The Shōwa era's living dead: the ludic reemergence of Japanese zombies

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INTRODUCTION

The release of Capcom's 1996 videogame *Biohazard* (retitled *Resident Evil* upon the game's release outside of its native Japan), with its ominous title card intoning "*welcome to the world of survival horror*", provided audiences with a formal label for a growing genre that combined shoot-em-up and horror experiences (Therrien 2009, 32). What *Biohazard* also firmly ushered in was the media era of the Japanese zombie – a hitherto uncommon figure in texts produced by Japan's *manga*, *anime*, film, television and videogaming industries, but a monster with roots in earlier folklore and whose presence went on to become inescapable over the two decades following *Biohazard*'s release. Two notable, prototypical exceptions to this absence of zombies in the twentieth century Japanese mediascape are *Phantom Fighter* (Marionette 1988), and an early game produced by *Biohazard*'s own Tokuro Fujiwara, *Sweet Home* (Capcom 1989). I argue in this paper that the relatively sudden appearance of the zombie in Japanese mass media is closely connected to the complex dynamics of national identity that developed in Japan in the decades following World War II.

That the zombie's first popular media appearance was not in film, television or printed media is crucial to understanding the reasons for – and the signifiance of – its sudden reappearance. The burgeoning medium of videogames and the interactivity it afforded players provided a new means for everyday Japanese to encounter, process and negotiate anxieties in the nation's popular cultural memory. To build this argument, I draw on traditional Japanese folklore, analyse the socio-historical context in Japan (particularly during those eight years between 1988 and 1996), and conduct textual analysis of *Phantom Fighter*, *Sweet Home* and *Biohazard*.

While Japanese traditional storytelling teems with *yōkai* (supernatural demons, monsters and ghouls), including the figure of the *kyonshī* (a 'hopping zombie' imported from Chinese legends and folklore), the Shōwa era (1926-1989) is largely marked by an absence of the living dead in yōkai tales and Japanese popular media. I connect part of this absence to the concerted efforts during the Allied occupation of Japan following World War II to radically renconfigure Japanese popular culture, as well as to censor public discourse related to the apocalyptic trauma of the atom bomb attacks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and of these attacks' survivors – the *hibakusha*, a kind of living dead). As Japan's post-war economy surged to its 'Miracle' success status, Japan's leaders worked hard to build a shared sense of a national identity that reflected the prowess and sophisticatication of the nation's economic advances.

This stable and optimistic socio-cultural context fractured violently with two major events: the death of Emperor Hirohito and the end of the Shōwa era in 1989, and the catastrophic bursting of the Japanese asset price bubble in 1992. With so-called 'zombie' banks and corporations at the heart of the economic crisis, and the tragedies, crimes and anguish of World War II brought back to the discursive fore by the death of Hirohito, the zombie's return was directly responsive to local socio-cultural context in the same way that the zombie's appearance in Hollywood (reflecting unease with the rise of capitalism and consumerism) (Shaviro 1993, 83; Kee 2011, 14) and Haiti before that (where it spoke to both spirtual belief and colonial conflict) (Lauro and Embry 2008, 87; Kee 2011, 9; Geyser and Tshabalala 2011, 3). The emergence of the Japanese media zombie reflected a public consciousness grappling with the jarring return and reanimation of two of the country's dead: the trauma of war and a Japanese economy humbled to grinding lows not seen since the immediate post-war period.

Collective memory, in Maurice Halbwachs' formulation, is a series of shared understandings and information, that combine to form a communal form of memory (1992). To analyse such memorial formations is to address *cultural memory*, which is defined by Astrid Erll as "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (2008, 2). The study of cultural memory is not so concerned with what did or did not happen in the past "but rather toward the particular presents of remembering" (Erll 2011, 8), or more specifically "how those events are *constructed in the present*" (Begy 2015). Analysis of my three case studies helps explain Japanese constructions of the past (and the present) being made at the end of the Shōwa era through the haunting, trauma-tinged mascot of the zombie. The reappearance of the Japanese zombie in the interactive medium of the videogame reflected a contemporaneous cultural need to exert and experience meaningful agency in a time of popular, perceived helplessness in Japan.

Recalling Tanya Krzywinska's argument that horror-based videogames fundamentally depend on an affective experience of the "dynamic between states of being in control and out of control" (2003, 14), the zombie videogame also proves a highly appropriate genre for these issues of collective memory to be encountered and worked through by everyday Japanese players. *Phantom Fighter*, *Sweet Home* and *Biohazard* offered players an opportunity that was not immediately possible in their everyday life in the 1990s: to defeat and silence the living dead, and their reanimations of traumatic pasts. In analysing the memorial effort of these games, I build upon work that has already addressed ludic collective memories of World War I (Chapman 2016), of World War II (Gish 2010), of Cold War histories (Pötzsch and Šisler 2019), and of the introduction of the railroad (Begy 2015), and contribute to the ongoing development cultural memorial approaches to videogame analysis.

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