



BLOODLETTING: SEDUCTIVE MONSTROSITY AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN WAKING AND DREAMING IN *BLOODBORNE*

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ABSTRACT

FromSoftware, a Japanese game developer, displays perhaps their most gothic inspired creation in *Bloodborne* (2015). Hidetaka Miyazaki, the director of the game, though drawing from several other key authors in the field, primarily pays homage to themes and concepts present in H. P. Lovecraft's relatively niche oeuvre. The American gothic tradition thematically underscores various significant characteristics of the game, not only through the pervasive use of Lovecraftian imagery, but by incorporating the sense that the land itself is cursed, with hidden secrets and occult histories residing just below the surface. The gameplay mechanics in a FromSoftware title are intimately ligated to the lore, world building, ambiance, and the narrative structure—a structure known for being relatively loose and nonlinear. In *Bloodborne*, the player-character controls an avatar referred to as a “hunter” during their sojourn in the oneiric, perverse world called Yharnam. The various inhabits of Yharnam range from beastly in nature to unfathomable to the human mind, though they share the commonality of once being human prior to receiving blood ministrations. This blood came from Eldritch Great Ones and was once hailed as a panacea before the terrifying side effects manifested. This article explores the gothic connection between seduction, monstrosity, and the dynamics of waking and dreaming in FromSoftware's *Bloodborne*.

Keywords: videogames, monstrosity, FromSoftware, seduction, dream, waking and dreaming.

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Traditionally, monsters were a reviled thing, yet currently monsters are handled with a more nuanced approach, rendering them as something to be understood on their own terms rather than through fear, repulsion, or an anthropomorphic lens. In a modernized sense of monstrosity, one may be inspired to become sympathetic, even empathetic, to garish nightmares presented in contemporary media. The American gothic tradition arguably pioneered the conceit that monsters which appear resolutely outside of the human experience may yet relate to humanity as they often embody abstract, philosophical concepts found in existential nihilism. In particular, Lovecraft's contribution to the American gothic, notably his formulation of Eldritch horrors, rely on and reuse concepts such as existential dread, fear of extinction, and chronophobia amongst a multitude of

other anxieties. Additionally, many have expanded upon H.P. Lovecraft's framework, turning these seemingly incomprehensible Eldritch horrors into more relatable concerns or unjust social practices. Lessening the othering of the monstrous frequently leads to the revelation that humans are the "real" monsters.

However, a type of schism remains in formulations of the monstrous in the contemporary American gothic as some monsters retain unrelatable characteristics, such as Stephen King's Pennywise the Clown in *It* (1986), while others appear created to inspire sympathy, like the enigmatic ghost in the film *Gothika* (2003). The familiarity of contemporary monsters, which is arguably the type currently more *en vogue*, is partly subverted in FromSoftware's iconic video game *Bloodborne* (2015), as it has examples that belong to both sides of the aforementioned schism. The player inhabits a post-cataclysmic world where the monstrous is simultaneously relatable and unrelatable as it draws inspiration from Lovecraftian and similar works. This complicates the blurred lines between what constitutes a monster and what passes for human. *Bloodborne*, keeping in line with various gothic tropes and elements, presents a confluence of monstrosity, replete with its at times seductive allure. Additionally, the game world allows the player to enter impossible physical realms, such as altered states of consciousness, namely nightmares, or modalities of experience. In particular, this article argues that the game is concerned with exploring aspects of waking and dreaming in relation to monstrosity and seduction.

1. THE MONSTROUS WORLD OF *BLOODBORNE*

In obscuring the narrative, FromSoftware allows for dreamscapes, nightmares, and consciousness to converge, exploring anxieties and bugbears that are no longer relegated to their primary strata of the mind. The monsters of xenophobia, racism, and othering appear just as readily as cosmic horrors, existential threats, and nihilistic demotivation. These incarnations, embodiments, or representations (however the observer best sees fit) appear as "enemy" creatures. Though as noted by a former hunter Djura found in the buried remains of Old Yharnam, the beasts were once human. Therefore, while the motives of the Eldritch Great Ones are perhaps more unrelatable, what they represent can be related to very human concerns. Regardless of appearing more beastly or extraterrestrial in nature, these foes are integral aspects of the human experience: they are an extension of the psyche.

FromSoftware, a Japanese company that often takes inspiration from Western media in their games, establishes a fragmented form of mythopoesis where the narrative is obscured through broken dialogue interactions from scattered non-player characters (NPCs), in addition to item descriptions that hint at events that have already transpired. If the player wants to understand aspects of the narrative instead of enjoying *Bloodborne* strictly for its gameplay, then it is incumbent upon the player to piece together this seemingly disparate information to begin to understand some of the more major plot points.

However, FromSoftware also omits a substantial amount of narrative information, allowing for the subject to fill in the gaps of the plot with their own “head canon.” This makes their games interesting for debate and discussion, but rather difficult for concrete analysis, especially in an academic sense where precision is key. In “The Cryptographic Narrative in Video Games: The Player as Detective” (2021), Ana Paklons and An-Sofie Tratsaert assert, “This concept of the cryptographic narrative has been adopted by some indie horror games . . . The idea behind this type of narrative in the gaming experience is that it leads to a hidden story which is not evident in the narrative first suggested to the player, thus creating a mystery to be solved” (170–71). Though *Bloodborne* is not an indie game, it is cryptographic as there are numerous hidden narrative threads throughout the game; some of these threads are merely hinted and are not fleshed out by design, leaving the mystery to be purposefully unsolvable by the player.

This sense of an untold, buried history is another key aspect that *Bloodborne* has in common with numerous pieces of American gothic media. *Bloodborne*'s ideologies are difficult to narrow down as the cryptic nature of the narrative allows the player to insert a degree of their own understandings into the narrative. The player draws their own conclusions as if the game were paradoxically both an exercise in the school of new criticism, prizing formal analysis of what is solely presented, fragmented as it is, as well as its opposing theoretical framework, reader-response theory. There is an interesting form of remediation at play in *Bloodborne* as it is a Japanese game set in a carnivalesque, steampunk world that mirrors or is mimetic of Victorian England in a multitude of ways. Yet the American gothic tradition thematically underscores various significant characteristics of the game, not only through the pervasive use of Lovecraftian imagery, but by incorporating the sense that the land itself is cursed, with hidden secrets and occult histories residing just below the surface. This transnational approach assists in making the game more relatable on a global scale; within the context of the American gothic, it is interesting to see an adaptation of Lovecraftian lore used in foreign media that clearly pays homage to an integral and innovative aspect of the American gothic. While other inspirations are readily noted, it is Lovecraft that predominates as the chief source of inspiration.

The foreboding nature of the game is also mimetic to horror cinema and television, where the narrative gets progressively tenser, and the central character is placed in a more precarious position the closer they get to the “truth” of what is occurring. The surreal quality of *Bloodborne* with its preoccupation with dreamscapes, altered consciousness, and various strata of the mind further muddles a logical approach to the narrative. Much like in Lovecraftian writings where madness is symptomatic of greater knowledge, the incoherence of *Bloodborne* arguably places it in a more subjective web of meaning.

In his article “From Content to Context: Videogames as Designed Experience” (2006), Kurt Squire claims, “Players’ understandings are developed through cycles of

performance within the gameworlds, which instantiates particular theories of the world (ideological worlds). Players develop new identities both through game play and through gaming communities in which these identities are enacted” (19). The player adopts the persona of a hunter that was once fully human yet becomes something slightly different after receiving blood ministration from the so-called Healing Church for an undisclosed malady. Blood ministration comes with peculiar side-effects such as transforming a human subject into an aggressive, monstrous beast that ultimately loses their sense of humanity.

The nature of cosmic horror in *Bloodborne*, especially its relatability on a transnational scale given its existential-nihilistic sentiments, is furthered by the bloodborne plague wrought from blood ministration that affects humanity by altering their status as a human. The process converts them into grotesque monstrosities. The hunter is tasked with dispatching these altered humans; the irony being that the hunter is a close relation—a precursor to this grotesque form of monstrosity. Maintaining a more human visage arguably allows the player to feel a closer affinity to their character, their stand-in that acts out monstrous tendencies.

Therefore, the hunter occupies a liminal space between humanity and the monstrous—a more relatable form of monstrosity than the Eldritch Great Ones whose blood is used in the blood ministration. Furthermore, aside from the Eldritch Great Ones themselves and the nearly extinct race of Pthumerians (who may or may not have been human), the vast majority of the enemies of the hunter in *Bloodborne* are former humans. The Celestials, for instance, are humans experimented on by high-ranking members of the Church to transcend humanity, in the hopes of creating a new Eldritch Great One. There are also mutated crows, rats, and canines that have been altered from their original, natural state due to their close proximity to humans, which may have led to accidental ingestion of mixed blood.

Bloodborne highlights a dynamic relationship between knowledge and the power of blood. Bygernwerth embodies both of these principles as it is mostly comprised of a university full of scholars seeking to move beyond human knowledge into a posthuman state. Through their research of Eldritch blood discovered in the tombs of the Pthumerians, leading to the origins of the Healing Church, these scholars ultimately altered their status as human. Additionally, it is heavily implied that the Pthumerian civilization ended after experimentation with said blood went awry, yet the Healing Church would not exist without the discovery of this blood since blood ministration is the cornerstone of that institution. From this, factions were established, represented by hunters dressed in either white or black.

The hunters dressed in white belong to the Choir, the highest order of the Church, and they rely more on innovations begotten from research and “hunter tools” (the equivalent of spells that have Eldritch properties). The members of the Choir are highly

educated and are often trusted to perform blood ministration, whereas the black garbed hunters tend to use more common weapons since they favor going on hunts to eradicate beasts. There is, of course, an irony to this since the fears of contagion and violent death are both represented by these factions, yet both were allegedly created for the betterment of society.

However, this is an instance of attempting to fix one problem by creating another. While traditional diseases may no longer be a pressing concern, infection from the plague supplants this fear. Mutation and death have become more pervasive. The few surviving humans fear infection from the blood plague or being torn asunder by rampaging beasts. Those remaining stay quarantined in their homes unless directed by the player-hunter to a place of relative safety, as non-infected humans do not have the capability of leaving on their own. It is telling that the other hunters do not assist in evacuations, despite being created as a social service.

The blood plague is derived from using the blood of the Great Ones in the hopes of creating panacea. Yet it is experimenting with the unknown that causes a cataclysmic event—an event the player does not experience first-hand as they are only subject to the world in ruin. While Susan Tyburski is discussing gothic cinema in their article, “A Gothic Apocalypse: Encountering the Monstrous in American Cinema” (2013), the claims are readily applicable to video games. Tyburski states that “in *The Last Winter*, an even more mysterious force causes humans to descend into madness as their environment becomes increasingly more hostile. Despite their individual incarnations, in all of these films the threat to humans is not limited to a single monster but to an all-encompassing monstrous environment” (148).

Bloodborne's world, Yharnam, also causes a blurring of sanity and insanity, demonstrating elements of gothic horror; it highlights the monsters lurking within the darker recesses of the collective human psyche that exist in dynamic relation to their environment. This also follows closely Tyburski's central argument concerning eco-horror since the natural environment has been disrupted and transformed into a more hostile, dangerous, and polluted world. The game sets Yharnam as a hellscape that the player transcends or succumbs to by either surviving the hunt, evolving into an Eldritch Great One, or failing to complete their quest.

Furthermore, the underlying causality for the blood plague is a closely guarded secret from all but the members of the Choir. It is implied that the Choir relies on misinformation to create contempt for outsiders, shifting the blame to them for the grotesque results of the Choir's treatments. This establishes knowledge and censorship as a means of power, assisting in driving the current of xenophobia since outsiders, much like the average Yharnamite, are not trusted to know the machinations of the Church, how society collapsed, or the origins of blood ministration. The insular Yharnamites have a sense of

mistrust placed on outsiders, which is exacerbated by the fear of contamination by the plague (see Fig. 1).

Paranoia likely is a common symptom of the plague, which furthers this disdain towards foreigners. Eileen the Crow is an outsider twice over as she is tasked with eliminating hunters that succumb to their “blood lust” and is the only character with a Scottish accent. This too places it within the tradition of Lovecraftian fiction and the American gothic as xenophobia and the hidden, “true” drivers of particular societies are prevalent themes in those works as well. Blood lust and xenophobia are recurring themes that will be further discussed. The fears in *Bloodborne*, exaggerated as they are, mirror some more recent fears of contracting a global epidemic, most notably COVID-19 and the mandatory quarantines.

2. SEDUCTIVE MONSTROSITY

Bloodborne also ascribes to yet another gothic tradition: there are no *born* monsters; they are expressions of humanity. Jeffrey Cohen (1996) proposes that

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture . . . Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself. (4)

Humanity, therefore, falls under the seductive influence of its own dark reflection, leaving representation of the self and its difficulty in asserting a “true” referent in its wake. Yet the motives of the Eldritch Great Ones are unknowable; they are thus part of the more unrelatable, less sympathetic tradition of the monstrous. The incorporation of Eldritch Great Ones in *Bloodborne* is an integral part of the narrative and gameplay that serves as the catalyst for the dystopic game world, as it is the blood of these Eldritch horrors that disrupts virtually every conceivable facet of this society.

Bloodborne resembles FromSoftware’s flagship series *Dark Souls* (2011–2018), yet it is set apart from *Dark Souls* on a gameplay level, by focusing more on a type of controlled yet frenetic playstyle that prizes aggressiveness rather than methodical combat; viciousness becomes an asset to the hunter who increasingly becomes more monstrous. The hunter is not some noble knight set to slay a malicious dragon or a Belmont tasked to put Dracula to rest for a century: the hunter is in the process of becoming a monster. The presence of Father Gascoigne, an early game boss who turns into a beastly monster, gives supporting evidence to what Eileen the Crow admonishes against: overindulgence in the hunt will rapidly progress the symptoms of beasthood until the hunter becomes “blood drunk.” The result of which includes losing their humanity by becoming a beast. Gascoigne, along with other hunters that transform into hideous abominations, become

signifiers or distorted portents, representing the consequences of zealously dispatching enemies.

In a sense the hunter is not only destroying the inhabitants of Yharnam, but the human player as well, given that becoming a monstrous hunter that revels in the destruction of their fellow inhuman inhabitants is satisfying for the competent player. By adopting aggressive playstyles, the player interacts with the game on psychological and physical levels. This is not particular to *Bloodborne*, yet its alleged difficulty requires players to learn the most efficient manner of slaying the various beasts and Great Ones, lest they do not progress further in the game. That is, of course, if the player responds to the game in the manner the developers intended.

Bloodborne's emphasis on dispatching the various residents of Yharnam in a bestial fashion creates a seductive quality for the player (fig. 1). The hunter remains *mostly* human until one of the endings of the game is achieved—where they ascend to become an infant Great One—yet they are undeniably something other than human, despite various signs and signifiers of humanity. Perhaps that is not quite accurate in *Bloodborne*; perhaps these monstrous qualities that the hunter possesses, seductive as they are, formulate an expression of innate, deep desires of the human psyche. Ideally, the player is meant to cast away their fears in entering this gothic world with the aim of embracing primal violence: a space dominated and relegated to what may be conceived as the id. The id is, after all, the seat of wanton desire and pleasure.



Figure 1 Yhnamites assembled for their ritualistic hunt for “monsters,” *Bloodborne* (2015).

The Gothic possesses a long history that continues to evolve in regards to seduction, replete with alluring qualities. A multitude of narratives depict protagonists that are often inexplicably drawn towards their own peril or ruin, ensnaring the audience by casting a similar type of spell of attraction. *Bloodborne* likewise draws in the player yet makes their presence feel out of place, an unwelcomed foreign addition that cannot assimilate into the various regions comprising Yharnam. Seduction, in this context, is rather difficult, if not impossible to represent, as seduction comprises an eradication of the boundaries between the Self and Other as noted in Baudrillard's text *Seduction* (1979).

Squire's earlier assertion that players acquire new identities through video games may be further understood as a drive towards the seductive, which is, debatably, a stronger force than the commonplace power fantasies in modern media. Baudrillard asserts, "Seduction cannot possibly be represented, because in seduction the distance between the real and its double, and the distortion between the Same and the Other is abolished. Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer 'other;' it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond" (1990, 67). Yet there is a degree of madness associated with this seduction; the revelation that Narcissus is pathological is all too apparent to the observer, though obscured from the principal subject. As the realities of the horrors in *Bloodborne* are revealed, a greater degree of the irrational and absurd must be accepted to maintain its narratological engagement with its player.

In narratives, the concept of a panacea is a rather seductive one—not just for those suffering from thanatophobia—begetting a state free from virological, bacterial, fungal. . .etc. attack. "Freeing" the body of these concerns has not only been a preoccupation in medicine, but for literature as well. Yet it is in literature that such promises come at the expense of a Faustian arrangement. Established medical communities do not purport to own a panacea; it is in narratives where these things are imagined in tandem with the ramifications they present. Be it immortality, unforeseen somatic side-effects, psychological corruption, or a costly trade, narratives generally envision that panaceas do not come cheap. While it is certainly seductive to be free of ailments, *Bloodborne* falls within the gothic tradition of urging caution as it defies the natural order (fig. 2).

Importantly, blood ministrations do more than cure pathologies prior to transformation since it grants the user a feeling of power and euphoria. The monsters often seek out and recreationally abuse this Eldritch blood. Furthermore, they become far stronger, instilling a lust for more power that is sated by consuming ever growing quantities of this blood. There are cravings for more blood, which before the monstrous side effects are fully realized and noted, was often freely given to patients, expediting the spread and intensity of the blood plague. The cost of this failed panacea is quite clear: it comes at the expense of one's humanity in favor of succumbing to desire and the alleviation of primal, instinctual fears.



Figure 2 A statue on a lift depicting experimentation, possibly an early form of blood ministration. Below the operating table, a scourge beast—resembling a werewolf—emerges, *Bloodborne* (2015)

Savagery may not just be an intrinsic part of *Bloodborne*, but also part of the seductive influence of our darker desires, our simultaneous denial of and return to monstrosity. After all, monstrosity, given the previous premise, can *only* exist within civilized realms. Under this assumption, monstrosity is a turn from the social or civilized, regardless of the various guises and manifestations monstrosity may take. Yet the civilized must exist as a baseline to establish the monstrous; breaking the normative, at least in fantasy or ideation, is frequently viewed as a pleasurable, seductive act. Stefanous Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsberg (2008) reason that, “We must reserve the qualification of ‘monster’ for organic beings. There are no mineral monsters. There are no mechanical monsters” (135). The organic has the capacity to feel pleasure, pain, anxiety, and comfort, relegating the monstrous to be inherently and dynamically ligated with emotion, biology, and cognition. While contemporary gothic representations do create spaces that are uncanny, particularly impossible realms as seen in works such as *House of Leaves* (2000), these things are not necessarily monstrous as they lack an embedded host to signify the monstrous.

Often times, as in the case of *Bloodborne*, the allurement of being monstrous comes from the shirking of established laws whilst giving into the impulses of the id. Savagery and monstrosity have an indelible link with human impulses that underscore a tendency towards the anti-social. It is notable that the denizens of *Bloodborne* follow predictable, ritualized patterns when they are unaware of the hunter’s presence. Once they become aware of the player, they instantly become hostile, as if the hunter’s mere presence is

enough to galvanize these former humans, which is another form of patterned, scripted behavior. While there are ludic and mechanical reasons for this, it also displays the frenzied and volatile nature of this brand of monstrosity. Thus, the physical representation of monstrosity becomes a secondary visual signifier to the more primal impulses residing in the deeper recesses of consciousness. It is through a meticulous process of enculturation and cohabitation that these impulses become stymied yet not fully removed from the subject.

However, as the game takes place after a catastrophe, the moment of potential salvation, the hope for recovery, has long since been forgotten in the amnesic fog of recurring behavioral patterns in a brutal, primal society. These humans-turned-monsters acting in anomic ways may serve to illustrate the desire to act in a more anti-social manner, or it may be more closely related to constructions of the monstrous as more “brainless,” akin to zombies or remnants (fig. 3). Regardless of the reasoning, the monstrous in *Bloodborne* is one of primal violence propagated by instinctual aggression. It is pleasurable to give in to one’s urges or to “turn the mind off” and do as one pleases. There is a sense of losing oneself for the sake of desire.



Figure 3 Inhabitants of the Fishing Hamle in ritualized prostration, *Bloodborne* (2015)

Patterns, which may be a product of action without heavily relying on cognition, comprise much of the mechanical interworking of the game, though this may also a consequence of narrative design. This denotes a paradox between the ritualized and the seductive impulses of the monstrous. *Bloodborne* eliminates, or at least reduces, the schism

between the seductive, monstrous impulses of our instinctual self with the controlled, cooperative self. Removing this dichotomy establishes a logical explanation of how monstrosity may become a societal normative if it is allowed to become unfettered through the death of ordered society.

3. WAKING AND DREAMING

The interplay between society, culture, consciousness, subconscious, and the unconscious come to the forefront in *Bloodborne*. In that nebulous realm of dreams is potentially where meaning is further broken down and fragmented and where, paradoxically, greater insights into the interworking of *Bloodborne's* narrative are found. Irina Paperno, in her chapter “Dreams of Terror: Interpretations” (2009), proposes a theoretical framework when discussing dreams and their relation to narrative: “In a word, dreaming is an analogy of fiction, or literature. As one scholar put it, dreaming is the ‘ur-form of all fiction.’ Yet (he continues) ‘a dream is fundamentally unlike a fiction, structurally and affectively, in that it is a lived experience as well as a narrative’” (162). *Bloodborne's* narrative is difficult to sequentially arrange, as if its telling resembles the foggy moments of a dreamer attempting to recall their recent dream as it slips away under the pervasive influence of rational logic. The nightmare realms in *Bloodborne* will be pursuantly analyzed within the context of adding to the overall narrative and as a type of lived experience for the player (fig. 4).

Yharnam, despite being a digital environment, is not purely mimetic of a physical setting. Mirroring early models of psychoanalysis that arrange the complexities of the mind, consciousness and unconsciousness, in various intermingling strata that possess a dynamic relay between various layers, Yharnam allows the player to enter distorted versions of the past referred to as Nightmares. Interlaid amongst these strata is the liminal realm of dreams. Derrida muses, “The metaphor of the *stratum* (Schict) has two implications. On the one hand, meaning is founded on something other than itself. . . On the other hand, meaning constitutes a stratum whose unity can be rigorously delimited” (1979, 159). Derrida’s assertion that the metaphor of the stratum may be flawed, despite some pragmatic uses, is applicable in attempting to understand the constituent nightmare layers of Yharnam, given their abstract nature. Yharnam is a place that resides in non-space as much as it does the material, replete with liminal spaces that fill this synthetic world. It is difficult to establish outside referents for some aspects of the respective stratum, causing, as Derrida suggests, a failure of the structure of a proper stratum correlating to the nebulous layers of Yharnam.



Figure 4 The oneiric realm of the Hunter's Nightmare, *Bloodborne* (2015).

There are various areas that comprise Yharnam in a material sense if discussed as a physical, rather than digital, location. Yharnam is built over the ruins of Old Yharnam and encompasses the eponymous town, Cathedral Ward, and corresponding areas. Close to this are Charnel Lane, Forbidden Woods, the College of Byrgenwerth, and Yahar'gul. The nightmare realms are distorted versions of the past that do not exist in the same way that Yharnam does as a geographical location in the game. They are more in line with states of consciousness. A Yharnamite cannot simply enter nightmare realms without acquiring particular items or traversing plague infested areas—a trial or ritual of sorts must be performed to gain access. These additional layers are Nightmare Frontier, which may be entered through the school of Mensis or by using a tonsil stone, the Nightmare of Mensis, accessed through progressing the game, and the Hunter's Nightmare, which requires an item called the Eye of a Blood-Drunk Hunter to enter. If the Hunter's Nightmare is viewed as a singular location with a couple of connecting parts, it comprises a more horrific and grotesque version of Cathedral Ward, the Research Hall, and the Fishing Hamlet. This is the most notable stratum of Yharnam, forming the Downloadable Content (DLC), “The Old Hunters.”

The first section of this DLC is a stark contrast to the Hunter's Dream, which is the hub area of the game. In *Bloodborne*, a prevalent thematic element is that of finding purpose within the dynamics of waking and dreaming, as noted by the Doll's recurring phrase, “May you find your worth in the waking world” (*Bloodborne*). It is quite intriguing that it is in waking, rather than being vulnerable during repose, that the hunter is

presented with the greatest risk of harm to their person. Furthermore, the hunter is able to traverse to a distorted past where memories, regret, and nightmares reside in a tangible manner. The hunter does not simply battle so-called ghosts representative of various subconscious fears or anxieties in these nightmare realms. These spaces are beholden to the same in-game physics as the rest of Yharnam.

The liminal realm between waking and dreaming has long been a preoccupation of the gothic. Judith Halberstam (1995) states, “Gothic. . . is the breakdown of genre and the crisis occasioned to ‘tell,’ meaning both the inability to narrate and to categorize. Gothic, I argue, marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse” (23). This inability to properly articulate can readily be expanded into conversing about dreams due to the lack of coherence, cohesion, and chronology of dreams. The “inability to narrate” is not only part of the aforementioned fragmented mythopoesis of FromSoftware, but also alludes to the difficulty in properly communicating and expressing dreams.

In his chapter, “Dreaming in Layers: Lovecraftian Storyworlds in Interactive Media” (2021), Eoin Murray asserts:

The Nightmares and Dreams within *Bloodborne* craft deeper meanings for the player to explore, from enemy encounters to the structure of the space around them. The farthest reaches of the game screen and environment hint towards a deeper connection between these Dream and Nightmare locations where the true madness of *Bloodborne*'s storyworld, Yharnam, resides. (225)

These nightmare locations become of special interest as they are emblematic of a breakdown in reason and sanity, furthering a sense of madness and monstrosity. The nightmare represents that which is hidden from history, culture, and the myths the hunters propagate about themselves. The nightmare is a closer verisimilitude of the truth of Yharnam than the typical areas the player encounters. It is in these spaces that the gothic tradition of buried secrets arises anew through unconventional means, as *Bloodborne* subverts its already unorthodox narrative by having the player call into question the reality of the world they are experiencing.

The fears expressed in *Bloodborne* function symbolically since the subtext does allude to the deep-rooted fear of the unknown, primarily manifested through the fear of infection, the Other (xenophobia), and scotophobia (numerous enemies lurk out of sight or in the dark), amongst various other concerns. As in numerous gothic works, there is a profound correlation between fears and trauma. In “Beyond the Walls of *Bloodborne*: Gothic Tropes and Lovecraftian Games” (2019), Vítor Casteloes Gama and Marcelo Velloso Garcia argue, “Mental trauma is translated into an element of the mise-en-scène by relating scenery revelations to odd metaphysical events. Changes in perception are linked to physical changes in the game’s setting, for instance, the result of making contact with great ones is the access to nightmares” (53). This also supports the appearance of the

amygdalas (massive multi-limbed and eyed creatures) throughout Yharnam since they are hidden from the player from the onset of the game. Once the player reaches the final act or has acquired relatively high insight—a metric that also denotes the amount of forbidden or inhuman knowledge—then the amygdalas are seen.

In medicine, the amygdala is an almond shaped mass of gray matter believed to be the core of a neural system that controls and regulates some emotions, particularly processing fear and threatening stimuli with corresponding reactions. Creatures hidden beyond human perceptions, the veil of “reality,” is a conceit directly used in Lovecraftian fiction, but also functions in *Bloodborne* as means of demonstrating that the world of Yharnam is not quite how initially presented: it experiences dynamic changes in its environment in relation to the player’s or the hunter’s (perhaps both) alleged acquisition of occult knowledge. One of these amygdalas ushers the player into the DLC. These environmental changes, notably the aforementioned distorted version of Cathedral Ward, prime the player to notice that the initial perceptions of the game world may have been erroneous. Entering a living nightmare via an amygdala, conceived in different terms, facing fears in a dream-state, is a means of ascertaining higher “truths” in *Bloodborne*.

The final area of the DLC and arguably the one with the most hidden truths is the Fishing Hamlet. This villa is, with little doubt, highly inspired by Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (1936). From a narrative perspective, the hunter is enticed to traverse this perilous plane of existence or consciousness (it is rather ill defined), through the seductive allure of uncovering the secrets that the original hunters attempted to bury. Lovecraft writes, “Several non-residents had reported monstrous glimpses from time to time, but between old Zadok’s tales and the malformed denizens it was no wonder such illusions were current. None of the non-natives ever stayed out late at night, there being a widespread impression that it was not wise to do so. Besides, the streets were loathsome dark” (2011, 822). The inhospitality towards the Other in Lovecraft’s text stems from a mistrust towards outsiders, illustrating a pervasive sense of xenophobia. This is also the case in *Bloodborne*, yet it was the first hunters, long before the player arrives, that caused the initial transgression.

Much like colonizers, the first hunters conquered the initially passive village after a Great One washed upon their shores. Given that colonialization is an ongoing process, the residents adopted many of the customs of these first hunters. Furthermore, these hunters, who were trained in occult sciences by the Healing Church, experimented on the residents, further mutating the natives of the fishing hamlet that were already affected by the presence of a Great One. This underscores the influence of outsiders on a relatively closed socio-political and ecological environment, causing this area to become an approximation of historical horror arrived at by traversing cultural unconsciousness. The game makes clear that this area is not part of the contemporary Yharnam, but rather an echo of a traumatic past: it is a nightmare space.

The realm of dreams as means of glimpsing “truth” is wooly at best, impossible at worst. Richard Hilbert (2010) uses a hypothetical dream to discuss complications that may arise in analyzing a simple dream where a person is “chased by a dog” (see Fig. 5). The dog in question may represent a variety of disparate things and its appearance in a dream calls into question its signification or meaning as a dog, proposing the question, “What makes it a dog?” (42). The polysemous nature of dreams becomes obfuscating, even potentially manipulating as definitively ascribing a particular interpretation of a dream and its associated dreamscape with singular, comprehensive, concrete, or abstract meanings becomes associated with self-reflexive exercises: the dog in the example *could be* virtually anything, rendering it closer to nothingness or, perhaps, a funhouse mirror for both the dreamer and interpreter. While this multifaceted approach moves dreams more into philosophical and not fully understood scientific realms, it does not necessarily preclude their use, as they comprise part of a visual shorthand that has become quite standardized within gothic and horror media.



Figure 5 The hunter in action, either evading or ambushing scourge beasts, *Bloodborne* (2015).

This shorthand becomes codified in *Bloodborne's* visual language through not only the monstrous creatures, gothic architecture, and statues (some in Yahar'gul allude to Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings), but as well in the vistas, landscapes, and sky. The color pallet, while seldom bright, presents a nebulous, hazy quality that may be interpreted as fog, further occulting sight, or to the blurred aspects of the represented stratified mind. As noted, these strata do not exist in clearly delineated borders, but in

dynamic flux and conversation with one another. The clouds are also mimetic of this, stretching long and dark, fostering an opaqueness that stifles the clarity of the night sky as if a type of overdrawn cobweb. While the nature of the narrative is murky, this is reiterated and reinforced by the visual metaphors that transcend direct language. Images, pictures, or, in this case, graphics may only be discursively discussed as they are a different medium than the strictly literary; it is an impossibility to fully translate images into literary terms as Roland Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida* (1980). Rather, there is an ongoing relay of remediation in attempting to extrapolate deeper meaning when discussing the visual, pictographic, or ocular as this formulates an altogether separate medium than that of the literary.

Bloodborne has a preoccupation with the visual and, therefore, eyes, which is a recurring theme ligated with insight. Rather than an avenue of acquiring insight, it can also refer to the means of properly engaging and reading the visual codified language that supports and scaffolds the narrative, by paradoxically being mysterious and obtuse. In the Nightmare of Mensis (named after the school of Mensis that was wiped out in their attempt at communing with or potentially calling down an Eldritch Great One), the main antagonist of the area, Micolash, a scholar driven to madness in his attempt to breach the unfathomable nature of the Great Ones, repeats a haunting chant, “Grant us eyes” (*Bloodborne*). Eyes thematically recur throughout *Bloodborne* with some of the monsters possessing nearly an uncountable number of eyes. This denotes a closer proximity to the Great Ones than the monsters that appear to have the typical number of eyes for their respective species. If the player angles the camera in a particular fashion, they can glimpse peculiar eyes inside of the Doll’s head; these eyes also have extra eyes on them, supporting the notion that these organs are not intended for relating visual or ocular stimuli, but rather serve a different, preternatural function. Theoretically, these eyes are what animate and bestow a sense of identity to the Doll.

“Grant us eyes” is construed as thematically complex given the expansive nature of the game, yet there is also a simplicity associated with it: grant us the ability to read that which is hidden before our eyes. Rather than a call to greater beings to grant the ability to perceive beyond the electromagnetic spectrum, it becomes a plea to communicate the visual in a more instinctual, primal mode. Generally speaking, this means that visual language does not necessitate a logical, rational discourse, but rather an intuitive understanding. Thus, for *Bloodborne* it may even be a misnomer to refer to visual language as a type of language as it serves more as a means for stimulus to garner a primal response. Simply, the intuitive and instinctual is the providence of the monstrous. And monstrosity defies the rational order, despite the human claim of being a rational creature.

4. CONCLUSION

Sleep is often associated with a sense of vulnerability; dreams are typically outside of the subject's control, rendering the individual a relatively passive agent in their own mind. Yet it is in the Hunter's Dream where safety, ataraxy, and serenity rule supreme: waking from the dream is when the horror of existence begins.

The Doll's recurring phrase takes on a new meaning once the player puts down their controller; eventually, one must leave the phantasmagorical, oneiric world of Yharnam to face their own monstrous version of reality. Yharnam is not the nightmare: it is an escape where one may experience, even revel, in the monstrous. It is a controlled release of adrenaline on a physiological level, potentially granting an evocative and emotive experience. It is an alternative means of experiencing "reality" codified through visual, auditory, and literary cues, as gothic narratives are often fundamentally concerned with revealing hidden aspects that reside within the fabrics of mainstream cultures.

It is in entering this world, being gradually introduced to the implications of the presented monstrosity, that *Bloodborne* belongs to the gothic's enduring legacy as a purveyor of either the unfathomable or all too human monster. The outsider in these narratives is never fully accepted by the residents, potentially leaving (if they do in fact leave) with more of an unsolved mystery in spite of having a profound truth revealed. Yet the seductive nature of becoming a monster—to rely on instinct, id, or the primal irrational self where a sense of catharsis, potentially euphoria, may be experienced—is a deeply appealing human desire. Briefly removing their societal shackles offers the chance to become that which society fears: an unrestrained version of the ancestral self, residing in the liminal space between the logical and irrational. The player-hunter and the denizens of Yharnam are simply that—unapologetically too human, rife with wonder and mundanity, mystery and tedium, restraint and terror.

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