

The Anthropology of Fear: Learning About Japan Through Horror Games

Chris Pruett

Abstract

Japan is the source of almost every major horror game franchise in existence. Whether they are attempting to mimic Western horror or create experiences rooted in the country's long tradition of scary stories, Japanese game developers seem to be uniquely adept at building scary games. It would surely be worthwhile to study the Japanese culture to learn why they happen to be such prolific creators of horror games, but this paper attempts to address the question from the other direction: what can we learn about Japanese culture directly from the games that they produce? Using horror games as a lens, this research finds that many common themes in Japanese horror games can be traced back to non-game cultural origins. In some cases these motifs come from traditional folklore or ideas; in others they are a reflection of anxiety related to recent events. A number of Japanese horror games--including games attempting to mimic a foreign format--draw directly from Japanese culture. By studying these games we can therefore learn about the culture of Japan.

Author Keywords

Genre; Japanese culture; emotion.

Studying the Japanese Through Their Horror Games

Japan is extremely prolific when it comes to horror games. For more than a decade the country has dominated the horror game market, so much so that every single top-tier horror franchise has its roots in Japan. How did this come about?

When Resident Evil (Capcom, 1996) was released for Sony Corporation's PlayStation game console in 1996, it was one of a few key titles that caused a dramatic shift in the video game industry. A generation of children who had grown up playing Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) and Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega, 1991) were quickly reaching adulthood, and the introduction of the PlayStation marked the moment at which the industry began to seriously consider teenage and adult audiences.¹ Suddenly there was a platform for games that were not targeted at children: Tomb Raider (Eidos, 1996), Tenchu: Stealth Assassins (Acquire, 1998), and Metal Gear Solid (Konami, 1998) created entirely new genres that employed mature themes and violent imagery. Only a few years earlier the two-dimensional, low-resolution comic violence in games like Mortal Kombat (Midway, 1992) had caused such controversy that the US Congress held hearings to explore the matter (Kent, 2001). But within the first few years of its release, Sony's console was home to a large library of violent and complicated adult-oriented games that put earlier titles to shame. A shift had occurred, the core audience of video game players had expanded, and, thanks

Loading... Special Issue, "Thinking After Dark"

© 2010 Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

to a small number of ground-breaking games aimed at mature players, the industry had changed. Resident Evil was one of those games.

Resident Evil, known as 'Biohazard' in its native Japan, created the horror game genre as we know it today. The term we now use to describe games that involve horrific themes, complex narratives, and puzzle-laden game play--survival horror--was coined by this seminal title. This is not to say that it was the first horror game; its design draws heavily from an earlier title, *Alone in the Dark* (Interplay, 1992), which predates Resident Evil by several years. There are many examples of even earlier games that explore horror themes, such as *The Lurking Horror* (Infocom, 1987), *Sweet Home* (Capcom, 1989), and *Splatterhouse* (Namco, 1988). But it was Resident Evil that brought horror video games to the masses, proving that players expecting action-heavy game play common to console games could be lured into more substantive and carefully-paced designs (see Pruett, 2007a, for more information about the history of the genre).

The game was a major success. Capcom, the development firm behind Resident Evil, reports that almost three million copies of the game were sold in North America alone. Its successor, *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998), achieved sales of close to five million. At a time when the metric for financial success was only a few hundred thousand copies, the Resident Evil series was a blockbuster. Capcom's hit led others to follow suit, and within a few years the survival horror genre was packed full of titles. While many of these were simply copycat games, a few key franchises emerged. Among them, Konami Corporation's *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999), a game which eschewed explicit violence in favor of a psychological brand of horror, is now regarded as the most important.

Since the late 1990s the game industry has grown by leaps and bounds. Subsequent game consoles are now home to a great number of horror titles. The juggernauts of the genre remain the Resident Evil series and Silent Hill series, but more recent games such as *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001), *Siren* (Sony, 2003), *Condemned* (Monolith Productions, 2005), and *Dead Space* (Electronic Arts, 2008) have helped to diversify the genre. Unlike most other video game genres, horror games are identified by theme, not by style of play. Consequently, the survival horror genre is home to a wide range of styles, including first-person games, third-person games, action-oriented games, puzzle games, and even text-based games. Whatever the style of play, one fact cannot be ignored: the vast majority of horror video games come from Japan.

Resident Evil, Silent Hill, Fatal Frame, Siren, Echo Night (From Software, 1998), Clock Tower (Human Entertainment, 1995), and Dino Crisis (Capcom, 1999) are all horror franchises from Japan that have been successful enough to spawn at least three games apiece. The Resident Evil series alone, including various spin-off titles such as *Resident Evil: Survivor* (Capcom, 2000) and *Resident Evil Outbreak* (Capcom, 2003), accounts for twenty separate games. By comparison, the only horror franchises from the West to account for three or more games are the *Alone in the Dark* series (four games) and the *Evil Dead* (THQ, 2000) series (three games). In fact, Japan has released more horror games than the West almost every single year since 1995 (see Figure 1). Clearly, the Japanese have a keen interest in horror games.

It might be interesting to perform a study of the Japanese culture to determine why it is home to such a high concentration of horror games. Instead, I would like to turn the question around and

study the Japanese through the horror games that they have produced. What is it that we can learn about Japanese culture by examining the large number of horror games that country is responsible for? It is through the lens of horror games that I wish to study the Japanese.

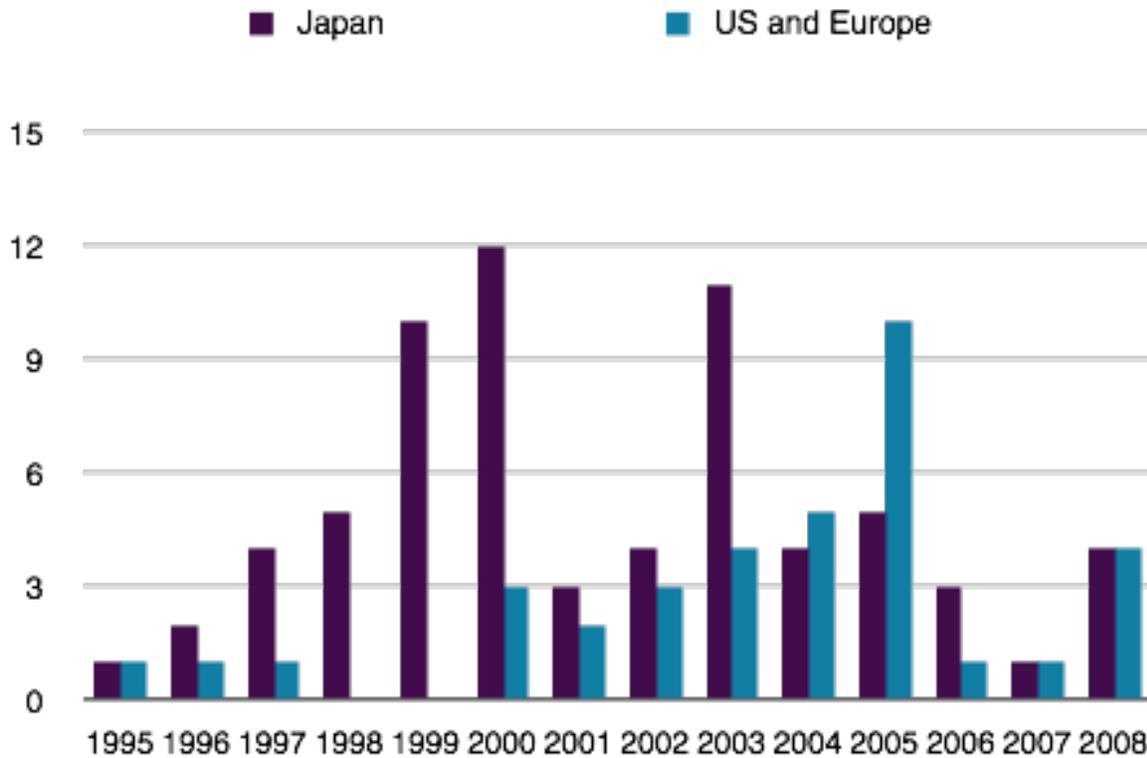


Figure 1. Japanese and Western horror game releases per year.ⁱⁱ Source: <http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh>

The Importance of Intent

Though some Japanese horror games are designed to reflect themes in traditional Japanese horror, others are constructed to appear as if they originated in the US or Europe. This is an important distinction; while the former style is relatively easy to dissect for interesting cultural clues, cultural signals in the latter style are often purposefully obfuscated by the developers of the game. This presents a challenge for the horror game anthropologist: in order to draw meaningful conclusions about Japanese culture from games designed to look Western, we must look past the content of the game and identify uniquely Japanese motifs that the developers themselves may not have been entirely cognizant of.

The Resident Evil and Silent Hill series are prime examples of Japanese content authored to appear Western. Resident Evil's introductory sequence (which features live action scenes starring white, American actors) and the series' penchant for Victorian buildings, underground laboratories, and other decidedly non-Japanese locales are clear evidence that the series is designed to appeal to the West. Resident Evil Outbreak even lifted the likenesses of famous Western actors for its protagonists, presumably in an attempt to design characters that are attractive to Western-

ers. Akira Yamaoka, the creative force behind the Silent Hill series, described in a lecture at the Game Developers Conference in 2005 his team's desire to create a Western-style horror game "through Japanese eyes." His intent was to create a game in the mold of Stephen King and H.P. Lovecraft, but Yamaoka admitted that since he and his team are Japanese, their cultural heritage probably influenced their work (Pruett, 2005).

At the same time, games like Fatal Frame and Siren are steeped in traditional Japanese horror ideas and motifs. They draw upon imagery and stories that are common throughout Japan, and are therefore excellent candidates for cultural analysis. It is with these games that we will begin; the games designed to appear Western will be much easier to analyze once some of the basic concepts of Japanese horror have been explained.

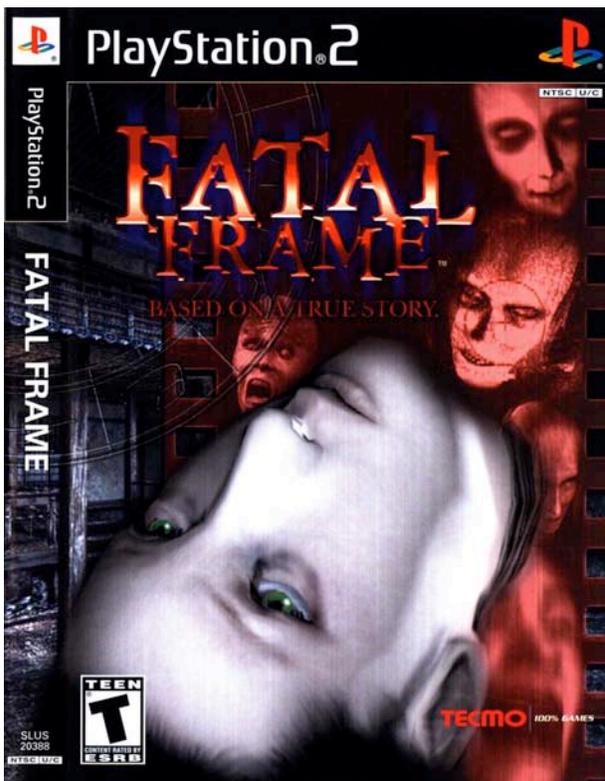


Figure 2. American box art for Fatal Frame.



Figure 3. "Sarayashiki Okiku no Rei" An Ukiyo-e print depicting Okiku from the Story of Okiku. Yoshitoshi, 1890.

Powerful Emotion and Pitiful Antagonists

The Fatal Frame (Figure 2) series is fundamentally about young women venturing into old, scary, decrepit Japanese buildings. In the first Fatal Frame, the protagonist is searching for her brother in a dilapidated mansion. In Fatal Frame 2 (Tecmo, 2003), a young girl searches for her

twin sister in an apparently haunted remote village. In *Fatal Frame 3* (Tecmo, 2005), a woman visits a sinister mansion in her dreams, where she searches for her late fiancée. The *Fatal Frame* series is one of the very few games that employ ghosts as antagonists. In each of these games, the decrepit buildings the main characters must delve into are infested with the ghosts of people who died long ago, often in the process of performing or suffering from some hideous ancient ritual. These ghosts are subordinate to a main antagonist, a ghost of particular power, whose grip on the human world persists as the result of some tragedy that she experienced in life. In all three gamesⁱⁱⁱ the antagonist, like the protagonist, is female.

The *Fatal Frame* series' story pattern is not simply the result of franchise iteration. The themes and motifs are typical of traditional Japanese ghost stories. Japan has a long tradition of scary stories stemming from the two major religions of the region: Buddhism and the indigenous Shinto. Shintoism in particular is home to a wealth of ghost stories because one of its core tenets is that everything in the world has a soul, called a *reikon* (靈魂), which can be prayed to and which can, under certain conditions, persist in the human world after death. Many of the most famous stories (see Hearn, 2005) revolve around ghosts who linger in the physical realm because they died while in the throes of intense emotion. This idea, called *onnen* (怨念), is that some emotions are so strong that they can reach from beyond the grave and manipulate the human world. *Onnen* is a central concept in Japanese horror literature.

The *onnen* concept allows ordinary people to become menacing after their death. Many stories are based on the idea that a dying person can only remember his final thought, and if that thought is one of intense sadness, pain, or rage, its strength may cause an apparition to remain in the human world that knows only that emotion. For example, in Hearn's "Diplomacy," a samurai is able to avoid the angry post-mortem wrath of a man that he must execute by tricking him into thinking about something else just before he is killed. The man's emotion, though still strong enough to affect reality after his death, is thus redirected away from the samurai and becomes impotent (Hearn, 2005: 43-50).

In another story, *Banchou Sarayashiki* (番町皿屋敷, known in the West as *The Story of Okiku*), a maid named Okiku (see Figure 3) is falsely accused by her samurai master of breaking a precious plate. As punishment she is drowned in a well. The plate is part of a set of ten dishes, and so every night thereafter she appears outside of the well, counts to nine, and sobs. Her presence is so maddening that eventually the samurai goes insane.

An interesting related trait of Japanese horror is that of the pitiful antagonist. Though the ghosts in *Fatal Frame* are scary and dangerous, they are also portrayed in a sympathetic light at points in the narrative. Japanese horror stories, especially ghost stories, are very often sad tales about victims of atrocity, innocent people whose powerful emotions transform them into angry spirits. *Fatal Frame*'s antagonist, Kirie, is referred to as the "Rope Shrine Maiden" because she was violently sacrificed as part of some terrible, ancient ritual. In *Fatal Frame 2*, the final antagonist is Sae, another woman who was killed by others as part of an ancient ritual. This game in particular shows the separation between the "good" parts of the ritual's victims (they appear as butterflies after death) and the "bad" parts, or *onnen*, of the dead, which return as vengeful spirits.^{iv} In each case, innocent women who are violently murdered return to kill those around them indiscriminately. As the narrative comes to a close and the true nature of these characters' deaths are

revealed, we are compelled to feel sorry for them; it is clear that they have only become evil after being victimized by others.

This model of innocence lost, involving a traumatic death which produces a sad or vengeful spirit, is pervasive in traditional and contemporary Japanese horror literature. It is the mechanic that drives Sadako to kill her victims in the 1998 hit horror film *Ring*, it is the reason that Okiku returns from the grave to count plates, and it is the implicit force behind the antagonists in *Fatal Frame*.^v The pattern manifests itself almost exclusively with female characters; perhaps this is because women, especially young women, were traditionally viewed both as a model of innocence and as capable of forming stronger grudges than men.

There are many other aspects of the *Fatal Frame* series that fit the traditional Japanese horror mold. The ghosts themselves appear to be floating above the floor, their feet entirely translucent, which is the way ghosts have been depicted in Japanese art since the 18th century. A more vague characteristic of the series is the way that characters so easily step into a world filled with ghosts, spirits, and other strange occurrences. According to Koji Suzuki, author of *Ring* and many other modern works of horror, this is because the Japanese believe that the spirit world is intertwined with the mortal plane. He writes,

In America and Europe most horror movies tell the story of the extermination of evil spirits. Japanese horror movies end with a suggestion that the spirit still remains at large. That's because the Japanese don't regard spirits only as enemies, but as beings that co-exist with this world of ours.

(Suzuki, 2005 [interview])

Just as Urashima Taro^{vi} finds that the underwater Palace of the Dragon is separated from the world by much more than just a few waves, the characters in *Fatal Frame* all pass easily out of reality and into some place more sinister.^{vii} Miku Hinasaki steps through a door and into the terrible world of Himuro Mansion, sisters Mio and Mayu stumble upon the lost All Gods Village almost by accident, and Rei Kurosawa's dreams seem to directly correlate with events that occur after she wakes. Each of these characters pass into an alternate reality in which ghosts maintain control, and yet in every case it is not so much an alternative dimension as the opposite side of a coin, or the nighttime to the regular world's day.

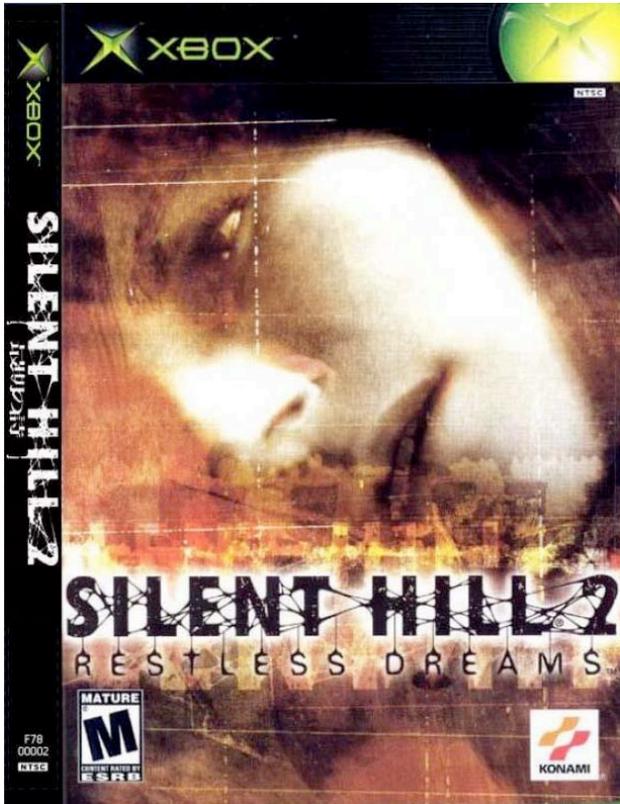


Figure 4. American box art for Silent Hill 2.

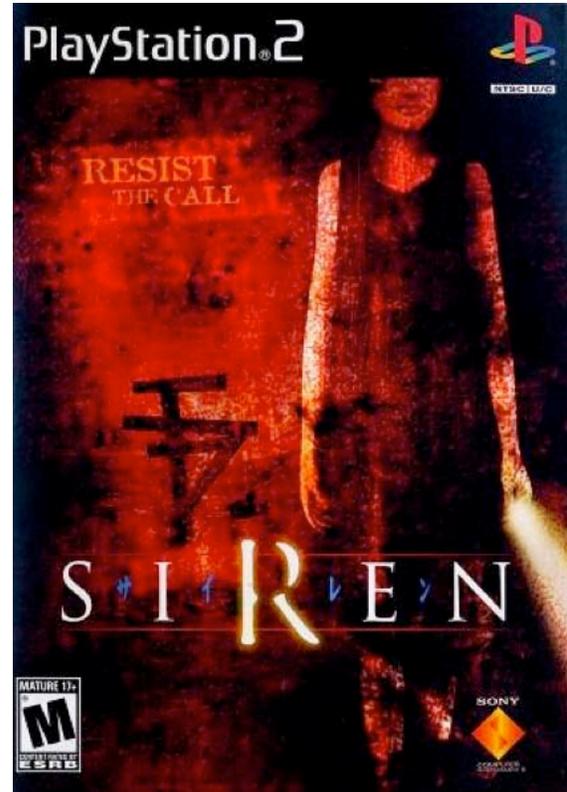


Figure 5. American box art for Siren.

Haunted Schools, The Leech Child, and Terrorist Cults

It is worth noting that Fatal Frame is not the only game from Japan to so clearly exhibit these traditional traits. It is one of the most lucid examples and is well known in the West, but many other games that never make it across the ocean also contain these themes. In his work on Japanese horror film, Kalat identifies several major movements within the world of contemporary Japanese horror, including what he calls “Dead Wet Girls” and “The Haunted School.”

The Dead Wet Girls genre (so named because water and dampness are often common motifs; horror is a summertime genre in Japan, and for several months of the year the country is extremely humid) describes works like Ring and Fatal Frame; these are contemporary tales about women exercising their onnen to wreak vengeance on the world.

The Haunted School genre, as Kalat defines it, describes a group of stories that all take place at night in a public school. Until recently, public schools were left unlocked after hours, and it was common for children to dare each other to enter a school alone at night. A great many stories stem from this premise; the most well-known is probably “Toire No Hanakosan”

(トイレの花子さん, “Hanako-in-the-Toilet”), a story about a ghost who lives in the school restroom and will appear if called upon in a certain way. There are also a large number of games that fall into this genre, including *Twilight Syndrome: Saikai* (Spike, 2000; “Twilight Syndrome Reunion”), *THE Tairyō Jigoku* (Tamssoft, 2007; “The Overwhelming Hell”), and *Kyōfu Shim-bun Heiseiban Kaiki! Shinrei File* (Konami, 2003; “Fear Newspaper (Heisei Edition) Mystery! Ghost Files”).

The Haunted School is a sub-genre of horror games that rarely makes its way outside of Japan. However, aspects of the genre are often present in mainstream games, and the category deserves special mention.

One example is *Siren*, a game that, despite its realistic presentation, betrays its Japanese roots with cultural themes like *The Haunted School*. Several stages in *Siren* (Figure 5) take place in an elementary school at nighttime that is infested with people who have become zombie-like creatures called shibito. These levels require the characters to hide under desks, cower in bathrooms, and combat former school employees in the gymnasium. Though the use of the monstrous shibito instead of ghosts changes *Siren*’s tone and presentation, these stages clearly draw from *The Haunted School*’s regular themes and motifs.

In fact, *Siren*’s cultural roots go much deeper than *The Haunted School*--it is firmly entrenched in traditional Japanese folklore. *Siren* takes place in the fictional village of Hanyuda, a remote locale that is home to a small group of farmers. Hanyuda is a strange place; it has its own religion, it was the site of a number of murders some thirty years ago, and a single family seems to have maintained control of the town for many generations. At the beginning of the game an earthquake and a strange sound (the siren for which the game is named) signal a change of state in the area: it becomes separated from the rest of the world and the lake that surrounds the village turns crimson. The residents of the town become murderous shibito, and the plot centers around a handful of survivors who attempt to escape.

It is eventually revealed that Mana, the town’s strange religion, is the creation of a character named Hisako Yao, who, some fourteen hundred years prior, ate the flesh of a dying creature from space and became immortal. She appears as a nun of the Mana religion, and guides other followers of the religion to “become closer to God” by drinking the crimson water and becoming shibito. This character is directly based on a character from Japanese folklore called Yaobikuni (八百比丘尼), and at points she is referred to by this name in the game. The story of Yaobikuni involves a woman who eats the flesh of a mermaid and becomes immortal only to find that everlasting life is full of pain. She eventually becomes a nun and, with the help of another mermaid, is finally able to die. Indeed, the *Siren* version of Yaobikuni is an ageless nun and the alien that she has eaten is referred to as “skyfish.”

The narrative in *Siren* also reveals that the people of Hanyuda practiced Shinto alongside Mana at some point in the past. The town is home to a Shinto shrine that is dedicated to Hiruko, which is a character from the Shinto creation myth. The myth involves a sort of Japanese Adam and Eve, named Izanagi and Izanami, who copulate improperly and cause their first children to be born with deformities (Izanami, the woman, taints the mating ritual by speaking before Izanagi). Their first child is Hiruko, “the leech child,” who is born without bones. His parents cast the

baby away by putting it in a reed boat and sending it down the stream. However, Hiruko survives and eventually becomes the fisherman god Ebisu (see Figure 6), the only member of a group of seven important gods to actually originate in Japan. Ebisu (sometimes rendered as “yebisu”) is an extremely common icon in contemporary Japan; as the god of fishermen and a symbol of good luck, his image can be found in restaurants, train stations, and on the labels of all sorts of products. However, his earlier form of Hiruko is much more uncommon; indeed, many Japanese are not aware that Ebisu and Hiruko are one and the same.



Figure 6. A typical statue of Ebisu from Ebisu station in Tokyo, Japan.

Siren’s narrative also mixes folklore with contemporary superstition and beliefs. One example of this is the appearance of the tsuchinoko, a mythical creature that, like Bigfoot, some believe to be a real animal that has eluded capture. Tsuchinoko are short snakes that have a wide girth, and various legends describe them jumping, speaking Japanese (but being untrustworthy), and biting their own tail to form a loop. Several Japanese prefectures have offered rewards to anybody who is able to catch a tsuchinoko and prove its existence, and this behavior makes its way into Siren’s large collection of items and clues. More interesting is the physical appearance of a tsuchinoko in the game; it looks more like a large leech than a snake, and it is visible only briefly before escaping down a drain. The suggestion is that the tsuchinoko is related to Hiruko, and is thus another example of Siren’s fish-oriented motif.

Analysis of Siren can teach us much about Japanese folklore, but the game also bears other hallmarks of traditional Japanese horror. In addition to the water themes and the appearance of The Haunted School, Siren’s world, like those found in the Fatal Frame series, is one that is separated from reality and home to otherworldly things. The game also reflects cultural unease about an aspect of modern Japanese society: cults and splinter religions.

Japan is home to a large number of young religions. Many are based on either Shinto or Buddhism, though some incorporate teachings from other religions that are foreign to Japan. Since the end of World War II when state-sponsored Shintoism was abolished, a variety of new religions, called shinsyuukyō (新宗教), have appeared. Some of these religions are large and influential (e.g. Sokka Gakai, a branch of Buddhism which has a large following and a related political party), while others are esoteric and nonsensical (such as Pana-Wave Laboratory, a group that covers their homes, cars, and bodies with white tarps to protect themselves from electromagnetic radiation). In 1995 a religious group named Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas on several Tokyo subway lines, killing twelve people and injuring many others. Investigation of the group revealed chemical weapons, bombs, drugs, and other evidence of planned terrorism. Since that event new religions have come under increased scrutiny, and many Japanese consider them cults.

So it is not hard to believe that a remote region like Hanyuda might have its own unique religion. Siren depicts this religion controlling the town and eventually driving its residents to their

deaths, and within the context of post-Aum Shinrikyo Japan, it is clearly representative of an underlying cultural distrust of cults. Kalat makes the point that just as the atomic bomb had a major influence on Japanese horror media in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. *Godzilla*), contemporary Japanese horror is related to recent national tragedies. Specifically, Kalat names the devastating Kobe earthquake and the sarin gas attacks, both of which occurred in 1995, as the progenitors of modern films like *Ring* and *Ju-on* (titled *The Grudge in the West*). In this context, *Siren*'s references to these events seem obvious; in addition to the untrustworthy cult, the story begins with a major earthquake that separates Hanyuda from the mainland. Even the siren, for which the game provides a supernatural explanation, sounds like a World War II-era air raid siren. Though *Siren*'s narrative is steeped in traditional folklore, it is also very much the product of modern Japanese ideas about horror.

The Attempt to Appear Western

So far this paper has touched only on games that were explicitly developed to mirror aspects of modern Japanese culture. But as previously mentioned, there exists a second class of games that attempt to obscure their heritage. These games, such as *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil*, and *Clock Tower* (among numerous others), attempt to appear Western by eschewing symbols and themes that are obviously Japanese. *Silent Hill* is an excellent example: it takes place in a fictional American resort town, stars an entirely white, American cast, and draws upon American horror films like *Jacob's Ladder* and *The Shining* for its visual and narrative themes. Yamaoka, the project's development director, has described *Silent Hill* as an attempt to make "Hollywood horror," specifically in regards to shocking visuals (Pruett, 2005).

But closer inspection reveals several traditional Japanese horror motifs lurking beneath *Silent Hill*'s Westernized exterior. Yamaoka himself has noted that no amount of effort on his part can possibly remove all cultural references from his games because he and his team are Japanese and that heritage is bound to affect their work. In the context of modern Japanese horror, *Silent Hill* contains several classic motifs.

As with the locales employed by *Fatal Frame* and *Siren*, the town for which the *Silent Hill* series is named has been separated from reality. In the original *Silent Hill*, this separation is explicit: all roads eventually terminate in a gaping abyss, as if the entire town has been violently lifted from the surface of the world. In later games in the series, the separation is more subtle; the apartment in *Silent Hill 4: The Room* appears normal but is isolated from the rest of the building; no amount of pounding on the door can be heard by people on the other side, and notes slipped under the door come through dramatically changed. In addition to an obvious physical separation from the real world, the *Silent Hill* series further isolates its characters by forcing them to delve into progressively tenuous derivations of reality. The "fog world," which appears most similar to reality, gives way to the "dark world" (a nighttime version of the fog world found only in the first *Silent Hill*) and then the "otherworld," a hellish version of the town (Pruett, 2007b). In *Silent Hill 3* the otherworld itself degrades until it finally appears to be decomposing in front of the characters' eyes. *Silent Hill* takes the idea of an otherworldly copy of reality in which malicious, supernatural creatures roam, and stacks it in layers, each more isolated and distant from the real world than the last.

The Silent Hill series is also home to a few references to common Japanese themes. As in *Siren*, the elementary school area can easily be considered a derivation of The Haunted School motif; in keeping with the genre's requirements that the school be visited only at night, it is accessible only through the dark world. The elementary school is also the point at which the most fundamental Silent Hill game mechanics are revealed, including the protagonists' first real descent into the otherworld. The elementary school is an important locale in Silent Hill, and in the context of Japanese horror we can consider it an extension of the large body of work that revolves around deserted schools at nighttime. A couple of other miscellaneous references to common horror themes are hidden away here and there (such as a Hanako-in-the-Toilet reference in both Silent Hill 2 and Silent Hill 3). Silent Hill 4 dwells extensively on a religious cult that, as in *Siren*, is unique to Silent Hill and is involved in both black magic and organized crime, providing another reference to modern sensitivity about young religions. But the most interesting reference is the series' antagonist herself.

Though it stars white, American characters, the plot leading up to the events in the original Silent Hill is typical Japanese horror. A young girl is tortured and eventually killed by a religious group hoping to use her suffering as a beacon that will summon a powerful demon to Earth. However, in death the girl is able to take vengeance on those who wronged her in life, and she does so by separating them, along with the rest of Silent Hill, from reality. Though the series goes on to show that the fog world, dark world, and otherworld are manifestations of the girl's pain and suffering, the story follows the same basic tenets as *Fatal Frame*, *Ring*, and other traditional *onnen* legends. In Silent Hill 2 (see Figure 4), the protagonist himself is responsible for the purgatory that he finds himself in, and this too is an application of *onnen*.^{viii} Though the format has been tweaked and presented with a Western sheen, the bedrock concepts of Silent Hill fit very comfortably within the Japanese horror genre.

Many of the Silent Hill games also portray non-standard family structures. The family of Harry and Cheryl is that of a single father and an adopted child, while the antagonist in the series' fourth iteration is an orphan. Kalat singles out the "broken home" motif as a particularly prevalent pattern in modern Japanese horror narratives. The works of Koji Suzuki, including *Ring* and *Honogurai Mizu no Sokokara* ("Dark Water"), focus on single mothers, single fathers, and other deviations from the traditional nuclear family. Kalat suggests that this reflects anxiety about dramatic changes in Japanese society over the last fifty years, especially in regard to the rights of women. He contends that while women's rights have come a long way in the last half-decade, the resulting culture is necessarily much more complex. This is perhaps why the antagonists of modern Japanese horror are so often female: in death they wield power that they were denied in life.

Cultural Mirrors

Horror games give us a window through which we can study the Japanese. But such studies can also teach us about our own culture. In attempting to define what "Japanese horror" is, we must also define "Western horror" in order to draw distinctions between the two. It is these distinctions rather than the details of the culture itself that make these works so fascinating (not to men-

tion frightening) to us. We find ourselves strangers in a strange land, unable to guess at where the narrative might be heading, unfamiliar with the conventions that the author is employing. Without the comfort of our usual cultural signals we feel out of control, and in that state the narrative can wield much power over us. The most effective Western horror films achieve the same sense of unease with innovative cinematography and surprising stories, but foreign horror films benefit from it almost automatically.

Though this paper has dwelt exclusively on details of Japanese culture that are evidenced by their horror games, it is perhaps the foreignness of these games that makes such details relevant. This is also a clue as to why so many horror games attempt to appear Western; if the cultural divide makes Japanese horror more effective to us, it stands to reason that it also makes Western horror more effective to them.

The Japanese have a rich history of scary stories, and themes common in historical works are evident in their contemporary horror media. Games are naturally affected by this heritage, even when they are designed to appear to be of non-Japanese origin. By tracing these patterns and motifs through the games that they occupy we not only learn about the Japanese psyche, but about our own culture as well.

References

- Capcom, Inc. (2009, June 30). *Platinum Titles*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from <http://ir.capcom.co.jp/english/business/million.html>
- Hearn, L. (2005). *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies Of Strange Things*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing.
- Kalat, D. (2007). *J-Horror: The Definitive Guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond*. New York: Vertical.
- Kent, S. L. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon--The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. Three Rivers Press.
- Pruett, C. (2003, August 30). *Chris' Survival Horror Quest*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from <http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh>
- Pruett, C. (2005, March 13). *GDC: Akira Yamaoka and the Atmosphere of Silent Hill*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh/post_view.php?index=1715
- Pruett, C. (2007, April 2). *The Prehistory of Survival Horror*. Retrieved September 15, 2009 from <http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh/features/prehistoryofhorror.php>

Pruett, C. (2007, December 2). *The Changing Utility of the Otherworld in the Silent Hill Series*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from <http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh/features/otherworld.php>

Suzuki, K. (2005, December 1). *Interview with Koji Suzuki, novelist of the dank and dread*. Retrieved September 15, 2009, from <http://int.kateigaho.com/win05/horror-suzuki.html>

ⁱ Though the PlayStation era was the first in which the adult-oriented video game market became viable in the United States, it is not clear if this was due to strategic Sony marketing or simply the result of the Nintendo Entertainment System generation coming of age. Sega marketed its Genesis console to adults years before the PlayStation, but it was much less successful.

ⁱⁱ Note that this graph does not contain “visual novel” games, despite the large number of such titles that employ horror themes. Though the visual novel format is consistently popular in Japan, that style of game is almost non-existent in the rest of the world, and therefore such titles do not provide a good metric for comparison.

ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, a fourth *Fatal Frame* was released in 2008, but as of this writing it has only been released in Japan.

^{iv} *Fatal Frame 2* actually has several of these characters, including another set of twins (Akane and Azami Kiryu; Azami’s *onnen* possesses a doll after her death) and the “rope man” (“*kusabi*”), who is sadistically sacrificed in lieu of twins to appease the “hellish abyss” upon which the town central to the game’s plot rests. This character returns as the final boss in the “normal” ending of the game.

^v It is also important to note that the mechanism for returning from the grave due to excess emotion is in no way limited to violent ghosts. In stories like *A Dead Secret* and *Of a Mirror and a Bell* (see Hearn, pp. 101 and 51, respectively), ghosts return from the grave not to exact revenge but to make sure that work left undone in their lifetimes is completed. The entire *Echo Night* series of games is based on this version of the *onnen* concept.

^{vi} Urashima Taro is a character from a Japanese folk tale of the same name. Urashima Taro saves a struggling turtle who turns out to be a princess in a secret underwater palace. He is invited to the palace and stays there for three days, but when he returns to land he finds that 300 years have passed.

^{vii} Another interesting correlation between the “Urashima Taro” story and the first *Fatal Frame* is the variability of time within these adjacent realms.

^{viii} See Hearn’s *Of a Mirror and a Bell* for a similar legend in which a living woman’s desire for a bronze mirror that she was forced to give up is so strong that the mirror cannot be melted.