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Hail the Nightmare: Music, Sound, and Materiality in *Bloodborne*

Abstract:

This article explores the usage of music and sound in the 2015 video game *Bloodborne*, exploring how the game's aesthetics of difficulty and maximalism exert a disruptive influence for a struggling player. In particular, it focusses on how the soundtrack attenuates the series of escalating monster boss battles around which the game is structured. Combining 'gothic' and 'Weird' horror tropes with the techniques of musical modernism, these composite 'musical monsters' gesture, disturbingly, towards new kinds of monstrous materialities that challenge a simple distinction between sound and image.

Key words:

Video game music

Film music

Modernism

Horror

Monsters

In an important moment in the latter hours of From Software's 2015 game *Bloodborne*, you, the player, can leap through or smash a window, uncovering a secret route.¹ On the other side, you will find yourself within a familiar and sublimely gothic cathedral structure, on what had earlier been an inaccessible balcony. At the end of the room is a lever-controlled lift which, in turn, takes you on a descent to a cavernous underground arena decorated by rock and ruins. There sleeps Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos: a monstrous creature with skeletal wings, covered in squid-like tentacles and fleshy cones, with a gaping eye-laden slit for a face. Prior to this encounter you heard only amplified ambient sounds, but as Ebrietas awakens an ethereal choir begins to sing. The soundtrack that accompanies this boss battle is a through-composed monster of its own, complete with rich polytonal dissonances and a floating, ambiguous metre. As Ebrietas, one of the harder bosses fights in the game, flails and body slams you, launching projectiles that can kill with one hit, the music's beauty becomes unbearably disruptive, even suffocating.

Highly challenging (as well as sonically and physically intimidating) boss encounters like the one described above are central to *Bloodborne*; each likely requiring numerous (countless, even) attempts. *Bloodborne*'s richly conceived and noisy musical score is reserved, mostly for these encounters, whilst a highly detailed and tactile soundscape sustains an uncanny sort of silence for much of the labyrinthine levels that precede them. Where music does feature, as it does in only a couple of instances, outside the arena, it is in some way newly inflected by threat. In music's absence, sound is likewise elevated, the relationship between the two blurred.

This article then, proposes to investigate some of the ways in which sound and music work in *Bloodborne*. Exploring that game's aesthetics of difficulty and its intensification of a sonic grammar familiar to both horror film and video game media—where sound and music overlap in uncanny ways. *Bloodborne*, I argue, disrupts its own generic conventions, beginning in a literary gothic mould but transforming or subverting itself into something altogether more

speculative, otherworldly, or cosmic. Monsters and monstrosity are central to this argument, I argue: on the horizon of ludic and imaginative excess, these sonically augmented creatures are suggestive of new kinds of musical materiality. By straying from traditional ludic narratives, and by presenting most of its musical content in boss battles rather than at moments where music could be enjoyed, *Bloodborne* proffers a disruptively sublime and original experience.

YOU DIED: Bloodborne and difficulty

Many hours before the encounter with Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos, *Bloodborne* starts as a brief hallucinatory cutscene. You the player lay in a darkly lit nineteenth-century gothic medicine room, and having undergone a blood transfusion operation watch first-person as a wolf monster emerges, dripping, from a large puddle of blood on the floor. The monster has an arsenal of vicious animal sounds of its own, but the soundtrack, if it could be called that, bubbles at a barely audible level: a low hum that either emanates from the creature or converges, in some way, with it. This multi-pronged attack on the senses is disruptively suggestive of a claustrophobic (and composite) kind of materiality constituted along a monstrous spectrum of sound and music, and abject animal and gothic imagery. As the monster bursts into flames, the hum is momentarily lost to the death cry of the beast but as silence resumes you realise that it is still there, building.

Waking up in 'Iosefka's clinic', you can now wander downstairs. It is quiet, eerily so, save for starkly detailed environmental sounds, wooden creaks, and footsteps. There is no music where convention suggests there should be: an unsettling omission. In the next wood-panelled laboratory, another wolf monster—known as a Scourge Beast—can be found. When it attacks you there is probably some confusion; unless you are familiar with other titles in the FromSoftware oeuvre you likely fumble at the control pad and then die, quickly. This outcome is not necessarily inevitable at this stage, but very likely, given that you have yet to receive a

weapon. In red capital letters, the words ‘YOU DIED’ taunt you, and a low frequency sonic accompaniment (groans and other subterranean-sounding murmurs) continues to underscore a sense of futility.²

The general rule in video game design is that a successful game should not be too difficult, and nor should it be too easy. This should read as something of a truism, but the experience of failure here has interesting implications; a sense of ‘growth’ and achievement is core to video game’s appeal (see Juul 2009). Japanese video game developer FromSoftware and their president and ‘auteur’ director Hidetaka Miyazaki have developed a reputation for playing at the limits of this dictum, however. Indeed, their games *Dead Souls*, the *Dark Souls* series, *Bloodborne*, and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* invite failure and frustrate by intent. It is a bold inversion of video game’s traditional conveyance mechanics, or, that is, the way that design teaches the player to do something through nuanced signposting and conditioning.³

Miyazaki’s approach to narrative is equally idiosyncratic. The story in video games typically serves as a ‘handle’, which gradually reveals itself to the player as a reward for hard-fought victory over in-game adversaries. Yet Miyazaki continually obfuscates and undermines the conventional role of plot in his games. Raised in modest surroundings, Miyazaki has recalled that he had little to entertain him besides English-language fantasy literature, of which he could only partly understand (quoted in Parkin, 2015). It is that arcane experience, enjoining the player to fill imaginative gaps herself, that FromSoftware wants to recreate in their games. Much of *Bloodborne*’s intricate story detail (referred to by fans as ‘lore’) lies then in a plethora of in-depth object description texts and riddle-like dialogue rather than linear narrative progression. Additionally, cutscenes though visually stunning feel impressionistic: clear character exposition is wholly absent, and a player could quite easily complete the game and be in no way sure of what story they were just told. Even then, the game’s (multiple) endings

offer no respite, suggestive of a cosmic circularity which damns the fates of the characters within and merely places you back at the start.

This esoteric approach to narrative coupled with a trying mechanics of ludic difficulty is a bold attack on orthodoxies of flow and immersion that characterise much in our popular and scholarly understanding of video games. *Bloodborne*'s 'rewards', if you might call them that, lie, perhaps, in the aesthetic appreciation of the game as a whole: in experiencing its intensive control pad kinesthesia, the ongoing process of discovering exaggeratedly imaginative creatures, and awe at its labyrinthine level design. More importantly, and central to this article, is the fleeting pleasure of a music which, upon slaying its monstrous hosts, leaves you somehow breathless and shaking.

It is this aesthetics of the obscure and the difficult on the horizon of ludic excess that has been described by Daniel Vella (in analysis of FromSoftware's *Souls* series) as constituting the 'ludic sublime': the latest, digital, manifestation of that most romantic of tropes (Vella 2015). Crucially, Vella's formulation, dependent as it is on the drive toward player mastery and the wholly, narratively, ambiguous, posits a view of the game 'work' as less the combination of discrete parts (image, sound, music, etc.) and more a wholly aesthetic object reconstructed by an indeterminate and evolving playing experience—one that can be contemplated inside and outside. In this, I am reminded of the so-called 'immersive fallacy': the refutation of the assumption that the 'pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality' (like the Star Trek holodeck) (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 451). *Bloodborne* is immersive precisely (and perhaps contradictorily) because its artifice is on display; because its difficulty makes you renew established strategies and even abandon the gameworld; and because music transgresses diegesis and becomes the monster you both see and feel.

Sounding fear

Bloodborne's tortured and twisting, temporally unstable score—the one that rears its head with the arrival of the game's monsters—has its roots in established horror-scoring practice. But like much about this game, that score appears to exceed its formal, medial, and generic constraints. Indeed, its sheer scope is impressive: it was the result of work by six different composers working across multiple years and three continents, and it was scored for significant orchestral forces (including full string and brass sections, and chorus).

Anticipating the potentially incongruous results of a number of different composers' work on the soundtrack, the game's music producers revealingly proposed an agreed aesthetic or 'style guide' (that 'captured what *Bloodborne* was about') during pre-production research for the score.⁴ They problematically dubbed the agreed style 'Victorian gothic' and expected the composers to conform to it. A vexed thing, their contradictory notion of the 'Victorian' encompasses a broad and intensified interpretation of what is commercially known as classical music ('soaring' and dramatic melodies) and, according to composer and orchestrator Penka Kouneva, an array of modernist and expressionistic technical devices, including aleatoricism, pounding rhythmic ostinati, as well as harmonic clusters and dissonance (Scaturro et al. 2016). The thoroughly un-Victorian composers György Ligeti and Alban Berg were among those composers Kouneva highlighted specifically.

Such sonically challenging repertoires have a strong precedent in the horror genre, though (in videogame, see, for example, Mitchell 2015). The apparent appropriation of music from a challenging and forward-thinking modernist idiom for the depiction of an (albeit intensified, composite, and 'Victorian') past is not unusual, however interesting the implied contradiction might be. Indeed, horror film has a long tradition of availing itself of the techniques of the musical avant garde. Neil Lerner, for example, has suggested that, in concert with horror's usage of heightened ambient diegetic sounds, 'unresolved dissonance, atonality,

and timbral experimentation' are a part of its established musical grammar (Lerner 2010: ix). And it is precisely the qualities of that music—its sonic materiality and the grain of extended techniques (Barthes 1977)—which, on a spectrum with sound, operate by inducing a primal, physical effect on its listener. This is a kind of pre-rational effect that hits you in the gut before you process it, or it is the visceral affect that precedes its cerebral subjugation. This blurring of the distinction between sound and music creates, in the words of Kevin Donnelly, an enveloping 'sonic architecture' that you come to inhabit (Donnelly 2005: 106). Music, rich with meaning but *felt* above all, encourages an experience not strictly visual or sonic, but multisensory. The ontology of so-called 'new' music tends towards its materiality, its ability to surround or attack.

Just as *Bloodborne*'s music becomes noisy, so too might its noise be heard as music. The opening scene of the game described above, in which unnerving sonic ambience emanate from seen and unseen forces, is an able demonstration of many of the techniques of contemporary sonic horror, albeit in an idiosyncratically heightened way—one that is consistent with the game's aesthetic of appropriation and strange, difficult, excess. Indeed, the prominence given to haunting ambient sounds there—the creation, that is, of a visceral soundscape that is at once 'silent' and without music but also somehow deafening—is consistent with contemporary developments in horror film scoring. These developments are reflected in what Jeff Smith (borrowing from David Bordwell's concept) has identified as the sound of 'intensified continuity'. This term refers to the intensification of a classic filmic grammar which, in its original theorisation, sought to analyse a shift to a more frenetic visual style of faster edits, closer framings, and wide-ranging camera movements (Smith 2013: 333). Intensified continuity's sonic profile consists of Foley hyper-detail and sound spatialization, as well as low frequency effects (which add a barely audible sense of 'power' to the creatures they accompany), and nondiegetic sonic punctuations which lend materiality, in a self-reflexive

way, to the otherwise inaudible in film. A sense of enhanced ‘realism’ is aided here by an unnatural intensification that is anything but real: the digitally augmented subterranean bass or the artificial sounds that emanate from on-screen threats or the space between shots. That this is applicable in the horror genre, and even came from there, should seem obvious.

William Whittington, for example, suggests that sound now notably takes up a larger portion of the average horror soundtrack than does music (consider the formerly romantic scores of, say *The Bride of Frankenstein* to the digital sonic viscera of the present day⁵). The result, Whittington suggests, mirrors a general shift in horror’s ‘reading strategies and generic expectations’, and today the focus is more about viscerality and spectacle (Whittington 2014: 170). This kind of evolution has not been a bad thing, strictly speaking, and horror’s role as Whittington points out is, after all, to aggregate our collective fears and anxieties. Those fears and anxieties being of the supernatural and the unknown, modernity, and our own primal unseen instincts. The horror soundtrack, with its emphasis on intensified sound necessarily, then, effectively ‘maps the terrain between these extremes by offering a range of sound effects from the “raw” to the “refined”, in order to challenge perception and question rationality’ (Whittington 2014: 170). The aesthetic of intensified continuity might be said to demonstrate the influence of video game in general, and horror video game especially (for something of this, see McQueen 2013), and it likewise applies to them too: *Bloodborne*’s sonic landscape is a hyper detailed one. Transition scenes are punctuated by brief artificial sounds and low rumbles; everything is heard close up, cold and hard, and weapons bristle with stone-like or metallic bluster. By juxtaposing a hyperdetailed soundscape with an excessive and noisy musical score, *Bloodborne*’s sonic grammar is difficult to disentangle at least in terms of the typical distinctions made between sound and music.

Much has been said in ludomusicology scholarship about the horror genre and video games, and several commentators have shown how horror games draw upon many of the same

erie and uncanny associations associated with it in film, both in terms of sound and visual design (see for example Roberts, 2014; Perron and Barker 2009; Roux-Girard 2010). But, in the indeterminate and immersive video game context, that experience is made visceral using the sophisticated blurring of spaces purely sonic and musical, diegetic and non-diegetic: combining economies of fear, absence, and the unknown. In this regard, particular attention has been paid to the *Silent Hill* series of games (1999-2015) and William Cheng's analysis of the original game investigates exactly those liminal spaces: the use of industrial noise to 'haunt the borders', to unsettle the player psychologically (and bodily) as though the sounds themselves were monsters (Cheng 2013: 176). Here, Cheng is concerned here with what he describes as the 'frightening efficiency with which minimal sounds[...] evoke maximal terror': what he terms a 'reductive aesthetics'.

Without necessarily negating the validity of those insights here, I suggest that *Bloodborne* revels in a contrasting aesthetic 'maximalism'. It is not so much the horror dictum that 'less is more' that seems relevant here, nor that the most terrifying thing is the unseen. Nor is it that the score transgresses most of all in its noisy silence, but that the music and sound encountered in *Bloodborne* exceeds the constraints of the medium through sheer visceral and cerebral as well material force: the player is disturbed by the content, by its overflowing of significations, and by the challenge this poses to traditional conceptions of video game conveyance or conditioning. Admittedly, the operation here is less subtle—but it is no less virtuosic in design, and in its ability to unsettle.

Sonic horrors: gothic and cosmic

As I noted earlier, *Bloodborne* appears at first to be overtly gothic in style. Lycanthropes and corrupted humans with rabid hounds, you find, stalk the streets, and characters are clad in nineteenth-century attire. Yharnam, the city in which much of the game takes place, is a

monster too: architecturally, it is a sublime concatenation of (revival) gothic architecture (see **figure 1**) and Giambattista Piranesi's impossible eighteenth-century subterranean prisons, as depicted in *Le Carceri d'Invenzione*. According to Julian Johnson (in a comparison with modernist music that is relevant here), Piranesi's etchings suggest not simply 'geometric proportions for their own sake, but frightening fantasy images of subterranean vaults apparently devoted to incarceration and torture' (Johnson 2015: 137). Always modern and deeply challenging, they offer a pre-echo to both the nineteenth-century gothic, and the labyrinthine dungeons of video games.

Figure 1: Image of the gothic Yharnam skyline (maybe available under creative commons(?))
see: <https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Yharnam?file=Yharnam.jpg>

As already noted in the vexed and invented musical modernism of 'Victorian gothic', *Bloodborne*'s setting thus establishes an uneasy concurrence of temporalities, one that is also elemental to the gothic subgenre. Indeed, it combines a radical modern aesthetic of digital difficulty with a combination of a nineteenth century brand of medievalism, monsters, monarchy, and corruptible clergymen. The gothic is, as Isabella van Elferen has argued, an anti-history, more than a mere reproduction of the past but one 'distorted by our own memories'

(van Elferen 2012: 6). But the gothic too, is a genre in flux, one that is capable of ‘incorporating’ and ‘transforming’ other forms of media ‘as well as developing its own conventions’ (Botting 1996: 14).

Bloodborne does not in the end reveal itself to be an entirely gothic piece of work, even if it draws from the subgenre extensively. At a later stage in the game, as particular secrets are uncovered and a certain amount of what the game identifies to be extra-human ‘insight’ is found, *Bloodborne* begins its tilt into the cosmic horror associated with the literary Weird movement. Its monsters and environs become more like those associated with the literary work of H.P. Lovecraft—or at least the ongoing afterlife of his oeuvre, as it has been taken up by authors, directors, artists, and more in the near-century since his death (that is, in 1937). Soon unearthly multi-limbed ‘Lesser Amygdalas’⁶ can be seen high above, dangling from Yharnam’s gothic towers, the sky goes purple as the moon turns to blood, and certain creatures emit a ‘terror’ mechanism that, if you stare at them too long, you die instantaneously. Lovecraftian horror or monstrosity, it should be said, supposes the radically new; the shock of inscrutability that renders humanity meaningless and drives its victim insane.

The Weird—the term for this late-Lovecraftian literary aesthetic—is supposed to represent a break with the psychological ‘uncanny’ of the gothic and opposes, according to Weird author China Miéville, ‘thinking through the history-stained present that[...] has become known [after Derrida] as the “Hauntological” (Miéville 2009: 513). Indeed, he goes on to describe a selection monsters, such as you might encounter in two ends of the game:

‘[r]ather than werewolves, vampires, or ghosts, Lovecraft’s monsters are agglomerations of bubbles, barrels, cones, and corpses, patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans, and other fauna notable precisely for their absence from the traditional Western monstrous’ (Miéville 2009: 512)

Bloodborne stages its own patchwork grotesquery: reconnecting the gothic to the Weird, in defiance of the above. And as Mark Fisher sees it, the Weird is recognisable above all by the

‘conjoining of two or more things that do not belong together’ (Fisher 2016: 11). A sense of wrongness from an object so strange it feels like ‘it should not exist’ (Fisher 2016: 15). ‘Newness’, then, is the defining feature of the Weird—a newness that, through encounter with it, forces you to fundamentally reassess the coordinates of your own comprehension (or turn away in horror). The problematic definition of a ‘Victorian gothic’ music that is in some way classical (or, even, romantic), whilst imbued with modernistic alterity, acquires new meaning in this light. If the idiom implied by strings, brass, and ‘soaring melodies’ reflects an (albeit corrupted) gothic—haunting—history, it is the post-war grammar of Ligeti (et al.), its implied rejection of Miéville’s ‘history-stained present’, that represents the Weird’s own cosmic insanity here. The score, a gothic and unstable patchwork of sound and history, is another kind of Weird monster too.

Lovecraft’s cosmic horror paradigm has, in its Weird commitment to the essentially unknowable, and pre-human, origin of horror, found recent advocacy in the philosophical movement of speculative materialism. Speculative materialism is the philosophical rejection of an anthropocentric (post-Kantian) commitment to the metaphysics of thinking beings and the things they think about: or, as Quentin Meillassoux puts it, the belief that ‘we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other’ (Meillassoux 2005: 5). Isabella van Elferen has discussed sound and music (or, rather, non-music) in the ‘hyper-cacophony’ of Lovecraft’s idiomatic brand of speculative materialism: an un-hearable oeuvre of ‘cacodaemoniacal ghastliness’ (quoted from *The Hound*) inaccessible to his characters, the reader, and even the narrator (van Elferen 2016b: 83). And whilst, as Van Elferen notes, ‘Lovecraft’s works cannot[...] be turned into graphic novels, films, or video games, for that would mean the numinous indescribability of his realities would be straitjacketed into forms and limits’ (van Elferen 2016b: 88), music might once again be the solution. As she goes on to argue, music’s unusual ontological status gives it a privileged

position ‘between materiality and immateriality’ as ‘metaphors for Lovecraft’s paradoxical materialism’ (van Elferen 2016b: 93).

Another kind of paradoxical materiality has been described by one of speculative materialism’s leading lights, Timothy Morton, and he has broached aesthetics directly in his (somewhat Weird) theorisation of ‘hyperobjects’: objects so large in scale (temporally as well as spatially) that they demand we refigure our idea of what a ‘thing’ even is. Being addressed particularly in his conception of ‘hyperobjects’ are the vast climate-related and ecological issues that threaten humanity in the Anthropocene. But art (and by extension music) has an important role to play in affording an opportunity to think through these crises, and *Bloodborne* in its depiction of a world corrupted by forces beyond comprehension, too, and plagued by god-like monsters that need to be defeated, necessarily deals in the metaphysics of ecological deep time.

For Morton, then, music can function like a ‘hyperobject’, or, perhaps, serve as a feature of it, drawing particular attention to his conception of one of the hyperobject’s key traits, ‘viscosity’: in music, he says ‘I am assaulted from the inside by a pulsation that is also sound’ (Morton 2013: 29). Viscosity, here then, refers to the sticky quality of something in which we are imbricated, neither within or without. A hyperobject is viscous, because we cannot see it, but we are nevertheless surrounded by it. In a discussion of the music of rock band My Bloody Valentine, Morton calls particular attention to the material grain of sound in music, and the ‘strange masochistic dimension of aesthetic experience’ beneath that of the disinterested Kantian one. Viscously, it attunes itself to you before you to it, and ‘hyperobjective art’, he says, ‘makes visible, audible, and legible’ a potentially self-destructive but primal and necessary ‘intrauterine experience’ from which it is impossible to escape (Morton 2013: 30). Chromaticism (and the avant garde) he also suggests signifies, musically, ‘art’s failure to embody Spirit’, which is to refer to a subjectivity rendered impossible by the contemplation of

the radically-outside of human experience (Morton 2013: 163). *Bloodborne*'s sonic palette, in addition to its self-reflective granular modernism, wraps around your body viscously—especially as you, the kinaesthetically engaged player, seek to become engaged within it. Against the hyperobject boss battles in *Bloodborne*, known as the Great Ones in a nod to Lovecraft, this cannot help but disrupt play.

Chant and other terrors

Isabella van Elferen in a chapter cited above has referred specifically to Lovecraft's references to ritual, chant, and 'liturgy' (he has used the term 'hellish chant') in his attempt to depict music, and the ability of ritual to simulate movement between earthly and unearthly planes (van Elferen 2016b: 84). Chant, be it as heard in the liturgy or as pounded out in Lovecraft's (albeit racist) depiction of pre-modern voodoo cult,⁷ could serve as an interesting bridge between the gothic and Weird. And this is, indeed, the case in *Bloodborne*'s score.

The first boss likely encountered in *Bloodborne* is the Cleric Beast, a giant wolf-human hybrid, who, in the game's richly textured universe is said to have originated as a human clergyman corrupted by sacred blood.⁸ Giant but emaciated, the tortured creature's skinny abdomen is characterised by a sharp protruding ribcage and a withdrawn stomach. Its primary weapon, one of its arms (much bigger than the other) has flowing long fur, and that hair continues erratically down the creature's head and back, leaving only patches elsewhere on the body. From its head protrudes a thick web of what looks like bloodstained horns or antlers. It shrieks an ugly, high pitch, and half-human howl, a sound that hurts you much like the scraping of nails on a chalkboard does.

The Cleric Beast's accompanying score (composed by Tsukasa Saitoh) begins as a chorus singing in Latin—the liturgical associations are manifest even to those unfamiliar with long-standing musical traditions. But in the game's heightened aesthetic, the sung lyric SAN-

GUI-ne (blood, after all, is the game’s primary resource and the source of its narrative ill) is characterised by the dissonance of stacked tritones (D-G# in three registers, see **Figure 3**) in an arrangement that emphasises an unusual registral displacement: the effect is doubly disquieting, discordant voices sound at the far end of their ranges, high and low without a comfortable middle. The use of registral extremes is a clearly disruptive musical technique that is picked up in the instrumental arrangement of this piece and others in the score. When the pounding string ostinatos begin (**Figure 3** also) we are at once in chromatic and expressionistic territory again (a chromatic cluster of notes between C# and F). If the chorus announces the Cleric Beast’s arrival and sings both of the gothic religious and the cosmic transcendental, the throbbing string repetitions suggest an altogether different, tribal, ritual: summoning god only knows what. I will return to the occasion of this boss battle later in the article.

Figure 2: Choral introduction to Cleric Beast (let) and lower string ostinato (right)

The use of so-called ‘classical’ music allusion in an ostensibly dungeon-like or labyrinthine video game setting has a long history that is immediately recognisable to the kinds of hardened gamers to whom FromSoftware’s work appeals. Indeed, baroque counterpoint was a defining feature of 1980s NES dungeon games, affording the composer, according to William Gibbons, an opportunity to transcend the medium. It also serves as a sublime ‘metaphor for complex architecture’ (an extension perhaps of the material dimensions of virtual space), as well as situating the game into a broader transmedia cultural context of fantasy and medievalism (Gibbons 2018: 139). And, indeed, *Bloodborne* taps into something perceived as ‘retro’ or ‘pure’ as far as an unmediated video game experience goes. Medieval chant, too, (or,

rather, what Karen Cook identifies as types of music that might be, at least, ‘perceived as chant’ (Cook 2018: 193)) is an established musical trope known to video game audiences. Indeed, chant, Cook suggests, is particularly interesting for its rich web of oftentimes contradictory meanings, maintaining the funerary associations from its early nineteenth-century rediscovery as well as in its diverse application across video games like *The Witcher*, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, and *Halo*. Video games habitually play on these interpretative simultaneities. That much should be obvious when you encounter the Cleric Beast after a long strenuous tour of Yharnam: are you encountering a pathos-laden gothic horror, a creature brought alive from a medieval bestiary, or a transcendental horror from a cosmic plane? Perhaps music destabilises any such distinction entirely. We hear all these things (and more) at once.

There are two other instances of musical ‘chant’ that are particularly excruciating, and they are two of the only encounters with music that are not strictly accompanied by a boss. Triggered by the completion of one boss battle, the layout of previous levels (which you can indeed revisit, to collect items or bloodstones necessary for levelling up) can appear to change slightly. Suddenly a new creature, a Kidnapper with lanky legs, giant claw-like hands, and dressed in a tattered shroud with a sack flung over his shoulder can be spotted where he formerly was not. Newly confident from my successful slaying of boss Vicar Amelia I approached him but when he turned for combat I was swiftly defeated after one or two swipes.

Death, of course, is a familiar experience in *Bloodborne*, but this time it was different. Instead of the usual restart, a short cutscene followed, a sack was removed from my face and I woke up in a subterranean prison known as Hypogean Gaol within Yahar’gul Unseen Village. From here a piece of music labelled ‘Hail the Nightmare’ (composed by Ryan Amon) on the official soundtrack could be discerned in the background. Accompanied by sustained gong-like resonances and the low rumble of the contrabass, a very low male voice sings again in faux-Latin in the style of plainsong: ‘Maledictus’ to which the chorus responds ‘donum libas’.⁹ This

is repeated, and ‘infici mur’ is answered by ‘maledictus bestia’. As I looked to escape, I encountered enemies stronger than I could manage at this stage in the game and soon enough (in an uncertain state of panic) found a quick route out of there and meticulously avoided encountering the Kidnapper again. It is later revealed that at this point I was situated in the basement of a huge cathedral-like structure when you hear this music. ‘Hail to the Nightmare’, then, could feasibly be the diegetic chanting of the blood-worshipping faithful. You never see the producers of this sound, of course, but the resonant properties of the score change depending on the environment: whether you are indoors or outdoors. There is one other level with a nondiegetic musical accompaniment like this: the late-game Upper Cathedral Ward, a level that revolves around a terrifying encounter in a pitch black hall and several high-powered wolf-like beasts, is accompanied by the sustained sonic ambiences and jittery high pitched violin glissando strings (and later sustained high female voice) that reminds me of the opening third of Xenakis’ orchestra piece *Metastaseis* (1953-54). It bristles with an uneasy musical tactility, and is all the more material when the giant chandelier comes crashing down and your vision is reduced dramatically. The piece of music (also composed by Ryan Amon) is called ‘Soothing Hymn’: another (perhaps playfully ironic) liturgical reference.

So far, the music in *Bloodborne* had played on the boundaries of musical diegesis in its depiction of monster bosses and, as such, it has likely conditioned in the player an appropriate response. Hearing music here, in a more traditionally transdiegetic setting suggestive of both traditional atmosphere-establishing scoring and the prospect of real presences, was made even more strange as a result. Besides these two instances, nothing like this happens in the game and, as such, whenever I subsequently visited (and, indeed, tamed) Hypogean Gaol or the Upper Cathedral Ward, something did not feel quite right. Later still in the game, in a level called The Nightmare Frontier, and if you have gained a sufficient amount of ‘insight’, a character called a Winter Lantern—a tattered woman’s body with a giant protruding ball of

eyes, corpses, and arms on its head—can be heard singing a kind of cheerful improvisation using a digitally manipulated human voice. That same creature can kill you instantaneously when it looks at you, and what you see and hear in this creature has the power to drive you insane with terror. If boss battles create monsters using music, when *Bloodborne* plays with musical diegesis even that simple truth becomes terrifyingly unstable.

Sonically augmented monsters

Bloodborne is a game about monsters above all. And as already stated, aside from a few instances (noted above), the only music you hear in *Bloodborne* occurs during a series of set-piece boss battles around which the game's main focus revolves. These battles represent real threat (and pose a substantial challenge) to the player—likely requiring multiple attempts.¹⁰ According to Kouneva, one of the game's score arrangers, this was an intentional aesthetic decision on the part of the developers, intended to create an atmosphere of 'dread and fear'. When the silence breaks, she says, and strange chant and unrelenting rhythm appear, you know that you are in a boss battle (Scaturro et al. 2016). This is a striking conditioning and design tactic, and the player quickly learns to associate incidental musical phenomena with otherworldly creatures and death. *Bloodborne*'s boss-battle monsters represent extremes in imaginative design, too, and are the primary limb of its gothic and cosmic horror ambitions. But in those tense battles against increasing odds it is hard to disentangle these already knotted nightmares from the music that heralds their arrival, emanates from them, and then disappears with them. Sonically, visually, and emotionally fleeting, both boss and music are inaccessible after their completion.¹¹ Daringly, these massive compositions are lost to aesthetic enjoyment in spite of their expressionist sonic luxuriations—a violence that transgresses romantic presumptions about the pleasures of music as a disinterested art form. Music only occurs whilst

the player battles under extreme ludic duress. You are conditioned by the gameplay mechanic to fear it, but that fear encompasses a pleasure you cannot afford to indulge.

Monsters, too, represent a transgressive form of enjoyment as much as they engender the return of the repressed, instil fear, and signify absolute, unsettling difference. As noted by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the monster is itself a form of desire, one that we ‘distrust and loathe’ just as we ‘envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair’ (Cohen 1996: 17). Drawing on Julia Kristeva, Cohen locates the monster in the ‘ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction [... of] abjection’ (Cohen 1996: 19). For Kristeva, the ‘abject’ is that which is neither self nor object, and is a destabilising presence ‘on the edge of nonexistence and hallucination [...that] annihilates me’ (Kristeva 2018: 68). Abjection refers to that feeling of disgust that one feels in their confrontation with a corporeal reality, or a material Real that escapes symbolic comprehension. *Bloodborne*’s blood-drenched creatures, with extraneous limbs, a profusion of eyes, and folds of dangling skin, clearly should inspire abjection.

But what makes for a musical monster? Isabella van Elferen has linked timbral abjection, as well as musical otherness and excessive monstrosity. And, among other things, the musically monstrous is ‘excessively loud and semiotically over-explicit’ (van Elferen 2016a: 314). Above all, however, it is music’s ‘phenomenal capacity to override its own acquired meanings’ alongside the symbolically overwrought monster’s dependence on metaphor that holds the key. For van Elferen, music takes the place of the abject itself, and its destabilising presence, its ontological fuzziness, returns a sense of unknowability to the monster, preserving its uncanny (gothic) or cosmic (Weird) aura (van Elferen 2016a: 316). As an object (or abject) of horror, the monsters of *Bloodborne* are indivisible from the music that sustains them and the sounds they make. These sonic qualities are as much a part of their being as the many arms that try to grab you or the bodily fluids they spew that burn you. Just as its

noise surrounds you physically, the music itself demarcates corporeal horror. The disruptive materiality of these monsters is more than the sum of its parts.

The behaviour of video-game monstrosities, the apparent chaos they exhibit and the violence they inflict, is bound by rules-based design, and, as Jaroslav Švelch puts it, reducible to ‘databases and algorithms’ (Švelch 2013: 194). There is here, as Švelch sees it, a neat contradiction: in a hyper-rationalised society concerned above all with information and control (and the unholy marriage thereof), video games map and compile the behaviours of millions. Monsters, instead, come to ‘exemplify the way in which societies of control deal with and take advantage of enmity, threat, and challenge’, and this represents a real shift in our conception of monstrosity (Švelch 2013: 194). Video games still present us with monsters, in the classical sense: the abject return of the repressed, the essentially unknowable, things of nightmares (etc.). But we are now given the tools to confront, and eventually overcome, them. What of horror (cosmic or otherwise) if you, the player of *Bloodborne* can expect to confront the simultaneously tentacled and yonic Ebrietas Daughter of the Cosmos (a Lovecraftian god-like monster contained in an underground abyss), and come out on top?

Figure 3: *The Cleric Beast prior to combat (again, this could be used perhaps under CC, see: https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Cleric_Beast)*

The first boss likely encountered in *Bloodborne* is the aforementioned Cleric Beast, which can be seen in **Figure 3**. The Cleric Beast's cry, a howl that combines the shrieking human cry with that of an animal, is sounded early when you first enter the city of Yharnam, and upon leaving Iosefka's Clinic. You do not yet know that it belongs to a boss-battle beast, but you might take the hint. Indeed, this is a fitting way to enter *Bloodborne*'s protean gothicism. The howl of a wolf has been identified by Amanda DeGioia as one of the Gothic's most prominent sonic topoi: a 'cry in the dark' from Dracula's 'children of the night' (that is, wolves) has deep gothic literary roots, that, moreover, lends itself well to film, heavy metal music, and more besides (DeGioia 2016: 295). The pathos implied in the human part of the sound likewise evokes a kind of gothic modality too—the lycanthrope you come to meet later was a former hunter like yourself who succumbed to the plague that ravishes Yharnam.

The cry itself also evokes something of what Michel Chion has described in sound film as 'the acousmêtre'. The acousmêtre is the momentarily bodiless sound, usually a voice, that sits neither inside nor outside the image but is imbricated in the action in some real way (Chion 1994: 129). The acousmêtre is a common but elemental part of sound film, and one that we take for granted today: perhaps being that promissory voice you hear moments before you find out its source, or more pertinently, the 'big boss' from behind the curtain who pulls the strings and is eventually revealed (Chion 1994: 131).¹² Chion notes that this reveal (or 'de-acousmatization') is usually characterised by a 'descent' of the temporarily limitless liminal sound into the prosaic or human.

In so far as this might still be the case in *Bloodborne*, that the cry functions as the acousmêtre offering endless interpretive (and indeed horrific) possibilities for the anxious player prior to the big boss reveal, when the moment finally does arrive it is less a descent than

it is a further elevation. A dark subversion of the trope. As you enter an auspicious looking arena at the end of a bridge, you hear the cry once more as the Cleric Beast leaps into view and lands with a thump; as it begins to walk in your direction (pulled along by its oversize left arm) a musical score begins to play. This is the first example of non-diegetic music the player has heard since the title screen, and the period between then and now, if my experience is anything to go by, could have been a long and grinding one—the effect is unnerving and music’s rich signifiatory potential overflows, becoming a deluge. A chorus sings tritone-dominated and semiotically rich ‘chant’ (accompanied only by low strings), furnished with the faux-Latin ‘Horror fini, perdet iter, soci perdet, sanguine sancta!’,¹³ and this is followed by a chugging 3/4 chromatic ostinato in the low strings with a progressive build in intensity eventually coming to combine a string section (with amplified soloists), sustained low brass harmonies, and chorus (see **Figure 2** earlier). The monster’s ‘diegetic’ cries punctuate the music, recontextualised by the score *and* your own ludic struggle, they still sound painful—more so.

Again, the developers seem to anticipate that the player will die here and the appearance of an option to summon a non-playable character (or NPC) to help defeat the Cleric Beast suggests as much. And it is hard not to die here; the sudden introduction of music is confounding. If the appearance of a monster signals a descent of its sonic signature, or acousmètre, into something material and therefore ‘manageable’, then music’s sudden appearance (juxtaposed crucially as it is against silence) proffers an inscrutable extension of the creature’s monstrosity and that precise moment of descent. During any attempt to retry the level after this, the distant cry sounds instead as a taunt reminding the player of past failures (an experience that cannot be replicated in film) and the encounter feels no less dramatic when it reoccurs. Failure and repetition are, indeed, a crucial part of the experience. When completed, and aside from the initial rush that completion of a difficult task brings, it is never clear that what transpired was not fluke. The player rarely *feels* ready for what is to come.

Švelch proffers the critical notion that mass-produced video games reduce the monster to puzzle or plaything, and that, in this context, video games can be thought of not as a socially liberating medium but as the ‘training ground for our lives in control societies’ (Švelch 2013: 203). *Bloodborne* might be viewed in this way too, and its monsters can to the most studious player be reduced to a set of alternating attacks with (somewhat) predictable patterns of movement and weak points. Indeed, communities of video-streaming players seem to have tamed its famed difficulty. But *Bloodborne*’s hyperobjective engagement of the ludic sublime, its musical evocation of a speculative materialism, and its acousmatic subversions of sound propose at least something of an escape route from informatic control. I named this subsection ‘sonically augmented monsters’ so that I might argue that music (and sound) extend the materiality of an, ostensibly, visual monster. But it might be that the emergent properties of a beast with music, the Cleric Beast, say, might be something altogether more complex, disruptive, and immaterial still.

* * *

Bloodborne is an aesthetically intensified example of video game horror. By going beyond (but still acknowledging) an interpretation of what you might call this music’s ‘assaultive character’ (Tompkins 2014: 190)—that is, as its method of creating fear and disgust—I have attempted, through *Bloodborne*, to destabilise ideas of musical materiality in ludic and audio-visual contexts. In this way, the game’s score produces a strange kind of the ludic sublime; it blurs the literary aesthetics of the gothic and Weird; and subverts traditional video game mechanics. Exploring both how music and image can comport to create monsters that are more than the sum of their already horrific parts, *Bloodborne* is revealed to be a richly enigmatic and challenging text at the forefront in expressive digital narrative media.

At the horizon then of labyrinthine sonic modernism and speculative materiality, *Bloodborne*, I argue, distils the gaming experience to something that on one hand feels

unmediated and direct, whilst also creating through metaphor an experience (by way of a glimpse) of the unknowable. Whilst a community of players has done much now to explain the game's famed complexity, *Bloodborne* itself has a metaphysics that resists such mastery. Its horror lies not always in the uncanny unknown, which diminishes on repeat performances, but in endless repetitions whose difficulty is only enhanced by successive confrontations with the (un)musical monster.

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¹ Counterintuitively, this breakable window is not signposted as such, and the 'important' section that follows is entirely optional. This whole sequence is likely a reference to H.P. Lovecraft's short story 'The Haunter in the Dark', wherein the protagonist breaks into an abandoned church, ascends its tower (in the game the player descends) and uncovers an eldritch monstrosity. H.P. Lovecraft's brand of cosmic horror is a big influence on *Bloodborne*, that and its narrative obscurity will be explored throughout this article.

² Death at this stage is intentional, even if, subsequently, players have found work-arounds for no-death run throughs on videostreaming websites. Death, here, delivers the player to 'the Hunter's Dream', a safe zone for customisation and shortcuts, a place where you might better prepare for your first enemy encounter and to which you will return often. But perhaps, more importantly, it establishes the 'YOU DIED' motif, a FromSoftware trademark and a hallmark of their *Dark Souls* series. If at this stage, the player is willing to continue the fight, rather than throw their controller to the floor in despair, they might just be ready for the game to come.

³ A famous example in *Dark Souls* is an enemy called a Mimic. Ordinarily, a chest signifies something that can be opened, and from which useful objects can be collected. The Mimic masks as a chest, but when you try to open it you are killed instantly. The effect of this is that you even learn to fear passive and ordinarily useful objects.

⁴ The following quotes are taken from 'The Gothic Horror music of *Bloodborne*', presented at the Game Developers Conference 2016. Video can be accessed here: <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1023339/The-Gothic-Horror-Music-of>

⁵ Having said that, the sound of a beating heart is an important aural moment in *The Bridge of Frankenstein*.

⁶ The amygdalae are almond shape neural nodes in the human brain and are understood to be important for the processing of memory and emotion (and as such are linked with the feeling of fear). The creature itself is one of the more overtly 'Lovecraftian' monsters you encounter in *Bloodborne* appearing less like a gothic monstrosity and is more 'alien' (having the features of fungus, say, or arthropod).

⁷ In his most well-known short story 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1926).

⁸ The so-called game 'lore'—its richly detailed world-building—resides mostly in objects and their viewable descriptions. Almost everything you encounter in the game, from items that you use regularly, to more specialised fragments of texts, provide riddle-like details necessary for understanding the gameworld.

⁹ Lyrics as transcribed on a fan Wiki here: https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Hail_the_Nightmare

¹⁰ There are 11 such bosses in the main game, plus several more in additional game modes and the Downloadable Content (DLC) *The Old Hunters* expansion.

¹¹ This is not entirely true. It is possible to play online and in cooperative mode, where you are able to join and help out another player who is struggling with a boss.

¹² It might be added that Chion notes, in the era of multitrack sound and expansions of 'cinematic space', the acousmetre is on 'shakier ground': technology, indeed, problematises the notion of 'offscreen' and 'onscreen'.

¹³ Lyrics as transcribed on a fan Wiki here: [https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Cleric_Beast_\(OST\)](https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Cleric_Beast_(OST))