# "Fear the Old Blood": The Gothicism of *Bloodborne*

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## ABSTRACT

Gothic studies and Game studies are beginning to be explored in connection with each other to find various configurations of Gothic elements in the cybertext of games. In this article, I explore various Gothic elements in *Bloodborne* (From Software, 2015). My methodology incorporates the analysis of the manifestation of Gothicism in the game through the interplay between the figure of the player character, mise-en-scène, and the presence of psychologically affective states pertaining to the experience of playing the game. The role and aspects of player participation, performativity, and in-game mechanics are also examined with respect to the particular function they serve in the realization of the Gothic experience. The presence of Gothic and Lovecraftian tropes, symbolism, and elements of horror within the narrative are also explored.

## Keywords

Gothic, Horror, Uncanny, Bloodborne, Lovecraft, Affect, Narrative

## INTRODUCTION

A recurring pattern in Gothic fiction is the presence of the Frankensteinian plot-- the intrusion into a "natural order" of the world through technological means, scientific or otherwise, by an individual driven by hubris. This leads to the creation of an abomination resulting in the downfall of the creator. Gothic fiction, since its inception, has always incorporated political anxieties related to social order and the individual, entwined with the "return of the repressed" and a fear of the Other. Indeed, this Frankensteinian trope harbors a disruption of the Enlightenment's confidence in rationality, science, and order– through human reason. H.P. Lovecraft's short story, "The Call of Cthulhu" begins with the following lines:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of the infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. (2008, 355)

The recurrent trope in question incorporates the essence of the mentioned lines, of a darker side of human ingenuity-- reason and science bringing forth chaos rather than order. I consciously include Lovecraft's quote because the aforementioned critique is especially present in his oeuvre. Lovecraft's fiction is reminiscent of his "Cosmicism", of the insignificance of humankind in the grand scheme of the universe and the potential forces or entities present in the vast unknown that are beyond the conception and control of human beings. The discovery of these entities and/or forces in Lovecraft's fiction generally leads to the annihilation of reason, civilization, order, sanity, and the manifestation of a primal terror in the psyche. The Gothicism in *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) is intricately entwined with such Lovecraftian

themes and motifs. One of the more dominant patterns in the narrative is the collapse of man because of his hubris and tampering with forces beyond his comprehension. Placing this theme at the center of my critique, my intention is to explore the various other Gothic elements in the game.

## ANALYSING GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN GAMES: METHODOLOGY

Krzywinska employs the reading of Gothic elements in the cybertext of games through the analysis of the interaction between "game grammar" and "Gothic grammar". She mentions:

> Games can be regarded as constituted through grammar. Videogame makers select elements from established game grammar to construct the particular vocabulary of that individual game. The same can be said of Gothic. As with games, a set of conventions emerge cumulatively and proliferate from similar texts, sounding the structural beat to which story, style and theme dance. (2015, 58)

In reading the elements of Gothicism in video games, she identifies the presence of five "major coordinating nodes of Gothic" (2015, 59), namely: the false hero; mise-en-scène; the representation, production, and simulation of a related group of psychologically affective states such as paralysis, claustrophobia, vertigo, alienation, estrangement, dread, discomfort, disorientation (2015, 60); style; and function. Drawing from Maneul Aguirre's conceptualisation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which incorporates a reconfiguration of the traditional "Hero's Tale" (2013, 11), she reads the "false hero" as one who is an ineffective hero, a flawed character who is reduced to passivity and helplessness throughout their journey and succumbs to tragedy. Piitinen summarises the figure of the "false hero" as:

> A hero who appears powerless and whose ultimate triumph is not guaranteed. That is, instead of the sense of mastery that players typically experience in games through being given skills, equipment and opportunities to conquer obstacles, the false hero has very little to work with and may have to flee instead of fighting his enemies. S/he is helpless and vulnerable and does not necessarily experience the relief of a happy conclusion at the end of the game. (2018, 44)

Krzywinska expands upon the coordinate of mise-en-scène as "uncanny spaces" and "[h]aunted, disquieted" environments like "haunted houses, spooky woods, crypts and graveyards, derelict buildings, attics and cellars" that through cultural imagination function as "representations of estrangement" (Vidler, 1992, 12). The third coordinate entails the game mechanics and the narrative producing a particular affect on players, "aligned often to the return-of-the-repressed structure as well as through the particular deployments of elements of mise-en-scène"(2015, 61). The fourth coordinate, that of "style" encompasses the following:

> aesthetic choices made in the realisation of mise-en-scène, the types of adjectives used, the objects chosen and used or the type of lighting for example. Style also includes the aesthetic rationale behind the choices made to organise the delivery of a story and is therefore manifest through editing, phrasing, elisions, use of time, auditory and visual elements, such as colour palette. (2015, 61)

The fifth and final coordinate of "function" entails the potential purpose of the incorporation of the Gothic elements in the games. Krzywinska gives examples of

such "potential uses" as the "localised use of Gothic" reinforcing the notion of "home" in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Standing Stone Games, 2007), in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) of incorporating the notion of moral relativism and in *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009) providing "the means to fuse together an ambiguous mix of power and objectification"(2015, 62). I shall analyse *Bloodborne* in relation to these five mentioned coordinates and the ways in which Gothicism manifests in the game through the mutual interaction and synergy between said coordinates.

## FALSE HERO

In *Bloodborne,* the player takes control of the player character (PC from here on), when the latter is in a state of physical vulnerability and complete ignorance of the world they are embedded in. The horror aspect of *Bloodborne* is encapsulated in the initial encounter with a werewolf that the PC lacks the power to confront and slay, being left with the only option to flee. This is reminiscent of other video games of the "Survival Horror" genre that generally feature a PC who is a "false hero", in the sense that they are not capable of confronting the monstrous enemies of the game and other horrors head-on and are forced to flee and resort to stealth. Yet, in *Bloodborne*, the PC gradually acquires powers, agency, and strength that give them the ability to slay such monstrous creatures. Indeed, later into the narrative of the game, the werewolf that seems so invulnerable initially is relegated to a minor enemy. This is aptly captured in the message that appears on the screen along with a flash of light, after the PC is successfully able to slay one of the major enemies or "bosses"-- that of "Prey Slaughtered" (figure 1) and in the case of two unique bosses, "Mergo's Wet Nurse" and the "Moon Presence", of "Nightmare Slain".



**Figure 1:** The appearance of this text for the first time as the player slays the first major boss, the "Cleric Beast" while its body crumbles and disintegrates reinforces the notion that the PC is a capable hunter and adds to a sense of accomplishment and progress

This gradual empowerment of the PC and the resultant veering away from the powerlessness of the "false hero" archetype is complemented by the player piecing together a substantial narrative of the world. The narrative of *Bloodborne* is not

overtly conveyed to the player but demands a certain active effort from them in an investigational manner to piece together a narrative. The game world is strewn with ambiguous messages, hastily scrawled notes, environmental clues, and enigmatic utterances from other characters that the player encounters and has to piece together to form a narrative. The game thereby puts the player in the role of a detective and rewards exploration and active participation. Interestingly, this is reminiscent of characters such as Dupin and the antiquarian archetype in Lovecraft's fiction. The player then endeavors to actively bring order to a world that is fragmented physically as well as in a narratorial way. Physically, the player traverses the game world, and in doing so uncovers the connection between different seemingly unconnected parts and establishes lines of traversal. Narratorially, the player investigates the world and pieces together pieces of evidence to bring out a conclusive narrative. These two aspects complement the player's role as the eliminator of the monstrous dangers of the world in embedding the PC within the role of an empowered agent of reason, strength, and ingenuity. Indeed, instead of being a "false hero", the PC can be read as a foil to the archetype by contrasting them with the other "false heroes" and tragic characters the player meets during the journey such as Gehrman, the First Hunter, Ludwig the Accursed and Lady Maria of the Astral Clocktower. Krzywinska's conceptualisation of the "false hero" archetype is one that incorporates the function of conveying to the player, in a performative manner, the presence of horror, tragic elements, terror, and vulnerability that are characteristic to protagonists in Gothic fiction such as Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Jonathan Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The narrative trajectory associated with these protagonists such as the lack of a favorable resolution in their quests, tragic events in their journeys, their sheer vulnerability in the face of malevolence, and the manifestation of dark impulses in their gradually fragmenting psyches sustains the atmosphere of the Gothic in these novels. A lack of these aspects would severely hamper the Gothicism of the texts.

Does the empowerment of the PC in Bloodborne result in such a disruption of the Gothic flavor of the game? My version of the answer would be in the negative. In both configurations of the PC as the "false hero" in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) and the empowered hero in *Bloodborne*, the responsibility is put on the player to tackle the malevolent forces and entities in the game. Performatively, in the former, the player is forced to find surreptitious methods to flee from the threat or circumnavigate around it using stealth mechanics. In the latter, the player is forced to confront the enemy head-on and engage in a fight. At first glance, the former has connotations of vulnerability while the latter has those of empowerment and agency. Yet, both these entail the player, learning the mechanics of the game and mastering them to overcome a substantial threat using the paraphernalia at their disposal. In the former, it is the understanding of the stealth mechanics, the importance of light and darkness, a spatial knowledge of the game environment for efficient traversal and self-concealment if necessary, and learning the behavior of the enemies to the player's stimulus. In the latter, it is the mastering of the combat of the game, learning the attack patterns and behavior of the enemy, and optimal execution of the application of this knowledge through physical reflexes. In both these cases, the player is forced by the game to confront the enemy, to meet the gaze of the Other and operate within it. There is no escape either way from this pervasive gaze regardless of the specific methods through which the player addresses the beckoning of the gaze. *Bloodborne* is a game especially known within the gaming community for its difficulty. The enemies seem insurmountable and the PC, no matter how empowered they get, seems fragile and vulnerable to the assault of such forces. In a combat situation, it is rarely the case that the player can engage blindly with even the weakest of the enemies and even hope to demolish them with little to no effort. The player has

to be alert at all times, reinforced by the fact that the game does not possess a "pause" mechanic; lest the PC be killed due to their fragility as compared to the enemies. The feeling of vulnerability is conveyed in Survival Horror games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* by the player being forced to flee. In *Bloodborne* even though the PC is strong enough in each stage of the journey in the game to confront the enemies in combat, they are never on an equal footing or stronger than the enemy. The player has to rely on their reflexes and ingenuity to make efficient and effective use of the resources they have at hand in the game while also continuously dodging out of the way of the enemy's attacks. Thus even though the function of fleeing is not that prominent in the game, it is still present on a micro-level through the function of the "dodge". Interestingly, extending this notion of the performative aspects of the player's participation in the game, it can be read that the very player, through participating in the "play" emulates the "false hero" archetype if they are unable to complete the game because of its difficulty.

### MISE-EN-SCÈNE

*Bloodborne* is largely set in the city of Yharnam, resembling a dark and sinister rendition of a Victorian London cityscape especially dominated by Gothic architecture. Towering spires and clock towers loom over the streets and arabesque gargoyles watch over a realm of ruin and desolation. Grotesque monsters roam the streets that are lined with broken carriages, coffins, and bodies of the hunted beasts pinned to wooden crosses and set ablaze. It is eternally dusk or night all through the duration of the game. The design of the city is akin to a maze. Narrow cobbled alleys give way to secret nooks and crannies shrouded by crates, wooden barrels, or secret ladders. It is up to the player to navigate the maze and survive the streets. A prominent element of the environment that captures the Gothic atmosphere is the sublimity of certain parts of the game world.



**Figure 2:** The PC gazes up at the "Moon Presence", as it descends from the sky with the blood moon in the backdrop

Notable examples from the ever dynamic and changing elements of the environment as the game progresses are: a gigantic pearl moon looming over the dark horizon dotted with jagged markings of a city pervaded with gothic structures; the giant

cathedral at the center of the *unheimlich* space housing the origin of the infernal beast plague that haunts the city; and a blood-moon rising behind the "Moon Presence" (figure 2), a seemingly godlike cosmic being that descends towards the PC, beckoning them. Indeed, the environment ties in efficaciously with the narrative to render a dark, enigmatic, Gothic atmosphere. Another characteristic that is highly contributive in this regard is the sound design of the game. As the player traverses through the game world, they are met with ambient audio stimuli such as grotesque screams, hysterical laughter, the sound of a monstrous beast beating at the door down the alley, and another dragging an axe as it screeches on the pavement. The ambient sound of the game adapts and builds upon the environment to create an atmosphere of pervasive horror and paranoia.

## DOUBLING

Doubling has been a characteristic trope of Gothic fiction. M. Todd mentions:

> Various types of doubling are employed[...]to convey the thematic undercurrent of anxiety which is central to the Gothic genre. One such example is the trope of character doubling, which is often discussed using terms such as *doppelgänger*, *alter ego*, *split personality*, *mirror image*, *shadow*, or *twin*. Use of these variations of self allows authors the freedom to explore subjects that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable, such as issues of identity, sexuality, gender boundaries, and the roles of men and women. (2011, 6, author's italicization)

In Bloodborne, the PC awakens in "Iosefka's Clinic" and upon returning to the location after visiting the "Hunter's Dream", they encounter Iosefka safely locked behind a door, presiding over her patients, refusing entry to the player. Upon inquiry, she mentions that she cannot let the PC enter into the chamber lest the PC infects the patients. However, later into the narrative of the game, perceptive players will recognize that the original Iosefka has been replaced by an imposter. She has a slightly different tone of voice and as opposed to the original one, she welcomes the player inside and also asks the player to send any survivors that they may encounter, to her clinic. Afterward, it becomes evident that this imposter had been selfishly experimenting on the patients in the clinic rather than taking care of them, as well as on any survivors the player may send to her. She does this to commune with the cosmic beings in the game world known as the "Great Ones". This is confirmed by the player discovering the patients turned into monstrous beings and she having been impregnated by a "Great One". At various points in the game, certain elements of the game world that come to be associated with the notions of order, safety, and the home are defamiliarized and transformed into the unhomely. This injects a certain pattern of the manifestation of the uncanny or the Freudian *unheimlich*, which is very reminiscent of Gothic fiction. The nurturing Iosefka that is initially portrayed as a protective guardian of her patients, is suddenly morphed into a malevolent force. This sudden change epitomizes the very experience of the Yharnamites in being betrayed by their scholars and the clergy, those in whom they had put their trust. This is also reflected by the player's experience of her being an imposter and the realization that the helpless survivors whom the player sends to her in good faith, end up being the victims of her horrific experiments.

In reaching the "Hunter's Dream" in the game for the first time, the player encounters a lifeless doll in front of the "Hunter's Workshop". The design of the doll lends it a very humanlike appearance of a pale young woman with white hair and thus its presence encapsulates a sense of the uncanny (figure 3). Gradually in the game, the

PC gains "insight" by raising their "insight" attribute and sees through the veil of illusion to perceive the doll as having sentience.



**Figure 3:** The lifeless doll lays beside the steps leading up to the "Hunter's Workshop"

The doll is from here on, perceived to be animate, sentient, possessing a life of her own and the PC can talk to her. Later on in the narrative, if the player actively participates in unearthing this connection in the game world, it is discovered that the doll had been created by Gehrman in the image of Lady Maria, whom he loved. The doll's connection with Lady Maria is reinforced in two instances. An item found in the game, the "Small Hair Ornament" can be inferred to be connected with Lady Maria and her emotional connection with Gehrman. If this item is given to the doll, she would remark-- "What? What is this? I-I... can't remember, not a thing... only, I feel... a yearning, something I've never felt before... what's happening to me? Tell me hunter, could this be joy? Ahh" (figure 4).



**Figure 4:** The doll's reaction to the object offered and the similar subsequent reactions from her, hint at her connection with Lady Maria

This remark can be inferred to hint at a connection the doll has to Lady Maria's emotions, specifically the "admiration" as it is mentioned in the game she has for Gehrman. Secondly, after the player kills Lady Maria, and interacts with the doll, she would remark-- "Good hunter. This may sound strange, but... Have I somehow changed? Moments ago, from some place, perhaps deep within, I sensed a liberation from heavy shackles. Not that I would know… ". The latter dialogue hints at the unshackling of Lady Maria from the "Hunter's Nightmare" where her psyche got trapped, after the player kills her. All of these seem to cement that somehow the doll is connected to Lady Maria and therefore is her "double" in a certain way. It can be inferred from other evidence in the narrative that Gehrman had a "manic" obsession with Lady Maria. The item description of "Maria Hunter Cap" includes the following: "Maria[...]had great admiration for Gehrman, unaware of his curious mania", and the "Doll Clothes" includes: "A deep love for the doll can be surmised by the fine craftsmanship of this article, and the care with which it was kept. It borderlines on mania, and exudes a slight warmth". Piecing together such evidence it can be inferred that Gehrman had an obsessive regard for Lady Maria. Unable to express his emotional and/or sexual urges, he resorted to an imaginary possession of his object of desire by fetishizing it in the construction of the mentioned doll, in her image.

## ENTRAPMENT

A theme that pervades the world of *Bloodborne* is that of entrapment. Numerous characters that the player encounters in their journey are seen to be entrapped in a state of existence that they want to get out of. Gehrman is trapped inside a dream world called the "Hunter's Dream" created and sustained by the cosmic being, "Moon Presence". When the player encounters him in the real world of the game, he is seen to be sleeping in his wheelchair and crying out for someone to extricate him from his prison-- "Oh, Laurence... Master Willem... Somebody help me... Unshackle me please, anybody... I've had enough of this dream... The night blocks all sight... Oh, somebody, please…". In one of the three endings, upon the completion of his contract, the PC would be freed from their connection with the "Hunter's Dream" by Gehrman as he kills the PC in the dream world for them to awaken in the real world. A different ending to the game entails the player killing Gehrman in the dream world, thereby unshackling him at last and taking his place in the "Hunter's Dream". The game world is filled with areas that the player will traverse in their journey, that are filled with people imprisoned in some way or the other as subjects of experiments. There are patients tied to their beds, writhing in pain with their heads expanded with fluid as a result of questionable experiments by the "Healing Church" and the scholars of "Byrgenwerth". There are some who have transformed into grotesque creatures as a result of these experiments and are entrapped in that form. Similarly, the townsfolk of Yharnam who roam the streets during the night of the hunt have transformed to various degrees into monstrosities by the intoxication of the hunt. Some have their legs and arms elongated, skin turned greyish, still stuck in the illusion of the hunt, mistaking the PC as a "beast" and attacking them. Some on the other hand have completely transformed into werewolves. A notable example is the tragic figure of Father Gascoigne, a priest from a foreign land who had come to Yharnam and joined the Healing Church as one of the hunters. He eventually gets entrapped in the bloodlust of the hunt, and unable to recognize his wife Viola– kills her in a frenzy. When the PC encounters the character, he eventually transforms into a hostile werewolf..

The members of the "School of Mensis" and their leader Micolash can be encountered within the game with their heads covered by a helmet-like contraption that resembles a prison called a "Mensis Cage". Seemingly a device used in their various rituals and endeavors to communicate with the "Great Ones", it symbolises

their entrapment in an obsession with transcending human existence and in the subsequent association with cosmic forces. Micolash, when encountered in the game, has turned insane after contacting the "Great Ones" and is trapped in a dream world called the "Nightmare of Mensis". The PC in seeking "Blood Ministration" in Yharnam, is also entrapped with their association with the "Hunter's Dream" by the contract that entails them enlisting as a hunter and slaying monsters. As Gehrman mentions-- "Just go out and kill a few beasts. It's for your own good. You know, it's just what hunters do! You'll get used to it…". The mechanics of the game captures this sense of entrapment that pervades the game world from the perspective of the player. In video games such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) or *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) the traversal is designed to capture the sense of freedom in exploring an open world. The spirit behind the design of the games as reiterated by various game reviews and developer interviews is summarised by the following sentence-- "If you see a mountain peak in the distance, you can go there". In these games, the PC can climb over objects, jump from high altitudes without getting penalized with death in certain scenarios, and moreover also feature modes of travel such as wind-gliders, animal mounts, and boats. In *Bloodborne*, the traversal abilities of the PC are very limited. The PC can only reach elevated places if there is a climbable ladder leading to it. The PC can't climb over walls and do parkour with ease like in the aforementioned games. The city of Yharnam is also designed to complement this sense of entrapment to a linear path. The player can see buildings in the distance at various points from specific areas, yet they are limited to only where the linear pacing and the traversal lines of the game will allow them to go. In *Bloodborne* "If you see a mountain peak in the distance, you probably cannot go there until and unless the linear path of the narrative allows you to". In video games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) that encompass the sense of freedom of the aforementioned games, the player can enter several buildings and houses belonging to the characters of the world without much resistance. In *Bloodborne*, the player is debarred from entry into the premises of the Yharnamites who have locked themselves up in the safety of their homes from the monstrous beast roaming the streets. The player can knock at several of these houses to be met with responses like, "Wretch outsider! Tryin' to fool me to open this door? Heaven, the depths of depravity…" or, "I don't recon you're from 'round here! Well, pfft, stuck outside on a night of the hunt! Ahh, you poor, poor thing…". Clearly, none of the residents of Yharnam give entry to the player. This sense of entrapment in the environment is reinforced by the fact that more often than not, the entry into a major area into the game is almost always blocked by a boss or a mini-boss. The player generally has to defeat the said enemy and subsequently gets awarded with a key for his/her feat that gives him/her access to a new area. For example, the player obtains the "Oedon's Tomb Key" after defeating Father Gascoigne and thus gains access to the cathedral ward area located above Oedon's Tomb.

ILLUSIONS

The world of Bloodborne is one of illusions, misdirection, and dream-worlds. During their journey through the narrative, the PC gains and gradually enhances an attribute called "insight" as previously mentioned. This is gained either by slaying bosses or by consuming the in-game items called "Madman's Knowledge" or "Great One's Wisdom". The item description of the former reads-- "Skull of a madman touched by the wisdom of the Great Ones. Use to gain Insight. Making contact with eldritch wisdom is a blessing, for even if it drives one mad, it allows one to serve a grander purpose, for posterity", while that of the latter reads-- "Fragments of the lost wisdom of the Great Ones, beings that might be described as gods. Use to gain Insight. At Byrgenwerth Master Willem had an epiphany: 'We are thinking on the basest of planes. What we need, are more eyes'". A recurrent theme in Lovecraft's fiction is of

individuals coming in contact with cosmic godlike beings like Cthulhu and losing their sanity. In the game, the player will encounter many grotesque monstrous beings with multiple eyes, individuals collecting eyes, and others such as Provost Willem of Byrgenwerth literally lining their brains with eyes to increase their insight and transcend into the realm of the "Great Ones". In Lovecraft's short story, "From Beyond" the scientist Crawford Tillinghast creates a device that through the stimulation of one's pineal gland, allows the perception of different planes of existence beyond the normal perception of human beings. The unnamed narrator of the story experiences this and encounters horrific creatures in his own environment which get enveloped by a different inter-dimensional plane of existence. Thus, this is inspired by Lovecraft's oeuvre, and the gaining of insight has certain consequences in the game. It reveals certain elements of the world that were previously not perceivable by the PC and the player. After gaining a certain significant amount of "insight", the PC is able to perceive gigantic spider-like creatures called "Lesser Amygdala" clinging to the tall buildings of Yharnam, silently, unmoving, and unabashedly observing the PC down below, seemingly an insignificant matter to these cosmic Lovecraftian beings. This revelation seems to hint that these creatures were there all along, but were not perceivable to the player because of the lack of insight that the PC possessed. The increase in insight also allows the player to hear the ubiquitous cries of Mergo, the child of a "Great One". This new change in the world establishes the environment as an unreliable source of information much like the function of an unreliable narrator. Another of such metamorphoses associated with the world comes from the PC killing the "Rom, the Vacuous Spider", in a pocket dream-world of sorts, underneath the "Moonside Lake" behind Byrgenwerth. A note found by the player in the Oedon Chapel mentions-- "The Byrgenwerth spider hides all manner of rituals, and keeps our lost master from us". Reminiscent of this note, on killing the creature, the sky changes to a reddish tint and is dominated by a moon that changes into a color of pale red, rendering a more apocalyptic character to the cityscape, especially with the newly revealed "Lesser Amygdala". This is reminiscent of the first line of Lovecraft's short story, "What the Moon Brings" which reads, "I hate the moon—I am afraid of it—for when it shines on certain scenes familiar and loved it sometimes makes them unfamiliar and hideous" (2008, 212). Interestingly, in the very initial stages of their journey, the player encounters a note on the ground mentioning-- "Behold! A Paleblood Sky!". At that stage into the game, the note will seemingly be quite enigmatic as the sky at that point is one of a normal full moon night. A message that only sheds some meaning in retrospect after the mentioned revelation and seems to reinforce the fact that the world of *Bloodborne* is not what it might seem to be at first glance.

In their journey, after talking to the imposter Iosefka, and the "Chapel Dweller" at Oedon Chapel, the player acquires the option to send other characters encountered in the story seeking a safe haven to either the Chapel or Iosefka's clinic. When the player makes such a decision, they do so without proper knowledge of the actual safety of either place. If the player sends any individual to the clinic, they will realize later that they had sent them to their demise as the imposter Iosefka is eventually revealed to be conducting experiments on these individuals. The narrative of the game intentionally keeps the player misinformed and at times misdirects him/her to establish the unreliable nature of the game world. The "Chapel Dweller" is one that epitomizes the misdirection and illusory aspects of the game's narrative. Till the point that the player meets the mentioned character, the game through a performative and visual manner seems to reinforce the notion that anything that is monstrous or grotesque on the outside is an enemy that must be slain. The "Chapel Dweller" who at first glance appears to be a grotesque creature, yet vaguely humanoid in appearance (figure 5), firmly captures a sense of the uncanny when he turns out to be a good

samaritan who wants to extend help to survivors by giving them safe haven in the chapel in any way he can.



But you did all ya could, and so many owe you so much.

**Figure 5:** The good-hearted yet grotesque "Chapel Dweller" thanks the PC for their aid in giving survivors safe haven in the chapel

Through the player's conditioning of treating anything grotesque as malevolent and the prevalent cultural dogma of equating the grotesque with evil, a sense of suspicion is attached as to the "real" motives of the character. This perspective is voiced by the aptly named "Narrow Minded Man" in the game who comments on the "Chapel Dweller":

> I'll spare you one nugget of advice. Beware the blind man. There, the beggar sits, at the bottom of the bloody food chain... ...and then he's here, acting like he owns the place...He's not to be trusted. What's he want with all those people anyway? That little weasel has a murky past, I'm tellin' ya.

Reminiscent of how the initially well-meaning "Frankenstein's Monster" was shunned by society and his creator, because of his grotesque appearance– much is the same fate of the "Chapel Dweller". This trend of a sense of the uncanny extends from the mentioned character and pervades through his sanctuary as well. The Oedon Chapel that turns out to be a safe haven for survivors as expressed by Arianna: "Oh, hello dear. You weren't lying, this is a safe place. Thank you. I am in your debt", transforms into the *unheimlich* later on in the game. After the appearance of the blood-moon, several of the characters who had sought and found sanctuary within the chapel are met with tragedy. Arianna immaculately conceives a monstrous infant, "Adella, the Nun" loses her sanity, and the "Lonely Old Woman" is plagued by a sudden onset of dementia. In these instances, the "uncomfortable" is spontaneously revealed within the sphere of the "hospitable", thus creating an "uncanny" atmosphere and reinforcing the Gothic horror of *Bloodborne*.

### PERVERSION OF THE SACRED

As previously mentioned, Gothic literature since its inception has harbored certain anxieties related to the pre-eighteenth-century world of feudalism, aristocracy, and the unquestioned authority and sanctity of the church. M. Todd mentions, "The psychic

fragmentation commonly found within the Gothic tradition is not only rooted in the psychological struggles of authors and their characters, but it is also based on major historical and cultural changes which produce an anxiousness and guilt" (2011, 1). Hogle reiterates this theme in Gothic fiction:

> [T]he longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century (2002, 4).

Bloodborne incorporates similar symbols and themes in its game world and narration. The "Healing Church" at the very center of Yharnam is the point of origin of the beast plague that rages throughout the city. The church's use of the technique of "Blood Ministration" or the transfusion of the "Old Blood" to cure diseases in the Yharnamites leads to the outbreak of the plague as the very blood that is used to heal is revealed to be the cause of the outbreak. It is notable that behind this process is the hubris of Laurence, an ex Byrgenwerth scholar who establishes the church and all its functions. He does not heed the warnings of his mentor, Provost Willem who repeatedly insists that he "fear the Old Blood" and instead endeavors to make use of it. The church is also revealed to have been engaged in nefarious experiments on the inhabitants of Yharnam and its surrounding areas to establish a connection of human beings to the "Great Ones". It is hinted that the church also kept the outbreak of the beast plague concealed from the citizens of Yharnam initially, to keep its image untainted and continued the practice of "Blood Ministration". The church even resorted to such draconian measures as burning and cordoning off complete sections of the city to stop the spread of the disease. A note found by the player in Central Yharnam reads-- "When The hunt Began, the Healing Church left us, blocking the great bridge to Cathedral Ward, as Old Yharnam burned to the ground that moonlit night". In the end, though even the church itself could not escape from the affliction as in a stroke of poetic justice, the individual associated with the church transformed into the most grotesque monsters. An item acquired by the player after slaying the boss named "Cleric Beast", called the "Sword Hunter Badge" includes the mentioned information in its item description-- "As it was, clerics transformed into the most hideous beasts".

The imagery related to the church portrays Laurence as a perverted Christ-like figure. When the player first encounters Laurence, transformed into a monstrous beast, his body is reclined in a supine position into a gigantic throne-like structure underneath a headless sculpture of a female angel pouring a liquid from a pot (figure 6). The imagery here can be read as being inspired by Michaelangelo's sculpture "The Pietà", the corpse of Christ reclining in a supine position in the arms of the Virgin Mary. The liquid in the sculpture in Bloodborne references the "Old Blood" that Laurence's church considered as "holy", clearly a perverted rendition of the blood of Christ in Christian belief as establishing a connection of the mortal body and soul with God. Here, the "Old Blood" instead establishes a connection of the human with the inner animalistic aspects of their soul, literally morphing them into beasts. The encounter with Vicar Amelia entails a similar theme of perverting traditional Christian symbols and imagery into the infernal and grotesque. The player encounters Vicar Amelia kneeling before an altar with the same sculpture of the headless female angel. She has a candle lit in front of her and as she kneels, she clutches a circular golden pendant close to her chest.

**Figure 6:** The imagery associated with Laurence–the perversion of the "The Pietà" is also found in the architecture of the city of Yharnam

It is interesting to note that the particular way in which she clutches the pendant is reminiscent of the Christian Eucharist rite, in which the bread symbolising the flesh of Christ is held in the palm of the left hand, which in turn is held in the palm of the right hand. Subsequently, she turns into a beast and the player has to engage in a fight with her (figure 7). All through the fight she, now a beast, keeps holding the pendant with her paw, close to her chest.

**Figure 7:** Vicar Amelia continues to clutch the pendant as a beast, in the same manner, symbolising the struggle between her humanity and the beast within, while also expressing the ritualistic notion of the perversion of the Eucharist rite

Another of these traditional Christian symbols that get perverted to create a Gothic horror effect is that of immaculate conception. This theme is in line with the other Lovecraftian elements in the game. In *The Dunwich Horror*, Lavinia Whateley is impregnated by the cosmic being called "Yog-Sothoth", and through immaculate conception gives birth to a son Wilbur; the son matures at an abnormal rate and his twin brother who is a hideous monster is described to have "looked more like the father than Wilbur did"(H.P. Lovecraft, 2008, 667). In *Bloodborne*, after the blood moon appears, two women mysteriously become pregnant. One of them (Arianna), gives birth to a monstrous child. At Byrgenwerth, the player can discover a note that reads-- "When the red moon hangs low, the line between man and beast is blurred. And when the Great Ones descend, a womb will be blessed with child". The second pregnant woman, the imposter Iosefka, seems to know of this as, writhing in labor pains, she mentions-- "God I'm nauseous... Have you ever felt this? It's progressing. I can see things... I knew it, I'm different. I'm no beast... I... Oh... God, it feels awful... but, it proves that I'm chosen. Don't you see?". Hogle, commenting on the manner in

which repressed anxieties and conflicts within different characters in Gothic fiction observes:

> [M]any of the lead characters in Gothic fictions ,[...] deal with the tangled contradictions fundamental to their existence by throwing them off onto ghostly or monstrous counterparts that then seem ‚uncanny' in their unfamiliar familiarity while also conveying overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements viewed as incompatible by established standards of normality (2002, 7).

The several instances of women getting impregnated by the "Great Ones" and subsequently birthing monstrous children is of special significance with respect to the mentioned observation. The world of Bloodborne is created with clear inspiration from nineteenth-century Victorian London as previously mentioned. It is also of note that even though it is a fictional game world, various concepts and paradigms that seem to exist in that world are directly lifted from the real world-- the imposter Iosefka mentions the "Hippocratic Oath" and various other aspects of the world are such that they could naturally fit in with a rendition of nineteenth-century London. This being the case, even though there are not many direct references to it in the game, it would not be far-fetched to assume that the society of Yharnam is one that is plagued by a similar set of patriarchal paradigms as present in nineteenth-century London. This would entail Yharnamite women being under patriarchal surveillance, being relegated to the home, and child-bearing for sustaining the socio-economic status quo. Perhaps, by mentioning that she is "different", "chosen" and "no beast", she is rebelling against the effacement of her individuality and her identity being reduced to merely a womb, a fate that she deems no better than being a "beast" of burden. It is interesting to note that she is an individual who is void of identity, being an imposter, a *doppelgänger*, of the original Iosefka. The other woman who gets impregnated in a similar way in the game is the prostitute, Arianna. One can read her case as having similar connotations as well. Fiedler observes that the female psyche in responding to the pressures of social conventions and patriarchal surveillance, "turn[s] from society to nature or nightmare out of a desperate need to avoid the facts of wooing, marriage, and child-bearing (2003, 25).

### CONCLUSION

The Gothicism in Bloodborne incorporates Lovecraftian "Cosmic Horror" and elements of Gothic horror in general. The themes and patterns in the narrative are synergistically expressed through the interplay between the game environment, narrative, symbolism, aesthetics, and the performative aspects of the "play" that is sustained between the cybertext and the player. The Gothicism transcends beyond horror because of the socio-political and psychological anxieties encapsulated in the narrative while also delving into existential explorations of the ontology of being a "human". The notion of dichotomies that are prevalent in Gothic fiction in general, namely: culture/nature, civilization/taboo, expressed/repressed, are explored especially pertaining to the question of "humanity". Analysing the significance of such elements of the Gothic in the specific medium of video games is a stepping-stone towards further questions. The volatility of virtual worlds and the dangers therein portrayed in *Bloodborne* and the Lovecraftian mythos allows for potential explorations of similar aspects of the virtual worlds that pervade our society– be it in video games or other virtual media. Questions pertaining to identity, self-creation and assertion, surveillance, and the disintegration of the boundaries of the "real" and the "not real" can be explored. The Gothic also allows for a space of questioning and disrupting logocentric, linear, seemingly structurally solid narratives pertaining to the self, the other, and institutions in society that can be read and

explored through the "play" associated with video games and player participation. Such questions render the possibility of spaces for further research within the combined sphere of game studies and gothic studies.

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