# Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

TAHA ALSARHAN

Affiliation: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Pécs, Hungary
Email: tahaalsarhan2@gmail.com

## Abstract

This study examines player agency and ethical decision-making in Lovecraftian-inspired role-playing games (RPGs) as a means of engaging with H.P. Lovecraft's themes and introducing players to occultism. While Lovecraft's works often center on cosmic horror and existential dread rather than explicit ethical dilemmas, these games expand on his ideas by incorporating moral complexities into their narratives. By granting players agency, these games enable users to make challenging decisions and form personal bonds with characters, enriching their appreciation of the mystical and psychological themes drawn from Lovecraft's mythos. Games like *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* not only provide established fans with interactive ways to explore Lovecraftian concepts but also introduce new audiences to these themes, fostering a richer appreciation of the genre. This study examines how Lovecraftian RPGs build upon and reinterpret his ideas, offering players a dynamic medium to engage with cosmic horror, moral ambiguity, and occult motifs.

**Keywords:** occult, role-playing, ethical, Lovecraft, video games

## Introduction

H.P. Lovecraft's influence extends far beyond horror, exploring the intersection of cosmic terror and forbidden knowledge. Lovecraft's works focus predominantly on witnessing the incomprehensible horrors of the cosmos, presenting a detached, observational perspective rather than an active engagement with ethical dilemmas. However, Lovecraftian-inspired video games extend this framework by incorporating moral decision-making

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

136

into their narratives, offering players new ways to grapple with the thematic essence of cosmic horror. These RPGs empower players to influence the narrative through meaningful choices. By actively engaging with these ethical dilemmas, individuals strengthen their connection to the narrative and gain a deeper understanding of the occult elements that permeate Lovecraft's literary works.

To examine how Lovecraftian-inspired video games reinterpret the themes of H.P. Lovecraft's works, this study employs a dual-case approach, analyzing *Bloodborne* (2015) and *Sunless Sea* (2014) through thematic and narrative frameworks. These games were chosen for their distinct portrayals of cosmic horror, moral ambiguity, and occult knowledge, illustrating complementary approaches to adapting Lovecraftian storytelling. Drawing on Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, the analysis explores how player agency transforms passive consumption into active participation, enabling players to engage with moral dilemmas and shape the narrative. Insights from David Punter and Glennis Byron's work on Gothic literature provide context for understanding how *Bloodborne* incorporates Gothic tropes, such as decayed settings, isolation, and psychological torment, while *Sunless Sea* leverages narrative-driven exploration to evoke themes of existential dread and moral complexity. Riordan Frost's discussion of role-playing games as a unique form of interactive fiction highlights how these games blend narrative progression with player autonomy, a point reinforced by Christopher Bartel's argument that moral decision-making in video games allows players to confront ethical concerns within controlled, fictional environments. By applying these perspectives, this study demonstrates how *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* reinterpret Lovecraft's themes, shifting the focus from detached observation to active moral and existential engagement through interactive media.

First, an understanding of what makes a video game fiction and how it incites human reactions. Allan Hazlett clarifies in his article "How to Defend Responsive Moralism" that "novels, plays, many films, as well as many paintings—any work of art that intuitively tells a story" (Hazlett, 2009, p. 244). Similar to that sentiment, Lovecraftian RPGs embody a synthesis of creative manifestation and narrative construction, wherein the interaction between visual elements, storytelling, and player autonomy culminates in the creation of an engrossing narrative. These games immerse players in narratives combining cosmic horror, moral complexity, and supernatural mystery, creating the same engagement found in compelling literature and cinema. This is also further clarified by Riordan Frost, who mentions in his work "The Ethics of Role-Playing Video Games,"

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

137

> RPGs tell a story, and they also have all the typical features of a fiction, with authors, participants (their version of audiences), and a medium for portrayal. The medium is different from typical fictions in that it uses the technology of a gaming console and the participation of the player in telling the story. I believe that RPGs are types of fiction, and the only thing that sets them apart in any way is the unique way they are presented. (Frost, 2010, p. 21)

Unlike the passive experience of reading or watching, Lovecraftian RPGs make players active participants in the story. Through gameplay choices, players embody characters grappling with moral complexities in Lovecraft's signature atmosphere of cosmic dread. Hence, the notion that a work of art that effectively conveys a narrative on an intuitive level can be applied to Lovecraftian RPGs as a form of interactive artistic expression. In this context, participants not only passively engage with the narrative but also actively contribute to its development, thereby introducing additional dimensions of personal interpretation, emotional connection, and agency to the overarching storyline. The emotional connection is further solidified by Hans Robert Jauss, who is a prominent reception theorist, in his book *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, where he argues,

> This definition presupposes the dialectical interplay or self-enjoyment through the enjoyment of what is other and makes the recipient an active participant in the constitution of the imaginary, something which is denied him as long as aesthetic distance is understood according to traditional theory as one-directional, as a purely contemplative and disinterested relationship to an object at a certain remove. (1982, p. 92)

Lovecraftian-inspired role-playing games (RPGs) exemplify a departure from the conventional interaction with artistic works. These games demonstrate a model where individuals engage directly with and shape the narrative, surpassing the constraints of mere observation or passive consumption. On the platform, players become co-creators, shaping the narrative's direction through their choices and interactions within the game world. The traditional concept of aesthetic detachment, commonly associated with a disengaged and passive observation of artistic works, experiences a shift when applied to Lovecraftian role-playing games. These video games serve as a medium that facilitates a connection between the viewer and artistic expression, encouraging players to fully engage with the storyline. As a result, the distinction between passive observation and active participation becomes less defined. Jauss further highlights, "the enjoyment of affects as stirred by speech or poetry which can bring about both a change in belief and the liberation of his mind in the listener's or spectator" (1982, p. 92). Lovecraftian RPGs

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

138

demonstrate how individuals can find personal fulfillment in engaging with the "other," as participants immerse themselves in imaginary worlds that are strikingly different from their own lived realities. The investigation into the concept of the "other" is transformed into an engaging and interactive encounter, enabling users not only to observe but also to actively participate in the development of the fictional realm.

An important connection between role-playing games and the human experience of video games can be understood through what Jauss (1982) describes as "sympathetic identification," defined as "the aesthetic affect of projecting oneself into the alien self, a process which eliminates the admiring distance and can inspire feelings in the spectator or reader that will lead him to a solidarization with the suffering hero" (p. 172). This idea resonates with the immersive experience offered by Lovecraftian RPGs, which not only engage players in exploring otherworldly narratives but also foster deep emotional connections with their characters. This connection is further illuminated by Michel Houellebecq's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. Houellebecq (2005) explains that Lovecraft's primary aim was to evoke a sense of "fascination" in his readers, focusing exclusively on the emotions of wonder and fear. Lovecraft deliberately built his universe around these sentiments, embracing this limitation as "a conscious, deliberate one" and suggesting that "authentic creativity cannot exist without a certain degree of self-imposed blindness" (p. 45).

The participants actively engage in immersing themselves into these unfamiliar identities, assuming the roles of protagonists entangled in disconcerting circumstances reminiscent of Lovecraftian storytelling. Furthermore, the process of immersing oneself in the plight of the protagonist follows the emotional involvement cultivated by Lovecraftian RPGs. Players frequently feel a sense of unity with their in-game avatars, as they connect with their challenges and difficulties within the terrifying Lovecraftian-inspired worlds. The establishment of an emotional connection between the player and the suffering protagonist deepens the sense of immersion and empathy, ultimately fostering a stronger bond. Consequently, this intensifies the aesthetic impact of the overall experience.

Moreover, the narrative of the game is responsive to the decisions made by players, resulting in a dynamic interaction between the game's structure and the active involvement of participants. This dynamic interplay is connected to Frost's belief that video games are a form of fiction. Frost argues that "The 'player' is the new vocabulary for the 'reader' when it comes to video games, but they have the same important role" (Frost, 2010, p. 22). This aligns with Jauss' emphasis on empathizing with characters and immersing oneself in their perspectives, which parallels the immersive qualities inherent in role-playing games (RPGs). The transition from the role of a "reader" to that

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

139

of a "player" denotes a transformation from a passive mode of consumption to an active mode of engagement. Within RPGs, participants engage in more than mere passive consumption of the story; rather, they actively contribute to its formation through their decision-making and interpersonal engagements. This statement is under Jauss' concept of the reader's interpretive autonomy, wherein each person contributes their distinct viewpoint to the encounter.

The examination of the role of readers and players in the interpretation and comprehension of artistic media provides valuable insights into the manner in which humans engage with tales and storytelling. This investigation holds significance within the field of humanities research, as it offers opportunities to examine the ways in which humans establish connections, understand, and extract significance from diverse kinds of artistic manifestations. James Gribble argues in "The Reality of Fictional Emotions" that these feelings experienced from portrayals of fiction should be taken seriously: "the emotions we experience in response to the representations or portrayals of events and characters in literary works are not less real because they have, as their objects, representations or portrayals of characters and events" (Gribble, 1982, p. 54). In literature, readers often form deep emotional connections with the characters and events depicted within the narrative. The emotions of empathy, joy, grief, and terror are genuine responses evoked by the depiction of these imaginary aspects. Likewise, inside role-playing games (RPGs), individuals establish strong emotional bonds with their virtual avatars. This connection prompts a wide range of emotional responses when players engage with the evolving storyline and make decisions that shape the trajectory of their characters. This illustrates how effective storytelling—in literature or gaming—can generate genuine emotional responses. The characters and events, despite their fictional nature or symbolic representations, function as vehicles for evoking genuine emotional involvement from the viewer or participants. The emotional sensations evoked by these representations are no less valid or real due to their immersive and empathic features. H.O. Mounce offers another argument for the validity of emotional connection in video games in his essay, "Art and Real Life," where he argues "It is evident that there are things in life that move us. This being so, why on earth should it be surprising that we should be moved by representations of these things?" (Mounce, 1980, p. 188). This concept reinforces the importance of engaging the audience and fostering emotional involvement in both literary and interactive forms of media. This illustrates how various storytelling mediums, from literature to RPGs, generate emotional responses that enhance human engagement with cultural narratives.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

140

## *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea*

## The Forbidden Blood

Certain adaptations of the Lovecraftian mythos have successfully retained a semblance of the essence underlying the concept of cosmic horror. One illustrative instance is the video game *Bloodborne*, released in 2015. The game, although not a strict adherence to the conventional form of Lovecraft's literature, takes inspiration from multiple themes of Lovecraft's works and employs various features characteristic of the genre. Consequently, the game becomes closely intertwined with the cosmic horror genre. Many narratives in Lovecraft's texts employ a central setting that is imbued with a sense of impending doom. "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" employs the decaying fishing village of Innsmouth, located in Massachusetts, which influences one of the final stages in the setting of an extra Downloadable Content (DLC) titled "Old Hunters" for *Bloodborne*. For those who are unfamiliar with Lovecraft's story, it unfolds as follows: during an educational excursion spanning New England, an unfortunate young individual becomes acquainted with a coastal town named Innsmouth, which is held in low esteem by the local populace. Upon his visit to the town, he discovers that the local inhabitants have undergone severe mutations because of interbreeding with divine aquatic beings originating from a submerged kingdom located near the coastal area.

The inhabitants of Innsmouth tried to eliminate the man because of his desire to learn more about the town and gain more knowledge. However, preceding this, the man's initial negative perception of the inhabitants is mostly influenced by their alarming physical features, which are portrayed as a not-so-subtle metaphor for interracial relationships. Such an appearance can be seen in *Bloodborne*'s DLC, with the inhabitants of the decaying Fishing Hamlet that the player comes across (cf. VaatiVidya, 2015, 00:01:09–00:02:30). The player is immediately made aware of a disturbing secret concealed within the depths, prompting them to navigate a series of encounters with formidable adversaries to reach their objective. Upon reaching the fishing hamlet in the DLC, the player encounters its inhabitants as grotesquely mutated aquatic beings (see Figure 1). Through exploration, the player uncovers that these transformations are the result of a curse placed on the village by Kos, a Great One. According to the game's lore, Kos washed ashore in the fishing hamlet, where her body was desecrated by the Hunters. This desecration led to the birth of her offspring, the Orphan of Kos, and a curse that afflicted the villagers, resulting in their grotesque mutations passed down through generations (cf. VaatiVidya, 2015, 00:02:16–00:07:30). The Orphan of Kos, encountered as the final boss of the "Old Hunters" DLC, embodies the suffering and anger tied to Kos's curse. The Orphan is born from Kos's remains, symbolizing divine punishment or lingering anguish tied to the events in the Fishing Hamlet. This mirrors

the transformation of the inhabitants in Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," where the townspeople's physical and societal decay stems from their pact with the Deep Ones. In both cases, the monstrous offspring, whether the Orphan of Kos or the hybrid children of the Deep Ones, serve as a tangible reminder of the catastrophic consequences of humanity's interactions with incomprehensible and alien entities. Both narratives explore themes of generational corruption and the inescapable repercussions of transgressing natural and moral boundaries.

By piecing together these truths, players engage in a moral reckoning that transforms traditional Lovecraftian themes of incomprehensible cosmic horror into a deeply personal and interactive exploration of ethical responsibility. Frost further highlights this,

> As I showed earlier, however, RPGs are different from typical fictions in that they require the player to collaborate with the developers to create a story that the developers have made possible. This means that a great deal of what a player will be emotionally responding to will be his own actions—both in terms of his decisions of how to control his character and his character's actions. (Frost, 2010, p. 28)

The Orphan of Kos, born from the remains of the Great One Kos, embodies the Gothic anxiety surrounding the body as a site of degeneration and evolutionary decline. As David Punter and Glennis Byron observe in *The Gothic*, "if something could evolve it could also devolve or degenerate, whether it were individual, society or nation" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 42). This fear is horrifyingly realized in the Orphan's grotesque physicality, which symbolizes the culmination of the Fishing Hamlet's curse and the irreversible corruption inflicted by the Hunters' desecration. The village's unsettling and abandoned atmosphere, along with the evocative auditory and visual components, engenders a powerful affective response.

The ethical culpability in *Bloodborne* is twofold. On the one hand, players must confront the atrocities committed by the Hunters, the faction they belong to, who desecrated Kos's remains and slaughtered her offspring, unleashing the curse that condemned the villagers. On the other hand, the player's role as the protagonist raises questions about their own complicity in perpetuating this cycle of violence. By engaging in combat with the cursed villagers and the Orphan of Kos, the player reenacts the same aggression that marked the Hunters' transgressions. This dual culpability positions the player in a morally ambiguous space where their actions, however necessary for progression, mirror the very violence they seek to uncover and, perhaps, undo. In *Bloodborne*, this collaboration manifests in the player's gradual discovery of the Fishing Hamlet's tragic history.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

142

Through their choices and actions, players are compelled to piece together the fragmented lore, transforming the villagers from faceless monsters to victims of systemic injustice. This process deepens the player's emotional engagement, making their responses to the story's events deeply personal. Similar to the physical metamorphosis of the dying Helen in *The Great God Pan* (one of Lovecraft's biggest inspirations), which Punter and Byron describe as "[p]erhaps most horrifyingly suggesting the possibility of sliding down the evolutionary ladder" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 42), the Orphan reflects the Gothic fear of devolution, both physical and moral. By actively constructing the narrative alongside the developers, players are drawn into a deeply unsettling exploration of societal collapse, ethical culpability, and their own complicity in the ongoing cycle of violence and decay.

**Figure 1**

Ludwig the Accursed



*Note*: "Ludwig." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Ludwig

Moreover, *Bloodborne* incorporates other elements commonly found in Lovecraft's stories. These include an enigmatic affliction that plagues the city of Yharnam, evidence of a forgotten civilization known as the Pthumerians (see Figure 2), and the existence of mysterious beings referred to as the Great Ones, like Amygdala (see Figure 3), who bears a striking resemblance in name and shape to Lovecraft's famous "Great Old Ones."

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

143

**Figure 2**

Pthumerians Descendant

*Note*: "Pthumerian Descendant." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Pthumerian_Descendant

**Figure 3**

Amygdala



*Note*: "Great Ones | Bloodborne Wiki." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.wiki.fextralife.com/Great+Ones

What is even more interesting about the setting of *Bloodborne*, Yharnam, is that its structure draws heavily from Gothic literature. The city of Yharnam embodies classic Gothic tropes, "Yharnam, an environment resembling the one from the *Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole" (Gama & Garcia, 2019, p. 50), functioning as a site of paranoia, persecution, and concealed histories. The decaying, labyrinthine streets and looming spires

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

144

of Yharnam evoke the haunted castle archetype. As Punter and Byron observe, Gothic castles often act as "unreliable lenses through which to view history and from the other side of which may emerge terrors only previously apprehended in dream" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 259). Yharnam reflects this distortion by compressing centuries of trauma, persecution, and forbidden knowledge into a single overwhelming environment. Its crumbling architecture and oppressive atmosphere blur the boundaries between the natural and the human-made, creating a space where players must navigate both physical and psychological terrors.

Yharnam also serves as a space of haunted histories, hidden traumas, and distorted perception. As Punter and Byron note, "[t]he castle represents desubjectification: within its walls one may be 'subjected' to a force that is utterly resistant to the individual's attempt to impose his or her own order" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 262). The city is built on layers of corruption and decay, from the rise of the Healing Church and its misuse of the Old Blood to the echoes of ancient Pthumerian rituals that continue to shape its present. The city embodies this uncontrollable power by resisting the player's ability to comprehend or control its labyrinthine structure and the horrors it conceals. This is something that Garcia and Gama draw attention to,

> Arguably *Bloodborne* draws from Lovecraft's mythos through the correspondence between madness and knowledge and, of course, the settings; an example of this connection can be found in some of the items, in the insight status, not to mention the transitions between dreams and nightmares that shape countless environments in the game. (Gama & Garcia, 2019, p. 51)

Gama and Garcia identify 'Insight' as a significant psychological characteristic available to player characters. It is an in-game stat that augments the player's perceptual acuity of the surrounding environment, governed by the amount of inhuman knowledge you have acquired by exploring the game and defeating enemies, especially Great Ones. Gama and Garcia further attest to this,

> the result of making contact with great ones is the access to nightmares. Creating such connections provokes a cathartic feeling on the player, leading them to try to relate seemingly different, or even similar, environmental settings to one another by the use of items, observation, and lore. This sort of gameplay places the player in the position of a scholar, a fundamental character archetype that is part of both Lovecraftian stories and *Bloodborne*. (Gama & Garcia, 2019, p. 53)

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

145

*Bloodborne* intricately weaves the theme of occult rituals and esoteric knowledge into its narrative, exploring the Gothic and Lovecraftian tension between the pursuit of enlightenment and its devastating consequences. Players encounter numerous rituals and symbols tied to the Great Ones, beings whose power transcends human understanding. The Chalice Dungeons provide a striking example of this theme, as these labyrinthine spaces beneath Yharnam are accessed through rituals involving Chalices and materials such as blood and body parts. These dungeons, remnants of the ancient Pthumerian civilization, reflect the society's attempts to commune with the Great Ones, resulting in grotesque horrors that symbolize the cost of tampering with forbidden knowledge. Likewise, the Healing Church—a central institution in Yharnam—embodies the moral ambiguity associated with occult rituals. Founded on the discovery of the Old Blood, the Church conducted experiments to harness the power of the Great Ones, inadvertently creating the Scourge of the Beast, a plague that transformed citizens into monstrous creatures. The Upper Cathedral Ward, filled with altars, ritual chambers, and malformed creations, showcases the Church's transgressions, including their worship of Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos. These practices highlight the ethical and existential dilemmas of exploiting divine power at the expense of humanity's well-being, emphasizing *Bloodborne*'s exploration of the heavy price that accompanies the pursuit of esoteric knowledge.

Dylan Henderson writes in his essay, "The Inability of the Human Mind," that literature, specifically novels, allows the reader to look inward. He mentions, "[i]t also allows them [readers] 'try on different mental states'" (Henderson, 2019, p. 91), and tempts them with "intimate access to the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of other people in our social environment" (Henderson, 2019, p. 91). Throughout the game, players are exposed to numerous instances depicting human aggression, corruption, and moral degradation. The denizens of Yharnam frequently engage in acts of violence, deception, and brutality, motivated by fear, obsession, or a quest for power. The players are confronted with Non-Playable characters (NPCs) who have succumbed to the Scourge, transforming them into hostile and belligerent entities. These transformed NPCs engage in aggressive behavior, launching attacks against both the player character and other NPCs. These individuals, motivated by their primal instincts and consumed by the plague, serve as a vivid depiction of humanity's decline into aggression and insanity. An example of this is Father Gascoigne, who has fallen to the plague and endures the consequences of relentless violence and sinister transformations.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

146

### *Figure 4*

Father Gascoigne Pre-Transformation



*Note*: "Father Gascoigne." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Father_Gascoigne

### *Figure 5*

Father Gascoigne Post-Transformation



*Note*: "Father Gascoigne." *Bloodborne Wiki*. https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Father_Gascoigne

Much like Yharnam serves as a version of the Gothic castle, the city also distorts perception and blurs the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, real and imagined. The city's claustrophobic alleyways and towering spires evoke a sense of oppression and unease, while its secrets, hidden in nightmarish dungeons and cryptic lore, resist merging into a cohesive truth. This aligns with Punter and Byron's observation that Gothic spaces "threaten us with measureless boundaries, and yet at the same time, with the most tomb-like claustrophobia" (2004, p. 262). In Yharnam, this duality is ever-present, as players navigate a city that both overwhelms with its scale and suffocates with its labyrinthine design.

The visual and thematic design of *Bloodborne* extends the Gothic tradition of intertwining beauty and horror, immersing players in profound ethical issues. As Punter and Byron note, Gothic style often incorporates "silver jewelry based on religious and occult themes" (2004, p. 80), reflecting a fascination with the interplay between sanctity and corruption. This aesthetic is integral to the game's portrayal of the Healing Church, whose elaborate cathedrals and religious imagery mask their transgressive experiments with the Old Blood and communion with the Great Ones. The Church's duality mirrors the Gothic tension between faith and heresy, presenting the player with an unsettling moral landscape to navigate.

For the player, these aesthetic and narrative choices heighten the ethical stakes of engaging with the occult. Rituals and symbols tied to the Great Ones, such as the Chalice Dungeons and the Insight mechanic, encourage the player to pursue forbidden knowledge, but at the cost of madness, corruption, and complicity in perpetuating the game's cycle of violence. The Gothic aesthetic reinforces this tension by presenting beauty and grandeur alongside decay and monstrosity, forcing players to confront the dual nature of their quest for enlightenment. The robes and symbols of the Healing Church, for example, evoke sanctity while simultaneously representing their moral downfall through occult experimentation. By participating in these rituals and uncovering the Church's secrets, the player becomes an active participant in the game's exploration of the ethical consequences of seeking power and knowledge.

This dynamic is further reflected in the player's interactions with NPCs, many of whom embody the Gothic aesthetic of corrupted innocence. Father Gascoigne, for example, dons clergy robes symbolizing his faith, but his transformation into a beast reveals the devastating cost of the Scourge of the Beast, a plague tied directly to the Church's occult practices. Engaging with such characters compels the player to question their own role in perpetuating or resisting the cycle of corruption. The aesthetic beauty of *Bloodborne*'s world becomes a lens through which players experience its moral and existential dilemmas, blurring the lines between faith, heresy, and the ethical consequences of uncovering esoteric truths.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

148

## The Sunken Mind

While *Sunless Sea* is more of a role-playing game than *Bloodborne*, its design philosophy merits consideration because it explores Gothic and Lovecraftian horror through narrative complexity, moral ambiguity, and slower-paced gameplay, contrasting with *Bloodborne*'s action-oriented gameplay. The game's narrative places the player in the role of a ship captain tasked with navigating a sea full of terrors and eldritch beings, while fighting back against the elements that could drive the crew mad. It is a more narrative-driven game that emphasizes the choices the player makes and their short-term and long-term consequences. However, it does incorporate role-playing game (RPGs) elements where players assume the role of a captain and have the ability to personalize their character's background, qualities, and decisions. These choices have the potential to impact the captain's capabilities and interactions within the game. The aforementioned element of character development is consistent with the standards seen in role-playing games (RPGs), wherein players have the ability to influence the protagonist's attributes and narrative trajectory. Furthermore, the involvement in missions and storylines is consistent with the narrative-focused gameplay of role-playing games (RPGs).

### *Figure 6*
RPG Elements in Sunless Sea



*Note*: "Sunless Sea, 80 Days and the Rise of Modular Storytelling." *Game Developer.*
www.gamedeveloper.com/design/-i-sunless-sea-i-i-80-days-i-and-the-rise-of-modular-storytelling

The player is presented with numerous options in the *Sunless Sea*. The player has the option to betray their crew, engage in cannibalism, and negotiate with torturers and demons in order to amass wealth by exploiting others; however, the game does not judge the player for villainous behavior. The descriptive text will unambiguously highlight the gravity of their wrongdoing, but beyond that, the matter rests solely inside your own conscience. This is effective because for the player to maintain a morally upright character in *Sunless Sea*, they must actively exert great effort and resist the allure of engaging in malevolent actions that would make progressing the game easier. Navigating the Zee (the name of the sea) is a challenging task, and as the player spends more time in this environment, their moral compass tends to gradually deteriorate.

One of the instances where the game challenges the player's moral stance is the Wistful Deviless questline. The questline exemplifies the Gothic tradition of the Faustian pact, combining moral ambiguity and the occult in a way that immerses players in the game's story. According to Punter and Byron (2004), Gothic literature frequently highlights "a more old-fashioned, eighteenth-century emphasis on, for example, the Faustian pact with the devil and its dire consequences" (p. 99). With her questline, players must choose between three unique pathways, each with its own moral and narrative complexities. Assisting the Deviless by delivering her letters or accompanying her to the Brass Embassy in London generates tangible rewards such as a Captivating Treasure and Secrets, but it also connects the player with the forces of Hell, presenting questions about allegiance and complicity. Alternatively, betraying her by reporting her as a traitor to the Brass Embassy results in benefits such as Outlandish Artefacts and Fragments, but raises the player's Terror, reflecting the psychological cost of self-serving activities. Players can also choose to disregard her mission altogether, avoiding moral quandaries but missing out on the storyline and benefits associated with her journey. Christopher Bartel's assertion that "our affective and aesthetic responses to works of narrative fiction often depend (in part) on our ability to recognize the moral significance of the events and scenarios that make up the fictional work" (2015, p. 292) emphasizes the importance of these choices. The Deviless' pleasant attitude and infernal essence create a dissonance that reflects the tension of the Faustian contract, compelling players to deal with trust, betrayal, and moral compromise.

The way the player perceives and comprehends the ethical weight of events greatly influences how we interpret and engage with stories. Examining the moral complexity in *Sunless Sea* and literature enhances our comprehension, enabling players to delve into the thematic depths and appreciate the complexities of the provided narratives.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

150

The absence of a singular central narrative does not diminish the game's value; rather, it enhances the experience by offering multiple methods of play. The dynamic nature of the player's Unterzee map (main setting), which alters with each playtime and new Captain, ensures that the world never presents the same experience twice. The positioning of ports in relation to one another can significantly impact the way the player engages with the stories, hence influencing their gameplay. If the player chooses to pursue a more villainous path, then the game will present them with choices that can accommodate such a direction. However, it is important to note that making evil choices often leads to more immediate gameplay rewards, while righteous decisions are more challenging to pursue but ultimately result in greater long-term benefits for the player's ship, such as increased supplies, a stronger crew, and easier navigation of the Unterzee.

Bartel emphasizes that evil acts within video games do not necessarily reflect evil behavior from the player, but that they are acting in the role they are assigned to in the game, "[i]t is in this sense that a player can play a game as a villain, just as an actor can play the part of a villain without thereby coming to hold the same moral viewpoint as the villain" (2015, p. 293). Enabling players to assume different roles, especially those that present moral dilemmas, increases the immersive narrative experience in *Sunless Sea*. The system allows individuals to shape the storyline, explore a range of possibilities, and experience the consequences of their choices without facing any ethical repercussions outside the game.

Moreover, Bartel evokes Henry Frankfurt's *Compatibilism*, which centers on the notion that an action can be considered free if it conforms to an individual's wants or higher-order volitions, irrespective of whether it is causally driven by external factors. Bartel uses Frankfurt's compatibilism to underscore the significance of a player's capacity to behave in accordance with their own volition, free from any form of external compulsion or limitation in tackling the issue of morality in video games. Bartel highlights that for the player to feel or be conflicted by a moral decision, the extent of this moral issue must be first measured by how much the player can relate to the character committing the act, "an agent can be held morally responsible for her actions only to the extent that she identifies her sense of self with the perpetration of those actions" (2015, p. 292). Observing the behavior of players in *Sunless Sea* is intriguing because making morally upright decisions is frequently not the most advantageous option from a mechanical standpoint. Bartel further adds that

> in these situations, the player feels a conflict between her freedom to act and her freedom to will. While the player has little freedom to act, the player still has the free will to either identify herself with the actions that are committed within the game or not. (Bartel, 2015, p. 291)

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

151

The concept of "freedom to act" in *Sunless Sea* relates to the limited range of options or actions that the player can do because of the game's design, narrative framework, or game-play. For example, the player may have a limited range of choices when navigating the treacherous waters of the Unterzee or when interacting with various individuals and factions. Conversely, "freedom to will" refers to the player's inherent ability to determine their emotional and intellectual involvement independently and ethically with the acts or options provided. Despite the game's restrictions on accessible actions, the player retains the ability to interpret, explain, or emotionally engage with those acts. This distinction highlights an intriguing aspect of gaming: while a player's choices may be constrained by the game's rules or design, their personal interpretation and connection to in-game actions remain unrestricted. Players may encounter ethical issues, moral dilemmas, or role-playing features that allow them to interact with the game environment beyond the predetermined actions. For example, a player may lack the autonomy to prevent a specific encounter or consequence, but they still possess the volition to determine whether their in-game character accepts or rejects the activities undertaken in that encounter. This can result in a heightened level of engagement as players navigate the conflict between the constraints imposed by the game and their personal interpretation or connection with their in-game character's decisions.

#### *Figure 7*
A Choice That Can Equally Have Good And Negative Outcomes



*Note*: "Sunless Sea Part #1—The Making of a Captain." by Black Wombat.
https://lparchive.org/Sunless-Sea/Update%2001/

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

152

The game's writing offers a very beautiful combination of Edgar Allan Poe's eerie writing style, Lovecraftian horrors, and the fantastical elements of Greek mythology. Moreover, players will discover a distorted portrayal of Victorian London. The player will experience a range of strong reactions, including fear, sadness, discomfort, and amusement.

### Figure 8
Map of the Unterzee

Combining Lovecraftian terror with mankind's natural desire for the unknown, the investigation of the Unterzee in *Sunless Sea* captures the core of occult ideas. Mirroring the occult's fixation on hidden truths, forbidden knowledge, and arcane rituals, players encounter enigmatic monsters, supernatural phenomena, and cosmic entities. Players lured into a setting reflecting the appeal of occultism, the search for forbidden knowledge, and the promise of discovering hidden realms, are drawn into these unexplored areas. The narrative of the game revolves around this dynamic, whereby curiosity serves both as a source of danger and a motivating factor. The game's depiction of Eldritch entities as bearers of dangerous, transformative knowledge aligns with occultism's connection

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

153

to harmful enlightenment. Like occultists, players are driven to go into the unknown and push beyond established limits, suffering real consequences, including more anxiety or crew loss. *Sunless Sea* reflects the conflict in the occult, where the search for enlightenment often comes at enormous personal or existential cost, by showing the Unterzee as a place of both discovery and danger.

### *Figure 9*

Nook Which is Described in the Game as
"The Throat of Some Unknown Leviathan"



*Note*: "Nook." *Sunless Sea Wiki.*
https://sunlesssea.fandom.com/wiki/Nook

Bartel's claim that "the virtual actions that a player identifies with her sense of self can relevantly enter into a consideration of that player's actual moral psychology" (2015, p. 292) speaks especially to *Sunless Sea*'s examination of occultism and moral ambiguity. While fictional, the game immerses players in scenarios with serious ethical implications, examining the psychological consequences of navigating an occult-saturated world.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

154

One such recurring instance is the possibility of cannibalism on the Unterzee during desperate times. Players can decide to eat human flesh for survival when confronted with limited supplies and a crew growing more afraid. Despite being only virtual, this game has players justify a transgression based on the obsession with the forbidden and the primordial that defines the occult. Consuming human flesh questions the player's view of their in-game morality and survival instincts; hence, it is packed with moral and existential consequences. Similarly, the encounter with the Wistful Deviless draws players into the infernal politics of Hell, emphasizing the Gothic and occult motifs of seduction and moral compromise. This scenario presents a Faustian dilemma, highlighting the Gothic fascination with forging pacts and alliances with demonic forces. Selling human souls at places like the Brass Embassy is a clear illustration of commodifying spiritual essence, an activity intimately related to the obsession of the occult with the metaphysical. Players must consider the moral consequences of trafficking in something as holy as a soul against the attraction of financial benefits. This situation not only accentuates the Gothic and Lovecraftian themes of forbidden knowledge and transgression but also reflects Bartel's point of view by letting players consider the consequences of their decisions in an imagined yet emotionally relevant environment. The immersive design of the game invites players to contemplate the limits of morality in line with Bartel's belief that virtual acts can profoundly affect players' moral psychology, therefore, blurring the distinctions between fictitious decisions and ethical issues.

## Conclusion

Through the study presented in this paper, *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* embody unique yet complementary methods of engaging players with occult-themed storylines and Lovecraftian hallmarks. *Bloodborne* engages players with rapid action and Gothic visuals, whereas *Sunless Sea* employs a more deliberate, narrative-centric methodology that highlights player decisions and their repercussions. Both games adeptly intertwine occultism, ethical dilemmas, and cosmic terror, crafting experiences that compel players to confront the seduction and peril of forbidden knowledge. The occult functions as a narrative structure that immerses players in ethically problematic situations, ranging from the Faustian bargain of the Wistful Deviless in *Sunless Sea* to the ritualistic pursuit of the Great Ones in *Bloodborne*. Lovecraftian influences amplify these experiences, merging existential dread, cosmic terror, and the inexplicable into narratives that compel players to interrogate the limits of morality and agency. Through the exploration of these issues, the games offer distinct perspectives on humanity's intrigue with the unknown and the ethical intricacies of interaction with it.

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

155

This analysis presents promising avenues for future investigation. One potential method is to investigate how interactive experiences affect players' enduring psychological reactions to moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas. Can games such as *Sunless Sea* and *Bloodborne* serve as contemporary "moral laboratories," allowing players to explore transgressive actions in a consequence-free environment, possibly influencing their real-world ethical perspectives? By proposing such questions, this study not only underscores the richness of games like *Bloodborne* and *Sunless Sea* as subjects of analysis but also highlights the potential of video games to serve as powerful media for exploring the depths of human psychology, morality, and our enduring fascination with the unknown.

## References

Bartel, C. (2015). Free will and moral responsibility in video games. *Ethics and Information Technology, 17*(4), 285–293. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-015-9383-8

Byron, G., & Punter, D. (2004). *The Gothic*. Blackwell Publishing.

Frost, R. (2010). The ethics of role-playing video games. *ResearchGate*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228727420_The_Ethics_of_Role-Playing_Video_Games

Gama, V. C., & Garcia, M. V. (2019). Beyond the walls of Bloodborne: Gothic tropes and Lovecraftian games. *The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies, 6*(2), 49–60. https://www.academia.edu/65223776/Beyond_the_Walls_of_Bloodborne_Gothic_tropes_and_Lovecraftian_games

Gribble, J. (1982). The reality of fictional emotions. *Journal of Aesthetic Education, 16*(4), 53–58. https://doi.org/10.2307/3332523

Hazlett, A. (2009). How to defend response moralism. *The British Journal of Aesthetics, 49*(3), 241–255. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp020

Henderson, D. (2019). The inability of the human mind: Lovecraft, Zunshine, and theory of mind. *Lovecraft Annual, 13*, 91–101. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868576

Houellebecq, M. (2008). *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the world, against life* (D. Khazeni, Trans.). Believer Books.

Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Aesthetic experience and literary hermeneutics* (M. Shaw, Trans.). Bowker.

Mounce, H. O. (1980). Art and real life. *Philosophy, 55*(212), 183–192. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100048993

VaatiVidya. (2015, December 7). *Bloodborne DLC—Wrath of Mother Kos [#3]* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-5HoAf9G6Q

## List of Figures

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

156

Figure 4: Father Gascoigne Pre-Transformation. "Father Gascoigne." [Digital image] *Bloodborne Wiki*, https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Father_Gascoigne. Last accessed November 28, 2023.

Figure 5: Father Gascoigne Post-Transformation. "Father Gascoigne." [Digital image] *Bloodborne Wiki*, https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Father_Gascoigne. Last accessed November 28, 2023.

Figure 6: RPG Elements in Sunless Sea. "Sunless Sea, 80 Days and the Rise of Modular Storytelling." [Digital image] *Game Developer*, December 25, 2015, www.gamedeveloper.com/design/-i-sunless-sea-i-i-80-days-i-and-the-rise-of-modular-storytelling. Last accessed November 28, 2023.

Figure 7: A Choice That can Equally Have Good and Negative Outcomes. Wombat, Black. "Sunless Sea Part #1—the Making of a Captain." [Digital image] https://lparchive.org/Sunless-Sea/Update%2001/ Last accessed November 28, 2023.

Figure 8: Map of the Unterzee. "The Known Unterzee | Fallen London, Sunless Sea, London Map." [Digital image] *Pinterest*, www.pinterest.com/pin/the-known-unterzee--45950858689599001

Figure 9: Nook Which is Described in the Game as "The Throat of Some Unknown Leviathan." "Nook." [Digital image] *Sunless Sea Wiki*, https://sunlesssea.fandom.com/wiki/Nook. Last accessed November 28, 2023

Taha ALSARHAN. Between Sanity and Damnation: Unraveling Player Choices and Ethical Dilemmas in Lovecraftian-Inspired Role-Playing Games

157