

# Game Narrative Review

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**Your name:** Daniel Willborn  
**Your school:** Southern Methodist University Guildhall  
**Your email:** dwillborn@smu.edu  
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**Game Title:** Bloodborne  
**Platform:** PlayStation 4  
**Genre:** 3<sup>rd</sup> person Action RPG  
**Release Date:** March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
**Developer:** FromSoftware  
**Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Hidetaka Miyazaki

## Overview

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The story begins with the player character signing a contract with a mysterious old man, who then proceeds to perform Yharnam “Blood Ministration”, a sort of blood transfusion with Yharnam’s healing blood. Afterwards, the player awakes and finds themselves in a foggy, isolated garden and manor known as “The Hunter’s Dream”. Having been chosen by the watchers, the player must now participate in “The Hunt” and progress through the game by killing numerous beasts.

As the game progresses, however, and as the player acquires more insight, the player is shown that the nature of the world around them is not as it seems. The beasts encountered become more cosmic in nature. Gargantuan Lovecraftian beings called Amygdalas become visible where they were not before. Once the blood moon has risen and the ritual of the one reborn has commenced, the player must journey into the nightmare that controls and manipulates the hunt and destroy the cosmic horrors inside. Only then will the hunt be over, and the player finally free of the accursed dream.

## Characters

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While there are many NPCs throughout Bloodborne’s world, only a select handful of them are relevant to the main story, and some of the plot-crucial characters are only briefly touched upon in some cutscenes. Below are the characters most important to the core foundation of Bloodborne’s story:

- **The Hunter** – The player character; they went to the city of Yharnam for their notorious blood ministration and blood healing techniques, and seek something known only as “Paleblood”. Once their blood transfusion is completed, they become chosen by the Hunter’s Dream and must carry out the hunt under Gehrman’s supervision. Once the hunt is over and morning comes, they may finally escape the dream.

- **The Plain Doll** – A seemingly innocuous doll; this artificial woman serves as Gehrman’s servant in the Hunter’s Dream, and helps guide hunters on their journey, in addition to helping hunters grow stringer by imbuing their bodies with the echoes of blood.
- **Gehrman, the First Hunter** – The host of the Hunter’s Dream; Gehrman is a seemingly feeble old man who leads hunters through the hunters dream and sends them out on the hunt. While only showing up periodically, he is the one who established the faction of workshop hunters and is now trapped in the hunter’s dream as it’s host, bound via a pact with the Moon Presence.
- **Provost Willem** – Master of the scholars at the College of Byrgenwerth; He shows up in a cutscene and one location, but he plays a pivotal role in the backstory, as he and his scholars discovered the blood that Yharnam is famous for, and was betrayed by his greatest disciple, Lawrence.
- **Lawrence, the First Vicar** – Founder of the Healing Church; Lawrence betrayed Willem’s trust by taking the old blood the scholars found and using it to establish the church of blood healing. The church became the most powerful force in Yharnam and known for its blood ministrations, however the blood is also the source of the scourge of the beasts, unbeknownst to everyone.

## Breakdown

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Bloodborne is a game about the human condition, the ineptitude of humanity in the grand scheme of things. Bloodborne constantly preys on your human nature, as your curiosity for the story and lore of this world can have potential negative or positive narrative and gameplay ramifications. Its system for accomplishment is crucial in building the player up as well as the characters in the world but is just as quick to take that power away with the next trial, a disturbing area, or a player attacking a character and permanently failing a hidden questline. There are many revelations that occur within the game’s narrative, but each one introduced seems to completely undermine the player’s preconceptions of the world and leave all prior questions only half answered. The narrative the player perceives, then, ends up being a somewhat subjective one, and the enjoyment more comes from putting the pieces they have together themselves.

The story of Bloodborne is not told. Instead, it is felt through the environment of the game world and the gameplay itself, placing more emphasis on ambiance and atmosphere to convey a tone or feeling. Since Bloodborne is a more gameplay focused experience, and one of the more difficult in the gaming industry, overcoming adversity not only rewards the player, but is key to considering how gameplay and game design philosophy impacts theming. This is especially true when discussing the theme of cosmic indifference in Bloodborne, because although pushing the player down may seem contrary to keeping the player engaged in a world, it, in fact, complements the in-game tone and narrative. The player’s perseverance through the adversities the game presents reflects humanity’s struggles to ascend higher in the existential hierarchy. The cosmic beings of bloodborne pushing back against the player represent the pushbacks humanity experiences against the various struggles of real life, such as terrestrial and cosmic threats.

## **Strongest Element**

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The most noteworthy aspect of Bloodborne, as well as its counterparts in the Dark Souls franchise, is that of building narrative through environmental storytelling: having the world and locales the player visits build the narrative of the game as opposed to having a strongly defined and front-and-center story. This makes areas of the game much more memorable, as well as add a layer of mystery to the world the player inhabits. The player is more encouraged to question events and the world, and piece together the occurrences of the narrative and lore themselves as opposed to having it be explicitly told. This type of storytelling also benefits games that want to purely focus on worldbuilding and gameplay.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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On the contrary to the strongest element of world-based narrative in the previous section, it must be said that foregoing a more traditional narrative style and structure brings up its own variety of issues. By not have a strong core central narrative, players from the beginning may not understand the context for their actions in the game immediately and may lose interest, especially if the player is of the type that is primarily driven by story. Additionally, this style of narrative could potentially lead to conveyance problems, as players may struggle to understand where to go and what specific actions to take as they are never told explicitly to do so. As a result, much more pressure is placed on making the world and progression through it make sense in a way that encourages the player to progress a certain way, which is made more difficult if the world is intended to be more open ended. Finally, if not much is explained to the player and context for actions is not clear, when a player reaches the end of the game and finishes it, they may be left confused by the events that have taken place and leave feeling unsatisfied or disappointed. Ultimately, this means that the game is more likely to alienate players that are driven more by story than by gameplay or exploration.

## **Highlight**

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The greatest moment in the main game, in my opinion, would be the moments at the very end of the game should you choose to refuse Gehrman when he offers you mercy. While before, Gehrman was peaceful man, seemingly enfeebled by his ties to the dream, made evident by him being in a wheelchair the whole game, suddenly the atmosphere of the entire locale shifts. Gehrman takes a slightly more aggressive tone and speaks regrettably towards the hunter. Then, Gehrman stands, revealing his true nature, and drawing his weapon. Gehrman and the player stand face to face. On opposite ends of a vast field of white flowers beneath the full moon, surrounded by the burning remains of the Hunter's Dream. The boss ensues, and the fight, while incredibly challenging, is filled with an overwhelming sense of tragedy, as the soundtrack weaves a tale of woe and sorrow akin to the history of the man the hunter must now face. When Gehrman falls, the fight is over, and he is finally released from his nightmare. All Gehrman has left to say to the hunter is this: "The night...and the dream...were long."

## Critical Reception

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Review rating for Bloodborne typically fall on average around the 9+ out of 10 scale. However, due to the style of game that this is and the reputation that precedes it, most reviews about the game talk exclusively about its world, gameplay, and performance, and little to no talk is given about the narrative. The IGN review for Bloodborne comes the closest to discussing the themes the game touches on, such as how “you could find a subtext of criticisms on real-world concepts like faith and worship” but ultimately says that taking the information at face value “is the more enjoyable path.” A Gamespot review even only mentions the story in passing, calling it “none too nuanced” but also stating that “the lack of thematic nuance is what makes From Software's newly introduced storytelling spotlight as successful as it is.” Focus was generally not on the story/narrative, but instead on the aesthetics, design, and difficulty, while only barely touching on the themes of the game.

## Lessons

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- Having a deep and well thought out lore that can be interpreted in many ways can add a layer of depth to the overall narrative in a game.
- While placing more of the narrative structure on the world can encourage the player to engage with the game from their own perspective, it can tend to alienate more story driven players.
- In a desolate world meant to inflict a sense of terror and/or loneliness, characters carry a lot more weight, even if they may not have much dialogue.

## Summation

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Bloodborne, and games similar to it, are worth looking at from a narrative perspective if we want to try to examine more non-traditional ways at storytelling that are more unique to the medium of video games. Bloodborne and its success serves as an example as to why more gameplay focused and less story driven games still have a capacity for deep, interesting narrative that speak to more complex themes, and how we should examine and explore more methodologies for how video games do storytelling.

References:

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