Culture-Conscious Nightmares

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Culture-Conscious Nightmares

Posted on March 1, 2005 by Editor

By Chris Pruett <c_pruett@efn.org>

The 2005 Game Developers Conference, an annual gathering of game developers, took place early this March in San Francisco. This year Akira Yamaoka, the producer of the popular and widely respected Silent Hill series of horror games, gave a lecture on the development of horror and atmosphere for his games.

Yamaoka’s lecture was titled Gripping Game Design: The Mood and Ambiance of Silent Hill [1], but only a portion of his talk was specific to his games. He spent a large portion of the talk discussing horror and its relationship to culture, particularly the differences between American horror and Japanese horror. In making the Silent Hill games, Yamaoka and his team set out to create what they call “modern American horror through Japanese eyes.” However, he pointed out that since the entire team behind the game was Japanese, traditional concepts of Japanese horror probably worked their way into the game unconsciously. Perhaps this is why the Silent Hill games resonate with such a wide audience; though the format and presentation of the games are consistent with what Yamaoka describes as “surprise horror,” the story and ambiance seem far more subtle than most American horror.

Yamaoka identified several areas where American and Japanese horror diverge. In general, he said, Japanese-style horror deals with unseen aggressors and the suggestion of violence, while Hollywood-style is typically far more explicit and visual. A good example of this is the 1998 Japanese horror film The Ring, in which the antagonist is almost entirely absent and the violence only vaguely alluded to. When The Ring was remade for American audiences in 2002, much more focus was put on the antagonist herself, and the violence of the story was made explicit. Another recent Japanese horror film, Juon, followed a similar pattern: when it was remade for American audiences in 2004 (released in this country as The Grudge), the violence and gore of the film were dramatically amplified. Generally, Yamaoka pointed out, Japanese horror is much more subtle and understated than American horror.

Part of Yamaoka’s point is that horror serves a different purpose in Japanese and American cultures. In the West, horror is often used as a mechanic by which drama can be promoted
among the protagonists. In *The Exorcist* (1973), the possessed girl forces a priest to question the limits of his faith and deal with the recent death of his mother. Though the idea of a demonic entity possessing a young child is certainly scary, the film is interesting because the situation promotes drama among the characters. In Stephen King’s short story *Graveyard Shift*, gigantic rodents living deep below the basement of a textile factory create a situation that allows the protagonist to tell his boss what he really thinks of him. The rodents themselves are interesting, but what is much more interesting is the way that these characters react to an extreme situation. Though generally not considered horror, the character of Death in *The Seventh Seal* (1957) serves a similar purpose by promoting a dialog about the existence of God. In the West, horrific antagonists or monsters often provide a mechanism by which authors can explore interesting characters and their reactions to difficult situations.

In Japan, however, horror seems to serve a very different purpose. The antagonists are quite often characters central to the plot, and many classic Japanese ghost stories present haunts that are ultimately pitiful. Rather than simply existing to force the protagonists to react, the creatures described by Japanese folklore and modern horror are often the focus of the story. *Yuki-Onna* (The Snow Woman) is a classic Japanese tale about a young man surviving an encounter with a snow-witch and then unwittingly marrying her, which results in tragedy when the man breaks a promise to her. In this tale, the young protagonist is really a secondary character to the snow-witch, who is bound by the rules of the universe despite her love for her husband. A more modern fairytale is *Toire No Hanako* (Hanako in the Toilet), which describes the ghost of a girl that will appear in an empty bathroom stall if called upon in a certain way. In this story, the protagonist (generally the caller) is inconsequential and varies with each version, as does the ghost Hanako’s actual response. What is consistent, however, is the idea that Hanako visits the land of the living so that she can extract vengeance for some past personal atrocity, but that she is confined to her stall until properly summoned. It is her history and motive that make the story both scary and intriguing.

Yamaoka points out that Japanese ghost stories are generally very sad, and the antagonists themselves often appear trapped by the laws of the universe. He briefly touched upon the concept of onnen, which he described as the idea that a grudge or feeling of hatred can be so strong that it extends beyond the grave. In a folk tale called *Of a Mirror and a Bell*[^2], a woman regrets donating her bronze mirror to the local shrine for use in a bell so much that the mirror refuses to melt. So shamed is the woman by her selfishness that she commits suicide, but not before promising riches to whomever can destroy the bell. This idea that strong emotions can affect the state of reality is very common in Japanese ghost stories, and often serves as the mechanic by which spirits are able to tell their stories.
For *Silent Hill*, Yamaoka and his team wanted to pursue an American horror story similar to the works of Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, and David Lynch. The American-style approach to horror was also convenient for them because it allowed the team to employ “shocking visuals” as a source of horror, rather than the more difficult-to-communicate metaphorical horror common to Japan. Plenty of video games allow the player to fight monsters, so choosing to present horror in the American style allowed *Silent Hill* to benefit from proven game mechanics.

However, it is easy to see that his team was also influenced (perhaps unconsciously) by traditional Japanese horror. The story in *Silent Hill* fits the Japanese mold very well: the main character is generic, almost to the point of being inconsequential (an everyman), and the focus of the story has less to do with the protagonist’s motives and feelings than those of the antagonist. *Silent Hill* 2 has been widely praised for its literate story, and it too is ultimately very sad. The second game in the series describes a horrific situation in which the protagonist’s sins have become physical manifested, which is very similar to the concept of onnen. Though the presentation of the *Silent Hill* games seems to follow the American standard (there is plenty of monsters and explicit violence), it is particularly effective as horror because of its Japanese influence.

Video games are uniquely positioned to teach young people about other cultures while simultaneously entertaining them. While titles like *Silent Hill* are not intended to be educational tools, the care and depth that has gone into the games has piqued the interest of more than a few gamers. Yamaoka and his team are consciously exploring cultural differences from the angle of horror, and the quality of their work is a testament to the value of such research. Games such
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Silent Hill have the opportunity to provide the tip of an educational ice berg to young people, to draw them in to study by presenting them with literate and culturally aware content. Most forms of art begin as entertainment before becoming culturally significant, and developers like Akira Yamaoka are helping to push video games into cultural relevance with intelligent, educational, and thought provoking experiences.

[1] You can find the abstract for this lecture here:
Slides from the presentation may also become available at this site eventually.

[2] Translated by Lafcadio Hearn as part of Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things. The text for this story is available for free here:

http://gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca/gaslight/kwaidanG.htm

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10 THOUGHTS ON “CULTURE-CONSCIOUS NIGHTMARES”

seriale
on January 30, 2014 at 7:10 AM said:

for that most effective price for the industry super genuine all

social network
on January 30, 2014 at 11:34 AM said:

I have mastered some essential points through your internet site post. 1 other subject I wish to talk about is that there are numerous games out there on the industry created particularly for toddler age children. They include pattern acceptance, colors, family pets, and shapes. These generally focus on familiarization as an option to memorization. This keeps small little ones engaged with out sensing like they are studying. Thanks

nigeria
on January 30, 2014 at 1:57 PM said:
Hi there, Sorry for your extended comment. Thanks for sharing your article, following time can you write about wart removal products. Also is there any proven house cure for skin warts? Can you suggest me some? I live in Canada. Please don’t forget that some stuff may not be offered in my area. That may be why suggest me general items which could be found everywhere. Also would you recommend buying wartrol online? is it not dangerous?

plotka

on February 1, 2014 at 1:57 AM said:

Good work…

Wroclaw

on February 1, 2014 at 3:41 AM said:

Hi Shane, I’ve very appreciated these articles and also the helpful summaries that they provide. You say each “the Son is God” and suggest we shouldn’t say “God died on a cross.” Can you explain? Thanks!

naija

on February 3, 2014 at 1:52 AM said:

I definitely appreciate looking through on this internet site, it has superb blog posts. “I have a new philosophy. I’m only going to dread one day at a time.” by Charles M. Schulz.

plotki

on February 3, 2014 at 1:56 AM said:

Good work…
how to cure hypothyroidism
on February 4, 2014 at 9:30 PM said:

First off I want to say fantastic blog! I had a quick question that I’d like to ask if you do not mind. I was curious to find out how you center yourself and clear your thoughts prior to writing. I’ve had a hard time clearing my thoughts in getting my ideas out. I do take pleasure in writing however it just seems like the first 10 to 15 minutes are generally wasted simply just trying to figure out how to begin.

Any suggestions or hints? Appreciate it!

nigeria dating
on February 5, 2014 at 12:18 AM said:

It commonly takes about 3 many years to total that with.

cork board ideas
on February 5, 2014 at 2:01 PM said:

Spot on with this write-up, I truly believe this site needs a lot more attention. I