

**- BLOODBORNE -**  
**Breaking the Rules of Narration**

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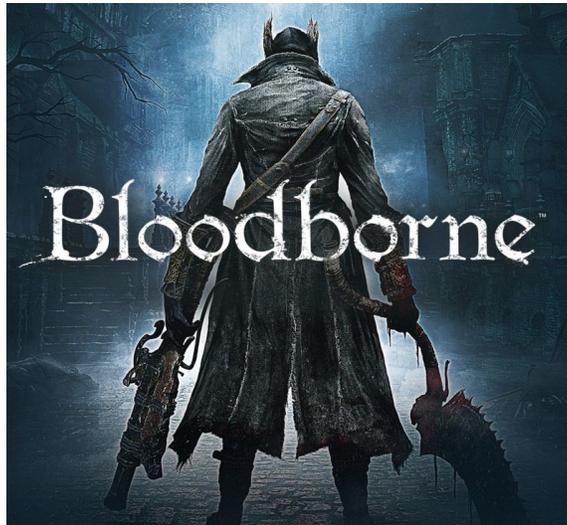
## 1- Intro

- I consider that Games should be surprising, and Bloodborne manages to be so where many of its competitors are not : the Storytelling. From Software flipped many of the rules of storytelling and Narrative design, moves that would have been regarded as mistakes or faulty mechanics in any other project. But Bloodborne was crafted with such an unified vision between the art, gameplay and the narrative, that these broken rules end up by supporting each others in service of the player's experience.

## 2- What is Bloodborne?

### 2.1 - Identity card :

- Genre : *Action RPG*
- Rating : *M for Blood and Gore, Violence, Includes online features that may expose players to unrated user-generated content*
- Developer : *From Software*
- Plateform : *Playstation 4*
- First released : *March 24 2015*



### 2.2 - Is Bloodborne a sequel ? :

- No. But Bloodborne is a spiritual successor to Dark Souls, himself a spiritual successor to Demon Souls. Both were action RPG by From Software, and Bloodborne carries on many of the peculiar tropes of these games within a new I.P.
- *Demanding skilled-based challenges with punitive deaths. Upon dying, players are teleported back to a checkpoint. Repetitive deaths teach players how to react in hostile*

*environments, learning from past mistakes and prior experience as a means of overcoming its difficulty.*

*- Players gain currency for slaying enemies, and these can be exchanged in order to level up or purchase new equipment. However, when they die all of the currency they currently had in their possession are dropped. Once revived, it's possible to reclaim it if they're able to fight their way back to the same location, but should they succumb a second time, these hard-won currencies are lost forever.*

*- Obscure story and storytelling, pieced together by the player. A story puzzle of sorts.*



### 2.3 - Who is behind Bloodborne? :

- The team of "From Software" of course. But Japanese gaming-industry sometimes focuses its production through a single individual's vision. Such name like Hideo Kojima or Fumito Ueda are nowadays considered game "auteur".

- The "Souls Games" owe a lot to Hidetaka Miyazaki, Game Director on 3 of its entries : Demon's Souls, Dark Souls and Bloodborne, the success of these games propelling him to the position of President.

- Miyazaki had a distinctive profile : *Coming from a poor background, he didn't own any books or manga, and wasn't allowed to play video-games until university. Instead, he played game-books and Tabletop RPG.*

*He graduated in social sciences and worked as an accountant manager. He only considered a career in video-games at 29, after playing the game "Ico", that awoke him to the possibilities of the medium. However Miyazaki found that few game companies would employ him, with one of them being "FromSoftware".*

- Many of the following statements are issued from the interviews of Hidetaka Miyazaki, president of "From Software" and creator/director of Bloodborne. These transcripts are compiled on [www.bloodborne-wiki.com](http://www.bloodborne-wiki.com)

### 2.4 - Target Audience :

- Bloodborne offers for new players a smoother entry point to the Souls Series.

How? By being more casual than the previous instalments, and a new game instead of a sequel to Dark Souls. But it isn't mainstream in anyway. The game doesn't aim to appeal to the largest audience possible, accepting that it should focus on its niche market instead of trying to please everyone...

- Their target audience ends up being :

*1- Audience that already played and liked the "Soul Games" series. They have already experienced the peculiar narrative design found in Bloodborne.*

*2- Players looking for a challenge, both in gameplay and story*

*3- Players interested in "Horror-Fantasy Action RPG"*

*4- Players old enough for the "Mature" rating, and assumed to be able to unravel the narrative unlike a very young audience would be.*

*5- Players that own a PS4*

- Considering who the potential target audience might be, is it wise to have a challenging narrative in a game such as Bloodborne? Apart from the PS4 bit, we can conclude that YES, their audience is already disposed for a non-mainstream narrative.

### 2.5 - Within its Target Audience :

- If the game is made and marketed for a specific audience, it also provide for any kind of players within it.

- There is a gamer personality quiz developed by psychologists, called the Bartle Test, Once answered, It puts you in one of four player personality categories :

*a : Killers are mainly motivated by player VS player.*

*b : Socialisers seek primarily to connect with other people by playing the game.*

*c : Achievers wish to prove their skills and display them.*

*d : Explorers like games where you gain knowledge, and experience the thrill of discovery*

- Dark Souls provides content for every one of these player personalities :

*a : PvP duels*

*b : Multibranching dialogue with NPC / Option to leave and receive messages with other players connected online / Strong online community since Dark Souls 1*

*c : Challenging game with optional character builds, optional bosses, unique rewards / Strong streaming community since Dark Souls 1*

*d : Exploration and investigative storytelling*

### 2.6 - Intentions:

- While another team was making Dark Souls 2, the Director of Dark Souls 1, Hidetaka Miyazaki, was working on Bloodborne. According to him, his goals were :

*1- To evolve the gameplay in direction that weren't fitting for Dark Souls, such as the use of firearms, a focus on evasion instead of armors, etc...*

*2- To maintain the sense of achievement players felt in response to demanding challenges, a staple of the Souls Series.*

*3- Bring new aspect : "exploring the unknown," and "the feeling of fighting for one's life"*

### 2.7 - Genre :

- From a Gameplay perspective? It is a third-person Action Rpg.

- But storywise? It is a Gothic Horror. But why Gothic Horror?

- First, the game needed a setting away from the medieval, that could narratively justify the lack of heavy armor, and yet the use of both firearms and melée weapons in close quarters. As such, the Victorian Era was selected as the main influence.

- Then, it was decided that horror was needed to enhance the player's experience of "*exploring the unknown*" and "*the feeling of fighting for one's life*". It was important for Miyazaki to have that sense of fear and terror because it directly ties into the player overcoming that and enhancing their sense of achievement. And the horror genre most associated with the "Victorian Era" is the "Gothic Horror".
- The art, sound, characters and story were conceived to install and sustain this mood game session after game session.



### 2.8 - What is Gothic Horror :

- Gothic Horror is a formerly literary genre that originated in England in the second half of the 18th century. One of the most famous work of the genre, Bram Stoker's Dracula, was one of the formative reading experiences of Miyazaki as a child. And Bloodborne has all the tropes of Gothic Horror within its Art and Story :

- 1- Haunted by the Past : *Past events or beings, that we thought buried, erupt in the present, disturbing it.*
- 2- Obscenity : *murder, incest, abduction, rape, torture*
- 3- Frontier : *Travelling from the modern world to a more arcane world, a remote locations that trap its visitors*
- 4- The Sublime : *What isn't considered aesthetic and beautiful... but is awesome : the top of a mountain, an infinite chasm, a shipwreck, a terrible storm*
- 5- Science Vs Supernatural : *Doubt of the existence of the Supernatural, Science that becomes magic, Events that science fails to explain and control.*
- 6- Domination : *Power compelling people to do what they don't want to do*
- 7- The Inhuman : *Trying to explore beyond the morals and physical limits of the human, to be inhuman.*
- 8- Humanlike Figure : *wax, automatons, doll, statues*

### 2.9 - Theme

- What kind of story is Bloodborne trying to tell? The Theme of the Game is clearly Transhumanism, more specifically, the horror of its abuses and excesses. This subject has

already been treated many times in science-fiction, much less through the lens of the Gothic Horror.

- The player's character fight mutated humans and the creatures responsible for it, and has mutated himself to face them. The more mutated a monster is, the more dangerous it is, and the player can respond in kind by enhancing himself further.

#### 2.10 - The Premise :

- The game takes place in a decrepit city called *Yharnam* known for its medical advances using special Blood as a primary tool. Over the years, many travelers journey to the city seeking the remedy to cure their afflictions.

This special Blood secretly came from an extinct civilization that worshipped and bred with Inhuman-Creatures.

The scholars of Yharnam start an evolutionary race using the Blood, until their experiments plagued the city with an endemic illness that transformed most of its inhabitants into murdering beasts, and attracted the attention of the Inhuman-Creatures. Ignoring these developments, the Player's character journey to Yharnam, seeking their fabled cure. Forcefully turned into a superhuman Beast-Hunter, the Player must survive the "night of the hunt" until dawn to leave Yharnam.

#### 2.11 - Objectives and Endgame :

**1** : What are the conditions for the player to "win" the game?

- *The goal of the Game is to locate and kill key NPC (Boss Battles)*

**2** : Within the story, what is the goal of the Protagonist?

- *The goal of the Player's Character, its Avatar, is to survive a night in a very hostile city.*

**3** : How to ensure the pacing, synchronicity and cohesiveness of the player's experience?

By make sure to keep in synch the "story" with the "game", ending them at the same point. They must go in the same direction, not work against each others. All the short-term objectives the player could have in the game (*Uncovering safer path and checkpoints while exploring, studying and killing a monster, collecting its currency and objects to enhance their character, etc*) must contribute to them both.

- *The goal of the Player is then to explore an hostile city at night, and survive until dawn, which can only rise if they find and kill key NPC ( Boss Battles). All the short term objective aim to raise their chances of survival by making them deadlier.*

### 3- What is Bloodborne's Narrative Identity?

#### 3.1 - Narrative Style : Minimalism

- Commonly, rarity sustain uniqueness, while anything cool always becomes unremarkable after the 1000th time. The game takes this at heart, making its narrative remarkable through its sparseness : almost no music, tight cast, few friendly NPC, short dialogue and cutscenes. Makes them all the more memorable when we encounter them.
- Also, conjointly with this sparseness, Bloodborne has a minimalist approach to its storytelling, a by product of the puzzle-story. What is a minimalist story? Its concept is of a story where both plot and character take a backseat; stories that are more about depicting a specific experience than actually telling a specific story. Why? Because emotion is more potent than Intellect.
- Then, what emotions Bloodborne intends to provoke? Its gothic horror trappings aim towards horror, sadness, confusion, powerlessness, curiosity and guilt. But they chose not to be too specific. Bloodborne provide strong stimulus to generate emotions in its audience, but accepts that each player might respond differently to said stimulus. The Game hold back from influencing the players emotions as much as possible, diminishing the risks of Ludonarrative dissonance, once again with sparseness : no unmanned reactions from the player's character, as little camera work and music as possible... It lets the player feels what he wants to feels This is in total conjunction with the type of avatar chosen for the player to play with : a cypher character.

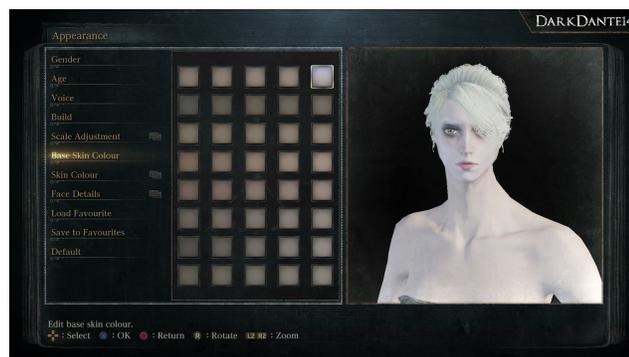
*ex: If you kill the "Maneater Boar" in the sewer, he may drop an item. The Red Ribbon of a little girl you have interacted with before. There is no scripted reaction from the Player's character, no cutscene, no music, no log confirming the horrible truth you are suspecting. What you feel and how you want to react is left to you.*



#### 3.2 - Player / Avatar Synchronicity

- Games know how to draw a player into a role, recognizing the fundamental advantage that games have over other mediums : That the player can be the character. But how much of this avatar's character do you plan, and how much do you leave to the player that will control him? What is the right balance?

- You can have a empty character that the player will fill with his imagination, called a Cypher Character (*Mount&Blade*). A character the player control, but whose history, personality and reactions are out of their hands, a Fully-Defined Character (*Uncharted*). Or something in between, a Player-Influenced Character, where the player can decide at times, what the character choose to do, and so, be (*Mass Effect*)
- The Player's Character of many RPG is a Cypher for the player to customize. The player feels greater ownership, but not a lot of empathy, compared to Fully-Defined Characters or a Player Influenced Character. Their lack of "character" result in an absolute blandness.
- How do you choose then? It all depends of the type of story your game is trying to tell. And From Software chose a Cypher character. Why? Because its weaknesses are in service of the experience.
- The Player's character of Bloodborne is a stranger trapped into Yarnham, a place he knows nothing about, and experimented on to fulfill a task he knows nothing about.
- While Games usually try to make the player feel like a local instead of a tourist in the name of immersion... Bloodborne choose wisely to do the opposite, because that is what we are : an outsider trapped in a place we don't understand. That is what makes the story of Bloodborne is completely adapted to a Cypher Player's Character, because its concept, a stranger trapped into a dangerous place he doesn't understand, is very close to what the player experience through the Gameplay. There is already a total synchronicity of experience and goal between the player and its avatar.
- ex: Just like the player, his avatar doesn't know anybody in the city. When he meet the little girl for the first time before her demise, it is a first time for both the player and the player's character. Their curiosity and caution are probably the same.*
- Actually, granting a personality to the Player's Character would be at the risk of dissonance, should its knowledge and feelings ceased to be aligned with the player's. There is no personality traits to prevent identification within the Cypher, no distance between what the player feels and what he imagine his avatar feels.
- ex: If upon discovering the ribbon inside the "Maneater Boar", your Player's character started to laugh because of a twisted sense of humor, you might be put off, feeling instead sorrow for the girl and contempt for your avatar.*
- But, a Cypher character can be too undefined. Not in his character, but in its concept, that doesn't provide a context for said Cypher to exist : In Bloodborne, we don't know who we are, where we are, how we get there, why we are here and what is our objective. This lack could be contextualized by playing an amnesiac or a new-born. Bloodborne doesn't even try, the player's character has objectives and informations that the player won't ever be privy to. Not understanding a place we are new to, makes sense. Not understanding who we are playing, who we are, impede our immersion : it doesn't make sense and is a Ludonarrative dissonance. Yharnam was always meant to be a mystery to solve and survive. But having a clear grasp on our player's character wouldn't impede this mystery in any way.



### 3.3 - The Non-Protagonist

- Regardless of the kind of Player's Character, the story has to be good. And a Cypher character present challenges : how to build a story around a character with no past, no fixed personality, no clear goal, no hero's journey? From Software's answer : You don't!

- In stories, the "*Main Character*" is the character through whom the audience experiences the story first hand, while the "*Protagonist*" is the prime mover of the plot. It is common for the same character to be both "*the Main Character*" and the "*Protagonist*", making him the hero of the story.

*ex: In "Ghost Recon : Wildlands", the player is the Main Character but Not protagonist of the story. The Deuteragonist are Karen Bowman and El Sueno, around whom the story revolves.*

*ex: The Prince, in "Prince of Persia : the Sands of Time" is both the Main Character and Protagonist*

*ex: In Virtua Tennis, you control the player's character, but only perceive him through a TV Camera recording the tennis match.*

- From Software chose not to make the Player's Character the Protagonist. The stories doesn't revolve around him. He is merely the vehicle through whom we perceive the "stories" of Bloodborne. Again, this is adapted to the concept of the story-puzzle, where most of the Narrative Content already happened, or is happening to others. Our function is to be an investigator that uncover the *unknown*, once again ensuring a synchronicity between the Player and his Avatar.

- In his real life, the player isn't the protagonist of a great Story, he has no hero's journey. He is a participant of a broader narrative, the human race, but only held a tiny part in it. Yet, because he experience the broader narrative through his own perspective, said narrative is framed through himself. That is the same with the Player's character within Yarnham.

- The Player's Character might not be the Protagonist of the stories of Bloodborne, but he is in the unique position to experience them all, being one of the few survivors left to roam in the streets at night. As a witness, participant or investigator, he can jump from story to story, slowly perceiving the larger picture, and providing the player with a breadth of experience.

- It is only by the end of the game that your avatar cease be unrelated in these events, and is now part of the story of Yarnham through its actions, mirroring the mastery of the game the player has slowly gained. And just when your character leaves Yarnham, so does the player since the game ends.

- Miyazaki recognized that in a Game, it is more important to provide the player strong memorable experiences, than making him the center of the plot.

*ex: Father Gascoigne is a monster hunter, going out every night to ensure a safe city for his family. He succumbs to blood-lust and become a monster himself, rabidly killing his wife. If told, his younger daughter will refuse to believe it and seek them out. She encounters a monster that kills her, prompting her elder sister, the last surviving member of the family, to take her own life. So ends the story of Father Gascoigne, who destroyed his family because of his zealousness to kill those who would do them harm.*

*What is the part of the player? He kills Father Gascoigne, bring news of his crime to his relatives and bear witness to the inevitable fall of his family. He has a secondary role.*

### 3.4 - Narrative Content :

- What is a story? It is a question raised by a situation, interesting enough that the audience will stick to the end to learn the answer. Bloodborne tell four kind of stories at once all through the game :

1- The Player story, what was planned for the player himself to feel, learn and struggle at while playing the game. Ultimately, the question asked is : *Can the Player take control of this hostile setting and beat the game?*

ex: Can he figure out how to beat Father Gascoigne, the first antropomorphic boss of the game?

2- The Player's character Story, depicting what is happening to their avatar through the night. Most of the game is about this story, yet, it is the most opaque of the game stories, mostly told by the cutscenes. This story benefits the less from the opacity of Bloodborne, impeding the total identification a cypher player character is meant to provide.

Regardless, the question it asks being : *Can he survive the Night of the Hunt?*

ex: Can he kill Father Gascoigne, a "Hunter" turned beast, who tries to slay him?

3- The World story, the lore of past events but must be uncovered to understand the context. That is the less dynamic, but the most developed through an extensive world-building. Every answer add a piece to a larger canevas, aiming to answer : *What led this city to its downfall?*

ex: What caused the people of the city, hunters like Father Gascoigne included, to turn into beasts?

4- The NPC stories, short side stories about the others inhabitants of the city. Their stories are the most dynamic, with branching narrative : *Who are they and what happens to them on that night once we cross their path?*

ex: What happened to Gascoigne's family on the night you fought him?

- How does From Software unify all these narratives? Through the Player's Character perspective, the only character in the game able to witness them all, and connect them into a single picture. The player's character is the only sane person allowed to roam in the infected streets of Yarnham, because only he has the skills to survive its dangers.

ex: Others NPC that met Gascoigne died, only you were strong enough to trigger his transformation into a beast, and report his fate to his relatives should you care to.



### 3.5 - Story's function

- What is the function of Bloodborne story within the game? What benefit does the game get from having one?
- Some game don't need a story to justify their content (ex: *Tetris*). Other needs a Premise to tie all the different parts and design choices together, while at the same time excusing them. It enhances the immersion (ex: *Street Fighter 1* ) But other games considers their story to be a reward. The player will continue to play because he wants to know how the story ends, and is given part of it at each success. (ex: *Assassin's Creed*)
- Bloodborne goes even further. It is a story puzzle. Gameplay r elated successes won't be rewarded by chunks of the story, but by clues. The sense of satisfaction comes from gathering enough pieces of the puzzle to be able to find out the plot. Story is part of the Gameplay. That is one of the benefits
- The delivery of a story matters more than the story itself. That's why we enjoy watching a movie more than reading its resume. Story puzzle aren't yet widely spread within the medium. Their unique delivery contribute to the strong identity of Bloodborne, the rest of the "Souls Games" since Demon Souls. That is another benefit. Furthermore, it is what the audience want from this game. All From Software could do, is aim to do it better than previously.

### 3.6 - Challenge of the Narrative : Interpretive Story

- The Puzzle Story of Bloodborne is flawed... on purpose. It lacks a lot of pieces, is half-told.
- Myazaki explained that as a child, he read novels in languages he didn't mastered, and so would allow his imagination to fill in the blanks. He wanted to replicate this process with Bloodborne. The only story elements that made it to the game were those needed for the players to build their interpretations upon. No storyline would be ever enforced upon the player, and neither any official statements about the 'true' story of the game.
- The player must collect the clues, fill in the blanks with its theories, co-authoring the narrative. It doesn't end when the player put the pad down, he will keep on thinking about it. Bloodborne ends up by being as much a Mystery Novel than a Gothic Horror because of it.
- The opacity of the story has a side benefit to the game : thanks to it, any Cut content isn't felt that much, unlike some other games whose narrative felt trounced (ex : Kotor 2)

### 3.7 - Paralell of Gameplay and Narrative :

- Even if the story and the gameplay aren't intertwined, they still support each others, because they mirror each others. Gameplay is at the service of the story.  
*ex: At the start of the game, the character's player doesn't understand what is happening to him or what happened to Yarnham. And to the player, nothing is explained about the gameplay : no tutorial, no game manual, no given-goal. He is just as lost as his avatar. On the first encounter with an enemy, the player doesn't know how to play to defeat him, just like the player, an untrained civilian, doesn't know how to slay a monster.*
- Unbeknown to the player, there are also a lot of hidden stats and triggers that play off the gameplay and the narrative :  
*ex: The more you die, the longer the loading screen to your checkpoint takes, symbolising how hard it is becoming for your avatar to come back from death.*

*ex: The stat "Insight", representing the amount of inhuman knowledge acquired is covertly raised whenever the player witness something otherworldly (a monster, a human transforming into a monster, a alien location.) The more the player explore the game, the more "Insight" will rise*

- Even the gameplay and the incomplete story-puzzle are both designed around the same idea : a challenge is fun, and the more frustrating the challenge, the greater sense of satisfaction will the player feel once he succeed. The demanding and frustrating progression is a result of the player investment. Nothing is given, it must be earned  
*ex: Playing all the game's content after multiple playthrough won't tell the player the story, just give him more clues. He has to do the work by himself, without a way to know if he is wrong or right apart from his own judgment.*

### 3.8 - Flawed Player's Agency :

- What effect has an obscure storytelling upon the player's agency?
- What is player's agency? It means that the player has control over their own player's character's decisions, that those decisions have consequences within the game world, and that the player is informed to anticipate what those consequences might be before making them. The player feel immersed, in control, that he has an impact.
- Player's agency isn't what make or break a game, but it is one of the staples of the RPG genre. How does Bloodborne delivers? In a RPG, the player expects quite a bit of agency :
  - *A lot of Character customization, from its apperance, stats and weapons.*
  - *Most of time, the game is played in real-time. The player does what he wants, when he wants*
  - *Many elements of the setting are interactive and destructible, revealing paths or items*
  - *Every character can be fought and killed. Some will reappear after that if they are essential for the rest of the game.*
  - *Sometimes, the Players will be asked to make choose among actions or answers while interacting with a NPC. These choices aren't constrained by a morality or alignment system. And their answers may generates narrative content, and result in branching Storylines. Inaction is registered as an answer, and might even have a more positive outcome than choosing. It gives the players the impression that the world pays attention to what they do.*
- The problem is that in Bloodborne, most of the player's choices aren't informed, impeding their agency upon the game. From using the items, choosing dialogues options or interacting with the environment... they have no idea what their actions will result in, or sometimes what they entail, it is very obscure. And if they do, the end result is somewhat different than what they expected. They don't feel cheated, because their choices are entertaining, result in very different outcomes and match the player's character (the ignorant)... but it gets frustrating to only understand their decisions by their consequences. But again, it is on purpose from "From Software". The game is an horror game, we afraid on our first playthrough of making any decision, because we don't know if they will do us harm or not. Yet, we must.
- Branching narrative can be a vital opportunity for the players, to define what kind of person their Cypher Character is. Bloodborne prevents the player to define their cypher's character through them, to it's detriment.

- It is only after multiple playthrough or by reading online walkthrough that the players gain real agency over the narrative.

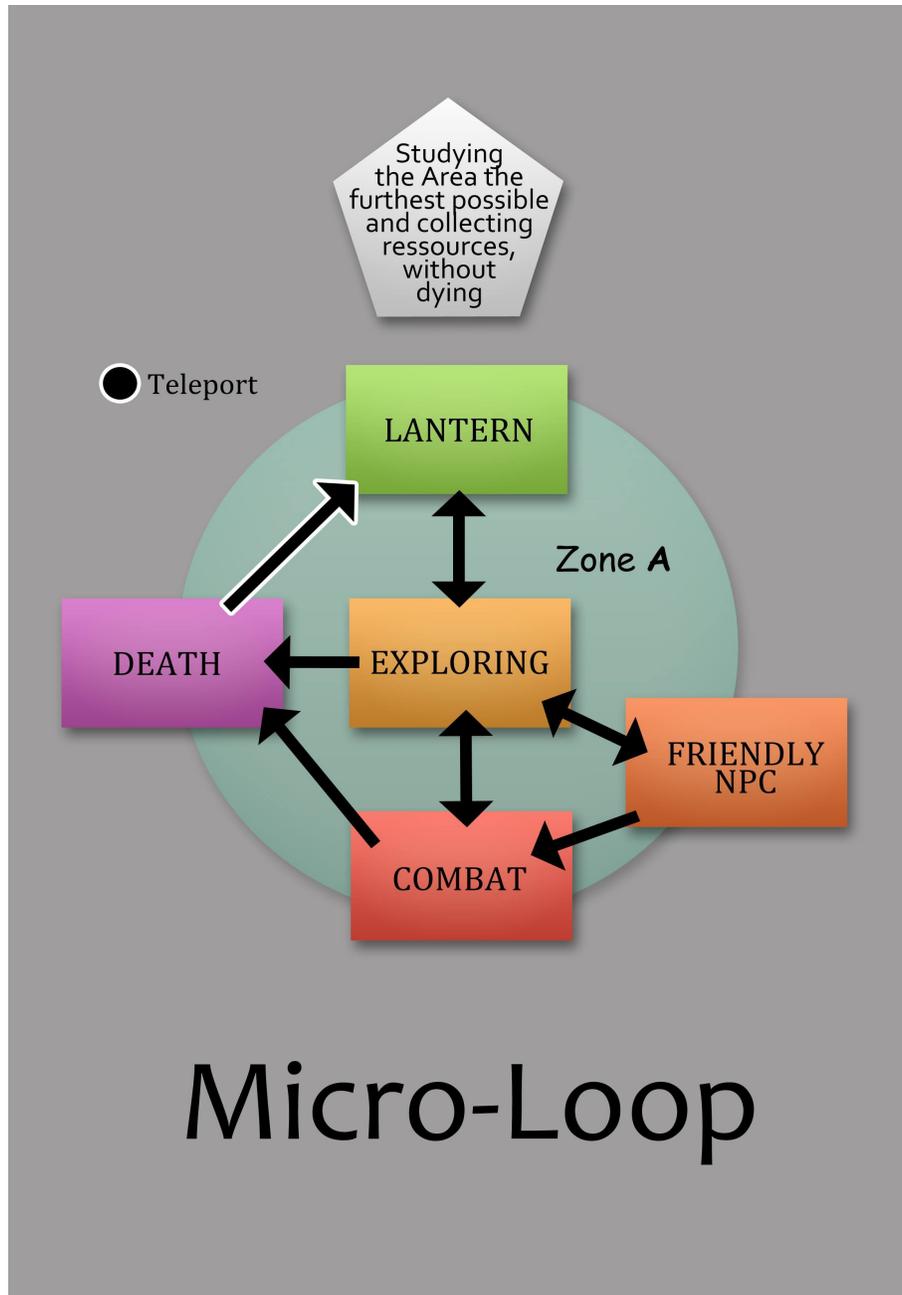
*ex: A NPC called Annelise ask you to kneel and join her covenant. As a player, you have no idea what this covenant is, what will be the consequences of accepting or refusing. Yet, you must back a choice, blindly.*



## 4- Micro Narrative Devices

### 4.1 - The Game Loops

A set of actions the players engage into repeatedly, in a looping sequence, until the completion of the game. Knowing them allows to know when and where to deliver the narrative content, and synergize it with the gameplay.



#### 4.2 - Core Game Loop : Micro

- The Lanterns are the starting points. That is where the player can access or exit an area. It is where the player's character appears, and the last lantern interacted is where he will reappear upon death. The collected currency can be safely stored away at a lantern.
- The player has no map, no objective. He can only explore the zone around the Lantern, further and further away. He will find paths steering his roaming and resources to collect. But it is in hostile environments filled with traps and enemies that impede the player's progression. Until he reaches a Lantern, how much can the player collect and discover about the area without dying? That's his challenge.
- There are a few friendly NPC through the games, that can be killed should the player choose to. You can talk to them to earn resources, learn about the lore or your objectives. A few give you choices resulting in a branching storyline. And the player's answer may turn them hostile.
- Most of the NPC are hostiles in the game. They can kill you in 2 or 3 strokes, often outnumber you and many exploit the environment (ambush you or exploit a narrow corridor to shoot you from a distance) There is a real paranoia, every corner is a potential threat, so the player must learn their placement and patterns to evade or kill them. Which is an ongoing struggle, stronger new enemies are introduced at a regular basis. Once killed, an enemy will drop currency and sometimes items, and can be farmed for it. An interesting feature to make players aggressive, is that after being damaged, they can regain a portion of their lives by striking an enemy immediately (*the feeling of fighting for one's life*).
- When the player loses all its health, he is sent back to the last lantern interacted with, and apart from the bosses, all traps and enemies are reset. All the currency the player had collected, but not deposited at a Lantern, is dropped. It's possible to reclaim it if he is able to fight his way back to the same location, but should he succumb a second time, these hard-won currencies are lost forever.

#### 4.3 - The Mystery Box :

- Story puzzle can be quickly boring if they fail to grasp the attention of the player. He must want to find answers through all the game. But how to entice the player to do so? How long until he gets bored to link the clues?
- The Hook is a very well known narrative device. This game is an ongoing series of hooks, meant to stroke the player's curiosity. J.J Abrams dubbed this mechanic the mystery box : every information or answer given must raise more questions, sustaining the curiosity of the audience. They will just keep on following the thread.
- The Mystery Box is a quite fitting choice of an Horror Game. The player is faced with the unknown, he seeks to survive. From the start, he suffers from a lack of knowledge, lack of information, lack of currency, everything is taken from the player to make him feel that he needs it back and spend hours playing and playing to fill this need.

#### 4.4 - On Engagement Loops :

- How to ensure that the player will keep playing the game? By keeping him engaged in it again, and again. It is like a looping trap. There are four basic elements on every one of these loops:
  1. Motivation : *The player must have a motivation to perform an action in the game.*

2. Action : *The player must perform said action, interacting with the game.*
3. Waiting : *The player must wait a certain amount of time, from a milisecond to... undefined. Can be even weeks.*
4. Feedback : *After the waiting, the player gets specific feedback for the performed action. This feedback must be significant enough to motivate the player to start a new loop.*  
- In a game where it is up to the player to put story together, how to hook him up on said story? By making the collect of story clues engaging. And that is performed by making the engagment loop of the story running along to the engagment loops of the gameplay. Consider how the three follwing loops are working together :

#### 4.5 - Investigation Engagment Loop :

1. Motivation : *The motivation here is to discover, to know something, because you don't know anything about the game, story-wise and gameplay-wise. As long as you keep playing, you discover new things, but you don't have any idea who they are or what are they doing there. The interpretation of the story clues is left to the player, out of the hands of the game.*
2. Action : *You start by going out and investigating the city, looking for clues for the Story-Puzzle. Every detail count : look of ennemies, locations of items, design of buildings, etc...*
3. Waiting : *There is no standard waiting time there. While investigating ennemies may kill you, starting a Dying Loop, and as long as you haven't solved it, you won't progress and discover new content. Or maybe you haven't figured out how to unlock the next zone, or found the path leading to it.*
4. Feedback : *You find something story-clue : new location, new enemy, new piece of Lore, than answers the questions raised by the previous story clue, but raise new ones, restarting the loop.*

#### 4.6 - Dying Engagment loop :

1. Motivation : *After you die, you respawn at the last lantern you interacted with. The motivation is then to go to the place you died (which can be really far) and recover all the currency you had, now dropped where you fell. You took huge risks to collect it by killing ennemies, and without it, you can't enhance your character, allowing you to stand up against the increasingly dangerous ennemies.*
2. Action : *You have to go where you died without dying in the process, and even collect new currency on the way. If you die, you loose all the dropped currency for good.*
3. Waiting : *You have to rethread again all the path from the Lantern to where you died. The problem is that all the ennemies you killed before have respawned too, so you can die again anywhere on this path.*
4. Feedback : *If you reach your dying spot, you can recover the dropped currency and fight the enemy that previously killed you (maybe dying again) or you can't reach that spot because something else kills you. In these cases, you loose all the dropped currency for good... but drop all the new currecny you collected on the way, restarting this loop. But if you succeed, you resume the Investigation loop.*

#### 4.7 - Combat Engagment loop :

1. Motivation : *While on the Investigation Loop, you thought you mastered combat and were in control, but your assumption is broken down when you're killed by an enemy you haven't studied properly, or yet if you meet a new one. You start the Dying Loop.*
2. Action : *Following the dying loop, you have to go where you died, to face this enemy again, and apply what defeat taught you to triumph (wrong weapon, a pattern to learn, stats no high enough)*
3. Waiting : *The time is the same as the Dying loop : how long it take you to go back there.*
4. Feedback : *Now that you know better this enemy, you either win and resume the Investigation Loop or die again, restarting both the Combat and Dying loop.*

#### 4.8 - Item's descriptions :

- Instead of creating cutscenes and additional NPC to tell you about this world, From Software used something they already had in profusion : items. They are a staple of the RPG genre, you always find a lot of them all over the game.
- There is no codex in the game to resume all the Lore invented by the writers. Instead, each item acts as an entry of a codex : a lengthy description of the object's meaning and history, revealing aspects of the Lore. This is the prime tool used to tell the story of Bloodborne. Most of it's story clues are delivered this way.
- There are hundreds of items in the game, each one an opportunity to grant more context to the player, compared to the 40 NPC (enemies included) delivering a few lines of dialogue.
- The location of items also provide clues (*ex : A unique item in a possession of a NPC, found later in the belly of a monster, suggest that said NPC has been eaten*)  
*ex : A little girl ask you to locate her mother, who left to meet her husband without her music box. The music box description says "A small music box received from a young Yharnam girl. Plays a song shared by her mother and father. Inside the lid is a small scrap of paper, perhaps an old message. Two names can be made out, however faintly, Viola and Gascoigne."*
- ex : Near the rabid Father Gascoigne is the corpse of a lady, unlike the other he killed. She has an item you can take. Its description being : "A woman's bright-red brooch, engraved with the name Viola. Perhaps the jewel is a gift from a hunter." It suggest that this dead lady is the missing mother, who was looking for her husband, the hunter Gascoigne.*
- During each loading screen, some items and their lore are displayed, even if the player doesn't own them, granting him informations.  
*ex : Even before meeting Father Gascoigne, you may have the description of items he owns during the loading screen. Each one has a description that may inform you on his identity when you will meet him, like the "Hunter's Axe" that identify him as a Hunter slaying beasts.*



#### 4.9 - NPC's Behavior :

- Your actions can trigger some behaviors from the NPC, revealing more about them : playing a music-box to an enemy makes him cry because it belonged to its relative, talking to a NPC to see another one spying on your conversation out of jealousy, being attacked by a once friendly NPC after joining a faction...

ex : Should you play the music box given by the little girl, the one her mother played for her daddy, near Father Gascoigne, he will start to hurt and cry instead of attacking you. He is the only NPC in the game affected in such a way, confirming that he is the daddy in question. You can exploit this moment of weakness in battle to attack him

#### 4.10 - Voice Over :

- Voices can be heard in the background. Lines can be spoken in battle by your enemies... and also by the non-hostile NPC. They are triggered by your actions, or sometimes solely by your proximity.

ex : While fighting Yarnham citizens, they will say sentences such as "*Cursed beast!*" or "*You plague-ridden rat!*". Father Gascoigne may utter "*Too Proud to show your true face eh? But what a sporting hunt, it was!*" when he kills you. They all reveal that in their mind, you are a beast to hunt, foreshadowing the fact that the Hunters are future-beasts, a truth that Gascoigne expose when he becomes more and more rabid during your fight with him, until he transforms into a monster.

#### 4.11 - Multiplayer Messages :

- An interesting feature is that even if the game is single-player, when connected online, Players can leave messages along the game for other player to find. Do you trust these messages? Some players seek to leave tips, but others enjoy dooming their fellow players  
ex : A player can write to "*play the music box*" when facing Gascoigne, a worthy advice, but others may tell you to "*trust the Suspicious Beggar*", a friendly NPC who is in fact an hostile beast like Gascoigne

#### 4.12 - Environmental Storytelling :

- The mood, music and look of the world tell us plainly in which kind of story we are. The Gothic Horror genre is laid bare. The Game doesn't cheat with the player's expectations. (There is nothing worse than ending up with a product betraying what we expected from its purchase) but he makes sure to deliver more than promised.

Bloodborne does Gothic Horror, but try to add a new spin on it to make it stand out : *Werewolves are skinny and loosing their furs, zombies have been pressed together in communal graves until they became a single bloating creature, coffin have been chained to prevent the deads from rising, the schythe can transform into a sword at will, etc.*

- That's swell, but how does it serve the narrative?

- Instead of managing the player's attention toward important clues with crude narrative device (a floating icons or marker on a map) the game choose instead to be appealing by itself. The Aesthetic of the game is so well made that world couldn't be uninteresting if it tried, a key component for exploration. We seek new places, pay attention to what we see, and spot clues because we want to look, not because we are told to do so.

- The various locations of the game have been filled with details : Paintings of lost dynasties, crest found on a corpse, mutants burning on pyre, human skulls that have

changed shape, statues of monsters. The Setting tell us very much about the story and lore by itself, visually, without the need of cutscene or text. The players are in a city that is experiencing a cataclysm. Every window, building, and alley is part of that cataclysm, giving us clues about what happened.

*ex : On your way to Father Gascoigne, you can see that the streets are filled with pires, and the hostiles NPC, armed with torches, gathering around them. Should you pay attentions to the pires, you will see that some burn humans, but others, some hybrid between a man and the first monster faced in the game, the wolf-beast. It suggest that the ennemies are hunting humans that may transform into beasts. Question is : why are they hostile to you then?*

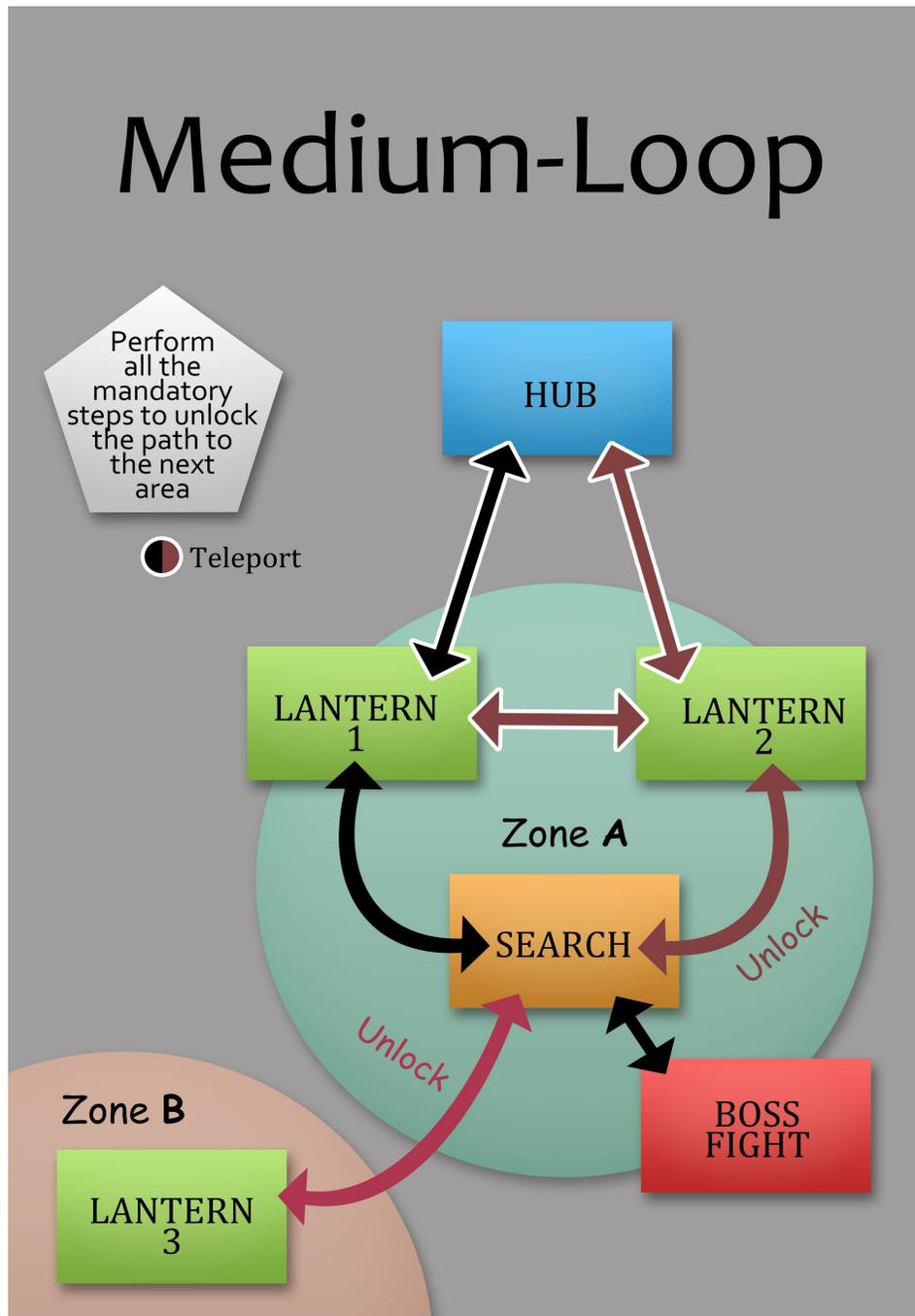
- Many segments of the game happen in Dreams, where the narrative, characters, set and art direction can be justifiably more symbolic.

*ex: Your journey into mystery is physically represented : The only way to unfold the city's lore further and further back in time, is to go deeper into the city and night as the game, until you go under its very foundations, and even further, into dream dimensions. Even your ennemies become less and less antropomorphic as you distance yourself from the normal world.*

*ex : The Old Hunter DLC push this idea even further and makes you walk backwards in time as you progress through the environment,. First witnessing the more recent iteration of the locale, and understanding what happened as you go deeper and deepeer through the DLC, discovering the older locale's iterations.*



## 5- Medium Narrative Devices



### 5.1 - Core Game Loop : Medium

- There is no marker or in game map to assist the player. He must by himself search a zone to understand its layout, plan the safest paths, discover its points of interest (NPC, Checkpoints, Bosses) and how to leave this zone for the next one.

- There are a lots of ennemies, but they can be evaded if the player wants to. And some bosses fights are the same, optionals. But some are mandatory, to trigger events, open paths or gain objects necessary to continue exploring the zone or unlock another zone altogether. Seeking these bosses and defeating them is the only way forward to end the "night of the hunt."

- The Lanterns are the checkpoints. Until the player find and light them, they are without effect. Once unlocked, they can be used to teleport the player's character to the Hub or to another lighted Lantern, without risking to loose health, ressources and currency. There are around thirty of them in the whole game, and are the most important points of interest to locate to maximize the survival of the player's character.

- The Hub is the Hunter's dream, a pocket dimension. It is the only spot where the player can safely spend his currency to buy equipments, enhance said equipments or his own stats, maximizing his survival. From this Hub, he can teleport to any checkpoint previously unlocked in the game

### 5.2 - Cutscene :

- Most of the time, the player is in control of the camera. The game is in Third person to grant him both the ability to properly scrutinize his avatar's surroundings, and also comfortable spatial awareness for melee fights. He is seeing the world as his avatar can. It is up to him to notice the important elements, and might even miss them if he doesn't pay attention, sometimes at the cost of his life.

- Then, there are these moments where the player loose control over where his attention lies. These are the few custscenes of the game, and among them, even fewer try to deliver a story. Then, what are they used to?

- *To introduce a significant location, or NPC, pinpointing the player's attention.*

- *To showcase lasting non-playable narrative segments, such as Intro-Video or Visions or the Endings*

- *To show the player events that the game can't risk him missing, such as new path appearing or alterations of the setting.*

- *To take control of the Avatar off its player's hand during moment his agency could impede the narrative : being pushed of a cliff to another level, being taken by a carriage to another place, interacting with an object regardless of the player's will.*

- These cutscenes always depict things that our avatar witness. We never see things that the player's character wouldn't be able to, like a conversation between NPC miles away. As said before, he might not be the protagonist, but he is P.O.V Character.

ex : Father Gascoigne into video show us a strange man hacking corpses on the floor, and then, attacking you. Because of the cutscene, we aren't given the opportunity to flee or strike first. A stage is being set there, a boss fight. We pay attention to him, we feel that this enemy isn't like the others.



### 5.3 - Use of Soundtrack :

- In accordance with the minimalist intent, there is only music looped during :

1- *The Title Screen, where we want to condition the player for the mood of the game before he starts to play it*

2- *The Hunter's Dream Hub, the "home" of the player's character, the only place where he is supposed to be safe. And a beautiful and sad music can be heard?*

3- *The Bosses Battle, where we want the player to feel afraid, excited and energized. Each Boss has its own unique battle music, that breaks the silence and inform the player that... yes, this is it, a fight that matters more than the others.*

- Silence and sound bring tension in the game. We try to be as silent as possible to be unnoticed by enemies. We try to hear the sound they make when coming into a new area, hoping to detect them even if we can't see them.

### 5.4 - Branching Storylines :

- In Bloodborne, the Branching Storylines are optional content, only present within the side narratives, like the NPC's stories or the alternative endings of the Player's Character story. The mandatory events leading to game completion still unfolds linearly regardless of these choices, there is no game-over. Since these narratives are optional, they don't reward the player with significant game-related perks. Regardless of their issue, these storylines aim more toward emotional impact instead of tangible impact on the gameplay.

- There is a great deal of tension during branching dialogues, because your answer is definite. The game has an auto-save system that prevent the player to try out other branches without starting a whole new playthrough. Also, each Branch take care of unveiling only part of its narrative, motivating the players to explore the other options during consequent playthrough to finally get the whole picture.

Bloodborne benefit from its Branching Storylines by motivating the player to start new playthrough to gain more pieces of the story puzzle.

ex: *Let's take the Yarnham's girl branching narrative as an exemple*

#### Common Trunk

1- *You meet a little girl whose mother has gone missing while looking for her husband. But she left without a Music Box she usually plays for him.*

2- *After defeating Father Gascoigne (who all clues identify as the father), you can find the corpse of the mother, and take her brooch as proof of her demise*

#### Branch A

3A- *You can give the Brooch to the girl, informing her of the death of her mother.*

4A- *Later, should you kill the "Maneater Pig" in the sewers, he will drop an item : the little girl ribbon. She refused to believe you and he ate her on her search.*

5A- *You meet her elder sister, worried when she came home to see her little sister missing. You can give her her little sister ribbon, informing her of her fate.*

6A- *On your next visit, the elder sister killed herself out of grief*

#### Branch B

3B- *You can withhold the Brooch, and instead tell the girl to go to the Chapel where others survivors are cooped up.*

4B- *Later, should you kill the "Maneater Pig" in the sewers, he will drop an item : the little girl ribbon. He ate her on her way to the Chapel.*

*5B- You meet her elder sister, worried when she came home to see her little sister missing. You can give her her little sister ribbon, informing her of her fate.*

*6B- On your next visit, the elder sister killed herself out of grief*

#### Branch C

*3C- You can withhold the Brooch, and instead tell the girl to go to the Clinic, supposedly a safe place*

*4C- Later, should you visit the clinic, you will fight the mutated patients, her among them.*

#### Branch D

*3D- You can choose not to tell her anything at all. Doing nothing.*

*4D- She will disappear, victim of an unknown fate.*

- We can note that the result of the player's choices never unfold real time in front of them (You don't witness the little girl taking off to the sewers, or the elder sister suicide), they can only discover its aftermath. Why? Because these plot points weren't meant for the player to have any agency over, and so, must happens off-screen to avoid Ludonarrative Dissonance. As such, the player doesn't feel tricked, because the game never overtly took agency out of its hands to complete its story. The illusion of freedom and agency is preserved by him not being there during the events he would have wanted to affect. He never had his avatar's control taken from him, like during a cutscene, and he knows that the events that transpired were the result of something he did.



### 5.5 - Missed Opportunity : Social Interactions

- If a game creates an emotional or intellectual need within the player, then it has to provide catharsis at one point or the other. It has to answer the need it created.

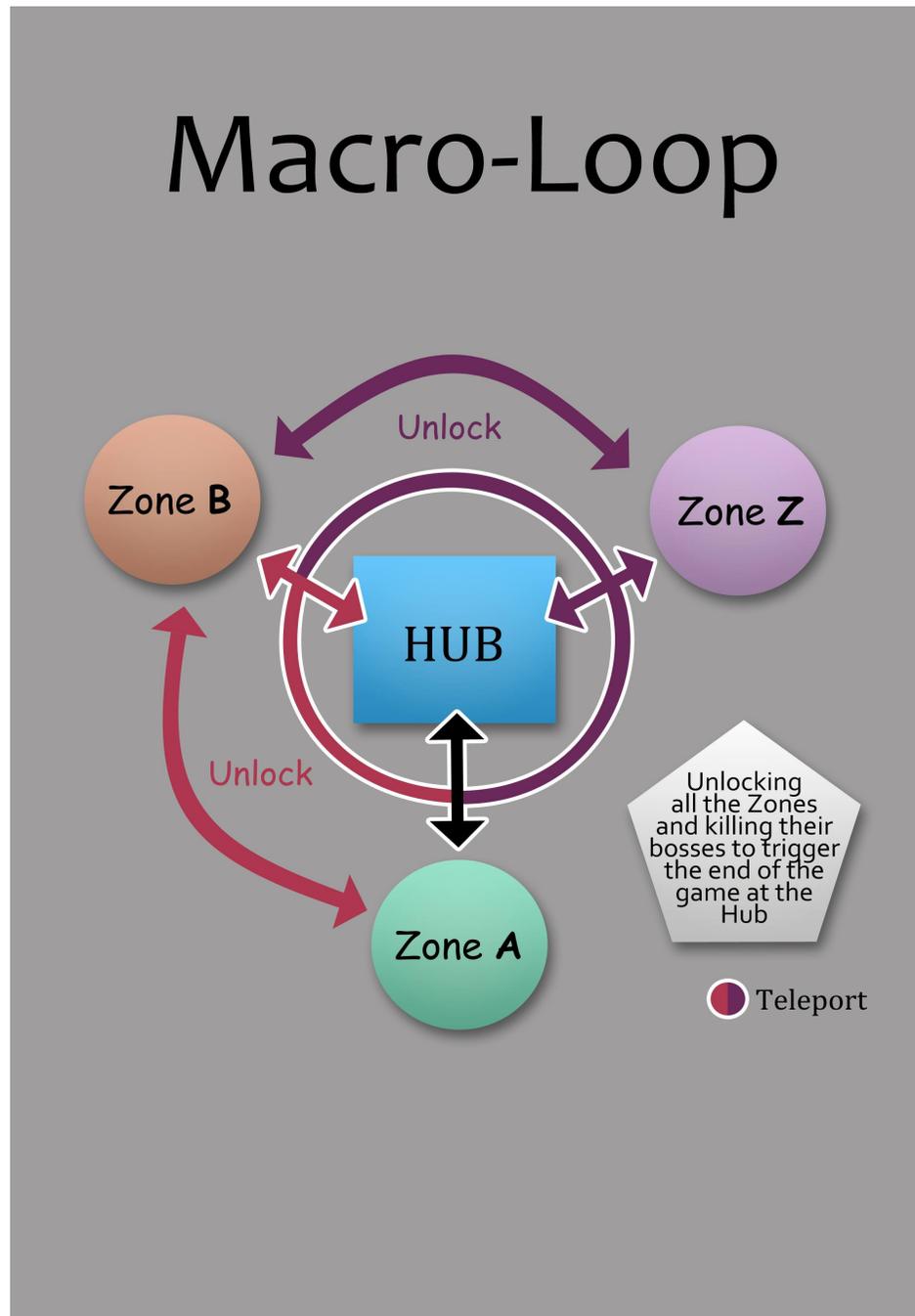
- There is truly a missed opportunity in the interaction with the non-hostile NPC. The world of Bloodborne is so hostile, that you are very happy to meet these friendly NPC. They are so singular and rare that they already feel special to the player. You crave answers about the city, about them. You crave interactions and relationship with other people. And if this game creates this need, it doesn't fulfill it at any point. The interactions with the NPC are so limited that we end up deprived of any meaningful relationship : The dialogues are sparse, their character too vague, their actions too

passive, our relationship with them too static. They appear too little in the game, and have too little to share with us to fulfill their potential.

Seeing how efficient their little stories already are, we can only imagine how potent they would have been with more meaningful content. Expanding our emotional and intellectual investment in these NPC would have been to the utter benefit of their storylines, and the immersion of the player



## 6- Macro Narrative Devices



### 6.1 - Core Game Loop : Macro

- The game is composed of interconnected zones, allowing the player to pass through them and come back later at his leisure. Some paths between zones must be unlocked (see Medium Loop), allowing the developers to regulate the player's progression through the game. Only after unlocking all the zones and killing key bosses in them can the player trigger the end of the game, at the Hub.
- Then, a New Game +, or a New Game ++ can be started



### 6.3 - Narrative Triggers :

- Let's consider the Game loop for an instant :
  - *The Avatar can move real-time through constraining streets, unlocking save-points, alternative path, crossroads and other areas as they further their exploration.*
  - *Along the way, they will meet hostile NPC that impede their exploration, and will be steered toward the Bosses they need to beat.*
  - *Killing a Boss unlock new areas leading to other Bosses, furthering the character progress through the game.*
  - *Upon death, the avatar is moved back within its exploration, back to the last save-point activated. He has to brave again all the dangers to reach the location where he fell.*
  - *Once the player has unlocked all the areas and killed all the Bosses, he can choose one story-ending among many, completing the game.*
  - It becomes very clear that the only mandatory player's actions the Narrative Designer can use to trigger plot points are : Fighting the Bosses, passing through key locations, and the "ending-choice". All other plot points triggered in a different manners will be optional content.
- ex: If you find the red-ribbon of the little girl and bring it back to her sister, proving her passing, the older sister will have killed herself. This is an optional content.*
- ex: Killing "Rom the Vacous Spider", a mandatory boss located on a lake, will shift the game to a new world state. This is no optional content.*

### 6.4 - World States

- The moon phases are world-states, triggered by mandatory events during the game. Some zones, bosses, secrets, quests and events can only be accessed during a specific moon-phase.
  - A new moon phase is usually when all the storylines are pushed forward through their narrative, and as such, are triggered away from all the storylines they affect to preserve the illusion of agency mentioned before.
  - Storywise (not real-time), the sky's display display represent how far into the night of the hunt your character is, and how close the player is to the game's completion. On further replays, it is a great indicator of which content is available at the moment.
- ex: Killing "Rom the Vacous Spider", a boss located away from friendly NPC, advance the game to the "Blood-Moon World State". By then, unstarted NPC storylines are locked, new ennemies are added in known areas. If you started the Little Girl's storyline, only then will appear the little girl's older sister at their house, wondering where her cadet went.*



### 6.5 - Narrativeless Playthrough :

- What happens if the player fail to solve the story puzzle, or is just not interested in doing so?
- Nothing. Even plagued by incomprehension over "what the hell is going on", the player's progression isn't impeded. The story is a plus, not a requirement. Avoiding all the narrative content can be perceived as a perks by players that don't care about the story or want to skip it after many playthrough. The game acknowledge that. So even if missing the story content is a penalty in itself for some players, it has never any gameplay penalties for all of them. It goes against the tendency of the moment, to meld story and gameplay as much as possible.
- The game still manages to be engaging without its story, through gameplay, mood and design alone, a testimony to its quality. Even without understanding the plot, or aiming to, the game stays playable, and more importantly, enjoyable. Its gameplay and objective (killing the Bosses) aren't obscured from the player.

*ex: Once killed, father Gascoigne drops a key unlocking the next area. No need to understand who was that guy to unlock the door and go further*

### 6.6 - Optional Content and Replayability :

- The RPG and Exploration intentions led From Software to implement a lot of optional content within the game : character customization, easter eggs, variety of equipment, optional bosses, alternative paths, hidden content, procedurally generated areas, branching storylines, alternative endings, unlockable ending, DLC... But what is the point of having content that only a fraction of players will witness?
- The mistake is of seeing it as something to be collected, when in fact, they are options to be selected. Each option customizing the narrative in a way or another.
- In Bloodborne, Death is never an endgame, it never resets the game and its narrative further back in time. Every choice you have made is still made. This system ensure that in face of a branching narrative, players won't abuse a save system to avoid the consequences of a bad choice, or to explore other options without having to start a new playthrough. The frustrations of a ill-made decision, and curiosity over alternate options are what motivate players to start a new playthrough.
- The Game is shorter than the previous "Souls Games", and the existence of the New Game + and New Game ++ indicate something crucial about the game : it is meant to be played more than once. None of its content can be witnessed in one playthrough.
- The first playthrough is only here to educate the player. He tries to figure out the gameplay and story. He misses a lot of content. He experiments with options that he doesn't understand. That is only by playing again, and again, trying the different combinations, that he figures out what they do. That is the only way to understand the story, and take control of the narrative.
- After multiple playthroughs, the player will know the rules and start to take control of the story, and make it unfold as he intends to, by choosing the appropriate options. The goal isn't anymore to finish the game, but to change the path leading to its end. To tell the story he wishes to tell.
- The average playing time is of 40 hours on the first playthrough, and is reduced by more than half on the following ones, showing that this process grow easier as it goes on.



## **7- Conclusion**

- Bloodborne provides a much more cohesive and focused story than the previous "Souls Games". But again, From Software was more interested in providing a unique experience than delivering a clear and well crafted narration. It isn't bad Storytelling, it just stimulates different narrative muscles both for the creators and the players. The many essays and analysis videos showed that there is an audience really invested into this story, enjoying its peculiar delivery. While many games try to be more like movies, Bloodborne aimed to tell story in a way only a game could, pushing the medium forward. And in my humble opinion, this is a direction worth learning from.