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Skeptical Hunter(s): A Critical Approach to the Cryptic Ludonarrative of *Bloodborne* and Its Player Community

Felix Schniz
University of Mannheim

> Well, you've come to the right place. Yharnam is the home of blood ministration. You need only unravel its mystery. (BLOODBORNE 2015: Introductory Sequence)

Introduction

BLOODBORNE (FromSoftware, 2015) is a curiosity among recent role-playing video games. Whereas titles such as DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION (Bioware, 2014) or THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT (Project Red, 2015), received general acclaim for their well-composed and scripted storylines, BLOODBORNE gathered a devoted fan base by applying nearly opposite strategies. Its narrative is not explicitly told, but implicitly unravels through a mosaic of dubious non-player characters, vague item descriptions, and compelling level architecture, urging players to be critically aware of their in-game surroundings. Its infamous "lack of specificity" has therefore long since turned into "a metagame of trying to figure out the plot with others" (Gallaway 2015: N.p.). BLOODBORNE Reddits, wikis, and similar digital discussion grounds have become hotspots of analysis and information exchange. With its cryptic narrative qualities, the game thus fosters a peer-to-peer spirit that can be interpreted as an emerging digital counter-trend to neoliberal market patterns.

This paper discusses BLOODBORNE as an example for emancipatory game design from a critical theory perspective. By critical theory, it refers to the intellectual "fight [against] ideological mystification, class oppression, and hegemony with the goal of changing society for the better" in the Frankfurt School tradition (Felluga, Introduction 2015: xxiii). Firstly, it explains how the game's cryptic style invites players to reflect on their in-game surroundings. Environmental storytelling and its impact on the ludonarrative of BLOODBORNE stand at the focus of this theoretical prelude. Secondly, the paper sketches the traditionally difficult stance of video games in critical theory thinking. It pays special attention to Nick Dyer-Whiteford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire* in which they discuss how video games do, in fact, provide critical input. Thirdly, a close reading of BLOODBORNE follows. Focusing on the game's ideological world, the role of the player-avatar within it, and the game's endings, the paper shows how the game encourages player-communication in a culture of critical debate and knowledge sharing. It fourthly explains how this kind of online-collaboration exemplifies a potential mode of postcapitalism according to Paul Mason. Finally, a conclusion offers a summary of the paper's argument and provides starting ground for further discussions.

Making Sense of Video Game Worlds

As Kurt Squire argues, video games can provide "experiences of inhabiting identities within ideological worlds" (2006: 26). Foundational to his idea is what Jesper Juul coined to be the 'half-real' state of video games: The fact that the fictional qualities of a video game and its rules are entangled, constantly relating to one another (Juul 2005: 195-196). Using GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS (Rockstar North, 2004) as an example, Squire describes how the game's iconic 1990s hip-hop imagery is purveyed by underlying rules which encourage certain actions (stylized violence), allow certain actions (roaming freely around to explore the game world), or reward and punish player behaviour (2006: 20-21). Thereby, it confronts the player with a set of norms and beliefs about its game world that a player must consider when interacting with it. Agency, in conclusion, plays a pivotal role in the experience of a video game's ideology. "[W]e can only understand games' meanings by understanding what players do with them and the meanings that players construct through these actions" (Malone, Murray in Squire 2006: 21).

Environmental storytelling is a central mean for the communication of a virtual world's ideology. In brief, the term refers to the interplay of level geography, audio-visual design, as well as the specific placement of objects in a virtual world. These properties 'tell' stories without being obvious. Hearing grumbling noises along a dark corridor in the early moments of BLOODBORNE, for instance, not only envelops one in the game's ambience of Gothic horror, it also prepares the player implicitly for the wolf-monster that waits at the end of the hallway. As Henry Jenkins describes, spatial narration is essential for video games, which are by design meant to be geographies rather than linear storylines (2004: 121-124). Their audience explores them based on individual pace and interest. Thus, every element of it ought to support certain motives, to make sure that a visitor of its world fully immerses into its central themes. This furthermore emphasizes the importance of player agency again. The act of interpreting ones surroundings is strictly left to the player (Ascher 2014: n.p.).

BLOODBORNE turns environmental storytelling into an investigative challenge. In the tradition of other FromSoftware games, it operates like an open-ended jigsaw puzzle: No frame of narrative security is provided in favour of intentionally obfuscate information snippets, and some parts of the whole are simply missing, leaving narrative blank spots. The introduction to the game immediately prepares the player for the game's secret-laden tone: After starting in-medias res in a puzzling dialogue with an anonymous character and a fragmented nightmare sequence, the player-avatar awakes in an eerie clinic. One does neither know why the game begins there, nor is it immediately obvious what the central objective might be. Similar to BLOODBORNE's spiritual predecessor, DARK SOULS, one must rely on three kinds of clues from this moment on: "the dialogue spoken by non-player characters, … descriptions of the items found strewn across the world, and … the visual design of the world itself" (Battey 2014). The player's dependency on these clues emphasizes how prone to ambiguity they leave him or her. Immediately to the right of the starting position, for instance, one finds a note reading "Seek paleblood to transcend the hunt" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.). At that stage of the game especially, the player can only wonder what 'the hunt' is. The term 'paleblood,' meanwhile, is addressed in other item descriptions scattered across the game world, but never

fully explained or used in relation to a tangible phenomenon. The true meaning of the term is never revealed in-game, and left intentionally unspecified by lead designer Hidetaka Miyazaki (in Byrne et al 2015: 541-542). Nevertheless, such hints are the player's most important mean of understanding. "Only by engaging [them] … can a player begin to get a wider picture of the game's larger story" (Battey 2014), even though its entirety remains unachievable.

This approach creates a strong bond between gameplay and theming intentions – a ludonarrative that holds a player's attention captive even long after playing and nurtures an urge to clarify understanding with others. Knowledge in a video game essentially equals performance (Squire 2006: 22-24) and like the players themselves, the player-avatar is a stranger to the world of BLOODBORNE, left to make sense of its events through whatever clues the surroundings might give. Thereby, the player's ability to make sense of under-descript clues is essentially foregrounded. The fact that a single player cannot unveil every mystery of the game, moreover, turns into an ultimate reason to discuss findings in a player community: "It doesn't matter that these people will likely never uncover the truth of these details; it's their very absence that will keep the game alive in discussion forums long after that majority of players have moved on." (Battey 2014: n.p.)

The Critical Theory and Video Games: a Forbidden Affair?

Despite these capabilities, however, video games are very much commodities of the entertainment complex and thus, inhibit a problematic position within critical theory thinking. Video games may have carried a scent of rebellion in the early 1960s, when they emerged as projects of curiosity from the labs of a few universities (Wolf 2001: 35-36, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al 2016: 67-68), but have long since the first mass-marketing sprawled into a globally operating, billion-dollar field of enterprise. The negative impact of such a cultural industry, the standardization of mass-manufactured cultural goods depriving them of their spirit, has been a core topic in the critical theory since the early days of the Frankfurt School culture industry (Felluga, Culture Industry 2015: 68). Hence, one can argue for their role in the capitalist monopoly as goods of leisure, rather than artworks that provoke the revolutionary. Instead, they are supposed to "[prescribe] each reaction" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 109) to the customer, numbing his or her emancipatory will.

Indeed, it seems evident to accuse video games of repressive desublimation, Herbert Marcuse's idea of technological influences depriving art of any transcending or revolutionary spirit (1964: 59-86). Video games in general can be seen as socially acceptable (or at least tolerable, depending on who you ask) vents for aggressive or rebellious behavior. The archetypical underdog story is a common trope, especially in action-focused video games that provide an escapist-exercise of the wannabe rebel. Whether one considers GTA IV's Nico Bellic (Rockstar North et al, 2008) or WATCH DOGS (Ubisoft Montreal et al, 2014) Aiden Pearce, these games offer to 'blow off steam' against a villainous force, all from the comfort of one's couch. To quote Michael Kimmel:

> Instead of worrying, for example, that an excessive diet of violent video games would make a young guy more likely to commit an act of violence, the Frankfurt School would have been more worried that he'd be more docile, that he'd never rebel socially, collectively, because he got all that rebellion out of his system on a machine created by one of the world's largest corporations. (2015: 45)

Nevertheless, contemporary theorists also acknowledge the impact of video games in the defiance of capitalist structures. Squire may have provided a general understanding of an ideological video game world, but one can adapt his perspective easily into a rather critical stance. With regards to the demands of the paper at hand, the concept of ideology shall henceforth be defined, in its most straightforward critical sense, as "the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society," generally expressing "those of the ruling class" (Felluga in reliance to Marx, Ideology 2015: 146). If video games can be said to express ideological worlds, these worlds can, under certain conditions, also be said to express a critical ideology and immerse its players into a ludonarrative of resistance.

Dyer-Whiteford and de Peuter work from such a perspective in their book *Games of Empire*. Besides outlining the video game and its role as a part of the "corporate game complex" (Dyer-Whiteford and de Peuter 2015: xxx) in the Empire, the understand of the status quo as a global, hypercapitalist appartus according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: xii), they also present in-depth case studies of video games that focus specific ideologies and their real-life implications. In an interesting take on the GTA series, for instance, which is prominent for its caricaturesque representations of neoliberal metropolises, they argue that "[t]he city is a key site of empire" (2009: 153), a global system of neocapitalist power and enforcement (2009: xix). It often is a mixture presenting pure and rich side by side, emphasizes class struggles, and shows them as places dominated by a business drive.

The perspective of video game cities as displays of empire is of major importance for the discussion of BLOODBORNE. Yharnam, the central hub of the game, is characterized as the site of oppression to the player-avatar. However, the cryptic tone of the game does not allow an immediate understanding of all the facets of the game's ideological tone. By his or her agency, the player must explore and understand the surroundings to progress the game as well as to make sense of its ideological depths. The more environmental clues, the player becomes critically aware of, the more of BLOODBORNE's ideology is revealed.

Yharnam, the Sacral-Imperial City

The world of BLOODBORNE is ruled by a totalitarian theocracy. Leaving the introductory area of the clinic, one soon learns that the city's ruling class is an organization called the Healing Church. The entirety of Yharnam's design speaks of its dominance: Its Gothic-picturesque architecture is defined by church-like frame-constructions and statues that remind of icons.

Main areas of Yharnam are the 'Cathedral Ward' and the 'Oedon Chapel,' for instance. Militant priests roam the street, attacking the player-avatar on sight. These enemy church members in particular, being about twice the size of the player-character, emphasize Yharnam as a place of strict class divisions. Through their size and clean robes, they are clearly distinct from the smaller common townspeople who are about the size of the player character and who furthermore wear dirty clothes that are "[w]ell-worn and damp with sweat" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.), as their item description reveals. The religious state apparatus of BLOODBORNE may appear a far step from the commonly adapted thoughts of a bourgeois ruling class. As they represent militant devotion order, and scientific progress however, they can be understood as the metaphor of enlightenment turned myth in the sense of Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (2010: 1-49). This observation is further deepened as one makes progress through the game and accumulates more pieces of the obfuscate puzzle:

The Healing Church upholds a capitalist hegemony, as an inquisitive player can find out, through the game's central commodity and currency: blood. In game, blood increases the player-avatar's health, his skill level, and even the strength of his weapons. It is a driving factor in the economy of Yharnam and the life of its inhabitants. As the item description of the 'pungent blood cocktail' reveals, Yharnam "produces more blood than alcohol, as the former is more intoxicating" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.). "Yharnamites are heavy users of blood" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.), explains another item, which is explained by the fact that the blood provided by the Healing Church appears to have miraculous properties: "The Healing Church nuns are chosen for their merit as vessels for blood", explains the item 'blood of Adella,' which restores the health of the player-avatar when consumed, and "[t]hemere chance of being treated with their blood lends legitimacy to the Healing Church" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.). Much of the Healing Church's ruling status can thus be linked to their distribution of blood. "It seemed to cure all ills and grant exceptional longevity to the citizens of Yharnam, who in turn worshipped the church" (Stanton 2015: n.p.). In combination, these snippets thus reveal that the blood provided by the Healing Church in the game's ideological world to be a mean of bio-political intend, an "administration of bodies and … calculated management of [the] life" (Foucault 1990: 1.139-1.140) of Yharnam's inhabitants. It signifies the rule of the Healing Church over the human body which has, as the player can find out during the course of the game, even more dire consequences.

The player-avatar, referred to by the game as 'the hunter,' arrives on the 'night of the hunt,' a hegemonic ritual which further reinforces BLOODBORNE's ideological theme. The scenery is reminiscent of old horror movies: villagers rally through the streets with torches and pitchfork in a reminiscence of common horror film tropes. Burning stakes from which the bodies of monsters hang furthermore unravel a tale of purge, of cleansing Yharnam from vile creatures. At first, one is intrigued to assume that the player-avatar's role as 'the hunter' entails joining this course. However, several details in the game's environment reveal that this is only a part of the truth. Other villagers, for instance, attack the hunter on sight, just as the Healing Church troops. Moreover, one can notice that several villagers look like beasts rather than men. They still carry their weapons and civilian clothing, but their bodies are

grizzly and abnormal, resembling werewolves. Again, only the aware player will learn the truth behind these events. As one can learn, the beasts that roam the streets of Yharnam are humans which turned into beasts after they consumed too much blood. As Stanton concludes: "The hunt seems to have been a semi-regular occurrence, and accepted as such – a horrible side-effect of using blood, perhaps, but not quite enough to turn people off this miracle cure." In Yharnam, the people have accepted to regularly slay off their blood-addled fellows in return for their miraculous drug. This crucial fact, unravelled by finding the right clues, further emphasizes the world of BLOODBORNE as one that is ruled by irrational reason where, again in Horkheimer's sense, "people willingly swallow … ideology" and "knowingly practice deliberate genocide" (Zuidervaart 2003: n.p.). In fact, it depicts blood as a drug – a literal opiate of the masses (Marx 1976: 378) in BLOODBORNE. It promises aid and yet causes a suffering in the inhabitants of Yharnam and, at the same time, a rebellion against said suffering through eerie metamorphosis.

In the role of aware outsider and dissident, the hunter is able to explore the outside of Yharnam and to understand the origins of the ideological world of BLOODBORNE. While the game also introduces other hunter characters and thus, marks the player-avatar at least partly as belonging to the hegemony of the Healing Church in press-ganged profession, he or she remains a pariah, shunned by Yharnamites and Healing church members alike and constantly referred to as 'outsider' by non-player characters. Collecting the right pieces of the game's narrative mosaic, in fact, reveals a tale of an uncanny resemblance to Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment: The blood, as it is used by the Healing Church, originates from eldritch creatures and its usage, while invigorating, shapes a communion between these alien beings and humans (Stanton 2015: n.p.). In BLOODBORNE's history, the blood of the 'Great Ones,' as these godlike creatures are called (Stanton 2015: n.p.), was originally examined at Byrgenwerth, an academic institution. Here, it caused a quarrel between two scholars, Willem and Laurence. Willem, coining the phrase "Fear the Old Blood [of the Great Ones, F.S.]" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.) was against the examination of its powers and its usage on humans, whereas Laurence intended to push the research further. This inspired Laurence to leave Byrgenwerth, and to found the Healing Church. As Jérôme Larré describes it, Willem embodies a rather mystical tradition of knowledge gathering, whereas Laurence stands for blind faith in scientific process (2016: n.p.). Their conflict embodies the dialectic of enlightenment, in which Laurence and Willem represent thesis and antithesis. The hunter can then be described as a synthesis of sorts, on the one hand bound to progress the hunt since his recruitment and yet, able to unravel the Healing Church' secret due to player agency.

As the 'the night of the hunt' draws to an end, the player-character is confronted by Gehrman, a secondary character and mentor. Gehrman has served as an authority of the hegemony during the course of the game, ordering the hunter to go out and slay monsters (merely rebuking: "You know, it's just what hunters do!" (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.)). After the player has slain enough monsters though, an end state in BLOODBORNE is reached. In the final encounter with Gehrman, the hunter is given a choice which defines how the game ends. The first option is to die by his hands. This ought to reawaken the player-avatar and release him or her from the phantasmagoria of BLOODBORNE. If the player denies this offer, one must fight

Gehrman. After a victory, a final cut-scene shows the player-avatar taking place in Gehrman's usual spot, suggesting that he or she took over his mentor position (BLOODBORNE 2015: n.p.). Both options deny emancipation: the first one reaffirms the system at hand by allowing oneself to end at the ideologies will, only to be replaced by another hunter once another night of the hunt approaches. The second one equally restarts the cycle for another 'night of the hunt,' the hunter merely inhibiting a new position within the disciplinary scheme. "Bloodborne is emphasising that, while we may have choice, the context has already decided what those choices will be." (Stanton 2015: n.p.)

There is also a secret ending, however, that promises an overcoming of the dominant rule. In order to reach it, the player-avatar must track down and use three items named 'One Third of the Umbilical Cord.' These items seem unsuspicious at first. Upon consumption, they merely raise the hunter's character stats. Not even their origin as bodily waste material marks them as noteworthy, considering that the range of consumable items in BLOODBORNE include, among others, blood vials, bone marrow, and vermin. Only their item description, stating they are used to gain "eyes on the inside, although no one remembers what that truly entails" (2015), vaguely hint at a further importance. Moreover, these items are rare, and generally require great care by side of the player to be found. Only four can be found during a playthrough: One is gained after the second to last boss fight, one by finding a well-hidden area, one by backtracking to the very beginning of the game at a specific point and interacting with an NPC in the clinic, and one by finding, another non-player character, and keeping her save throughout a large portion of the game. If the frame conditions are met, however, the player-character has the opportunity to fight Gehrman and, succinctly, an eldritch being referred to as Moon Presence, which can by name already considered to be an enigmatic symbol of the atrocities of the hunt as such. Defeating the Moon Presence means bringing an end to 'the hunt' and thus, the entire act describes a revolutionary transcendence depending on agency: It ultimately is up to the player to bring a new state upon the world of BLOODBORNE.

The secret third ending is the pinnacle of BLOODBORNE's enigmatic theme. It provides an overcoming of the game's ideological superstructure, achieved only by players which carefully enact the necessary steps. Stumbling upon it by mere chance is possible, but ultimately understanding why it came to happen is nearly impossible, considering the lack of solid explanations provided by the game's environmental narration. The question is how one is supposed to find out about it ultimately leads us to the importance of BLOODBORNE's rich and independent metaculture.

Beyond Yharnam: From Mass Product to Collaborative Production

Word about this secret ending has spread virally and fast. On March 24th already, BLOODBORNE's release date in North America, Youtube user 'MobiusOne' uploaded a video showing how he defeated the Moon Presence, providing all necessary steps to achieve this ending with it (2015: n.p.). Message boards, web pages covering video games and wikis soon caught on, providing the information to the playing community. From April 17th on, dedicated fans could also consult the official BLOODBORNE strategy guide to find out about

the secret ending and the conditions to reach it. However, the fact that so many players knew about the phenomenon so fast is a valuable lesson of about a possible "route to postcapitalism on the rise of information technology" (Mason 2015: 138)

In *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, Paul Mason describes exactly such online communities and the social factors driving them (2015: 123-145) as a sign for the corrosion of neoliberal principles. As soon as digitalization took hold – that is, as soon as access to computers and access to the internet has generally been established – the virtual world turned social. One was finally able to contact and to collaborate with others in real time and a largely un-monitored and restricted virtual terrain. Groups collaborating in cyberspace show a behavior distinctly different from neoliberal strategies, often working on the premises of open-source access, peer-to-peer sharing, and benevolence. Mason's grand example for this practice is Wikipedia (2015: 128-129). Thousands of people add write, edit there on a daily basis, without expecting financial compensation for their services. Thereby, communities like Wikipedia "[undermine] something fundamental about how capitalism works" (Mason 2015: 133).

BLOODBORNE's community in particular shows such undermining tendencies in several ways. To begin, the innformation exchange knowledge exchange that takes place within the community appears in the shape of a gift exchange (Mason 2015: 129). To stay with the illustration of the Wikipedia model, BLOODBORNE users have their own wiki on which users voluntarily provide in-depth strategies, exact listings of character or item attributes, and detailed personal analyses of BLOODBORNE's environmental narration. Moreover, the community even actively argues against the authority of the developers in order to fill the blanks of BLOODBORNE's obscurity. While the secret of the third ending may, in hindsight, not even be considered a secret at all, fans today still argue about BLOODBORNE's supposed 'last secret' – the 'Yharnam Stone,' an item received after mastering a series of side challenges that does not bare function. The player community, however, is convinced that the item has further relevance (Tassi 2015: n.p.). They argue explicitly against the official guide which clearly states that the stone "serves no purpose other than as a testament to [the player's] victory" (Byrne et al. 2015: 465). Taking away from developer clearly shows an anti-authoritarian spirit. Finally, their knowledge exchange denies profit from the market. As already mentioned, there is also a guidebook out explaining the secret ending and much more. In its latest incarnation, the guide is currently sold for 22,27€.[1] Who would buy guide book, however, if even the crudest riddle of BLOODBORNE can be discussed online, perhaps even while gaining another informational surplus? Knowledge sharing enters an interesting terrain here because what you can and can't copy is notoriously unclear in the informational age (Mason 2015: 117). While the secret ending, for instance, can of course be meticulously described in an expensive guidebook, it is only logical to say that one can (and that players will!) freely share stories of a personal victory with others. These gaming communities share knowledge limitless, and seemingly without the necessity for a mechanism of buy, sell, and trade capitalism to function.

[1] In its most recent form on Amazon.de, last checked on Oct 23rd 2016.

Conclusion

BLOODBORNE inspires emancipation on a diegetic and extra-diegetic level. It immerses the player into a virtual ideological world that is defined by mystified oppression, biopolitics, and a never-ending cycle of theocracy-sanctioned barbarism. It furthermore encourages its players, due to its cryptic tone, to actively engage a player. This leads to a raised awareness of the world's ideology, as well as the desire to discuss one's findings in a larger community. This peer-to-peer spirit, as has been explained, leads to a digital defiance with the neoliberal network. The skeptical hunter has left the game to team up with fellow hunters, asking evermore questions.

Further discussions must aim to evaluate in how much these communities represent a freedom beyond global capitalism. On the one hand, it can be argued that the premise of BLOODBORNE merely reinforces the "illusion of choice and engagement" (Wolf 2012: 521), as did many other games, films, and novels that explore the story of the insubordinate versus the world. On the other hand, player agency in an encrypted world and the community which developed as a result shows characteristics that are of interest. And while not all games may be that mysterious, communities like this are a common sight in video game fandoms – fans exchanging hints, tips, or even modifications for an existing game well aside its consumer zone of attraction. Ultimately, BLOODBORNE provides us with enough clues to consider the real-life impact that its community may represent. We only need to unravel its mystery.

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Games

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