ARTÍCULOS

Becoming the Gay Pig – A Mapping of Queer Entanglements with Disease and Monstrosity in *Bloodborne*

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EN **Abstract.** In this article, queer player–game experiences with Bloodborne are mapped. Bloodborne is approached through a player-researcher framework that examines how subjectivities become entangled with the game's various elements. The cartography is grounded in the positionality of a white, cisgender, able-bodied, gay Irish man whose identity has been markedly shaped by the relationship between the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and the Irish Catholic Church. From this acknowledgement, experiences of playing Bloodborne are related to experiences of growing up in the Irish state. The aim is to construct a cartography of entangled experiences with the game that begins from this positionality, and to explore its implications for formulations of queerness and Irish queer identity. To accomplish this aim, textual analysis is conducted from a feminist new materialist perspective in order to isolate and analyse elements of Bloodborne. Drawing in particular on Barad's (2003, 2006, 2018) work on entanglements, the analysis focuses on the game's use of blood and monstrosity, mapping them as in-game Gothic-Lovecraftian elements and using them to identify parallels between the game and experiences within the Irish Catholic Church. These relations are then connected to queer identity through consideration of the HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, and of how discourses at the time formulated Gay, Bisexual and Men Who Have Sex with Men (GBMSM) identities in particular. By attending to these entangled subjectivities with Bloodborne, a mapping of Irish queer identity with the game is constructed, exploring how liberation from oppressive systems may be achieved if one risks their own humanity.
Keywords. Ireland; Cartography; Catholicism; Queer; Monstrosity.

EN Convertirse en un cerdo gay: cartografía de entrelazamientos queer con la enfermedad y la monstruosidad en *Bloodborne*

ES **Resumen.** En este artículo se cartografían experiencias queer de jugador-juego con *Bloodborne*, un videojuego de rol (RPG) de terror gótico-lovecraftiano en tercera persona. Se adopta un enfoque de jugador-investigador para examinar cómo las subjetividades se entrelazan con los diversos elementos del juego. La cartografía se fundamenta en la posicionalidad de un hombre irlandés blanco, cisgénero, sin discapacidad, gay, cuya identidad ha estado notablemente marcada por la relación entre la República de Irlanda (ROI) y la Iglesia católica irlandesa. A partir de este reconocimiento, se ponen en relación experiencias de juego en *Bloodborne* con experiencias de crecimiento en el Estado irlandés. El objetivo es construir una cartografía de experiencias entrelazadas con el juego que parta de esa posicionalidad y explorar sus implicaciones para las formulaciones de lo queer y de la identidad queer irlandesa. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se realiza un análisis textual desde una perspectiva feminista de los nuevos materialismos, con el fin de aislar y analizar elementos de *Bloodborne*. En diálogo, en particular, con el trabajo de Barad (2003, 2006, 2018) sobre los entrelazamientos, el análisis se centra en el uso que hace el juego de la sangre y la monstruosidad, cartografiándolas como elementos gótico-lovecraftianos intradiegéticos y utilizándolas para identificar paralelismos entre el juego y experiencias en la Iglesia católica irlandesa. Estas relaciones se vinculan después con la identidad queer mediante la consideración de la epidemia de VIH y sida de las décadas de 1980 y 1990, y de cómo los discursos del momento formularon, en particular, las identidades de hombres gays, bisexuales y hombres que tienen sexo con hombres (GBMSM). Al atender a estas subjetividades entrelazadas con *Bloodborne*, se construye un mapeo de la identidad queer irlandesa con el juego, explorando cómo podría alcanzarse la liberación de sistemas opresivos si se arriesga la propia humanidad.
Palabras clave. Irlanda; Cartografía; Catolicismo; Queer; Monstruosidad.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. An attempt at detangling Irish queerness from Catholicism. 4. Gothic-Lovecraftian horror and fear of the outsider. 5. Becoming Bloodborne's "gay pig". 6. Conclusion. 7. References.

1. Introduction

In this article, I construct a mapping and analysis of queer player-game experiences with *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015). Beginning with the self in the hybrid role of player-researcher, I adopt a feminist materialist perspective to examine my experiences with the game as an Irish queer man. I draw on elements such as personal history, bodily affect and queer affirmation to construct an entangled player-game cartography and examine what it reveals about how queer gaming experiences may be formulated.

Bloodborne is a third-person Role Playing Game (RPG) that heavily draws on elements from both Gothic and Lovecraftian horror, exposing players to monsters that are rooted in European history and folklore, and which challenge our understanding of the world around us, including our place in it. However, these elements are not value-neutral and drawing on them also implies that the game is entangled with each genre's history of discrimination and racism.

Parallel to this, I come to the game as a queer, cisgender and able-bodied Irish man and bring these related experiences to the game as I pick up the controller. Ireland is an island defined by centuries of colonial oppression, and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) is a state defined by continued partial occupation. Alongside the sectarian violence that has impacted its politics, the ROI is heavily influenced by the Irish Catholic Church, and these elements weave together with concepts of gender and sexuality to construct an Irish queer identity.

Seeing my own subjectivities as a coalesced manifestation of these various factors, I foreground the discussion of *Bloodborne* and its various in-game elements with my own experiences and memories. To do this, I focus first on outlining my time as an altar boy, exploring and utilising these experiences to outline relations between my own Irish queer identity and the Irish Catholic Church. I do this to place Irish queer identity as the central point of this article from which I orient discussions of *Bloodborne* around.

Following this personal exegesis, I perform a textual analysis of *Bloodborne*, focusing on the game's use of blood as a substance that can threaten disease while also offering salvation and transcendence. In particular, I focus on 'Blood Vials,' and the parallels between their usage and the symbolic consumption of blood in Catholic ceremony. As I demonstrate, these concepts of disease and salvation relate heavily to the Gothic construction of queer male identity during the HIV and AIDS epidemic and its aftermath, and can be related to queer figures of Gothic monstrosity such as the vampire.

Bringing these elements together, I conclude the article with a consideration of queerness as it manifests in entanglements between myself and *Bloodborne*. I accomplish this by isolating and analysing the game's 'Maneater Boar', comparing it to the anti-social figure of the 'gay pig' to examine how it contributes to entangled player-game formulations of queerness.

2. Methodology

This article is borne out of a desire to engage with *Bloodborne* as part of a wider consideration of queer player-game experiences. Central to this consideration is the role that the researcher plays as the cartographer of such experiences, particularly in the construction and production of such mappings.

As an attempt to answer this question, my focus begins with my own perspective as a queer video game player and how I am entangled with the games under consideration. I begin this work prioritising subjectivity, from which the analytical contributions of this article are positioned around. Important to this is the acknowledgement that my positionality to this research is central to the knowledge produced from it. I am a white Irish queer cis male able-bodied researcher looking to consider how queer experiences of video games may be observed and mapped, and I believe it is a reasonable claim that such work will be influenced by my positionality whether intentionally so or otherwise. Rather than try to avoid this by making some idealised claim to objectivity, I instead look to embrace my own subjectivities from the very beginning and research how they can be used to inform the generation of knowledge.

To support my stance here towards research and analysis, I engage with and frame my work through a feminist new materialist paradigm, informed by the work of scholars such as Braidotti (2013) and, primarily, Barad (2003, 2006, 2018). Collectively, they present a critique of 'Human' as a category of identification, challenging our assumptions that it can be understood objectively. Rather, understanding ourselves as a 'Subject' requires an acknowledgement and consideration of the material relationships we have with other beings and objects, including our own bodies and minds. To this, Barad introduces the related concept of 'entanglements', or the ontological inseparability between subjects, objects or those that observe them (Barad, 2016, p. 309). In this work, I use the concept to describe the inseparability between my own self and *Bloodborne* as I consider my experiences with the game, and the reliance that observations and interpretations have on these relations as a result.

My attempts at acknowledging such a (re)negotiation of subjectivities in this work come from the recollection of my own experiences, drawn from memories of things that I believe I have experienced, and which I believe connect with my experiences of playing *Bloodborne*. The work of this article is not only to present an

attempt at recalling these memories in an act of revelation, but also to substantiate them through supporting theoretical and empirical research.

Speaking to this, I draw on a number of theoretical sources in order to produce a mapping and supporting analysis of queer gameplay experience in this article. To contextualise *Bloodborne* as a hybrid Gothic-Lovecraftian game, I give an overview of the primary elements associated with Gothicism and Lovecraftian horror, and how they manifest in literature and video games. This outline gives support to the recollection of my own experiences with *Bloodborne* and how they entangle with my experiences of Catholicism as part of my Irish queer identity. Finally, I consider how these entangled experiences relate to Edelman's (2004) conceptualisation of queer identity, looking at how my own queer player-game entanglements with *Bloodborne* oscillate between supporting and challenging antisocial conceptualisations of queerness at various points.

Central to this mapping of entangled queer identity is my use of Carr's (2003, 2006, 2009, 2019) work on textual analysis and Kuntz's (2018) radical cartographies. Collectively, I use their works to formulate a cartographical method that involves the isolation and analysis of specific in-game elements and how they relate back to the player in a process of reflexivity and relational inquiry. I see this as an iterative process in line with Barad's concept of entanglements, with successive considerations offering continuously novel insights and mappings as entanglements between player and game are (re)negotiated and (re)considered.

As stated, to implement this research method I begin this article with a consideration of my own relations with *Bloodborne* as a queer player-researcher, using specific in-game elements as an anchor to orient around as I draw on personal experiences and reflections (see Ahmed, 2006). For the purposes of this article, I use my experiences of Catholicism and the Irish Catholic Church to examine relations between queerness and the game's use of blood, a substance presented as capable of both monstrous transformation and godly ascension.

Playing this game as a gay man, I relate such a dual framing of blood to the HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, and its impact on gay male identity specifically. To do this, I compare relations between blood and disease in *Bloodborne* with the practices of 'barebacking', that is, having sex without a condom. As an act which increases the risk of infection during penetrative sex, barebacking is a practice which I relate to the in-game consumption of blood and presentation of monstrosity. While beyond the remit of this paper, such relations, which draw on the moral framing of gay male identity as itself monstrous, also draw similarities to the moral panics borne out of the COVID-19 pandemic and are worth considering as a development of the work presented here (see for instance Morena et al., 2024).

Finally, I relate this work to ongoing scholarship within queer game studies, an area of academic research that looks to use queer theory as a framework for the acknowledgement and analysis of queer gaming experiences (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. xiii; Ruberg, 2022). Drawing on antisocial queer theories that formulate queerness as a reaction against the violence of homonormative forces, I consider how such a conceptualisation relates to works connected to player subjectivities in Horror and Gothic gaming. This includes the work of Wilde (2020, 2024), whose autoethnographic work around gaming has informed my writings, and Kirkland (2012) whose work on the Gothic I reference directly in this article.

3. An Attempt at Detangling Irish Queerness from Catholicism

Take this, all of you, and drink from it,
for this is the chalice of my Blood,
the Blood of the new and eternal covenant,
which will be poured over you and for many
for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this in memory of me.
(Eucharist Prayer II, in Dublin Diocesan Liturgical Resource Centre, 2012).

The Republic of Ireland (ROI) is a state which is defined, at least in part, by its relationship to the Irish Catholic Church. Going through the school system and, later, training as a second-level teacher in the country, I took it as a given that most schools in Ireland had a Catholic ethos and were technically denominational schools. While I thought this may have changed over the years, as of April 2025, the Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee, reported that 88.3% of the 172 primary schools in Ireland have a Catholic ethos. At post-primary level, 47.6% of post-primary students are registered in schools with a Catholic ethos, while 0.9% are at schools with "an ethos other than Catholic, Church of Ireland, inter-denominational or multi-denominational" (McEntee in Department of Education and Youth, 2025). I was unable to find a figure specifically related to non-denominational schools or student registration.

These statistics serve as an example of how interwoven the Catholic Church was, and continues to be, in Irish society. During my time in school, I remember seeing priests wander the school corridors and missionaries from countries such as Fiji coming into our classes. In primary school, we attended class trips to the parish church when it was time to prepare for our First Holy Communion, and it was assumed by teachers that our parents/guardians were bringing us to Mass on Sundays. In one particular instance, I remember a teacher standing students up to confront them about why their parents did not make them attend service over the weekend, something I assume the students were meant to feed back to their parents about. These memories are interwoven with other sensory information such as the darkness of the church, the mixed smell of dust and frankincense, and the colourful light that filtered through the building's stained-glass windows.

Around the years 2000 to 2001 I was an altar boy. I think I was either ten or eleven years old at the time, and did it for about a year with three or four other boys from my primary school year group. Being Catholic denomination, I was able to sign up for the position as part of a class trip to the church, and once I was 'hired', I was able to leave class with the others on various days during the week. Generally, we were gone for about an hour or two so that we could assist the local priest with that day's service. My memories of this time mainly revolve around being in the until-then forbidden sacristy helping the priest with his robes as we got our own on, and kneeling at the side of the altar, ringing the mass bells at designated times. Typically, there was a small series of bells that we could just lift and shake, but occasionally there were heavier bells that required the use of a drumstick, a coveted task that was confined to the parish's countryside church.

The main duty of being an altar boy was assisting the priest in preparing the celebration of the Eucharist. I remember enjoying the ritual of it, helping the priest wash his hands, and giving him his wafer-bread and red wine that symbolised the body and blood of Jesus Christ. I remember him pouring the wine into the silver chalice that sat on the altar, intimately whispering a prayer to himself before he drank. He would close his eyes and bring the chalice to his lips, tilting his head back as he drank. Sometimes, wine would dribble down the side of his mouth. This he would clean away with a neatly folded, pristine white cloth that we had left on the altar before the service. He would then use it to clean the chalice of any last remnants of wine before placing it neatly on top and continuing with the service. As he administered communion to the congregation, I would see the cloth lay there on the top of the chalice, the stain of red wine folded away from prying eyes.

I stopped being an altar boy when my mother asked me to stop, making it clear in the conversation that there was no room for negotiation. Increased reporting was revealing the historical sexual abuse of children by members of the Catholic clergy in Ireland, the scale of which required the establishment of The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse in the year 2000 (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2025). I was never sexually abused by a priest but, as she revealed later, my mother was concerned that I would be.

My stint as an altar boy bears a lot of parallels to my experiences with *Bloodborne*. The game presents a stark narrative of power and corruption within religious institutions, drawing on both Gothic and Lovecraftian elements to highlight the fallacies inherent to religious dogma. This is seen with the Healing Church, Byrgenwerth College and the School of Mensis, three institutions in the game's city of Yharnam that offer varied interpretations of how *Bloodborne*'s eldritch horrors should be approached as beings worthy of reverence and worship. Central to this is the use and consumption of their blood, both as a means of survival and act of communion, which we eventually see as a substance capable of monstrous transformation and ascension.

Blood is also central in the Irish Catholic Church, which similarly features its consumption as an act of worship to a messianic figure as well as a mark of ascension. As an altar boy, I assisted the parish priest in the celebration of the Eucharist by serving him sacramental wine, used to symbolise the blood of Christ. He poured it into the ornamental chalice, drinking it while I stood in front of him in an act of worship. Like what is seen with the game's Healing Church in particular, this ritual denoted how Christ was to be revered in accordance with Catholic doctrine, and I stood there in my white robe bearing witness.

Alongside this, however, lie entangled aspects of sex and violence. I watched and assisted a priest in symbolically consuming the body and bodily fluids of a man while we were all dressed in these robes, ringing bells each time to denote the religious significance of such action. Alongside this, the increasingly apparent history of paedophilia and sexual abuse in the Irish Catholic Church meant that my mother was at home, worried for my safety while attending to such duties. This was all happening while I was going through a school system heavily influenced by the sacrosanct eroticism of Catholic ceremony that taught me little to nothing about queer sexuality while coming to terms with my own, in a post-colonial state on an island still partially defined by occupation.

I raise this to highlight the complicated relationship between the Irish Catholic Church and Irish queer identity, and how they map to *Bloodborne* from my perspective as a player-researcher. *Bloodborne* is a game steeped in elements I link to my own childhood, associating them particularly with the experiences I have highlighted here. As I have outlined, acts of worship in the Church are intertwined with sex and violence, and blood is a key component throughout. Playing the game reminds me not only of my experiences as an altar boy in the Irish Catholic Church, but also of the country that I came from, heavily defined by the institution.

Moving forward from this account, I move next to an outline of *Bloodborne* as a Gothic-Lovecraftian game and expand on how entanglement with it facilitates examinations of Irish queerness. Here, I focus on queer monstrosity to frame the analysis, looking at how the figure of the vampire highlights the impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic on gay male identity. Expanding on this, I conclude this article with a theoretical consideration of queerness by focusing on monstrosity in *Bloodborne*, considering how boundary conditions may be challenged through related entanglements.

4. Gothic-Lovecraftian Horror and Fear of the Outsider

Oh yes… Paleblood…
Well, you've come to the right place.
Yharnam is the home of blood ministration.
You need only unravel its mysteries.
But, where's an outsider like yourself to begin?
Easy, with a bit of Yharnam blood of your own… (FromSoftware, 2015)

Bloodborne (FromSoftware, 2015) is a third-person Role Playing Game (RPG) developed and released by FromSoftware. It stands as a feature within the company's catalogue of games that have become known as 'Soulsborne' games, a portmanteau of the studio's games *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009; 2020) and *Bloodborne,* and its *Dark Souls* anthology (FromSoftware, 2011; 2014; 2016).

Bloodborne's narrative is a classic Gothic tale of power and its abuse, where the city of Yharnam and its citizens have been taken over by an outside force. However, while the monsters you encounter are increasingly revealed to be Lovecraftian beings that exist beyond the capacity of human comprehension, you learn that it is the city's once trusted institutions which have led to its ultimate ruin (see Mukherjee, 2024).

The city's Byrgenwerth College and the Healing Church are central to this ruination, institutions which invested heavily in studying human transcendence while also worshipping eldritch gods found in the city's catacombs. The Healing Church in particular worships these gods through the consumption of their blood, a substance with miraculous healing properties and which was distributed throughout the city, but which ultimately led to the city's ruin by transforming its populace into bloodthirsty monsters. To begin the game, as the opening quote of this section demonstrates, you need to partake in the consumption of this, putting your own sense of self at risk in the process through its threat of transformation.

The first time I played *Bloodborne,* I found it incredibly difficult to make any sort of meaningful progress through the game's first area. I was completely unfamiliar with the Soulsborne series of games at this point and found the challenge I faced to be incredibly confronting. I felt frustrated and impatient, but I also slightly unnerved. The claustrophobic environment of Yharnam, its accompanying soundscape and the threats that inhabited it all contributed to an uncomfortable feeling of intimacy with the game, compounded further by the game's punishing combat mechanics that required a difficult combination of precise timings and aggressive playstyle.

Figure 1. 'Blood Vial' in *Bloodborne*

Source: Screenshot captured by the author from Bloodborne (FromSoftware, 2015); see also Bloodborne: Collector's Edition Guide (Future Press, 2017, p. 18).

From the beginning of the game, I was made aware of the *Bloodborne*'s healing mechanic, which involved the collection and use of an item called a 'Blood Vial' (Image 1). The description of the vials in the game reads:

> Special blood used in ministration. Restores HP.
> Once a patient has had their blood ministered, a unique but common treatment in Yharnam, successive infusions recall the first, and area all the more invigorating for it.
> No surprise that most Yharnamites are heavy users of blood.

This description shows that these vials restore Health Points (HP), so they are an invaluable asset in the game. To use them, I pressed a button on the controller, and my character correspondingly and violently stabbed the vial into their leg, presumably through the use of a syringe. The effect was immediate every time; a sound-effect would play, and my character's HP would return. However, as I learned later in the game, by using these vials I was also participating in the Healing Church's religious rite of communing with the eldritch gods, putting my character and me at the same transformative risk that befell most Yharnamites. Learning this, I began to more fully comprehend the tension that I had felt from the very beginning of the game. To progress through the game also meant to run an increased risk of violently destroying any sense I had of a defined/contained player-game subjectivity and, if I wanted to continue playing, I needed to accept this.

Such a consistent threat of boundary collapse in the game, where any establishment and containment of the self is readily challenged, supports the conceptualisation of player-game relations as entanglements that are consistently (re)negotiated. These (re)negotiations extend to perceived boundaries between the self and game, and my time with *Bloodborne* and its various tensions led me to draw parallels with my experiences of growing up in the ROI. Through the game's atmosphere, narrative themes and use of items such as Blood Vials, I began to think back on my time growing up in the country and the elements used by the Irish Catholic Church in particular. *Bloodborne*'s Healing Church and the Irish Catholic Church exist in environments influenced by, perhaps even supported by, inconceivable horror. This is depicted through the presence of eldritch gods in *Bloodborne*, whose presence destabilises the very conception of a contained self. Through its

Gothic-Lovecraftian elements, I began to similarly see the colonial violence that affected the island of Ireland for generations as inconceivably, cosmically horrific, and something which the institution of the Irish Catholic Church has been defined by (see for instance Maier, 2013).

I connect this Gothic-Lovecraftian conceptualisation of the Irish Catholic Church to the scholarship around Irish Gothicism. Killeen (2014) describes Ireland as a Gothic location, where Celtic traditions and the dramatic landscape weave with British Imperialism and colonial violence (Killeen, 2014, pp. 8-10). It is a country and an island haunted by ghosts who occupy the landscape so completely that the present and past overlap and weave together into the very fabric of Irish society (Killeen, 2014, pp.10-11). This is all combined with the Gothic presence of the Irish Catholic Church, an institution focused on death, resurrection and the use of blood in religious rites, which has a defining role in defining Irish Republican identity. It is therefore unsurprising that the Church continues to play a significant role in contemporary Irish life. One stark illustration of this enduring influence is the Peace Walls in Northern Ireland, which physically separate Catholic and Protestant communities along lines of religious affiliation. Sectarian violence is at the heart of the Irish state, even as it looks to move beyond such histories.

Killeen also acknowledges though that the term 'Gothic' is a complicated term to use as it is very difficult to pin down exactly what it is referring to (Killeen, 2014, p.17). Even to define it as a genre is a problem, Gothicism's incoherence and indeterminacy challenging the application of any categorisation (Killeen, 2014, pp.13-17). Instability is inherent to the work that I present here, and it is a fundamental part of understanding entangled subjectivities (Barad, 2006, p.261). Given its focus on contemporary issues combined with the use of literary elements from multiple genres like Romance, the Gothic "is a genre which absorbs and assimilates other genres" (Barad, 2006, p.261). However, if measurement, or analysis in this case, is to take place, then limits are required to force some sort of stability and allow for observation.

In an attempt to establish some consistency of approach when exploring the Gothic, I lean on Kirkland's (2021) definition of the term. He writes that the 'Gothic';

> ...refers to various branches of popular culture which emerged in the eighteenth century, exhibiting a complex engagement with the spooky, the ambivalent, the unsettling and the uncanny. Given the moment of its emergence, and its continuous revival and resurgence throughout the modern period, many critics consider Gothic fiction a response to contemporary concerns regarding industrialisation, urbanisation, massification and the displacement of religion, spiritualism and superstition by scientific rationality (Kirkland, 2021, p.4).
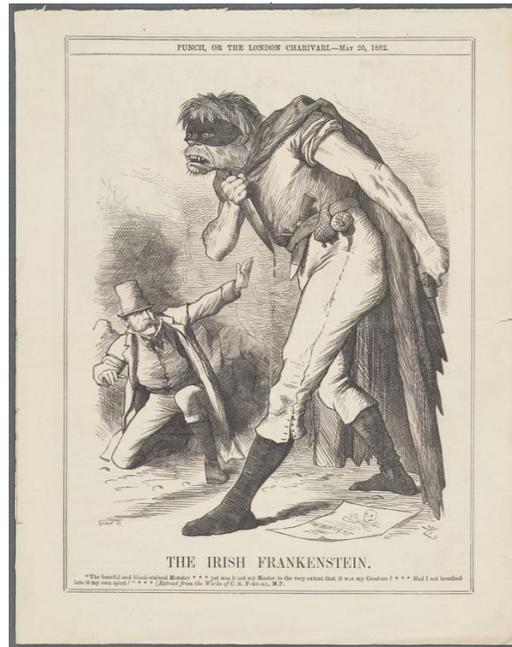
Featuring elements that explore and challenge various boundaries, Kirkland's definition frames Gothic texts as those which are reactionary and reference contemporary issues facing a community. Nevertheless, basing the Gothic on contemporary anxieties frames it as temporally dependent. As such, within the context of this article and its framework, I interpret Gothicism and the elements it employs in the service of narrative as unstable, being constantly (re)defined and (re)negotiated given their dependence on contemporary issues.

Gothicism's instability lends itself particularly well to discussions around queerness, which Westengard (2015) argues "is a central element of Gothic fiction, as well as one of the primary anxieties projected onto the monstrous body" (Westengard, 2015, p. 278; see also Halberstam, 1995; Westengard, 2019). Gothic works demonstrate how relations between queerness and games like *Bloodborne* may exist, particularly through entanglements with queer players, and it highlights how such queer player-game entanglements bring forth haunting forms of queer anxiety and trauma.

While it may seem that Gothicism is a genre/mode that crumbles at the first sign of scrutiny, there are some commonly used elements which derive from different cultures and traditions. A particularly straightforward way to observe them is to focus on the monsters that Gothic works include, such as ghosts, werewolves, vampires and witches, even if their implementation may vary. In the context of Irish Gothicism, for example, Frankenstein's monster was used to represent the fear of an external threat to British Imperialism, the image of the 'Irish Frankenstein' framing Irish Republicanism as a threat to the British Empire (Ulin, 2015, p.49; Image 2).

Bloodborne also draws on Lovecraftian horror and the works of Howard Phillips (H.P.) Lovecraft similarly presents the threat of a monstrous outsider, albeit in grander proportions. These monsters, such as Lovecraft's Cthulhu, exist on a maddening scale well beyond human comprehension and whose mere presence in the universe pose an existential threat to humanity (Ulstein, 2019, p.52). Contrary to the Gothic though, works such as *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) tend to look away from the externalisation of internal fears and anxieties, positing instead the insignificance of human life (Ulstein, 2019, p.54). These features of Lovecraft's work, which can generally be described as anti-humanist, have set Lovecraft as an influential figure not just in horror but also in many of emerging philosophical paradigms of the twentieth century, such as new materialism, posthumanism and speculative realism (Sederholm and Weinstock, 2016, p.7).

Source: The New York Public Library, Digital Collections, "The Irish Frankenstein" (satirical print on Charles Stewart Parnell in response to the Phoenix Park Murders, 1882), accessed 2017.

Various video games include references to Lovecraft's works ,such as *The Call of Cthulhu* (Cyanide, 2018) and *The Sinking City* (Frogwares, 2019), both of which reference elements from *The Call of Cthulhu* in their narratives. Incorporating the concept of madness as a game mechanic, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) also draws on Lovecraftian elements, including a sanity meter. This meter is a visual and quantitative measure of the character's mental stability and is affected by remaining in the dark too long, witnessing disturbing events or encountering enemies. *Bloodborne* similarly draws on a number of Lovecraftian elements, including its monster design, presenting its eldritch Great Ones as omnipresent beings that exist on multiple planes, beings who challenge the boundaries of life and death.

As *Bloodborne* demonstrates in its fusion of the two genres, Gothicism and Lovecraftian horror share numerous aesthetic and narrative similarities, even if the scale they work from is different. In both, monsters typically denote a violent intrusion by an unwelcome outsider, and narratives generally centre an individual whose secure positioning in the world is fundamentally threatened by contact with them. In Gothicism this can be seen, for instance, in the intrusion of the past though monsters rooted in existing folklore such as ghosts and vampires, while Lovecraftian horror presents creatures like Cthulhu that exist beyond the boundaries of our perceived reality.

However, as seen with the Irish Frankenstein, these monsters do not exist merely to be encountered. As with Stoker's Dracula and Shelley's monster of Frankenstein, they are disruptive figures who hint at violence if not outright cause it. Lovecraft's eldritch horrors in particular can be seen as an extension of his rampant xenophobia, given that he actively supported the Ku Klux Klan in 1915 and asked for the extension of Jim Crowe laws to the northern American state. His discriminatory views, particularly those on miscegenation, are intertwined with, and inseparable from, his writings (Kneale, 2006, p.115).

This inseparability is evident in many of his stories through the use of 'mongrel,' most notably in *The Shadow over Innsmouth* and *The Horror of Red Hook*. In these stories, he describes monstrous fish-human hybrids and "primitive half-ape savagery" respectively, creatures which are the result of humans consorting with and worshipping Great Ones (Lovecraft, 1927: in Klinger, 2022, p. 218; Lovecraft, 1927, p. 62). Also worth noting is that Lovecraft wrote these stories just after the Great Migration, a time in American history where African Americans migrated "by the thousands...into industrial cities to find work and later fill labor [*sic*] shortages created by World War I" (Library of Congress, 2025).

Such information only increases the racist potency of Lovecraft's 'mongrel' and, much like my own interwoven experiences of queerness and Irish Catholicism, it is neither possible nor particularly desirable to separate the extremity of Lovecraft's bigoted views from the stories and monsters that he presents. While his works may offer a framework for understanding the Human subject through his anti-humanist perspective, his views also derive from overt discrimination, imperialism and white supremacy (see Švelch, 2023, p.20).

Given that I use this article to map my own entanglements with *Bloodborne*, a game that deploys both Gothic and Lovecraftian elements in the name of narrative, it is reasonable to assume that such research is also inseparable from the impact of imperialism. While not providing a complete analysis of these factors, I

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[1]   Tenniel, J. (1882, inferred). The Irish Frankenstein. In *Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle: visual materials.* https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/1cb258d0-0841-0135-4894-00477c6484ef.

finish this section comparing the vampire, a classic Gothic monster who usefully symbolises the disruptive potential of the outsider, with discourses surrounding gay men during the HIV and AIDS epidemics.

Since the end of the twentieth century, vampires have been a popular occurrence in popular media, including video games, with particular reference often being made to the figure of Count Dracula from Stoker's *Dracula* (2003). Similar to *Bloodborne*, Stoker's novel centres around monstrous transformations and the defilement of some natural order. This is especially seen in the inclusion of blood as a substance capable of offering either monstrous salvation or damnation, depending on the perspective, and is heavily entangled with Christian symbolism.

The Count has also facilitated a number of interesting academic discussions, including considerations of religion and identity (see Halberstam, 1993; Bowles, 2013), multiple examinations of gender and sexuality (see Demetrakopoulos, 1977; Stevenson, 1993; Kuzmanovic, 2004), and examinations of colonialism and postcolonialism (see Renes, 2016). This last point is particularly seen in Haslam (2007), who argues that Stoker's work, as part of the 'Irish Gothic' collection of nineteenth-century literature, marks the "political anxiety and theological ambivalence" (Haslam, 2007, p.86) that many Protestant authors felt in Ireland at the time (Haslam, 2007, pp.83-86).

As video games have developed, game series such as *Castlevania* (Konami, 1986) have also iterated on Stoker's Count, placing the monstrous figure of the vampire as a staple in Gothic horror gaming (Crofts, 2023, p.41). The Count evokes fear, whether sexual or psychological, and the threat he poses is oftentimes demonstrated through his attraction to female innocence (Halberstam, 1993, p. 335). Central to his identity is the consumption of blood, which the vampire traditionally prefers from a virginal white woman, and Christian relics and rites are the most effective way to protect them from the creature (see for instance Stoker, 2003, pp. 302-304).

The vampire is a useful figure to bring together my experiences of Christian rites with those playing *Bloodborne*. Similar to Eucharistic practices where bread and wine are symbolically used as the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the vampire consumes the blood of another, often leading to some form of transformation. At times, this can mean that the vampire regains their strength and various powers, but, as is seen in Stoker's work, this can also lead to compulsion and transformation for the victim. The vampire engages in their own form of communion, which I relate to Irish queer identity, exemplified by my time as a queer altar boy.

These connections that I draw here between vampirism, Christianity and Irish queer identity align with Cameron's (2012) argument that the vampire is a great figure for queer sexuality given how it actively embodies non-normative desires (Cameron, 2012, p.117). To this, Lau (2018) additionally argues that the vampire is an almost-ideal personification of Edelman's anti-social conceptualisation of queerness (Lau, 2018, p. 8). The vampire and Edelman's idealised queer subject are both "antisocial, both participate in nonreproductive sexuality, [and] both value jouissance – the painful pleasure associated with the death drive – over intelligibility in the symbolic" (Lau, 2018, p. 8). This painful pleasure is experienced through the consumption of blood, and through Bersani, it connects narratives surrounding HIV and AIDS with the queer monstrosity of vampirism (see also Pheasant-Kelly, 2019).

Larry Kramer's[2] *The Normal Heart* (2021) exemplifies Bersani's anti-social argument, demonstrating the material conditions that faced gay men at the time of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and the motivations for his argument. Referencing his efforts to set up the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) advocacy group, Kramer's semi-autobiographical play explores the challenges that faced queer communities during the initial outbreak of the virus. Focussing on the experiences of cisgender gay men, the play demonstrates how many were stigmatised and ostracised, and the lack of governmental support that was offered in the effort to prevent the virus' spread. This is particularly demonstrated by the monologue by Kramer's character Dr Emma Brookner, a doctor who offers support to the gay men suffering from infection:

> EMMA: ...I am taking care of more victims of this epidemic than anyone in this world. We have more accumulated test results, more data, more frozen blood samples, more experience! ...Any way you add all this up, it is an unconscionable delay and has never, never existed in any other health emergency during this entire century (Kramer, 2011, pp.66-67).

Kramer's monologue exemplifies Bersani's description of 'malignant aversion', where institutions enacted a form of complicit genocide towards queer communities (Bersani, 1987, p.198). It demonstrates the hopelessness that many gay men faced during the height of the health crisis, unable to obtain the help they needed from these institutions that were supposedly there to support them, and how simply existing as gay was itself a deviant and radical act. In the aftermath of the HIV and AIDS epidemics, this play also demonstrates the connections between gay male identity and vampirism given how the epidemic was used to frame gay men as diseased monsters who consumed the bodily fluids of others.

Given this outline of Gothicism and Lovecraftian horror, which includes an examination of Irish Gothicism, queer monstrosity and the monstrous framing of gay male identity, I now move to explore the concepts of disease, deviancy and blood in *Bloodborne*. By analysing monstrous elements in *Bloodborne*, specifically the game's 'Maneater Boar,' I demonstrate how Irish queer identity and Catholic ceremony relate to monstrous deviancy in the game.

5. Becoming *Bloodborne*'s 'Gay Pig'

HIV and AIDS can be understood as a global disease that has affected, and continues to affect, many diverse communities and demographics, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) reporting

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2   Kramer was also a founding member of the political advocacy group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).

that, as of 2022, roughly 39 million people have tested positive for HIV and that Eastern and Southern Africa contain approximately 20.8 million diagnosed cases (UNAIDS, 2022). As mentioned, gay men received little to no support from governmental and health institutions during the initial outbreak of the virus in the 1980s, which Bersani conceptualises as 'malignant aversion' (Bersani, 1987, p.198). The term is presented as a way of encapsulating the passive, yet intentional, aversion that institutions in America seemed to demonstrate to the communities affected by the outbreak of the virus, justified by the framing of Gay, Bisexual and Men-Who-Have-Sex-With Men (GBMSM) in particular as monstrous deviants deserving of death (Bersani, 1987, p.198, 206; Reynolds, 2015).[3] The virus, a bloodborne pathogen, was a morally just result of homosexual sexual activity, demonstrating the immorality of such behaviours and proving that GBMSM deserved to die.

Given the hopelessness that resulted from such malignant aversion, Bersani concludes that the only choice left was to embrace self-annihilation and *jouissance* as a mode of escape (Bersani, 1987). If GBMSM, particularly gay men, were to be monsters worthy only of death, then the only solution is to stand firm and embrace such destruction. Sexual pleasure should be embraced, and GBMSM should refuse to apologise for their promiscuity and plurality (Bersani, 1987, p.218).

Edelman (2004) draws on Bersani's argument for the potential destruction of the self and develops it into a theorised form of queer negativity. Drawing on Lacanian theory, Edelman conceptualises Bersani's *jouissance* as a death drive, and posits that queer negativity may be the radical approach needed to truly counter the deleterious discourses and support a liberatory politics. As Edelman describes it, *jouissance* moves beyond the concept of sexual pleasure and instead refers to unfathomable modes that exist "beyond the bounds of identity, meaning and law" (Edelman, 2004, p.25). In effect, *jouissance* is driven by a death drive, and this death-driven *jouissance* marks the overall rejection and destruction of an objectively conceived self (Edelman, 2004).

By providing such context, Edelman argues that death-driven *jouissance* frames queerness as disturbing and reactionary, defined through cycles of repeated destruction and (re)formation. This deliberate resistance to singular objectivity contributes to the radical and political potential of queerness which conversely also means that defining queerness in any manner other than reactionary undermines its political power (Edelman, 2004, p.22). In effect, queerness is a radical act of refusing to submit to heterosexual hegemonies and moralities.

I connect this interpretation of queerness to the fetish of 'barebacking', or, "the practice of unprotected sex among men" (Dean, 2009, p.2). This practice emerged in the aftermath of the HIV and AIDS epidemic when medications gradually became available, and was typically interpreted as "a case of pathological self-destructiveness or, at best, gross irresponsibility on the part of those who should know better" (Dean, 2009, p.2). For those who barebacked, the established safety measures that contained GBMSM sexual activities, in particular condom usage, were abandoned in place of a death-driven *jouissance*, simultaneously centring pleasure and self-destruction.

However, barebacking can also be seen as a practice and sub-culture that shirks off the epidemiological perspective of queer sex and overcomes the boundaries placed on queer sexual pleasures (Dean, 2009, p.45). This boundlessness is impersonal but not without intimacy, where activities like anonymous group sex can facilitate "access to an impersonal intimacy that barebackers often characterize [*sic*] as sacred, rather than profane" (Dean, 2009, p. 46). While the history of the HIV and AIDS epidemic marks a time of great tragedy for queer communities, it has also formulated barebacking as an extraordinary and transgressive practice entangled in communal networks of care (Dean, 2009, pp. 46-47).

Relating to barebacking as a culture and practice, Dean describes two specific figures within the sub-culture; (i) the 'pig'; and, (ii) the 'bug chaser' (Dean, 2009, pp.48-49). Beginning with the former, Dean outlines the gay 'pig' as:

> ...a man who wants as much sex as he can get with as many different men as possible, often in the form of group sex that includes barebacking, water sports, fisting and SM [Sadomasochism] ("pig pile" is a long-established term for a gay orgy or gang bang). There is really no such thing as a vanilla pig or a safe-sex pig, since the erotic identity of *pig* defies normative constructions of sexual behaviour. Being a pig entails committing oneself to sexual excess, to pushing beyond boundaries of propriety and corporeal integrity (Dean, 2009, p.49).

Unlike other terms for gay men which focus on physical characteristics, the gay 'pig' focuses on sexual behaviours often vilified because of their perceived extreme promiscuity (Florêncio, 2020, p. 7). Bug chasers are a type of pig in the barebacking subculture that signifies men who engage with unprotected sex with others who are HIV-positive as they seek to become infected with the virus themselves (Dean, 2009, p.48).

While barebacking prioritises sexual pleasure over sex, bug chasing iterates and offers a radical reinterpretation of HIV discourses. As opposed to those promoted during the HIV and AIDS epidemic, and in opposition to the image of the healthy body promoted in its aftermath, the intentional desire to contract HIV challenges moral and epidemiological arguments, embracing the fears and anxieties typically associated with the virus. For bug chasers, "HIV... is pictured as a source of life rather than of death" (Dean, 2009, p.49).

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[3]   Reynolds, D. (2015). Larry Kramer: 'Genocide Is Being Inflicted On Gay People''. *Advocate,* 24th March 2015. https://www.advocate.com/people/2015/3/24/larry-kramer-genocide-being-inflicted-gay-people;

Figure 3. 'Maneater Boar' in *Bloodborne*

Source: FromSoftware, 2015; UDON, 2017, p.33.

Bloodborne has pigs. The game's 'Maneater Boar' is one of the most grotesque creatures encountered in the game (Image 3). A symbol of excess in *Bloodborne*, the pig is a fat, bristled, gluttonous creature covered in its own filth. With blood dripping from its mouth, the Boar is a monster engorged from consuming the viscera of others, with a distended stomach from its refusal to stop, which drags on the ground beneath it. Highly aggressive and huge in stature, I was terrified the first time it charged at me, coming from the depths of a sewer tunnel. I remember the pressure I felt trying to manoeuvre into an open area in a pitiful attempt to gain some sort of advantage. I felt disgusted as I tried to defend myself against it as the Boar slammed its body across the screen, watching my character's body eventually fade away. defeated as the pig appeared to grin down the barrel of the camera.

Encountering the Maneater Boar, a monster which has clearly, fully and gleefully embraced monstrous transformation, I was reminded of my own feelings of disgust around GBMSM sexual activities when I first came out. Sexual health clinics constantly warned about the dangers of barebacking, yet here were people who were willing and able to engage in same-sex sexual promiscuity without caring about the supposed threat that HIV and AIDS posed to their bodies. *Bloodborne*'s Boar gorges on pleasure, feeding on blood and disease in sick ecstasy as it throws its excessive body around. Such a creature demonstrates the liberation of such acts, where societal confines of domesticity are destroyed. Similarly, pigs and bug chasers will not be contained by the discourses that try to do so.

Looking back, I can recognise now that my own internalised queer bigotry, particularly around such acts, was directly informed by the formative role the Irish Catholic Church had in my life. I received insufficient sex education in my Catholic-ethos school that was primarily, if not exclusively, focused on reproduction from an anti-abortion perspective, and generally understood the Irish Catholic Church to be against sexual pleasure despite the various allegations of sexual abuse.

As a symbol of sexual excess, the Maneater Boar is a great figure in *Bloodborne* that stands counter to my own internalised queerphobia. Covered in filth and viscera, it embraces Edelman's death-driven *jouissance* to the point where its body has been monstrously transformed. Much like the pig and bug chaser who risk, even desire, viral infection, the Boar can reject containment and control through its gluttony, serving as a monstrous threat as it violently pushes against attempts to claim space in the city of Yharnam. In the game's Gothic-Lovecraftian context, this monster became an externalisation of my own queerphobia as well as a reflection on the potential (and monstrous) liberation offered by barebacking practices.

Central to this are my experiences as an altar boy in the Irish Catholic Church and the subservient role I played in helping the priest prepare and deliver communion to the congregation. The institution played a major role both in the struggle for liberation and the perpetuation of various abuses; it forms a constituent part of Irish queer identities given its prominent role in the Irish state. As a queer person coming from Ireland with this background, *Bloodborne*'s Maneater Boar exemplifies a Gothic model of queerness formulated around similar elements to those that I grew up with, but which violently pushes against them as it embraces a death-driven *jouissance*, emphasising filthy abundance and violent excess in the place of obedience and control.

6. Conclusion

Bloodborne is a third-person Gothic-Lovecraftian horror RPG that presents a narrative focused on the power of religious institutions and the monsters that are created when such power is abused. Traversing through the city of Yharnam, one uncovers the secrets of a city now in ruins and battles with the potential of your own monstrous transformation caused by communing with eldritch gods through the consumption of their blood.

As demonstrated, the narrative, aesthetic and gameplay elements of the game all weave together an experience that I identify with through my lived experiences as an Irish queer man. Central to this is my involve-

ment with the Irish Catholic Church, an institution which plays a pivotal role in Irish contemporary society. It symbolises a form of religious eroticism through its emphasis on the ritualised consumption of the flesh and blood of a male messiah figure. At the same time, the institution became increasingly scrutinised as the extent of sexual, paedophilic abuse by members of the Church came to light, abuse which I did not suffer but which nevertheless impacted my time growing up in the country.

This article presents an entangled mapping of these experiences, using my position as the player-researcher to investigate how Irish queer identity interweaves, informs and is informed by *Bloodborne*. Central to this is the use of Carr's and Kuntz' works on textual analysis and radical cartographies, respectively, along with Barad's and Braidotti's on feminist materialism. Focusing on the tensions between blood and disease, I relate *Bloodborne* to the HIV and AIDS epidemic and its impact on contemporary formulations of gay male identity. Using the theories of Bersani, Edelman and Dean, I examine how the game confronts queer players with the transformative monstrosity of a bloodborne disease, focusing on the Maneater Boar as symbolic of the gay pig and bug-chaser fetishes that exist within gay-male culture. The creature usefully demonstrates Edelman's theory of death-driven *jouissance,* which frames queerness as a form of pleasure-driven resistance that embraces self-destruction to push against hegemonic, in this case, heteronormative, structures.

As a final point, given that *Bloodborne* draws on elements of the Gothic and Lovecraftian horror, I also see it as interwoven with aspects of the xenophobia and bigotry that figures like Lovecraft were also known for, and whose stories were used as a form of fearmongering against some disruptive, typically racialised, 'Other.' *Bloodborne* is a game set in some nebulous part of Eastern Europe and there are no non-white human characters in the entire game. Given the genre's histories and the game's setting, there is an argument that playing the game and dominating space in the city of Yharnam is analogous to forms of colonial violence, entering the city as a human ready to save it from the eldritch monsters that inhabit its streets.

While such an argument requires further consideration, it is worth highlighting to demonstrate how entanglements between Irish queer identity and *Bloodborne* may be further problematised. Exploring the game's Gothic setting and relating it to my own experiences of growing up in Ireland, I feel caught in a tension between the history of colonial violence on the island of Ireland and its entanglements with the British Empire. With this, I question the role that contemporary Irish queer identity may have in reproducing and perpetuating such colonial harms. These are considerations that will continue with me throughout my research.

For now, I present this cartography as an initial demonstration of how *Bloodborne* entangles with Irish queer identity. By considering and mapping my experiences with the game and its monstrous elements, I demonstrate how the game exemplifies a radical formulation of queerness that includes experiences of death-driven *jouissance*. This Gothic-Lovecraftian formulation of queer monstrosity can challenge religious dogma and institutional abuses, demonstrating the power gained when monstrous excess is embraced.

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