

“Born of the blood, made men by the blood, undone by the blood”: Bloodborne as a critical reflection of Ghosts of the Anthropocene

Abstract

Drawing on critical frameworks in criminology, including Popular Criminology and Ghost Criminology, this paper aims to explore how *Bloodborne* offers a critical reflection of the haunting nature of the harms inflicted by humans in the age of the Anthropocene. More specifically, we aim to examine how the cultural text of *Bloodborne* illustrates humanity’s corruption of the natural and the harms this inflicts, arguing that this can be understood as a reflection of ghosts of the Anthropocene. Using ethnographic content analysis, three main themes were uncovered in *Bloodborne* that related to humanity’s corruption of the natural, the harms this inflict, as well as how this can be understood as a reflection of ghosts of the Anthropocene: *Sanguine Exploitation*, *Horrific Creation*, and *Monstrous Extinction*. We conclude by arguing that *Bloodborne*, in evoking the horrors of climate catastrophe, is an important cultural script that responds to McBrien’s (2016) necrocene and Haraway’s (2015) Chthulucene.

Darkness, dense and disorienting, appears all around us, seeping into our mind. Slowly, faint, yellowing lantern light sift through the shadows, in tandem with a voice, seemingly coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once;

Oh yes... Paleblood... Well, you have come to the right place. Yharnam is the home of blood ministration. You need only unravel its mystery. But where's an outsider such as yourself to begin? Easy, with a bit of Yharnam blood of your own. But first, you'll need a contract...

As the old, ragged man eases closer, his wheelchair creaking, his face finally comes into focus; his whitening hair dishevelled, his eyes covered underneath filthy bandages. 'Now, let's begin the transfusion', the man says, as soon as the contract binding us to this place has been signed. As the darkness disperses further (or is it that we've already started to grow accustomed to the dark?), we realise where we are; strapped to a gurney, unable to move, we are here to find a cure, to partake in the healing blood ministrations of which Yharnam has become famous. But as the coveted blood starts pouring into our bloodstream, the room darkens once more, and a lycanthropic beast emerges from the depths, crawling towards us. Not quite man, not quite wolf, flesh-torn, blood-dripping, the beast reaches for us, holding out a clawed hand. This is not just a promise of annihilation, however. This is an invitation.

The man laughs;

Oh, don't you worry. Whatever happens, you might think it all a mere bad dream.

The First Ministration: introduction

Described as one of the best games of its generation, 'elegant, precise and irresistible,' (Parkin, 2015), FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* (2015) has both been granted great critical

acclaim (Metacritic, 2024) as well as been the subject of disparate academic interest. This includes the analysis of the role of monstrous femininity, dream space and blood when comparing *Bloodborne* to the horror film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Appleby, 2018), examining the Gothicity and Lovecraftianism of the game (Gama & Garcia, 2019) and drawing parallels between *Bloodborne* and the Hegelian notion of ‘the night of the world’ (Sen, 2023). These studies are part of a larger scholarly tradition where video games are regarded not only as entertainment, but as important cultural artefacts that speak about (as well as with) our wider culture. Such studies in the field of criminology have previously explored: carceral violence in the *Silent Hill* series (Steinmetz, 2018) and *Majora’s Mask* (████████████████████); representations of domestic violence and its effects on the public imaginary in relation to *P.T.* (████████████████████); and how *Death Stranding* can provide a lens for understanding our cultural sensibilities toward violence (Steinmetz & Grubb, 2024). Other scholars have also critiqued the elision of criminality and madness in the Arkham collection of *Batman* games (Fawcett & Kohm, 2020), as well as the ‘horrors of police’ in the *Resident Evil* series (Steinmetz & Petkovsek, 2023). As such, more recent studies have begun exploring the criminological importance of video games, drawing on ideas emanating from Popular Criminology (Rafter, 2007), reflecting the fact that video games remain ‘a significant medium in contemporary society’ (Steinmetz & Grubb, 2024:2). Popular Criminology, as ‘a discourse parallel to academic criminology and of at least equal social and intellectual significance’ (Rafter, 2007, p. 404), invites us to explore how crime and punishment are represented, constructed and portrayed in video games in order to uncover important public discourses surrounding criminality, including issues of justice and harm (Rafter, 2006, 2007).

Studies have explored the cultural significance of *Bloodborne*, including the examination of the modes of storytelling and narratives employed (Hoedt, 2019), the gothic and Lovecraftian themes permeating the game (Gama & Garcia, 2019) and the role of madness, transcendence and Godhood (Sen, 2023). However, no previous study has interrogated *Bloodborne* from a criminological perspective, exploring what the game may reflect regarding issues of violence, justice and harm. This lack of criminological attention is somewhat surprising since the aesthetics, themes and narratives of *Bloodborne* all resonate with the notions of justice, violence, punishment and power. As a response, and drawing on critical frameworks in criminology including Popular Criminology and Ghost Criminology, this paper aims to explore how *Bloodborne* offers a critical reflection of the haunting nature of the harms inflicted by humans in the age of the Anthropocene. More specifically, we aim to examine how the cultural text of *Bloodborne* illustrates humanity's corruption of the natural and the harms it inflicts.

In order to fulfil this aim, the paper will be divided into four parts. The first part will delineate the theoretical frameworks used in our analysis, including Ghost Criminology and ideas relating to the Anthropocene, as well as Kristeva's (1982) notions of the abject and Creed's (1993) ideas of monstrous femininity. Here, links between haunting, harms and humanity will be made, and, borrowing the imagery of Harraway's (2016) *Pimoya Chthulu*, these concepts will be woven together with the Chthulucene and the Lovecraftian themes such as the horror of the unknown and unknowable imbued in *Bloodborne* as a way to understand the lingering violences caused by the Anthropocene and how *Bloodborne* lends itself to a critical analysis of such.

The second part of the paper will briefly outline the methodology used when analysing *Bloodborne*, drawing primarily on Altheide's (1987) ethnographic content analysis. The third part of the paper will explore the three thematic strands emerging from our

ethnographic engagement with the game world: sanguine exploitation, horrific creation and monstrous extinction. The fourth and final part will weave all of these insights together, invoking again the idea of *Pimonia Chthulu*'s spider's web, and conclusions will be offered, as well as potential ways forward. But firstly, we will start teasing out these gossamer threads by turning to the definition of our current epoch: the Anthropocene.

Ghosts and Spectres in the Anthropocene

The winds of the Anthropocene carry ghosts – the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present. (Gan, Tsing, Swanson & Bubandt, 2017:2).

The age in which we are currently living is usually referred to as the Anthropocene. As Gan et al. (2017:2) phrased it, this is 'the geologic epoch in which humans have become the major force determining the continuing livability of the earth' (Gan et al., 2017:2). Broadly, it can be defined as that period of geological time where humans can be said to have had a measurable ecological impact. It is an age marked by unprecedented human effects, where the disruptive and damaging traces of humanity on diverse ecologies are ever present. As Haraway (2015:159) elaborated; 'it's more than climate change; it's also extraordinary burdens of toxic chemistry, mining, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people and other critters, etc, etc, in systemically linked patterns that threaten major system collapse after major system collapse after major system collapse.' Such devastating extinctions sometimes also have accumulating effects, setting off spirals of annihilation that go over and beyond deaths initially imagined. This is what Rose (2004, cited in Gan et al. 2017: 7) refers to as a 'double death': deaths in the present that presage an 'extinction, which extinguishes times yet to come' (Gan et al., 2017:7). This includes various forms of ecocide but also harms caused by colonialism and colonial settlers, where violence ripples through time.

As such, these ecological traumas, these extinctions, leave traces. These deaths linger. These ghosts of the Anthropocene are a reminder of harms committed in the past and haunt futures yet to come, putting time out of joint (██████████). These ghosts speak of worlds and lives reduced to ash and rubble, on-going deaths of both pasts and futures, ‘birth[ing] ghosts of an extinguished future’ (██████████). Late modernity and the Anthropocene are, then, inherently haunted. Building on the notion of violence, injustice and harms as haunting, ██████████ developed a framework for the spectral turn recently evident in criminology. This Ghost Criminology explores the temporal dis-ease caused by harms and various forms of violence, causing time to be experienced as ‘out of joint’. Drawing on Derrida’s (1994) notion of hauntology, Ghost Criminology aims to examine the afterlives of these traumas, exploring how harms of the ‘no longer’ as well as violences of the ‘not yet’ haunt our present, making it waver. By utilizing the spectral as a conceptual metaphor, Ghost Criminology examines the coalescence of past-present-future, and the disruption of a spectre that is simultaneously both present and absent, visible and invisible. Doing so opens up avenues for ethical, political and social critique. Such studies have previously explored the haunting resonances of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, unpacked the white supremacist origins of both criminal justice and the criminological discipline (Brown, 2023), as well as the lingering impact of ‘necrowaste’ and how some harms caused in life appear to linger even long after death (Robins, 2023). Studies drawing on Ghost Criminology have also explored how vulnerable EU citizens have been rendered into social ghosts by the Swedish state, becoming a site for necropolitical power that both enables and perpetuates lingering violence on Roma people (██████████).

As such, Ghost Criminology has been used as a framework to understand the lingering, haunting effects of various forms of violence, harm and injustices, including the

ecological trauma caused by the Anthropocene ([REDACTED]). These spectral harms, caused in part by the ‘productive horror of our civilization’ (Gan et al., 2017:5), create ‘landscapes of horror’ (McClanahan, 2019:640). *Bloodborne* itself is filled with both horrifying and haunting aesthetics, relying on uncanny, abject and weird imagery to instil fear and disquiet in the player. The next section will therefore go on to examine how the horrors of the ghostly relate to the abject and the weird, and how these concepts relate back to the framework of Ghost Criminology.

Anthropocene, Chthulucene, monsters and tentacles

In her feminist reconfiguration of the Anthropocene, Haraway (2015; 2016) utilizes a lens of horror as a ‘new way to think ecology [...] one that takes seriously the weird, the eerie, and horror’ (McClanahan, 2019:646). In blending all these concepts together, Haraway conceived of the Chthulucene. This describes the entanglement of past, present and future, along with the intertwining of ecologies and species, ‘including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus¹’ (Haraway, 2015:160). The Chthulucene is derived from the Greek words of *khthôn*, referring to the Chthonic, beings of the earth and underworld, and *kainos*, meaning ‘now, a time of beginnings, a time for ongoing’ (Haraway, 2016:5). The temporal dis-ease in which Ghost Criminology is focused is very much mirrored in the very definition of the Chthulucene. This is evident in Haraway’s (2016:5) elaboration on the relevance of the word *kainos*;

‘Nothing in *kainos* must mean conventional pasts, presents or futures. There is nothing in times of beginnings that insists on wiping out what has come before, or indeed, wiping out what comes after. *Kainos* can be filled of inheritances, of remembering, and full of

¹ Renshaw (2021:5) further commented that this intertwined view of humanity, particularly human-as-humus, or humanity’s affinity with other ‘composting beings’, is highly generational, where future generations are more ready to accept such kinship.

comings, of nurturing what might still be. I hear *kainos* in the sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities’.

Haraway also imbues the Chthulucene with both the name and abilities of the long-legged arachnid *Pimoid Cthulu*. While this particular spider is in fact named after H.P. Lovecraft’s mythological deity-monster Cthulhu, Haraway herself explicitly renounces this connection, arguing that ‘[t]hese real and possible timespaces are not named after SF writer H.P. Lovecraft’s misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things’ (Haraway, 2015:160). In spite of this, as noted by Ulstein (2019), the Chthulucene does possess distinct weird connotations, described by Haraway as ‘symchthonic, wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings (Haraway 2016: 33).’ The fact that the fear of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu springs from the implication of its very existence; marking ‘a break with all the rules that humans have wrapped comfortingly around themselves’ (Ulstein, 2019:50) further strengthens its tentacled ties to the Chthulucene.

As such, the Chthulucene can therefore be said to be connected to the weird, as well as the uncanny and eerie, concepts which are very much at the heart of *Bloodborne* (Hoedt, 2019; Gama & Garcia, 2019; Sen, 2023). Drawing from Freud’s (1919/2001) concept of the uncanny, Fisher (2017) conceptualized both the weird and the eerie, stating that, while related, their main difference can be located in the external versus internal, positioning the weird’s intrusive, external wrongness against the familiar, internal strangeness of the eerie. The weird may manifest itself as something out of place, as ‘that *which does not belong*’ (Fisher, 2017:10, emphasis in original), or as a break from existing frameworks of understanding. The eerie, by contrast, turns the focus inwards, relating to more subtle, disturbing absences. It prompts questions such as; ‘*Why is there something here where*

there should be nothing? Or, why is there nothing here when there should be something? (Fisher, 2017:12, emphasis in original). The Chtulhucene, and by extension, the Anthropocene, are both inherently shaped by the weird and eerie, as they both concern themselves with the destabilization of human significance (Ulstein, 2019). And, as McClanahan (2023:224) argued, '[w]eirdness and something-wrongness are nowhere more materially evident than in the ongoing climate crisis'.

As a game with clear Lovecraftian elements (Gama & Garcia, 2019), such as the horrors of the unknown and incomprehensible, cosmic horror and the dangers of knowledge, *Bloodborne* is not only teeming with the weird and eerie, precisely the kind of video game Ulstein (2019) argued is perfect for exploring the anxieties of the Anthropocene, but it is also seething with the abject. The abject, defined by Kristeva (1982:4), is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'. As the abject threatens borders, it must also be rejected, cast out and expelled in order to protect our sense of selves and our subjectivity. The abject has also been configured by Creed (1993) as the monstrous feminine, where certain motifs, such as the monstrous womb and the artificial womb traditionally have been used as a way to abject female characters. Connecting the monstrous feminine to the ecocritical, Pinder (2021:2) argues that the monstrous-feminine, by blurring the boundaries between human and non-human, represents the 'perceived degradation of the human form and delegitimation of man's dominion over nature.' In a similar vein, Loring (2024:iv) argues for a definition of the monstrous-feminine beyond the psychoanalytical, arguing that '[m]onstrous-feminine characters often work in tandem with the natural world to overthrow the intersecting oppressions of misogyny and environmental degradation caused by heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.' As such, there is therefore a direct link back between the abject and the horrors of the

Anthropocene, in which the Anthropocene not only engenders abject horrors but where certain aspects of the Anthropocene are rendered abject, and therefore expendable, exposable or forgettable.

So, how are all these concepts and notions connected? As we have attempted to tease out above, *Bloodborne* provides the node for all of these interconnected theoretical tendrils, the slippery body from which these tentacles extend; connecting its abject and uncanny themes to the weird and eerie nature of the Chtulucene, which in turns weaves into the horrors of the Anthropocene, and the ghosts left in its wake. As a Gothic tale of decay and destruction, centred around the abject theme of blood as both all-empowering yet infectiously dangerous, *Bloodborne* interweaves the horrors of monstrosity and corruption with eldritch warnings of forbidden knowledge. It is a story of societal descent into ‘productive horror’ (Gan et al., 2017: 5). The next section will provide a brief description of the setting and synopsis of *Bloodborne*.

Fear the Old Blood: Bloodborne

We are born of the blood, made men by the blood, undone by the blood. Our eyes are yet to
open. Fear the Old Blood. (Provost Willem, *Bloodborne*, 2015)

Having suffered through the opening sequence described at the beginning of this paper, the player, known only as the Hunter, emerges onto the blood-sleek streets of Yharnam, an old, Gothic city, its majestic grandeur now decrepit and crumbling, knowing only that they need to ‘seek paleblood to transcend the hunt’ (*Bloodborne*, 2015). Having arrived in Yharnam in an attempt to cure some unknown disease (Sen, 2023), the Hunter soon realizes that Yharnam is ‘ravaged by a terrible, all-consuming illness’ (*Bloodborne* game case, EU standard edition), also referred to as the ‘scourge of beasts’ (*Bloodborne*, 2015),

turning its denizens mad or into horrible monsters. In fact, death and decay are evident in almost every aspect of the game, from the disintegrating buildings and flesh-torn beasts hunting your every step, to the very streets of Yharnam being littered by corpses and coffins, seeping the abject into the player's mind from the very start (Kristeva, 1982). Yharnam is controlled by the Healing Church, a religious faction devoted to the worship of 'the old blood', blood that was found deep underground and is believed to originate from the Great Ones, strange deity-monsters reminiscent of Lovecraftian and weird mythologies. While this blood is endowed with all sorts of healing qualities, making people travel to Yharnam from all over the world, the player learns, as the game progresses, that it is also the very source of the plague. The strong influence of the Healing Church, and the coalescence of medicine and faith, is evident in almost all aspects of the game, from the way the Hunter must inject themselves with syringes of blood to gain health, to the names of the places you visit (such as Cathedral Ward and Iosefka's Clinic) and the beasts that attack you, including enemies like Cleric Beast, Vicar Amelia and Father Gascoigne.

The gameplay and ludologic structure of *Bloodborne* is slightly unconventional. As Hoedt (2019:3) explains; 'moving away from more traditional, linear models, the game's narrative is instead dispersed, found in cutscenes and dialogue, hidden within item descriptions and visual details, scattered around its world'. This type of arcane, cryptic storytelling, synonymous with the FromSoftware brand, lends itself to disparate interpretations and readings, which is furthermore encouraged by Hidetaka Miyazaki, the director and auteur of *Bloodborne* (Hoedt, 2019). As such, there is no linear plot or narrative that the player must follow, but instead, the disrupted gameplay 'construct[s] a tale of forbidden knowledge and the inevitable downfall of those who pursue it' (Hoedt,

2019:2-3). This style of gameplay is not only related to Lovecraftian themes such as the dangerous pursuit of knowledge, but the disrupted, non-linear storytelling, which makes the player experience the story ‘out of joint’, is furthermore consistent with the theoretical framework of Ghost Criminology. As such, the very game design of *Bloodborne* lends itself to the study of disrupted temporalities, and the afterlives such disruptions leave behind.

‘Grant us eyes!’: A note on Method

Drawing on Ghost Criminology as well as Popular Criminology (Rafter, 2007) this study will explore the haunting effects of the ghosts of the Anthropocene by examining FromSoftware’s *Bloodborne* as a cultural artefact, reflective of such harms. In order to tease out the spectral within this text, ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987; ██████████; ██████████; Steinmetz, 2018) was used. This method utilized a highly reflexive as well as interactive approach, that ‘documents and understands the communication of meaning, as well as verify theoretical relationships’ (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). During the course of analysis, *Bloodborne* was read and re-read by performing two close playthroughs, as well as four to five playthroughs of different specific parts of the game (such as some boss fights, including the Cleric Beast, The Orphan of Kos, and The One Reborn and some areas, such as the Clock Tower and the Cathedral Ward) which included the study of ‘narratives, images, characters, plot devices, monsters, scenery and other elements of the game’ (██████████, 2021). Drawing on Ghost Criminology, as well as ideas of the Chthulucene, the abject, weird and eerie, has allowed us to unpack how *Bloodborne* could be understood as a critical reflection of the haunting nature of the harms inflicted by humans in the age of the Anthropocene.

Findings

Using ethnographic content analysis, three main themes were uncovered in *Bloodborne* that relate to humanity's corruption of the natural, the harms this inflicts, as well as how this can be understood as a reflection of ghosts of the Anthropocene: *Sanguine Exploitation*, exploring the specific role blood plays in the game, *Horrific Creation*, examining the futile yet devastating attempts to control and harness power expressed through motifs of the monstrous womb, and *Monstrous Extinction*, exploring how the decimation of species are expressed in the game.

Sanguine Exploitation

Our thirst for blood satiates us, soothes our fears. Seek the old blood, but beware the frailty of men. Their wills are weak, minds young. (Vicar Amelia, *Bloodborne*, 2015)

Blood is central to the game. Not only is this reflected in the game's very title, but blood has seeped into every aspect and mechanic of *Bloodborne*'s corpus: blood vials are used to restore the player's health, injected straight into the player's body using a syringe; blood echoes are used to level up the player's weapons and skills; blood gems are used to upgrade weapons; pungent blood cocktails are used to distract and draw out monsters, bearing names such as Blood-starved Beast and Bloodletting Beasts. The most obvious and perhaps important reference to blood in the game is the Old Blood; the subject of worship of the Healing Church, endowed with miraculous healing powers, and the source of the corrupting plague ravaging Yharnam. Inherently abject as it signifies the porous border between life and death (Kristeva, 1982), the blood in *Bloodborne* represents both life and death, health and impurity, the monstrous and the humane. It is in this uncanny duality, in the terrible yet intoxicating power of the blood, that the spectres of the Anthropocene can be traced. The blood keeps getting ministered, despite the spreading sickness, the corrupted bodies, the decaying city. It continues despite everyone, including

leading members of the Healing Church, either going insane or turning into beasts. As Eileen, a Hunter of Hunters, states:

Prepare yourself for the worst. There are no humans left. They're all flesh-hungry beasts, now.

Mirroring the devastating effects of ecological exploitation and environmental harms, this ceaseless use of blood in pursuit of power can be read as a reflection on the harms caused by humanity's corruption of natural resources. Never-ending, despite signs of decay and corruption, this exploitation, be it sanguine or environmental, is symptomatic of humanity's vampiric hunger for power and capital, as well as the human fallacy of supremacy and exceptionality in the Anthropocene. As 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood' (Marx, 1837:834), capital has not only been described as vampiric, but McClanahan (2023:224) has also connected the 'constricting, devouring [...] exsanguinating' nature of capital power to the weird and the 'something wrong-ness' of the harms caused in the Anthropocene.

As such, the corruption represented by the littering of corpses and bestly transformations, caused by the Healing Church's endless hunger for power and ascension in *Bloodborne*, closely mirrors the pollution of air, the deforestation of rainforests and endless carbon dioxide exhaust in the pursuit of capital and increased interest. This reflects both the vain and devastating pursuits of 'dreamworlds of progress' (Gan et al., 2017:2), and the terrible, haunting costs we are willing to pay it. The fact that *Bloodborne*, similar to that of *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818) and *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897), takes place during the latter part of the 19th century; a time of industrialisation, increased capitalization and new (and un-new) belief in human progress, and also one of the

suggestions for the start of the Anthropocene epoch (Crutzen, 2002:23), further emphasises this resonance.

By symbolically intertwining blood with both the weirded costs of forbidden knowledge, as well as abject corruption and impurity, *Bloodborne* thus projects a narrative of the corruption and exploitation of the natural world that is reflective of the horrors of both Cthulucene and the Anthropocene. As Father Gascoigne, a Hunter that has succumbed to the corrupting powers of the blood and begun engaging in a frenzied killing spree, remarks, '[t]he sweet blood, oh, it sings to me. It's enough to make a man sick...'. And, as Kristeva (1982:96) writes,

'blood, indicating the impure [...], inherits the propensity for murder of which man must clean himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together.'

As such, this takes us onwards to the second theme identified in the game; *Horrific Creation*.

Horrific Creation

Another prominent theme of the game is that of attempted (and mostly failed) creations of life. This is firstly evident in the themes of pregnancy and surrogacy which seem intrinsic to the lore of the Great Ones. As the in-game description of an item called One Third of Umbilical Cord states:

Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate.

While the weird and Lovecraftian elements of the game, emphasising the horror of the unknown and unknowable, suggest that we can never truly comprehend the Great Ones, nor truly understand what they want (if they want), their desire for offspring remains a clear thread through the game's narrative. Unable to create descendants of their own, the Great Ones turn to their subjects, the humans residing in Yharnam, to fulfil their desire. As a note at the old, bygone college of Byrgenwerth reads:

When the red moon hangs low, the line between man and beast is blurred. And
when the Great Ones descend, a womb will be blessed with child.

As the game progresses, certain characters in the game's narrative appear to become impregnated with eldritch beings, inevitably with disastrous results. For instance, Arianna, a prostitute seeking refuge in Oedon Chapel, becomes progressively more ill. She is later found sitting in the crypt underneath the chapel, delirious, her dress blood-soaked, with a small, tentacled creature in front of her. Imposter Iosefka, ironically herself the conductor of abject experiments in attempts to turn humans into Great Ones, also gets impregnated by some unspeakable entity, appearing to cause her great harm:

God I'm nauseous... Have you ever felt this? It's progressing. I can see things... I
knew it, I'm different. I'm no beast... I... Oh... God, it feels awful... but, it proves that
I'm chosen. Don't you see? How they writhe, writhe inside my head... It's... rather...
rapturous...

As Pinder (2021) states, horror games, and survival horror in particular, often draw on anxieties surrounding monstrous or uncanny motherhood in order to produce feelings of horror and dread, using 'the processes and spectacle of reproduction, gestation, and childbirth as the locus of player fear' (Pinder, 2021:1). As examples of abject monstrosity, echoic of the monstrous womb motif (Creed, 1993), these characters not only blur the

lines between monstrous and humane, weirding and corrupting the natural, but they also allude to the (futile) attempts to control and harness these monstrous powers. Annalise, Queen of Cainhurst, and an enemy of Healing Church, will ask the player for blood dregs (an item that resembles sperm) in the hope of bearing a new heir in the form ‘the Child of Blood’ (Blood Dreg description). Similarly, Queen Yharnam, a ghostly woman who used to be the ruler of the race that preceded humans, is portrayed wearing a marital gown, with hands cuffed and blood running down her stomach, as if a foetus had been violently ripped out from her. It is heavily implied she was impregnated by a Great One, as during their age, wedlock was a blood contract and ‘only permitted to those slated to bear a special child’ (Ring of Betrothal description). That child, likely Mergo, was then used for some purpose or ritual. As with the aforementioned examples, while their consent and agency in acting as surrogates for the Great Ones is seriously contested, they pay the price for their monstrous, corrupting power with madness, blood and death.

This heedless strive for (and abject failure of) control of the arcane and powerful resources found in Yharnam is arguably reflective of humanity’s pursuit of environmental control and domination. This is illustrated even more clearly in the disparate attempts in creating Great Ones conducted by all leading factions on Yharnam, including the Healing Church. One of the most obvious examples of this is the creation of The One Reborn by the School of Mensis, one of the two upper echelons of the Healing Church. Just like the other factions, the Mensis scholars sought to ascend humanity into Great Ones. The One Reborn was their attempt to create, or deliver, a Great One in order to control and harness this power for themselves. It was created in a nefarious ritual that caused the death of everyone living in Yahar’gul, the village where the Mensis Scholars resided. The very moon becomes an ovum that births this horrendous monstrosity. The One Reborn is a terrifying amalgamation of dead body parts, grotesque and decaying, a monster of

Frankensteinian proportions. Here, the attempt of controlling nature and bypassing the natural order had disastrous results, for residents and scholars alike. As the description of another Third Umbilical Cord reads:

This Cord granted Mensis audience with Mergo, but resulted in the stillbirth of their brains.

Similarly, The Choir, the other upper tier of the Healing Church alongside the School of Mensis, also strives to achieve ascension and to harness the power of the Great Ones. They conducted horrific experiments on human orphans (*Orphanage Key*, *Bloodborne*) that resulted in the creation of the Celestial Emissary, a bluish alien-like creature with gleaming eyes and tentacles emanating from its head. This also resulted in the Living Failures; creatures of failed experiments, left to their immense pain, confusion and madness.

Taken together, these weird and eerie narratives illustrate humanity's (often vain) attempts at controlling and harnessing powers we do not fully comprehend, and can thus be read as reflective of both the monstrous attempts at controlling nature, including the environmental and ecological harms caused by herbicide and pesticides (Ustuner et al., 2020), excessive use of antibiotics in farmed animals, leading to antibiotic-resistance (Singer, 2003) and pain caused in animals that have been genetically modified to grow faster (Yourgenome, 2024). Similarly to the Living Failures left behind by the Choir and all the petrified corpses riddling the streets of Yahar'gul, humanity has continuously left behind remains of ghosts, from the absence of decimated species to the barren landscapes remaining after deforestation.

Unnatural amalgamations and unethical experimentations inevitably bring disastrous results: be it the abject creature writhing in Iosefka's womb, driving her insane; the

The theme of extinction is prevalent in *Bloodborne*. Your very purpose as a Hunter is to kill the beasts roaming the streets of Yharnam, attempting to exterminate the scourge of beasts. As Gherman, the First Hunter and your mentor in the game, states at the beginning:

Just go out and kill a few beasts. It's for your own good. You know, it's just what hunters do! You'll get used to it...

As Eileen, the hunter of Hunters, similarly states that 'a hunter must hunt', the part of executioner and annihilator seems intrinsic to your character as Hunter in the game. For even if the beasts were humans once upon a time, they are now considered the monstrous Other. Below Central Yharnam, sealed behind iron-laden doors, is Old Yharnam, a lower district of the city that is overrun by beasts. By appearances, this valley hamlet is of considerably lower class compared to Central Yharnam, and the plague appears to have emanated from here initially. However, despite trying to contain it, Old Yharnam was overrun by the beastly scourge and so it was burned down to cinders. Everything monstrous, even if it was once human, was meant to be exterminated, as a note found in Old Yharnam reads:

The red moon hangs low, and the beasts rule the streets. Are we left no other choice, than to burn it all to cinders?

Besides the hordes of beasts slaughtered, the Hunter and other power factions also kill Great Ones. While some of these deaths are optional to the player (such as the Celestial Emissary and Ebreitas, Daughter of the Cosmos), other Great Ones must be killed by the player in order to progress the game. While some of these fights are vicious and aggressive, some of the Great Ones do not initiate attack, nor fight very well once the Hunter begins attacking. Ebreitas, for instance, appears to be lamenting at an altar when the player approaches her, and The Brain of Mensis, after being incapacitated, does not

even attack the player at all, but simply stares at the hunter with a pitiful gaze. We, as players, are rendered complicit in the broader processes of extractivism and consumption through both narrative and gameplay mechanics. These ambivalent narratives create an uncanny ludologic to the game, where, similarly to Steinmetz's (2024) analysis of *Death Stranding*, *Bloodborne* problematises the violent narratives of the game, forcing us to confront the consequences of violence.

Further, there is an in-game example of the environmental damage caused by the blood ministrations. An item description describes how a non-playable region, Loran, has been 'devoured by sand'. This 'tragedy [...] is said to have its roots in the scourge of the beast' and that Yharnam will be the next to fall. If we are to use the archaic meaning of the word, there is a *weirdness* to this. It suggests at once a looping (a repetition of what has occurred before) and destiny (that the fate of Yharnam has now been set).

Perhaps most indicative of this weirding of violence is the discovery of Kos, another Great One found dead on the shores of the Fishing Hamlet. While Kos, a luminously pale fish-like creature, covered in pale-blue scales but with a face like that of a human woman's, has been murdered by unknown means, with the Healing Church desecrating her corpse upon finding it: harvesting blood and particular parasites for their experiments (Kos Parasite description). The villagers residing in the Fishing Hamlet, having morphed into amphibious humanoid hybrids due to the presence of Kos, were furthermore all slaughtered, leading to the ultimate downfall of all Hunters, as a curse was laid upon them, indicated by a priest of the Fishing Hamlet:

Byrgenwerth... Byrgenwerth... Blasphemous murderers... blood-crazed fiends...
Atonement for the wretches... By the wrath of Mother Kos... Mercy for the poor,
wizened child... Mercy, oh please... [...] Lay the curse of blood upon them, and

their children, and their children's children, forevermore. Each wretched birth will plunge each child into a lifetime of misery.

It is heavily implied that Kos, while her physical body was dead, managed to put a curse upon the Hunters and members of Byrgenwerth. The Great Ones are described as sympathetic and tend to answer when called upon (Moon Caryl Rune description, *Bloodborne*), but they will also curse those that incite their anger (Defiled Chalice description, *Bloodborne*). Mother Kos, whose body was violated, had plenty of reason to spite the Hunters. This is how the Hunter's Nightmare was created, a place where Hunters who have become drunk with blood will forever hunt each other (Simon the Harrowed, *Bloodborne*). The truth of the Fishing Hamlet would become the greatest secret of the Healing Church as they would go to every extent to keep it hidden, even in the Nightmare realm that the Fishing Hamlet now resides. This can be framed as the kind of 'production of ignorance' that follows corporate or state malfeasance in the wake of ecological disasters: It is 'the secret of kept secrets fashioned by a certain bureaucratic creativity' (██████████).

As everyone involved in the sacrilege of Kos's body was sent to the Hunter's Nightmare after death, as punishment for their desecration, *Bloodborne* also demonstrates narratives of ecohorror: where the powerful elements of nature come back to haunt (McClanahan, 2019; Pinder, 2021). While this indiscriminate killing demonstrated in *Bloodborne* is by no means original or unique to video games, the weirding of this violence, and the way the slaughter and exploitation of the Great Ones are rendered abject, not only reflects a critique of such violence, but also resonates with the characteristics of the Cthulucene, demonstrating how we need to learn to 'stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (Haraway, 2016:5).

A Final Ministration: Coda

Bloodborne is, then, an important cultural script with which to explore the horrors associated with ecological harm. As Bould (2021: 3) notes – in phrasing that is curiously apposite for the natal themes of the game – ‘the art and literature [of the present moment] is pregnant with catastrophe’. This finds potent expression in the streets of Yharnam, littered with chained coffins and patrolled by plague-inflicted Huntsmen. *Bloodborne*, alongside other cultural scripts of the Anthropocene, imagines ‘a world haunted not just by the dead, but by the spectre of death’ (Bould, 2021: 2). It is a game world haunted by decay and decline. It well illustrates Rose’s (2004, cited in Gan et al, 2017) notion of deaths in the present pre-figuring extinction of the future. It is this aspect of *Bloodborne* as a cultural script engaging with and reflecting upon ecohorror that we will reflect upon in the discussion.

Chaturvedi and Doyle (2015: 24) note that the notion of ‘progress’ ‘became a dangerous myth’ when it became centrally concerned with ‘changing, taming and controlling the non-human world’. Specifically, they point to the way in which the concept became wedded to the idea that scientific knowledge should be applied to ‘human manipulation of the natural environment’. As we proceed through the game, we see the effects of this as we encounter a world in its terminal stages. We find locations that draw upon examples from the Gothic and Weird that similarly signify disease and decline. From Yharnam, a double of Wisborg (the plague-ridden town in *Nosferatu*), to the Innsmouth-like Fishing Hamlet, this is a game world driven into decay through extraction and plunder. The Healing Church sought out the blood from the Chalice Dungeons beneath the former and the villagers harvested the corpse of a Great One on the shore near the latter. Both actions precipitated a downfall in the name of ‘progress’. This is a world that is redolent of McBrien’s (2016) notion of the ‘necrocene’.

As we noted earlier, the Anthropocene describes the measurable impact of humanity on ecosystems. Amongst several – contested - points of origin, it can be argued that the height of the Industrial Revolution provides an important marker. However, Moore (2016) proposes that we should re-orient so that, instead, the roles of capitalism and colonialism are placed within the core of the definition rather than a simplistic link to the burning of fossil fuels. As a result, Moore (2016: 6) has suggested the term Capitalocene more fully captures ‘capitalism as a way of organising nature – as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology’. McBrien (2016), in turn, has extended this to its logical endpoint. This sees capital and its drive for endless accumulation arrive at its terminus: the necrocene. This reframes capitalism as a process of ‘becoming extinction’: ‘Capitalism is the reciprocal transmutation of life into death and death into capital’ (McBrien, 2016: 116-117). The necrocene, then, is the end point of a relentless process accumulation that results in toxic by-products and the negative value of waste.

We can develop this yet further by tying it into Mbembe’s (2003) notion of necropolitics. This is Mbembe’s elaboration of the Foucauldian notion of biopower which, in part, details the way in which the state has the power of life and death over its subjects. Mbembe’s conception of necropolitics extends this idea of citizens ‘made die’ to one in which they are ‘let die’ or left in a state of permanent injury. Locations where this occurs are labelled as ‘death-worlds’. By way of illustration, Mbembe suggests that slave plantations were sites where individuals or groups were ‘let die’ in this manner. Davies (2018) has then applied this to the injuries that follow environmental degradation and harm. It offers a way to explore the insidious ways in which environmental pollution or radiological harm seep into flora, as well as both human and non-human populations. As Davies (2018: 1540) notes, the ‘uneven spread of globalization and pollution [...] keeps marginalized groups in situations and spaces of wounded subjugation’. The populations

of these death-worlds are ‘subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead’ (Mbembe, 2003: 40). Clearly, there is a superficial resonance with the inhabitants of either Yharnam or the Fishing Hamlet since they too have been left alive, but in a ‘state of permanent injury’ by actors profiting from their injury. Yet, we can extend this idea further by applying Mbembe’s discussion of the ‘all-encompassing nature of postcolonial cruelty’ to Davies’ (2018: 1546) idea of the ‘saturating capacity of slow violence’. In this way, the harms inflicted upon these populations do ‘more than penetrate every space: it pursues the colonised *even in sleep and dream*’ (emphasis added, Mbembe, 2001, cited by Davies, 2018). In addition, Davies (2018: 1548) describes the ways in which ‘[f]or communities in polluted areas, toxic spaces have shifting temporalities, both quick and unpredictable [as well as a] slow drip of deteriorating environments’. The game world of *Bloodborne* is temporally fluid, and it shifts between states of dream, nightmare and sanity-shattering cosmic reality. The throughline that joins these is the world-ruining drive for ‘progress’. The world we encounter in *Bloodborne* is its version of the necrocene.

Similarly, by weirding the narrative of humanity’s corruption of the natural; of the endless pursuit of power and progress no matter the cost, through the use of tentacled eldritch beings, harrowing pursuits of forbidden knowledge and slithering, blood-induced madness, *Bloodborne* can be read as the epitome of the Chthulucene; as an illustration of how the ‘diverse earth-wide tentacular powers’ (Haraway, 2015:160) goes beyond humanity; beyond human comprehension, while the symchthonic nature of the Chthulucene also illustrates how the harms by humanity reaches across time and space ‘with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings (Haraway 2016: 33), haunting us.

This, then, is the backdrop to why *Bloodborne* functions as a sophisticated and nuanced cultural script that speaks to climate catastrophe. The themes we have identified here – sanguine exploitation, horrific creation and monstrous extinction – each evoke the horrors of the present moment. From the extermination of species to the exploitation and exsanguination of natural resources (McClanahan, 2019), and atmospheric pollution and global warming, snowballing into even more environmental and ecological disasters such as forest fires, floodings and torrential storms, these deaths pile on one other, doubling, tripling, creating legions of ghosts. This can be further unlocked with reference to the following lines from Gramsci (1971, cited in Wainwright and Mann, 2018: 24), written between the two world wars;

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

We can match these few lines to our current moment. *Bloodborne* evokes this specific interregnum – the state of *betweenness* – as it relates to the necrocene and Chthulucene. The climate catastrophe is here. It is present. The old ways caused and exacerbated the crisis. We are amidst the death throes of the old politics and the birth pains of the systemic change required to respond to the necrotic. Our present moment is one of ‘business-as-usual’ whilst subject to the morbid symptoms of climate disasters and refugees, as well as the concomitant rise of nationalism and authoritarianism. As Wainwright and Mann (2018: 24) note, the climate crisis ‘poses political problems for which the current order has no answer’. *Bloodborne*’s endings echo this. They suggest the repeated harms of ‘business-as-usual’ as we slip into the necrocene and Chthulucene, or – as befits cosmic horror – a resolution achieved in the production of a world-without-us.

Exploitation of resources, sanguine or environmental, and vain attempts at controlling life and nature, illustrate the Chthulucene of both Yharnam and Earth. To break with the annihilating practices ‘humans have wrapped comfortingly around themselves’ (Ulstein, 2019:50), Haraway (2016: 5) calls upon us to ‘stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth’. As Morton (2016) also argues, in order for anthropocism to be transcended, much like the hunt, the difference between humans and non-humans needs to be dissolved. As *Bloodborne* demonstrates, it is by *becoming one* with the Great Ones that humanity can ascend, going into a new childhood and age, born out of the Chthulucene. To end with Haraway’s (2015: 161) call to arms – or perhaps that should be tentacles – ‘make kin, not babies’.

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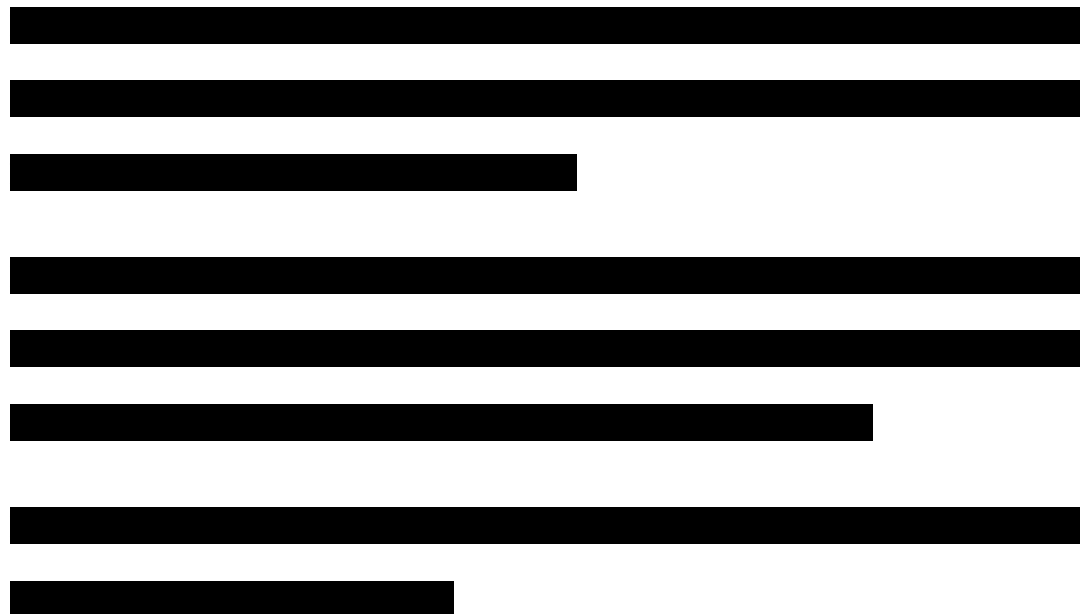
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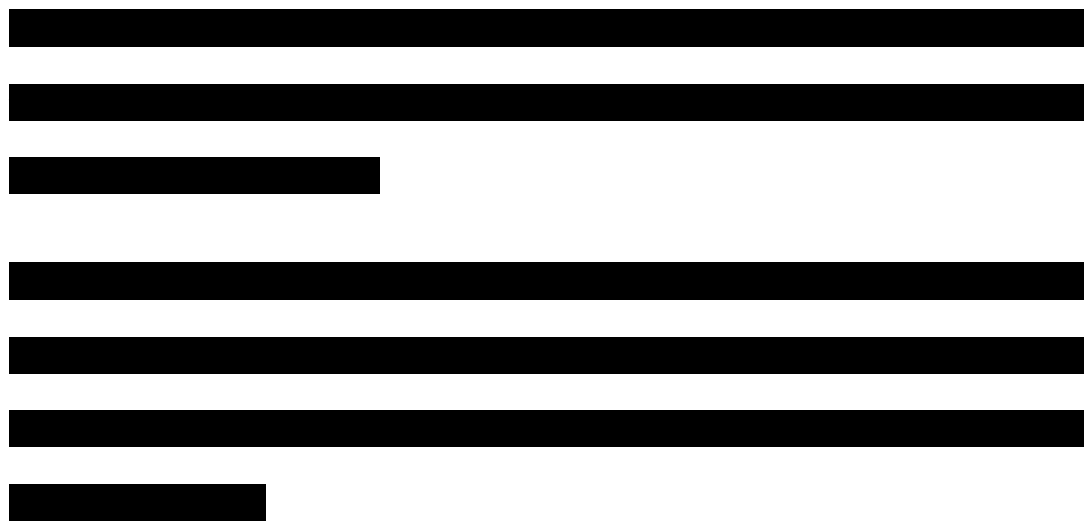
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