

The Fractured *Imbunche*: a Study of Chilean Horror Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This extended abstract presents a work in progress that aims to study Chilean horror videogames. Its objectives are to establish if and how these games develop the transculturation process, and if there are elements or repeated motifs that could be considered uniquely Chilean about them. In order to do so, an abridged state of Chilean horror games will be presented. Secondly, the concept of transculturation will be briefly explained, as well as some of the approaches taken by Latin American videogames. A third approach, based on studies of Japanese horror games, will be proposed. Then, a few elements of Chilean horror literature will be discussed, to establish a few of the motifs that are expected to be found.

The Chilean videogame industry is, in comparison with other countries, relatively small, and if we delve more specifically into horror it becomes even smaller. However, some of its titles have gathered some level of recognition. For example, *Tormented Souls* (Dual Effect, 2021), a fixed-camera horror game inspired by the likes of *Silent Hill*, has gained a following online and has recently announced that there is a sequel in the making. Or the lesser-known *The Signifier* (PlayMeStudio, 2020), a fairly experimental game about a psychologist that goes into a dead woman's memories to solve her death, which has nonetheless garnered enough attention to have PlayMeStudio partner with Blumhouse Games to develop *The Simulation* (PlayMeStudio, TBA), a game about a developer that is given a horror game in a murder scene to analyze how it's connected. There is also some interesting projects that are being developed, such as *Curilemu* (Austral Games, TBA), which is based on Chilote mythology. Overall, despite its small size, it is possible to see that the Chilean horror game industry is one brimming with potential and worth being studied.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key concepts for this study will be that of transculturation. When discussing this process, it is important to recognize it as one among many concepts for discussing cultural contact, including postcolonialism, multiculturalism and others (Kuortti and Falk, 2015, p. xii). However, what

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differentiates it from other processes is that “it seeks new cultural formations; it covers heterogeneous authorship and audiences; and it calls for active participation on the part of the individual” (Kuortti and Falk, 2015, p. xii), i.e. it is an aesthetic process with a focus on creation of new identities, forms and motifs. In that sense, the videogame becomes an ideal cultural device to apply the notion of transculturation. Firstly, because of the videogame’s status as container and space of cultural creation (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 12) and secondly, because it demands an active role not only from the developer team that creates it, but also of the players that interact with it, therefore accomplishing one of the pre-requisites needed for this process.

This process has been studied and applied to Latin American videogames by Ramírez-Moreno and Navarrete-Cardero, who have recognized two main approaches taken by Latin American games: regionalism and cosmopolitanism. The former corresponds to games that “articulate local folklore, traditions threatened by the influence of globalization, and other pre-European cultural cosmovisions” (Ramírez-Moreno and Navarrete-Cardero, 2024, p. 10), whereas the latter includes games characterized “by a revisionist approach to tradition, customs, and myths particular to the region, universalizing them without losing sight of the local color that makes the cultural identity of these games distinguishable” (Ramírez-Moreno and Navarrete-Cardero, 2024, p. 14). It is worth noting that in Ramírez-Moreno and Navarrete-Cardero’s study, both approaches still include cultural elements of the country that produces them.

There is however another view when it comes to studying games and cultures. Pruett, in his study of Japanese horror games, claims “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” (Pruett, 2010) with the latter purposefully making their cultural symbols and themes more obscure. According to the author, however, it is still possible to recognize cultural elements of Japan in the motifs of these horror games. Although the author here is specifically talking about Japanese horror games, his ideas can easily be applied to other countries, particularly Latin American countries, which are “notable for harboring the origin of cultural hybridization as a conceptual model” (Ramírez-Moreno and Navarrete-Cardero, 2024, p. 3), i.e. they have multiple cultural influences mixed together that create their own unique identities.

As mentioned earlier, there is currently only a handful of Chilean horror games in the market. This has led to a lack of studies focused on them. Thus, when discussing motifs beyond the obvious use of Chilean myths and locations, there hasn’t been a study around common motifs that can be found in them. There has been, however, studies on Chilean horror literature, particularly short stories. According to Diamantino Valdés, “the figure of the imbunche has become a metaphor for the Chilean identity, inasmuch as it represents the fracture of memory and political repression” (2022, p. 20)¹, with the imbunche being a creature from Chilean folklore who used to be human but whose limbs have all been twisted and has been turned into a monster. In that sense, Diamantino Valdés is already highlighting some motifs in Chilean horror: disjointed memories and political components. Some of the games mentioned earlier, like *The Signifier*, have premises that already hint to the use of fractured memories in them, so the aim of this study will be to see if the aforementioned works do indeed possess these motifs and what others might be recognized in them.

In conclusion, this paper will apply the concepts of transculturation, regionalism, cosmopolitanism and obscuring of cultural symbol to Chilean horror games to discern where they fit within these categories. Furthermore, it will study if and how they use motifs of fractured memories and political repressions, as well as any other motifs that might be identified during the study, to shed some light on the identity of Chilean horror games.

ENDNOTES

¹ Own translation, original in Spanish: "la figura del imbunche se ha transformado en una metáfora de la identidad chilena, en cuanto a la fractura de la memoria y la represión política".

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