *Gamergate and Anti-Feminism in the Digital Age*. [Online]. Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14057-0>

Oja, M. (2021) *Encouragement of moral decision-making and ethical gameplay in the Undertale video game*. Bachelor's Thesis. University of Oulu.

Perez, M. (2017) *Undertale: A Case Study in Ludomusicology*. Master's Thesis. University of New York.

Pisanksi, K., Isenstein, S., Montano, K., O'Connor, J. & Feinberg, D. (2017). Low is large: spatial location and pitch interact in voice-based body size estimation. *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics*. 79, pp.1239-1251.

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale: Cinematic Dub Ep. 1- Home. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmtLvPOCxTU>

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale: Cinematic Dub Ep. 2- The Gauntlet of Deadly Terrors. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rdv672_70I

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale: Cinematic Dub Ep. 2.5- My Skeletal Romance. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYHBa-WQ2Dw>

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale: Cinematic Dub: Ep. 3- Wishful Thinking. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEFY-1zAjEc>

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale Cinematic Dub Ep. hOI: Rich History. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4htWdeC3tUU>

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 4- Unyielding Justice. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4yyY9QJZu8>

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 5- It's Showtime!. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7FEq4akuGU>

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 6- Oh! True Love!. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR_si9KnNG0

PlotlinePlus. (2017). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 7- Death By Glamour. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYHUL-hUL_s

PlotlinePlus. (2018). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 8- New Home, Old Friends. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIQZKUynd-g>

PlotlinePlus. (2018). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 9- King of The Mountain. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpgS0JGk6Tg>

PlotlinePlus. (2018). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 10- My World. Available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuzH6chtr04>

PlotlinePlus. (2018). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 11- A *Slice* of Life. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHbgvWmVSFQ>

PlotlinePlus. (2022). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 12- Doki Doki Lizard Club. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mu1lbr0wqGU>

PlotlinePlus. (2022). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 13- True Lab. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVGmC-uKRfU>

PlotlinePlus. (2022). Undertale Cinematic Dub: Ep. 14- Hopes and Dreams. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jam7PSnJPbk>

Przybylski, A.K. & Weinstein, N. (2019). Violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents' aggressive behaviour: evidence from a registered rep. *Royal Society Open Science*. 6, pp.1-16. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.171474>

Ramsay, M (2015) Are feminists taking over video games? *Storify*. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141015034228/https://storify.com/MorganRamsay/how-often-do-video-game-journalists-write-about-fe>

Reale, S. (2014). Transcribing Musical Worlds; or, Is L.A. Noire a Music Game?. In: Donnelly, K.J., Gibbons, W. & Lerner, N. (Eds). *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*. New York: Routledge. pp.77-103.

Ruberg, B. (2018). Straight-washing "Undertale": Video games and the limits of LGBTQ representation. *Transformative Works and Cultures*. 28, [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516>

Ruch, A. (2025). Forced: Perceptions of “Woke” Politics in Video Games. *International Journal of Communication*. 19, pp.2008-2027.

Saltz, D. Z. (1997) “The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55(2), 199, pp.117-27.

Sandvoss, C., Gray, J. & Harrington, C.L. (2017). Introduction: Why Still Study Fans?. In: Sandvoss, C. & Harrington, C.L. (Eds). *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. 2nd ed. New York: NYU Press. pp.1-26.

Sataloff, R. (2017). *Professional Voice: The Science and Art of Clinical Care*. 4th ed. San Diego: Plural Publishing.

Seraphine, F. (2018) Ethics at Play in Undertale: Rhetoric, Identity and Deconstruction. *Proceedings of the 2018 DiGRA International Conference: The Game is the Message*, pp. 1-6. University of Torino.

Smith, J. (2020). “Wear People’s Faces”: Semiotic Awareness in Fan Adaptations of the Music from The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mas. *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*. 1(4), pp.45-75. [Online]. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2020.1.4.45>

Smith, J. (2020). *Worldbuilding Voices in the Soundscapes of Role-Playing Video Games*. Doctoral Thesis. University of Huddersfield

Spencer, C. (2017). The Undertale Drama. *Kotaku*, [Online]. Available at:
<https://kotaku.com/the-undertale-drama-1798159975>

Stang, S. (2019). “This Action Will Have Consequences”: Interactivity and Player Agency. *Game Studies*. 19(1). [Online]. Available at:
<https://gamestudies.org/1901/articles/stang>

starryserenade. (2022). *Undertale Cinematic Dub Ep 14: Hopes & Dreams (Finale)*. [Online]. Tumblr. Available at:
<https://www.tumblr.com/starryserenade/692954267125989376/undertale-cinematic-dub-ep-14-hopes-dreams>

Stingel-Voigt, Y. (2020). Functions and Meanings of Vocal Sound in Video Games. *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*. 1(2), pp.25-43. [Online]. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2020.1.2.25>

Summers, Tim. (2016). *Understanding Video Game Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Suziedelyte, A. (2021). Is it only a game? Video games and violence. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*. 188, pp.105-125. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.05.014>

Švelch, J., & Švelch, J. (2020). Recasting Life Is Strange: Video Game Voice Acting during the 2016-2017 SAG-AFTRA Strike. *Television & New Media*, 23(1), 44-60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420962784>

Sweeney, M. (2015). Aesthetics and social interactions in MMOs: The gamification of music in *Lord of the Rings Online* and *Star Wars: Galaxies*. *The Soundtrack*. 8(1 & 2), p.25-40. [Online]. Available at: 10.1386/st.8.1-2.25_1

Tatlow, S. (2020). Everyone in Space Wants to Hear You Scream. *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*. 1(3), pp.15-34. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2020.1.3.15>

Taylor, T.L. (2018). *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

This community is terrible about spoilers.. (2023). [Online]. Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/1b4ovly/this_community_is_terrible_about_spoilers/

Thornton, S. (1995). *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Thompson, R. (2017) *Interactivity in Game Audio: Instances in which Listening Improves a Player's Gameplay*. Doctoral Thesis. University of Minnesota.

Thompson, R. (2021). Game Music Beyond the Games. In: Fritsch, M. & Summers, T. (Eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.409-423.

Tulloch, J. & Jenkins, H. (1995) *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*. London: Routledge.

Twitch Watch Time Statistics. (2025). [Online]. TwitchTracker. Available at:
<https://twitchtracker.com/statistics/watch-time>

Undertale. (2015). PC [Game]. USA: Toby Fox.

van Elferen, I. (2011). ¡Un Forastero! Issues of Virtuality and Diegesis in Videogame Music. *Music and the Moving Image*. 4(2), pp.30-39.

van Elferen, I. (2016). Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model. In: Kamp, M., Summers, T. & Sweeney, M. (Eds). *Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music*. Sheffield: Equinox. pp.32-52.

Vinney, C. & Dill-Shackleford, K. (2016). Fan Fiction as a Vehicle for Meaning Making: Eudaimonic Appreciation, Hedonic Enjoyment, and Other Perspectives on Fan Engagement With Television. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*. 7. DOI: 10.1037/ppm0000106.

Voegelin, S. (2023). *Uncurating Sound: Knowledge with Voice and Hands*. London: Bloomsbury.

Watching Gameplay vs Playing It. (2025). [Online]. Reddit. Available at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/1hpms57/watching_gameplay_vs_playing_it

Wells, G., Romhanyi, A., Reitman, J. G., Gardner, R., Squire, K., & Steinkuehler, C. (2023). Right-Wing Extremism in Mainstream Games: A Review of the Literature. *Games and Culture*, 19(4), pp.469-492. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231167214>

Werber, N. & Stein, D. (2023). Paratextual Negotiations: Fan Forums as Digital Epitexts of Popular Superhero Comic Books and Science Fiction Pulp Novel. *Arts*. 12(77), pp.1-32. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12020077>

What is the appeal of watching streaming of people playing games?. (2012) [Online]. Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/1cf1z2/what_is_the_appeal_of_watching_streaming_of/

Why did all the voice actors unanimously decide Papyrus sounds like Skeletor? (2018). [Online]. Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/9okwtu/why_did_all_the_voice_actors_unanimously_decide/

Would be Poggers. (2021). [Online]. Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/s5tvd4/would_be_poggers/

Youngblood, J. (2022). A Labor of (Queer) Love: Maintaining “Cozy Wholesomeness” on Twitch During COVID-19 and Beyond. *Television & New Media*, 23(5), pp. 531-541. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221080966>

Zheng, S.S. (2025). 'I'm Passive yet devoted': reconstructing fan identity and hierarchy in the transcultural landscape. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*. 12(497), pp.1-11. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04798-9>