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Abstract

H. P. Lovecraft's iconic Cosmic Horror tales frequently involve an encounter with a non-human incommensurability that strains human systems of representation. However, while current critical work often focuses on the materialistic disruption caused by such contact, there has been little focus on the objects within these stories. I argue that the representation of such items reflects upon the paradigms through which material worth is perceived and can consequently assist in further nuancing theoretical critiques of anthropocentric epistemology. Video games frequently place material assets to construct a certain frame of contact for the player. It is within Lovecraftian video game adaptations then that there lies the potential to re-conceptualise the study of object encounter and representation to reflect upon the urgency of challenging processes of non-human contact. This article explores the role of artefacts within Lovecraft's fiction, the representation of materiality in a range of video game adaptations, and finally examines the process of "narrative archaeology" in *Bloodborne*, where the player must piece together micro narratives from textual descriptions to reveal the macro cosmic revelation. In so doing, I argue that *Bloodborne* helps to identify the critical potential of Lovecraftian adaptation for materialist critique through the framework of virtual encounters.

Keywords

Archaeology; Archaeogaming; Artifacts; Bloodborne; Narrative Archaeology; Object-orientated Ontology; Video Games

At the heart of H. P. Lovecraft's tales is a curiosity towards what lies outside of conventional understanding, a desire to pull back the veil of secrets hidden in the dark corners of the Earth or beyond. For the narrator, this knowledge is invariably too much for the human mind to comprehend, driving them insane by the mere suggestion of what has been witnessed. In Lovecraft's fiction, there is often a meeting with a form of cosmic materiality, where "matter" itself is suggested to be far stranger than human conceptualization accounts for and where it challenges the validity of ingrained or projected anthropocentric labels. These confrontations are formulated through an encounter with a non-human terror, one whose very inexplicability forces the human perceiver to confront an entity outside of any relational network that may provide taxonomical stability. Fundamentally, these encounters decentralize the position of the human within the wider universe, mocking the belief that every object or subject may be defined in proximity to our values. Extensive critical debate has already discussed the materiality of figures such as Cthulhu, which China Miéville perceives to "en-Weird ontology itself," or which act as gateways for Speculative Realists—such as Graham Harman in *Weird Realism* (2012)—to consider an "object-orientated ontology" (Miéville 113). Yet, little attention has been paid to

the *process* of encountering objects within Lovecraft's tales and how such perspectives may offer new definitions of the non-human, while simultaneously reflecting upon our own material practices. Video games include a myriad of objects; whether these are interactable items or background objects, each moment is curated for player interaction and often aimed to elicit a specific reaction. This medium is, therefore, the perfect vehicle to challenge the very inscription and coding of material "identity," to explore how the imagination and rendering of the contact process can afford new perspectives towards the non-human.

Lovecraft's fiction often utilizes archaeological settings or tropes as a frame to excavate such destabilizing revelations. The structure of an intrepid explorer questing to previously lost or unknown locations, deciphering cryptic puzzles, and obtaining priceless artifacts is common across a myriad of archaeological media. Originating in Imperial Romance fiction, such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886), this inquiry is replete through both Gothic fiction—e.g. Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903) and M. R. James's "A Warning to the Curious" (1925)—and later popularized within more mainstream media: Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1996), and Nathan Drake in *Uncharted* (2007). The format

resonates with Lovecraft, who noted James's influence on his writing but inverts the archetypal relic as "reward" in favor of unearthing incomprehensible knowledge that threatens the stability of the subject (*At the Mountains of Madness* 168). Lovecraftian fiction alters the traditional archaeological-trope tale, trading the wonder of the priceless artifact for a different interpretation of subjective awe, one invested with a mixture of cosmic insignificance and ontological destabilization. In so doing, these tales offer an alternate lens to reflect upon the engagement with non-human identity, a powerful rumination on the formation of material labels and how conceptualizations of ontology outside of anthropocentric constraints require a moment of estrangement: the alienation from the object.

Video games are an especially ripe format in which the enduring interrogation of object identity offers new frames of encounter. Within this medium, items may have a variety of functions, whether this is to aid progression or only for aesthetic presentation. Lovecraftian themes have increasingly begun to emerge within more mainstream media, yet video game adaptations are often considered to be *niche* artifacts that garner a cult following rather than being huge commercial successes. In this article, I argue that these transpositions frequently deviate from the original Lovecraftian interrogation of non-human identity as portrayed through object utilization. While games such as *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (2005) or *Eternal Darkness* (2002) are well recognized within Lovecraftian fandom and received critical praise, often they failed to break through to a mass market. However, the commercial success of *Bloodborne* (2015) disrupts this trend and itself represents a process that I term "narrative archaeology," in which the player becomes the Weird explorer who must piece together dissociated knowledge or lore from object descriptions, arguably a more faithful adaptation or even development of this original ontological interrogation.

This article will outline the role of item identity in archaeological media, focusing initially on the elevation of artifacts, objects that are anthropocentrically designated as "valuable." Through examining the presence, or indeed absence, of objects and their function within Lovecraft's archaeological fiction, I outline how philosophical inquiries such as object-orientated ontology permit not only an appreciation of how materiality is conceptualized, but equally a reflection on contemporary practice. Applying this identification first to a range of Lovecraftian video game adaptations and subsequently a more extended analysis of *Bloodborne*, I expose how the excavation of object identity is transposed across media. By encoding the quest for knowledge within excavated items, through both functional use and their description, *Bloodborne* engages with the cosmic horror potential of the material while being simultaneously dependent upon the projection of object

identity. I argue that the artifacts in Lovecraftian fiction instigate a material alienation, one that forces the subject to confront the processes involved within item labeling and offers the prospect of a more compelling and nonpartisan contact framework with the non-human.

The Prescription of Artifact Identity

Archaeological adventure quests are frequently driven by an explorer (re)discovering an ancient and "lost" location, which houses a mythical object of priceless value. These items are often removed from their original culture and context, appropriated, and re-housed in either museums or private collections. Yet, although Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series may "play for sport" and Indiana Jones in *Temple of Doom* (1984) seeks "fortune and glory," Lovecraftian explorers are drawn more by a curiosity towards epistemological revelation than material gain. The prescription of certain items as having artifactual status inscribes these objects as having a significant value, the subject's perception thus differentiating them from other nearby commonplace examples. This separation and identification are core aspects of how artifacts are conceptualized. Eugenio Donato suggests that, "Archaeological origins are important in two ways: each archaeological artifact has to be an original artifact, and these original artifacts must in turn explain the 'meaning' of a subsequent larger history" (220). Provenance becomes crucial to the prescription of object labels. An item's worth is predicated on a knowledge of what it fundamentally is; paradoxically, an object must be individual enough that it is deemed unique and thus valuable, while simultaneously identifiable in order to be situated in proximity to similar relics. These relational taxonomical networks, such as the museum, require that micro fragments may be arranged in a manner through which an observer may understand the macro whole—whether this is a society, culture, or historical moment. Artifactual identity itself is thus formed by the subject's perception based on the knowledge of where the item originates, that it is sufficiently different to other examples, and conclusively that it may "speak" beyond itself. Such a forced imposition has evident issues, whether this is located in the contentious paradigms of acquisition or suggests that such a micro item may comprehensively replicate or narrate such a nuanced field. The prescription of artifactual identity has, however, become almost a subconscious process for the perceiving subject, influenced largely by its physical proximity to other items. Roger Luckhurst, discussing the relics excavated within Egypt in the nineteenth century, comments that "the materials dug out of the ground of Egypt became artifacts only within the frame of the museum" (145). Alluding to the various underhand methods in which objects were smuggled out of the country, including mummies being re-branded as "bone-manure," Luckhurst highlights how the *performance* of these

objects directly influence their identity (138). Yet, I argue that this is identifiable not only in exhibition arrangements, where schemas of mobility influence a crowd in certain pre-determined routes but also in archaeological media.

The opening level of *Tomb Raider* and its re-make *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* (2007) introduces the player to Lara Croft, who is hired by Natla, the Chief Executive Office of a wealthy corporation, to locate a piece of an artifact: the scion. Even with little pre-requisite knowledge of what this relic looks like, its positioning within the game makes its artifactual status evident. Navigating various terrains, puzzles, and fierce-some monsters, the player slowly makes progress to the Tomb of Qualopec. At the end of this section, Lara finds a final elevated room with a stone pillar at its center. Resting atop this raised platform is evidently the artifact that both player and character are looking for: the first part of the scion. Although there are other items in the room (bricks and murals), the scion is the only *interactable* item and its central proximity designates its apparent value, even with little further explanation. Video games, however, are predicated on a structured or intentional layout, each object is an “asset” that developers have intentionally placed within a locale for an intended affect. The physical elevation of the artifact therefore imitates the trope that runs throughout archaeological media, mirroring its metaphorical hierarchy above other perceptively “mundane” items. *Tomb Raider* here draws upon encoded expectations within the player, the presentation of this object overtly designates it having an alternate value: it is neither scenery nor functional (such as ammo), but rather an artifact. However, beyond its inscription as an artifact, the scion at this point has no evident purpose. While the Atlanteans must have ostensibly fabricated the relic with specific intent, evidently this is a label rather than tacit designation as both identity and tool-mechanics are obfuscated from Lara. Such an interrogation queries how players utilize and recognize *useful* items within video games and how this may reflect upon wider real-life applications of “thing” identity; indeed, this appreciation of an individual object ontology is one which speaks to the Lovecraftian destabilization of anthropocentric behavior.

Lovecraftian Relics and Non-Human Ontology

Lovecraft’s fiction incorporates a multitude of archaeological settings, particularly referencing Ancient Egyptian history, which contains a dichotomy of architectural presence and seemingly ontological absence: ruins are left to “speak” for their absent architects. Yet, these tales deviate from the expectation of an archaeological adventure as the narrators often only discover knowledge too horrifying for the human mind to process. Although examples such as “The Temple” (1925), “The Nameless City” (1921), and “Under the Pyramids” (1924) all incorporate the exploration of a ruin,

in each there is little reference to any form of artifact. “The Shadow out of Time” (1936) culminates with the narrator descending into an alien lost city, delving below the surface of the desert to locate a tome of knowledge which has been hinted at in their dreams. Within these stories there is little detail of the objects encountered, and indeed these derelict locations are often only filled with debris—items inscribed as lacking value, or waste. It is worth noting that any truly alien civilization would potentially utilize objects in an alternate manner. Therefore, the lack of any particularly named items is arguably due to the narrator’s lack of comprehension. Such a preclusion originates within the lack of material labels, implying that any fabricated object, or tool, cannot be understood by its mechanics alone. The dismissal of these remnants proposes a layered form of object ontology, a paradigm that elucidates upon the chasm between object-use and material composition.

The aforementioned elevation of artifact status can be found in Lovecraft’s stories, particularly “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936). The tale is narrated by Robert Burke, whose fascination with the occult leads to his interest in an abandoned church in Providence, Rhode Island. Discovering that the church has remained derelict following rumours that it was occupied by a cult and an “evil” which had to be exorcized, Blake invariably feels the curiosity towards the unknown that marks the archaeological excavation. Breaking into the church, the narrator discovers that this vestige space is largely filled with broken remnants. Exploring its interior, he climbs to the highest steeple: “In the centre of the dust-laden floor rose a curiously angled stone pillar some four feet in height and two in average diameter, covered on each side with bizarre, crudely incised and wholly unrecognizable hieroglyphs” (*H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3*, 283). In a comparable manner to *Tomb Raider*, Blake discovers a pedestal elevating an item of evident value, distancing it from the other objects within the room. He finds that “On the pillar rested a metal box of peculiarly asymmetrical form,” a discovery that even without explanation designates the object and its contents as a form of artifact (283). In *Tomb Raider* and “The Haunter of the Dark,” the placement of the item itself inscribes them with a certain form of identity, even though both explorers have little knowledge of what they have actually found. Each ontologically-specific label is thus a projection upon the object. The user’s preclusion from the intended function (inscribed by the Atlanteans or here the Church of Starry Wisdom) reinforces a lack of tacit comprehension. This plurality of material identity suggests that such inscribed labels are evanescent as each of these spectral designations circumnavigate the “heart” of the item itself; fundamental material comprehension requires a more immutable and local dimension, thus inferring a deeper object ontological dimension.

Lovecraftian fiction has the potential to consider not only how non-human identity is conceived but how anthropocentrism informs, or indeed limits, such a conceptualization. Graham Harman's theory of "object-orientated ontology" questions how a fundamental object identity and perspective would be represented, one which is not defined through a semiotic network of relations. Martin Heidegger first proposed that objects reside in a subconscious dormancy, which is only recognized by a human subject when they act in unusual ways. For example, the human subject only fully notices a door handle when it is broken, a transformation of its use-label. In *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Harman argues that "Heidegger's account of equipment gives birth to an ontology of *objects themselves*," proposing a tool-being which embodies an interrogation of ontology beyond anthropocentric perspectives (1). Both the scion and metal box are perceptively dormant until uncovered, yet through object-orientated ontology these items are, until this moment, outside of human-based systems of circulation or definition. Their existence beyond the human gaze does not preclude objects from their own agent practices, a concept elucidated by theorists such as Jane Bennett, who argues in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* for conceptions of non-human vibrancy. Harman contends that "The true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*" (2). Within these settings, the artifact's placement upon the pedestal demarcates a sense of value due to such a relationship, one perpetuated by taxonomical institutions. Inherently, at a fundamental level, within archaeological quests, there is no representative difference between the pedestal and the adorning item: the differentiating factor is their perceived material worth. Such designations resonate with an object-orientated focus that would see both items as intrinsically comparable if reduced to atomic compositions; yet, I argue such approaches frequently avoid engaging with the *processes* of encounter, how material labels reveal human paradigms of contact, and how video game item descriptions both compound and illuminate these mechanisms.

For both *Tomb Raider* and "Haunter of the Dark," there is a suggested innateness to the item that operates beyond human projection. In the latter, Burke finds a Shining Trapezohedron, which conforms to Lovecraft's perchance for fervent descriptions of material dimensions, arguably an attempt to grapple with alien incommensurability: "The four-inch seeming sphere turned out to be a nearly black, red-striated polyhedron with many irregular flat surfaces; either a very remarkable crystal of some sort or an artificial object of carved and highly polished mineral matter" (*Lovecraft Omnibus 3*, 284). While foregrounding a sense of indescribability to his cosmic horrors, evidently the

author utilizes physical assessment as a method to process the visual—a paradigm which resonates with *Bloodborne's* item descriptions. In *The Weird Tale*, S. T. Joshi notes that the "specificity" of such passages outlines "something that goes beyond mere realism, although realism is at its foundation. Realism is not an end but a function in Lovecraft: it heightens the weird by contrast" (193). While certainly such an approach does challenge anthropocentric perspectives of materialism, I argue that Joshi—like Bennett and Harman—fails to engage comprehensively with processes of object labeling and how such methods elucidate upon human/artifact interaction. Burke comments at length upon the materiality of the object; recalling the aforementioned conceptualizations of artifact identity, his scrutiny is based on attempting to ascertain provenance and purpose rather than principally accessing its unique nature. The alien origin and inexplicable composition confound such scrutiny, however, as the relic inverts the archetypal archaeological gaze and rather stares back at the subject: "This stone, once exposed, exerted upon Blake an almost alarming fascination. He could scarcely tear his eyes from it, and as he looked at its glistening surfaces he almost fancied it was transparent, with half-formed worlds of wonder within" (*Lovecraft Omnibus 3*, 284). Rather than projecting upon the item, Burke is subsumed by its "unknowable" nature—an artifact without any reference point, it exists *beyond* the relational network of labeling as a chasm expands between the description and ontology of the object itself. This disruptive potential is somewhat elided by acting as a portal for the monstrous "haunter," as Burke recognizes its function as a "gateway," yet the apparent tacit nature of tool implementation is undermined as the perceiver may appreciate its output but cannot comprehend the obfuscated mechanics of the artifact itself.

Analyzing the Shining Trapezohedron offers a differentiation between objects with an overt anthropocentric function or purpose and those which are of purely aesthetic value, although arguably the latter is still a form of utilization. Ben de Bruyn argues that such a separation represents "an 'aristocracy of objects', not just in the sense that it represents items like crowns, seals and swords, but also in that it systematically distinguishes important objects from trivial ones" (88). Focusing on the commodification of antique items, particularly within Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (1936), de Bruyn suggests that objects become taxonomized depending on whether they are attributed with an aristocratic sense of historical weight. Archaeological relics invariably experience a similar process: a truly unique item lacks a reference point to judge its value. The narrator of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" visits a local museum to learn of the town's history but is confounded by its inexplicable material heritage: "Even

now I can hardly describe what I saw, though it was clearly enough a sort of tiara, as the description had said” (391-392). Here a gulf opens between the taxonomical label and the visual, elucidating upon the arbitrary bridge between the two. This interaction resonates with the upcoming video game object details, which seek to both “describe” the item’s physicality while explaining its place within a macro network. Lovecraft’s hesitating expression of the artifact resonates with Harman’s object-orientated ontology: “If an entity always holds something in reserve beyond any of its relations, and if this reserve cannot be located in any of these relations, then it must exist somewhere else” (230). Suggesting a fundamental dimension beyond labeling, Harman seeks to consider an object perspective, but such inferences are restricted by anthropocentric language. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock asserts in “Lovecraft’s Things: Sinister Souvenirs from Other Worlds” that “These are things that become more than things—things with depth, hidden qualities, and indeed life of a sort” (65). While such designations compellingly seek to escape anthropocentrism, Weinstock’s “enchantment” cannot quite avoid prescribing the human as the prime actant. Object labels invariably imply an implicit designation of status; whether this is tool, waste, or debris, they reveal human processes of encounter.

For Lovecraft, these objects are not purely of archaeological interest, defined in terms of aesthetic or economic value, but rather their confounding indescribability points towards the inability for human systems to approach such items. In *Weird Realism*, Harman scrutinizes Lovecraft’s tales and is correct to suggest that “No other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess” (7). An object-orientated ontology suggests that this gulf may only be crossed by thinking outside of the human. This reimagined definition of object identity has elsewhere been adopted by theorists such as Timothy Morton, who coined the term “hyperobjects” as a paradigm to engage with non-local and trans-temporal phenomena of non-totalising concepts, for example global warming. Yet such approaches risk the conflation of materialism, and the material, as a reconsideration of object ontology, differs from an appreciation of the *process* of encountering materiality. These Lovecraftian artifacts themselves are not above scrutiny. Invariably, such paradigms still utilize the non-human as a very tool to paradoxically “understand,” unable to quite escape such materialist trappings. Poignantly, by the conclusion, the majority of these relics are lost; although the lack of physical evidence may undermine each narrative, this suggests that these are items that exist beyond human interaction, beyond our influence. Meanwhile, I argue that Lovecraft texts offer an exemplary medium through which to propose an alternate material interface, namely that artifacts

reveal the processes through which humanity engages with the world external to themselves.

Surviving the Horror within Lovecraftian Video Games

The adaptation of Lovecraft’s stories to the video game format is inevitably a fraught process as the medium frequently, but not ubiquitously, incorporates material interaction, sustained narrative progression, and the suspense driven by a degree of challenge or difficulty. Yet, Lovecraft’s archaeological tales often follow quite a repetitive structure, involve little to no object utilization, and, most importantly, the encountered entities are too horrific to process or articulate. Multiple adaptations have attempted to bridge this gap by implementing a sanity mechanic through which the player or their avatar begin to experience hallucinogenic experiences that impair the ability to play the game through a mixture of visual, audio, or mechanical alterations. *Eternal Darkness* is the most famous example of this effect and includes the fake deletion of saved game files and the screen fading to black as if the television has been turned off, wresting object agency away from the player. Sanity mechanics translate the psychological horror of confronting a Lovecraftian monster, but each game eventually faces the challenge of depicting, and even sometimes fighting, this unrepresentable entity, an object or “asset” within the system. Sanity effects are therefore an unreliable basis by which to analyze non-human identity. Instead, video game items offer a promising alternative by exposing how the narrative is presented or quite aptly unearthed.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive interrogation of each Lovecraftian game and the items within, before predominantly focusing on *Bloodborne*, I will introduce two main genre categories: roguelike and survival horror. Roguelike is a sub-category of roleplaying games (RPGs) in which the player’s avatar will progress through a series of levels (often procedurally generated), collecting useful items along their way while avoiding traps or monsters. The eponymous *Rogue* (1980) is orientated around locating the “Amulet of Yendor,” which is aptly raised on a pedestal and delineates between items with functional use (deduced through trial and error or item description) and narratively inscribed objects, which offer little insight into their mechanics. *Darkest Dungeon* (2016) opens with the player inheriting their family’s estate, which has been abandoned following their ancestor’s excavation of its deeper floors that unearths the Eldritch horror within. The player must put together a band of adventurers to fight their way through to the “darkest dungeon” and destroy the Lovecraftian abomination at its center. These explorations are rewarded with items to upgrade the estate, to improve your roster of characters, and to generally make each expedition a

little easier. These games often foreground the development of the player's skills through trial and error experience, items obtained are invariably lost upon death. This lack of permanence—or “permadeath”—is apt for a Lovecraftian setting, as in a nihilistic sense each avatar or character will have little or no consequence beyond their own existence. Yet such a format necessitates that there are both monsters to challenge the player and objects which are in fact worth this risk. As previously mentioned, Lovecraft's narrators acquire little, if any, material evidence of what they have witnessed. The drive of roguelike games to find loot or treasure to spend on items to improve the player's chances of progressing further seems to overlook the apparent dereliction of these vestige spaces. *Darkest Dungeon's* objects are given little narrative attention beyond acting as a form of currency and expenditure, especially as each acquired artifact or trinket is given no background history or explanation of its own unique identity.

The roguelike format requires that there are objects of worth to be discovered, ones that are either of financial gain or practical applicability. When compared to Lovecraft's stories, however, these are a particular deviation from the seemingly apparent *absence* of artifacts. Nowhere is this indeed more prominent than the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), in which a scientific expedition discovers an abandoned city atop the peaks of Antarctica. The chilling juxtaposition of material presence and ontological absence within the city is a recognizable Lovecraftian trait, yet it is a lack of archaeological objects that is especially prominent: “As I have said, all furniture and other moveables were absent; but the sculptures gave a clear idea of the strange devices which had once filled these tomb-like, echoing rooms” (56). Inverting the expectations of an archaeological quest, this derelict metropolis is curiously devoid of artifacts or other material evidence. As such, the explorers translate murals to trace a hypothetical history; devoid of any description, they force each object to essentially “narrate” itself—a cross material “reading” that will resonate with *Bloodborne's* narrative archaeology. Roguelikes, such as *Darkest Dungeon*, forego such a connection as items simultaneously become commodified consumables with marketized value while equally being inherently disposable “things.” Such designations accentuate an ontological state of tool-being, where each object is merely a material appendage to the user with little recognition of its composition or how we encounter it outside a matrix of “use”

Alternatively, many Lovecraftian video games fit into the vein of survival horror. In this genre, the player's avatar must be more cunning, as they are often provided with a limited amount of resources and are required to wisely determine their most *useful* application. The scarcity of items, such as ammo, health-kits, and other beneficial

consumables, necessitates that the player takes a stealthier approach and consequently drives the central feeling of suspense. In “Storytelling in Survival Horror Videogames,” Ewan Kirkland states that games within this genre: “elicit a story produced through game-play by requiring that certain narratively-loaded objects be picked up and correctly used, elaborate yet casually motivated series of tasks performed, or psychologically-resonant enemies defeated” (73). Items are, therefore, not only used to preserve the character and foster progression, but also encoded with a certain narrative resonance to suggest their applicability to the player. Although not chiefly a Lovecraftian video game, Arkane Studio's remake of *Prey* (2017) encapsulates a perfect sense of the archetypal cosmic horror with humankind's encounter with an alien species (the Typhon) and the suggestion that something sinister resides within the “black between the stars.” Within the game, the player must combat the alien threat to the space station Talos 1, utilizing any items they encounter upon their journey. Once again this often takes the form of ammo, health-kits, or other beneficial consumables; however, *Prey* also allows the player to recycle unwanted items into materials and fabricate new objects. Here, objects with no apparent function or practical use to the player may be turned into those which will aid their progress, eliding any form of nuanced object identity as demonstrated by the lack of detailed item descriptions. However, a particularly interesting element of *Prey* is that the first enemy the player encounters (a mimic) may replicate and hide as multiple mundane items to wait in ambush, renegotiating frames of encounter. Not only does this cause the player to be wary around objects that would conventionally be disregarded, but it equally deconstructs the differentiation between alien and object, two forms of non-human identity. As the player later gains the ability to likewise mimic certain commonplace objects, these items transform from being disposable to functional.

Purpose and utilization of objects is therefore a key component within Lovecraftian video games, one which is a questionable adaptation of the original archaeological expeditions. A final prominent example is *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth*, an adventure style survival horror which acts as a loose adaptation of “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), “The Shadow out of Time,” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” Following the investigation of private detective Jack Walters into a missing-persons case in Innsmouth, the game progressively expands from raiding a small cult outpost to culminating in fighting Mother Hydra. Although *Dark Corners* includes the standard consumables, it equally foregrounds what Kirkland discussed as “narratively-loaded objects.” While each object may have an accompanying description, these are often simplified and merely designate the item's functional capacity. Whether

these are “A handle used for lifting trapdoors,” “A key to the town’s poorhouse,” or “A lever with ornamental decoration,” each item the player encounters is framed through its practical applicability, offering little explanation for their wider significance. For example, the player finds a shrine to Cthulhu which, after solving a simple puzzle, they acquire a red gem from atop a pedestal. Invoking the evident trope format, this item however is given little explanation other than: “A precious red gem.” Crucially, the player is forced to take the object to progress, with no suggestion of its importance or indeed that *much* later in the game it will be a vital component. Returning to *Tomb Raider* and “The Shadow out of Time,” evidently the emplacement of the red gem demarcates its artifactual status by evoking this archetypal process of encounter to differentiate it from the consumable objects. Arguably the lack of any definitive identity is due to the avatar being unable to comprehend its function, yet for the player this becomes a disposable item with little psychological resonance. Object identity within these Lovecraftian examples therefore seems to be relegated to truncated descriptions and considered only for their immediate practicality. For these video games, narrative is conveyed through more conventional means, whether this be cutscenes or journal fragments. I argue that while this style evidently has its own merits, it is largely divorced from the potential within Lovecraft’s tale to reframe and elucidate upon paradigms of material interfacing. *Bloodborne* however breaks this trend; by requiring the player to act as an excavator, this narrative archaeology necessitates a reading across object descriptions which re-frames and confronts moments of object encounter akin to Heidegger’s broken door-handle.

“Welcome Home, Good Hunter”: Excavating *Bloodborne*’s Narrative

Bloodborne is a rarity for the Lovecraftian genre. Reviewed as “the first true essential of this [console] generation” (*Edge* review included on back-cover of the case), this is clearly not a cult classic, but one which has captured mainstream and popular interest. The critical acclaim of *Bloodborne* is one which its developers, FromSoftware, were quick to capitalize upon; the release of a Game of the Year Edition in 2016 after multiple nominations, including winning the Joystick award, exemplifies the title’s self-conscious commercial success. Although standalone, the game follows on from the equally popular “Souls” series, typified by their trademark “challenging” difficulty level, unconventional narrative presentation, and obscure lore secrets. Rather than utilizing a Mediaeval-esque Fantasy setting, with the opposition of light (fire) and dark, *Bloodborne* instead focuses on a Hunter who participates in the ritual hunt of Yharnam, slaying Gothicized beasts and later encountering Lovecraftian

monstrosities. The director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, was acutely aware of staging this transition, who suggests that “Gothic horror is based more in the world of reality . . . And here, you have a world like that which is gradually being eroded away by Cthulhu-style horror” (538). Throughout the game, the player’s expanding cosmic awareness is recorded through an Insight mechanic, which reveals previously hidden entities (such as the Amygalas) or altering audio effects. Progressively the game moves away from Gothic to more Lovecraftian settings, trading gritty realism for more abstract and interrogative ontological formations. Objects themselves replicate this transformation, as they are not only presented through functional description but are utilized to present the macro narrative. I argue that the player is akin to an archaeologist who must delve into the depths, recovering eldritch artifacts, to literally reveal monstrosities previously invisible to the world. As the story is primarily conveyed through object description rather than more conventional methods, each item becomes a piece in a grand puzzle. The player must be therefore prepared to search out these items if they wish to discern the truth. Although this journey can be skipped, this will crucially limit the player’s comprehension of the world around their avatar.¹

While video games often include protracted opening cutscenes to consolidate the player’s orientation in the world or universe, *Bloodborne*’s introduction offers little exposition and is indicative of the narrative experience. Standing as one of three narrative cutscenes, *Bloodborne*’s opening is also the only major instance of first-person perspective. Here, the player signs a contract to enter the dream world, or nightmare, receiving only a handful of narrative hints, namely that blood ministration is central to the city of Yharnam and the cryptic allusion to “Paleblood.” *Bloodborne* depends on the player’s inquisitiveness to drive them onwards, or alternatively drawing on their bloodlust to overcome the difficulty level. One of the earliest narrative clues is in fact an interactable note that the player finds in the clinic they awake in. This can be missed or avoided however, demonstrating that the plot is elusive even from the beginning. The directive to “Seek Paleblood to transcend the hunt” offers an objective to the player, without any hint as to what Paleblood signifies. Vitality, this concept is not even cleared up by the end of the game, it operates beyond human interaction whose inexplicable meaning aligns with the “reserve” of object-orientated ontology. Within *Bloodborne* there are few concrete answers, and instead the

¹ *Bloodborne* is presented in a non-linear manner and each player may have varying experiences of the narrative, depending on which routes they take and how interrogative they are. I am designating the player as having witnessed all three endings, defeated every boss, and obtained every unique item.

player is required to deduce their own interpretation of the gathered fragments. This initial note foregrounds that textual description is a key element to navigating the game's secrets and is one which is primarily located in its lootable objects.

Bloodborne's narrative bestows each item with functional and narrative value. Although some players may choose to complete the game in the shortest method possible and prioritize the challenging gameplay, the Lovecraftian elements require inquisitiveness. As a result, this makes *Bloodborne* challenging to classify: styled as an action roleplay game, the general lack of dialogue options or interaction requires player agency to shape the narrative experience. Returning to Kirkland's analysis of survival horror games, evidently *Bloodborne* foregrounds an alternate utilization of object identity. Although it requires certain items for progression and allows the player to achieve objectives and defeat bosses, the game equally contests the aforementioned format. Indeed, the majority of objects do not need to be used. The player can complete the game by beating a minimum of six bosses (thus avoiding large sections), and these encounters only gain "psychological-resonance" once an understanding of the lore is developed. Yet it is neither a roguelike game. Although a sense of trial and error is expected, *Bloodborne's* objects and enemies are situated in exact locations for a certain narrative resonance within the player; items found on dead bodies often suggest who, or what, the entity may have been. Artifacts in *Bloodborne* thus act by shaping an alternate narrative, offering a method to decode the story for those who are willing to pursue it and restricting the comprehension of those who either avoid, or fail, to read the details. By emphasizing the importance of object location itself, *Bloodborne* forces an inquisitive player to consider the process of encountering materiality; rather than simply collecting items, they must act akin to an archaeological explorer. If a player is to achieve full comprehension, they cannot simply collect objects to be reviewed later, but must excavate objects in a manner that is attentive to their proximity to other game assets.

Item descriptions are a major part of *Bloodborne* and emphasize my terming of this game as narrative archaeology. As not all items are intrinsic to the plot or mythos, the player has to explore and sift through their findings to discern historical events. Item utilization is equally important; for example, Shining Coins are described as "there are very few uses for spare change during the hunt, but these will serve as guides through the darkness." Rather than functioning as the expected currency, these items lack any form of value. Instead they are literally *throw-away* objects which emit a golden light, either acting as a bread crumb trail or to test how deep a physical drop is. Exchanging their original identity as money to become waste, the object ontology is here shaped by its functional rather than symbolic or

representative value. Andrew Reinhard in *Archaeogaming: An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games* (2018) suggests that such practices resonate with the archaeology of garbage—or Garbology—in which narrativized objects reveal paradigms of encounter as: "Both the actual trash and stories, however are valuable to the archaeologist interested in how people deal with things, especially past the point of an item's durability" (156). While most of *Bloodborne's* items appear to be left-behind, evidently their position has been curated, having been intentionally placed there by the developers. Unsurprisingly then, the majority have some functional purpose, whether this is mechanical interaction or as narrative reliquary. While unable to quite escape the inscription of anthropocentric value upon the material, this does however re-frame interaction with objects, forcing the player to stop and consider the moment of encounter. Such formations offer new sites in which the mediation of object identity—such as garbage or waste—can be considered. Equally some act merely as a proof of achievement with no interactable use. The Yharnam Stone is bestowed upon the player for defeating an optional side boss and reads: "A sacred heirloom left by Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen. The Queen lies dead, but her horrific consciousness is only asleep, and it stirs in unsettling motions" (*Bloodborne* n. p.). However, this item is gifted to the player, the reward for curiosity and perseverance. Rather than just an embodiment of achievement, the object is intended to expand the player's comprehension of the nightmare, the hunt, and Pthumerians. Yet, such descriptions require an excavational process to fully understand the lore beneath. Though this casts the player as a taxonomical collector, in so doing it draws attention to the contact with material remains themselves.

Narrative archaeology requires the reading of these micro fragments to composite a macro whole, encouraging the player to deduce this themselves rather than be presented with the definitive narrative. These items do not exist in isolation, indeed certain descriptions can be read together to deepen understanding. For example, the Lecture Theatre Key contains both a functional description—"Key to the Lecture Theatre in the Lecture Building"—and begins to explain the backstory of the location: "Today, the two-storey Lecture Building is adrift in the nightmare, but once it was a place of reflection, where scholars learned of history and archaeology" (*Bloodborne* n.p). The key primarily functions by permitting progression to a restricted area, yet its description is equally useful to a player delving into the lore—standing as one of the earliest examples of the diegetic scholarly interest in archaeology. This hint begins a chain of connected descriptions concerned with discovering "the eldritch Truth," a term only fully understood by solving cryptic allusions that lead to optional areas of the game with their more overtly Lovecraftian bosses. Within the locked

Lecture Theatre room, the player can find the Augur of Ebrietas which emphatically states it is a: “Remnant of the eldritch Truth encountered at Byrgenwerth . . . The initial encounter marked the start on an inquiry into the cosmos from within the old labyrinth, and led to the establishment of the Choir” (*Bloodborne* n. p.). Although each player may experience these locations and thus items in various orders, understanding can only be gained by reading such descriptions alongside each other. Further, rather than being dissociated from their discovered location, items are frequently entwined with their origin, requiring a nuanced awareness of the environment.

The connections between Lovecraftian elements and archaeology within the game are further reinforced through the Chalice Dungeons. Acting as a side-quest for the player, these locations are built from the typical Dungeon crawling experience of traditional RPGs while serving as the labyrinths previously mentioned in the item descriptions. Aptly, these areas are situated within the overarching plot by being geographically located below Yharnam—although the player must teleport to these spaces and cannot verify this. As the scholars of Byrgenwerth discovered the Great Ones blood in these ruins, the connection to historicity is reinforced as only through comprehending the past can the present be understood. In the Chalice Dungeons, the player is required to progress through the level, opening doors, discovering hidden treasure rooms, defeating bosses, and proceeding to deeper layers, mimicking an archaeological explorer. Turning to the importance of item descriptions, even the chalices themselves expand upon the lore. The first chalice a player would logically discover is the Pthumeru Chalice described as opening “the tomb of the gods” and instigating the unearthing of the Great Ones. The further depths are represented by the Central Pthumeru Chalice which continues the narration of the previous item: “The old labyrinth was carved out by the Pthumerians, superhuman beings that are said to have unlocked the wisdom of the eldritch Truth” (*Bloodborne* n. p.). It becomes clear, therefore, that these Dungeons convey a deeper understanding of *Bloodborne*’s world; while easily missed, they serve as a central component to the narrative. Finally, the Great Pthumeru Ihyll Chalice finishes off this description as “this reveals that while early Pthumerians were mere humble guardians of the slumbering Great Ones, their descendants felt entitled to name themselves a leader” (*Bloodborne* n. p.). These three items then, like the previous Lecture Theatre key, embody an extended narrative that requires reading all of them to reach the final understanding—one which is concluded with fighting the Yharnam Queen and acquiring the aforementioned Yharnam Stone.

Bloodborne’s narrative archaeology extends even up to its conclusion by incorporating three alternate

endings. The first two are dictated by an either/or ultimatum; to achieve the third the player must decode cryptic clues to realize that they require three Third Umbilical Cord items before the final confrontation. The object’s vague and elusive final line alludes to this ending: “use to gain Insight and, so they say, eyes on the inside, although no one remembers what that truly entails” (*Bloodborne* n. p.). Throughout the game “eyes on the inside” refers to a deeper cosmic understanding of the world. With the help of other notes around the game and object narration, the player may deduce its *non-described* function. The very consumption of these items infers a recapitulation of anthropocentric values, but equally the obfuscation of this ending speaks to an incommensurable object-orientated ontology, or other designations of the non-human. To organically find this obscure conclusion and fight the secret Moon Presence boss—a Great One whose nightmarish entrapment fuels the hunts—the player must apply the narrative archaeological tools developed throughout. Although *Bloodborne* shies away from an implicit challenge towards materialist thought, its diegetic quest for an expanded awareness draws upon alternate paradigms through which to encounter the material. Indeed, even the ending itself, which depicts the player’s guide (the doll) picking up an infant Great One, offers little narrative affirmation. Full understanding may only be achieved by further reading. *Bloodborne*’s achievement trophy “Childhood’s Beginning,” which is unlocked after the fight, states “You became an infant Great One, lifting humanity into its next childhood.” Seemingly the player must be prepared to not only search out the secrets within the game, but also those outside of it—the trophy representing the final piece in the puzzle.

Bloodborne’s narrative archaeology offers new contact paradigms with materiality, transitioning from items with described applications to enigmatic fragments that the player must piece together into a macro comprehension. Each object develops a lasting sense of individuality. Indeed, the majority of armor encountered is largely for aesthetic or roleplay purposes to encourage a re-kindled reverence towards these meetings. Such a myriad of materials crucially become waste or artifacts depending on the player’s *subjective* process of encounter. Video game spaces thus offer an experimental ground to consider and experiment with innovative schemas that challenge contemporary materialist practice—a inquiry adopted by “archaeogamers” like Reinhard. Certainly, it is vital to consider a conceptualization of object identity beyond anthropocentric entrenchment, as proposed by Bennett, Harman, and Morton. This, however, is not enough. I argue that we must simultaneously consider the process of encounter itself, for progressive development depends not only on new definitions, but also on new modes of deploying

self-aware contact. Lovecraftian texts offer the ripe potential of meeting objects and ontologies that challenge dominant schemas, of a confrontation that strains our very structures to represent such moments accurately. *Bloodborne* focuses in on such encounters, its narrative archaeology not only elucidates upon anthropocentric formations that force objects to perform their own historicity, but equally pays reverence to the very moment of contact itself.

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