

Game Narrative Review

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Your name: Canon Coker

Your school: DigiPen Institute of Technology

Your email: canon.coker@digipen.edu

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Game Title: Bloodborne

Platform: PlayStation 4

Genre: Third-Person Action RPG

Release Date: March 24th, 2015

Developer: FromSoftware

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hidetaka Miyazaki

Overview

As dusk begins to fall over the waking world, an outsider from a distant land arrives in the city of Yharnam in search of a cure for an illness they suffer called “Paleblood”. After receiving a blood transfusion in the halls of Iosefka’s Clinic, the player character is killed by the claws of a beast. The player awakens in a strange realm called the “Hunter’s Dream”. Here, a man named Gherman explains to the player that by some twist of fate, they are to play the role of a hunter and spend this night slaying Yharnam’s beasts, for tonight, is the night of the hunt. The Hunter is bound to the Hunter’s Dream, a fact for which death cannot shake. Should The Hunter wish to awaken to a new day and escape the Hunter’s Dream, they must play their chosen role in the night of the hunt.

The rigorous hunt leads the player through the city and to its outskirts. Along the way, The Hunter uncovers the secrets of the city, its church, and its history and to what ends this nightmare began in pursuit. Such insights slowly unravel a much less comforting revelation of cosmic proportions as the presence of Eldritch Abominations called the “Great Ones” are revealed. The Great Ones bear power unperceivable by the mental capacity of man, and their arrival brings with them a threat for which humanity is powerless. To counteract such madness, The Hunter must infiltrate a dream world called a “nightmare”, a realm that bears jurisdiction over the waking world by the will of the nightmare’s host. To have an audience with the dawn’s light and free Yharnam of the night’s horrors, the nightmare’s host must fall, bringing an end to the hunt; and bringing the world a new day.

Characters

- **The Hunter** – The Player Character; an outsider who traveled to Yharnam to receive a blood transfusion by the way of Yharnam's famous healing blood to counteract an illness they suffer called "Paleblood". When the transfusion goes wrong and a secret side effect of Yharnam's blood begins to transform The Hunter into a beast. The Paleblood prevents the transformation, a miracle which garners the attention of a Great One called the "Moon Presence". By the will of the Moon Presence, the player character becomes bound to the Hunter's Dream and roped into the hunt playing the role of The Hunter. Should they wish to be unshackled of the dream, they must see the hunt through to its end.
- **Gehrman, the First Hunter** – The Hunter's guide; Gehrman, like the player character, was once a hunter. He now resides constrained within the Hunter's Dream forced to guide new hunters through the night of the hunt as so willed by the Moon Presence. In the waking world, Gehrman was responsible for establishing the hunter's workshop, and his knowledge of the workshop's tools and practices proves beneficial on The Hunter's journey.
- **Lady Maria of the Astral Clocktower** – Gehrman's favorite pupil; A hunter of old who met her end years ago. She exists now within a dream world called the "Hunter's Nightmare", a realm that brings to life the church's locked-away secrets, serving as purgatory for hunters who fell victim to blood drunkenness during their life. No matter the guilt she may have felt, what scars she left on the waking world have no cure.
- **Master Willem** – Provost of the College of Byrgenwerth; Leader of Byrgenwerth's scholars and by extension responsible for uncovering the old blood. Master Willem believes meditation and insight to be the keys to ascending humanity to a higher plane of existence, with the practice of blood experimentation being best left to the past following the discovery of the curse of beasthood.
- **Laurence, the First Vicar** – First Vicar of the healing church; Once a student of Master Willem, Laurence left behind Byrgenwerth as he believed the continued experimentation of the old blood was the key to humanity's ascension. Under this belief, he established the Church of Blood Healing and continued to experiment. On an expedition into the Chalice Dungeons deep below Yharnam, Laurence would disappear never to be seen again. His experiments resulted in the deaths of countless Yharnamites, and he is ultimately responsible for the outbreak of beasthood.
- **Rom, the Vacuous Spider** – The half-ascended Byrgenwerth scholar; Blessed insight by the grace of Mother Kos, Rom was the closest Byrgenwerth ever made it to Great One ascension. With the spider-like body of a Great One but the mind of a human, Rom remains within the lake at Byrgenwerth, using her power to hold back the eldritch truth from the eyes of the waking world and preventing a sinister ritual of the Mensis school.
- **Micolash, Host of the Nightmare** – Leader of the School of Mensis; Hidden away in the unseen village of Yahar'gul, Micolash and the school of Mensis seek audience with a Great One as an extreme method of ascending. Their ritual is a

threat to all the waking world but as such is currently held back by the power of Rom.

- **Ludwig the Accursed** – Leader of the church hunters; Ludwig was a trained killer whose practices transitioned the church away from beast hunting and instead opened the door to focus on the slaying of kin. While believing himself to be a noble, he too now resides within the confines of the Hunter's Nightmare.
- **Moon Presence** – Host of the Hunter's Dream; The Moon Presence is the Great One which wills over the Hunter's Dream. Also known as "Paleblood", the Moon Presence is responsible for binding Gherman and The Hunter to the dream.
- **Kos** – Host of the Hunter's Nightmare; Kos is the presence that wills over the Hunter's Nightmare. As a curse upon the Hunters for the fishing village massacre and the theft of her orphaned child, Kos created the nightmare as an eternal punishment that all blood-drunk hunters must face.
- **Orphan of Kos** – The orphaned Great One; The child of Kos recovered from Kos's beached body during the fishing village massacre. Brought back to Byrgenwerth by Gherman and Lady Maria, the child would be experimented on in an effort to gain new insight into the nature of the Great Ones.

Breakdown

Bloodborne is an exploration of the flaws of humanity, and through the use of its gameplay systems and environmental storytelling, it exposes how those flaws lead to our voluntary descent into madness. Bloodborne is a mystery through and through. Its environments, story, characters, and gameplay mechanics all prompt questions, and a need for clarity. But, like all mysteries, answers exist, they need only be uncovered. In opposition to a clear and linear narrative told to the player, Bloodborne presents a world where those answers must be hunted for instead. Miyazaki asks his players to engage in the hunt, but just as the characters the game depicts have gone mad undergoing such a task, how far are we willing to go to understand that which was perhaps kept secret for a reason? What are we willing to do to understand things never meant for our eyes?

It's no secret seven years following Bloodborne's initial release that Miyazaki was heavily inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft. The mid-game shift from animalistic horror to cosmic horror makes such immensely obvious, but how deep the inspiration bleeds is far less surface level. The game's structure largely follows Lovecraft's evolution in approach to horror writing. It follows an opening act depicting more conventional gothic horror before a second act bringing down the curtain to reveal terrors reminiscent of the Cthulhu mythos. It finally concludes with third act delving into substance clearly inspired by the dreamlands, a plain which places man and Great One on equal footing to converse and do battle. The whereabouts of the optional boss encounter with Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos are ripped directly from the pages of *The Haunter of the Dark* (Lovecraft 198). The questionable sense of security from even the game's most uplifting of endings leaves the player to question if anything was resolved or had they simply been blessed with ignorance. Lovecraft's footprints are all over Bloodborne's identity. Such revelation however I argue isn't the point of Bloodborne, but rather is a tool to help illustrate Miyazaki's message about madness. Lovecraft's narratives often depicted a

struggle with the human condition, and the madness men face upon the realization of their insignificance in the greater scale of the universe. This idea carries over into Bloodborne and is exhibited through many of its characters and scenarios. But the focus is not simply on telling a Lovecraft story, but to expose humanity's tendency to give in to our worst when presented with struggles beyond our cognizance.

The story of Bloodborne ultimately revolves around a disagreement in methods to counteract the human condition by virtue of ascending humanity to a higher plane of existence. The discovery of lifeforms insurmountable in every manner to humanity by the Great Ones' left behind remnants throws the brightest minds of Yharnam to disarray. They become infatuated by morbid fixation in understanding that which they had uncovered, exponentially throwing morality to the wind the longer things went on. Men transforming into beasts, Byrgenwerth's scholars massacring entire civilizations, and companions renouncing good faith with each other in betrayal. But the significance lies in their choice to do so, no matter how inhumane their actions became, they choose to embrace the madness, and give into temptation. Miyazaki's characters illustrate such a choice, and too, his method of conveying such to the player illustrates this further.

As previously stated, Bloodborne is not a story the player is told, it's rather one they experience. Walking the streets of Central Yharnam on the night of the hunt conveys so much to the player because it lets us feel the terror of the world around us. The cries of civilians as they lose their humanity, the screams of far-off beasts lusting for blood, the footsteps of patrolling Yharnamites in search of us, the unwanted outsider, all come together to build an unparalleled unsettling, and unwelcoming atmosphere. Be it the barks or the sound design, a sense of immersion is created like no cutscene can because we the player experienced those streets through direct gameplay. But once again, this direction too plays into Miyazaki's theme of a voluntary descent into madness. While the literal plot depicts characters giving in to their human-natured faults, Bloodborne too presents the player the choice to delve as deep as they wish. Whether that be traversing the fog, ejecting the disc, or any number of extremes in between, Bloodborne throws it's theme directly into our hands. No matter how desolate the world before us, we made the choice to delve deeper, not because we were railroaded by a cutscene, but because we gathered ourselves and pushed forward on the analog stick. Bloodborne warned us we were in the wrong to do so. Whether with a punishing difficulty bound to make any first-time player put aside their controller, perhaps an environment so profoundly disturbing we left the room to vomit, or a character we thought we could trust tarnishing any sense of hope which remained by defying their word, Bloodborne threw plenty of red flags our way. Despite it all, we made the choice to ignore them, and we kept playing.

Bloodborne's narrative is as relevant as a player wants it to be. Should a player have no interest in it, the lore of the world can be run right past, and the environments and item descriptions can be ignored, but so too can we slow down, stop to take it all in, and ask ourselves "Why are we here?". We can make note of the bodies that line the streets, the manner which different schools of ideology describe each other, how item descriptions relay the history of the world, and the way we quite literally descend deeper into Yharnam's subsections to uncover locked and hidden away locales. These secrets are not kept hidden to be tedious, they are locked away to hide the truth. The Healing Church

burned Old Yharnam to the ground to hide that their medical practices had turned the city's population into monsters. Lady Maria is no savior; she is the very woman responsible for the Astral Clock Tower's inhabitants going blind as well as the murderer of countless innocents from an equally innocent fishing hamlet. Rom didn't stand in our way to hurt us, she stood in our way to protect us from unleashing a grander threat upon the world, and we killed her in cold blood not because she swung first, but because we too had grown blood-drunk. The deeper we go the less comforting we come to find Bloodborne's narrative to be. Ultimately, Bloodborne is a tragedy not because of any monster, but because it depicts no villain, only heroes attempting to prevail but all falling before conflict with one another, detailing just why humanity will never ascend to anything greater than insects. We too find ourselves playing into this regretful fact as actions like the slaughter of Rom come to expose how our ignorance entices us to conflict with the other players of the story. This pinpoints a battle between gameplay progression and in universe morality which due to our heuristics of the medium, favors the former, resulting in the player blindly choosing to let loose a wrath of terror by simply progressing the game. Piecing such together is a task which once again returns to Bloodborne's theme. We chose to rip it's world apart, knowingly or not, in pursuit of truths we perhaps would have been happier never having discovered. We willingly descended into our own madness to justify actions which presented no positive repercussion. We chose to act without thought and followed our instincts, giving into temptation and with such invoking upon the world a terrible fate.

But as previously stated, such knowledge can be avoided. The player is afforded to run past Bloodborne's storytelling without giving it a second thought, but Miyazaki is no fool to this approach and designed Bloodborne with that understanding in mind. Miyazaki counteracts this playstyle by interweaving his theming directly into the one aspect of the Dark Souls formula that no player can avoid. Bloodborne's redesigned take on the Dark Souls combat system forces players to engage in a voluntary descent into madness. In introducing a more risk versus reward approach to battle, Miyazaki intermingles our freedom to plunge into dangerous in pursuit of wonder with the punishing and calculated battle mechanics the series has become known for. Bloodborne takes away our shield and gives us no wall to hide behind. It drastically speeds up the pace of encounters to put us constantly on the run. It throws enemies our way that we must learn like the back of our hand or face death's door in but one fatal blow. While we can try and run away, death too often is inevitable, so we as the player are presented with two options, stick to our heuristics for how to approach a Dark Souls style combat encounter, or change with the game and embrace the risk of death in a fight for survival. The brilliance is Bloodborne can be beaten both ways, again providing the player the choice to descend as crazy as they wish. Dropping a shield for a gun lets us stagger our enemy's combos and interrupt with punishing visceral damage. Making use of our weapon's trick functionality allows us to approach encounters with a more varied skill set than we have had before. But the biggest change which draws on Bloodborne's themes more than any other is the introduction of the rally system. Rallying allows us to recover health by continuing to fight even after we've taken damage. While we still have the choice to step away and heal, the rally system lets us put our lives on the line to keep pushing as far as we can go, encouraging the player to play aggressively, matching the aggression imposed by the world around them. It's dangerous, it's risky, and it will get us

killed, but we chose to do it regardless because Bloodborne enticed us to do so, voluntarily giving into the madness to see what rewards we might reap and what secrets we might uncover.

Strongest Element

Bloodborne's strongest narrative decision is to interweave its storytelling directly into its minute-to-minute gameplay systems. Whether it be the choice to transition healing to the 'Blood Vial' system, result in healing items which must be picked up or purchased rather than refilled upon player death to communicate the significance and nature of blood more clearly in the city of Yharnam. The way Blood Bullets can be refilled by self-harming during battle emphasizes that Blood Bullets are literally made of The Hunter's blood. Or most significantly, how Bloodborne's redesigned combat systems tie perfectly into the game's feel and themes without the need for any traditional narrative context. The choice to present core narrative constructs in details such as these works to mitigate the confusion players may face from other aspects of Bloodborne's narrative design direction. It presents ideas the player cannot afford to miss in a place the player cannot miss them while still holding to its narrative design philosophy.

Unsuccessful Element

While not exclusive to Bloodborne, the nonlinear approach to narrative presented in the Dark Souls series does come with its drawbacks. A player's reliance on heuristics learned from other developers in today's games industry may have set an expectation for how game narratives are to be presented. While it could be argued that such is less a fault of Bloodborne itself and more so a critique of the modern games industry, it cannot be denied that many players may and will miss plenty of the brilliant attention to detail, expansive lore, and rich characters crafted by Miyazaki and his team not because they are poor in quality but because they are presented in a non-linear. This too extends to affordances the player may not be aware they have unless they go out of their way to experiment which too is a practice today's industry has largely abandoned in favor of spoon-feeding players everything without ever requiring them to think for themselves.

Additionally, Bloodborne's narrative direction and attention to detail run very deep and are core to its identity, however, there is room to take Bloodborne's groundwork and run further with it to fully immerse players in a world that feels bound by the rules it's narrative describes. For example, many of Bloodborne's levels exist as the dreams of the Great Ones and the narrative tells us that bringing about the demise of the coinciding Great One too will fall the dream world we so inhabit. While as far as the plot is concerned, such did occur as described, the player is still afforded to explore these dreams, traversing a world that should by all accounts of logic no longer exist. Bloodborne also exhibits a stat called insight which effectively measures how aware The Hunter is becoming in the grand scheme of the cosmos. While interesting audio and visual changes can occur in the environment as well as the game's difficulty increasing systematically alongside the stat, it pales in comparison to the manner in which insight is narratively described to dictate an individual. This is best exemplified by Master Willem who the player finds sitting atop a Byrgenwerth balcony staring into the moon. His

insight has begun to allow him to elevate his thoughts to a higher plane of existence similar to the nature of the Great Ones, albeit still bound by the ramifications of the faults of humanity. But what this does to him in a practical application is begin the growth of literal eyes inside of Willem's mind. The change in body structure results in his battle with ascension which he chooses to fight against, resulting in his outward physical appearance changing as he now sprouts mushroom-like fungi along his back. Master Willem is seemingly afforded a great deal of choice in how he chooses to traverse his newfound insight and the results which with it come, and yet The Hunter, a character who too can gain insight all the same and as depicted in Bloodborne's secret ending, has the capability of full ascension to a Great One, is presented to no such array of choice. Perhaps Bloodborne could have instantiated a skill tree system for which the player can choose how to utilize their insight in a similar vein to how a later series installment, Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (2019) approached character customization with the Shinobi Prosthetics and their correlating skill trees.

Highlight

Bloodborne's peak arrives post its initial launch with the conclusion of its paid downloadable expansion, The Old Hunters. As with many hunters to have come before, the slaughter of countless beasts has driven The Hunter blood drunk, resulting in their relocation to a dream world called 'The Hunter's Nightmare'. Within the nightmare, the player bears witness to the fates of the hunters of old, and by examining their purgatory we too bear witness to their indefensible crimes which cursed them to this realm long ago. The level is constructed illogically in a way that enhances the narrative's content as traversing a dream world sensibly should not face the restrictions by the bounds of reality. Instead, The Old Hunters expansion is designed to see the player through a series of vision-like memoirs of past events, none of which linearly tie together and nor do their inner workings, instead leading to a spaghetti-like mess of pathways that applicably fits perfectly. The areas bosses mark the strongest in Bloodborne's lineup not exclusively by the fights which bear their name's sake but so too the characters and their stories which stand opposite our crosshair. As with the rest of the game, The Old Hunters is devoid of linear storytelling instead opting for the heaviest and strongest execution of environmental and gameplay-focused storytelling in all of Bloodborne. Given the setting which we explore being a purgatory for hunters, what stories the environments depict all play deeply into the theme of humanity's voluntary descent into madness. However, the most potent example of such arrives in the expansion's final act, as the player descends from the Astral Clock Tower to uncover the last secret suppressed within The Hunters Nightmare.

The player steps into a fishing village that had been referenced in passing throughout the rest of the game. Lady Maria stood guard against what lay here, and with her fell by our blade, we walk the streets of a by-standing fishing hamlet massacred by the Healing Church. The expansion begins with a warning to leave the secrets of the nightmare alone, a warning doubled by the exponentially more punishing difficulty in comparison to the base game. This continues the idea of the descent into madness always being voluntary as once again we were warned to stay away from what lies within, and

we pressed on anyway whether it be for insight or glory. The Old Hunters presents this idea stronger than ever as the bosses you defeat on the journey here all stand to protect this secret, a secret which they were all driven mad in relation to, and a secret only luring us in ever deeper which we as the player subconsciously justify murder to continue pursuit towards. In general, one of the core ideas of the expansion is the psychology of the subconscious mind. Whether it be our subconscious choice to ignore the warnings and give in to temptation, powering forward in search of answers, or the nightmare itself seemingly suppressing parts of itself deeper inside to hide its truths. The state of the world is very reflective and introspective and prompts the player through the regrets it depicts to think deeply as to who and what is suppressing such, and moreover, why.

The destroyed environment of the village is overwhelmingly blue, producing a flawless feeling of regret and dread, complimenting the hamlet's blood-stained waters perfectly. Playing into the descent idea, a large part of the level is literally spent descending to lower and lower elevations, coming across greater horrors the lower we descend. The barks of the villagers come to present the as fore mentioned history that once occurred with the church's massacre as well as suggest something more sinister which resulted in the curse's origin. On the ocean's shore at the deepest level of the village's outskirts, the player arrives at the deceased body of the beached Great One, Kos. From her body emerges a stillborn Orphan, a fiend who opposes us and demands to face our blade. Like all dream worlds Bloodborne presents, to conclude the nightmare, the host who dreams it must be slain. Bringing down the Orphan too slays the nightmare, uplifting its curse upon the blood-drunk hunters forever.

While from a progression sense this is where this chapter ends, understanding it takes a greater analysis. Why do we fight the Orphan and why was the curse placed upon the hunters? As with the rest of the game, delving deeper into item descriptions, and the environmental storytelling, however mad we must grow to uncover such, we come to learn the hunters ransacked the village upon hearing the emergence of Mother Kos. Taking the chance to research her body, they invaded the village to learn all they could, slaughtering anyone and anything which got in their way. Upon discovering her stillborn orphan, they abducted the child and returned to Byrgenwerth to begin experimentation. As a result, Kos, a being still spiritually cognizant despite her physical death, damned the hunters to face her wrath upon the theft of her child and the slaughter of her innocent worshipers. Insight of such twists the tone towards the stories' conclusion, as perhaps our actions have forgiven sins better left for punishment. We now play as one who mindlessly murdered anything which came our way and brought an end to the nightmare, actions that put us in a similar moral dilemma to the hunters who came before us. In this way, the expansion concludes with the player's hands covered in blood and proves that we too have lost our minds in the pursuit of blood, insight, and truths. The Old Hunters concludes with no reason for celebration, only reflection, and regret. As the player, our descent into madness has grown undeniable, as we have become the very monster, we effectively set out to destroy. There is no beast more monstrous than man and our actions, none scripted, nor cinematically presented, our direct actions as a player inputting control into a gamepad, have lost all direction in pursuit of understanding that which now unquestionably were secrets best left untampered. We are a murdering machine and will

slay anything which comes in our way, not for revenge or upon being provoked, but because we now live to taste the freshly killed blood of the next thing we see move.

Critical Reception

Bloodborne has been praised by critics for its gameplay and level design alike but largely lacks extensive commentary in regard to the game's story and narrative design direction.

- IGN scored the title a 9.1/10 but largely ignored commenting extensively on the narrative on offer, only stating "You could find a subtext of criticisms on real-world concepts like faith and worship in the understated dialogue, but taking each outrageously odd story point at face value is the more enjoyable path."
- GamesBeat had more to say but not to an extensive detail of substance. "Story in Bloodborne, between extremely vague cutscenes, exists on the periphery." They too went further to state "No one knows that boss you just killed, neither the dutiful scholar nor the hack-and-slasher, but the opportunity to discover their context is open to all to explore." GamesBeat too reviewed the title favorably giving Bloodborne a score of 88/100.

Lessons

- **Design Narrative Structure to Suit Our Games** - In portraying narrative design reflective of its themes, Bloodborne teaches us that video games can benefit from an experimental and non-linear approach to storytelling should such fit conceptually with the game it is tied to.
- **Gameplay Systems Can Be a Great Tool for Story Telling** - Designing gameplay mechanics to match thematic and narrative ideas creates a world that feels cohesive as it lets the player's actions reflect and clarify the story being told even should they choose to ignore the work's other narrative design strategies.
- **Let The Interactivity Do the Talking** - Straying away from the use of cutscenes in favor of a show, don't tell approach produces an experience that takes greater advantage of the interactive medium's potential for unparalleled artistic heights. Letting the player come to learn a game's world organically creates a lasting impact and grip of interest which gameplay pausing cinematics simply cannot replicate.

Summation

Bloodborne presents an exploration of humanity's voluntary descent into madness given the hunger for knowledge of that which one yet understands. This thematic intent is achieved at such heights of quality as a result of Miyazaki's nonlinear approach to narrative design. Focusing on environmental storytelling, narrative concepts presented through gameplay, and a story that asks the player to hunt for the knowledge they desire to understand produces an extreme flavor of a show, don't tell design philosophy that enhances the player's sense of immersion and connection with the game's world. A narrative presented this way, even if select players may miss the vast majority of its

intents, fits thematically with the world FromSoftware has constructed. FromSoftware has proven time and time again through not just Bloodborne, but also the larger Dark Souls franchise, to have created an approach to narrative design unrivaled by any other contemporary game in the industry today. Bloodborne's design philosophy is more than worthy of the industry's focus and reviewing its direction is vital to paving the road for the interactive medium's ascension to becoming something greater.

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