

“Grant us eyes, grant us eyes! Plant eyes on our brains, to cleanse our beastly idiocy!”: FromSoftware's *Bloodborne*, and the New Frontier of the Gothic

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Abstract

This article will consider the ways that *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) plays on a broad range of Gothic themes and conventions, utilising unusual narrative techniques and gameplay mechanics which offer the player a means by which they might experience a Gothic narrative in ways that the traditional novel format does not allow for. It will argue that *Bloodborne* showcases the genre's potential new frontier: converting conventions into interesting new gameplay mechanics, and letting the player experience the genre through player-led narrative and agency.

Keywords

The Gothic; The Weird; Genre; Game Mechanics



Introduction

In 2015, FromSoftware released the Playstation 4 exclusive video game *Bloodborne* to critical acclaim, winning five Game of the Year awards and receiving nominations for seventeen more. The game is considered to be exemplary of FromSoftware's signature formula for game design,¹ as popularised by their *Dark Souls* series, which features a combination of challenging gameplay and narrative obscurity. *Bloodborne* remains relatively anomalous to that formula, featuring a grand, Gothic story and a far more energetic and violent form of gameplay than other games released by FromSoftware so far. This article will consider the ways that *Bloodborne* plays on a broad range of Gothic themes and conventions, utilising unusual narrative techniques and gameplay mechanics which offer the player a means by which they might *experience* a Gothic narrative in ways that the traditional novel format does not allow for.

There is little critical discourse on the Gothic in video games. In 1996, Fred Botting concluded his book, *Gothic*, by arguing that the genre actually died before the rise of narratively rich video games, with Francis Copolla's 1992 film, *Dracula*, which he wrote had been wholly divested of the Gothic's "transgressions, horrors and diabolical laughter... brilliant gloom and rich darkness... artificial and suggestive forms" (Botting, 1996, p. 180). Twelve years later, he released the lyrical follow-up to *Gothic*, called *Limits of Horror*, filled with suggestive ideas about contemporary Gothic forms, and though video games are mostly absent from his analysis, he does include a brief analytical glance at the potential Gothic properties of the classic video game *Pac-Man* (Botting, 2008, p. 215). Providing a little more consideration of the Gothic in video games, and published at a similar time to *Limits of Horror*, was the 2007 *Routledge Companion to Gothic*, which went a step further and featured an entire paragraph on potentially Gothic video games. This was in Jason Whittaker's article, 'Gothic and New Media', citing now-classic games such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, the franchise as it stood from 1996-2006), *Silent Hill* (Konami, the franchise as it stood from 1999-2006), *Quake* (id Software, 1996) and *Doom* (GT Interactive, 1993) (Whittaker 2007). Since 2008, however, there has been another lull in discourse on the Gothic in video games, a matter which should be surprising considering the rate at which gaming technology is advancing, and with it the capacity for video games to include rich narratives against a variety of well-defined backgrounds. Indeed, since 2008 a great many innovative new games have been released which certainly warrant critical attention as to their relationships to the Gothic over the likes of *Pac-Man*, including *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs* (Frictional Games,

¹ As of 30/05/2017, *Bloodborne* has a score of 92 on Metacritic, attracting "Universal Acclaim": <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/bloodborne>

2010 and 2013), *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen 2011), and *Dishonoured* (Arkane Studies, 2012). Even the game taking the focus of this article owes its lineage to *Dark Souls* and *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009 and 2011), each of which, though prominently set in easily recognisable Fantasy kingdoms, certainly embody many of the Gothic elements I will be arguing for in *Bloodborne*. In this article, however, I will argue specifically for the ways that FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* features the "transgressions, horrors and diabolical laughter... brilliant gloom and rich darkness... artificial and suggestive forms" that Botting supposed vanished in 1992. And I will do this by demonstrating how it addresses a broad range of Gothic conventions, in order to provide not only an exemplary Gothic setting and narrative, but also a Gothic experience through the procedure of gameplay.

Shira Chess wrote "In many ways the potential for non-linear storytelling of a video game is ideal for replaying gothic conventions" in 2015, in her article analysing the *Ravenhearst* video game series by Big Fish Studios – a series of adventure puzzle games set in and around a Gothic manor house (Chess, 2015, p. 386). In her analysis, she compares the *Ravenhearst* series to the more recent idea of the Gothic Romance, as it arose in the mid twentieth century. Primarily, she bases her analysis of the Gothic in *Ravenhearst* on the hidden object puzzle gameplay element, writing, "The hidden object puzzle, as a game mechanic, itself plays out several anxieties present in the Gothic novel, translating it into game form. The visual of finding a hidden object within a space of never-ending mess seems fitting for the Gothic—a genre built on excess" (Chess, 2015, p. 395). I would argue that this idea – of translating and examining gameplay elements for the Gothic – can be taken far further in *Bloodborne*, a vastly more complex, third-person action-roleplaying game, with an average completion time of around fifty hours. I will demonstrate this by not only examining *Bloodborne* for elements of the Gothic from a variety of different eras and, indeed, splintered sub-genres of the Gothic, but for a whole variety of different, unusual gameplay elements I would submit have been constructed deliberately by FromSoftware to enhance their Gothic narrative.

As outlined by David Punter in his two part series of books, *The Literature of Terror*, the Gothic has seen a great number of different iterations over a period of centuries (Punter, 1996). For the first part of this article, I will be examining several of those iterations, as they arose up until the start of the twentieth century. Firstly, the Classical Gothic, which was made popular in the mid-1790s, is characterised by such texts as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), and prominently features crumbling castles and themes of transgression (Punter 1996, Vol. 1, p. 54). Secondly, the Gothic as envisioned during the Romantic era, as characterised by such books as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819), and featuring glimpses of monstrous

humans and seekers of forbidden knowledge (Punter 1996, Vol. 1, p. 87). Thirdly, the early American Gothic, which is visible throughout the nineteenth century, characterised by stories such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), and defined by "its darkness, its tendency towards obsession, [and] its absorption with... evil" (Punter 1996, Vol. 1, p. 165). And fourthly the Decadent Gothic, which was popularised in the late 1800s, is characterised by books such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and is "concerned... with the problem of degeneration" (Punter 1996, Vol. 2, p. 1). Then, for the latter part of this article, I will be considering *Bloodborne* as it relates to one particular sub-genre of the Gothic, featured in what Punter calls the "Later American Gothic", that being the Weird, as characterised by H.P. Lovecraft (Punter 1996, Vol. 2, p. 27).

First then, to the simplest of game mechanics that *Bloodborne* offers in order to advance its Gothic narrative: the exploration of its setting.

Bloodborne begins in the city of Yharnam, at night. Yharnam is a city precisely embodying Botting's thoughts on late eighteenth-century Gothic locations: "the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic grandeur and wildness, its dark labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest" (Botting 1996, p. 2). Yharnam features thin labyrinthine alleyways littered with richly decorated abandoned carriages, caged hounds, embossed coffins, and arched doorways. The lighting renders the cobbled streets thick with gloom. Yet, *Bloodborne* is not content merely with the Gothic city. As Shira Chess writes, "Early gothic novels were housed in bleak and gloomy castles", reminiscent, no doubt, of Horace Walpole's 1796 progenitor for the genre, *The Castle of Otranto*, and here *Bloodborne* does not disappoint (Chess, 2015, p. 385). Beyond the outer limits of Yharnam, and accessible only by invitation, is the ancient and crumbling castle Cainhurst, filled with candles, decaying tapestries, chipped regal statues, and all manner of secret passages and grand rotting libraries. Botting goes on in *Gothic* to describe the genre as inhabiting, variously, "dark subterranean vaults, decaying abbeys, [and] gloomy forests", and *Bloodborne* delivers each in turn, from the underground Chalice Dungeons - shifting, crumbling catacombs buried deep beneath Yharnam - to the Cathedral Ward: a vast church featuring towering spires and enormous, echoing chambers, and the Forbidden Forest, filled with gnarled, leafless trees and all manner of deadly pitfalls (Botting, 1996, p. 44). Botting also suggests that "Science, with its chemical concoctions, mechanical laboratories and electrical instruments becomes a new domain for the encounter with dark powers" in the Gothic, and, of course, *Bloodborne* delivers here too, in the form of Byrgenwerth college, a domed and abandoned place of arcane learning (Botting 1996, p. 12). *Bloodborne*, then, almost seems to give the player a tour of Gothic

locations through the ages, painstakingly rendered for atmosphere in conjunction with its lighting system and soundtrack, which features sweeping, choir-led orchestral numbers, and eerie ambient noise. Importantly, the player is given free rein, once an area has been unlocked, to explore it. The player is essentially given the opportunity to freely explore every available edifice in these Gothic locations, in a manner not limited by the narrator, as in the traditional novel. The player is allowed to *experience* the world through agency: it is the player's choice where they might explore.

One particular exploratory gameplay element of *Bloodborne's* world especially embodies the Gothic, and that is the use of fog. Robert Mighall, in his article 'Gothic Cities' in *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic* devotes an entire sub-chapter to fog, saying, "Fog is a supremely sublime element... bringing obscurity... It also points to the problematic of visibility and knowledge" (Mighall, 2007, p. 56). *Bloodborne* uses fog as a means of blocking the player from certain parts of the game. These blockades, called 'fog gates', eerily obscure what lies beyond them, providing a physical barrier which the player must choose to pass beyond by pressing a button on their controller. Essentially, the player experiences the obscurity and lack of knowledge characteristic of fog in the Gothic, until they pass through the fog gates and experience what lies beyond.

And set in this Gothic landscape is *Bloodborne's* story.

As suggested above, *Bloodborne's* narrative is obscure. Unlike its peers, such as the *Elder Scrolls* games (Bethesda, 1994 onwards) or the *Witcher* games (CD Project Red, 2007 - 2016), which both take pains to make certain that the player is given every opportunity to absorb exposition through prolonged character dialogue and discoverable lengths of prose (say, in books on shelves), *Bloodborne* has a storyline deliberately difficult to follow. In *Bloodborne*, the primary means by which it is possible to discern more about the world's background is through reading the notes describing pieces of equipment. For example, by reading a medicinal item found in Old Yharnam it is possible to find out why that section of the city has been closed off: "Small medicinal tablets that counteract poison. Used to treat ashen blood, the baffling sickness that ravaged Old Yharnam long ago" (*Bloodborne*, 2015) Thus, the means of piecing together *Bloodborne's* story is by listening to the snippets of conversation given by friendly characters, and by reading pieces of equipment, in order to build up a bigger picture. Further, while in games such as those in the *Elder Scrolls* and *Witcher* series, the player is given a map and markers to follow storylines, in *Bloodborne* the player is given no map-like directions; it is, in fact, very easy to miss entire sections of the game. Cainhurst castle, for instance, is only accessible by finding a well-hidden invite buried deep in a

labyrinthine section of the game, with barely any clues ever given to the invite's location or, indeed, existence. Essentially, these gameplay decisions leave the player feeling quite lost, and caught up in trying to understand a large and fragmented set of narratives; an effect which, I would argue, deliberately embodies the Gothic. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick writes that the Gothic "is likely to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales" (Sedgwick, 1980, p. 8). And Botting writes of "Tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits" (Botting, 1996, p. 2). Thus, the player feels as if they are experiencing those fragmented narratives first-hand. By picking up and dropping and missing various plot threads, and gathering pieces of background from scavenged items, they are experiencing the Gothic story in a way reminiscent of the traditional Gothic novel, but enhanced by agency – they are creating their own fragmented narrative as they go along.

Holding dozens of smaller, "fragmented" narratives together is *Bloodborne's* central story – the player's purpose. This is given to the player at the start of the game by the player's reticent and evasive guide, the old hunter Gehrman, who says, "Ah-hah, you must be the new hunter... You're sure to be in a fine haze about now, but don't think too hard about all of this. Just go out and kill a few beasts. It's for your own good. You know, it's just what hunters do!" (*Bloodborne*, 2015) The player is a hunter and as such must hunt the beasts that fill the moonlit streets of Yharnam, in a storyline reminiscent of Van Helsing's in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Yet, with its branching narratives, *Bloodborne* challenges this central story at every turn. By gathering items, and listening to snippets of conversation delivered by the city's still-human inhabitants, it is possible to discern the reason why Yharnam is filled with beasts. And the narrative that emerges is, I would argue, one that embodies Punter's thoughts on Decadent Gothic narratives: "how much, they ask, can one lose – individually, socially, nationally – and still remain a 'man'?" (Punter, 1996, Vol. 2, p. 1).

Summarily: members of the Byrgenwerth college, which was established outside the city of Yharnam, discovered a substance called the Old Blood, decades ago. They quickly found that administering the Old Blood to patients would effectively cure any illness. A student of the college left Byrgenwerth and founded the Healing Church in Yharnam. The Healing Church dealt in blood ministrations, curing all illness in Yharnam with the miraculous Old Blood. However, it quickly became clear that the Old Blood came with a terrible side effect; it was turning patients into beasts. The Healing Church founded the Hunters; individual clerics designated to go out and kill these beasts, and any of those showing signs of affliction before they could transform. The player enters Yharnam at a time when the city has been mostly overrun by beasts. Those few other hunters that still

remain are beginning to transform into beasts themselves, and the worst beasts of all are those who transformed from ministers of the Healing Church itself.

I would argue that this central narrative, encompassing the first half of *Bloodborne*, absolutely embodies the Gothic as critics envision it. For instance, Botting considers Gothic narratives to broadly feature “threats associated with supernatural and natural forces” which in this case would be the transformed beasts and blood-mad rival hunters (Botting, 1996, p. 2). He also underlines the importance of “religious and human evil” in Gothic narratives, which in this case would be the excesses and continued experimentation of the Healing Church on its followers (Botting, 1996, p. 2). Further, he stresses the recurrence of “mental disintegration and spiritual corruption” in the Gothic, which in this case would be the madness inhabiting those coming close to beastly transformation, some of whom are certainly clerics (in the fight against the hunter called Father Gascoigne, for instance, he is exhibiting signs of madness before his inevitable transformation, crying out, “The sweet blood! Oh, it sings to me!” (*Bloodborne*, 2015)) (Botting, 1996, p. 2). Further, as well as the Decadent Gothic (as above), the transformations themselves seem to especially embody the Gothic Horror sub-genre of Gothic, which Kelly Hurley in her 2007 article 'Abject and Grotesque' correlates with the grotesque: “images of a grotesquely metamorphic body are of course common to Gothic horror”, she tells us, citing examples of similarly grotesque hybridity, such as that found in the Watley brothers from H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Dunwich Horror' (1929), the beast people in H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), and of course the shifting between Jekyll and Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) (Hurley, 2007, pp. 137-140).

Returning from the Gothic elements of the narrative back to the gameplay, it is through one particular element of player-given choice that the player is made to question their morality in slaying the beasts that fill Yharnam. At one crucial point in the game, the player comes across a sane rival hunter protecting a large group of beasts. That rival hunter, called Djura, is aggressive, and tells the player to leave. By piecing together the narrative, as described above, the player finds out that the beasts Djura is protecting were once people, and that he is protecting them because they are peaceful when left to themselves. This brings in to question the morality of killing all the beasts the player has encountered in the game so far and, importantly, because the player has partaken in the act of killing them through gameplay, the player is forced to take responsibility for those deaths, and the questionable morality surrounding the slaughter. It is very possible that every creature in *Bloodborne* is simply acting in self-defence. As such, the player is made complicit in the “mental disintegration and spiritual

corruption" of the Gothic, and further made to experience the Gothic narrative through that player's choice to continue slaughtering beasts, despite the horrific implications given to that player (Botting, 1996, p. 2).

One particularly interesting set of game mechanics related to this is the idea of death in *Bloodborne*. Most of the beasts that the player slays are reborn whenever the player dies, or whenever the player leaves an area and returns to it. Thus, the beasts are caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. But then, so is the player. Whenever the player dies (enhanced by the bright red words YOU DIED on the screen), the player is also reborn, usually set back quite a way from where they perished. Botting writes of death in video games: "No more life. Nor death... Beyond life and death... daemonic, repetitive rhythm of life-death... curiously cast in Gothic dress" (Botting, 2008, p. 215). This idea, of rebirth and renewal, of a kind of un-death, is reminiscent of the kind of supernatural post-death stories created by Stoker and Shelley in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Except, here, the player experiences the rebirth. They are shown it in the streets of Yharnam, as those they kill rise again and again, and they experience it as they, too, rise again and again from death.

Moving on from the Gothic as characterised by various elements of the genre before the twentieth century, it is possible to interpret various narrative and gameplay elements as belonging to other, related genres. As Botting writes, "The diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing" (Botting 1996, p. 14). *Bloodborne*, I would argue, does this in a very interesting way. Firstly, we will briefly examine *Bloodborne*'s relationship to the Steampunk genre, and then move on to the genre which characterises the game for most of its second half: The Weird.

Firstly, then; one of the most curious elements of *Bloodborne* are the *melée* weapons available to the player, which do not feel traditionally Gothic, a genre that favours poison, knives and crucifixes. They are transforming trick weapons, each with two modes. For instance, the threaded cane can be used like a quick-striking rapier, or transformed into a long whip. These weapons feel like they belong to the Steampunk genre. Laura Hilton writes of the relationship between Steampunk and the Gothic in 2011, saying, "'Steampunk is one subgenre of science fiction that exemplifies its entanglement with the Gothic'" (Hilton, 2011, p. 191). Hilton describes Steampunk as resembling Victorian England, where any technological advancements are steam-based, and this is particularly evident in one of the weapons available to the player: the stake driver, which seems to be powered through a combination of springs and steam. In this way, the

player first experiences what Botting calls “the Diffusion of Gothic features” as medieval and powder weapons are combined together against a Gothic background to produce an element of the game which is certainly science fictional in nature (Botting 1996, p. 14).

One of the most compelling gameplay elements that can be attributed to the Gothic experience follows on from the idea, touched on above, of “mental disintegration” (Botting 1996, p. 2). *Bloodborne* features a gameplay mechanic called 'insight', which is a number that increases every time the player encounters a particularly monstrous creature, or which can be increased by locating and consuming an item called 'madman's knowledge'. As such, *Bloodborne* essentially features a tool which measures how insane the player character is. Further, the more 'insight' the player gathers, the more Yharnam and the beasts inhabiting it change. When the player achieves an insight of 15, beasts start to become more aggressive, and some feature glowing eyes. And when the player reaches 40 insight, the whole game transforms from Gothic to Weird.

The Weird is certainly related to the Gothic. Indeed, a substantial portion of books devoted to Gothic horror tend to be devoted to the Weird, and specifically, the “preeminent figure in the field” (as China Miéville puts it) H.P. Lovecraft (Miéville, 2009, p. 510). Clive Bloom writes, in *Gothic Horror*, “Lovecraft combined the mystical tale of Arthur Machen with an emergent American-style science fantasy to create tales at once supernatural...and cosmological” (Bloom, 2007, p. 7). Thus, while still fond of the rotting castles ('The Rats in the Walls' 1924), fractured narratives ('The Call of Cthulhu' 1928), gloom, madness and despair ('The Shadow Over Innsmouth' 1936) as recognisable of the Gothic, the supernatural elements of Lovecraft's fiction tend towards the cosmological, alien and utterly unrecognisable. Miéville writes, “Rather than werewolves, vampires, or ghosts, Lovecraft's monsters are agglomerations of bubbles, barrels, cones and corpses, patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans, and other fauna notable for their absence from the traditional Western monstrous” (Miéville, 2009, p. 512).

As such, when *Bloodborne*'s monsters change from traditionally recognisable hybrid beasts and werewolves to grotesque, alien monsters more closely associated with Lovecraft's weird tales, it feels almost as if the game is letting the player experience yet another version of the Gothic; continuing to take the player on a tour of the genre.

As above, the moment of revelation, of change from Gothic to Weird, comes with the accumulation of enough 'insight'. After the player has witnessed enough horrifying events, or consumed enough portions of 'madman's knowledge' to bring their 'insight' score up to 40, the now-

familiar streets of Yharnam are permanently altered. In a moment reminiscent of Lovecraft's 'From Beyond' (1934), the invisible suddenly becomes visible. Attached spider-like to the spires and structures of Yharnam everywhere are huge, monstrous creatures with heads resembling mushrooms, later identified as 'Amygdala'. For the time being, they remain non-aggressive, and indeed their purpose is unclear. The only clear thing is the realisation that the player has gained enough maddening eldritch knowledge to see what has been hidden from the sane; Yharnam has been overrun not only by beasts, but by completely inhuman creatures from other cosmic realms. In a sense, through the mechanic of 'insight', and the results of its accumulation, *Bloodborne* is simulating a kind of weird madness for the player.

This theme, of the hunt for arcane knowledge, comes to the fore during the second half of *Bloodborne*, and is reflected by the player's hunt for answers as to the origin of the Old Blood. Represented both by the Gothic (in books like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 1818, and Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886), and the Weird (in books like H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, 1936), it is learned men who uncover the true terrors; as Miéville puts it, the horrors are "investigated by scientists, doctors, engineers... and it is their very 'rationality' that uncovers the radical and awesome monstrous" (Miéville, 2009, p. 512). As the game progresses, the truth behind the Old Blood is revealed. As above, the Old Blood was first studied at the college of Byrgenwerth. However, as it turns out, Byrgenwerth sourced the Old Blood from something otherworldly, just like those huge creatures inhabiting Yharnam – a Great One.

Little is explained as to the nature of the Great Ones in *Bloodborne*. We know only that most of them have now ascended to other planes of existence, and that they are ancient and powerful god-like beings bearing a striking resemblance to Lovecraft's elder gods (Cthulhu, from 'The Call of Cthulhu' 1928, for instance). Near the end of the game, after the player has encountered various iterations of the Great Ones, that player is given a choice: whether or not to be reborn as a Great One.

I would argue that this final example of narrative agency – that the player is allowed to choose whether or not they will transcend, and be reborn as a Great One – sets *Bloodborne* apart from traditional Gothic and Weird novels, in which the reader is given no choice but to see the results of whatever decisions the characters in those novels have made. Whichever choice the player makes, the narrative arc of the game is completed, and on the player's own terms. Player agency remains up to the very last moments of the game.

In conclusion, *Bloodborne* is a huge and complex video game, which, as I have argued, takes the player on a tour of the Gothic genre. For all that I have demonstrated above, I would submit that *Bloodborne* offers a Gothic experience reminiscent of Botting's idea of "the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes", quite in the face of his conclusion in *Gothic* that the genre died in 1992 with Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (Botting 1996, p. 14). Further, I would conclude that with *Bloodborne*, FromSoftware have successfully revitalised the Gothic genre through a relatively new medium, and broadened the narrative potential of it by utilising gameplay mechanics in order to offer a Gothic experience beyond that available in the traditional Gothic novel. *Bloodborne* showcases the genre's potential new frontier: converting conventions into interesting new gameplay mechanics, and letting the player experience the genre through player-led narrative and agency.

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