

Game Narrative Review

Your name: Liangzheng Luo

Your school: Carnegie Mellon University

Your email: liangzhl@andrew.cmu.edu

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Game Title: Bloodborne

Platform: PlayStation 4

Genre: Action Role Playing Game

Release Date: March 24, 2015

Developer: From Software

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hidetaka Miyazaki (Director)

Overview

(Note: this review will be focusing on the main game without many sights into the DLC) Blood. Beast. Death. The moon over the city of Yharnam glows relentlessly, covering all the living and the dead with a shade of mystery. The hunter is awakened at the beginning of the so-called Hunting Night with vague instructions - "Seek Paleblood to transcend the hunt". More and more unveiled the world becomes during the journey, and the hunt comes to an end eventually where the hunter must choose a path for the city of Yharnam and ultimately himself: to end the night and embrace the cherished sunlight, or to take a step forward towards the unknown future of humans?

Bloodborne is a standalone title besides *Soul* trilogy. It tells actually half a story through the gameplay and hides the fragments of the other half deep inside every corner of the world. Based on a gothic world background, Bloodborne is actually a fantasy with different lens on observing beyond-terrestrial beings and their power but the game focuses on the change of player, a human, which makes the whole story meaningful and profound.

Characters

- **The Hunter (user-defined)** - The hunter is an outsider journeying to Yharnam for its famous Blood Ministration to cure an unspecified disease. With no dialogues assigned at all, the hunter, essentially the avatar the player controls, is called on a journey in the city to complete a contract - find Paleblood.
- **Doll** - Believed to be made by Gehrman, when first found outside the Workshop in Hunter's Dream she is inanimate. After the Hunter gains at least one Insight, an

important attribute affecting how much the Hunter sees the world in its real form, she is awakened and serves as a key character fulfilling the job both as the world teller and for leveling-up.

- **Old Hunter Gehrman** - Gehrman is an old hunter in a wheelchair located in the Hunter's Dream. He is the first hunter trained by the Healing Church to deal with the beast problem in Yharnam and now resigned in the Workshop with fighting equipment he invented. He also is an instructor in the early game and the agent of one of the Great Ones, Moon Presence, fulfilling the job of overwatching the player's movements.
- **Provost Willem** - Willem is the head of Byrgenwerth, an academic institute from which the Healing Church originated. He zealously pursues higher levels of knowledge and after finding remnants of ancient Pthumerians where knowledge of the Great Ones and the Old Blood were discovered, he devoted himself to achieving the evolution of human beings. Now, at the very last days of his life, he can barely speak and only sits on a chair outside Byrgenwerth College, waiting for someone to reveal the secret of this world.
- **Bosses** - bosses in Bloodborne come from different backgrounds and can be in either the human figure or large scaled beast.
 - **Vicar Amelia** - Once the heads of the Healing Church, Vicar Amelia is clearly a victim of Blood Ministration. When the player finds her, she is seemingly praying to a skull believed to be from Laurence, the founder of the healing church. She unavoidably transforms into an enormous beast, clasping the Gold Pendant which is a reminder of the cautionary adage by Willem: "Fear the Old Blood". This shows that the misuse of blood has caused a catastrophic effect on most people in Yharnam, even those thought to be in a higher level.
 - **Gehrman, The First Hunter** - Gehrman becomes the enemy if the player chooses to refuse his claim at the end of the game. Unlike most other bosses, Gehrman is not affected by the blood but tries to stop the player from going further in the Night of Hunt.
- **The Great Ones** - Great Ones are also bosses but, by the name, they are not typically beings that originally exist in the City of Yharnam. However, they come and reveal themselves with diverse purposes.
 - **Rom, The Vacuous Spider** - Rom was a student of Provost Willem but now transformed into a giant spider on Moonside Lake. It is unclear what turned her into a Great One. Due to her special ability of backtracking time, she has placed a veil over the world to keep the secret of its true form. Killing her brings the world to a state of the Red Moon, the final time phase in the game.
 - **Mergo's Wet Nurse** - Despite the name "wet nurse" Mergo's Wet Nurse looks bizarrely strange with eight arms and two wings on the back but actually, her body is invisible. She serves as a surrogate mother to Mergo, a Great One in its infancy. She is a required boss in Bloodborne for the very relationship between her and Mergo who, another Great One, Moon Presence is expecting to hunt.

- **Moon Presence** - The creator of Hunter's Dream, Moon Presence is a powerful Great One of the moon. It directs the player behind the scenes in order to stop the birth of Mergo and keep its reign over the city of Yharnam. It keeps track of the player and only shows up to end the player's life if Gehrman is defeated.

Breakdown

The chronology of Bloodborne covers a massive number of events during a relatively long time period.

Before the game starts:

On the land of Yharnam long time ago was a civilization - Pthumeria. The queen of Pthumeria, Yharnam, had contact with a Great One to presumably bear a child named Mergo. The queen died in the delivery process, but remained a spiritual state in reality.

Provost Willem founded Byrgenwerth in search of higher level knowledge and ways to evolve mankind. Together with colleagues and his students he had an expedition to the remains of ancient Pthumerians and discovered the Old Blood which had a connection to the Great Ones. The Old Blood was a tempting source for knowledge but also dangerous as Willem frightened the reckless use of it could result in beasthood. People in Byrgenwerth divided finally as Laurence disagreed and used the Old Blood to try to ascend beyond humanity and Gehrman took the Old Blood for his own research. That led to the fall of Byrgenwerth and the birth of the following groups:

Laurence created the Healing Church to continue his experiment with the Old Blood. Laurence as the head of the Church, introduced Blood Ministration which mixed the Old Blood and human blood to treat some diseases and the power of the Church grew significantly.

Members of higher ranking in the Healing Church formed an organization called the Choir. With the finding of the Great Isz Chalice, the Choir got the chance of having direct communication with a Great One: Ebrietas, the Daughter of Cosmos. Ever since then they pursued ceaselessly truth of the Great Ones and ultimately the ascension of mankind.

Micolash, a student of Willem as well, formed the School of Mensis with a focus on performing Mensis ritual which caused the Great Ones to descend, the moon to turn red (Blood Moon) and Amygdalas to appear in many places in the city.

The Hunter's Workshop was created by Gehrman who invented weapons to deal with the beasts.

While the Blood Ministration proved to be very effective, its side effect that transforms humans into beasts brought down Old Yharman. Then The Healing Church began to train a group of specialists named the Hunters. Thus, Gehrman became the first ever hunter in Old Yharnam. However, the beast catalyst grew out of control and finally Old Yharnam ("Yharnam" at the time) was burned to the ground, probably by the Church to control the beast disaster. After the tragedy a new Yharnam rose again with its old part closed.

In-game events:

It is in modern age with firearms invented and used. The protagonist travels to the city of Yharnam in search of ways to deal with his/her disease. A Blood Ministration turns the player into a Hunter with the goal “Seek the Paleblood”, and so the adventure begins.

Everything in the game actually happens within one night - the Hunt Night. The time phase in this night is clearly divided into three parts, with each transition triggered by defeating a certain boss and the world changes in this way.

It is sunset when the player looks up to the sky after going out of the birth place. During this phase the Great Ones have not show themselves and the players fights mainly beasts and insane Yharnam citizens just like all other Hunters do. Defeating Vicar Amelia turns the moon cycle of Bloodborne to full moon when the moon scatters cold light and the world unveils a bit further.

Defeating Rom, The Vacuous Spider brings the moon cycle to the final stage: Blood Moon. In this phase the player gets to see the world in its real form with Insights more than 40.

Defeating Mergo’s Wet Nurse ceases Mergo’s cry and stops the ritual. The Hunter is of no need at this point and Gehrman asks the player to be killed in Hunter’s Dream and wake in the real world. Refusing the offer triggers a boss fight with Gehrman and there are two possible endings after defeating him: if the hunter does not use at least three umbilical cords he/she is grasped by Moon Presence and becomes the new agent of it. Otherwise, as the hunter has enough power and insights he/she is able to contend against the Great Ones even like Moon Presence. After slaying it, the hunter becomes a new Great One himself which, stands for a starting new childhood for mankind in their higher state.

It is not until the very end when Moon Presence shows itself that the story is clarified to the player: Moon Presence traps Gehrman in Hunter’s Dream, thus commanding the player indirectly by sending information by him. The Great Ones try to weaken the others’ reign over Yharnam but they tend not to do that themselves. Moon Presence sends the hunter to end Mergo’s life in childhood but overlooks the hunter’s growing potential.

Though a long story, the majority of it is not conveyed to the player directly. Instead, Bloodborne lets the world to tell the story. Most NPCs the player talks to are not omniscient: they have their own story and can probably merely tell the player part of that. Every item and weapon has some descriptions on its background story. The players need to reason from what the world says combined with what they see and hear to draw a complete portrait of a character or guess an event. Understanding Bloodborne’s story is very much like fitting pieces of a jigsaw together.

The story of Bloodborne overall is profound even among From Software’s Soul series. Two main factors cause this: first, there are a number of events and characters before the gameplay and they have a significant impact on the world. The player can only get to know the lore of the past by reasoning from trivials in the broken world now. Second and most importantly, the game hides information in the world and never lets any character in the game ask the player to dig out the truth. The game is waiting statically for the players to explore: in this way of interactive storytelling, the player uses his/her free will to decide whether to go further, thus every choice becomes meaningful as it is a reflection of the player’s real thoughts. It is a superlative method designed for Bloodborne, a game

exactly about the evolution of mankind and being free and courageous to decide for oneself is the most precious attribute at any time.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game is it offers openness and freedom for every single player to make their own choices during levels. Its carefully designed map makes it possible for the player to go deep in the world and rewards the player with some items or a valuable information. This keeps the interest curve high and makes it fun and meaningful to explore the world. What is more, by encouraging the player to wander more, the game fulfills the job of narrative design with the help of the whole world structure. In this way, once the player grasps the hang of it, he/she enters a flow state smoothly and explores the story spontaneously.

Everything in Bloodborne is not about right or wrong but making choices that one has to face the consequences. Bloodborne combines its subject with meaningful interactions and gives the player complete freedom to follow their heart.

Unsuccessful Element

It is potential for good or evil that the game hides information in the world, and the clear fact is that this way of storytelling does not work well for some players. Bartle has classified four kinds of players: socializers, explorers, achievers and killers. Apparently Bloodborne is a best fit for explorers but it looks too depressing for those who just want to stay easy and go through the whole story quickly. Imagining fighting with some giant boss you don't even know who it is - the gameplay just makes you do that and when it is defeated, it is gone forever without leaving some words explaining its motivation. This confusing moment repeatedly happens as I go through the game for the first time.

Furthermore, even for experienced *Soul series* players Bloodborne is not a friendly title as its main storyline is linear and only covers a minor part of the background settings so finishing it does not leave a clear impression. To fully understand the story without external help, the player has to go new game plus and repeat most of things again except for being more aware of surroundings and choose the other possible option.

Highlight

"Tonight, Gehrman joins the hunt."

-Gehrman, the First Hunter

The best moment in Bloodborne, from my perspective, is the fight against Gehrman, the First Hunter. Admittedly he is not the hardest or the largest boss in the game, but the stage, the story and the interaction with him make this bossfight impressive and shocking.

This sadly beautiful fight in Hunter's Dream is a climax in story where two conflicting ideas collide with each other - whether humanity should take a step further and resist their fate. Gehrman has every justified reason for he is trapped by Moon Presence and does not want the player to repeat the tragedy. Lumenflowers on the ground reflect the moonlight and witness the first hunter fight for the last time. During the fight when

Gehrman enters the second phase, he seeks power from the moon and releases a large, powerful arcane AOE seemingly to be a roar against his fate. He moves so quickly that it is hard to believe the fact he is in a wheelchair.

Everything in this epic bossfight makes Gehrman a distinctive character and completes his story perfectly.

Critical Reception

Brandin Tyrrel from IGN gives the story structure of Bloodborne a high claim saying that “Your personal story will be created on your own terms, as you explore the spiderweb of paths and secrets that crisscross Bloodborne’s potent world..... Rewards in Bloodborne come with careful examination and curious effort.....”. His idea is basically the same with what is mentioned in successful point - to set a high interest and expectations for players to let them explore the world on their own. He does not bring up any cons on the storytelling part despite pointing out the fact of extended load times and minor frame-rate hitches. Bloodborne then in its newer version shows item descriptions during the loading time, adding something dealing with the boredom. (9.1/10)

Kevin VanOrd from Gamespot in his review comments that “The lack of thematic nuance is what makes From Software’s newly introduced storytelling spotlight as successful as it is”. That is one of the reasons people categorize Bloodborne into Soul series although they do not share the same world settings. Also he says that “Bloodborne... tells a story with its environments... echoing its plot within its architecture and its enemies.” Bloodborne connects the big world using its standard level design, and opening a gate generally means open a locked part of the story. (9/10)

Patrick Klepek from Kotaku, on the contrary, has put questions on the storytelling part. He says “It’s still not clear to me why my character was killing so many things, rather than out looking for a cure.....The important story isn’t found in any text or dialogue, it’s my understanding of how to play Bloodborne.” Because of the lack of information provided, Patrick sets off the journey as he wants and the result is ironically almost identical to people who fully understand the story. However, apparently the narrative design has caused some unwanted confusion to Patrick to an extent that he does not know what to do at some point.

From critical receptions above we are able to identify different player groups have very different reactions to Bloodborne’s story. Those who spent a number of hours in the game understands the mechanics and know how to explore the world while some others have some time struggling finding the meaning of everything.

Lessons

- **Let the world speak for itself**, just like the way nature does it. It would be absurd in the world of Bloodborne if someone keeps going along with you and explains everything to make sure you understand the story. No. Bloodborne chooses to go natural - just like how everything in the real world conveys information. There is just so much waiting to be dug out. This is a double-edged sword because it is hard to control and not everyone will get accustomed to it.

- **Leave important choices to players.** This could dramatically increase the player's sense of playing the game and controlling the plot. The best moment of this usually comes when player has gone through a bunch of up and downs and he/she needs to decide based on his/her own judgement of morality and value. It is worth noting that the game does not necessarily need to provide countless story branches, leaving some room at key point just works sufficiently.
- **Visual elements and music contribute much to the atmosphere.** For ARPGs the nice feeling of growing is another important factor of user experience. This is shown in multiple ways: the damage number grows, the enemies become more terrifying and the environment becomes more challenging. These things can be achieved by raising the visual performance and changing the ambient sound during the game. Even during a multi-phased bossfight, escalating the boss's attacking action is also a practical way to add to the atmosphere.

Summation

Bloodborne, after the successful release of Dark Souls II, pushes the boundary of open-world storytelling further by constructing a massively detailed world and cutting story into pieces and hide them in the world. Never a game has successful veiled a Victorian gothic world under the conspiracy of outer gods, let alone leaving options for exploring. The gameplay, the story works well together to create a gorgeous, mysterious and charming land of Yharnam.

Citations

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