

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

Since its release in 2015, *Undertale* has emerged as one of the most influential independent video games in contemporary digital culture. Created almost entirely by a single developer, Toby Fox, the game gained widespread international popularity through word-of-mouth, online communities, and critical acclaim rather than large-scale marketing. Its success is not merely commercial but cultural, as *Undertale* became a reference point for discussions about morality, player agency, and narrative experimentation in video games. This prominence makes *Undertale* a fundamental object of study for examining how meaning is produced in interactive narratives, particularly when viewed through Barthes' concept of the Death of the Author, which rejects authorial dominance in favor of reader, or player, interpretation (Barthes, 1967; Fox, 2015).

What makes *Undertale* particularly interesting is the uniqueness of its narrative structure and ethical design. Unlike conventional role-playing games that reward combat and progression through violence, *Undertale* allows, and meaningfully validates, non-violent play. The story adapts to the player's moral choices, producing radically different narrative outcomes. This structural openness directly aligns with Barthes' assertion that a text should not impose a single, closed meaning, but instead function as a space where interpretation is actively constructed by its audience (Barthes, 1967). In *Undertale*, the author does not dictate what the story ultimately signifies, rather, the player's actions determine the narrative's ethical and emotional meaning.

The cultural impact of *Undertale* is further evidenced by its influence on later narrative-driven games that emphasize psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and player accountability. Games such as *OMORI*

and *OneShot* adopt comparable narrative strategies, including emotionally confronting storylines, branching player-dependent outcomes, and an emphasis on moral and psychological consequence rather than mechanical mastery. Scholars of contemporary role-playing games note that *Undertale* has become a key reference point for indie developers seeking to decentralize authorial control and foreground player interpretation (Hutchinson, 2024). This lineage reinforces *Undertale's* relevance to Barthes' Death of the Author concept, as its design philosophy demonstrates how relinquishing authorial authority can inspire new forms of narrative expression within interactive media (Barthes, 1967; Fox, 2015).

Undertale's ethical design has itself become a subject of dedicated academic attention. Khoo's (2018) DiGRA-published study of the game's procedural rhetoric finds that players develop strong emotional attachments to its characters and frequently struggle to assign culpability for the consequences of their choices, suggesting that the game's mechanics, not only its story, actively shape moral reasoning. Similarly, Hannula's (2021) thesis on moral decision-making in *Undertale* argues that the game's humanized non-player characters make antisocial behavior emotionally costly for the player, encouraging ethical engagement through dialogue and gameplay affordances rather than explicit instruction. These studies confirm that *Undertale's* mechanical systems are inseparable from its ethical content, a premise this study extends by examining how those same systems also displace authorial intention in favor of player-constructed meaning.

Narrative-driven digital games rely on dialogue not merely as a vehicle for information, but as a structural mechanism that produces meaning through implication, omission, and player interpretation. Roland Barthes argues that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1967), emphasizing that meaning is produced through interpretation rather than authorial intention. In interactive narratives such as *Undertale* (2015), this concept becomes materially

enacted, as dialogue frequently operates under emotional and moral pressure, particularly during moments of crisis and irreversible decision-making. Rather than presenting a fixed meaning authored by its creator, *Undertale* requires players to interpret what is left unsaid, positioning them as the primary producers of narrative significance. This interpretive demand directly correlates with Barthes' Death of the Author concept, as the game's meaning is not finalized by Toby Fox as the author, but emerges through the player's choices, actions, and ethical stance within the narrative system (Barthes, 1967; Fox, 2015).

Within this framework, the coherence of a game world depends on consistent narrative logic, including character credibility, causal continuity, and the relevance of dialogue to player action. *Undertale* deliberately destabilizes these expectations by allowing characters to react differently based on the player's prior choices, memory, and moral alignment. Scholars of game narrative argue that such instability encourages players to actively construct meaning rather than passively receive it (Juul, 2021; Murray, 2023). This disruption reinforces the erosion of authorial authority, as *Undertale* refuses to deliver a single, stable narrative truth. Instead, the game embodies the Death of the Author by allowing its narrative meaning to fragment according to player experience, forcing players to assume responsibility for interpretation (Barthes, 1967; Fox, 2015).

Existing scholarship on player agency more broadly has approached this instability primarily through design and sociological frameworks rather than literary theory. Muriel and Crawford (2018) examine player agency through actor-network theory, arguing that the capacity for player control carries political and sociological dimensions that remain underexplored in game studies. Mason et al. (2021), in an interview-based study of player agency in narrative-focused games, similarly observe that scholarship on agency remains largely theoretical and rarely investigates how players themselves account for the consequences of their choices. These studies

confirm that the theoretical relationship between player agency and narrative meaning remains an open and active question, one that this study addresses specifically through the lens of post-structuralist literary theory rather than design theory or sociology.

The transfer of narrative authority becomes most visible during moments of narrative finality, which in *Undertale* are articulated through its three fundamental ending routes: Neutral, True Pacifist, and Genocide. Each ending is not a simple variation of closure but a distinct narrative outcome that reflects the player's cumulative choices throughout the game. The Neutral ending functions as an incomplete or unresolved conclusion, signaling that the narrative meaning remains open and contingent on further action. In contrast, the True Pacifist and Genocide endings represent fully realized moral extremes, produced entirely through player behavior rather than authorial instruction. Game narrative scholars argue that such branching endings foreground player responsibility and ethical consequence as central meaning-making devices (Fernández-Vara, 2019; Ryan, 2021). By refusing to privilege a single "true" ending, *Undertale* resists fixed authorial closure and instead allows meaning to emerge through player action. This structure aligns closely with Barthes' concept of the Death of the Author, as the author's intended message is subordinated to meanings constructed through player agency and irreversible consequence (Barthes, 1967; Juul, 2021).

Undertale's True Pacifist and Genocide routes exemplify how permanent narrative consequences operationalize the Death of the Author within interactive media. Once a player commits to a specific route, the game remembers and reacts, even across resets, transforming the narrative into what Aarseth (1997) and Murray (2023) describe as a cybertext with memory. Characters such as Sans, Flowey, and Chara communicate through indirect and emotionally charged dialogue that withholds explicit explanation, compelling players to confront the implications of their actions

without authorial guidance. Veale's (2021) comparative study of *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods* supports this observation, arguing that both games implicate the player directly in the affective and ethical weight of their choices rather than displacing that weight onto a fictional protagonist. This strategy intensifies immersion by placing interpretive and moral responsibility entirely on the player, effectively displacing the author's authority in favor of lived experience (Tavinor, 2021; Fox, 2015).

Despite this growing body of scholarship on player agency, morality, and procedural rhetoric in *Undertale* and in interactive narrative more broadly, limited research has explicitly linked these mechanisms to the specific post-structuralist concept of the Death of the Author. Existing studies emphasize player immersion, ethical choice, and emotional consequence in general terms (Juul, 2021; Murray, 2023; Khoo, 2018; Hannula, 2021), but stop short of situating these mechanisms within Barthes' literary framework or examining the theoretical bridge that Aarseth's (1997) cybertextual theory provides between literary post-structuralism and interactive mechanical design. *Undertale* presents a unique case in which post-structuralist ideas are not merely interpretive tools but are embedded directly into gameplay systems and narrative memory. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining how *Undertale*'s endings consistently apply the Death of the Author concept to intensify player immersion, moral accountability, and interpretive responsibility (Barthes, 1967; Fox, 2015).

1.2. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Barthes' concept of the Death of the Author represented in the narrative structure and endings of *Undertale*?
2. How do *Undertale*'s permanent narrative consequences construct meaning through player action rather than authorial intention?

1.3. Research Objectives

Based on the research questions above, this study aims to:

1. To analyze how Barthes' concept of the Death of the Author is manifested in the narrative structure and endings of *Undertale*..
2. To examine how dialogue, narrative memory, and permanent consequences in *Undertale* construct meaning through player action rather than authorial intention.

1.4. Research Significance

Theoretically, this research contributes to literary studies by extending Roland Barthes' post-structuralist concept of the Death of the Author beyond its original domain of static, printed literature into the field of interactive digital media. Barthes' essay was written in 1967, decades before the existence of role-playing video games whose narrative outcomes are determined by mechanical player input rather than passive reading. By treating the Death of the Author not as a rigid historical theory but as a conceptual framework capable of evolving alongside its object of study, this research clarifies how the concept applies to a medium in which the reader possesses genuine mechanical agency over the text, an agency no novel, poem, or film can offer its audience. In doing so, the research also draws on Espen Aarseth's (1997) theory of ergodic literature and the cybertext as a

necessary bridge between Barthes' literary philosophy and the mechanical realities of interactive narrative, demonstrating that post-structuralist theory and game studies are not separate disciplines but complementary frameworks capable of illuminating each other.

Methodologically, this research offers a model for analyzing video games as literary texts through close reading of their narrative structure, dialogue, and system memory, without relying on audience-based data such as player surveys, interviews, or reception studies. This approach treats the game itself, its mechanics, its characters, its branching routes, and its permanent save-file consequences, as the primary object of literary analysis, in the same way a literary critic would treat the text of a novel. This is methodologically significant for game studies as a discipline, where the question of how to analyze a game as a text in its own right, rather than as a social phenomenon to be measured through player behavior, remains an open and frequently contested methodological problem. By demonstrating that a video game's mechanical systems can be read with the same interpretive rigor as a literary text's narrative devices, this research offers a replicable model for future close-reading studies of other narrative-driven games.

Practically, this research provides insight into how permanent narrative consequences, encoded through systems such as save-file memory, statistical accumulation, and route-dependent characterization, can be used by game designers and narrative practitioners to construct meaning through player action rather than authorial exposition. The findings of this study, particularly regarding the mechanisms through which *Undertale* makes player choices feel permanent and morally weighted, offer concrete design principles of value to developers, narrative designers, and writers working in interactive media who wish to create games in which player agency produces genuine emotional and ethical consequence rather than the illusion of choice without weight.

Academically, this research is significant for the field of English literature and game studies as it bridges two areas of study, Western literary theory and contemporary interactive media, that are not often examined together within the context of Indonesian higher education, where the study of video games as legitimate literary objects remains uncommon. By situating *Undertale* within the established literary framework of Roland Barthes and the formal theoretical apparatus of Espen Aarseth, this research aims to demonstrate that interactive digital narratives are valid and valuable objects of literary and academic inquiry, deserving of the same critical attention traditionally reserved for novels, poetry, and film. It is hoped that this study will encourage further academic engagement with video games as texts within English Literature Departments, expanding the scope of what is considered literature worthy of formal academic study.

