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THEMATIC SECTION

The Subversion of Victorian Morality in *Bloodborne* (2015)

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how the Japanese gothic video game *Bloodborne*, consciously and intentionally, subverts the historical, ethical, and philosophical concept of Victorian morality. The article takes into account that the Victorian Compromise is an integral part of Victorian morality, and as such, it partly originates from deeply influential and far-reaching utilitarian philosophy (and politics) of English social reformer, jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832). *Bloodborne* subverts Victorian morality by presenting it as a stagnant, hypocritical, and plainly ineffective moral system that fails when the community faces a crisis or a state of exception. For further explanation on the state of exception, this article uses the framework presented by a relevant contemporary thinker of ethics and politics Giorgio Agamben (1942). Within *Bloodborne* and its setting, the gothic city of Yharnam, the state of exception is the Hunt. The Hunt is shown to be pushing the citizens and their views on civic responsibility, ethics, solidarity and critical reasoning to its breaking point. Instead of *Bloodborne* citizens being

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa como o videogame gótico japonês *Bloodborne* subverte, de forma consciente e intencional, o conceito histórico, ético e filosófico da moralidade vitoriana. Neste artigo, considera-se que o Compromisso Vitoriano é parte integrante da moralidade vitoriana e, como tal, origina-se parcialmente da filosofia (e da política) utilitarista, profundamente influente e de longo alcance, do reformador social, jurista e filósofo inglês Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832). *Bloodborne* subverte a moralidade vitoriana, apresentando-a como um sistema moral estagnado, hipócrita e claramente ineficaz que falha quando a comunidade enfrenta uma crise ou um estado de exceção. Para uma explicação mais aprofundada do estado de exceção, este artigo utiliza concepções de um relevante pensador contemporâneo em ética e política, Giorgio Agamben (1942). Dentro de *Bloodborne* e do seu cenário, a cidade gótica de Yharnam, o estado de exceção é a Caçada. A Caçada demonstra estar a levar os cidadãos e as suas opiniões sobre responsabilidade cívica, ética, solidariedade e raciocínio crítico ao seu

dismissed as simply cruel, selfish or ignorant, it should be recognized that their views are deeply influenced by the ideology of Victorian morality. The evidence for Victorian morality being a consciously present and significant underlying factor in the game is further reinforced by the omnipresent Victorian aesthetics and architecture, soundtrack, British accents in the English dub of the game, as well as numerous other factors. *Bloodborne* is therefore a Japanese interpretation and subversion of a deeply Western morality tradition.

KEYWORDS: Victorian morality, Victorian Compromise, *Bloodborne*, utilitarian, ethics.

ponto de rutura. Em vez de os cidadãos de *Bloodborne* serem considerados simplesmente cruéis, egoístas ou ignorantes, deveria ser reconhecido que os seus pontos de vista são profundamente influenciados pela ideologia da moralidade vitoriana. A evidência de que a moralidade vitoriana é um fator subjacente conscientemente presente e significativo no jogo é ainda reforçada pela omnipresente estética e arquitetura vitorianas, a banda sonora, os sotaques britânicos na dobragem inglesa do jogo, bem como vários outros fatores. *Bloodborne* é, portanto, uma interpretação e uma subversão japonesas de uma tradição moral profundamente ocidental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Moralidade Vitoriana, Compromisso Vitoriano, *Bloodborne*, utilitário, ética.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* (2015) action role-playing video game title presents and subverts Victorian morality as a utilitarian, stagnant and ineffective ethical tradition which thoroughly fails when the community that practices it faces a crisis or a state of exception. Topically and within the realm of the humanities, this paper presents an ethical and philosophical analysis of a video game, incorporating elements of legal history. Relevant sources will include British theologian and philosopher Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936), contemporary political and ethics theorist Giorgio Agamben (1942), as well as Lawrence Friedman (1930), a leading contemporary legal expert from Stanford University. There will also be mention of how the utilitarian works and philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1747–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) influenced Victorian morality and Compromise. The article will also mention contemporary scholarship and studies of neo-Victorian and Gothic literature, alongside a few references to the King James Bible.

Bloodborne presents Victorian morality as a moral framework which breeds strong class prejudice, mutual citizen distrust and the inability to challenge authority in crisis. Therefore, *Bloodborne* is explicitly a critique of the utilitarian ethical tradition and framework. It is also implicitly a critique of Kantian (deontological)¹ and Christian (Anglican due to historical context) ethical frameworks. This paper will therefore delve deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of utilitarian ethics, which were primarily pioneered politically and socially by Jeremy Bentham and, to an extent, John Stuart Mill. Utilitarian ethics also underlies the often-mentioned but seldom fully understood concept of the Victorian Compromise, which is intimately tied to the concept of Victorian morality as a whole. Finally, *Bloodborne* openly suggests that the community which practices this type of morality is inevitably slowly tearing itself apart. Since FromSoftware is a Japanese studio, with the tradition of game design and production over several decades (starting in 1994), *Bloodborne* can be considered a Japanese view and interpretation of deeply Western morality tradition(s). The article will also explain what exactly, in a contemporary political sense, the state of exception is, which a community may face and what it may demand from a community, by resorting to Giorgio Agamben's framework.

This will all be contextualized within the narrative of *Bloodborne*. This will also include mentions of certain plot elements and a few (potential) fates of certain characters, which may be considered spoilers to the game's plot. Nevertheless, the article will not go into details of the game's endings or conclusions.

2. YHARNAM AS A VICTORIAN SETTING

2.1. Victorian Elements in Environmental and Character Design

When analyzing any title made by FromSoftware in the last decade and a half, one needs to be aware that FromSoftware's game titles usually intentionally contain a significant amount of contextual and environmental storytelling. In other words, the environment, architecture and flavor text² used to describe found items play a significant part in storytelling instead of more expository and explanatory dialogue, title crawls or even cutscenes.

The setting where almost the entire game takes place (exceptions being the brief visits to other realms and dimension that exist parallel to the one most of the game takes place in) is a city called Yharnam. The city of Yharnam is a famous place in the world of *Bloodborne*, with other developed and established places and cities, which are not explicitly shown or explained in detail. This is especially evident as the player's custom-made character (can be male or female) always inevitably remains an "outsider" in Yharnam. The world of *Bloodborne* is both quite Victorian and gothic, in several important ways. First of all, there is the architecture – exemplifying the connection between Victorian and gothic. Victorian architecture, historically speaking, encompassed several different styles and was nominally eclectic in its approach, with the catalogue of Victorian architecture including the Gothic Revival style. Therefore, Yharnam's architecture often features rib vaults and pointed Gothic arches, typical of Gothic architecture, alongside stained glass and religious imagery that depicts martyrdom, piety, and sainthood. Historically, the first mention of the word "Gothic" is considered to be in the writings of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), an Italian painter and architect, as an expression mocking a new kind of architecture.³ Furthermore, the game's soundtrack makes abundant use of classical violins and piano keyboards. Victorian fashion is omnipresent throughout the world, featuring elements such as cylinders and top hats, sumptuous dresses, and long coats. Interestingly enough, and worth mentioning, audio design also hints at a strong British (that is, Victorian) influence, considering that the English language dub is almost entirely done in British English, with appropriate accents and cadences that suit the more classical sound of the language. Most weapons have a more elaborate mechanical design in comparison to their real-world counterparts, while still remaining rooted in steel and gunpowder, dominant in the Victorian era.

The game consciously and intentionally borrows from many influences besides the Victorian and Gothic ones. There is a very obvious influence of H.P. Lovecraft's literary mythos

and style, alongside influences from European cinematography, such as the film *Le Pacte des loups* (2001), a French period action drama directed by Christophe Gans. The influence of the mentioned film is evident in the game's aesthetics, including clothing and certain outfits, as well as weaponry. Thematically, at the core of both works of fiction is a theocratic conspiracy inspired by historical events from the 18th and 19th centuries of European history. One should also mention Northern European folklore influences, which can be seen in the runes typical of Scandinavia, Germany and other European countries to the north.

2.2. Local Yharnam Customs

At the heart of *Bloodborne*'s story is a custom that is called “blood ministration”. This custom is what made Yharnam a special, and somewhat notorious place in the established world of the game. Once, it was a revolutionary medicinal technique and technology that was used to extend life, cure illnesses, which was also supposed to lead to higher planes of consciousness. By the time the player visits Yharnam, blood ministration has become overused, corrupted and has brought forth the disease known as Blood Scourge. This disease is responsible for the mutation of Yharnamite citizens into beasts during the Lunar Hunt. The entire blood ministration procedure and process is based on the blood of the “Great Ones”, celestial otherworldly beings not entirely knowable to humans of the world of *Bloodborne*. Throughout the game, it is shown that the Great Ones can communicate with humans to some extent, although not through words – the communication seems to occur more through physical contact, visions, and something akin to telepathy.⁴ *Bloodborne* can be considered neo-Victorian fiction, based on contemporary scholarship of neo-Victorian literature. For instance, Sally Shuttleworth has described (while quoting Hilary Schor) neo-Victorian fiction in general as something to a surprising degree concerned with both the material and immaterial worlds (Shuttleworth 2014, 8), and this type of relationship between the material and the cosmic is something that lies at the narrative and thematic core of *Bloodborne*.

Another custom directly linked to the mentioned blood ministration is the so-called Lunar Hunt. It has become a semi-regular, periodic event that has most of the citizens locked up inside. During that time, strange creatures and monstrous beasts roam the streets, with the citizens who have been the heaviest blood users (basically addicted to the Yharnam blood) turned into highly aggressive, primitive hostiles that hunt down and burn anything in sight. By the time the player begins to participate in the story within Yharnam, the Hunt has become a

48 relatively routine occurrence – it takes place when the Moon is closest to the Earth. During the Hunt, certain psychic energies become more apparent and stronger, as the borders between dimensions become blurry. All of this is the work of Yharnam's theocratic Healing Church elite. It is revealed that many of the city's elite actually desire to become the Great Ones themselves, which means leaving behind (or, from a different view, completely transcending) their humanity.

3. CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY IN YHARNAM

3.1. Yharnam as a Morally Bankrupt Place Where Victorian Morality and Compromise Rule

At first sight, civic responsibility and ethics might be a strange concept to study and dissect in what is regarded as a horror or, at the very least, a dark gothic fantasy role-playing game. However, it is a key element to understand *what* is actually happening in Yharnam and *why* Yharnam citizens behave the way they do throughout the whole game. Also, it should be noted that existing and contemporary scholarship is aware that “Gothic fiction, since its inception, has incorporated political anxieties related to social order and the individual”, as Mukherjee describes it (2024, 95). Even though nearly all Yharnam citizens (or Yharnamites, as they are collectively called) are locked up inside their houses, you can still knock on many doors in Yharnam. In fact, that is the introductory premise of the game. You wake up in a dark, Victorian-era-looking transfusion clinic with a cryptic note next to you. You venture out in the streets while the Hunt is underway. What you find is a city in chaos, with beasts roaming the streets, monstrous looking creatures being burned at the stake, and angry mobs of strange looking people armed with pitchforks, axes, knives and torches all around. One of the first instincts of a newcomer in Yharnam would be to (literally) knock on some doors, ask what is going on, and potentially seek help, shelter or clarification of some kind. Which, of course, is our instinct for basic solidarity, empathy, and some kind of civic conscience in an emergency. The player inevitably has very little luck with that, as knocking on the vast majority of citizens’ doors results in the player hearing insults, mockery, and being shooed away. Voices and dialogue one hears through the door sometimes indicate seething anger, astonishing arrogance, or deeply entrenched fear. Sometimes, all that the player can hear is the crazed and desperate laughter, and some citizens speaking nonsensically. Nearly all citizens continue to refer to the player as an “outsider” – one who is unwelcome in Yharnam and is regularly blamed by Yharnamites for

the grim situation in which Yhamam finds itself. One is at first tempted to think that the citizens of Yhamam are oblivious, scared or simply evil. However, this superficial explanation lacks depth and true understanding. Most citizens are simply responding and behaving according to a moral ideology, a variant of what is historically known to us as Victorian morality, which was underpinned by a theory of society known as the Victorian Compromise.

One cannot understand Victorian morality without understanding the Victorian Compromise, which permeated the class-based British society of that time. The Victorian era is, as is generally accepted historiographically, the period between 1837 and 1901, which is the period of Queen Victoria's reign in United Kingdom. Victorian morality and Compromise have become ubiquitous in the United Kingdom, although they were also spread well beyond its borders. Historically, it was a period of significant technological progress, the further expansion of the British Empire, and class turmoil, marked by the strong class divisions typical of the United Kingdom. The Victorian Compromise was based on values that unified potentially opposing class tendencies, but with all classes remaining inevitably intertwined, bound by British society and an expanding British nation. The most influential upper class adhered to values such as physical restraint, good manners, morality in display, charity, and religiousness. There was also a growing middle class, which was accumulating wealth through trade and commerce. The lower and working classes were intertwined with the rising middle class through acts of philanthropy, improved working conditions, and political support. Both lower and middle classes still mostly had no access to the highest social circles, nor to the true parliamentary and political influence, which was mostly still the domain of the upper class.⁵ All other classes were dependent on upper classes for true political influence. With the mentioned political influence and hereditary access to wealth and power, the upper class had the most stringent value-based expectations placed upon them, followed by the middle class. Respect for authority meant respecting the individuals with authority, namely, upper-class individuals with high societal titles and functions (Friedman 2007, 114). The Victorian Compromise was all about influential people displaying values externally, while, if needed, indulging in "sin" quietly and privately.

Judging from the written materials left behind by intellectuals of the time, there were plenty of deviations committed across the classes, especially amongst the uppermost class. A notable source of the time is theologian, philosopher, and writer G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), who explicitly comments on the Victorian Compromise and Morality in several of his prominent pieces, most notably in his essay "Three Main Trends of Victorian Thought: Utilitarianism, The

Oxford Movement, and Romantic Protestantism” (1913). He describes the societal atmosphere of the time: “The middle classes were emerging in a state of damaged Puritanism. The upper classes were utterly pagan” (Chesterton 1913).

Related to how Victorian customs co-existed with the laws, *Guarding Life's Dark Secrets: Legal and Social Controls over Reputation, Propriety and Privacy* (2007) by Stanford legal scholar Lawrence Friedman provides ample information. Prostitution was labelled as a “great social evil” – while, of course, brothels and red-light districts remained numerous (Friedman 2007, 931). Women were, above all, expected to be dedicated to marriage and family, facing more severe consequences for losing their reputation of chastity or virtue (Friedman 2007, 106). A good literary example of the ideal wife of the time can be found in Coventry Patmore’s narrative poem, *The Angel in the House*. A certain degree of pretense was always at play within this type of social compromise. Friedman further states the following:

Victorian surface was simply that; a surface. There was always of course, the dark underside, even in the high Victorian era. Not all men (or even women) lived up to the stern ideals of the code. Men drank, gambled, broke the Sabbath and consorted with prostitutes. Not all women were chaste and obedient. Some of the sinning – probably most of it – was done in secret. Open violation of the code could have terrible consequences, especially for women. (Friedman 2007, loc. 963)

3.2. Utilitarian Origins of Victorian Compromise and Morality

The Victorian Compromise was a social theory, with the primary interest being the well-being of the community, specifically the English community, both at home and abroad. Utilitarianism and utilitarian philosophy form the intellectual and social basis on which Victorian morality and Compromise were built. This is confirmed by G. K. Chesterton, who states: “Now for the great part of the Victorian era the utilitarian tradition which reached its highest in Mill held the centre of the field; it was the philosophy in office, so to speak” (1913). With John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) being a vocal proponent of it as a distinguished member of parliament, utilitarianism was first introduced by Mill’s teacher, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). The philosophy of utilitarianism is, above all, one of practicality. The main maxim of utilitarianism can be summed up as *the greatest happiness of the greatest number* (Bentham 1789, 8). Utilitarian ethics, therefore, value consequence and effect; motivation is not the primary focus. This is quite evident in Jeremy Bentham’s philosophy, which also highly valued a form of individual and

collective hedonism, going so far as to define pleasure and pain as the two ultimate, perennial, natural driving forces that govern all humanity's decisions and actions.

John Stuart Mill followed Bentham's theories, defining "utility" as the creed which is the foundation of morals, and that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, and wrong if they promote the reverse of happiness. On the other hand, other relevant morality traditions, such as Kantian, place much more value on motivation and good will.⁶ Kant's ethics are grounded in the categorical imperative, which aims to be universal, summarised in the maxim "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1793 or 2017, 24). While Mill explicitly mentions Kant as remarkable, he criticizes Kant's universalist theory and categorical imperative as being contradictory in itself, considering it lacks mention of reasonable self-interest (Mill 2009, 94-95). Both Bentham and Mill emphasize the nature and importance of pleasure. Kant, on the other hand, refers to happiness as highly noteworthy and important (Kant 1793, 1), although subjective to the point that it does not need to be codified in detailed regulations (Kant 2017, 22). Interestingly, the entire setting of *Bloodborne* is oppressive, decrepit, and lacks most of what we would call pleasure or even basic comfort, considering the uncanny atmosphere of Gothic horror that is present throughout the game. Both the deontological and utilitarian concepts are challenged in *Bloodborne*, although the utilitarian one to a much larger extent. Christian symbolism, and therefore, Christian morality, can also be considered present in *Bloodborne*. It is subverted to a lesser degree than utilitarian and deontological philosophy, though it can be considered as examined through the failings of Yharnam's ruling theocratic elite, which mostly contributed to the bestial overpopulation and danger in Yharnam. Historically, Victorian morality is closely connected to utilitarian philosophy, as well as the Anglican Church, whose involvement with Victorianism is well-documented (Altholz).

Lawrence Friedman also argues that Victorian Compromise should not be dismissed as mere hypocrisy, as the double standard in the law had at least an implicit purpose. The utilitarian principle is based on the notion that it is useless to try to stamp out vice. However, there must be some way to keep a lid on it, while maintaining the image of utmost dignity, posture, chastity and restraint in public as much as possible, for the best of the community (Friedman 2007, 169). When we push this type of social contract to its limits, we can safely say that within Victorian morality, it is possible to be guaranteed the status of a good husband and father, a conscientious citizen and a respectable businessman while gambling away your profits or inheritance, visiting

brothels and ignoring the cries of a wounded servant⁷ of your neighbor who is bleeding in an alleyway – as long as no one of importance saw you perform any of those misdeeds.

3.3. State of Exception as Ultimate Challenge to the Communal Morality System

After immersing ourselves in the world of *Bloodborne* and getting to know Yharnam, its customs, politics and citizens, we can safely say that Yharnam is a place that is under a semi-constant state of exception. A state of exception (or state of emergency) is a political, ethical, and to an extent, legal concept that has a significant tradition in both the 20th and 21st Centuries. A state of exception is any kind of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures. The expression itself was first introduced by the controversial German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) and was subsequently further elaborated, reinterpreted, and made relevant again by the contemporary legal and political theorist Giorgio Agamben (1942). The concept of the state of exception is naturally associated with the legality and legitimacy of dictatorship and the enforcement of extraordinary measures upon citizens. In his influential book *State of Exception* (2005), Agamben argues that states of exception can be *simulated*. The aim of the mentioned simulated emergency is to make an exception a permanent rule (Agamben 2005, 22). For example, a severe and sudden earthquake can be an authentic state of exception – a true, unforeseen emergency which probably justifies political and judicial deviations of some kind, depending on the situation. However, states of exceptions can also be faked or intentionally provoked – e.g. a bomb placed within a civilian structure by government services with the sole purpose of triggering unrest or blaming a certain political party, minority or ethnic group.

In *Bloodborne*, the state of exception is the Hunt. The true state of exception, as Agamben states, is something that is *per se* beyond the legal sphere and interpretation. The simulated state of exception is something that is *produced* so it can be codified into law, and new emergency laws (which usually involve some type of government overreach) can be created. Considering that the Hunt has started due to the Blood Scourge disease, as a means to maintain some form of societal control over the bestial population, which has now become routine and ritualized, we can say that the Hunt is now a *simulated* state of exception. The mentioned state of exception primarily benefits the ruling ranks of Yharnam's Healing Church, or what remains of it.

Agamben's theory posits that the state of exception presents both an ethical and a political challenge, prior to any interaction with the law or its codification. In other words, we could say that the state of exception is a test of a community's ethical and moral fiber. Through the Hunt and the events in Yharnam that the player participates in, we see a specific ethical ideology being tested. That ideology is Victorian morality – and alongside it, the Victorian Compromise, as a theory of societal relations that underlies it.

4. CITIZENS AT OEDON'S CHAPEL

4.1. Saved Citizens Displaying Symptoms of Victorian Morality

During the course of the game, the player can interact with a few relatively reasonable sounding individuals from Yharnam, who will ask the player for help in finding a safe place during the Hunt. All of this is highly typical of the RPG (Role Playing Game) genre, and something that would normally be considered a side-quest, at the end of which the protagonist would normally receive something helpful if the task was completed successfully. This concept is subverted in *Bloodborne*, as the effort and the intention go thankless in most cases, with the addition of “saveable” NPC characters beginning to act in very strange, erratic and (self) destructive ways, sometimes leading to potential confusion or regret from the player.

The safe haven in Yharnam is located at Oedon's Chapel, where citizens seeking help can be sent. The mentioned chapel has plenty of incense, which keeps the Blood Scourge beasts and crazed mobs at bay. Oedon's Chapel is run by a person known only as Oedon Chapel Dweller, a strange, slightly disfigured man dressed in modest robes. Nevertheless, he is one of the greatest humanists and benefactors in Yharnam, who opens the doors of the haven to citizens, regardless of their past and social status.

A total of five citizens can be brought to the safe haven of Oedon's Chapel. The following list displays the character descriptions and how they exhibit (or resist) symptoms of Victorian Compromise and morality. The list will not encompass all possible outcomes for the characters, although some of them will be mentioned. As is also customary in FromSoftware games, all of the mentioned NPCs (including the Chapel Dweller) can be killed by the protagonist at any time. *Bloodborne* has no manual “save” function, so the mentioned characters remain dead even

after reloading the game. This, as such, also creates a greater awareness of the consequences from the player's perspective.⁸ The following table includes the Chapel Dweller, for consistency.

- Oedon's Chapel Dweller – A slightly deformed-looking man in rags. Non-violent and friendly character, wants to save as many Yharnam citizens as possible. Does not exhibit any Victorian Compromise/morality symptoms. In fact, he is the very opposite of a Victorian-looking person and does not display almost any of the Victorian prejudices or mannerisms. He is charitable *per se* without any utilitarian cause, with no desire to climb up the social ladder or hierarchy.
- Arianna, a Yharnamite Prostitute – the only adult NPC survivor that (besides the Chapel Dweller, who is already at the chapel by default) is never openly hostile, maliciously manipulative, scheming or overtly or covertly violent towards the protagonist or any other NPC at the safe haven. She is helpful to the player/protagonist in the sense that she provides her healing blood to the protagonist. A woman from the fringes of society, dressed in a fine dress from Castle Cainhurst, which might imply that she is an impoverished noblewoman (although this is not confirmed). In Victorian mentality, she is a representation of “great social evil”, yet displays a kind heart and practical reason through most of the game.
- Elderly Lady – Rude, foul-mouthed woman of ill temper. Detests outsiders and foreigners such as the protagonist (which is symptomatic of Victorian mentality), thus holding them responsible for the fate of supreme Yharnam. She starts to exhibit signs of mental illness, potentially similar to dementia. Eventually, she starts to hallucinate that the protagonist is her child. She can provide her sedatives to the player, which are useful items – though in the context of her story, it is not out of her good will or intent, but as a result of mental illness.
- Sister Adella – A nun, in service of the Healing Church. Her purpose is to provide her special, healing blood to those in need. On a path to becoming a saint, she is a pious and zealous believer in her purity. If she were not a nun, she would be a true “angel in the house”. Historically, this character can also be considered representative of the Victorian era's obsessions with spiritualist and supernatural themes. The paradox of Sister Adella is also a challenge of religiously based Christian (strictly speaking, Anglican) ethics. Adella is pious, yet incredibly proud. She is devout and seemingly humble, yet she is also

jealous and envious. Appears to be calm and wise, yet hides a neurotic and volatile side. Narratively speaking, she can be considered the opposite of Arianna. Both have blood with healing properties, though they come from opposite sides of the social spectrum. Adella can turn violent and kill Arianna in a fit of jealousy *if* the player uses Arianna's healing blood too many times, and if Adella is present to witness it. This character again raises the discussion of criticism and subversion of the Christian (precisely speaking, Anglican) tradition of peaceful coexistence with neighbours, as well as the usual reverence for religious and pious figures.

- **Narrow-Minded Man** – Arianna's neighbor, highly suspicious and paranoid of *everyone*, especially outsiders and those who appear to be of a lower social class. This all fits a typical Victorian world outlook. If he is brought to safe haven, he is ungrateful, rude and condescending towards the player. Afterwards, all he does is conspire antagonistically against the Chapel Dweller, claiming that he is simply a "beggar with a murky past", subtly goading the player to beware (and potentially go against) the Chapel Dweller. He seems to have conflicting feelings towards his neighbor Arianna; he cynically berates her, confirming his deeply Victorian disposition towards prostitutes, yet decides to leave his house only after she does. If both Sister Adella and Arianna are present at the chapel, he will express admiration for the "young saint" Adella, cryptically suggesting that Arianna is jealous of Adella, having something she does not. In reality, it is the other way around. This way, the Victorian Compromise, morality, and worldview are shown to be in direct opposition to situational awareness and practical reasoning.
- **Suspicious Beggar** – an NPC found scavenging and seemingly drinking blood from human remains. He turns out to be an abhorrent demonic beast in disguise, who is out for the citizens' blood. If he is brought back to the haven, he starts picking off other survivors one by one. He can also be engaged in combat by the player, after which he changes form and counter attacks immediately. This character can be considered a challenge to deontological, Kantian ethics. In the Kantian context, with the best good-will imaginable, should we tell a fellow citizen who is found drinking blood from human remains of our safe haven, as the environment strongly implies that the truth could cause much harm to others and ourselves? Kant's definition of lying mentions that a lie is always harmful and technically "unethical", as it hurts a human being or, at the very least, humanity in general. This is also interesting from an ontological perspective in the

Kantian context, considering that while the mentioned NPC is definitely humanoid, he is not strictly speaking “human”. It is worth mentioning that he can still talk, even while transformed, which confirms an intelligent life form, while still bending and stretching our definition of humanity significantly. Regardless of the status, the mentioned NPC can be considered a challenge to Christian (Anglican) morality, as both Old (*The Bible, Authorized King James Version*, Le, 19:18) and New Testament (*The Bible, Authorized King James Version*, Mk, 12:31) speak of loving thy neighbor as thyself, and a significant aspect of practical Christianity is communal life in the company of fellow citizens and neighbors. However, if a communal life is affected by a state of emergency, do other principles, such as situational judgment and protection of self and others, take precedence?

Amongst the mentioned characters, the following part of the article will focus specifically on Arianna, to display how she remains immune to the ideology of Victorian morality.

4.2. Arianna, a Prostitute from the Fringes of Society Immune to Victorian Morality

Bloodborne seems to reinforce the notion that individuals from the fringes of society fare better in unprecedented or exceptional circumstances than those who are firmly dependent on society and are eager to be seen as law-abiding citizens at all times. Additionally, *Bloodborne* is not the first video game to subtly convey such viewpoints.⁹

Naturally, this comes into conflict with the core concept of Victorian public morality, which emphasises morality on display and behaving *properly*, especially in public. Arianna is a woman who is accustomed to being shunned by society, and during the Hunt, she becomes a beacon of hope for the player and the entire safe haven, beside the Chapel Dweller. It is worth mentioning that Arianna’s house is located at the end of Cathedral Ward, which is actually an administrative center of the government. This positioning of Arianna’s house hints at who the main part of Arianna’s clientele was, and it would be reasonable to assume that the customers were mostly higher-ranking members of the city government, specifically those associated with the Healing Church.

Bloodborne’s Arianna is, at first glance, an antithesis of the perfect Victorian woman and everything that an “angel in the house” should not be. She is highly self-aware, does not pretend at all, has a good situational judgment and intelligence, and is not afraid to show it. She is generous to the extent that she wants to repay the player with her healing blood. She is just

looking to survive, without harming anyone in the process. Ironically, despite her profession, due to her disposition and character, she can be considered an “innocent bystander”, unlike the majority of other Yharnamites, including those at the safe haven. Innocence in FromSoftware games and other gothic tales in general is quite vulnerable and often in danger of being devoured by the cruel surroundings and an unforgiving world. Arianna can also be ignored or missed by the player while in her house (which leaves her fate quite ambiguous), killed by the player, killed by Sister Adella in a jealous frenzy, or die near the end of the game, when to her and the player’s horror, a small creature loosely resembling a baby comes out of her – which could be a product of psychic energies of certain Great Ones or their wrath brought about by experiments of Healing Church. This understandably places her under a great psychological strain, and she begins mumbling incoherently and laughing hysterically, most likely in shock. In order for Arianna to survive, the “baby-looking creature” must not be harmed by the player – even though the opposite might be the player’s first instinct.¹⁰

The supernatural Hunt ends in all of *Bloodborne*’s available conclusions, and it is possible to speculate that the mentioned strange creature (as many others) simply disappears, and Arianna comes to her senses. Arianna’s quest can end with some hope. Of course, even if she survives the entire ordeal of the Hunt, her final fate is still open and unresolved – though in the harsh, gothic and Victorian world of *Bloodborne*, this is often the best outcome one can get, even with all the noblest intentions in mind. This is partly due to the omnipresent Victorian Compromise and morality that have long since dominated the city of Yharnam in *Bloodborne*, which is fiercely criticised in the game through its narrative design, environmental storytelling, dialogue and characters.

5. CONCLUSION

The fictional world of *Bloodborne* is an example of a gothic, macabre fantasy tale done by Japanese authors. What has been discussed so far illustrates how *Bloodborne* is also a conscious, deliberate and detailed dissection and criticism of what is historically known as Victorian morality and Victorian Compromise. The game suggests that Victorian morality, when practiced in a community, produces insular, elitist and paranoid individuals, solely obsessed with their position in society and scoring “morality points” to be seen and valued by the public. Citizens of a community that practices this type of morality often seem to consider themselves above occasional debauchery, vice, lies, incitement to violence, and other misdeeds, which are evident

throughout Yharnam. Citizens of Yharnam, who are mostly shown to be under severe influence of Victorian morality, are also shown as unable to think critically about authority, remaining fearfully reverent of the theocratic Healing Church, and believers in the supremacy of Yharnam, with outsiders and anyone from outside being *a priori* at fault for Yharnam's deeply rooted issues. Moreover, as is seen in the haven, they seem to remain obsessed with and convinced of their own moral and communal superiority. Victorian morality is portrayed as a force that dangerously clouds situational judgment and critical thinking. A community that practices this type of morality is inevitably tearing itself apart, as *Bloodborne* demonstrates how such a community is completely unable to deal with any kind of exceptional or unprecedented states, due to the lack of true social cohesion, non-existent transparency and easy breaking of shallow and superficial connections amongst citizens.

As a narrative and a story, with its emphasis on environmental storytelling and scraps of information offered to the player, *Bloodborne* inquires and asks more questions than it provides answers. However, across the gaming world and various cultures, the criticism and reinterpretation of the Victorian Compromise and morality in *Bloodborne* remains fairly obvious. In fact, it is one of the more obvious aspects of the narrative, regarding the ethical and aesthetic essence. This article has, as much as possible, displayed how *Bloodborne* is also explicitly a critique of utilitarian-based Victorian ethical tradition and framework, with some reference and mention of Kantian (deontological) and Christian (notably Anglican) ethical framework(s). As mentioned, an additional layer of significance is that *Bloodborne* is a Japanese game, which interprets European intellectual tendencies and history with care and precision. For the future of the discussion on gothic fantasy games, such as *Bloodborne*, one must not lose sight of European intellectual, religious and spiritual history. Understanding of philosophical underpinnings and nuances becomes ever more relevant for understanding gothic stories in various media, as well as the many questions they pose.

¹ Kantian morality is one of the schools of normative ethics, which is concerned with how one should act in a moral sense. Named after its well-known representative and founder, the highly influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the school is also known as deontological ethics, which is primarily concerned with the nobility of intent itself, rather than the consequences of actions. Consequences are the primary focus of utilitarian ethics, pioneered by the highly influential British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832).

² Text used to describe found items during the game. This text is also found on playing cards in card-based narrative games.

³ The expression “Gothic” also denotes the Goths, northern Germanic tribes that were historically in contact with the Roman Empire.

⁴ To casual observers, the Great Ones appear like large, looming and monstrous creatures. It is also worth noting that the Great Ones are not necessarily evil nor good. The game’s lore explains that the Great Ones are unable to reproduce physically and yearn for children, and that human beings can become a kind of surrogate.

⁵ The question of whether the mentioned power division is fundamentally different in the 21st century is highly debatable, but it was likely even more pronounced during the Victorian era.

⁶ Immanuel Kant’s ethical viewpoint is based on his writings and lifelong research of pure reason, something that Kant claims is inherent to every physiologically and psychologically fully functioning individual.

⁷ Who is, obviously, a person of the lower class.

⁸ The mentioned characters can also be left to their own fate if the player is unable to find their houses or simply chooses the conversation option to withhold any information. It is debatable what happens to the characters if the player withholds information; however, the fact is that they become unresponsive after a certain event in the game. It can be presumed that the mentioned characters are killed in their houses. Arianna, for instance, mentions that she has very little protective incense left. However, their fates are not revealed in the case of ignoring or withholding information, and other outcomes can also be presumed for the mentioned characters.

⁹ This viewpoint in video games is also mentioned by Deacon St John, the biker protagonist of the post-apocalyptic stealth action game *Days Gone*. In the world of *Days Gone* (2019), after a deadly, rage-inducing virus breaks out, the most efficient survivalists are often those from the fringes of the former society or individuals who have previously navigated the line between illegal and legal domains with success. E.g., Copeland, a survivalist, gun rights activist and podcaster who lived in his van and was considered an extremist, and of course Deacon himself, who, after military service in Afghanistan, joined a motorcycle club and performed actions that sometimes crossed into illegality.

¹⁰ FromSoftware’s games also often make a point in their narrative design that human beings tend to quickly fear everything that does not look “human” enough to them. This is mentioned verbatim by a potential ally and a helpful character from *Dark Souls 2* named Weaponsmith Omifex, who is a part woman, part bird. She says the following lines: “Do you find me strange? You humans are always this way. You glare at any unfamiliar creature. That mix of curiosity, fear and revulsion...” (03:15 – 03:33).

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