

The Good, The Ugly and The Bad in Code Vein: A Retrospective

I am the good and the bad, you're only the ugly.

– Duke Nukem

Introduction

Code Vein is a third-person, action role-playing-game with anime aesthetics that could be included in the relatively recently created "genre" of "Dark Souls Clones", as it shares many gameplay similarities with the FROM games. Not that any of those elements weren't invented by other games before, but I prefer to make this distinction at the very beginning of this retrospective so we depart from a common understanding of topics and themes, and expectations can be set appropriately.

As a disclaimer, this retrospective includes spoilers from both Code Vein's narrative and gameplay aspects. Read at your own discretion. If you enjoy games similar to Dark Souls, I suggest you look at some reviews and let's plays before deciding to buy it. It is not a bad game in any case, but it does include a few shortcomings that may ruin your enjoyment depending on your personal tastes. I played the game entirely offline, thus this retrospective doesn't cover any online components.

Premise

Set in the future, the world suffered a major catastrophic event called The Great Collapse, where many perished and strange-looking, huge spines called Thorns of Judgement emerged from the ground all over the world, destroying whole cities and landscapes in the process.

Along with The Great Collapse, horrible creatures known as The Horrors appeared, killing anything in sight. As the situation grew desperate, humanity turned to a parasite researched for healing purposes, now hastily turned into a military weapon: The Biological Organ Regenerative parasites (BOR parasites). Implanted in the heart, this parasite will regenerate and hijack all biological processes within a dead body, resuscitating the host in the process and causing near immortality. Aside from a single weakness: a direct wound in the heart. To distinguish them from regular humans, the revived are referred to as The Revenants.

Revenants act as sort of vampiric fighters that can develop unique abilities called Gifts, depending on their Blood Codes, which is essentially the Revenant's "class". Revenants long for human blood and need to consume it in a regular basis, lest their unchecked thirst leads them into a frenzy that will convert them into evil, blood-thirsty creatures known as The Lost; who are devoid of reason and self-control and can't be killed even if critically wounded in the heart.

Over time, the excess presence of Lost start the generation of an air component called The Miasma. If Revenants breath Miasma, they risk themselves becoming automatically frenzied. This causes a new surge of protective masks for Revenants whenever they are around Lost-infected areas.

However, Revenants alone aren't enough to fend off The Horrors or controlling the ever-growing population of Lost. Further research into a Super Weapon is conducted and an specially compatible subject for this is found: Cruz Silva, the daughter of Gregorio Silva and friend of Louis (the leader

of a group of Revenants that antagonize Gregorio. The player's character joins them at the beginning of the game). She is called "The Queen of the Revenants". But she finally proves to be too weak for the parasite and the project fails. Cruz frenzies herself, going rogue and entering a murderous rampage.

More revenants are created under Gregorio Silva's command in an operation called "Operation Queenslayer", with the mission of eliminating Cruz. Although the mission finishes successfully, Lost and miasma remains.

Unlike other revenants, Cruz is effectively immortal. To prevent her from resuscitating, the so called Relics are created. Her body is separated into different parts and each is sealed within a Relic. These are then held in the bodies of a selected group of suitable hosts (known from here as The Succesors), who develop special powers thanks to the link with The Queen. One of these hosts causes The Red Mist to appear, which effectively isolates the area surrounding the research facilities with the rest of the world, preventing horrors from invading.

In a worrying turn of events, Bloodsprings -artificially created plants scattered inside the Red Mist that provide Blood Vessels, an alternative of human blood for Revenants- start to dry up, escalating conflicts between the Provisional Government lead by Silva and the different factions of revenants, who must pay a toll of Blood Vessels to the government periodically.

Gameplay

This is Code Vein's strong suit. Just like any "Dark Souls Clone", combat in Code Vein is generally balanced to be fast-paced and intense, with both player and enemies dealing heavy damage. Reckless behaviour and/or mindless button smashing will generally lead to a quick death. Players can choose to move around the world alone or bring in a permanent AI companion chosen from the few available, each with their unique skills and abilities, allowing the player great flexibility in the choosing of the game's difficulty at any moment. Let's look at what Code Vein provides specifically.

Movement

There is nothing groundbreakingly original here. The main character can walk around and shift to running with the press of a button. Players can't jump, which leads to a few silly situations with the level design: players may encounter knee-level obstacles that can't be surmounted. Players can also go up/down ladders. Players can interact with scripted events and game elements such as NPCs, levers and elevators. And of course, players can engage in combat, being able to attack, dodge, block and parry. As an original addition, players can also perform Blood-Veil-specific attacks that deal vast amounts of damage and replenishes Ichor, the in-game mana stand-in. Blood Veils are your defense garment, your armor, and it usually takes the form of a jacket or cape on top of your character. There are in-game options to show or hide your Blood Veil.

Like in other Souls-like clones, Code Vein provides a health bar and an energy bar. The energy bar depletes when actions are executed and provides the game's overall combat balance.

Combat

Combat is where the game excels, providing ample customization options for both defense and offense. Just like any other action game, the combat is managed statistically behind the scenes influenced by the weapons, Blood Veil and Blood Code players have equipped. Blood Codes are effectively the character's „class“ and it influences the stats and decides what skills can be used. I

will explain them into detail later in this section.

- Defense: As mentioned, players have direct defense mechanisms at their disposal and all of them are strategically viable throughout the game, which is a nice surprise for those that don't want to be continuously rolling their way to victory.
 - Block: By the press of a key, players block. The sturdier their weapon, the less damage is passed onto the player and less energy is consumed. However, not all attacks are blockable and the trial-and-error nature of this mechanic balances the fact that I found it quite on the overpowered side of things for Heavy Warrior Blood Codes. I found it intuitive: if it seems like you can't block it, you probably can't.
 - Parry: maybe the specific mechanic where Code Vein tried to spice up combat in comparison to the competition. It is directly influenced by your Blood Veil, as when you parry it triggers a Blood-Veil-specific animation. There are a few different standard types that cater to its gameplay styles and each one of them comes with its own unique parry timing. This effectively makes parry an advanced mechanic for experienced players, because most Blood Veils have rather delayed parry timings, forcing the development of new muscle memory each time you equip a new Veil or new enemy types appear. Unlike regular enemies, bosses can't be parried. Your Blood Veil won't damage them and you will only make them stumble for a bit, leaving them open to a couple of attacks.
 - Dodge: the most basic defense mechanism in the game and is intuitively influenced by your Blood Veil and weapon weight compared to your carrying capacity. This capacity is determined by your Blood Code and allows for three different rolls of varying speed and invincibility frames. One important thing to notice is that the weight considered is exclusively that of your equipped weapon. You have the possibility of equipping a secondary weapon, but is not considered for the weight proportion calculation.
- Attack:
 - Light attack: it's the basic attack and, depending on weapon, can be continually tapped to chain up to - swings. Some weapons can nicely link into a heavy attack, but most of the time they can't.
 - Heavy attack: Intuitively, they are slower and hit heavier. Usually a single attack, but some weapons provide a -hit-combo. Pressing the heavy attack button also performs a high-damage charged attack that is specific for the weapon type and sometimes even specific to the weapon.

Some weapons offer a nice transition between heavy and light attacks. However, keeping in mind that most do not, I am inclined to think that comboing between heavy and light attacks and viceversa was generally not intended and if they blend together nicely it would be more of a coincidence than anything else.

- Blood Veil attack: Blood Veils have a dedicated attack button. When keeping it pressed, the character slowly takes on a "ready" position, waiting for the release of the button to perform the attack. It is a very interesting mechanic, as all Blood Veils offer unique attacks pandering to different play styles. Some can even attack from a distance, providing an edge against unaware enemies. There are three other different ways of attacking with the Blood Veil, conferring varying levels of bonuses that I will explain later:

- Attacking an enemy from behind.
 - Doing a hook attack while focused.
 - Pressing the Blood Veil attack button after a light attack.
- Special simple attacks: Unique attacks that are performed when doing a light or heavy attack after another specific action, like dodging and running. Pressing the run button while idle also provides the opportunity to a special attack. For example, hitting heavy attack after hitting the run button while standing will perform the previously mentioned hook attack that will send weak enemies into the air. Dodging forward or backwards can also influence the resulting attack animation. For example, some weapons will deal a thrust when hitting light attack after dodging forward and a sweep attack after dodging backwards.
Most of these attacks are just weapon-type dependant. However, some specific weapons can provide unique attacks that differ from the one provided in general to all weapons within a weapon type.
 - Gifts: the "magic abilities" of the game. Each Blood Code comes with its unique set of Gifts that can be used when that Blood Code is equipped.

Weapons and Blood Veils

Weapons are one of the first fields where the game shines but also falls a bit short. Within each weapon type there tends to be a large variety to choose from, but there are only a small amount of weapon types in the game. Players have one-handed swords, two-handed swords, two-handed hammers, two-handed axes, halberds and bayonets to their disposal. Damage types tend not to vary from one weapon to another within the same type, encompassing Blunt, Slash and Thrust damage. To me, bayonets are the most interesting aspect of the game's combat, as they are the only light weapons along with one-handed swords and include a ranged shot that functions basically like a Gift. Some Blood Codes cater specifically to them and can be part of some interesting builds.

While most regular weapons are dropped by normal enemies, some bosses drop their weapons, which tend to come with unique abilities. There is a third option to acquiring new weapons, which I found to be the most interesting: players can gain reputation points with the game's different companions if they gift those companions with appropriate objects found in the levels, with enough points players can gain that companion's weapon for themselves. Companion weapons are among the best in the game and come also with unique attacks and effects.

Blood Veils aren't as varied with only - different types and some of the types having maybe one or two unique sub-types. However, they have great influence on the damage Gifts make and thus players should equip one that best matches the strengths of the Blood Code used at any moment. I said should, and not need or must, because for the first playthrough this influence is not great and players can pretty much go through the whole game without needing to change Blood Veils once as long as they improve its level with the necessary materials. In further iterations of New Game + this is not the case, though.

Blood Codes and Gifts

Blood Codes are the main way of influencing the character's stats apart from leveling up and equipping weapons and Blood Veils. Nevertheless, leveling up only increases maximum health, energy and base weapon damage. Blood Veils influence damage resistances, Gift damage as well as Blood Veil damage and the character's main statistics (albeit to a lesser extent than weapons).

Weapons influence damage output and greatly change the main statistics (strength, dexterity, mind, etc.). So Blood Codes remain the key tool that decides the functioning of the chosen build, as they change everything already mentioned at the same time, including the maximum carrying capacity without suffering penalties to movement.

There are a total of 10 Blood Codes in the game, and while they all find themselves somewhere between the different typical archetypes (heavy warrior, light warrior, magician), they offer a wide range of both dedicated and hybrid builds that make the gameplay really varied. You can change them on the fly at any time, thus the game expects flexibility and adaptability from players to the challenges that are thrown at them. Some bosses will require rethinking strategies, although in the first playthrough, once some mid-game Blood Codes are unlocked, you don't really need to be changing once you found a playstyle that suits you.

Gifts are the "magic" abilities the player has access to when equipping a Blood Code and those are unique to each. There are passive and active Gifts. Passive don't consume Ichor while active do. They are implemented through an elemental system which comprises Blood, Fire, Electricity and Frost and an affinity system of Light and Darkness. They include all kinds of offensive, defensive and miscellaneous effects; from ranged bolts to damage absorbing shields to added elemental damage on weapons to showing different information on the mini-map.

There is one thing about Blood Codes and Gifts that is a very intelligent decision from the designers. There isn't really in-game tutorials, apart from a training area you can go at any time, explaining their strengths and weaknesses, you usually get Blood Codes at a point where they may prove useful against the next boss.

So players are highly encouraged to switch Blood Codes through other means: that is through mastering the Gifts of the given Blood Code, which then makes possible to equip those Gifts with a different Blood Code. This fosters frequent experimentation and the testing of new builds.

However, not all Gifts from a given Blood Code are available from the get go and players need to spend experience points to unlock them to use. Players master Gifts by killing enough enemies with those Gifts equipped, this increases an experience bar unique to the Gift and when the bar is full, the Gift is mastered. However, every area in the game has a maximum character level that, upon surpassing, the experience gained for the Gift is minimized. This has three main benefits to game balance:

- Players are encouraged to use their experience points to unlock new Gifts instead of leveling up.
- It forces players to move forward in the game if they level up too much for the area they are in if they want to keep mastering gifts, preventing experience farming in the same area for too long and keeping the game challenging to the player most of the time.
- Players may find builds they prefer above the one they are using at the moment and increase their engagement with the game. This probably wouldn't have happened unless they had any other strong external reason to do so, as choice regarding Blood Codes in this game is way too overwhelming and this system provides a smooth way of trying them all out.

Combat Flow and Balance

It is time to list one of the main problems with the combat in Code Vein. It feels as if the attacks don't carry weight to them, making combat feel too artificial. Both the player and enemies don't feature strong "hit reaction" animations unless their poise is broken and they flinch. I thought the poise system itself seemed a bit unbalanced for my taste, so most of the time you will be looking at the enemies' health bars to confirm that you have hit them. This alone can be a big drawback to many people, as it makes fighting in close quarters a lot less satisfying than it could be.

Even if you choose to mostly do range attacks by choosing a build with high levels of Ichor to perform lots of gifts or equipping a bayonette, close range combat, and Blood Veil attacks, are the only way to restore Ichor. However, if you can get over the cardboard-like feel the combat sometimes has, there is a lot of joy to be had with it, experimenting with all the Blood Codes and Gifts (there may be easily around Gifts in the game).

Blood Veil attacks not only replenish a good handful of ichor points in one go, they also temporarily raise your maximum Ichor capacity. This fosters good pacing and variety in combat, so even if you like going ranged, it makes sure you don't get bored just shooting bolts at the enemy by forcing players to also go up close from time to time. Resting at "Bonfires" (bright, sparkly Mistles in this game), will replenish your Ichor, too. But there are plenty of enemies within Mistles, so you aren't beating Code Vein without mastering physical combat, even paired up with a Heavy Warrior companion.

Another original aspect that Code Vein brings to the table, albeit not used to its full potential in my opinion, is Focus. Performing actions in battle (especially dodging at the appropriate moment) and getting hit increases your Focus bar. Once this bar is active it starts to drain until it goes back to zero after a few seconds. While Focused, players' statistics increase: they deal more damage, their poise increases and they present higher damage resistance. Also some Gifts have special effects that are greatly increased or only work during this period. One last thing is that the previously mentioned hook attack will now also perform a strong Blood Veil attack while the enemy is in the air.

The negative aspect about Focus is that doesn't last long enough and the affordance chosen to let players know that Focus has kicked in is sometimes very easily missed in the heat of the battle: players see some brief blue lines around their character along with a too quiet sound effect and the character then glows bluish while the effect lasts. Overall this affordance is weak and I personally missed it quite often, especially when battling big bosses or various enemies at the same time.

One interesting aspect is that enemies can gain Focus too, and because they are usually much bigger than you, the above mentioned affordance is thankfully much more noticeable. This effectively makes near-death enemies tougher and spices up combat by forcing players to be much more careful around these enemies, dynamically influencing their strategy on the spot.

Narrative

Code Vein has a strong narrative factor that makes it distinct from other Souls-like clones that choose to have a much more subtle -and sometimes more obtuse- narrative aspect. Characters are perfectly delineated and the story and plot are laid out carefully in front of the player. There is side content involving some key choices during play that allow for three different endings. It is a story full with emotional moments that will get to you several times, and it has some good character development for most of its cast.

There is a nice touch to the narrative's character development: Revenants loose memories both when they are revived and every time they die. Leaving behind a cristalyzed version of these memories. More on this later.

Where Code Vein's narrative may be strong for some, it can also be the main negative aspect for others. Code Vein is an anime game, and thus has a shounen-like story with all the common tropes such as "I must protect everybody", "friendship beats everything" and the like. I am a life-long

anime fan that has barely seen any anime for the last years precisely because I got burnt out on most of them being, deep down, indistinguishable from one another. With this said, I liked the story overall and the tropes weren't too overused, although you find them in key dramatic moments, partially eliminating the emotional impact from the scene. There are also some cringeworthy parts and your typical where-does-his-philosophy-stem-from moments with one antagonist making zero sense with his motivations.

Story and Characters

Like most anime, the premise is used more as a hook and is quickly overcome in favor for the actual plot of the game, although I laid out some extra information: As the game begins, players have no knowledge of The Horrors, the outside world or how The Red Mist came to be.

A good point in the story's favor is that, even though the gameplay features only the main character and one companion, all main characters actually move together throughout the story, appearing in all cutscenes. Weaving everyone together like this in all the plot's intricacies makes for a far more interesting and compelling story, as the characters tend to have interesting dialogue when no typical shounen trope is currently on-screen.

The first level functions as a tutorial and features a throwaway companion that becomes frenzied and turns into a Lost, becoming the first boss of the game. This level introduces the main conflict for the first half of the game: Bloodsprings are drying up and dying, making the supply of Blood Vessels dwindle and thus generating tensions between Revenants and the Provisional Government, because the former can't pay their Blood Vessel taxes to the latter.

After the first boss fight, a new character named Io is introduced. In this scene, Io is shown as a cryptic character with a bit of an erratic behaviour. Io wounds the player's character over a dried-up Bloodspring, bringing it back to life as the dripping blood touches its roots. The main character's ability of reviving Bloodsprings is unique in the world of Code Vein and is witnessed by another Revenant character called Louis. He takes the protagonist under his care and they later go together to The Base, where Louis is revealed to be the leader of another group of Revenants. Louis prompts players to lend him their ability to revive dead Bloodsprings, which would be of great help in his current quest: finding the source of the Bloodsprings to secure a permanent supply of Blood Vessels to the Revenant population. Here the real story kicks in.

For the next few levels, players search for dried up Bloodsprings that the protagonist "revives". Once active, Louis is able to use a tool on the Bloodspring that causes a glowing marker to appear. This marker points to the source that they are looking for. At one point players encounter a creature known as a Succesor, and reveals the truth behind Bloodsprings and Vessels: the source is a Succesor that is no other than Louis sister, and she must be kept from frenzying, lest the stream of Blood Vessels completely disappears.

Short before fighting her, players encounter a remnant of the protagonist memories that takes to a new level. This level is set in the past, during „Operation Queenslayer“, and the player is paired up with Jack, a character that has already appeared a couple of times in the story and that has come across as an antagonist whose perceived goals clash with those of Louis and his group. Here it is learned that it was the protagonist who personally slayed Cruz Silva (The Queen of The Revenants) but frenzied afterwards, forcing Jack to kill the main character by destroying their heart. Although the protagonist survived their heart being destroyed.

This level is a nice change of pace in the story and starts showing to players that there is more to Jack than what it seems on the surface. Jack ends up becoming part of the group later in the story and I think that his character arc from seemingly antagonist to loyal ally is very skillfully done.

This level also gives the protagonist a backstory and turns them into a key element in the plot. I found this a refreshing take on the silent protagonist trope: they usually are a blank slate for the player to function as avatar. Trying to take the best of both worlds is dangerous, because not always what the player wants will coincide with what the character wants (in the narrative). This dissonance arises to the surface a couple of times during the game. Nevertheless, I found myself most of the time agreeing with the main character's motivations, so I think these dissonances don't take away from the experience too much.

The beaten Succesor, a woman from Louis' past called Aurora Valentino, tells the group that The Queen is really immortal and that to keep her from reviving herself, her body was divided into pieces and set into relics. Then these relics were put into the different Succesors, who isolated themselves to prevent these relics from coming together. After finding the source of the Bloodsprings, the group must now find these Succesors and prevent them from frenzying, as that would free The Queen from the relics, allowing her to revive herself.

this is the longest part of the game and includes most of the levels. All Succesors are people with past connections to the main cast, and some very good character development is seen here. It also served to introduce Mido (the main antagonist).

Yakumo, Louis' right hand, could be consider a „paladin“ archetype. He is strong, caring and always tries to do the right thing. Along with Jack, I think he has the best character development and was among my favourite parts of the game's narrative aspect.

On the other hand, there is another revenant that joins the group early in the game called Mia. She has a little brother and their relationship can get a bit annoying at times as they are both really overprotective of the other and I felt that their character arcs weren't really cohesive with the overarching plot.

As mentioned previously, crystalized memories are the main source of character memories, as we are directly exposed to them. They are objects we can find here and there scattered through the levels. These objects make players enter an instanced scene where they can only walk and witness separated, forgotten happenings, from the different characters' pasts.

This is an example of a good idea executed poorly. During these memories we can only walk, and the music is the same for all of them. They tend to last good to minutes, especially the ones involving the main plot, and if you gather - to watch them one after the other the flow and pacing of the game really suffers. There is definitively room for improvement here.

Along the road, in these memories, the true antagonist antagonist is shown. And it is not Silva, how it was hinted up until now, but Mido, a ruthless scientist, who turned multiple characters into revenants and performed strange experiments on people for his own spurious reasons. Mido is intertwined with the main cast through Yakumo. After The Great Collapse, a still human Yakumo encountered Mido. Mido offered protection to him, his sister and his friends in exchange of help with Mido's experiments. Eventually Mido betrayed them, turning everybody into revenants. In the aftermath of these events only Yakumo and his sister survived but were separated.

The group eventually learns Mido was part of the experiments that created The Relics, and are confronted by him as they search for more Successors, because Mido is looking to actually cause the Succesors to become Lost. Thus the quest changes again and the group follows Mido's footsteps right to the front gate of The Provisional Government, where Mido looks to confront Gregorio Silva face to face.

This is another dark spot in the narrative. Placing the main antagonist so far along the story feels like a cheap twist for shock value to easily surprise the player, but at the end it only causes Mido to be badly developed due to lack of time. The few exposures players have to only show him as very, very evil. In the final showdown he finally lays out his motivations and it just comes across as an ad-hoc excuse to bring the plot to its end state because there is very little information about his character.

Mido's confrontation is the game's climax. He reveals to the player how Gregorio Silva is nothing other than another Successor. Mido also reveals that Gregorio Silva personally created and is maintaining The Red Mist to ward off the remnants of humanity from The Horrors. Players are shown the Horrors for the first time and are told how keeping The Red Mist active causes Silva to need high amounts of blood to prevent him becoming frenzied, and thus the Blood Vessel tax system was created.

Mido believes Revenants to be the next step in human evolution and wants to foster further evolution, to that end he wants to turn Silva into a Lost to get rid of The Red Mist. Mido has been monitoring The Horrors outside the Mist and has observed that they have evolved into more powerful beings at a very fast rate in the last years. In comparison, Revenants within the Mist have remained mostly unchanged, barely evolving at all, and growing complacent, unaware of their true potential. Mido believes forcing Revenants back to their first purpose -fighting Horrors- will trigger them to evolve and reach their full potential.

This in itself on paper isn't very bad, but because these evolution topics have never been mentioned through the - hours (up until now) of game, it makes for a half-baked climax.

Afterwards Mido projects various Relics into the distance, which seek Silva like homing missiles and thrust themselves into his chest, causing him to frenzy. Yet this isn't enough to get rid of The Red Mist, as Mido underestimated Silva's strength of will. Nevertheless, Silva turns into a Lost and won't be able to keep the Mist up forever.

After beating Mido, the group rushes towards the Provisional Government to face Silva. And this is maybe the point I disliked most. After a climax, it is always better to wrap up the plot relatively fast as it is here where a story is most prone to dragging. However, the game drags on for another - hours after defeating Mido.

Nevertheless, this time is used to develop another revelation regarding Io, which I personally found dull as, just like Mido's affairs, this isn't fleshed out enough during the game. Io is supposed to be a Guardian and all Successors have a Guardian, but this is barely brought up from other characters and thus isn't explored thoroughly enough. Io's conflict is that she feels she has no purpose but is inarguably attached to the main character. It is at this point where it is revealed that Guardians were created from Cruz wishes, to prevent Successors from frenzying, and so Io remembers she was previously "assigned" to the main character (who is then revealed to be a Successor) and that she isn't even Human nor Revenant. This revelation is used to try and emphasize the Good Ending... which I think doesn't do very much. And it is a pity, the story has so many good bits, yet at the key moments doesn't reach its full emotional potential.

Players beat Silva, and depending on how many memories of Successors they managed to gather, one of the three endings kicks in. I got the best ending because I gathered all memories and so it is the ending I will be explaining. When fighting Silva, it is with the knowledge that the main character will inherit both Silva's Relic and his duty of maintaining the Mist. However, when the moment arrives, Io comes out of nowhere and shows that she is able to actually bear Silva's Relic, taking this burden away from the main character. The game did not really explain much on how this was possible. It was shown as Io finally finding her true purpose, yet to me was an easy cop out to

create a happy ending out of nowhere that basically destroyed any emotional engagement I had with the story. At the very end of the „good“ ending we see the main character opening a hole in The Red Mist and exiting to the outside world with some of the companions, supposedly to fight The Horrors. Leaving a cliffhanger for a possible second installment.

Regarding the other two endings, I went online to inform myself about them and I think that they carry a much more powerful punch in the gut, more coherent with the overall tone of despair of the game.

Atmosphere

This is unfortunately the weakest part of the game, especially due to repetitive, inconsistent level design and the massive reuse of assets, especially with enemies. In general, though, the game wants to convey a mood of gloominess, oppression and despair and I say that, all things considered, it succeeds in it. Nevertheless it doesn't reach its full potential, not by a long shot.

Assets and Level Design

The game looks pretty, even on a regular PS with its horrible loading times. Textures fit the aforementioned mood enough that helps immerse yourself in the world. Then the real problems of the game surface: the reuse to the bone of enemy types and uninspired levels.

I mention again that levels feel uninspired. That is because there are only a couple of types of levels and they are reused over and over with different color palettes. We have urban interiors, urban exteriors, caves and ridges and variations of open swamps. For example, all urban levels feel very similar, even though three of those levels the cities are covered in snow, fire and sand respectively. They feel the same because the level design is also too same-y.

That is a second problem. Levels feel disconnected and inorganic, with seemingly arbitrary blockades to force progression in unnecessary big circles that connect again to the previous path through a shortcut that is, oh what a coincidence, always closed from the first side that players approach them. This level design philosophy isn't bad in itself, and games like Dark Souls have proven it can be done masterfully. However, levels in Code Vein feel maze-like for the sake of being maze-like instead of feeling like an organic space that makes sense. While it sounds worse than it actually is, just by how I'm laying it out here, interesting combat encounters happen frequently enough that helps to partially deflect the player's attention from the environment, conducting their focus more towards the next fight, making actual level progression feel secondary most of the time.

Bosses are recurrently mentioned, by critics, as another one of the game's biggest flaws. Most people bearing this criticism tend to bring Dark Souls as the standard on boss design and draw the conclusion that Code Vein's bosses are uninteresting and simplistic. I disagree on both terms overall, although I acknowledge there is a grain of truth in that judgement. While I disliked most boss encounters in Dark Souls, most of Code Vein's bosses can be beat first-try by an experienced player in Souls-like games as only less than a handful offer a rightful challenge. And those who do, aren't exempt from having a couple of annoying -hit-kills in their last phase to punish players mistakes.

I think bosses in the game fit the overall challenge level that is laid out in front of players along the game. There are some spikes, and all interestingly designed bosses are at the very end (the very last five bosses of the game if you get the good ending), but I find this boss design serves the game's

more narrative focus, instead of trying to make every single boss fight memorable by being a wall to stop player progression, which is what Dark Souls did with all its -in- bosses with how FromSoft approached boss phases in that game.

Music and Sound Effects

I'll start with the shortest. There is actually very little music in the game. Most of it is subtle and the most noticeable one is when combat music kicks in or fades out.

Music within the memories is always the same track and can get annoying. However, music in cutscenes I think was very skillfully used and served well to improve the emotional engagement. Music is orchestral, like it tends to be in many Japanese works, and I think it fits the mood of the game just fine.

I have a personal rule that if after beating a game I have no personal recollections of any music track within it, its music score was probably good enough and fit the purpose. Not bad, not good.

The Good, The Ugly And The Bad

All in all, I consider Code Vein to be a solid game worth giving a try if you both like Souls-like games and anime/manga (and even if you don't like anime as well). Its heavy narrative-driven focus could be a deterrent to some, but cutscenes are skippable and its gameplay is varied enough to keep your interest until the end.

It is a real pity that some levels feel too similar between them due to all the asset recycling. With better levels and more enemy variety I think that the experience would improve a lot and would make Code Vein a much more serious contender within Souls-like games.

The Good:

- Combat is incredibly varied, as the system of mastering Gifts allows for a nearly infinite choice of builds. Along with how the choice of weapons and blood veils influence statistics, this aspect alone can carry the game for several playthroughs.
- The system that fosters players changing and trying out Blood Codes is very clever and paced brilliantly.
- The premise is interesting and the story has many good, memorable moments. Especially when it focuses in the interesting characters.
- I didn't get much into it for lack of space, but the way Jack went from antagonists to ally felt very rightly handled and may be one of my favourite aspects of the narrative. Yakumo comes as close second as maybe the most interesting character...

The Ugly:

- ...that could have been Louis. He is an interesting character and placed at the forefront of the narrative during the first half of the game, but afterwards (and specially when you unlock all his memories) he kind of takes the backseat for the rest of the game. A pity.
- The story isn't without some cringeworthy moments and your typical shounen tropes sprinkled here and there, unnecessarily souring the emotional engagement.
- Many bosses feel narratively uninteresting and aren't anticipated enough before facing them,

which would increase player engagement with them.

- Combat doesn't feel like it carries weight most of the time judging by how animations play out. It feels like you are hitting a cardboard sometimes.
- The game feels unnecessarily long. There are main zones to explore and a lot of optional levels. Just doing the story can take good hours. If you are a completionist you could go up to if you try to gather all memories and explore all side dungeons. For some, the game may feel like it drags during the last third. It definitely did to me.

The Bad:

- The constant reuse of enemies can really make a dent in the enjoyment, specially in the second half of the game, as the cosmetic variety and the slightly different movesets aren't enough to really counter the diminishing unpredictability and lost sense of discovery in each next level.
- Levels can feel uninspired, repetitive and their design confusing for the sake of being confusing, with only less than a handful being actually interesting. The very last level is one of them, luckily.