Narrativization Processes of Video Game Tutorials
- From *EarthBound* to *Undertale* -

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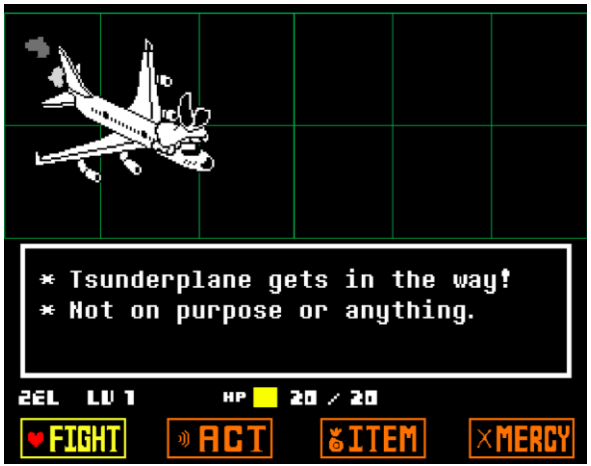
1. Introduction: The Sub-Genre of “Mothertale” Games

EarthBound
(Shigesato Itoi , 1994)

//

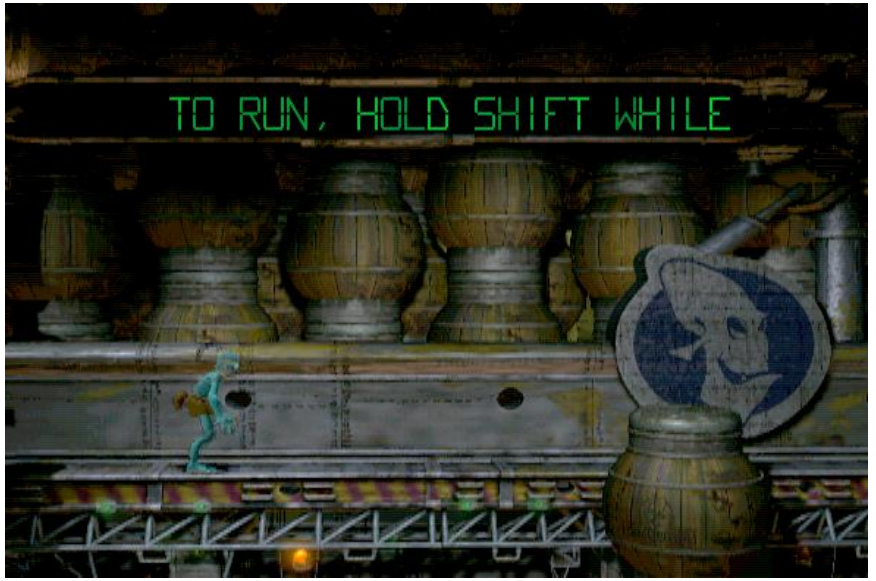
Undertale
(Toby Fox, 2015)

1. Introduction: The Sub-Genre of “Mothertale” Games



2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials

• From a **narratological** point of view, video game **tutorials** are **ontologically ambiguous**: they create a **metadiscourse** that no longer addresses only the fictional characters, but also the player (Therrien and Julien, 2015)



• They produce many ***metalepses*** (Genette, 2004) and ***mises en abyme***

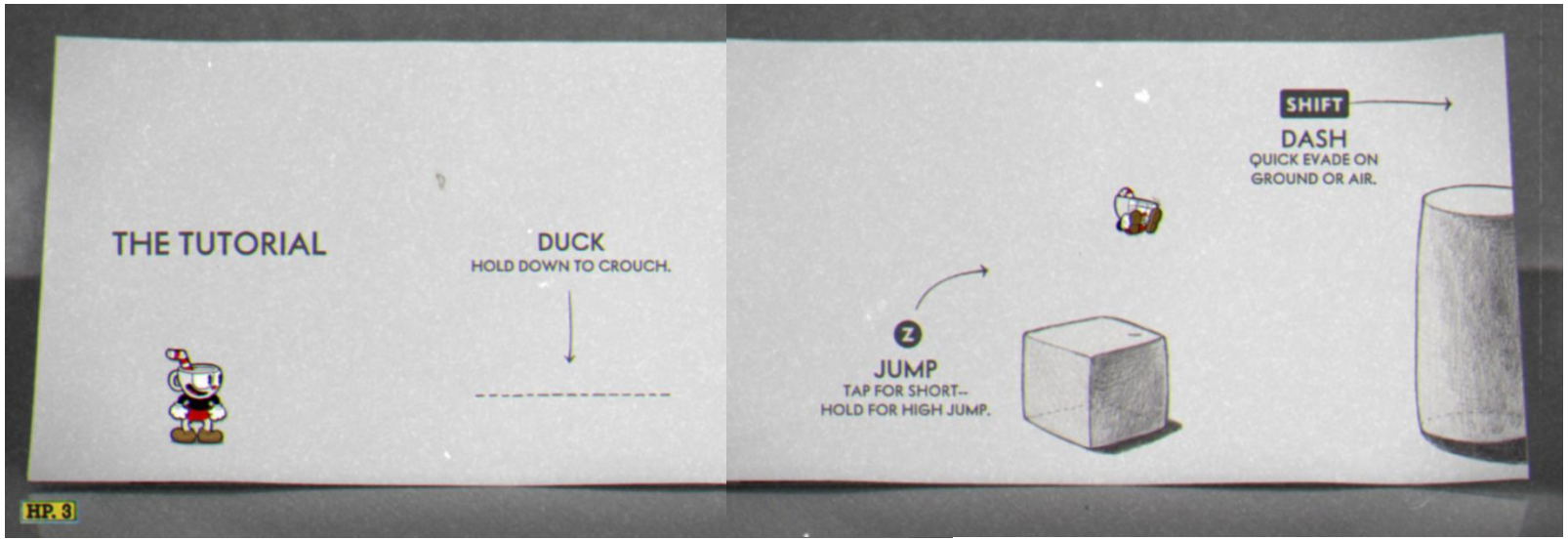
2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials

- **Unnatural narratives** "conspicuously **violate** […] **conventions** of standard narrative forms" (**Richardson**, 2011: 34)

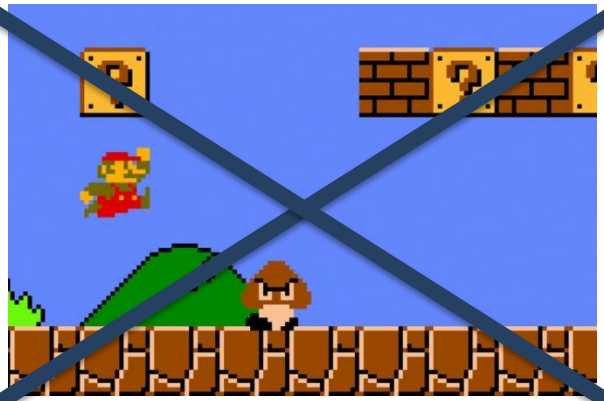
- "Videogames are **unnatural narratives** ***par excellence***" (**Ensslin**, 2015: 43)

2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials

- In the field of video games, metalepses are **not transgressions**, but **conventions** (Allain, 2018)
- Tutorial metalepses are moments when **the game signals how it is articulating fiction and gameplay**



2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials



- Inclusive **definition of the tutorial**:

= Metalanguage intended to transmit **utilitarian information** about the **commands** (“press X for X”), the **rules** (“the sword can break the blocks”), the **behaviors** expected by the player (“you can do X”) and the **main goals** of the game (“you have to save the princess”)

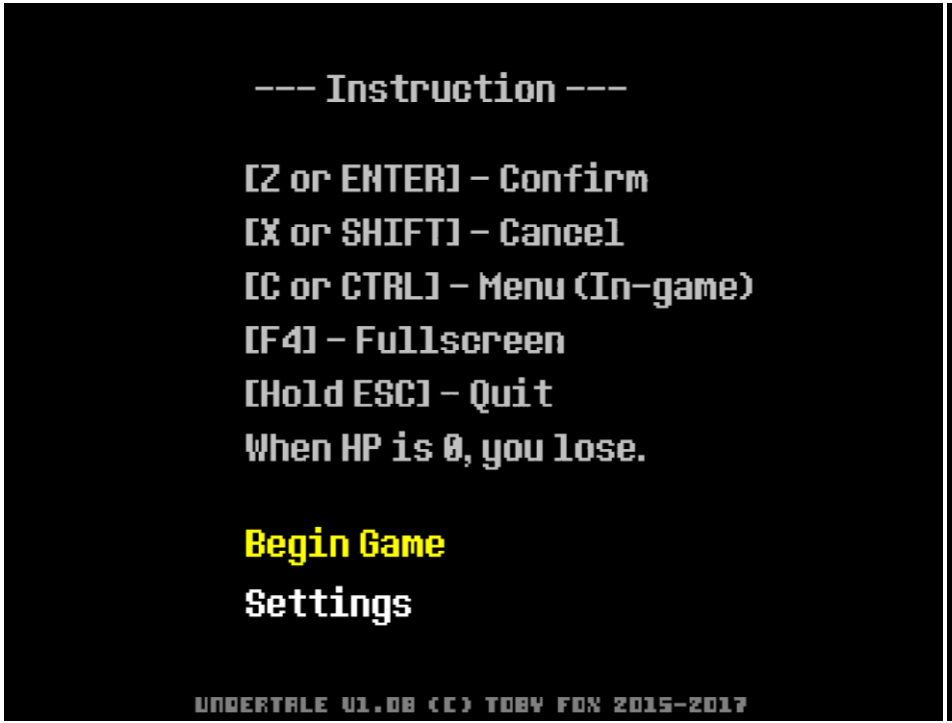
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

⇒How do tutorials articulate the empirical content and the game's fictional universe?

- **Non-fictionalization of the tutorial**
- **Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment**
- **Avatarization of the tutorial**
  - Tutorial metaphors
  - Fictionalized metalepsis
  - Raw metalepsis

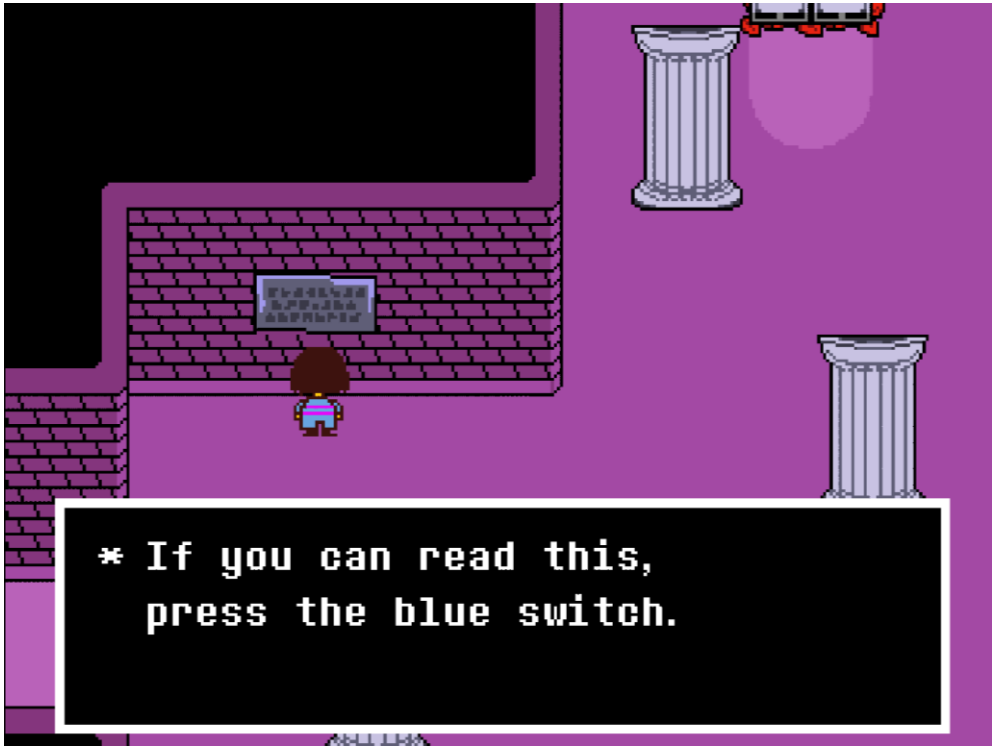
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.1. Non-fictionalization of the tutorial



3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.2. Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment



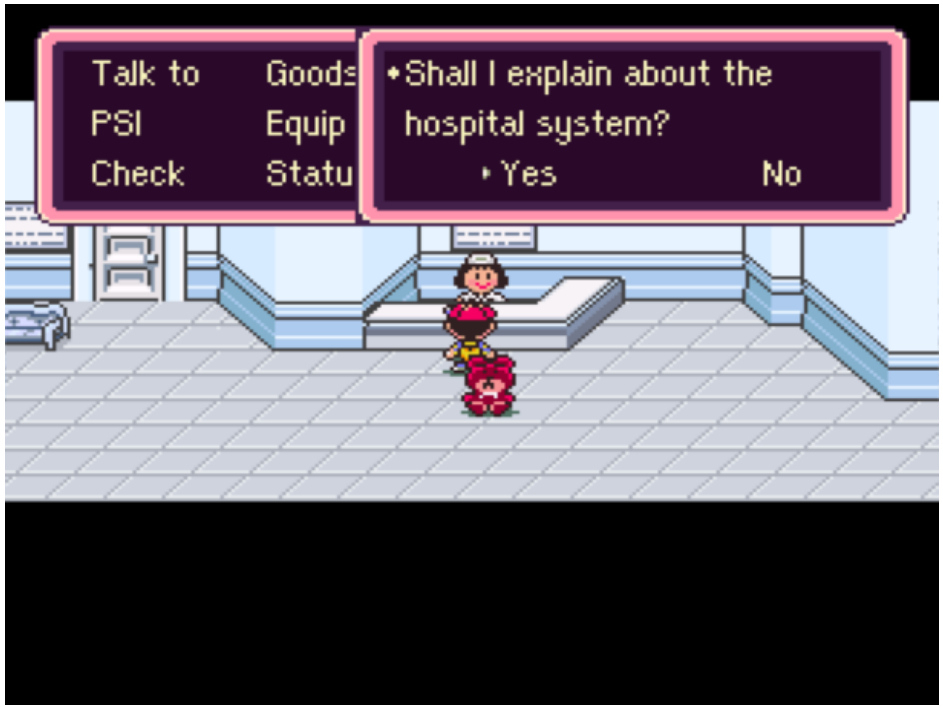
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.2. Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment

⇒“Semi-fictionalization”

3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.3. Avatarization of the tutorial



⇒ Personification of the explanation

4. The Avatarization

- Non-fictionalization of the tutorial
- Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment
- **Avatarization of the tutorial**

- does the character **dissimulate** the metalepsis? (“**tutorial metaphors**”)
- does he **highlight** it? (“**fictionalized metalepsis**”)
- does it **retain** the metaleptic rupture without signaling it? (“**raw metalepsis**”)

4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

= When characters **conceal** **the metaleptic nature of the information** they reveal by expressing it in **terms that belong to the fictional world**

⇒ Most NPCs are thus the **incarnation of some information**, which they explain in **metaphorical terms**

Ex. in *EarthBound*

Talk to
Goods
Equip
Check
Statu
•I almost told you about my...
•Uh, by the way Ness, did you check my billboard?

Talk to
Goods
Equip
Check
Statu
•I wrote the message myself.
•That's my real job, you know... I'm a billboard guy.

Talk to
Goods
Equip
Check
Statu
know... I'm a billboard guy.
•Why don't you check out my work?

Talk to
Goods
Equip
Check
Statu
•(Treasure Hunter! This is Lier X. Agerate's house!)

4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

The **functionalist nature** of these characters is often **emphasized ironically**

4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

Ex. in *Undertale*

4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

- **Tutorial NPCs // avatars:**

⇒ The avatar = a **“metalepsis operator”** (Genette, 2004: 110): it introduces an **empirical element in the game diegesis** (Barnabé and Delbouille, 2018)

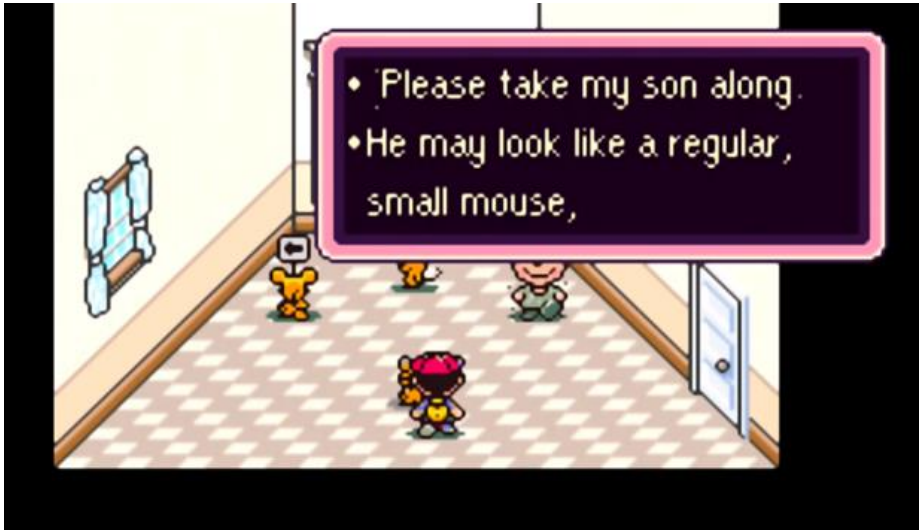
⇒ // Tutorial NPCs represent **empirical content** (the rules, the controls…) **through a fictional prosthesis** (the character); they operate as so many **avatars of the system**

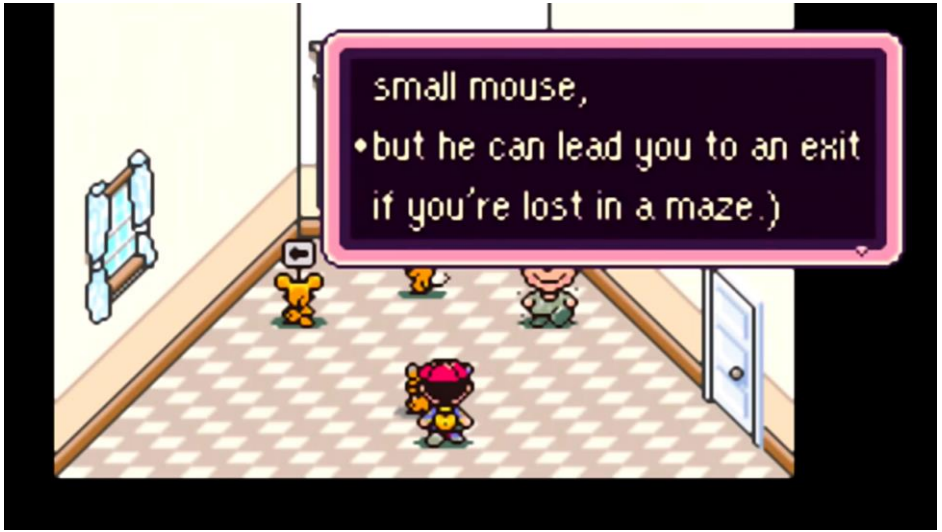
4. The Avatarization

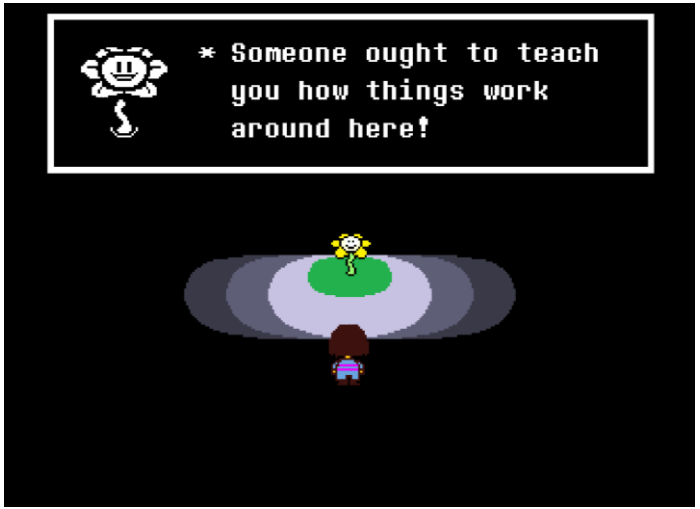
4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

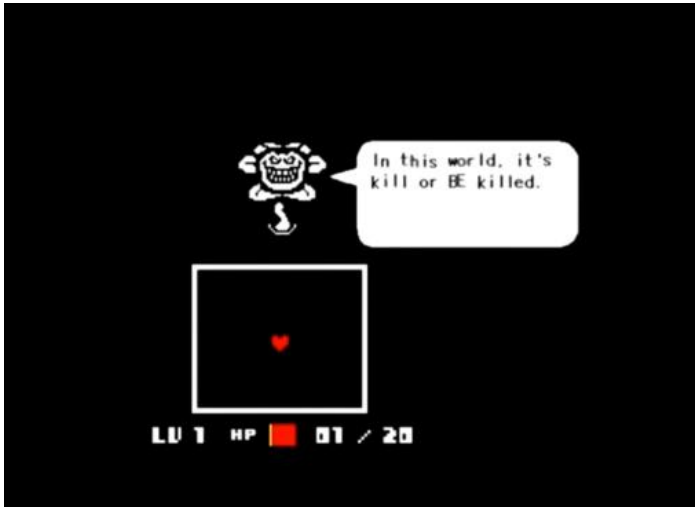
- In ***Earthbound***, the avatarization process can go so far as to make **characters incarnate gameplay mechanisms**

Ex.: the **“exit mouse”**

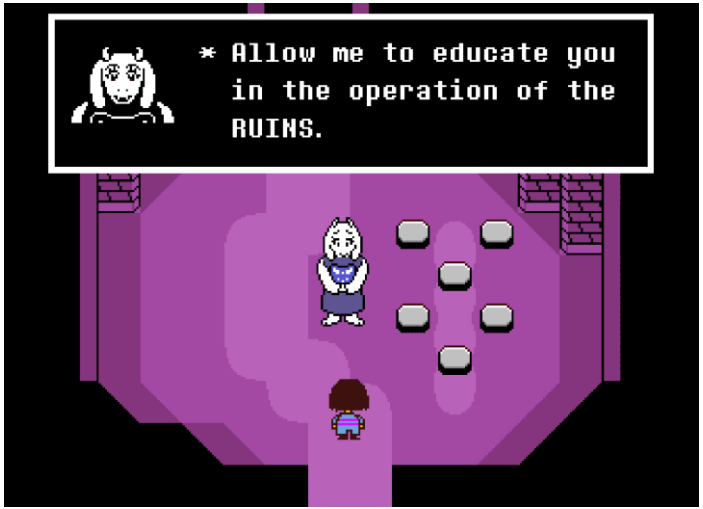


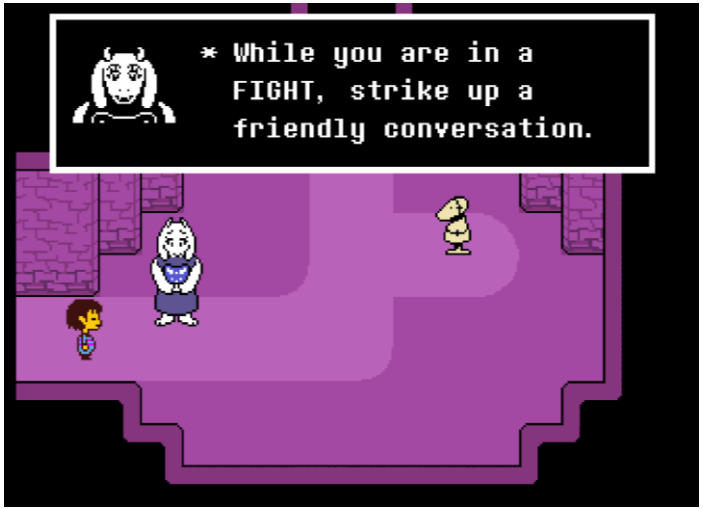






- In ***Undertale***, the binarity of the game is represented through **two antagonistic tutorial characters**

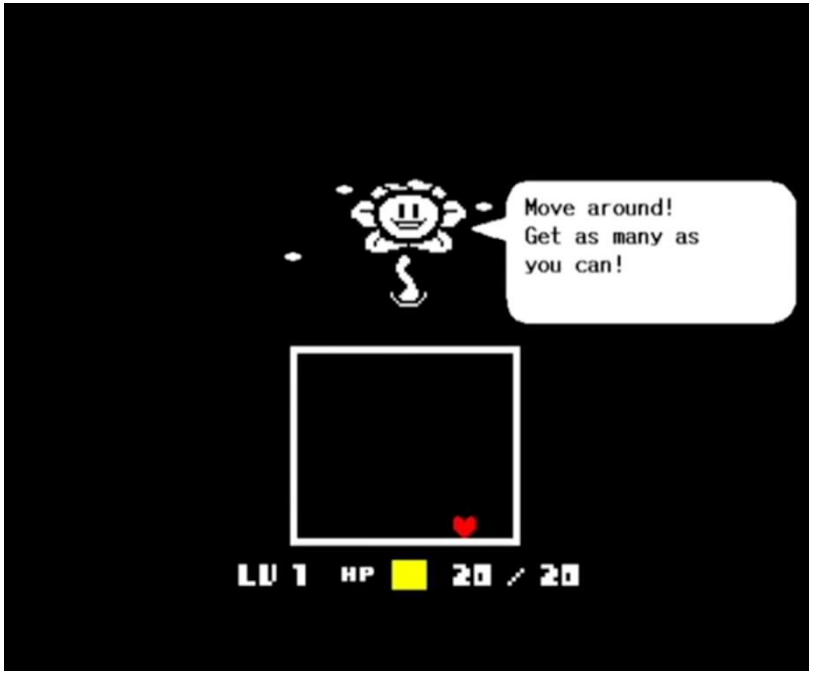


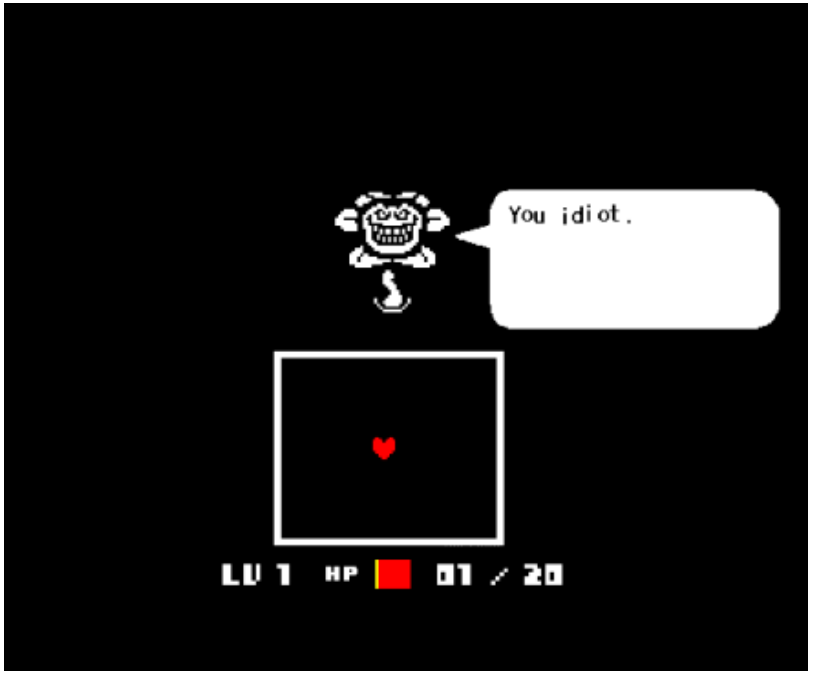


4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

Flowey = tutorial metaphors + **antiphrasis**





4. The Avatarization

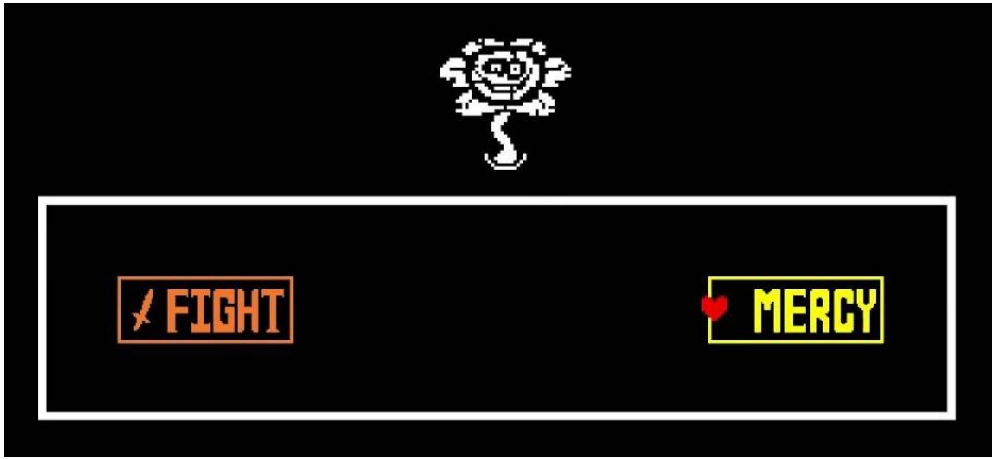
4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

Toriel = **simulacrum** of tutorial

4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

⇒ While ***Earthbound's*** characters remain rather **prescriptive**, ***Undertale's*** tutorial phase does not stop **reverting its own message**, which invites the player to adopt a **reflexive attitude**, a **critical distance** (Seraphine, 2018)



4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

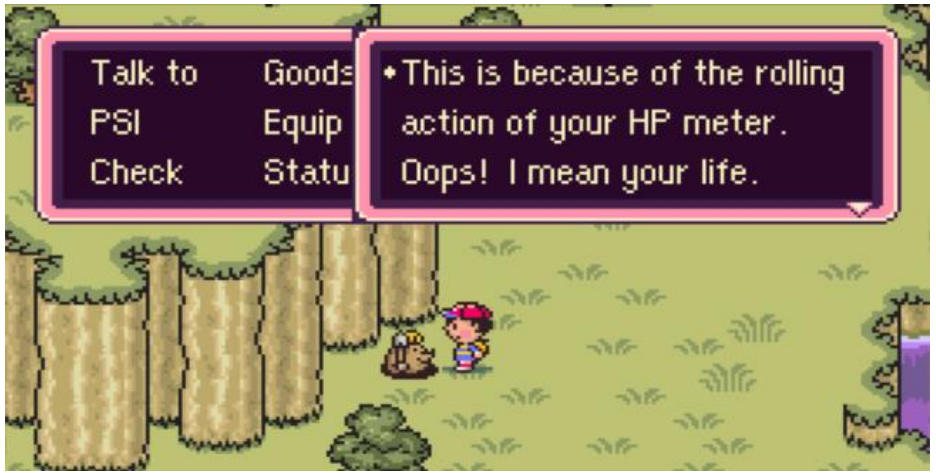
= When characters **emphasize the existence of a metalepsis** and show that they are **aware** of the narrative transgression they operate

Ex. in *EarthBound*

Talk to
PSI
Check
Goods
Equip
Statu
•When they approach you this way, your TV screen, no... no...

Talk to
PSI
Check
Goods
Equip
Statu
•I mean the world in front of you will show a red swirl for a second.

Talk to
PSI
Check
Goods
Equip
Statu
opening attack.
•In that case, your TV... Oops again!


Talk to
PSI
Check
Goods
Equip
Statu
•This is because of the rolling action of your HP meter. Oops! I mean your life.

4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

- These figures are **part of the diegesis** ***as metalepses***
- The tutorial NPCs **distance themselves** from their universe and from its rules by **commenting on them ironically +** they seem to **make "as if" they were not aware** that their world is a game fiction

4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

- Their attitude // **playful attitude**:

Play = a **"metaphorical process"** (Henriot, 1989: 300) through which the player **acts "as if"** what he was doing was different (Schaeffer, 1999: 234)

⇒ *EarthBound*'s tutorial = also a **model of the attitude that is expected of the player**

4. The Avatarization

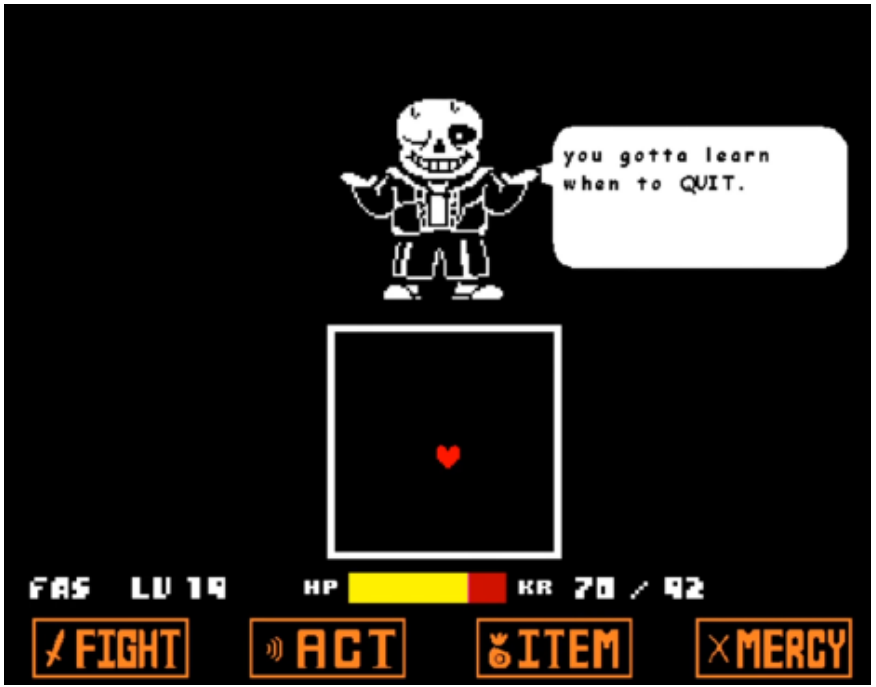
4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

Ex. in *Undertale*

4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

- In *Undertale*, fictionalized metalepses are mostly used ***outside*** **the tutorial**

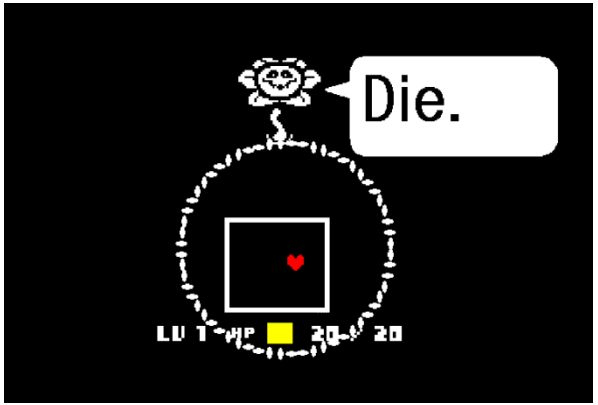


4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

⇒ In *EarthBound*, the player is built as an **accomplice** (the characters and the player are playing *with* the game)

⇒ In *Undertale*, the player and the system are built as **antagonists** (the tutorial drives the player into mistrust and uncertainty)



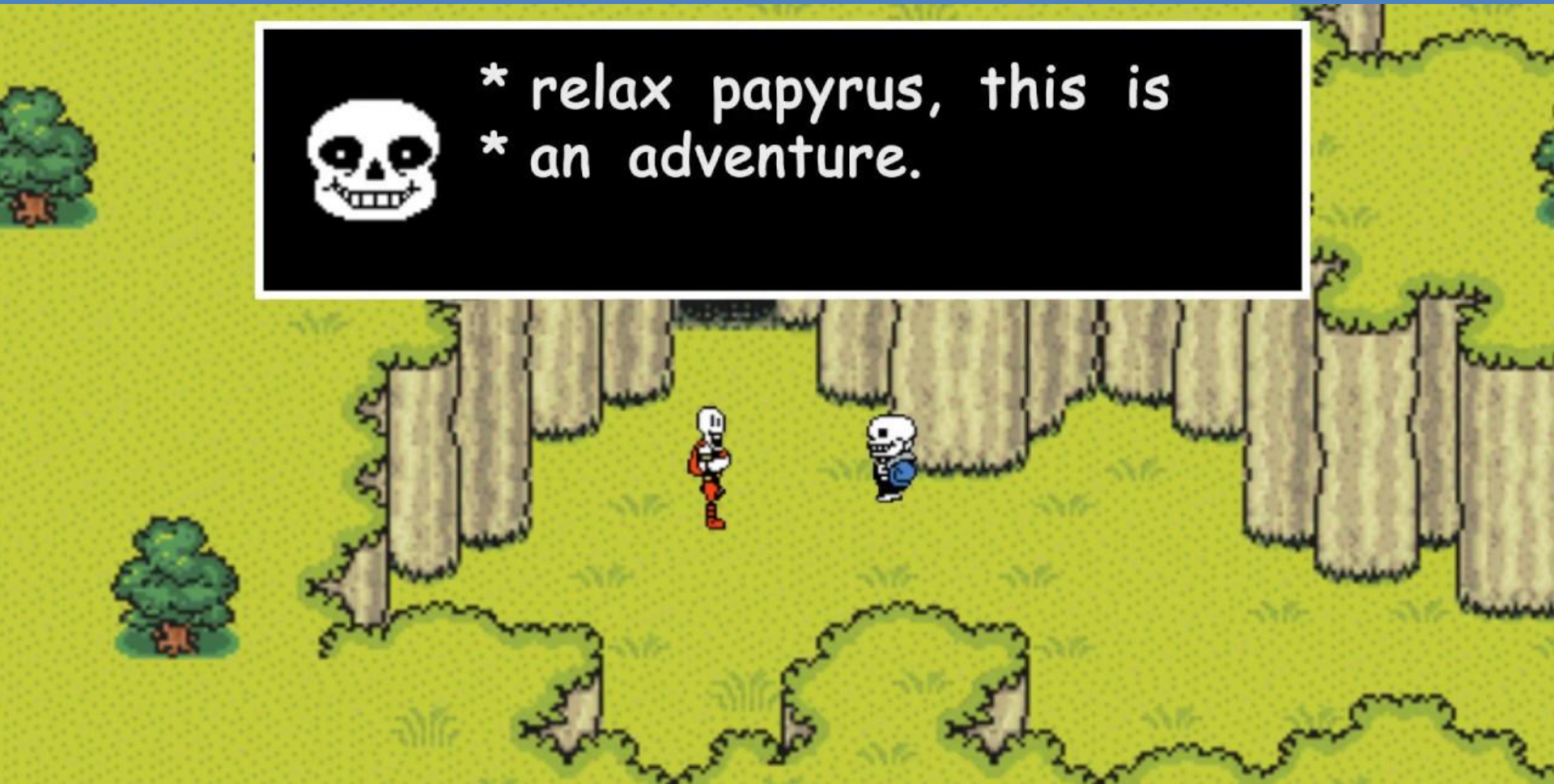
4. The Avatarization

4.3. Raw Metalepsis

= When metalepses are **neither fictionalized nor emphasized**

Ex. in *Undertale*

5. Conclusion



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