You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them, and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Four years ago, I reported a story for public radio about independent video games, which were just coming into their own.

If you're not a gamer and you have no idea of what that means -- think about how video games started.

Pac Man was a very simple design. But in the 1980s, you had drive to an arcade to play that game on a cabinet machine, or buy an Atari system.

Now game slike Halo and BioShock have hyper realistic graphics. You can move around 360-degree. The stories can last 20 hours long.

But that also means, today a single programmer can create a game with the sophistication of Super Mario Brothers that you can play on your browser with a keyboard and a mouse.

These independent game designers can make their games about whatever they want. Some of them are very quirky, and very personal.

One of my listeners wrote me and said I should check out this hot new indie game called Undertale. It's gotten huge critical acclaim.

I had not played indie games for a while, so went online to download Undertale. And I was stunned by how much the world of indie video games had grown since I reported that story.

Julian Feeld is the editor of Existential Gamer, a site that reviews games.

JULIAN: Video games growing up were my safe space, they were the place I went to where there was no social anxiety, no human interaction that I'd have to decipher and navigate.

I asked him to help me decipher and navigate this world. He says in the last few years, indie games have become more like indie films – in that they're not very indie any more. Many of them are still the vision of a single designer, but it takes a small company to make them.

JULIAN: It's the difference between a PT Anderson film and a Marvel film, you know, PT Anderson could be seen as indie cinema but it's big, it's being released everywhere and people are talking about it.

But Undertale was made by one guy: Toby Fox. The only outside help he got was from an illustrator who created art for the prologue. Otherwise, every nuance of this game is infused with his quirky personality.

JULIAN: Usually what you have someone who has bitten off more than they can chew very ambitious or flawed or a game that is small, it doesn't have narrative breath or impact in a very specific way and I think Undertale did that. I think Undertale is the full package.

Here's the other important thing about Undertale. In the last few years, there's been a schism in the game world.

Traditional gamers have complained that journalists keep lavishing praise on these independent games with socially conscious messages that are not actually challenging to play. But Undertale is beloved by critics *and* traditional gamers.

Undertale is not just a hit. It spawned a subculture of fandom and merchandise. There's even an album of *jazz* covers of the music in the game.

MUSIC

By the way, the music in this game is really good. I'm going to play it throughout this episode. In fact, it's been running in my head like a very pleasant earworm for months.

So what is Undertale about? Why are so many people crazy about it? That is after the break.

>> BREAK <<

First, I had to get an interview with Toby Fox, the creator of Undertale.

That is not easy. Toby is a young guy. He was in college when he started making the game. But he is not the stereotypical Millennial blogging,

tweeting, and Instramming all the time. He doesn't like to do phone or Skype interviews. When journalists send him questions to answer, he often responds with just the word, "pass." He'd rather put this thing out in the world and let people come to their own conclusions.

So I was going to treat him like the Great Gatsby, hiding away while everyone else has a great time at his party. Then I thought, he made a Kickstarter video to fund the game. How did he introduce himself?

CLIP: KICKSTARTER

He appeared in that video as a little video game dog.

CLIP: KICKSTARTER

So I gave him the option of answering my questions over email, but I would turn the text into audio using text to speech software. I had no idea if he'd go for it.

TOBY: I REALLY RARELY DO INTERVIEWS AND DISLIKE COMMENTING ON WHY THINGS ARE POPULAR SLASH CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED, BUT I THINK THE ROBOT VOICE IDEA IS HILARIOUS.

And that's what he's going to sound like, when he does chime in, which is not much. Most of his answers were yes or no.

First, I want to give you a sense of what the game looks like. The design is retro and pixelated, like a Nintendo game from the '90s.

JULIAN: Undertale was created based on this game Mother and Mother II which in English was called Earthbound and Earthbound II, and these games created by Japanese creative director who was trying to show his take on American pop culture which is deformed and made into bizarro interesting version of itself and there was a sensibility which got translated into Undertale, which is an American giving his take on a Japanese game which was giving its take on an American game.

Most of the characters in Undertale are monsters -- really adorable monsters, who each get their own theme song.

When the characters speak, a box appears and their dialogue type out in real time. The sound of the voices is pure gibberish. But the typeface and the pitch of their voices have a surprising amount of personality. Like here is the motherly figure, Toriel, who is a goat wearing robes.

CLIP: TORIAL

And here's the goofy little skeleton, Sans:

CLIP: SANS

Who sounds different from his brother Papyrus, a tall flamboyant skeleton wearing a cape and boots.

CLIP: PAPYRUS

And here's the nerdy professor Dr. Alphys, who looks like a mini-Jerry Lewis dinosaur in a lab coat.

CLIP: ALPHYS

The character you control is a child with no clear gender. You can name him or her whatever you want.

At the beginning, you learn that there was a war between humans and monsters. The monsters were banished underground. You character accidentally fell down there. Your goal is to return to the surface. I asked Toby what the inspiration was for the story.

TOBY: I WANTED MONSTERS SO I PUT THEM IN A HOLE

He's being coy because there's a lot more depth to it.

Towards the beginning, you find your character in a very comfy underground home, being taken care of of by Toriel, the motherly goat figure. She gives you a cell phone, and keeps calling in to check on you as you explore the world.

I grew up on cell phones. I got really annoyed when she kept calling me. I kept thinking, is this Toby's commentary on what it was like to grow up with cell phones?

TOBY: NO.

Okay. Apparently not.

Nathan Grayson filled me in on the whole story. He writes for a game review site called Kotaku (Ko-Tah-Koo). He says the character's name, Toriel, is a play off Tutorial, because every game starts with a tutorial.

NATHAN: And the tutorial thing is like tutorials being like an overly worried mom, because they never stop poking you, hey do you know how to do this? Do you know how to do that? The metaphor is very clear. It's like a mom that won't stop calling you and it's like I'm fine, Mom. Geez!

That is not the first time Undertale comments on the language of video games, and flips your expectations. Like when you're ready to leave Toriel's cave:

NATHAN: She to convince you to stay with her because the world beyond where you are is dangerous and full of terrible stuff, she acts as mother figure, when you decide you want to leave, she tries to stop you and you end up having combat encounter.

When you fight a monster in Undertale – the color version of the game switches to a black and white box – except for a little red heart, which represents your character. The monsters will attack your heart with missiles, swords, bones – whatever represents them best.

You can fight back and kill them. Or you can flirt with them, flex your muscles, wiggle around, sing a lullaby – lots of other silly stuff until they give up fighting you.

NATHAN: What I didn't realize non violent way out of it, I thought once she stopped responding to any of my other approaches that I had to kill her and so I did and it was really heartbreaking because she was this character that only wanted best for you, and when you finish her off, you get a little scene of -- the way game portrays health and life is a little heart, so it shows her little heart and then it breaks in half, it's like just the right

amount of heavy handed for what the scene was. Admittedly, I did restart wanted to do pacifist play through, that blocks it off from it,

So at that moment, you started the game over again.

NATHAN: Yeah, but here's the crazy thing.

Yeah?

NATHAN: The game still remembered that I did that stuff, so even though I hadn't completed play through, when started up on my next one the game started making references to what I had done previously.

Really?

NATHAN: When I fought Toriel again one of the options I could tell her that I had seen her die.

Oh my God.

NATHAN: And yeah, it was like, so weird and so unsettling.

And so ground breaking for a video game. You can make it through the entire game without killing a single character. It's called the pacifist route. If you go the other way and take the genocide route, killing those monsters will take a toll on you.

Julian Feeld took that path because he thought that's what you're supposed to do in video game. But by the end, Undertale had become a ghost town and he was the monster everyone else was afraid of.

JULIAN: I think Undertale speaks to fact people are turning to video games with higher expectation they ever have before, they're questioning basic models, why are we killing everything? That's a good question, most games don't pose that question, it's assumed that murder is main action you're going to be partaking in.

I asked Toby Fox if he had an aha moment, when he was playing a particular game and had to kill a monster to move to the next level, but he hating doing it because he really like that character.

TOBY: THAT'S EVERY GAME, ERIC

But he doesn't make it easy on you. Some of the monsters really taunt you.

JULIAN: He sets up character interaction you're being told how about how? Still don't want to fight me? How about after I hit you? I think he knows what he's doing.

Like halfway through the game, I came across Undyne, a female creature from the Black Lagoon with a red ponytail, wearing an eye patch and knight's armor.

She told me she wanted to kill me because I had killed this dog character a few levels back. I have to admit, that dog wasn't much of a threat. He was actually pretty cute, though he was carrying a sword. I was just impatient and I wanted to get moving through the game. Nathan Grayson says all I had to do was pet him, over and over and over again.

NATHAN: But if you keep petting him neck gets longer and longer and he gets more excited until it becomes this ridiculous thing, like his neck is through the screen and loops back around through screen lops back around. And so after that, he ends up tearing through the rest of the area and builds crazy snowmen -- super elongated objects like his neck was, whereas if you don't do it that way, you later encounter him at lump of snow, this dog staring at this snow waiting for it to turn into art.

If you take the pacifist route, most of the monsters will give up trying to fight you and reveal their messed up personal issues. But even when you make friends with these monsters, they can still be annoying. They'll call you during the game and send you pointless text messages.

It reminded me of how often we judge people in real life, or online when their personalities come on strong and we have no context to understand them. In a previous interview, Toby said the game is really about whether you want to make friends or go it alone. I asked if <u>he</u> ever feels that way.

TOBY: I CONSTANTLY WISH I COULD BE FRIENDS WITH A SKELETON INSTEAD OF BEING ALONE

Video games are all about making choices. That's what separates them from more passive types of entertainment. But Julian says:

JULIAN: I might argue that a majority of video games craft illusion of choice, that a more discerning mind might look to Undertale to find true choice, as in a completely different ending based on that choice, whereas other games might give you illusion of different ways but the end result those branches of story reunite and you're going to get the same ending no matter what

I haven't finished the game yet because I'm really slow at playing at video games. I'm embarrassed to admit that it takes me a while to figure out the secret clues. I also don't have a lot of spare time.

I know that I'm going to get the morally neutral ending in Undertale. I've killed a few characters along the way before I realized how much better it is to play the pacifist route. So I went on YouTube, where someone posted the pacifist ending. I won't go into great detail, but here are some spoilers.

It is really moving – and long -- 40 minutes long. All the characters rally around you and help you finish your quest. When you finally make it to the surface, all these monsters that you fought watch the sun rise with you. Then one by one, they each say good-bye.

Nathan Grayson wrote an article about how that ending brought him through a personal crisis. Around that time in his life, he had become a recluse.

NATHAN: When I was going through few friends left, well I don't want to burden them with too many of my problems, but I am having problems, but because I don't want to burden them, I resent them for not helping even through they don't know need help, because I'm not telling them.

Yeah, that to me is the message that you get if you play pacifist ending, the ending that you're intended to play is you are not alone and there's something so comforting and powerful about that.

NATHAN: Yeah, and the thing about it is, it's not this revolutionary message, there are plenty of other works that have expressed that, what UT does it expresses it in this way that's not this canned sequence of events that occur in Disney Pixar movie, instead it's a series of choices you made by the time you reach the end awareness of what the other side could've been. That you could've made a choice to reject these characters, that you could've run rampant and ruined it – you could've done any number of things but instead you did the thing that made people care about you and support you because of you.

One of the people he decided to reconnect with was his sister.

NATHAN: You know, our relationship was strained because she's on the Asperger's spectrum, she's always been awkward to communicate with, and so and so my sister talk about one thing and then suddenly go into tangent about something unrelated no relation

in current conversation, or interrupt talking with someone else, ugh! Ugh! And UT is the type of game where it presents you with situation like that, not literally like it but similar to it and says okay take a step back and understand what's going on for this person and the way they approach the world.

Playing Undertale brought me back to that time when I was in my 20s, and I realized that I was really, finally an adult. I looked back on the journey that brought me there, on those kids I hated, the adults that seemed so confusing or weird to me, and suddenly I saw them as fully dimensional people. I had gained a new sense of empathy and patience that I didn't have as a teenagers. Its like in the game of life, I made it to the next level. All my hit points are restored.

That's it for this week, thanks for listening. Special thanks to Toby Fox

TOBY: MAYBE YOU SHOULDN'T USE MY ANSWERS THEY'RE NOT VERY GOOD.

Nah! Also thanks Chris Robinson, Julian Feeld, and Nathan Grayson – who says playing video games and writing about them all the time has changed the way his brain works.

NATHAN: Because when you play games, critique a lot of games, realize that the game making process is very deliberate, every last thing is in place for a reason, and so yeah, if I walk into a room and notice something that is out of place or annoying, why did they do that? Why did they make the room that way? So yeah, that will be my upcoming book, Nathan's approach to rooms.
(LAUGHS) Feng shui damn it!
NATHAN: That's an even better title.

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. I'll put screenshots of Undertale at my site, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.