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BLOODBORNE:

**SYSTEM DOMINANTS, LIMINALITY AND THE LURE OF
RESISTANCE IN VIDEO GAMES**

Verónica Frejo Marañón

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GLOSSARY

Accessibility

The term “accessibility” is mostly used in the video game world to indicate how well adapted games are to being played by people with disabilities. A game with high accessibility can include features like “color-blind” mode, eye tracking or support to adapt its controls to a device that is designed to be operated with one hand, for instance.

AI

Artificial intelligence.

Boss

The final, most powerful enemy of a videogame level. Commonly treated as a skill check for the player, a test.

Controller

Electronic device with which the player interacts by pressing buttons or turning joysticks which handles the movement of whatever entity is controlled inside the videogame. It is the equivalent to a TV remote or a steering wheel.

Customizable Character

A digital avatar that the player can alter in some measure. The most common alterations are aspect and skill points, which determine characteristics such as health quantity, strength or dexterity, for instance.

Cutscene

A fragment of the videogame in which the player does not possess any agency. Scenes of this sort are commonly used at important moments during the game, such as a boss first appearance or a camera pan to fully show a newly found place.

DLC

Downloadable content. Extra content added to the main game, usually post-launch.

Level

Segment of a videogame. Environment through which the player's character progresses. Each level commonly possesses a higher difficulty than the previous one. Alternatively, a player's level can be raised by obtaining experience (called blood echoes in *Bloodborne* and achieved by defeating enemies or bosses and selling objects). It is indicated numerically.

Ludonarrative Dissonance

Term coined by game designer Clint Hocking, which refers to the phenomenon that occurs when a video game narrative does not match with its gameplay events (e.g. a character is presented in cutscenes as a peaceful explorer but then proceeds to slaughter hundreds of people when controlled by the player, as it is the only way to progress through the level).

New Game (Game Reset)

Some games, after their final objective has been completed (usually this consists in defeating a boss), reset themselves, that is, they allow the player to enter a new game where the player can complete a playthrough all over again if he or she wants. Most video games with this feature leave it as an option, but some, like *Bloodborne*, resets mandatorily. New Game (sometimes a + is added after "Game") is often a more difficult version of the main playthrough (enemies have more health and deal more damage, etc.).

NPC

Non-playable character. That is, any other non-object entity in the game that is not the player's controlled character.

Platform

Platforms are the machines in which the game can be played. The five most used are: Personal computer (PC), consoles made by Sony (Playstation 3, 4 and so on), by Microsoft (Xbox models), by Nintendo (Wii, Switch, etc.) and, lastly, mobile phone. Games can appear in all, some or even only one of them if an agreement is reached between the game publisher and the platform company, as it is the case with *Bloodborne*.

Playthrough

The complete cycle, from beginning to end, of a videogame.

RPG

Role-playing game. These video games focus on the playable character/s evolution (usually shown with statistics like levels, attack and defence numbers, etc.) and have the players immerse themselves in the world and narrative.

Triple-A Games

High-budget, high-profile games that are typically produced and distributed by large, well-known publishers.¹

Wiki

Information website of a collaborative nature.

¹ Definition obtained through technology company's Arm Limited's Glossary section. See: www.arm.com/glossary/aaa-games#:~:text=The%20term%20%22AAA%20Games%22%20is,du%20to%20their%20extreme%20popularit y.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to expand the current academic discourse surrounding video games by applying underused literary tools to their analysis, namely Russian formalist theories of the dominant and systems, as well as liminality, which so far has been applied to video games mostly from an anthropological and aesthetic point of view. Video games are close to literary products, as they share core elements such as plot and narrative and thus the application of this theory can expand our cultural understanding of the medium, as well as expand the theory. Liminality theory, especially, can be expanded to take into account text interactivity and 3D space navigation, exclusive only to video games. *Bloodborne*, a game developed by a Japanese studio, FromSoftware, was chosen to undergo this in-depth exploration. Firstly, the reason why I centre my analysis on video games will be given, proposing that they contain meaning and, most importantly, a narrative that can depend partly on the player, an interesting point of potential literary analysis. Then, the history of video games will be surveyed from its inception to its current status. Afterwards, I will bring attention to the uncommon success of games developed by the Japanese studio FromSoftware, as they are famed, sometimes even infamous, for their difficulty. These two chapters will serve to place *Bloodborne* in a historical context, which will help later on to determine why it is unique. This assessment will be further supported by the following chapters of the thesis, in which *Bloodborne* will be analysed by applying the formalist concept of systems and, in this way, its dominant features will be extracted, and their inner workings explained. Liminality will prove to be crucial in bringing together all these dominants, as it is ever-present in all its layers, unlike in most other games. These elements will then coalesce into my proposed main dominant feature of the game, resistance, which marks its uniqueness and its paradigmatic status among FromSoftware titles. The game resists the player in order to keep him or her in a permanent, satisfactory state of knowledge acquisition. Since not all the tools or narrative are given, the player extends the stay in the virtual world by attempting to decipher the undecipherable. This resistance is then placed in a historical context which saw games' dominant feature shift from uncooperativeness to adaptability. I will argue that resistance, due to its success, is merging with adaptability, diluting here and there but keeping its core identity; and that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: WHY VIDEO GAMES?

When movies were finally considered worthy of being called art, the movie critics disparaged pop music from the likes of Elvis Presley and the Beatles. And when video games came to the fore, all those established critics—book, movie, pop music—ridiculed this growing form of expression (Goldberg 290).

While this ridicule Goldberg acknowledges has decreased considerably in recent years, videogames are still frowned upon in many contexts. However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought them much closer to the general public, as we can see in a study carried out by Bar and Copeland-Stewart, by which we can observe that the time spent playing videogames increased for 71.3% of the respondents after the virus' outbreak and subsequent quarantine (125). They also found that there was an overwhelming majority of positive effects on the participants' well-being due to their time spent playing video games (130-135). So, what is so appealing about these digital creations? The simple answer is that they are *meaningful*. This meaning is contained in their designs and extracted while the user engages in play.

Meaningful play in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The meaning of an action resides in the relationship between action and outcome. (Salen and Zimmerman 156)

This depends fully on the kind of system we deal with. Salen and Zimmerman follow the classification that Christopher Langton develops in *Artificial Life: An Overview*. He distinguishes between four kinds of systems; in order from lower to higher complexity they are: 1) fixed, which “remain the same forever, the relationships between their elements never changing”, 2) periodic systems, “simple systems that repeat the same patterns endlessly”, 3) chaotic systems, which “behave in a completely random fashion” and 4) complex systems, which “lie between periodic and chaotic systems, exhibiting patterns of behaviour more complex than the repetition of periodic systems” (Salen and Zimmerman 170). Of course, games are part of the latter kind of system and this allows for a vast versatility and diversity in the medium. Each successful video game has to provide certain rules so that the player can engage with it, as well as balance each interaction in a way that the feedback received after following said rules feels rewarding.

This interactivity can generate highly interesting results if we take into account that video games are narrative. The complexity or even intentionality of this narrative will depend from work to work, but it is undeniably there. Especially now that video games have come far enough to compete with and even surpass cinema in terms of sales (Witkowski), it matters more than ever. My aim in this thesis is to intertwine game design studies with literary theory studies, thus taking part in a relatively young endeavour that, nevertheless, already counts with many interesting insights and frameworks. In order to do so I have chosen to focus my analysis on a specific video game, *Bloodborne*, published in 2015. This will allow me to develop a theory of engagement between game and player that is often mis-portrayed or approached but not developed fully. This theory will tackle every aspect of *Bloodborne* and show its idiosyncrasy even among video games created by the same studio, FromSoftware, thus establishing it as a paradigm of an emerging genre. Furthermore, it will propose a reason why this genre seems to be creating ripples among the current dominant tendencies of the video game market despite their fame and promotional materials showcasing an erroneous aspect of it that may alienate many potential users. Before we undertake this theoretical analysis, however, it is necessary to determine what the current state of video games is, where they come from and why.

CHAPTER II

THE EMERGENCE AND SUCCESS OF VIDEO GAMES

Even if their emergence took place much later than that of other kinds of entertainment, the nature and complexity of video games have shifted at a staggering speed. Their birth can be traced to 1946, when the earliest programmable computer was successfully built in the University of Pennsylvania. A year later, Alan Turing created the first chess program, which turned out to be too advanced for contemporary machines. He never got to successfully implement it, his death following two years later. However, the torch was taken up and a growing interest in artificial intelligence which focused on board game mimicking produced steady innovation. Two decades later, in the 1970s, video games were made marketable and coin-operated machines, spearheaded by the massively successful *Pong*, became growingly common in arcades and other public spaces. In 1975, the first home version of *Pong* was released, and video games became a more attainable commodity (Donovan 11-46). From then on, they underwent an overall steady growth, marred by several drops, among which the almost fatal crash of 1983 stands out. This event nearly decimated the home console market due to two main reasons. On the one hand, console brands abounded and game production even more so. This profuseness of game creation was due to the fact that many third-party developers, or anyone skilled enough to create a program for a console, could publish their games without the console makers being able to stop it. Because of this, a great amount of the videogames on the market were low quality cash-grabbing attempts, which quickly put off consumers' interest. On the other hand, the lower average income families had available as a result of the 1982 global economic recession (Kose et al. 11).

Nevertheless, where home consoles sank, personal computers, which had quickly gained popularity since their creation in the early 1970s,² thrived now, as they could offer a 2 in 1 as both a platform for work and ludic entertainment. Thus, the industry survived and shifted. The economy recovered and new console models were created. The crash vividly present, they were brought back but at much more affordable prices. The market was now occupied by fewer manufacturers, which built their machines with a higher quality assurance than ever before (Oxford). Only top of the line products would earn the trust and hard-earned money of potential consumers. And earn it, they did. The presence of consoles in homes has only increased since then, bringing more and more profit by the year and showing no signs of

² For a detailed timeline of computer history, see the Computer History Museum's website: <https://www.computerhistory.org/timeline/computers/>

stopping (Tomić 21-22). However, this success caused the start of a steady decline of arcades in the early 1980s (Kent 317). There were simply fewer reasons to spend money in arcade machine games; they were not to be purchased (at least not by the average-income family), designed to be extremely difficult to keep consumers inserting coins, could be engaged with by someone else, and were tied to the arcade's opening and closing hours. Now, one could play without even leaving the bedroom and so, home gaming became a central focus of both manufacturers and customers.

The rest of the decade and the next one, the 1990s, continued to show the financial profitability of the industry, and pushes to create better platforms to play video games on were constant. From the early 2000s onwards, this dizzyingly fast technological evolution was accompanied by the inclusion of internet connections that would allow players to game and share their content online (Chikhani). Hardware and software developments have been relentless to this day, and they have turned what once was but a programming experiment into a widely popular, multi-million industry. To put this into perspective, the video games market was worth 178 billion dollars (approximately 163 billion euros) in 2021, and has gone from having 2 to 2.9 billion players worldwide just from 2015 to 2021 ("Video Game Industry Statistics"). These massive numbers vastly surpass those of any other entertainment industry (Ritcher), as "[j]ust one game, the Houser brothers' *Grand Theft Auto IV*, earned \$500 million in its opening week, far outpacing the movie industry's biggest force, James Cameron's *Avatar*, which earned less than half that amount" (Goldberg 9).

While this growth has cemented the presence of video games in society, it has also brought along its drawbacks. The one that concerns this thesis the most has its origin in a big industry shift that took place in the late 2000s; the powerful push to make "casual" games, especially if played on the already available mobile devices, the norm. That is, "casual" as opposed to "hardcore." Boyes defined the former kind of games as "titles that are friendly to new/occasional users and are intuitive and accessible." This inevitably evolved into game creation that appealed to masses, which in and of itself is not harmful at all. The issue lies in the fact that, as more and more money was invested into game development, fewer creative risks were allowed to be taken. The industry began to move in clear cut phases. As Kelly states:

"Whether you call it cloning, copying or fast following, a common perception in the industry is that the market moves in genres and it's a safer bet to get in on a genre rather than strike out. [...] Wild innovation quickly transformed into a market where developers copied the hell out of one another, and effectively all provided variations on the same basic product to players (who then became bored). [...] Then came the crash, the regret, the millions lost on bad investments [...] Only a few game makers successfully managed to get beyond the risk-aversion."

This cyclical movement is representative of Schumpeter's Creative Destruction, a process that, in his words, "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly

destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (83). Like a capitalist *ouroboros*, those who do not keep up, suffocate. Thus, creative experimentation in triple-A games has become increasingly rare, shifting instead towards “indie” creators at a high rate since the end of the 2000s. “Indie” studios usually consist of smaller groups of developers (or, in some cases, only one, like the creator of the widely successful *Stardew Valley*) who work on a much smaller budget and, as the name suggests, independently from big corporations. They represent, as Crogan states, “[t]he passage away from a large studio profile of console games production toward a more variegated and diversified sector” (672).

CHAPTER III

AN UNEXPECTED SUCCESS: FROMSOFTWARE

Around the late 2000s, when the video game industry was showing the first results of the low risk, high reward economic model that suffocated creativity, a small Japanese studio, FromSoftware, struggled with the development of a dark fantasy game. It was, in fact, widely considered to be unsalvageable, already a failure, to most staff. The then programmer Hidetaka Miyazaki asked to take control of the project, “if my ideas failed, nobody would care – it was already a failure.” He was allowed to do so and, because of this lack of expectations, Miyazaki and his team could design a game that had close to no creative constraints, a game they truly wanted to play. So, *Demon's Souls* was born in 2009. Perhaps not surprisingly, it sold poorly in the beginning. Players did not seem to click with the game and, upon testing it at the Tokyo Game Show that took place a few months before its release, provided devastating negative feedback, especially regarding its high difficulty. Even the game's publisher, Sony, did not think it was a good product. The former president of Sony's Worldwide studios, Shuhei Yoshida, stated the following on a 2012 interview:

We underestimated the quality of the game and to be honest, the media in Japan did the same. [...] For [sic] my personal experience with *Demon's Souls*, when it was close to final I spent close to two hours playing it and after two hours I was still standing at the beginning at [sic] the game. I said, “This is crap. This is an unbelievably bad game.” So I put it aside. (Reilly)

As a consequence, Sony's U.S. and European branches passed it up because of its unconventional design and extreme complexity, believing that it would fail outside of Japan (Parish). Against all odds, the underwhelming sales turned around after the game started to find a public that was infatuated by what it did differently. Thus, as a response, Altus, a third-party company, picked up the rights to publish it in North America and Bandai Namco to do the same in Europe. Since then, the relatively small, niche community has exponentially grown with each game the studio has released. *Demon's Souls* successor, *Dark Souls*, cemented the place for these kinds of games in the media. A new genre, the “Souls-like”, emerged.³ These games have all core characteristics in common: obscure and fragmented narratives and challenging, methodical combat. That is, in fact, pretty much the opposite

³ Even if the genre is known as “souls-like”, FromSoftware's games are often referred to as “Soulsborne” games after the release of *Bloodborne*. This name remains even if the studio has released differently named video games that adhere to the same overall formula.

approach the most popular RPGs that were created back then, and even now (e.g. *Dragon Age: Origins*, 2009; *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, 2011; *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015; *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018). These games transmit their story in a linear manner, with plenty of dialogues and cutscenes, and allow for a difficulty selection so that, ideally, the player does not find them too easy or too challenging. Since this was the norm, when “Soulsborne” games reached a wider public, only their supposed difficulty became their identity sign. The phrase “this is the Dark Souls of...” was coined in gaming journalism (and then widely mocked for being overused and missing the game's point). Even FromSoftware's own publishing company, Bandai Namco, used this label in order to catch the attention of players with something to prove, as it is apparent in the name chosen for the later release of *Dark Souls* and its DLC for PC, the “Prepare to Die” edition.

The success of the Japanese studio continued to grow and, just as Bandai Namco prepared *Dark Souls* to be a trilogy due to it, Miyazaki received an offer to create something new. Sony, who previously had not trusted the team at FromSoftware when *Demon's Souls* came along, now saw the potential in the studio's vision. Thus, *Bloodborne* was conceived. As Foster succinctly puts it, we can describe it as

a video game in which the hunter, an outsider coming to the [Victorian inspired] city of Yharnam, participates in the night of the hunt [...] with no guidance for where to go or what to do. The winding corridors of the city are maze-like, plagued with monsters around every corner. [...] Throughout this exploration the player is fed tidbits of Yharnam's history and the plague that destroyed the city. As the player continues through the game it becomes apparent that the beasts are only part of the problem; great ones and ancient eldritch gods sought by men of previous generations caused the scourge of beasts [...]. (Foster 61-62)

As a platform exclusive, given the success of its predecessor, *Dark Souls*, it would no doubt generate many PlayStation 4 consoles sales. The fact that Sony was willing to support FromSoftware economically in order for them to create in exchange what could effectively be called a “console seller” means that the status of the once unknown Japanese studio had been fully consolidated to a triple-A status. This shift is remarkable due to how seldom it occurs. In an oversaturated market where economic giants fiercely fight for a player base, a small, “indie” development studio often has no chance of success and, if it does, it is usually moderate and niche. Indeed, it is incredibly rare that a game developed by a non-triple-A studio reaches the, in comparison, astronomical figures that their counterparts can achieve. When it does happen, it is usually because the game or games in question are filling an existing gap, whether it is creating something completely new, bringing back an extinct genre or simply reacting to the main current trends and acting in opposition at the right time of over-saturation. Therefore, the exponentially growing success of FromSoftware's games is quite significant in order to understand how players want to engage with video games, what clicks for them and, as I will explore in subsequent chapters of this thesis, why.

CHAPTER IV

BLOODBORNE'S RECEPTION

a. Fans and Journalists

Thus, *Bloodborne* was released in 2015 to high praise from critics and players alike. It has received several awards, among which the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) for game design stands out.⁴ Today, it appears as the 208th best rated game in history, regardless of platform, a score that places it above wildly popular and beloved titles like *The Sims* (2000), and as the 11th in the platform it is exclusive to, Playstation 4, in the best-known review website, *MetaCritic*.⁵ Here, it also boasts the label of “Universal acclaim”, which numerically translates to a 92/100. Other well-known publications had favourable opinions on the game as well. Here are a few excerpts of professional journalists' reviews. Firstly, from the website Eurogamer:

The fact is that few other studios in the world can match what FromSoftware is doing in big-budget games. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki is possessed of a rare talent, an all-encompassing design sensibility capable of tying everything that matters - aesthetics, narrative, sound and mechanical design - together in a manner where each feeds into and enhances the others. The structure underlying *Bloodborne* is not just original but coherent, and because of this the impact of everything it does is commensurately greater. This is total design. (Stanton)

Secondly, from PushSquare:

From start to finish, *Bloodborne* revels in its unique – if somewhat masochistic – approach to entertainment. There are very few games that cause you to curse their developer one minute and sing their praises the next – but this is one of them. It is, quite simply, a sensationally designed and superbly refined offering. (Potter)

And, lastly, IGN reviewer states that:

Bloodborne is an amazing, exacting, and exhausting pilgrimage through a gorgeous land that imposes the feeling of approaching the bottom of a descent into madness. Though extended load times and minor frame-rate hitches have an effect on the pacing, it's otherwise an intensely challenging and rewarding game. There's an incredible power to unlocking its mysteries, and in succeeding, despite its demand for a pound of your flesh. (Tyrrel)

⁴ For a complete list of awards and nominations, see *Bloodborne*'s IMDb page: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt3814634/awards/?ref=tt_awd

⁵ To access the review site in detail, see: <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/bloodborne>

b. Academic Analysis

As we can see, *Bloodborne* has fascinated quite a large number of players, professional or not.⁶ It should come as no surprise, then, that some academics have found it of interest as well. Although not many, there are highly insightful analyses on different aspects of the game. Of particular interest is Nicholas Foster's work, which applied Roland Barthes' theory of texts to *Bloodborne*. In his analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, a book titled *S/Z*, Barthes divided texts into two kinds: *lisible* (readerly), that require very little to be understood, and *scriptible* (writerly), which not only require much higher levels of engagement with the text, but also have the reader participate in them as a co-writer (Ott 3). Thus, Foster argues that *Bloodborne* can be understood as the second kind, a writerly text, as it is "[missing] an integral part of piecing together the fractured narrative. No piece of lore, no dialogue, no progression in the game will unlock the secret of Yharnam" (66). While one can agree that *Bloodborne* could fall under this term, there seems to be some contradiction in its application if Barthes' theory is followed *à la lettre*. As Foster notes, Barthes would not consider the game to be a writerly text, since it is a consumer good, and they can never be writerly, an active production, but a commodity (Foster 71). Nevertheless, I believe the application of this theory still works well as a framework of analysis for *Bloodborne*'s narrative. It is not given directly to the player so, indeed, we can consider the gap-filling process as co-writing on the player's part.

While not using this same framework, author Madelen Hoedt, in her book, *Narrative Design and Authorship in Bloodborne: An Analysis of the Horror Videogame*, also coincides in stating that engaging with *Bloodborne* results in a process of co-authorship (16). She points to an interview that game director Hidetaka Miyazaki gave for VG247, in which he confirms that co-authorship is, indeed, intentional and expected from the player. In Miyazaki's own words:

[T]here is a perfect storyline in my head. [...] However, [...] I have no intention at all of enforcing [it, only what makes] it into the game [is] something that I need to force players to accept as a base for building up their own interpretation of the world. (Donaldson)

Hoedt proceeds to develop a highly in-depth analysis of *Bloodborne* focusing on this fact, on the relationship between Miyazaki's narrative authorship and that of the players, and also on how much this narrative drinks from literary works, especially from Gothic and Lovecraftian texts. To do so, while applying literary and game design theories throughout, she takes the reader along a journey through the full game, its mechanics and lore. This last item, as we will see in the following chapter of the thesis, can be problematic, as she is forced to fill the gaps of the story, making her own personal connections. This is inevitable if one

⁶ A curious document stands out. *The Paleblood Hunt*, a 107 pages long essay created and shared by a fan of *Bloodborne* who goes by the name of Redgrave. In it, he explores all the lore available in the game. See: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JL5acskAT_2t062HILImBkV8eXAwaqOj611mSjK-vZ8/edit

plans to traverse the game in this way, and she makes the reader aware of the fact that this is an account related under only one of many viewpoints (11). However, I believe the book contains many statements based exclusively on either the author's personal feelings or the ones she assumes players to have at certain moments of the game. For instance: "Terror grips your heart, one which runs deeper than a simple fear for your flesh; it is a fear for your very soul and sanity. Yet you know there is no choice, nothing for you to do but press on and find out more" (Hoedt 26). Or:

Given this approach to narrative and the aforementioned process of co-authoring, this active role of the player in uncovering and piecing together the story of Yharnam gains even more prominence. Interestingly, this sense of control slowly erodes in the second and third acts of the game as players gain a deeper understanding of their role (and insignificance) within the events of the game world. (Hoedt 18)

I am in no way stating that these impressions are not valid. Only, my goal in these pages is not to attempt to guess the emotional and cognitive impact that the game has on its players but to locate the tools it utilizes to "communicate" with them, why so many find it appealing regardless of how they may feel.

Furthermore, I believe that Hoedt's and other scholars' use of the term "Gothic" in regards to *Bloodborne* is too broad, which, in my view, harms the analysis. For instance, Hoedt states that *Bloodborne*'s fragmented narrative is inherently Gothic (97). The issue that this can bring forward is that elements she uses to define the Gothic, like fragmentation, can be also present in other works. If fragmentation is a sign of the Gothic, then, what about the previous FromSoftware titles, *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*? They are characteristically dark fantasy, inspired by the European medieval era, yet they share the same fragmented style of narrative as *Bloodborne*. Are they Gothic as well because of this? These questions arise also in other academic texts on *Bloodborne*. The distinction between what is and what is not Gothic is inconsistent among authors. Oliver Langmead, in his article, "*Bloodborne*, and the New Frontier of the Gothic", groups Lovecraftian horror with the Gothic horror genre, stating that

when *Bloodborne*'s monsters change from traditionally recognisable hybrid beasts and werewolves to grotesque, alien monsters more closely associated with Lovecraft's weird tales, it feels almost as if the game is letting the player experience yet another version of the Gothic; continuing to take the player on a tour of the genre. (61)

Hoedt not only does separate the two genres but also appears to make a distinction between Gothic mode and Gothic genre. By mode, we understand "a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre" (Baldick 213). Thus, it transcends genre, which is tied to a historical beginning and end (albeit not fixed) and should not be confused with it. In light of this, Hoedt's distinction quickly fades, as she states that *Bloodborne* "uses a setting of Gothic horror", is a "tale of

Gothic terror” (2),⁷ “points [...] to the horror genre and the Gothic mode” (74), is “a Gothic text” (98) and “a new interpretation of the Gothic” (196) all the while providing no specific definition of what it is that which distinguishes Gothic mode and Gothic genre. Instead, she used as identifiers of “Gothic” elements and themes such as the “insistence on reliving history to find out what has happened before” (33), “religious pride, [...] scientific ambition, [...] perceptions of monstrosity, the division and connections between self and other, or even, simply, of dangerous men and nightmarish creatures” (74) and, in regards of structure, a fragmented narrative, as I mentioned above.

However, things like “dark locales” (56) or “fragmented narratives” (58) should not be taken as certain markers that a text is Gothic. If we do so, as shown in the previous mention of FromSoftware titles, we take the risk of eroding what Gothic is completely, reducing it to an ever-broadening aesthetic.⁸ Even *Bloodborne*’s own director, Miyazaki, considers that the game hinges on Gothic horror, which he differentiates from “Cthulhu-style horror:”

I think *Bloodborne* has aspects of both Gothic and Cthulhu-styled horror, but it’s the former that’s depicted from the start and provides a guide for the game’s visual feel. That’s because Gothic horror is based more in the world of reality... And here, you have a world like that which is gradually being eroded away by Cthulhu-style horror. (*Collector’s Edition Guide* 538)

Instead, I believe that it would be best to divide genres while taking into consideration history, as it has an undeniable impact on their creation and disappearance, or rather, evolution into a different genre. This is the case for Gothic. While it certainly shares similarities with later works, even up to the 21st century, this does not mean that we speak of the same genre but of a mode. In order to locate the threshold of genres (which is never an exact division) we must bring forth evolutionary differences in the literary corpus, which come hand in hand with historical shifts. Fred Botting points to the fluid nature of the Gothic genre stating that:

In the period dominated by Romanticism, gothic writing began to move inside, disturbing conventional social limits and notions of interiority and individuality. The internalisation of gothic forms represents the most significant shift in the genre [...] It is at the level of the individual that Romantic-Gothic writing takes its bearings. (83)

Similarly, Alison Milbank acknowledges this historical shift and brings it further to the end of the genre, its transformation in what she calls “Victorian Gothic” (145), and states that, despite the differences in the writing style of the era, Gothic still remains as a mode

⁷ “Horror” and “terror” are used interchangeably despite being often differentiated by scholars since Ann Radcliffe first introduced the theoretical distinction in her posthumous work “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826). See Jerrold E. Hogle’s introduction in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (3). Furthermore, Horror and Gothic genres are also separated without explanation throughout the text (e.g. Hoedt 80, 91).

⁸ For extra context on the “Gothic aesthetic” see Robert Miles’ *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (pp. 28-45).

(147). As we can see, while there is no consensus among scholars on the nomenclature, most recognize that history caused the Gothic to change, to evolve into something else. As Botting pointed out, the main historical shift of Gothic consisted in a change of focus from the outside inwards. The source of horror is no longer centred around the place where past and present meet, but tied to the individual, able to chase him or her anywhere, including the very own confines of the mind. Evolution continued to occur further down the line with Victorian horror and, after it, the Cosmic horror genre emerged around the last twenty years of the 19th century. This is the nature of literature. So, Langmead's "tour of the genre" (61) would be a look through the history of literary horror, a homage to its genres.

Furthermore, genre categorization works differently for videogames due to their interactive nature. Game designers like Ernest Adams suggest that genre is divided in two when it comes to video games: narrative genre and gameplay genre. The first is defined by the game's content and the latter by the skill it demands from the player from a handling perspective, that is, how difficult the game is to play and overcome. Under this categorization, then, *Bloodborne*'s narrative genre could be (ultimately) Lovecraftian horror, and its gameplay genre would be action-adventure RPG. However, at the end of the day, genres evolve, disappear, fuse, etc. This occurs constantly and at a rapid pace in videogames, as Tulia-Maria Cășvean suggests (63). This is why I aim to pinpoint what *Bloodborne* does with the genres it drinks from instead of ascribing hazy categorizations to its identity. I believe its design does not support these sorts of categorizations, as genre flexibility is, in my view, at its core, indivisibly linked to its most crucial characteristic. This will be explored in the following chapters, V and VI. My aim in this thesis is to take *Bloodborne*'s idiosyncrasy further by applying to it the Russian Formalist theory of systems and dominants in order to place it in a specific point in video game history. Thus, in order to do this, it is necessary to determine what is its central characteristic, its dominant feature, see how it has shaped to be that way and if it will shift into something else in the future, giving way to other types of video games.

CHAPTER V

BLOODBORNE'S DOMINANTS

a. The Formalists: Systems and the Dominant

We have observed previously the numerous changes that the gaming industry has undergone in its relatively short lifespan. I would now like to focus on major trends in games themselves and where *Bloodborne* sits betwixt and between them. I argue that, regardless of different genres and themes, which always fluctuate in time in every art form, there has been a massive shift in the video game world since its inception. And *Bloodborne* is the culmination of one of these shifts, which are dependent on players' evolving interests, naturally. In order to fully determine why and how this happens, we must pinpoint its core aspects, which merge into a central, overarching trait. Following Russian formalism, this would be the dominant:

[T]he concept of the dominant [...] was one of the most crucial, elaborated, and productive concepts in Russian Formalist theory. The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure. [...] The dominant specifies the work [...] and thus acts as its mandatory and inalienable constituent, dominating all the remaining elements and exerting direct influence upon them. (Jakobson 41)

However, it is not enough to analyse *Bloodborne* on its own, of course, we must look outwards to past trends and categorizations in the video game industry. Steiner suggests that, instead of the internal characteristics, the dominant is decided by the work's relationship with a broader system (Steiner 91-93).⁹ I believe that it cannot be that one-sided as both dimensions, inner and outer, must be understood in order to establish a link between them. Something similar applies when he states that the dominant is always marked by conflict between foregrounded and subservient elements (89-90). I believe that the transition from dominant to dominant may fluctuate in a more harmonious manner. Evolution does not have to be violent.

Dominant and subservient characteristics of works do not exist by themselves, isolated, then. They form part of another formalist notion, the system. "The name "systemo-functional" was chosen by Jurij Tynjanov [...] to designate his approach to literary studies. It points aptly to the holistic and relational nature of the approach" (Steiner 99-100). As

⁹ This section is highly inspired by Jasper Van Vught's own application of formalist theory to videogames. See: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15554120211027475>

Jakobson and Tynjanov suggested in their joint article, “Problems in the Study of Language and Literature”, the issue of selecting a dominant cannot be solved without following the structural laws of the system of systems. From a methodological standpoint, it is fatal to consider the implementation of system theory without taking into consideration the laws inherent to each of them (Jakobson and Tynjanov 31). So, let us begin by pinpointing *Bloodborne* dominant elements on a scale of internal subservience in order to reveal its core dominant characteristic, which will be then contrasted with the video game system to which it belongs.

b. *Bloodborne*’s Aspectual Dominants



Fig. 1. A quick look at *Bloodborne*’s aesthetic and player interface

So, let us divide *Bloodborne* into several aspects in order to find what is crucial about each of them.

- Gameplay Dominant

As I have already mentioned, FromSoftware’s games are infamous for their difficult gameplay. The overall impression, especially for those who have never played them, is that they are extremely punishing towards the player. However, most players who have beat any of these games usually say that the game is hard but fair. Having played through all of the games directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, I agree. The skill demand presented by these games is not exacted for the purpose of frustrating the player, but to reward the player when he or she learns and even masters the gameplay rules. Since there is only one difficulty mode for these games, everything is crafted to ensure that the rules are consistent and precise in their application throughout the entire playthrough. Researcher Ben Lewis-Evans, when discussing

video games usability, that is, how well the experience intended by the developers is transmitted from game to player, explains that consistency is

fantastic for usability because brains love patterns, particularly predictable consistent patterns that match expectations. Consistency leads to learnability [and] is at the absolute core of *Bloodborne* and the Souls games. Within each life, with very few exceptions [...] the exact same enemies will be in the exact same place, acting in the exact same way they were when you first encountered them. Enemy attacks are similarly consistent and consistently telegraphed. The AI is relatively basic and predictable. This consistency applies from the smallest [group of enemies to the hardest] boss. It also applies to your character. Within each weapon the way your character moves is the same. As is how equipment is used. Predictable. Consistent. Usable.

Consistently demanding, then, is how we can best define *Bloodborne*'s gameplay dominant. I choose the term "demanding" because the game, indeed, demands from the player that he or she studies its patterns, learns them or even masters them and, ultimately, overcomes them. There is no other way to succeed, no difficulty slider to be lowered.

- Narrative Dominant

Game designer Marc LeBlanc coined the terms "embedded narrative" and "emergent narrative." He states that the former is all the story put in place by the developers and the latter is the story that forms as a result of the player interacting with the game. For instance, "cutscenes and scripted dialogue are purely embedded, as the player has no control over them. Direct communication between players in a multiplayer match is purely emergent, as the game creator has no control over it" (Allison). This division supports Salen and Zimmerman's theory that all elements of a video game have narrative potential and therefore that "any representational element can be a narrative descriptor" (401).

[U]nlike most adventure games, which are overloaded with backstory and cinematic narratives, it's never entirely clear what you're fighting for. Miyazaki's games may be rich in lore, but nothing is made explicit. Your character is always a nameless warrior lost in an inscrutable, archaic realm; the friendly characters you encounter speak in riddles or grunts; everything is arcane, much is hidden. (Parkin)

Bloodborne's narrative structure is, as Hoedt points out, highly fragmented (17), left for the player to piece and complete using their imagination. Thus, it presents a balance of embedded and emergent narrative that is more even than in most other Triple-A video games, in which the content of linear, embedded narratives tends to be higher. Despite *Bloodborne*'s being lower than average, however, it is still possible to discern some broad plot beats. These act as the skeleton of game progression.

Firstly, after creating a character to our liking, he or she, the Hunter, wakes up in a hospital bed in which an old man in a wheelchair informs us that we are about to receive a

blood transfusion, a process which is all too common in the place we find ourselves in, the city of Yharnam. He tells us, then, not to worry, that whatever happens “we may think it all a mere bad dream.” Our avatar faints and reawakens to see a werewolf rising from a pool of blood by the side of the bed we occupy. The monster, upon stretching its claws towards our face, bursts into flame and dies. Right after, small figures that look almost like deformed corpses of children climb over our Hunter’s body, causing him or her to lose consciousness all over again as we hear the voice of a woman address the creatures calmly, stating that they “have found [them]selves a Hunter.” All these events happen just during the initial cutscene of the game. Afterwards, *Bloodborne* properly starts and we are free to move our character around and exit the clinic that contained us in order to explore the streets of Yharnam. Soon after we find the only safe space in the game, The Hunter’s Dream, inhabited by a living, human sized doll and an elderly retired hunter called Gherman, who tells our Hunter not to think too much about what is happening and just go on killing beasts. The Doll takes care of our character, aiding us by allowing us to increase the Hunter’s power level by using the experience points we gain as a result of killing enemies or selling items we find in the world. The action of levelling up is called “channelling blood echoes” in *Bloodborne*.

Then, we progress through the city, its surroundings and some levels labelled as “nightmares.” Each level has one or more bosses at the end of it. Out of all the bosses in the game, only a few are required to be defeated in order for the Hunter to advance towards one of the endings, as seen in the following table:

Boss Name ¹⁰	Optional
Abhorrent Beast	Yes
Amygdala	Yes
Beast-possessed Soul	Yes
Blood-Starved Beast	Yes
Bloodletting Beast	Yes
Brainsucker	Yes
Celestial Emissary	Yes
Cleric Beast	Yes
Darkbeast Paarl	Yes
Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos	Yes
Father Gascoigne	No
Forgotten Madman	Yes
Gehrman, The First Hunter	Yes
Keeper of the Old Lords	Yes
Lady Maria of the Astral Clocktower	Yes
Laurence, the First Vicar	Yes
Living Failures	Yes

¹⁰ The table only shows unique instances of the bosses. Some of them repeat in other areas, however, bringing the total count from 38 to 43.

Loran Darkbeast	Yes
Loran Silverbeast	Yes
Ludwig, the Accursed/ the Holy Blade	Yes
Maneater boar	Yes
Martyr Logarius	Yes
Merciless Watcher	Yes
Mergo's Wet Nurse	No
Micolash, Host of the Nightmare	No
Moon Presence	Yes
One Reborn	No
Orphan of Kos	Yes
Pthumerian Descendant	Yes
Pthumerian Elder	Yes
Rom, the Vacuous Spider	No
Shadow of Yharnam	No
Undead Giant	Yes
Vicar Amelia	No
Watchdog of the Old Lords	Yes
Witch of Hemwick	Yes
Yharnam, Blood Queen of the Old Labyrinth	Yes
Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen	Yes
Total: 38	Mandatory: 7

Thus, the sequence of mandatory events in *Bloodborne* looks like this, a far cry from how it would look if all bosses were defeated, and their respective areas explored and/or looted:

1. Wake up in a clinic's bed
2. Sign the blood transfusion contract
3. Defeat Father Gascoigne
4. Defeat Vicar Amelia
5. Defeat Shadow of Yharnam
6. Defeat Rom, the Vacuous Spider
7. Defeat the One Reborn
8. Defeat Micolash, Host of the Nightmare
9. Defeat Mergo's Wet Nurse
10. Choose an ending (out of 3 possible ones)
11. Back to step one (Hunter wakes up in the clinic again)

Steps 3 and 4 show two humans that transform into lycanthropic beasts, keeping with the theme the game has provided until then. Step 5 is a fight with hooded humanoid figures. Step 6 is, however, where the game starts to shift its genre presentation. After plunging into a lake that reflects the, until then, white full moon, we drop into a never-ending arena bathed in light through which our Hunter can walk and breathe without a problem despite it being, in theory,

underwater. This is the first sign that something is different. The boss that resides in this bulwark, Rom, the Vacuous Spider, is non-hostile until attacked. And attack it we must if we want to exit this realm. Rom is not a human or a werewolf, but a mix between a giant spider and a rock. Its head is full of eyes and its body covered in bioluminescent flora. The game refers to it as a Great One, a creature no doubt inspired by H. P. Lovecraft's creations, as many critics have pointed out. This marks the beginning of an unmissable revelation, as the game turns its thematic towards Lovecraftian horror.

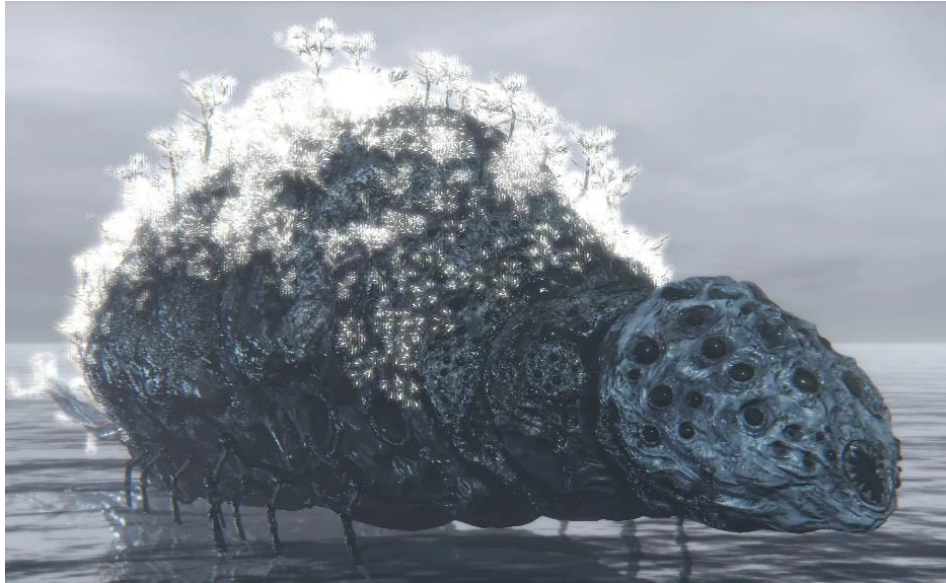


Fig. 2. Rom, the Vacuous Spider¹¹

Upon Rom's defeat, a cutscene plays in which we can see a very pale, tall and slender woman dressed in white with her stomach area drenched in blood. She sobs and the camera turns to the moon, now closer to us, and turned light red. From this moment on, the Lovecraftian identity of the title is revealed. Now, cosmic entities can be seen perched atop some buildings in Yharnam. They were always there, as they tried to grab the Hunter if approached, but now they are completely visible. Thus, as the mandatory steps are followed, the moon gets closer and the night gets darker.

¹¹ Screenshot of *Bloodborne* obtained through the wiki website. See: https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Rom,_the_Vacuous_Spider



Fig. 3. Yharnam, earlier state.



Fig. 4. Yharnam, latest state.

Some information is provided through NPC dialogue (which is obscure by design), few and far between cutscenes and, mainly, through item descriptions and environmental design. The latter of which consists in creating a virtual world that not only supports the narrative, but also contributes to its telling through visual information (e.g. a broken window, burnt beast corpses on the street, chained up coffins and so on).

There is no clear beginning, middle or end if we focus solely on *Bloodborne's* narrative since, as we have seen, the game infinitely resets upon its completion (that is, upon choosing one of the three possible endings and carrying them out so that their respective cutscenes trigger). We, the player, always start each playthrough in the exact same way.



Fig. 5. Item description interface.

From then on, all the information that the player receives in regards to narrative depends on world observation and the decision to read item descriptions. These contain lore related to the item itself and its surrounding circumstances. It is the player's responsibility to piece together the snippets he or she has obtained throughout their playthrough (or playthroughs) in order to assemble a story. This task can be more or less complicated depending on the person, as it is possible to skip much of *Bloodborne's* content. Not only can a player not pick up some piece of clothing, item or weapon, but several areas of the game are entirely optional as well and, therefore, can be missed. Thus, skipping some important revelations such as the "waking world" counterpart, an exact copy of the Hunter's Dream hidden away in the depths of the city, would entail the creation of a completely different story. In fact, even beyond this, if a player reads every description or visits all locations (observing the environment attentively), it often occurs that the resulting story he or she extracts will not match completely that of other players. It is also possible that the player changes his or her mind

after giving some thought to how the fragments connect after re-visiting areas or the full game all over again. Because of this, *Bloodborne*'s story is partially dependent on whoever plays it. We who guide the Hunter with the controller act as a co-writer. This level of agency on the player's part would be impossible were it not for the fragmented nature of the work and for the gaps left on purpose within it. Due to the state in which the player finds the embedded story, we can conclude that the game's narrative dominant is obfuscation. The reason why I have selected this term is because the full meaning of the narrative is obscured, hidden away from the player. Fragments of the story are omitted, forever beyond our "reading" capabilities, like the complex books Miyazaki borrowed as a child in the library (Parkin). The remaining fragments are scattered around the world, told only through visual means, or thoroughly concealed under cryptic notes or object descriptions. Thus, the narrative is obfuscated deliberately, parts of it kept unseen by the player with the aim to invite co-authorship. In doing so, the game turns into a multitext, each player's emergent narrative adding to the multiplicity of a practically infinite number of versions of *Bloodborne*'s narrative.

- Setting and Atmosphere Dominants

Bloodborne's setting is relatively varied visually. It mostly consists of buildings created to be characteristically Victorian in style, pointing specifically towards the Gothic Revival architecture of the era. There are also other locales like dark, dense woods full of traps or run-down hamlets, but buildings predominate. Despite being influenced by real life buildings and historical styles, the architecture presented in the game ranges from impractical to nonsensical by reality's standards. For instance, some houses open to very small yards (so small that only one person could fit in them while standing up) fenced in by a railing which overlooks a pit with a drop of several meters. There is, nevertheless, a semblance of realism, an echo of a city we could encounter in 19th century Europe: the very image of Prague's Charles Bridge or the Italian Abbey of San Galgano, sewers, different wards, churches, or alleyways. But all these elements are complicated, twisted and placed in convoluted ways so that the end result is a warped image of reality: Metal ladders that ascend entire buildings, stone coffins that upon activating a lever mechanism open to reveal underground tunnels that lead to an inferior layer of the city or to a poison swamp where gigantic tombstones loom over us.

Its atmosphere serves to further showcase the state of events presented to the player. Yharnam, during the night of the hunt (which spans the duration of the entire game), is full of smoke from manholes and from the burning pyres that lycanthropic, half-turned hunters, partially corrupted by the blood Yharnam is so fond of, have created to burn werewolves. Its alleyways are narrow and have low visibility, which creates an oppressive atmosphere. Throughout every area of the game, the ambient sounds of beasts and other enemies that can be found around the player's character are carefully designed to be clearly heard. This is an

effective way to make the player be aware that danger lurks at every corner. Two notable examples of atmospheric sound design are: Firstly, a beast's howl upon climbing the first ladder of the city, loud and seemingly coming from a distance, plants the seed for the player to think of the kind of monster that could have produced such noise. The game then resolves this question after a complete traversal of Yharnam by introducing a bestial boss which, upon suddenly appearing in front of the Hunter after a massive jump, repeats the howl. Secondly, creature sounds can generate a tense atmosphere when the game introduces low visibility areas. Without much sight to aid the player, only the breathing and growls of beasts can serve as a guide (or deterrent), keeping him or her on edge. All these sounds are especially effective since there is no ambient music in most of *Bloodborne*'s areas, just the sounds of footsteps, creaking wood or an ominous bell signalling an hour change that never seems to take place, as the game state only changes after each mandatory checkpoint established above. While the lack of music contributes to the ambient density (not distracting from other sounds and contributing to a constant expectancy) of most areas, it is present in boss fights. Here, it highlights the importance of the encounter, exerts pressure to succeed and lays emphasis on the strength of the adversary. The only regular area that has music in the background is Yahar'gul, the Unseen Village. The reason for this musical inclusion is to provide some information to the player,¹² as well as to support the atmosphere of the place. The track consists of a choir formed by a contrast of alternating deep, masculine voices and high pitched, feminine ones. They repeat the same Latin words in a loop, which is evocative of some sort of summoning ritual. As it turns out, this is exactly what is happening in this area. The boss is being called from the beyond; a man-made Old One, an attempt to create a cosmic deity. The streets of Yharnam are full of abandoned personal objects from citizens that tried and failed to escape the Scourge of the Beast; briefcases, hats, prams or even carriages are left abandoned throughout the city. Its outskirts are equally scattered by remains of a once healthy community. In short, *Bloodborne* depicts many segments of our world and warps them to create a blend of the familiar and the imaginary, confusing or guiding the player whenever the situation requires. Thus, the dominant of its setting is an almost *Escheresque* deformation of reality; and its atmosphere dominant, cohesive density: All the elements that contribute to create an atmosphere work in conjunction, thus making it so that every area abounds with environmental details, is encompassed by fog, smoke or darkness and accompanied by sound design that supports each theme presented and helps the player be aware of enemies before they are visible.

¹² The music provides information through its lyrics, which are sung in Latin, as I mention afterwards. There have been some interesting efforts to translate them by the community of fans. The lyrics and translation to English of this song in particular, titled *Hail the Nightmare*, can be found in the *Bloodborne* wiki, where we can see that they speak of a curse, blood and their connection to the depths of the sea, a common resting place for the Great Old Ones in Lovecraft's works, which will also inspire subsequent segments of *Bloodborne*'s content (especially the "Old Hunters" DLC.) To access the translation, see: <https://bloodborne.fandom.com/f/p/3100000000000008593>

- Structural Dominant

Bloodborne's world is constructed in a labyrinthine manner. More specifically, it is a maze. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they represent different structures. Following Hermann Kern's categorization, a labyrinth is "a winding but unicursal path that inevitably ends at the center" while a maze is "a tortuous structure [...] that offers the walker many paths, some of which lead to dead ends or blind alleys" (23). In this manner, while *Bloodborne* has a central, mandatory path for the minimum required run "completion", it also contains numerous other branches that can be explored in different orders and that will affect the ending obtained and, of course, the narrative and spatial perception of the player.

Labyrinths as ways of directing and delaying navigation and mazes as challenges to traverse are not only good assets for video game worlds. The properties of digital media make them even more challenging by making the spaces they occupy dynamic, unstable and ever-changing or by proposing new spatial configurations that players are not familiar with in the real world. (Fernández-Vara 76)

Bloodborne excels at the latter, as we have seen. It presents a semblance of reality, quickly warped and distorted into impossibilities. Yet, despite its world being maze-like, as Hoedt suggests, it is "a space that can be mapped, understood, and perhaps even mastered" (120). Understood, however, only as a game world that can be traversed by the Hunter, not in a narrative way. By this I mean that there is no clear answer to the nature of spaces in the game. Furthermore, once one of the three exits is reached, an ending achieved, the maze repeats itself *ad infinitum*. And thus, I argue that not only is the structural dominant of *Bloodborne* a cyclical maze, but a liminal one at that. In fact, arguably all events of the game occur in a liminal state.

c. Liminality

The anthropological theory of rites of passage and liminality developed by Arnold van Gennep and continued by Victor Turner has been adapted and applied to narrative. The study of the threshold, or limen in Latin, is spearheaded by The LIMEN Group.¹³ These researchers of literary liminality theory define as "liminal"

any text generated between two or more discourses, a transition area between two or more universes and which thereby shares in two or more poetics. In a second, derived sense, we also apply the term "liminal" to texts, genres or representations centered around the notion of the threshold, or whose fundamental theme is the idea of a crossover, an entry or a transgression into the unknown, the Other, the Numinous.

¹³ To follow their research and publications, see: <http://www.limenandtext.com/liminality.html>

Liminality theory has not been applied often to video games. When it has, it has been in two ways. One, followed by scholars, which is the application of the theory from an anthropological point of view, like in Sonia Fizek's "Gamification of Terror - Power Games as Liminal Spaces" and Matthew Horrigan's "The Liminoid in Single-Player Videogaming: A Critical and Collaborative Response to Recent Work on Liminality and Ritual." The other, followed mainly by journalists or video game fans, from an almost exclusively visual point of view, like Peter Leigh, a.k.a. Nostalgia Nerd's "Liminal Spaces in Old Games" or the Aesthetics Wiki's article on "Liminal Space."¹⁴ In this section I intend to apply literary liminality, following the steps of the LIMEN group, and thus continuing the analysis of *Bloodborne* as a text.

In this manner, I suggest that liminality manifests in multiple levels of the game. Firstly, we could argue that, from a narrative standpoint, the story of *Bloodborne* ends when we stop playing: whether we give up or feel like we have extracted enough knowledge to formulate our own story. And yet, it does not, as its cyclical nature is programmed to last forever. It ends for the player, not for the game. Thus, it sits in an everlasting liminal state. This narrative plurality is a manifestation of liminality, as *Bloodborne*'s story, a multitext, is each and every one of the players' stories upon interacting with the game. It is precisely this narrative potentiality that defines it as a liminal text (Aguirre 3). Since all interactions with a game generate emergent narrative, we can argue that limina are pervasive in *Bloodborne*; the potential of success in gameplay, the choice in navigation through its maze, the acquisition (or lack thereof) of knowledge in story or space, the number of cycles traversed, the different time that each player takes in completing a playthrough... As a narrative with more than one outcome (and an interactive one at that), liminality is perceived wherever we look.

Furthermore, digging deeper reveals that the characterization of the Hunter can be also considered to be liminal, as all player-controlled avatars in video games are, since the player is and is not the character he or she plays as. Beyond this, the Hunter is specifically portrayed in a deeper liminal dimension. A particular event in the game points to this. I have previously stated that the game resets upon completion but I have not mentioned that for gameplay convenience it lets players keep the weapons they have obtained and most other objects that do not affect game progression (that is, that speed it in any way). This only affects playability and it is done so because every new cycle until new game +7 increases the damage dealt by enemies and taken by the Hunter, so it is only fair that the developers let players be prepared. Apart from this, the story is completely reset. Everything, every time, save for one small exception. Upon choosing the "Yharnam sunrise" ending, which sees the Hunter being killed in the dream and awakening into a supposed waking-world Yharnam the morning after the hunt is over, the game still resets but sometimes the Doll can be seen praying to a new tombstone in the Hunter's Dream. This is a rare event but, if interacted with, she discloses the following to the Hunter: "This grave stands in memory of a hunter I once knew. Though

¹⁴ See: https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Liminal_Space

enchanted by the dream, she [or he] remained strong, and eventually saw the light of dawn. I pray you have found meaning, and comfort, in the waking world.”

Thus, the Hunter is revealed to embody an even more complex existence than previously thought. If the game just reset every single time without mention of the previous playthrough, we could state only that the Hunter inhabits a liminal world. However, in one of those possible resets a character acknowledges the existence of the Hunter before the reset, his or her death or awakening. This complicates the identity of the avatar even further, as it is not even possible to determine whether the Hunter that listens to this tale of the Doll is the same she speaks of, the same as in the previous game cycle, or not. As it stands, the only link between each reset would be the identity of the player, which gets projected into one or many hunters.¹⁵ This makes it so that liminality is present even in the narrative left by the developers for the character, explicitly shown in the story. The Hunter is and is not the same, alive and dead, dreaming and awake at the same time. And this problematizing of the narrative persists throughout the entire game, even if not as explicitly.

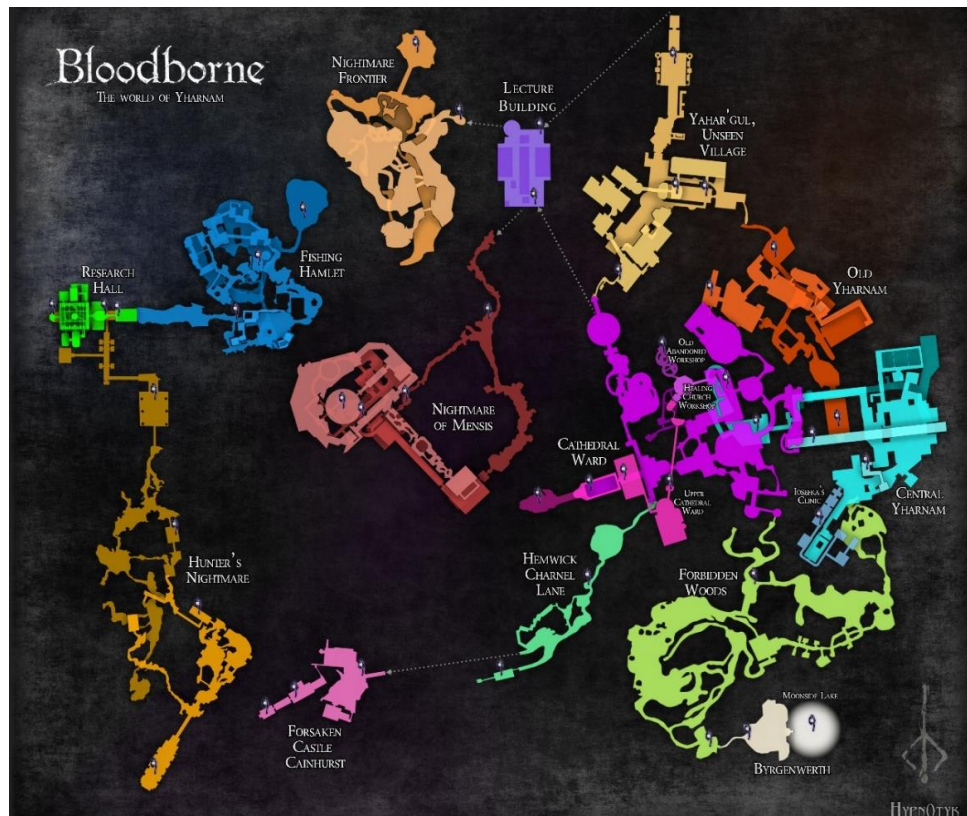


Fig. 6. Complete map of *Bloodborne* (including DLC but excluding Chalice Dungeons)¹⁶

¹⁵ If we want to dig even deeper, in fact, we cannot even be certain of the player's identity, as the game can change hands at any point.

¹⁶ Map created by a user who goes by the name of Hypnotyks. See the original post: https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/42q84y/complete_bloodborne_map_with_dlc/

The world of *Bloodborne* is divided into two main apparent dimensions: the “waking world” and the “dream/nightmare world.” However, these are just tentative categorizations, as we can never state with certainty that a location is part of “reality” or not. Thus, every area is both at the same time or, even, neither. Liminal places by all means. There are no rules set by the game that distinguish any place from another. Beasts and other creatures roam every corner of the game. Did we ever awake at all after the very first moments of the game, after the blood transfusion? As I mentioned above, is our character dreaming? Dead? Switching between inner recesses of the mind (their own or other minds) and reality? Blending them in a delirious state of half consciousness? The game is rife with liminality. For instance, we touch a dead man’s shoulder and are transported into an unknown location. A “nightmare”, a place which, as we have seen, turns out to be impossible to label as real, metaphorical, both, or other. The maze takes us to undecipherable realms. And yet, there seems to be some method to the madness. Observant players will notice that the levels the game considers “nightmare realms” follow a geographical hierarchy of sorts. They are stacked on top of each other in a way that appears impossible to reason, of course, but they are. You can see a city underwater from one of them, yet when you visit that city later on in the game there is no sign of water... except for a humanoid sea creature that falls from the heavens to its death, the same kind of creature that is prevalent in the first nightmare. So, these locales form a sort of layered, ever so slightly interconnected dimension of unknown logic, a blend between the real and the imaginary that becomes indistinguishable from each.

Furthermore, the perception of our character can be further altered if we acquire Insight, a sort of currency described as “inhuman knowledge [that] represents your awareness of the nightmare's effects” (Byrne et al. 522). Thus, *Bloodborne*’s world can change in the following ways depending on the Insight in our possession:

Insight Thresholds for Enemy and Environmental Changes¹⁷

Required Insight	Area	Change
1	Hunter's Dream	Doll activates and allows you to channel blood echoes (level up)
10	Hunter's Dream	Insight shop opens
15	Cathedral Ward	Church Servants gain weapon auras and produce new attacks

¹⁷ Table adapted from page 523 of the *Bloodborne Collector's Edition Guide*.

15	Hemwick Charnel Lane	Mad Ones appear in Hemwick at night
40	Cathedral Ward	Amygdala is visible even when the Blood Moon isn't out
40	Yahar'gul, Unseen Village	Amygdala is visible even when the Blood Moon isn't out
40	Hunter's Dream	Hunter's Dream music changes even when the Blood Moon isn't out
60	—	A baby's crying voice can be heard in all areas except the Hunter's Dream and Chalice Dungeons

Beyond its environments and characters, *Bloodborne*'s narrative is also highly liminal. As I have mentioned above, its obfuscation, caused by being designed to appear incomplete, fragmented, and even ambiguous, can create many different stories when players co-write them. This multitextuality is not unique to *Bloodborne* or even FromSoftware games, as there is emergent narrative in most if not all video games. The difference here is how intentionally the lore is hidden, how co-authorship is expected of the player regardless of the resulting story it may create. Most triple-A games have a clear, linear story to tell, while in "Soulsborne" games, especially *Bloodborne*, it is possible to miss even the bigger picture.

Lastly, genre, the main reason for my selecting and analysing *Bloodborne* in this thesis instead of some other Miyazaki-directed game, is also liminal. Most people agree that there is a switch in genre when the player reaches Rom, the Vacuous Spider. However, while it introduces Lovecraftian themes and visuals, it does not let go of what it was up to that point, a mélange of references to the Gothic and Victorian horror genres, tied by the perpetuation of the Gothic mode. *Bloodborne* thrives in the limen of genre. And this identity is what makes it stand out over most other games in this department, since they subscribe to one genre only, or possess hybridity but display it from the beginning instead of keeping it hidden until a specific point.

Thus, we have extracted the aspectual dominants. Now let us revisit video game history. As I have stated in chapters II and III, games began their commercial existence by being designed to be highly difficult. This was due to their conception in arcade machines, which were interacted with by the users by depositing a coin. The harder the game was to beat, the bigger the profit for the developers. As games entered people's homes, however, a shift had to occur. Progressively, due to the high level of offer, video games had to be made more attractive, not frustrating. This change did not happen overnight, of course, as design conventions and hardware constraints still made easy-to-use features (such as being able to save the progress achieved in a game) difficult to build into it. Nevertheless, as technology

advanced, so did ease of access. It makes economic sense to provide options for the widest range of people possible. The higher the number of users that are able to play the game, the higher the profit. Thus, easy modes were implemented, devices were made more convenient to use, sometimes even portable. The difficulty of early games was often intentional, as we have seen, which can make them be deemed uncooperative. Thus, we can talk about a dominant shift in the industry from uncooperativeness to adaptability.¹⁸ But where do FromSoftware games stand in this timeline? And *Bloodborne* among them? Where are games now? Well, taking this historical evolution and *Bloodborne*'s aspectual dominants, I am ready to propose its fundamental feature, and then place it within the bigger picture.

¹⁸ I have chosen the term “adaptability” instead of “accessibility” due to two reasons: First, accessibility is already used in a more specific manner in the gaming world (see glossary). Second, and most importantly, I believe that a video game being designed to adapt to the player's skill level represents the perfect opposition to the core dominant I will propose in the following chapter. In short, the player is the one who will have to adapt to the game, not otherwise.

CHAPTER VI

CONVERGENCE INTO A NEW DOMINANT: RESISTANCE

Many players state that FromSoftware games are for masochists, that the studio punishes the player for engaging with its games (one only has to take a quick gander through some YouTube videos or visit player reviews sites to verify the truth of this statement). However, as we have seen with *Bloodborne*, this is not quite true. It is not punishment that the game is after, but player satisfaction, a sense of reward that goes beyond whacking a few enemies. And this can only be achieved if the game *resists* the player. Yes, I argue that resistance is the core element, the dominant feature that defines these games. And *Bloodborne* is the paradigmatic work under the dominant, its purest form. This term is the coalescence of the aspectual dominants: consistent, demanding gameplay, obscured narrative, a distorted reality as an environment, cohesive atmospheric density and maze-like structure, all supported by liminality and genre hybridity. This resistance differs from the first dominant of video games, uncooperativeness, in that, while resistance wants the player to succeed by providing a consistent set of rules and a reward from learning them (the satisfaction of acquiring knowledge; gameplay or narrative wise), uncooperativeness is often clunky, inconsistent, and difficult without any further motive. In contrast, *Bloodborne* consistently resists being beaten through demanding skill from the player, it resists being understood by obscuring its narrative, hiding it in an oppressive, twisted, dark world, fragmenting it and leaving it to be found in its maze-like structure, which is complicated to grasp as well due to the liminality that pervades the game and, lastly, it resists genre categorization by switching theme mid-game. This last element is exclusive to *Bloodborne* amongst its FromSoftware siblings, and along with its extended content of liminality at all levels (which is much less present in the others), makes it so it becomes a paradigm of resistance.

Thus, while adaptability is still the norm in mainstream gaming, I believe that the resistance dominant is causing ripples and influencing how games are made. I will go into further detail about this in the following argument, but for now I believe it is fair to say that it is normal for an increasingly higher number of players to want less “hand-holding” in games. Easy, perfectly adapted experiences in an over-saturated market struggle to stand out in the minds of users. Many yearn for the kind of satisfaction brought by defeating a challenging but fair boss, navigating an intricate map or piecing together a story. *Bloodborne* resists the player in order to encourage perseverance: A perseverance that is not blind but requires learning patterns, a method. It appeals to players due to how different it is from most other video games available nowadays. I would argue that its two most attractive qualities for people are its visual aesthetic and the way it resists the player. This resistance, however, does

not exist just for the sake of difficulty but, as the game's director Hidetaka Miyazaki suggests, in order to generate satisfaction when overcoming obstacles (Sheridan, 2012). While adaptable games have difficulty settings that can be set high, they do not represent this resistance. Instead, they have the potential to be challenging only in gameplay, that is, the game will adapt to the player if he or she wants to test their skill. Here lies the crucial difference: resistance lures, challenge is confrontational. *Bloodborne* does not taunt, it calls in hopes that the player succumbs to its charms. Thus, it is the player who adapts to the way *Bloodborne* resists, which sits in direct opposition to other games adapting to the player's capabilities.

This resistance has as a consequence a certain amount of difficulty, of relative confusion, but that is not the main goal. Indeed, it is not there to make it difficult for the player, but something else; to resist the player's assumptions; to resist the conventions of the game world, its context. This provides *Bloodborne* with a metatextual dimension, as it is the result of an awareness of genre conventions, which it refuses (partially) to comply with. All this has several consequences beyond just making the game "difficult." Why would players engage with this kind of game, or why would they engage with this game that refuses even to be classified as this or that genre? What is the incentive for them? One of *Bloodborne*'s distinctive features vis-à-vis other games is that there is no final outcome, there is no final goal such that, once the players have performed the appropriate motions, the game will inform them that they have "made it." All they can do is try over and over, keep exploring. Thus, they never really abandon the liminal world but remain always in it, in contrast to most games which, sooner or later, let the players know that they are more or less good at them, and eventually, that they have pulled through and the adventure is over. In *Bloodborne* it is never over. The credits do roll after successfully going through the steps necessary for each ending but at the end of them players are unceremoniously placed at the very beginning again. The world has reset, and they wake up anew in the clinic, right after receiving the blood transfusion. While other triple-A games let the player roam the world freely after achieving the final goal (*Skyrim*, 2011; *Tomb Raider*, 2013) or roll back to before beating the final boss so that no ludonarrative dissonance can occur, for instance, when roaming an evil-ridden world while the source of said evil lies defeated (most of *The Legend of Zelda* games), *Bloodborne* completely resets the entire playthrough without warning after achieving one of the three endings.¹⁹

So then, what is it that motivates players to go on, to keep on playing even if sooner or later they will realize that there is no exit, that no matter what they do —whether they run

¹⁹ This feature was eliminated by FromSoftware after *Bloodborne*. So, only *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* reset automatically, while the subsequent titles *Dark Souls II*, *Dark Souls III*, *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring* do not, displaying a message instead which lets the player choose to stay in the current playthrough or pass to the new one. This was most likely done for the player's convenience. I will comment further on changes like this in the following section.

flawlessly through the game, not letting the Hunter fall to their death or be defeated in any way, or achieve any other temporary objectives or limited goal, or whether they die constantly but manage to barely pull through— their progress is going to be reset over and over again? The answer must be that the liminal stage *Bloodborne* contains the player in, through its control of the Hunter, offers some kind of reward. And this reward is the difference between being placed in a maze and trying desperately to get out and being placed in a maze and, having time to spare, deciding to explore it, to get lost in it again and again, taking note of new discoveries in the manner of ways of approaching encounters, secret areas or events uncovered or new lore fragments pieced together. All this in hope that one day they will have a complete picture of the maze, not a way out. An exit pales in comparison with being able to understand the structure of it. Therefore, resistance involves readers in a different kind of quest; it is not a quest to get out or to obtain something very specific but one with the aim of understanding the maze, which becomes its own reward. As MacCormack states when writing about Lovecraftian texts: “The secret of literature does not seek revelation. The question it asks cannot be answered. It is a secret that constitutes the work.” And, Foster, as if responding, states in a separate text: “While this sounds defeating, it actually invites more thoughtfulness and analysis. If the answers are given in the text, then there is no need to think about the text” (65). This is what a great number of people find appealing about *Bloodborne*. And then, of course, not only to understand but also to participate in the construction of a narrative with the knowledge obtained is also a very satisfying incentive. The player, becomes the co-author of his or her unique stay inside the twists and turns of the eternal cycle of the maze.

The fact that we dwell within this maze, this liminal territory, and no longer try to get out of it suggests that FromSoftware have created a different use of the maze, by which they provide one not for players to try and get out of it but for them to attempt to understand it and, in a way, help build it. And in order to succeed at this, they constructed *Bloodborne* to oppose you when you approach it with stereotypical proposals found commonly in gaming, from gameplay to narrative structure or genre convention. The game is constantly pushing its players to forget about these elements; to forget it all and try to learn how the maze functions and what its secrets are. To propose a metaphor for this process, it is like finding a tablet written in an ancient, lost language, of which only some parts can be deciphered so far. There is a tantalizing appeal at trying to decipher it. It is like learning a language, one has to be creative in its learning, and even though it is known that the tablet will never be fully deciphered, the contribution of insights to it never stop in hopes that some meanings can be worked out. This is what *Bloodborne*'s resistance evokes, whereas, to continue the metaphor, in other games that fall under the adaptability dominant players are given several language options to choose from. These languages are selected by the developers from among the most spoken ones so that they know most players will be able to select the one they are good at. In this way, nowadays it is possible to choose in triple-A games between very easy, easy,

normal, hard or very hard difficulty modes.²⁰ So, if the approach players take is fairly passive, they just have to follow instructions, follow them well enough, which takes skill if a higher difficulty is chosen, but follow them nonetheless, which eventually leads to the obtention of the complete text. Thus, players practically know how the texts reads, they know what it means, they know what the end is, whereas in *Bloodborne*, the very text that is offered is being constructed partly by the player through their own perception and intuition; filling in gaps even though the full text will never be known because there is no such thing by design. Here lies the key of resistance.

²⁰ The names given to these modes may vary, or the extremes “very easy” and “very hard” be absent, but the choice remains very similar in most cases.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

All in all, in this thesis I have set out to open a window of analysis into video games. Having presented their significance and historical context, the task at hand has been to discern *Bloodborne*'s idiosyncrasy and cultural significance through an in-depth analysis that would set it apart from other games. I have proposed resistance as its core dominant feature and set its place in a system that, reacting both to itself and to external factors such as societal change, will keep evolving. Resistance originated with the 2009 title, *Demon's Souls*, it reached its paradigmatic state with *Bloodborne*, and it has diluted somewhat since then, yet is still rising in prominence, as we can see in the following chart:

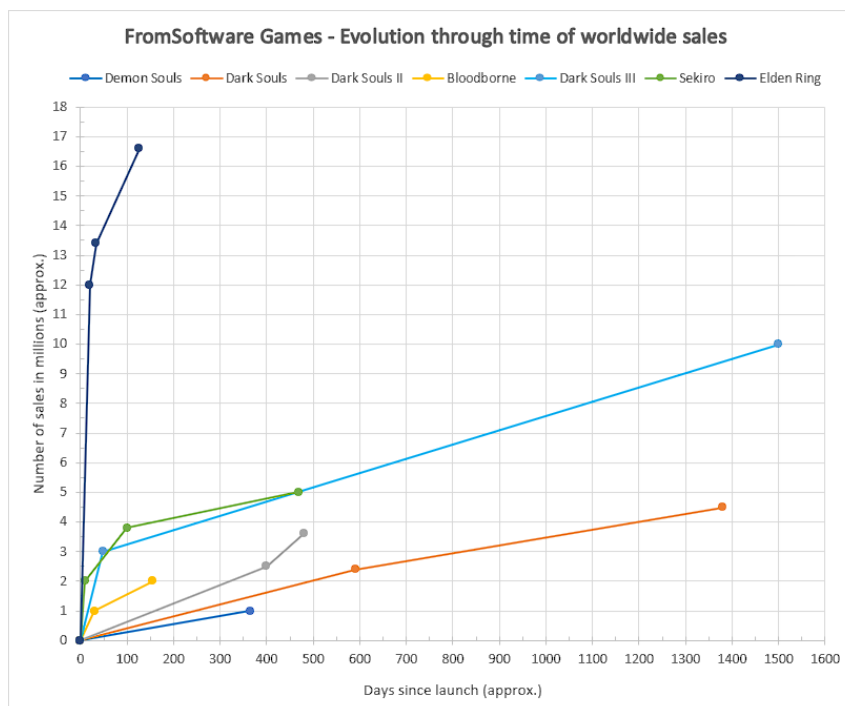


Fig. 7. Chart of FromSoftware games sales since 2009.²¹

²¹ The data used to create Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 has been obtained from *Statista*, a statistics website (see www.statista.com) *Vgchartz*, a statistics website specialized in video games (see www.vgchartz.com), and from Kyle Orland's digital article "Putting *Elden Ring*'s 12 million sales in context" (see <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2022/03/putting-elden-rings-12-million-sales-in-context/>).

Bloodborne, despite being a console exclusive, and therefore much less available to players, like *Demon's Souls*, was much more successful, and remains more lauded than its predecessor by most fans of the "Souls-like" genre. After it, all games (except a remake of *Demon's Souls*, not pictured in the graph) have been available on all platforms and have performed increasingly well. However, the last one of them, *Elden Ring*, published at the end of February 2022, has been extremely successful compared to any other FromSoftware game. As we can observe in the chart above, in only a hundred days since its launch *Elden Ring* has sold more than all the previous titles combined in the same timeframe. Why? Well, I propose that this is due to the aforementioned dilution of the dominant. The games that FromSoftware developed after *Bloodborne* began to dilute the dominant slightly by adding elements such as intrusive tutorial prompts and a more linear narrative (only *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring*) or removing others like the mandatory playthrough reset upon completion, doing away with genre liminality and reducing the overall presence of liminality altogether. However, by far the biggest divergence from resistance is, in my view, the change of world structure, which affects the gameplay genre. The environments of Miyazaki's games until *Elden Ring* were divided in sections, often interconnected but of a modest scope, which allowed for meticulous world design and imbued them with a maze-like nature. The latest instalment, however, just like the *Legend of Zelda* franchise did with *Breath of the Wild* in 2017, switched to the current most popular gameplay genre, open-world, which means that the map is dramatically enlarged, which severely diminishes the maze-like structure and the environmental detail of a great number of areas, thus affecting the cohesiveness of the world. This, plus the newly added system of in-game summons (friendly NPC ghosts that help the player on his or her battles) make *Elden Ring* the most adaptable resistant game yet. A hybrid through and through. And a highly successful one at that. The staggering number of new players proves this. So staggering, in fact, that not only does it surpass all other FromSoftware games together sales-wise, but it has also earned a place among the best-selling games of all time, as the chart below shows.

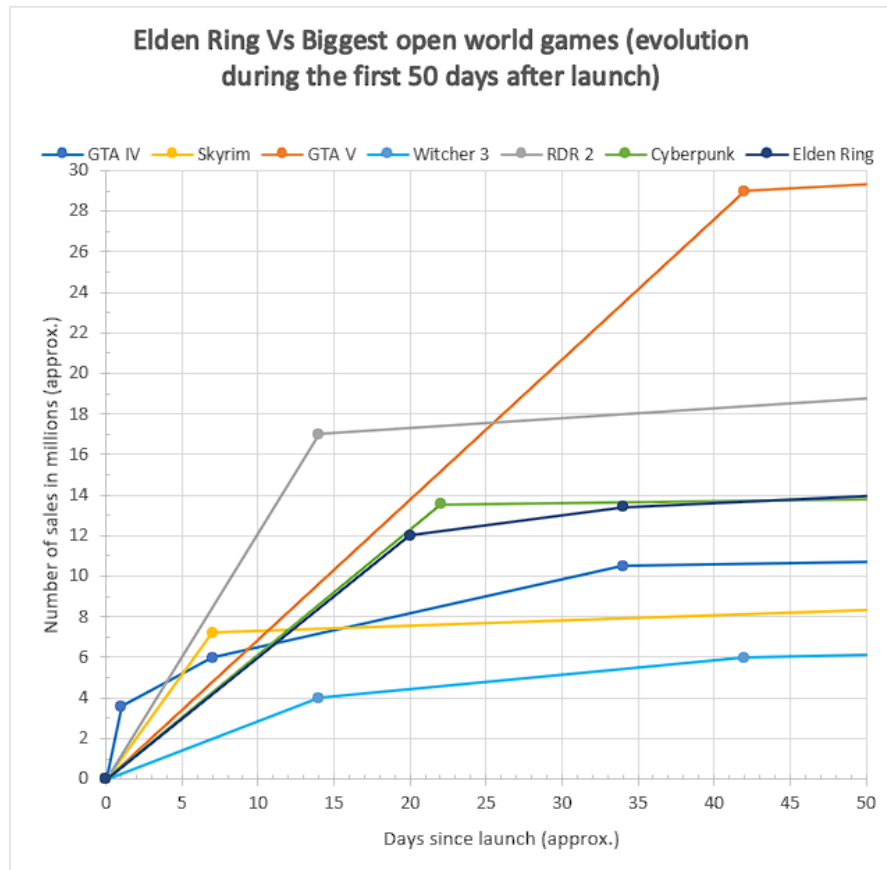


Fig. 8. Chart of open-world hit games sales.

Thus, while the push for adaptability still exists, resistance remains. Co-writing remains as strong as ever, just like fragmentation and, even slightly diminished, narrative obfuscation and consistent skill demand (this last one can, arguably, be equalled to that of the previous titles if the spirit summons are not used). Furthermore, this increasing dilution or hybridity between adaptability and resistance will, most likely, not be applied to all triple-A titles, as the top best-selling ones remain having only adaptability as their core characteristic. It makes sense, as it allows for a higher number of players to engage with games, and this translates into higher sales. Resistance is not for everyone, understandably. However, *Elden Ring*'s massive success will influence some high-profile projects, as hit games always do. This is how open-worlds became the norm, for instance. After *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* proved to be a massive hit other video game developers decided to try their luck in the genre. Some succeeded moderately, others massively, as the chart shows.²² This, in turn, instigated more developers, another big hit appeared, and so on. This loop keeps finding success in the

²² This chart reflects both the success of *Elden Ring* and open-world games, as it contains sales data of *Grand Theft Auto V*, the second best-selling game *in history*. Considering the millions of games that have been created, standing near this giant is a feat.

industry, and *Elden Ring* is its latest creation. However, because it still retains much resistance, developers will take notes and attempt to replicate or even improve the hybrid formula in hopes of the next bestseller. Thus, these two dominants will react to each other, merge, perhaps, and change into something new, as they often do. Here, further application of formalist theory can help create a map of video game systems through which genre emergences, evolutions and so on can be monitored and studied in an academic context. I believe the theory's pliability can prove to be very useful in expanding beyond this, in fact, as perhaps an overarching system of narratives can be formulated. This would encompass all kinds of narrative texts, which would allow us to observe and provide a framework for cross-pollination among genres and trends among narrative types (e.g. a movie's success ripples through cinematography and into videogames, which creates or popularizes a narrative or gameplay genre).

And so, this analysis could not have been possible without the successful application of literary theory on a field that it was, in principle, not designed for. This serves to bring traditional text closer to younger forms of narrative like video games. Not only does this help to expand our understanding of contemporary culture but showing that these theoretical tools work on this field has a positive effect on the tools themselves, starting with an expansion of the corpus available for scholars. On the one hand, the application of formalist theory has allowed me to propose the thesis of resistance in interactive narratives. This resistance applied to video games can be considered to be similar to Barthes' concept of writerly texts. However, my proposition avoids contradictions the latter generates when applying it to video games and, in my view, shows more clearly when a text requires extra effort and when it does not now that the media of narrative have expanded. Furthermore, the resistance hypothesis, by taking into account the interactivity of the medium of video games, could also be adapted and applied to "choose your own adventure texts", further expanding the available corpus of research.

On the other hand, beyond this lie exciting possibilities of research on liminality in video games, as well. This is because the successful application of literary liminality theory in this thesis proves that it works with interactive texts contained in a virtual world. Interesting possible objects of research arise from this. For instance, the existence of player choice expands liminality due to the potential outcomes, yes, but what if a game tricked the player into believing they have options only to later reveal that they either did not matter or that they were fictitious? For instance, *Life is Strange* (2015) provided players with a story in which the narrative decisions taken by them would have consequences later on. During its episodic release, this seemed to be the case as the ramifications for each actions multiplied. Its fifth and last episode, however, did away with all these decisions and reverted to the very first event of the game, the death of a character that the player's avatar avoids mandatorily, and asked players a "yes or no" question, now that it is up to them, save this character or not? This essentially takes liminality to the margins of the game, it lessens its presence, a rare event that would welcome analysis. Lastly, I believe research on the variable degrees of

“insertion” of the player’s consciousness into a virtual avatar can lead to the creation of a framework of liminality theory applied to gameplay and narrative genres, especially now that virtual reality is on the rise. All thrilling possibilities in my eyes and, I hope, in those of future researchers of this maze without exit.

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