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Research Report on Curse the Fiends, Their Children, Too: Cultural Heritage and Subversion of Fictional Tropes in *Bloodborne*

Sarah Zaidan, Richard Pilbeam and Elin Carstensdottir

Abstract

Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, From Software's multi-award winning 2015 action role-playing game *Bloodborne* was lauded for its game design and intriguing setting. Miyazaki as a creator frequently makes use of subversion of expectations established through narrative tropes to criticize and imbue the player's interaction with the game with more complex meaning than first appears. Although set in an entirely fictional world, *Bloodborne* draws explicitly on Catholicism, Gothic horror tropes and European architecture. However, these are then used to explore a specifically Japanese set of themes, with extensive use of Shinto and Buddhist ideas throughout. The use of Western symbols of cultural heritage also functions to interrogate these symbols for a Western audience, with the game explicitly invoking and then subverting recognizable iconography, destabilizing something initially presented as *classic*. By applying sociological literary criticism to the world and characters of *Bloodborne*, we are in the process of engaging with social and literary themes guided by a review of literature pertaining to both Japanese history and the roots of the Western iconography that the game draws upon to create its aesthetic. We are focusing on the various forms Japanese cultural heritage takes in *Bloodborne*, both as it is presented through game and visual design, and how those elements, in addition to its Western cultural elements are used to engage and interrogate Japanese cultural heritage.

103

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Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, From Software's multi-award winning 2015 action role-playing game *Bloodborne* has been internationally lauded for its darkly beautiful Gothic setting and compellingly visceral game design that iterates upon formulas introduced in From Software's popular *Dark Souls* series. As a creator, Miyazaki has captivated audiences through his interconnected fantasy worlds, where exploration and open-ended narratives are used with great effect. Miyazaki frequently makes use of subversion of expectations established through narrative tropes to criticize and imbue the player's interaction with the game with more complex meaning than first appears.

Although set in an entirely fictional world, *Bloodborne* invokes the aesthetic of a British Victorian setting and Western cultural heritage, drawing explicitly on Catholicism, Gothic horror tropes, European architecture and Western cinema. However, these are then used to explore a specifically Japanese set of themes, with extensive use of Shinto and Buddhist ideas throughout, and critiques of current Japanese forms of ultranationalism, xenophobia and historical revisionism. The use of Western symbols of cultural heritage also functions to interrogate these symbols for a Western audience, with the game explicitly invoking and then subverting recognizable iconography, destabilizing something initially presented as *classic*.

The following report of our ongoing humanities research project introduces the ways we are examining how From Software and in particular Hidetaka Miyazaki used a British Victorian setting to interrogate issues that are relevant to Japanese players, such as isolationism, xenophobia, and the erasure of cultural heritage in service of a prevailing national hegemonic identity. We are focusing on the various forms Japanese cultural heritage takes in *Bloodborne*, both as it is presented through game and visual design, and how those elements, in addition to its Western cultural

elements are used to engage and interrogate Japanese cultural heritage. In *Bloodborne*, the player's conflict with its world and eventual victory over it are contingent on exploring and uncovering its past, with the player gaining a quantifiable resource called *Insight* which allows them to understand the world in new ways. This makes the game an ideal vehicle to explore the meaning of cultural heritage, and how heritage is contested. Our analysis will provide a framework for readers and players alike to understand how *Bloodborne* presents a radical critique of forces which aim to control and shape notions of cultural heritage for their own ends.

Bloodborne's explicit citation of prior horror works is of particular interest to our research, as the works it cites come from two distinct and opposing traditions – Gothic and Weird – while remaining aesthetically and thematically coherent. *Bloodborne* begins by overwhelming the player with a checklist of Gothic horror iconography, many of which are so explicitly referential that they blur the line between homage and reproduction. In particular, the haunted castle Cainhurst draws so heavily on Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) that elements of the environment are essentially virtual reproductions of the film's sets and props. Likewise, Tod Browning's 1931 production of *Dracula* is explicitly cited, with the uniform of Yharnam's Healing Church based on the disguise worn by Count Dracula while posing as a coach driver. This coach ride to Castle Dracula, a key event in all versions of the story, is also the means by which the player character accesses Cainhurst and, to further invoke the source material, it occurs at a crossroads at night after the player character receives a mysterious formal invitation. Others examples do not cite specific works, but rather cite familiar iconography: Foggy streets conceal knife-wielding murderers, suggestive of Jack the Ripper; there are repeated allusions to graverobbing and the use of human remains in scientific experiments, recalling Burke and Hare and *Frankenstein* (1831); the city of Yharnam is in the grips of a panic

over werewolf attacks, with suspects – including the player character – hunted down by paranoid mobs desperate for a scapegoat; forbidden rituals honoring *old* Gods take place in secret; and Yharnam itself is surrounded by a maze of dark forests filled with strange animals and cackling witches, in which the player is warned not to venture. However, as the player explores the game world further, they gradually uncover the truth: It is only the symptoms that are Gothic, while the cause is Weird.

The initial revelation can occur in one of two ways, but both are structured similarly. Upon gaining entry to a previously inaccessible church (either the vast Gothic cathedral which dominates Yharnam's skyline, or a hidden chapel near the city's foundations), the player is confronted with a series of statues. Unlike the statues seen throughout Yharnam so far, these do not depict saints, angels, demons or medieval grotesques, but rather idols of hunched, humanoid figures whose heads resemble a cross between a morel mushroom and an octopus. Like the aforementioned Gothic invocations, these idols are also an explicit reference, but this time to horror author H. P. Lovecraft's (1928) most well-known work, *The Call of Cthulhu,* in which they represent something not ghostly or demonic, but material and extra-terrestrial. Things have, literally, gotten Weird.

Weird fiction, a genre most commonly associated with Lovecraft, was an early 20th century attempt to break from the traditions of Gothic horror. As outlined by contemporary Weird writer China Mieville (2008, 113), the Weird was shaped by writers who "were explicit about their anti-Gothic sensibility", rejecting Gothic fiction's preoccupation with the "radicalised uncanny" (2008, 112) in favour of a "halluincatory/nihilist novum" (2008, 113). The ghosts, vampires, werewolves and animated corpses of Gothic horror are horrifying precisely because they are recognisable embodiments of things we fear to openly acknowledge, but the

creatures of Weird fiction – forgotten alien civilizations, heaving masses of protoplasm, ocean-dwelling *gods* who mate with their worshipers, and so on – are the inverse of this, horrifying because they are innately incoherent and unknowable, material things which nonetheless exist outside of human understanding, the products of a "chaotic, amoral, anthroperipheral universe" (Mieville 2008, 110).

Bloodborne's citation of Lovecraft at this point in the story is not simply the addition of another horror source to its palette of references. A comparison can be made with the ongoing *Castlevania* (1986) series of games, whose Japanese title, *Akumajou Dracula*, literally translates to "The Demon Castle of Dracula". As both its English and Japanese names imply, *Castlevania* is firmly within the Gothic horror tradition, and invokes much of the same iconography as *Bloodborne* (the first game even has a faux-cinematic credits roll, revealing that the game's enemies were *played by* famous horror actors). The series' 1997 installment, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, saw the introduction of *Call of Cthulhu* imagery into the game's world, with the eponymous Cthulhu creature appearing as an opponent for the player. However, this is the entirety of Cthulhu's role in the game – it simply flaps back and forth in a corridor, impeding the player's progress until defeated, and there is never any doubt that Count Dracula's personal vendetta against humanity remains the center of *Castlevania*'s fictional universe. In contrast to this cameo appearance, *Bloodborne* uses Lovecraft's fiction to recontextualize literally everything about how its world works, scratching at the Gothic facade and revealing its Weird foundations. After the initial reveal of the Lovecraftian idols, the player is tasked with investigating an abandoned university in which they are told that Yharnam's church "has its roots" (*Bloodborne* 2015). This journey sets off a chain of revelations, all drawn explicitly from Lovecraft's work, about the true nature of the horror overtaking Yharnam. The curse placed upon Yharnam is revealed to have been caused by a group of academics

who were attempting to research the nature of beings referred to as "The Great Ones" (*Bloodborne* 2015), alien beings who had unlocked the secrets of the universe and passed their biological traits down to an insular group of mutated worshipers, a scenario which combines both Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) and *The Shadow Over Inssmouth* (1936). As the player digs deeper, a new understanding the world begins to emerge: The transformation of humans into were-beasts is now understood to be the result of failed scientific experiments to elevate human consciousness, vampirism is a means to alter one's body chemistry to transcend human limitations, and witches are the remnants of a suppressed matriarchal tradition who sought to provide mothers for The Great Ones' children. Finally, in order to complete the game, the player must venture into a series of *Nightmares*, alternate dimensions whose nature, design and inhabitants are drawn from Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943). One such Nightmare, the longest and most complex, uses its physical design to demonstrate the relationship between the game's Weird and Gothic elements. This particular Nightmare is a collage of existing times and places warped together into a continuous vertical space, likened by one of the game's characters to a tree which *sprouted* from actions in the past and then grew downward over time. The base of the Nightmare, representing the most recent events in Yharnam's history, is overrun by werewolves and disease, while the top, representing the genesis of these events, is a small fishing village of mutated humans who worship a sea deity, taken directly from *The Shadow Over Inssmouth*, as well as Weird manga artist Junji Ito's works *Uzumaki* (2013) and *The Thing That Drifted Ashore* (2015). This is not a simple genre mash-up, as with *Castlevania*; *Bloodborne*'s Gothic was *caused by* its Weird.

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What is significant about this relationship is that, as previously discussed by Mieville, the Weird and the Gothic embody opposing approaches to horror, and yet *Bloodborne* is able to deploy both as connected parts of a thematically and aesthetically coherent narrative. Of particular interest to Mieville on this front is the work of English horror writer M. R. James, whose work prefigures the emergence of the Weird in number of ways. Despite describing himself as an antiquary and writer of traditional ghost stories, James (1904, 120) is "acutely conscious of capitalist modernity" with his ghosts inhabiting mass-produced objects, including printed advertisements, and lashing out indiscriminately rather than to right a past wrong; "the horror is of the universal equivalence of mass commodification" (James 1904, 121). James' ghosts also prefigure the creatures of the Weird in that emphasis is placed on their physical, material presence and the associated haptic sensations. James' ghosts are not ethereal specters, but possess tangible hair, chitin, slime, and tentacles. Key to Mieville's analysis of the relationship between James and the Weird is James' short story *Count Magnus*, in which the apparition of a long-dead aristocrat is accompanied by an otherworldly physical servant in the form of an octopus-headed creature that sucks flesh from bones. As Mieville (2008, 123) remarks, this is a story where "Hauntology deploys Weird as its sidekick".

However, as Mieville (2008, 127) notes, this is not a genuine fusion or mingling of the Gothic and the Weird, but rather "represents an under-one-roof *co-existence* […] of what will later be seen [as] the oppositional dyad"; there can be *flirtation* between the two, but never *merger*; one must always prevail over the other. Returning to *Bloodborne*, we see a similar process at work in its handling of Gothic and Weird elements, with the game positioning them in opposition. The Weird elements in *Bloodborne*'s world are what led to its Gothic elements, but only because *something went wrong*. The werewolves infesting Yharnam are the product of failed attempts by

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scientists to reach out to the Weird entities normally beyond human comprehension; those who are insufficiently enlightened find themselves incapable of retaining their humanity, regressing mentally and physically into animals without reason. The vampires, while they retain their human reason, are simply an intermediary stage on this path to enlightenment, and significantly do not prey on humans; the "Vileblood" (*Bloodborne* 2015) vampires of *Bloodborne* threaten nobody, are victims of colonial violence, and simply wish to be left alone, in stark contrast to the narrative of *Dracula*, in which a predatory foreigner arrives in London and begins *infecting* British property and women before being heroically put to death. The game's mechanics further this division, with certain enemies designated as either *Beasts* or *Kin of the Cosmos* for the purposes of damage calculations; what does additional damage to one does not do additional damage to the other, and *it is impossible for an entity to be both at once*.

This use of game mechanics to articulate the narrative's conflict between Gothic and Weird is further developed through *Bloodborne*'s inclusion of a quantifiable resource called *Insight*. The player character begins the game with an *Insight* value of 0, and then gains additional points of *Insight* as they witness the supernatural events occurring in Yharnam. *Insight* serves two main functions. Firstly, it is a resource that allows the player to work cooperatively with other players using *Bloodborne*'s online multiplayer system. Secondly, and far more pertinently to this project, gaining *Insight* allows the player character to experience things that are otherwise beyond human comprehension. Upon gaining their first point of *Insight*, a human-sized doll slumped near the player character's home base area will come to life and begin to converse with them, functioning as a major character in the story. Subsequent *Insight break points* – 15, 40 and 60 – reveal more about Yharnam: The lanterns carried by the Healing Church's servants are revealed to be covered in removed human eyeballs; the ritual conducted by the witches outside town is summoning apparitions from the

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ground; the population of Yharnam has been silently observed by spider-like creatures clinging to the buildings; and, finally, the player character is haunted by the sound of a crying child, whose kidnapping is eventually revealed to be driving much of the game's story. What is significant about this system is that, while the *Insight* effects may initially seem to be hallucinations brought about by the player character's deteriorating sanity, they are eventually confirmed to be unambiguously real. A comparison can be drawn here between *Bloodborne*'s *Insight* system and the video games *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002) and *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010). These games also feature an *Insight*-like system in which the player character's traumatic experiences gradually cause them to perceive the game world differently, but these changes in perception are either ambiguous or simply outright hallucinations. In contrast to this, *Bloodborne*'s changes in perception are shown to reveal real, material things that the player character was previously unaware of; madness has made them more, not less, in touch with reality.

111

Another comparison to *The Call of Cthulhu* can be made here, although this time to the tabletop role-playing game (RPG) adaptation first published by Chaosium Games in 1981. While the game is presently in its 7th edition, a consistent element of its design is that characters in the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG all have a resource called Sanity, which represents their psychological state and depletes as they encounter otherworldly events, with lower sanity values severely impairing player characters until they cease to be playable. This Sanity mechanic is explicitly cited within *Bloodborne*'s internal developer notes as the basis of the *Insight* system, with *Insight* internally referred to as *SAN*, the abbreviation used by the *Call of Cthulhu* rules. However, despite being based on the Sanity mechanic, *Insight* functions in exactly the opposite way: *Insight* is gained, not lost, and is a benefit, not a hindrance.

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This reconfigures the player's relationship with the horrors of Yharnam; rather than avoid them and attempt to mitigate their effects, as in the aforementioned games, *Bloodborne* directly incentivizes the player to seek out sources of horror as a means to move further toward enlightenment.

In contrast to *Insight*, *Bloodborne* also features a mechanic called *Beasthood*, which can be used to significantly increase the player character's damage output under certain conditions. A player character's total *Beasthood* is calculated based on multiple values, but most significant is that it lowers as the player character gains *Insight*, and raises again if the player character loses this *Insight*. In keeping with the game's conflict between Gothic and Weird, it is therefore impossible for a player character to reap the full benefits of *Beasthood* while also possessing the *Insight* to understand the mysteries of the universe, as the two approaches are contradictory. Furthering this link between beasts and the Gothic, the weapon specifically designed to synergize with the *Beasthood* mechanic it not the product of artisans or engineers, but instead a piece of a beast's skeleton that the player character allows to partially possess them – it is even explicitly referred to as *undead*.

Bloodborne has three possible endings depending on the player's actions, with the hardest to accomplish involving the player character successfully *ascending* from their human body and being reborn as a new Great One; the goal that the *Bloodborne*'s various scientific institutions were trying and failing to reach. This suggests that the underlying logic of *Bloodborne*'s universe is that the Gothic elements are a regressive deviation on the path to understanding the true, Weird nature of reality, but this is further complicated by the method involved in *reaching* this understanding: reckoning with unresolved maternal grief. *Bloodborne*'s Great Ones, having reached the apex of evolution, are rendered incapable of producing a new generation of life –

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they cannot be surpassed, so they cannot have children of their own. This does not mean, however, that they cannot physically reproduce; rather, their offspring are fated to die shortly after being born, leaving the mother to grieve for eternity. This grief functions as the means by which contact with humans is established.

The story of *Bloodborne* rests upon two instances of this maternal grieving, both interconnected. In the first instance, the curse placed upon Yharnam is eventually revealed to be the act of a Great One, Kos, whose unborn child was torn from her womb and dissected by colonial scientists. This child's ghost persists in a kind of limbo state – the area is designed after the Sanzu River of the Buddhist underworld, where children who die before their parents are sent – driven mad by anger and unable to leave. The player must defeat the child, who has taken on the form of a monster that weeps inside its mother's corpse and wields a bladed placenta, and in doing so free its tormented soul. This returns Kos' lost child to her, and she lifts the curse upon Yharnam (this is of little comfort, however, given that the city is already ruined). The second instance concerns Yharnam's present, and the events our character is directly involved in. In an attempt to make contact with Kos, and knowing of her grief, a faction within Yharnam's Healing Church seeks to find a replacement, surrogate child for Kos, and discovers that the queen of a subterranean city beneath Yharnam has entered into wedlock with a Great One, producing an unborn child, Mergo. In a repeat of the earlier events, the Queen's womb is torn open by the Healing Church, Mergo's dead body removed and his soul trapped in a limbo state. Although unknown to the player until the game's climax, this is what drives the events of the night they spend trapped in Yharnam, and the source of the ghostly crying they hear throughout the game. Lacking the reach and power of Kos, the Queen is reduced to simply weeping outside the tower in which Mergo's soul is

113

trapped. In order to complete the game, the player must end the Healing Church's ritual by defeating the creature keeping Mergo captive, causing the queen to bow in gratitude and fade away, reunited with her child once more.

Despite these events being the key to communing with the Weird elements of *Bloodborne*'s universe, the narrative proceeds to loop back around and become a traditional ghost story again. While Lovecraft's Weird abominations are defined by their inability to be understood, *Bloodborne*'s Great Ones are revealed to be, though alien and distant, motivated by something *familiar*, returning the story to the realm of the Gothic uncanny. A suffering child's soul must be put to rest to quell the wrath of its vengeful mother, taking the story full circle from Gothic to Weird and then back again to Gothic. Interestingly, this last minute pivot is precisely what the scientists who drive the Weird aspects of *Bloodborne*'s story failed to take into account: While they believed they had transcended the old Gothic world of vampires, werewolves and ghosts for a new, Weird world of aliens and cosmic exploration, their work still left behind traumatised, repressed spectres who could only be banished through direct confrontation with the past. Returning again to Mieville (2008, 128), he informs us that these two contradictory approaches are

> "two iterations of the same problematic [...] modernity showing its contradictory face, utterly new *and* traced with remnants, chaotic and nihilist *and* stained with inhuman rebukes [...] one or the other iteration may be dominant, but neither can ever efface the other".

It is through articulating this contradiction, rather than choosing one side or the other, that *Bloodborne* achieves its unique impact.

114

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