In September 2015, an independent “indie” game *Undertale* was released after several years of development. The creator, Toby Fox, funded the game through a Kickstarter campaign in 2013 and completed the game almost entirely on his own, acting as the sole writer, composer, and game developer, only employing help for the game’s art design. Marketed as “A traditional role-playing game where no one has to get hurt,” (Fox, 2013) *Undertale* made over 1000% of its intended $5000 funding goal on Kickstarter, with only a demo and concept art posted at the time. In *Undertale*, you play as a human child navigating through an underground society of monsters, ghosts, and skeletons. Through your journey, you can befriend the enemies instead of fighting them, and make friends with a variety of characters, many of whom are either overtly LGBTQ or strongly implied to be. *Undertale* emphasizes your choices as a player, but it is only through playing peacefully that you have access to the game’s “True Ending.” As an independently created game, without the need for advertisers and an already eager audience before the game was finished, Fox was able to exercise complete creative freedom over the final product, and used this freedom to be LGBTQ inclusive. In this paper, I will discuss the queer representation in *Undertale* and compare it to queer representation in conglomerate produced mass media, and highlight how *Undertale* ultimately presents a message of hope, futurity, and determination. I will also look at how *Undertale*’s humour subverts anxious displacement, and how it normalizes the queer relationships without normalizing the characters, while still using a very absurdist style
of humour. Undertale was a smash hit upon release, and is an acclaimed game that has won multiple game of the year awards, sold over one million copies, and has been almost universally praised. This mass popularity and acclaim demonstrates how queer representation can be varied, complex, and inclusive, without alienating its audience and without being marketed toward adults only or featuring explicit content.

When comparing Undertale to other queer-representative media, it is important to note the context within which the story takes place. As the cast of characters is comprised primarily of monsters, and there are only two human characters, its diversity in terms of race and economic status cannot be measured. However, the game is notable for its wide range and variety of queer characters. In traditionally funded and marketed media, it is the audience’s ability to pay that makes them a valuable targeted demographic (Peters, 2011). Due to a media’s need for marketability, they tend to focus on characters that reflect the valued demographic, which is generally affluent white, cisgender people, especially men (Peters, 2011). Similarly, videogames also tend to lack LGBT diversity, as the valuable audience is often seen as predominantly male, cisgender and heterosexual, and developers worry that playing as a queer character may turn off this audience (Shaw, 2009). Video games in particular are an interesting medium to examine LGBT representation in. In many games, immersion plays an active role, and the player gets to make a number of choices as they play, the character they play as acting as an avatar for the world they inhabit (Krobová, Moravec, & Švelch, 2015). In some, the developers may give the player the option to romance characters of the same gender. However, even in these games, there is a tendency to focus on the heterosexual young male demographic, and design these relationships with the sexualization of women and the male gaze in mind (Krobová, Moravec, & Švelch, 2015). Despite the wide range of people who do play games, conglomerate companies
are largely made up of heterosexual men, and tend to see their audience as the same, which leads to limited options even in games where the player gets choices to represent themselves (Krobová, Moravec, & Švelch, 2015). However, when a game uses a crowdfunding campaign such as Kickstarter, the creators don’t have to worry about making sure to attract an audience: they already have, based on the concept alone of the game. This method of independent producing also allows niche markets and audiences, such as the LGBT community, to be targeted (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Queer creators can reach out to queer audiences, and these independent games can attract an audience based specifically on their content, rather than the content being formed by what a mainstream audience would want. While *Undertale* was not specifically a queer-targeted game, the amount of people interested in the gameplay, concept, character designs, and style of humour allowed the game to be funded well past its goal, and it was able to include this wide range of diverse, queer characters. There was no need for the game to appeal to a valued audience the way a conglomerate created and traditionally funded video game or media would need to in order to make money (Peters, 2011). The crowdfunding model of independent game developments allows for a circumvention of this need to appeal to a mainstream demographic, and allows not only for niche audiences to be represented, but also for more freedom on the part of the creators. This, in turn, allows for more diverse queer representation. *Undertale* features a variety of LGBTQ characters in lead roles, including a nonbinary hero, a main w/w couple featuring a bisexual woman, a transgender man, and a number of characters that use they/them pronouns. It is an example of a indie game that was extremely successful in its crowdfunding campaign, with a creator who focused on LGBT characters, and its success shows that perhaps games and other media does not need to focus only on representing its valued audience to appeal to a mass amount of people. In addition,
Undertale is a game for people of all ages, and it does not rely on queer sexuality or promiscuity to attract people who are not queer. It is an example of a game that is able to explore complex queer characters and relationships for both major and minor characters, without making the content explicitly for adult audiences in order to attract viewers; nor making the characters completely chaste and sexless, as was often seen in television, especially prior to the year 2000 (Peters, 2011) and is still often seen in video games today (Shaw, 2009). I will discuss the content of Undertale and its representation of queer people more in detail in the following sections of the paper.

For young queer audiences, the message of hope can be a powerful one as they face discrimination and hate in their day to day lives. Goltz describes how the It Gets Better Campaign, designed to instill hope in young queer audiences, was able to change and grow to represent a wider diversity of people over time, as more people became involved in the project (Goltz, 2013). Similarly, you can make the comparison to indie game development in this regard: as more and more indie games are able to be funded, by a variety of creators who are more diverse than what is seen in a typical development company, there will able to be more diverse representation. In Undertale, all of the ghost characters are nonbinary, and use they/them pronouns. This is seen in reference to one ghost character, Napstablook: “Napstablook is wishing they weren’t here” (Fox, 2015), and when speaking to another ghost character: “I am a ghost that lives inside a DUMMY. My cousin used to live inside a DUMMY too...they got annoyed and flew away like any self respecting spectre” (Fox, 2015). One character, a ghost that gains a body named Mettaton, is heavily coded to be transgender. His house, where he lived before he got his body, is traditionally feminine looking. Everything in the house is pink. His diary, found there, reads, “Blooky asked me if I was going to try to come corporeal too. They sounded
so...resigned...I’d never find the kind of body I’m looking for, anyway” (Fox, 2015). In a later entry, when he finds someone that can build him a male robot body, he calls it, “A form beyond my wildest fantasies. In a form like that, I could finally feel like... ‘myself’” (2015). For his character, a great deal of importance is placed on his physical body and masculine form, and he speaks excitedly about showing off his new body, stating, “I’ve been aching off to show this off for a long time...I’ll make your last living moments ABSOLUTELY BEAUTIFUL!” (Fox, 2015). It is also interesting to note his character is very vain, flamboyant, and camp, in a way that could be attributed to a stereotypically gay man.

The main character of Undertale is also nonbinary, and one of the only two human characters in the game. At first, the audience is made to believe that the main character is simply their avatar through the world, as the character is not referred to using any pronouns at all. However, in the True Ending it becomes clear that the character you have been playing as is their own person, subverting the video game trope that the main character is simply a stand in for the player. One character remarks, “What IS your name? ... ’Frisk’?...” (Fox, 2015), and after which point Frisk is referred to by their name, and by they/them pronouns, as in the following example: “Let Frisk live their life” (Fox, 2015). This representation is different from what would be seen in a game produced by a gaming company, as queer media produced for a mass audience tends to focus on upper class, cisgender gay or lesbian individuals (Peters, 2011) and videogames contain few genderqueer and transgender characters as is (Shaw, 2009). Visibility of these different and diverse members of the LGBT community is important, because diverse visibility allows for the socio political representation of these minorities, and helps these people with self-recognition and identity formation (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015).
In addition, *Undertale* also models positive, hopeful futures for the queer characters it has. It is incredibly important for there to be representations of queer people with positive futures, especially targeted at queer youth, in order to provide the audiences who are represented with hope (Goltz, 2013). Although *Undertale* cannot represent all people, the lack of both set races and economic statuses for the characters may help a wider range of people identify with them, despite the fact that the setting of the story is so far removed from reality. The setting and story being removed from what we know as “normal” helps the representation of queer futurity from being classist or elitist, or too narrow or normalizing in its appeal, something that the *It Gets Better Campaign* was criticized for being (Goltz, 2013). In the True Ending, Mettaton, the previously mentioned transgender robot, achieves his dream of performing to the human world as a star. Throughout the game, background characters treat him like a celebrity, and clearly look up to him. The female couple in the game, Alphys and Undyne, reveal their feelings for one another and are shown having fun at the beach in the game’s post credit sequence. Frisk can go back to their home or stay with their new monster family, depending on your choice, but is shown smiling with their friends. There are also two male characters who you can get to reveal their feelings for each other, a process that allows you to bypass them without a fight. They are later shown to be happily on a date with one another. While these characters all have happy endings that propose a positive, hopeful future for queer people, the setting for the game also seems to be a post-homophobic and post-transphobic society. None of the characters are required to come out, each characters’ pronouns are respected, and no one takes issue- or even seems surprised- with and at the characters’ sexual and gender identities. An examination of the closet cannot be invoked, because in *Undertale*, there seems to be no closet. While this setting may be positive, and serve as excellent escapism for its audience, it may also cause some queer viewers
to question how realistic that futurity is, and what the value of such a vision is when it is so removed from how our society is today. However, regardless of whether Undertale, or, in comparison, the It Gets Better Campaign can accurately model a possible future for all viewers, there is a place for it, as queer viewers take away hope and inspiration from the project (Goltz, 2013). The representation of queer audiences and the diverse visibility in Undertale, and the success Undertale has garnered paves the way for other indie games to follow with even more diverse representation, and proves that independently produced “niche” media may not be as narrow in its demographic as previously believed (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015).

In Undertale, humour is a major aspect of the game. In contrast with the theory of anxious displacement, and the normalization of queer characters in comedy and media produced for all-ages audiences (such as sitcoms), the characters of Undertale are all shown to be quite odd. The characters and relationships are not normalized; however, their sexuality is. In gay themed television, notably in comedy shows, anxious displacement is the process by which the queer characters are normalized by overloading surrounding characters with negative, anxious, or otherwise absurd characteristics (Cavalcante, 2014). This shows a change in the way queerness has been represented in the media, as previously, representations of queer characters had been largely negative (Cavalcante, 2014). In particular, queerness is normalized by means of anxious displacement in shows containing queer parenting in order to attenuate the misunderstanding that queerness is a risk to social norms, conventions, and moral values (Cavalcante, 2014). Undertale’s representations of queer characters are neither normal nor negative or a target for shame, and the style of humour is absurdist and wacky. The absurdity interacts with their sexualities, but this abnormality and strangeness is shown in a positive light,
rather than a negative one. It is not condemning abnormality, but rather finding the comedy in the characters’ unique strangeness.

An example of this is seen in the True Ending, when Frisk (the character you play as) and Alphys, a nerdy dinosaur-like monster, go on a date to the garbage dump. This occurs as a misunderstanding, when Alphys gets the wrong idea as you pass on a letter from her crush Undyne, who is an exuberant, tough fish monster. While hanging out at the dump, Alphys admits it’s Undyne she has a crush on, not Frisk, and asks for help on what she should say to her. To help her, Frisk decides to role play as Undyne, a game that Alphys gets into as she begins to yell, “I START HOLLERING!!! UNDYNE!!! I LOVE YOU!! UNDYNE!!! KISS ME AGAIN, UNDYNE!!!” (Fox, 2015). Undyne, who is looking for Alphys, hears her yelling, comes over, and reacts in shock and confusion, much to Alphys’ embarrassment. Despite the misunderstandings and absurdity of the situation, Alphys eventually admits her feelings, and the two get together despite both of their oddness and awkwardness. In a show that portrays anxious displacement, this sort of absurdity would be passed on to the characters who surround the queer characters, to make the queer characters seem more domestic and normal (Cavalcante, 2014).

The queer characters of Undertale also display attraction to one another openly, something that is often not seen in media for all ages featuring anxious displacement, as the normalized characters are domesticated to the point of chasteness (Cavalcante, 2014). In an interaction with two male guards that you help get together as a couple, must get the second guard to take off his armour, revealing a muscled chest underneath. The first guard, beginning to sweat, appears nervous, until he finally reveals his feelings for the other guard, stating, “I can’t take this anymore!... I like, LIKE you, bro...” (Fox 2015). While the game is not sexually explicit in any regards, and can be played by people of all ages, this interaction eludes to the arousal and
attraction of the guard. In addition, Alphys and Undyne share a kiss during the end credit scene. As mentioned, the setting of *Undertale* is a post-homophobic and transphobic society, and the queerness of the characters is not even remarked on. This is the aspect of them that is normalized, as opposed to their behaviour, and the normalization of their queerness allows them to be as odd and absurd as they like. Without having to worry about the audience’s reaction to the queerness of the characters, and losing money, the indie nature of *Undertale* allowed Fox to find humour in the characters without normalizing them, and without using anxious displacement to do so.

As an independent game created primarily by a single person that was fully funded before most of the content was complete, *Undertale* was able to do things that traditionally funded and distributed, conglomerate produced piece of media would not be able to. It did not have to worry about audiences who were homophobic and transphobic, and spends no time normalizing its characters and humour. It represents a range of diverse queer characters, and gives these queer characters major roles in the story. In addition, it models hope for these characters and their futures, as all of the queer characters get a happy ending. The game is able to do this as an independent product, and its widespread success shows that perhaps the demographics for this type of queer media are more widespread, and appeal to more of an audience than was previously believed.

References


