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***Postcolonialism, Orientalism, and Video Games***

***Guest edited by Souvik Mukherjee and Zahra Rizvi***

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# CyberOrient

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## Editorial:

### Postcolonial Play in the Orient's Sandbox

Souvik Mukherjee and Zahra Rizvi

#### *Abstract*

*In this introduction to the special double issue, the guest editors outline their vision behind the work by giving a short overview of the orientalist bias in game studies, the postcolonialist turn in the field, and the need for South Asia-centric scholarship to contribute to and invite South-South discourse in games scholarship. This short introduction also introduces the various contributions to this double issue which range from academic articles to book reviews to comments.*

#### *Keywords*

*South Asia, postcolonialism, South-South discourse, orientalism, videogames*

The story of oriental thinking around games goes back many centuries. Thomas Hyde's 17th-century text, *De Ludis Orientalibus* (1694), addresses, in detail, many games that are referred to as "Oriental." Hyde refers to chess as a form of battle "not indeed imagined, as of planets or stars, but real; not modern, but ancient, oriental, Indian" (1694). Over a century later, Sir William Jones, the champion orientalist, wrote his essay on Indian chess in 1807. The terms "orientalist" and "Orient" have, however, since gained a very different meaning after postcolonial thinker Edward W. Said's research in his seminal book, *Orientalism*, published in 1978. The Orient, according to Said, is a semi-mythic construct and the premise of Orientalism is the "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978). The description of the East by the West is often one of mystique, fantasy and the exotic as opposed to the practical rationality of Europe; orientalism presupposes that the Orient needs to be described and cannot represent itself accurately. Just as with other cultural phenomena, orientalism in games too did not stop with Hyde or Jones. In the ensuing centuries, oriental games and play "need" to be described by the European scholar, often in colonial scenarios; similarly, European games such as football and cricket "need" to be introduced in the colonies to instil morality and discipline in the subject nations.

Arguably, the trend persists long after the end of European colonialism, even in the most recent form of ludic activity: digital games. The content of digital games, from Europe and North America, and even from Asian countries, perpetuate colonial and orientalist stereotypes as shown in the earlier research of the editors (Mukherjee 2018; Rizvi and Chowdhury 2021; Rizvi and Mukherjee 2023). With the recent and much-belated postcolonial turn in games studies (see Lammes 2010; Penix-Tadsen 2016; Mukherjee 2017; Mukherjee and Hammar 2018; Harrer 2018), there is a heightened awareness of the need to reexamine the inherently orientalist constructions in digital games (see Šisler 2008; Zeiler and Mukherjee 2022) in the ludic, narrative, player experience and industry aspects. From exotic characters and locales in, for example, *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dog 2017) and *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014) to the scant attention paid to the video game industry in Asia (see

Patterson and Fickle 2024), the problem is deep-seated. We plan to address this continued orientalism in games, particularly in the case of digital games, in this special double issue of *CyberOrient*, titled *Postcolonialism, Orientalism, and Video Games*.

In the first instalment of this double issue, Soraya Murray's article, "Raji's Burden" raises the important question of "what it means to insert culturally specific non-Western themes and narratives into a conventional Western rule-based system" and whether even games from the so-called Global South also tend to slide back into the set Western conventions of game design. When the same applies to cultural representation, then the whole question of Orientalism is reconfigured, and the problem Murray poses for *Raji* is aptly bridged over into the second instalment, by Vít Šisler in his essay, "Theoretical and Methodological Framework for Studying Orientalism in Video Games" where he proposes a theoretical and methodological framework of studying Orientalism in video games. Šisler uses examples from Arabic-speaking countries and Iran primarily and features interviews with game developers as well as a robust engagement with existing game production scholarship. Using the compelling concept of "gameenvironments," his essay serves as a useful take-off point to the other essays in the collection. Following Murray's essay, Arkabrata Chaudhury and Arunoday Chaudhuri write about the need to challenge the "Indian mythic" and the way in which gender and Indian history are presented in *Raji*. Chaudhury and Chaudhuri's essay speaks to the concerns raised directly by Murray regarding *Raji* and also those that Šisler's gameenvironments research indicates, albeit in a different and larger context. Moving from an Indian video game to the experience of a popular AAA franchise from the Global North, Animesh Dhara's essay on the reception of *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* in India quite intriguingly presents the scenario of how Americanness is perceived among Indian *GTA* players. Again, keeping the player in mind, Achintya Debnath attempts to analyse the remarkable popularity the battle-royale (an online multiplayer game that combines last-man-standing gameplay with elements of a survival game) game, *PUBG (PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds)* among Indian audiences but through the lens of psychoanalysis.

Adding to the essays, the double issue also contains Xenia Zeiler's review of Souvik Mukherjee's book, *Videogames in the Subcontinent: Development, Culture(s) and Representations* (2023) and Anders Ackerfeld's review of Liz Przybylski's *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* (2020) provide important insights into game production and culture studies outside the Global North and a theory of research methods that may be useful in games studies research.

The conception of this special issue was specifically born out of a need to redress South Asia's prolonged absence in games studies' discourses and the larger allied scholarship on digital culture, by way of amplifying some of the major and critical issues in the gaming cultures of what is arguably one of the most diverse and populated parts of the globe. Looking back at the rich scholarship in this double issue, the editors hope that the work here is the drop that ripples the ocean of enduring absences in game studies by foregrounding the assemblage of the South-South discourse, to this end, as well as highlighting the global challenges to colonialism and orientalism in understanding narrative cultures, play-cultures, and code.

Like all exercises of care, this double issue is possible only due to the work of everyone who saw its value, devoted their time and collaborative energies, and contributed in its fruition. In this we are eternally grateful to the general editors and the editorial team of *CyberOrient*, and, of course, our reviewers. Vit, Anders, Hana, Paul, Poonam, Mahli-Ann, Souvik Kar, Prabhash, and Keerthi, we owe this one to you all.

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**Article:****“Raji’s Burden”****Soraya Murray***Abstract*

*This article uses a visual culture studies approach to examine how video games invoking non-Western cultural specificities face heightened pressures to completely and “authentically” represent their cultures. Focusing on the independent Indian video game Raji: An Ancient Epic (Nodding Heads 2020) as a key example, I employ art historian Kobena Mercer’s concept of the “burden of representation” to show how race, ethnicity, and gender intersect in this game. I argue that there is more at work here than a superficial re-skinning of characters and game space to suit national tastes and aesthetics and that Raji enters into much larger and ongoing debates about the function of representation. Through deep reading and critical analysis of Raji’s characters and spaces, I provide a context for its role at the center of cultural and even political struggles. Ultimately, I show what representational stakes are revealed when a video game is overburdened with the responsibility of standing in for a whole culture, and why such interventions matter.*

*Keywords*

*Raji, Raji: An Ancient Epic, video games, burden of representation, India*

## Introduction

My research considers video games as visual culture forms that can be understood within their own context as insightful objects to think with, and that can reveal sociopolitical realities and imaginaries that powerfully shape how we think about each other and the world. Particularly as it regards the representation of minoritized cultures, those games that image non-Western cultural specificities often face heightened pressures to fully, authentically, and appropriately represent those cultures. Often, this pressure exists because there are so few instances of that culture's inclusion, so every single case becomes fraught and overtaxed with the responsibility of standing in for all of that culture. One such example of a game under this duress is the independent Indian video game, *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games and published by Super.com in 2020. Using it as a key example, I invoke art historian Kobena Mercer's concept of the "burden of representation" to understand how race, ethnicity, and gender intersect in this game. I argue that, beyond being a superficial re-skinning of characters and game space within conventional game mechanics to suit national tastes and aesthetics, *Raji* enters into much larger ongoing debates about the function of representation. Through deep reading and critical analysis of *Raji*'s characters and spaces, I provide a context for its role at the center of cultural and even political struggles around "authentic" Indianness. Overall, this work shows what representational stakes are revealed when a video game is overburdened with the responsibility of standing in for a whole culture, and why contemplating such interventions matters.

## Context and Reception

*Raji: An Ancient Epic* tells the story of two orphans: Raji, a young carnival acrobat, and her younger brother, a puppet storyteller named Golu.<sup>1</sup> Left unconscious after being caught in a demonic siege against humans, Raji awakes to find that her sibling and all of the other children have been abducted.

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<sup>1</sup> For this article, I played the Enhanced Edition of the game, released 2022, on a Sony PS4.

Getting him back will involve traversing a vast and sublime world far beyond her own tiny universe of the carnival, and defeating demon lord Mahabalasura and his minions. The gameplay takes the form of a platforming hack-and-slash action-adventure, with occasional puzzle-solving and elegantly integrated elements of Hindu lore. A vision of game director Avichal Singh, art directors Shruti Ghosh and Ian Maude and their team, *Raji* was the first Indian game ever to be represented at E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Signaling its having “crossed over” into mainstream appeal, to date it has garnered 36 award nominations and ten wins, an extraordinary feat for any game, much less an indie title (Gamescom Asia 2022).

Part of the excitement around the release of *Raji* resided in its status as one of the only console (as opposed to mobile) games from India, in this case from a Pune-based company, as well as its centering on Indian culture and mythology. While it is not the first game from India or the first to image Indian myths and lore, it seemed to capture the imagination of mainstream audiences nationally and internationally. Of course, the industry has for years been outsourcing to India, where the intensive labor of game development can be completed at lower wages. But that is quite different from the prospect of a game that comes from within the culture itself, and emerges from the concerns and heritage of that national context (Evans-Thirlwell 2017). This is a rare occurrence, and *Raji* stands apart in this regard. Begun in 2017, the game was released in October 2020, to resounding enthusiasm (Martens 2020; Thorn 2020; Chhibber 2020; Shekhar 2017; Ramachandran 2020). *Raji*, which has since been released in an enhanced edition in 2022, can now be played in three modes: Campaign mode (standard), Story mode (which emphasizes the narrative), and One Shot One Kill (in which the player kills or is killed in one hit). Importantly, this edition added Tamil, Bengali, Assamese, Kannada, Marathi, and Telugu languages to the original English version (Pham 2020).

That cultural authenticity is presented as part of the game’s original intervention. The official website notes as a unique selling point of the game

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<sup>2</sup> E3 is considered the largest gaming expo of the year.

that, “crafted by a passionate team dedicated to showcasing their native culture, *Raji* features, for the very first time, a game world set in ancient India and infused with Hindu and Balinese mythology” (Nodding Heads n.d.). And it is true that *Raji* is no doubt a beautiful game with beautiful spaces, and one that engages with universal themes around the hero’s journey and surmounting overwhelming odds, set within an Indian aesthetic and cultural heritage that brings a novel, untapped voice to the genre.

Reviews tended to effusively characterize the game as “gorgeous” (Tarason 2017), “charming,” “a treat for the eyes” (Arora 2020), and refreshing in its cultural specificity of a greatly underrepresented region of the world in video games—though some dubbed it a lesser form of iconic titles like *Prince of Persia*.<sup>3</sup> Domestic and international reviewers noted its rich environments, beautiful design and aesthetic polish as key to having “put India on the international game-development map, living up to the top industry standards” (Sekhon 2021). Perhaps most significantly, many felt its focus on South Asian culture redressed a lack of representation, and articulated in a stark sense of recognition. One reviewer of Indian descent shared their pleasure in cultural references that comprised the game’s worldbuilding, emotively voicing how much it meant to finally see familiar Indian landmarks in a game: “It was incredible to play through *Raji* and recognize pieces of places I’d been visiting during trips to India my entire life” (Chhibber 2020).



Figure 1: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020 (screenshot by author).

<sup>3</sup> I would also point out that the *Prince of Persia* franchise has also caused controversy because of its misrepresentations of Iranian culture and history. I have written of this problem of Orientalism in games in my own work, (Murray 2018a, see especially chapter one) but there are many others as well. See for example (Ahmadi 2015; Šisler and Mohseni 2017).

Another reviewer noted the need for video games that break from the saturation of Eurocentric and Japanese narratives issued by mainstream developers: “In a video game landscape dominated by America, Japan, and Europe, it’s refreshing to see a game based outside those three spheres, one developed by people who actually live in the culture the game is about” (Parrish 2020). Another reviewer called it “a rare gem.” They heaped high praise on its spaces: “*Raji* is a stunning game, lovingly hand-crafted with excellent art: towering statues lit in shafts of light, glowing illustrations on the walls, ancient wall murals and carvings, palaces lit with moody lanterns, the city in the distance, and even beautiful ornate doors with sunlight filtering through stained glasses” (Almeida 2020). Overall, *Raji* was lauded as a step forward in Indian game development in terms of quality and celebrated for its embrace of authentic aesthetic touches that invoke the greatness of Indian culture.

### **The Burden of Representing India**

But this game, in its invocation of the “native” ancient Indian, Hindu, and Balinese cultural references, also raises weighty questions about what it means to insert culturally specific non-Western themes and narratives into a conventional Western rule-based system. For example, can such a game ever truly slip the representational traps of Orientalism and conquest that seem so baked into Western game development? Can it sufficiently address elisions and the overbearing dynamics of game space that seem so hard to surmount? How can it speak back to the mainstream, while also providing an experience that remains legible and inviting to non-Indian audiences?

Historical game scholars have debated the role of cultural authenticity, accuracy and the representation of heritage (Šisler 2013; Mochocki 2021). For example, Michal Mochocki considers the connection between heritage authenticity and perceptions of greater game immersion or involvement. And ultimately, the scholar argues that games can participate in a matrix of “cognitive, emotional and social engagement with heritage content”—but not the material heft of heritage (Mochocki 2021, 972). Vít Šisler, Jaroslav Švelch, and Josef Šlerka have investigated other global industries

and cultures, looking at the ways that the cultural, institutional and market demands intersect to produce transcultural objects that both signal their origins, while accessing more dominant game markets (Šisler, Švelch, and Šlerka 2017). They characterize those crossover games from, for example, local developers in Iran, as mobilizing different kinds of authentic components connected to religious, political mythological, or popular culture influences (2017, 3865–3869). Often, particularly during the earlier years of Iranian game development, there was a tendency to take dominant game frameworks and re-contextualize the content to appeal to an Iranian audience. However, they have also identified that the successful balance of international market success and meaningful engagement with authentic Iranian heritage has inspired trust from local player culture.

These outcomes certainly make sense from the standpoint of a globalized gaming industry and the perspective that the varied impacts of “globalization and localization, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and traditionalism and modernization compete and coexist” (Šisler, Švelch, and Šlerka 2017, 3876). Toward what one might think of as a “dialing in” of a market successful balance between all of the above competing impacts, examples from Iran’s gaming industry can serve as useful examples of the strains on local developers.

That said, my concern is for the specific dynamics of strain placed on makers, not only by the market itself, but by the communities they purport to speak for. I argue that from the perspective of the pressure to speak for a nation, and in this case also for cultural and gender designations, there is far more at work than the re-skinning of characters and game space to suit national tastes and aesthetics. This is not merely about successful absorption into the market. In fact, *Raji* enters into much larger and ongoing debates about the powers of representation. Key to this conversation is scholar Kobena Mercer’s canonical concept of a “burden of representation” that encumbers image-making practices seeking to intervene in the mainstream and create space for other voices. Mercer defines this burden as a dynamic of undue pressure caused by “a restricted economy of minority representation in which one speaks for all” (Mercer 2013, 20). Within this dynamic, a lone example

issuing from a particular constituency outside of dominant culture—in this case, a rare Indian video game—might be excessively scrutinized for all the ways that it meets (or fails a perceived responsibility to meet) expectations of those it seeks to represent. Mercer wrote in relation to Black film in a Eurocentric context, but the dynamic exists across representational practices, and video games are equally sites of such contestation (Murray 2018a). “Because access and opportunities are regulated such that films tend to be made only one at a time,” Mercer explains, “there is an inordinate pressure on each individual film to be representative, or to say as much as possible in one single filmic statement. This precisely is the ‘burden of representation’” (Mercer 2013, 91).



Figure 2: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020 (screenshot by author).

*Raji*'s developers themselves identified a sense of responsibility to represent India to the world. In one interview, Ghosh spoke plainly about this goal:

The market lacked games that represented what we've grown up with in Indian culture [...] There was nothing that showcased our architecture or told the stories that we've heard from our parents and grandparents—it was something that we thought we could bring to the world and that we could do to a really good quality, so that it could compete with games that are made in the West. (*Unreal Engine* 2022)



Compelled to bring the stories of Indian culture to the mainstream industry, Singh, Ghosh, and Maude undertook to produce such a game, and to do so in terms that would be legible by Western standards (*Unreal Engine* 2022). Singh, in an interview with *Gamesindustry*'s Matthew Handrahan in 2020, affirmed: "It speaks of authenticity. It speaks of passion. It speaks of cultural representation" (Handrahan 2020). In this, the Nodding Heads messaging was consistent and clear: Indian game development can compete with the quality of Western games, the game invokes authenticity and seeks to remediate a lack of cultural representation. In doing so, the company heaped upon itself an enormous burden of representation. It did so by encumbering the game as a cultural object with a crushing responsibility to satisfy undue representational demands, on behalf of all those in the category of "Indian," who may have felt painfully excluded from the grand conversation of video games. This is *Raji*'s burden.

### **Game and Play Description: Into a Dark Cave Boldly**

That burden of representation, or the pressure to redress a history of representational wrongs through a single work, is reflected in the very feel of the game, and in an emotional charge concentrated through aesthetic choices. The world itself is rendered in a 3D isometric perspective that suggests a god's-eye view of *Raji*'s story, emphasizing her tiny existence, while the voices of gods narrate her journey and sometimes intervene in her fate with gifts of powerful weapons and skills. Taking a page from classic games like *Journey*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Prince of Persia*, *Bastion*, and *Limbo*, *Raji* places a resolute but diminutive and unprepared figure against a vast, sublime space full of peril. In reviews, *Raji* was often compared to the original *God of War* for the persistent presence of gods in the player-character's fate, and general visual style of gameplay. There is a little bit of the classic *Tomb Raider* as well but with a very different feel. After all, the character of young *Raji* belongs in the spaces she restores, rather than conquering them or functioning as a kind of swashbuckling adventurer against an exotic backdrop. But this is an important point about the fundamentally predatory relation to gamespace inbuilt into many game scenarios, to which I will return (Murray 2018c; 2018b). With its play

between flatness and depth, *Raji* presents a pleasurable aesthetic ebb and flow between puppetry to tell sections of the protagonist's story, murals to share stories of the Hindu gods which inform the worldbuilding, and the lovingly-rendered 3D world itself. There is a strong sense of foreground, middle, and background, and careful attention to texturing using digitized hand-painted samples in order to bring a very particular sense of culturally located materiality to the sense of place and space established. This attention to detail effectively plunges the player into *Raji*'s world, and the interplay of depth and flatness unfolds in a kind of rhythm that cyclically reinvests the player in the "ancient epic" nature of her quest.

*Raji* moves through spaces associated with power and fictionalized architectural wonders from the greatness of ancient India. The ancient and the epic are reinforced through these game space aesthetics. The game world takes its inspiration from ancient Indian mythology and incorporates the ornate medieval Rajasthani and Hindu–Islamic–Persian inflected Mughal architecture, as well as the Pahari art style into a cohesive world that towers above *Raji*. *Raji* (voiced by Alka Sharma) must fight to save the human race from the demons who have waged war once again, after a thousand years of peace. This is rendered in an animated form of shadow-play resembling delicate Balinese puppetry in bright, sunny colors. We meet the teenage girl *Raji* and her younger brother, *Golu* (voiced by Sharma), two young carnival performers on the festive holiday of *Raksha Bandhan*, which celebrates sibling bonds and in which sisters tie amulets around the wrists of their brothers, and brothers vow to protect sisters. However, as one reviewer indicates, "in a feminist spin on proceedings, it's the elder *Raji* who must come to her brother's rescue after he is captured by the very demons whose tale he tells for a living" (Arora 2020). Within the story, tales of ancient battles are interrupted by actual *Gadasura* demons who wage a new war, strike down *Raji* and take *Golu* from her. This tale is told using the black shadows of Balinese leather puppets (called *wayang kulit*). Their shadows are cast against a scrim (called *kelir*), viewable to an audience on the other side, while the storyteller conveys the narrative. The distinctive flat *wayang* puppets are animated using sticks to move their hinged limbs and are traditionally used for various rituals or to illustrate Hindu mythologies

and values. After the tragic inciting incident is conveyed, the game begins, opening up onto a more fully rendered space. Raji awakes and sets off to find Golu.

These flickers between live action and the Balinese-style puppetry signals the placing of Raji's new story and quest into the realm of myth. She writes a new epic with her heroine's journey to save her kin. Raji wields the Trishul and Sharanga bow, as well as a sword and shield, and eventually a discus-like Chakra, all gifts from the gods to aid her in her defeat of the demonic hordes. Durga, the warrior goddess to whom Raji and her brother pray, guides the young girl and offers her most powerful weapon, the Trishul. Players hear the voices of Durga (also voiced by Sharma) and the god Vishnu (voiced by Sourin Chaudhuri) who ponder Raji's chances of survival. Durga believes in her while Vishnu, the god of preservation, is skeptical but reserves judgment to see what resourcefulness Raji will demonstrate.



Figure 3: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020 (screenshot by author).

Raji first enters the Fortress of Jaidhar, dedicated to Durga, an impressive sunlit citadel in the color of red clay, to face her first real set of battles within a demon-controlled region. Armed with fighting skills and weapons, she ventures forth. With some success, she is here granted a new weapon of the gods from Vishnu, a powerful bow and arrow. There are mandala puzzles to be solved which reveal memories to Raji. There are also environmental puzzles in the form of demon-infested trees. Solving them restores the space to fecundity and reveals visions of one's foe. The gods engage in dialogue about Raji, humans, and their penchant for war as a tool to change the world. There are many battles with demons, and Raji almost saves her brother after a bossfight with a giant demon named Chieftan, a terrifying creature with two faces and four arms who breathes fire and wields chains with flaming skulls attached. The colossus Chieftan moves in stiff, jerky motions, and his steps shake the earth, but Raji is resolute.

Injured after vanquishing her foe, Raji is gathered up by mystics and ferried to a new land. She experiences another vision of her imperiled brother. Awakening, she enters a new fortress, Hiranya Nagari, built to honor Vishnu. It is a blue water-world, full of floating wonder and technological innovation. Here again, the inhabitants are beguiled, enthralled under an evil spell, and the place remains in shadow. The land is dark, but light seems to emanate from the blue waters and fluorescent pink lotus flowers. Here, Raji learns to toss magical lily buds into the waters to cross the canals. For the water is poisoned, and even the giant koi—the Guardians of Hiranya—are disturbed.



Figure 4: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020 (screenshot by author).

All the game's spaces possess a sweeping verticality with vistas and chasms that bring an air of peril to the setting and the diminutive protagonist. Players go down and down, into a city full of mechanisms, with waterways and complex mechanical systems. There are people everywhere, but their eyes glow green and they seem to be in stasis, unreactive. They are mesmerized. There are white flying batlike demons that attack from above. Mechanical eyes seek to destroy Raji with their gaze. We learn from Durga that this is a place of power, but one now in the evil Rangda's hands. Another tree puzzle is resolved, restoring vitality to the landscape. A series of mandalas reveals Golu and Raji's orphaned condition—players learn their parents are “in the stars.” Solving two puzzles involving great cogs that control the waterways, Raji enters the temple to Vishnu where we are introduced to new gods. And then Vishnu gifts Raji with a curved sword and shield. Vishnu instructs her to save Mayura, the great white peacock, as she promises to wield these new weapons in his honor.

To incite the great Rangda, Raji's arrow flies to light a beacon fire and initiate another boss fight. The demon, defeated, a mystic arrives astride Mayura to warn her of a new enemy, and she travels with him to a mystic land, a mountainous world of trees and vines. This time it is Lord Shiva's shrine; Vishnu and Durga wonder aloud if he will ever act on behalf of Raji. Another demon tree puzzle unlocks visions revealing the destruction of the mystic's land, people, and their centuries of history and learning. Raji aids the mystic chieftain against demon lord Mahabalasura but must first win the trust of Naga, guardian of the mystics—a giant snake enraged by the corruption of his land. She convinces Naga of her fealty and it carries her to the mystic chieftain whom she defends against Mahabalasura, who has stolen the mystics' most sacred scroll. Raji battles the demon but is mortally wounded, allowing Mahabalasura to escape. Golu runs to her, and the mystics attempt to save her with magic. Raji, delirious, has a fever dream of a black non-space where she is taunted by all her fears and insecurities through a series of challenges until she can be reunited with her Golu again. Mahabalasura, whom players learn is the most powerful mystic born, but now an outcast—proves a formidable enemy. He holds the means to tear apart the world, with the help of his stolen mystic scroll.

The mystics send Raji to a vast desert, where she travels toward a new citadel, in the Thar Desert. There she will face her enemy, at the Fortress Deva Bhoomi which lies ahead. This space feels the most like *Journey's* orange desert, but the interiors possess a different sensibility, being shadowy, with mottled light from the exterior. Another mandala reveals a blessing from Durga. She finds a tree in a shining pool at the center of the desert in an elaborate oasis. Vishnu grants her a divine Chakra as a weapon to fight the demons in this desert land. It is wielded as a throwing discus. After dispatching with lesser demons, Raji finds her true foe on an elevated platform encircled by monumental female statues in poses of worship. Mahabalasura in his trickery distracts Raji with a battle, and then opens the gate to the Deva realm, unleashing demons into the world. In the midst of a great sandstorm, Golu and Raji are reunited finally in the Thar Desert.

### A True Feminist Fable?

Throughout this epic, the burden of representation heaped upon *Raji* is complicated by gender. Against these empyrean game environments, Raji is carefully modulated to be capable, bold and determined yet small and imperiled. One gets the feeling that she is in over her head. While fighting enemies, Raji cries out in defiance: “You will not stop me!” or “You will not underestimate me again!” Consistent with her backstory as an acrobat and circus performer, many of the attack moves integrate gratifying flipping, spinning, and tumbling actions. They are performed elegantly, with her long black braid flowing and bright red sari rippling behind her. The game smartly combines aspects of gaming that would be nostalgic, like the aforementioned *God of War*-style 3D isometric view gameplay, with delicate aesthetic touches. It is a pleasure to see the nimble character tumble, cartwheel and flip, which Raji executes with a flash of red fabric and the lightness of a circus acrobat. And, there are many visually and technically gratifying fighting combos and maneuvers, such as spinning around a post, striking enemies in the round, with a dancelike flourish. Hideous, hulking demons of various orders dwarf our heroine, spit deadly acid, or clobber her with studded clubs, stun her with their mechanical eyes or lash at her with whiplike tails. The general effect is that a player is quickly and masterfully

coaxed into caring for Raji, whose burden to protect her kin and defend the human race seems unreasonably arduous and grave for her narrow shoulders. At the same time, she dashes headlong into the battle; Raji seems up to the fight and motivated by a sense of righteous outrage.



Figure 5: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020 (screenshot by author).

Some have gone so far as to suggest that *Raji* presents a feminist epic. Early on in the game, we overhear the war goddess Durga say of Raji: “she walks boldly into a dark cave, she leaps chasms, she stands fearless before a goddess.” One reviewer commented:

In a heavily patriarchal society where religion is often twisted to serve misogyny, kudos to the developers for making a teenage girl the playable character, who prays to said goddess and is empowered by her. Raji is not only a dutiful Durga devotee but also a believer of her own abilities, as she jumps around in an Indian dress and banter with demons while slaughtering them. The game that takes her name is a true feminist fable. (Arora 2020)



As a relatively rare female-of-color primary playable character, in a sea of white male protagonists churned out by the dominant industry, her sheer existence as a counter-image can feel like a feminist intervention. Her embodied, activated self and connection to (maybe even an emissary of) Durga as a Hindu symbol of feminine strength is woman-centered, referring to a warrior goddess and symbol of fortitude and protection. Durga has also been appropriated into Indian nationalism as a symbol of the mother country. However, there is no implicit relationship between the imaging of a female goddess and feminism per se, and certainly, Hindu goddess worship has not equated with the elevation in the overall status of women in society (Hiltebeitel and Erndl 2000). Still, due in no small part to the effusive pronouncements of critics, little Raji bears the weight of operating as a feminist icon as well as an authentic Indian one. Cast as an underdog, she presses forward into the space of the game with verve, and one feels her sense of self-possession and resolve.

In addition to the character of Raji, as a rare female Indian action-oriented game protagonist, perhaps unfairly signaling a feminist intervention just by virtue of her existence, her mode of dress was also elevated. Much attention was paid to the fact that Raji was not a sexualized female protagonist. “We didn’t want to oversexualize Raji—it is a complete distraction from the story,” Maude, one of the game’s primary designers explained. “We want people to fall in love with Raji and look after her and follow the story and how it is so integral that you will not want to lose a battle” (Desai 2019). It is true that the artistic intent by the designers to not sexualize the female protagonist in a game is not implicitly feminist (Waites 2007). And certainly, by their own admission, the intent is that the player should exhibit care and protectiveness toward Raji. This suggests another type of gendered dynamic, one rooted in the vulnerability of a female character and the urge on the part of the player to emotionally invest in saving her from harm. That said, the narrative could not rightfully be described as centered around a damsel in distress or a romantic love story. Instead, it is one of sibling devotion, and Raji, fights to save the world mostly as an extension of her love and protectiveness for her little brother. “That is for Golu!” she defiantly cries while dispatching with demons who attack from all sides and seem to tower over her small form. For players, Raji becomes a little sister.



In a larger sense, the designers have themselves created the conditions for an impossible task: that *Raji* can somehow singularly “represent” India at all. This implicitly presumes a monolithic understanding of India, when even the most superficial engagement with India’s culture and history quickly points to its many cultural, political and social dimensions. Adding to this the nuances of gender, certainly the burden of being all things to those members of Indian communities deeply invested in how their own culture is telegraphed to the world is unbearable.

### **Raji and the Politics of Gamespace**

The sublime spaces into which *Raji* treads into battle with unknown foes shape a player’s interpretation of her relations to the land. It would be too much to expect any single game to redress a long-established tradition of modeling colonizing or predatory attitudes toward the game environment. Still, in this regard, *Raji* presents an intervention. Shoshana Magnet first coined the term “gamescapes” to draw awareness to the fact that game landscapes operate within a larger ideological framework, and that there are shifting provisional meanings possible in video games, based upon the interplay created between the active participant and the dynamic gamescape (Magnet 2006). Magnet highlighted that representation in games was tied up with power, negotiated between designer, game, and player. Magnet invoked an awareness of landscape as framed and ideologically loaded and then mobilized the concept toward greater interpretive potentials.

Within art history, which is a much older discipline dedicated to the study of cultural objects and image-making practices, scholars have long understood the function of landscape as a tool for galvanizing social, cultural, political, and even ideological perspectives (Clark 1979; Cosgrove and Daniels 1989; Andrews 2000; Barrell 1983; Bermingham 1989; Appleton 1975). Often this has involved presenting land as a space for conquest or domination. In his discussion of traditional landscape, W. J. T. Mitchell ties the gaze upon the land to “the eye of a predator who scans the landscape as a strategic field, a network of prospects, refuges and hazards” (Mitchell 2002, 16). Though he references conventional landscapes and not game spaces, Mitchell’s words

invoke a kind of looking that recalls the opportunistic eye of the shrewd gamer. This model suggests an immersive gamespace that presents itself as innocuous, but in fact creates dynamics of what Mitchell calls the “violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye” (Mitchell 2002, 29). These are loaded words, but applicable to the intensity with which playable spaces may become increasingly overdetermined by cultural imperatives. And it is true that video games often encourage the observation and exploitation of everything within a game space in terms of potential use-value for the player. Part of playing video games involves learning how to maneuver within the rules, how to master them, and even at times how to break or hack system limitations (Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Juul 2005; Consalvo 2009; Ruberg 2017).

Playing with conventional game systems often encourages opportunistic and exploitative forms of observation, something that media scholars noticed early in critical game studies. Already in the mid-1990s, some were beginning to understand how video games repeated narratives of the mastery of space, connecting play with deeply embedded ideologies within the cultural imagination. For example, in their 1995 co-authored text, media scholar Henry Jenkins and literature scholar Mary Fuller explored connections between power narratives of exploration and colonization in New World documents, and their symbolic repetition in video game spaces:

Nintendo® not only allows players to identify with the founding myths of the American nation but to restage them, to bring them into the sphere of direct social experience. If ideology is at work in Nintendo® games (and rather obviously, it is), ideology works not through character identification but, rather, through role playing. Nintendo® takes children and their own needs to master their social space and turns them into virtual colonists driven by a desire to master and control digital space. (Fuller and Jenkins 1995, 72)

This foundational relation of the player to game space is now fairly codified, and difficult to disrupt since it functions as a preemptive expectation. More

recently, critical game studies scholars like Souvik Mukherjee and Vit Šisler have enhanced and expanded the work of Jenkins and Fuller into a more robust conversation about games and neo-colonialism, drawing in theories of postcolonialism to counter the most cloying stereotypes of the non-West (Šisler 2008; Höglund 2008; Lammes and Sybille 2010; Mukherjee 2017).



Figure 6: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020. (screenshot by author)

*Raji* intervenes in expected relations to game landscapes through a key mechanic that configures the female protagonist's discovery of spaces as oriented around restoration and rejuvenation, rather than predatory extraction. The territories *Raji* enters are sick with corruption; her presence and intervention revitalize them. In particular, in addition to fighting off the demons as toxic presences, one must find and heal the demon-infested trees that are covered with fearsome faces inspired by Balinese demon masks. Sitting in meditation and solving the puzzles of the corrupted trees, by re-aligning their segmented trunks, makes them whole, revitalizes the landscape to its former abundance, and reveals visions that inform *Raji*'s quest.

Still, in a larger sense, this dynamic of a corrupted land that must be healed and returned to its purity is complicated. It interrupts the colonizing impulse that so over-defines most games, but it is also fundamentally built on a notion of purity, which has undercurrents of cultural essentialism. This is troubling in the larger context of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political call for the toy and games industry to produce games that highlight Indian folklore and culture (Handrahan 2020; Doke 2021b). In a public announcement intended to mobilize the industry toward his agenda, Modi explained: "today the world wants to understand the present potential of India, the art-culture of India, the society of India in a better way. Our Toys and Gaming Industry can play a big role in this" (Doke 2021a). But Modi is seen by many as having a Hindu ethnonationalist agenda, evidenced in the rollback of protections for Muslims in India and a general lack of adequate response to extreme Hindu nationalists who engage in hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims (Serhan 2022; Gupta and Mogul 2022).

This speaks to Modi's awareness of how video games can participate in the construction of a social imaginary, or, in other words, the ways that a given culture's collective life becomes represented, symbolized, and galvanized. Elected in 2014, Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party are identified with the Hindu right, and his election was seen as a move toward nationalism, and away from secularism. Although the mandate to represent the culture of India seems fairly innocuous, some have noted concerns about how seemingly innocent cultural forms may become appropriated into an ideological agenda (Udupa and Naik 2023). For example, *Vice* seemed to do an about-face with its critical assessment of *Raji* when, after a gushing review in August 2020, a second piece was written in October of the same year, linking the game with Modi's Hindu Nationalist agenda (Ramachandran 2020; Thapliyal 2020). Adesh Thapliyal explained the crucial national cultural milieu into which *Raji* enters:

Narendra Modi asked the domestic game industry to adapt "Indian culture and folk tales" and promote "Indian ethos and values." And the Prime Minister is only reflecting the national mood: fictions that look toward an imagined Hindu past like

the *Shiva Trilogy* book series and the *Bahubali* film series have become unstoppable cultural juggernauts, demolishing sales records on the back of public hungry for stories about the country's glorious Hindu past.

It's hard to disentangle this surge of cultural chest-beating with the ascent of Hindu right, which rose to power with an eclectic ideology that pairs neoliberalism with fascist calls for a Hindu-first India. *Raji: An Ancient Epic* has the best intentions at heart, but it is not exempt from the cultural eddies that swirl around it. It wants to highlight the beauty of Indian art and architecture, which has been too long confined to lithe bronze Natarajas and one white marble mausoleum. It also tries to rewrite Indian mythology to make a progressive, feminist case for the warrior goddess Durga, who here bumps Brahma off the Trimurti, the trinity of major Hindu gods. (Thapliyal 2020)

Thapliyal wrote of a “cultural nationalism simmering underneath” and “uncritical ideology” within the game, and the ways in which “the artifacts of Indo-Islamic culture are everywhere; missing, however, are any actual Muslims, except, perhaps, for a few white-clothed, curved-sword-holding corpses” (Thapliyal 2020). Though to be fair, said corpses are actually only mesmerized by a demon spell, I take Thapliyal's larger point that the presence of Muslims in *Raji* exists primarily in vague cultural references, and as a passive background to our activated Hindu female protagonist. Overall, it is true that the game grounds itself in Hindu mythology, and while Thapliyal's criticism stops short of insinuating that the game is self-consciously advancing a Hindu-nationalist agenda, they do accuse the game of folding neatly into the schema of a distressing turn in India's national ethos. They write: “rather than produce a new, authentic image of India's storied past, *Raji* is only able to refract and multiply the familiar ones, deepening the already large rift between the truth and a politically expedient fiction, and revealing how far conservatism has penetrated the nation's sense of itself” (Thapliyal 2020). I am unconvinced this is an entirely fair criticism, especially given that the game's conception predates Modi's charge to toy

and game makers to highlight India's culture. Still, the connection between the character of Raji as an emissary of the warrior goddess Durga, and Durga's role in Indian nationalist movements cannot be ignored. It will be important to observe and critically analyze how this conversation unfolds through trends in subsequent Indian game development.

### No One-Shot-One-Kill Solutions

Perhaps mostly as a result of the rarity of such an opportunity for representing Indian culture to a global video game industry, *Raji* bears an impossible weight, what Kobena Mercer spoke of as a “burden of representation” (Mercer 2013, 91). Can this independent game—and one of very few ever created by an Indian game design company, possibly be expected to bear the entire responsibility of fully remediating the profound lack of Indian representation? How could it possibly compensate for the dominant industry's current stranglehold on the representational politics of games, and be expected to singlehandedly redress all the Orientalist problems and elisions that have gone on? Then, of course, there is the intersecting component of gender representation, and the undue expectation heaped upon the game by critics that the association with feminine power via Durga can equate to a “feminist” intervention. In short, this would be unreasonable, and *Raji* certainly does not solve all the challenges facing Indian representation in one stroke—nor should it be expected to.



Figure 7: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games, published by Super.com in 2020. Image: Super.com.

However, *Raji*, as a critically important example of an attempt to make space for other voices in a Western and Japanese-dominated industry, opens up a vital conversation about video games and the burden of playable representation. It also demonstrates to the industry that there is a global market for such stories. There is a lot at stake, and much to be gained through inclusivity in the conversation of games, not the least of which is an interruption of cloying and outdated colonialist relations between players and game spaces. Separate from any maker intention, *Raji* becomes a difficult object when set against the milieu of a larger perceived Hindu ethnonationalist agenda, into which it enters. But this is because it enters into difficult times and a cultural conversation for which a great deal hangs in the balance—not unlike *Raji*'s epic tale itself. To be sure, any work of culture that addresses an “authentic” Indian past—however fanciful—risks being appropriated into an essentialist or purist agenda, for which the only antidote is an insistence on many and varied visions of India.

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**Article:****How Not to Play an Indian Mythic:  
Raji: A Modern Fantasy****Arkabrata Chaudhury, Arunoday Chaudhuri***Abstract*

*The current paper analyses the video game Raji: An Ancient Epic (Nodding Head Games 2020) to determine the accuracy of its representation of historical Indian experiences, in the domains of architecture, aesthetics, spatiality, technology, and so on. The ludic elements of the game, including weapon or enemy design and their compatibility with reflecting an Indian ethos in video game mechanisms have also been discussed. The treatment of Indian mythology is extensively explored, with an eye to locating its space in Indian mythic tradition. Through an analysis of narrative storytelling in the game, aspects such as the foregrounding of a female protagonist and the apparent progressive feminist attitude of the game have been scrutinised. The sociocultural depiction of India and its implications and contexts relating to contemporary understanding of the space of the subcontinent has also been taken into consideration. A careful study of the game within the contemporary post-colonial discourse constitutes a part of the article. We also undertake a comparative study with another Indian mythic video game, Unrest (Pyrodactyl 2014), to better understand the issues surrounding the treatment of mythic and historical elements. The article both contemplates the missed opportunities and future potentials, for example, in terms of more nuanced and accurate representation and the balance between ludic execution and representational possibilities, as experienced in the ludo-narrative experience offered by the game.*

*Keywords*

*Game Studies, India, Postcolonial, Mythology, feminism*

## Introduction

Anastasija Ropa, in her study on the representation of India through European eyes, notes that multiple tendencies are usually at play in presenting India through literary and visual modes, from the usual role of a foil to European civilisations, to “a mystery and simultaneously a composite entity, a patchwork or collection of amusing and quaint landscapes, peoples, customs, etc.” (Ropa 2015, 2). It is only plausible that digital games, in their complex interactive nature, would make the questions surrounding cultural representations of such peripheral—both politically and culturally—spaces even more problematic. Vít Šisler affirms the representational significance of digital games when he opines “video games have established themselves as a form of mainstream media that shapes our comprehension and understanding of the world by constructing, conveying and iterating various representations” (Šisler 2008, 203).

*Raji: An Ancient Epic* (2020), the debut game of Nodding Heads Games, a Pune-based video game development studio, is a hack-and-slash platformer (hack-and-slash games are games that focus on active combat, mostly using melee weapons and at times projectile-based weapons, while platformer games focus on movement through and successful traversal of uneven terrain and often vertically located platforms). When Nodding Heads Games began developing *Raji* in early 2017, it created a splash in the international gaming scene. It was a time when the global video gaming industry was increasingly reckoning with the necessity for diversity and active inclusion of voices from the Global South following the GamerGate controversy (Jerrett 2022, n.p.). The basic premise of *Raji* follows the usual staple of literature and video games alike where the protagonist, here Raji, goes on a quest to defeat the monster, here Mahabalasur, to save something of value, here her brother Golu, her land and its people, the “mystics,” the gods and goddesses, and ultimately herself (Booker 2005, 22–23, 73–80). Since its release, many reviewers have praised the game for its attempt at representing a cultural ethos largely absent in the gaming industry (Muthaiah 2021; Chhibber 2020).

The developers of *Raji* note that the game features “a game world set in ancient India” (Nodding Head Games 2020) and claim the game “speaks of

authenticity” and “cultural representation” (Handrahan 2020, n.p). This claim requires a study considering the recent developments in the ideas surrounding how video game design can serve to create educational experiences of museum-like spaces (Anderson 2019, 178–180), and how such experiences can be analysed based on the feeling of authenticity and factual accuracy (Mochocki 2021, 3–4). Anderson, specifically, points out that “historical games must create lore founded in actual historical fact” (Anderson 2019, 181), and following this observation we can argue *Raji* needs to maintain a sense of factual authenticity in terms of mythical and historical representation.

While evaluations of its gameplay mechanics and narrative integrity have received lukewarm critical and popular responses, *Raji* has received considerable critical approval due to its use of Indian themes, both in narrative and visual capacity. Alan Wen, remaining mostly unimpressed with the game’s mechanics, writes that “what really compels you to keep playing is the rich Indian culture on display on virtually every frame” (Wen 2020, n.p.). Christopher Byrd has “fancied ‘*Raji: An Epic Tale*’ as a purely visual experience that taps into a rich cultural mythology” which he feels has “been generally overlooked by the video game industry” (Byrd 2020, n.p.). Writing for Los Angeles Times, Todd Martens claims that “the game seeks to highlight a place—ancient India—and the culture it birthed” (Martens 2020, n.p.).

## Mythologem

Ekatarina Galanina and Daniil Baturin have found the mythologems in video games that operate in the areas of “the axis of the world, the mythologeme of initiation, the mythologeme of the mother goddess” (Galanina and Baturin 2019, 3663–3665). Galanina and Baturin note that in most of the ancient cultures, the world is represented in connection to a world tree (2019, 3663), and in *Raji*, a part of the gameplay logic requires the player to heal holy trees of *Bhoomi-Devi* in every level to restore order to that space. The idea that a neophyte goes through an initiation process through challenges that cause the protagonist’s rebirth as a hero (2019, 3664) is reflected not only in the narrative progress of *Raji* but also construes the entirety of the ludic logic. Though *Raji*’s journey is partially guided by the mother goddess in the form of



Durga, her representation doesn't conform to the duality of either the giver of life or the warrior goddess (2019, 3665). Durga's representation in this game not only defies Western tropes of mythology but is also problematic in terms of Indian mythology, which we will examine later in this article.

## Spatiotemporal Setting

We begin by analysing the time frame the game declares to reflect. It stays within the well-established paradigm that divides Indian history into three eras, namely the ancient, the medieval, and the modern, while claiming to be representative of the earliest. As the very title emphasises the experience of an ancient India, an authentic educational experience should have left out the period we identify as early medieval. However, *Raji* takes ample inspiration from medieval architectural spaces and cultural elements. *Raji*'s distortions in the temporal sphere are matched by its actions in the spatial. While the game claims to depict ancient India, its gaze remains limited to a part of northern India. Geographically, the game is constrained to Rajputana or Rajasthan, its present-day analogue state in the Republic of India. Only for the level of Shiva's temple is the setting transported to the Himalayan foothills; significantly a vast mountainous Himalayan tract was ruled by Rajput clans, which largely falls within the present-day state of Himachal Pradesh. This is especially unfortunate considering that Avichal Singh, the game designer and project manager of *Raji*, professed to depict the diversity of India as an aim of the developers (Intel Gaming 2021).

### *Representation of Space*

The world-building in *Raji* diverges from ancient Indian ethos regarding the philosophy and use of space. The space in a video game is necessarily characterised by its ludic nature where the logic of gameplay shapes the formation of the places. However, the world-building or the spatial representation could have also been done with the additional impetus of using it for environmental storytelling. As a game claiming to provide an authentic depiction of a peripheral cultural milieu, *Raji* would have gained from assimilating ancient Indian attitudes towards inhabited spaces, especially those

of the temples, which seem to dominate the landscape in the game. However, throughout the game, the environment and level design seem to be informed by the necessity of supporting the hack-and-slash and platforming gameplay along with showcasing impressive vistas oozing with exotic orientalist fantasy. As Christopher Byrd notes in his review of the game, “the combat in the game felt like so much rinse and repeat; ‘Raji: An Ancient Epic’ doesn’t do much to expand on the hack n’ slash genre” (Byrd 2020). Notably, the ludic conventions *Raji* seems to borrow for showcasing the apparent ancient (and medieval) religious-mythic spaces, were devised for the representations of Greek architecture, as in games like *NyxQuest: Kindred Spirits* (Over the Top Games 2010) and *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment 2016), and exoticized versions of “Oriental” civilisations, as in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal 2003).

A prime example of the distortion of Indian space to fit the traditional ludic norms can be found in the initial level of the game. Raji enters what appears to be a temple dedicated to Durga and receives her signature weapon, the *Trishul*, as a boon to fight and defeat the *asuras*. The *garbha-ghriha*, literally a “womb chamber,” the sanctum sanctorum housing the image of the divinity in Indian temples, is usually a constrained space, a small chamber, adding an aura of enigma. Marehalli Prasad and B. Rajavel write that the space where the deity is situated in a Hindu temple “has only a door and no windows” (Prasad and Rajavel 2013, 140). Here, in *Raji*, the idol of Durga is in a spacious hall, similar to a Greek temple, inside a cave. The concept of the *Ardha Mantapa* that serves as an in-between space transitioning into the *Maha Mantapa*, that is, the main hall (Prasad and Rajavel 2013, 140) does not exist here, and the main gathering hall for the devotees is occupied by statues of bulls. The game, it appears, fails to exhibit the impetus and the vision to reinvent the ludic space to accommodate Indian concepts of spatiality.

### *Architecture*

The flaws in the temporal-spatial representation are evident most prominently in the architecture and the art style of *Raji*. Avichal Singh in an interview himself stated that the idea of the game germinated on a visit to the fort

of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan (Dastoor 2020, n.p.). The in-game architecture, especially the fortress at Jaidhar seems to take extensive stylistic cues from medieval Indian, particularly Rajasthani, architecture. Here one needs to remember that the fort was built only in the mid-12th century, and Mohammad Saquib, in his article on the architecture of Jaisalmer, claims that initially only a mud fort was constructed on the Trikuta Hill in 1156 C.E., and only in 1651–61 it was rebuilt in stone (Saquib 2012, 60). Moreover, the fort is rather recognised as a monument of medieval India, as the structure that currently stands underwent extensive evolution and rebuilding during the Mughal rule over northern India, and thereby has incorporated many Indo-Islamic elements. This is generally true of Rajput architecture that India has inherited, considering that medieval Rajput rulers were intricately linked with and often collaborated with the Mughal suzerainty situated in nearby Delhi. Furthermore, as the fort architecture served practical militaristic defensive purposes it, therefore, needed to be upgraded for better protection and updated to counter the latest technological advancements in siege tactics. Medieval India witnessed massive improvements in gunpowder technology, forcing the ruling elite to effect substantial modifications. Singh also mentions how the famous Patwon-Ki-Haveli, a set of five mansions in the city of Jaisalmer known for their intricately detailed exterior, served as an inspiration for the in-game architectural design (Dastoor 2020, n.p.). This *haveli*, again was a structure built only in the early 19th century by a Jain merchant (Saquib 2012, 67). Saquib exclaims how the *havelis* here “stand on a raised platform as seen in the medieval houses of Aleppo, Syria” (2012, 67), thus casting the net of cultural influence far and wide, which contrasts the developers’ aspiration to situate both a touristy exoticism and cultural authenticity of India’s ancient past onto a 19th-century structure. Ar. Tania Bera writes how the Indian word *haveli* comes from the Persian *hawli* which means an enclosed space, and goes on to explain how the “Rajput style of architecture mainly comprising a blend of Mughal and Hindu features showcases grand *havelis*, astonishing forts and exquisitely carved temples” (Bera 2020, 4211). Thus, basing its spatial framework on Rajput architecture, *Raji*, in its representation of ancient Indian architecture borrows a lot of elements from the early-medieval and medieval eras.

### Art Style

The art style of the game is claimed to be inspired by the exquisite *Pahari* school of painting, which is a part of the greater Rajput school of painting (Sekhon, 2021). The Pahari School, though a descendant of the artistic traditions of ancient India tracing back to the times of Ajanta Cave Paintings belonging to 2nd–7th centuries C.E., came about only in the late 17th century. Moreover, the entirety of Rajput school was influenced by Mughal school, and therefore Persian painting style (Coomaraswamy 1912, 315). Painters moved between courts in search of patronage; indeed, many artists abandoning the Mughal courts with their declining fortune gave new impetus to *Pahari Painting* mid-18th century (Britannica 2018, n.p.).

The game has attained a lot of praise, both critical and popular due to its use of the aesthetics of the Indonesian form of shadow puppetry to present the narrative (Martens 2020), in lieu of traditional cutscenes, which does provide an alternative to the Euro-American modes of visual storytelling. Souvik Mukherjee acknowledges that storytelling in *Raji* “is done through the ancient tholu bommalata shadow puppetry tradition from Andhra Pradesh” (Mukherjee 2022, 70). However, these cutscenes do contain several anachronisms and cultural discrepancies. In the opening cutscene, introducing the central characters of the narrative, the market–fair scene has giant Ferris wheels in the backdrop. This effects a jarring disjuncture in the claimed fabric of ancient cultural heritage since Ferris wheels were not only absent from the South Asian landscape till the last couple of centuries, but also possibly invented in the Eastern European region. Norman D. Anderson has noted that the first recorded mention of a pleasure wheel, a precursor to Ferris wheel, is found in the diary of an English traveller named Peter Mundy, which he described after reaching the small village of Philippopolis, currently located in Bulgaria, on May 17, 1620 (Anderson 1992, 3). He also noted that July 1961 issue of the *Horizon* magazine contained a plate of the Rajput painting of Maharaja Man Singh of Marwar riding a pleasure wheel-like contraption with his wives (Anderson 1992, 11). Though the caption proclaims it as “the hand-propelled, thousand-year-old Indian forerunner of the modern Ferris wheel” (*Horizon* 1961, 2–3), the claim appears dubious with imaginary investment heaped upon a painting commissioned only in 1830.

### *Cultural Anomalies*

Some objects in the gameworld appear as historical and cultural anomalies, and their presence can only be attributed to the fact these were convenient staples in the hitherto Global North dominated game development industry. In the Fortress of Jaidhar, the players encounter a stack of barrels. The art of coopering was essentially European in nature and never really caught on in India even after direct contact was established via the oceanic route during the Age of Discovery (Habib 2017, 111). On the way to Jaidhar, the player crosses a drawbridge, which, however, was a medieval European invention for the protection of castles and towns (Britannica 2021, n.p.). Adesh Thapliyal (2020, n.p.) notes the profusion of Persian carpets in the level containing a marketplace. In the Fortress of Jaidhar, one finds multitudes of vases whose design is conspicuously similar to Chinese rather than Indian aesthetics. When traversing the fortress of Jaidhar, we notice extensive use of tiles with intricate geometric designs which are a salient feature of Islamic architecture.

In Hiranya Nagari the player comes across an area decorated with multiple stained glass windows. Stained glass windows have, historically been a part of the European Gothic architectural style that gained prominence during the Renaissance, with its root in the Roman civilisation. Lyla Bavadam, writing a review of Jude Holliday's book on the use of stained glass in Bombay, notes that "stained glass arrived in India in the mid-nineteenth century as a direct result of the introduction, predominantly to Bombay, of the neo-Gothic architectural form that was taking Britain by storm" (Bavadam 2012, n.p.). However, by reusing a colonial religious import while removing its usual biblical context, the developers have again problematised their aim of presenting an authentic image of ancient Indian cultural milieu.

In the level where Raji traverses the temple city of *Hiranya Nagari* dedicated to god Vishnu, we find the level being powered by geared waterwheels, which, historically, were absent from ancient India. The earliest evidence for such a device utilising right-angled gearing comes from a late first-century-B.C.E. wall painting in Alexandria, Egypt (Habib 1992, 8). The technology was disseminated to the Arabs via Roman Syria and arrived in India only in

the medieval age during the rule of Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 C.E., Habib 1992, 10), though there is debate regarding the exact timeframe. Habib posits that the first written mention of the geared waterwheel or Persian wheel in India can be found in the 16th-century autobiographical text *Baburnama* by the first Mughal emperor Babur; Habib infers that “the arrival in India of this sophisticated apparatus from the Mediterranean and Iraq (where it had been in use by the twelfth century) must have taken place by at least the beginning of the fifteenth century so as to have diffused so widely by Babur’s time” (Habib 2017, 11–12). On the other hand, Iqtidar Hussain Siddiqui contests Habib, opining that the Persian wheel had become prevalent in Delhi in the 13th or 14th century (Siddiqui 1986, 64–65). In medieval northern India itself, the use of gearing was mostly limited to utilising animal power for lifting water, not for harnessing energy from water flow for the purpose of using it in other activities. Definite evidence for watermills comes from the Deccan by the 17th century (Habib 1980, 21). Explaining the lack of diverse use of waterpower Habib points to the lack of metal gearing in the subcontinent which prevented waterwheels from being used in advanced mechanisms (1980, 22). He notes:

Wooden pin-drum gearing was incapable of transmitting greater power than was needed to rotate the Persian wheel. So unless metal gearing could be produced and this, as we shall see, was not possible, in view of the exceptionally backward state of the Indian iron industry—vertical watermills or any other mechanism seeking to tap water for substantial power could hardly have been thought of. (Habib 1980, 22)

The developers of *Raji* have constructed a large part of the Hiranya Nagari level as a space where visual storytelling and puzzle-based gameplay depend on the manipulation of the architectural structures through mechanisms of enormous waterwheels. Meanwhile, they have ignored the historical realities of technological limitations. This suggests an attempt at creating an artificial, technologically developed, past, which may at the same time appease those in search of the fantasy of an unreal but glorious past and those seeking comforting familiarity in an “Oriental” ludic atmosphere.

### *Historical Omission*

Therefore, it is evident that the game incorporates many elements of Islamicate civilisations. Yet the game, with an implicit sense of cultural purity, refuses to acknowledge the quintessentially Islamic nature of many elements that have become an integral part of Indian culture. Nor is it willing to let go of such aspects to present a more faithful recreation of an Indian mythical world. Adesh Thapliyal extensively discusses the erasure of Muslims from *Raji*'s narrative, and its implications and significances in the context of the rising tide of cultural nationalism associated with right-wing fundamentalism (Thapliyal 2020). The first mosque in India, the Cheraman Juma Mosque in Kerala, was established in 629 C.E. (Haseena 2015, 51), during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, more than half a millennium before the Jaisalmer Fort was constructed. Here, *Raji*, despite its proclaimed use of medieval Indian forms of art and architecture (Nodding Head Games 2020), fails to represent the non-Hindu sections of society that were intricately associated with the formation of the medieval Indian cultural milieu.

### **Worlding through Character Design**

#### *Non Playing Characters*

While the initial cutscene introduces Raji and her brother Golu performing fairground tricks to an enthusiastic audience, the game proper feels shockingly empty of human presence. While the narrative lever of the invasion by the *rakshasas* can be used to justify this lack of Non-Player Characters (NPCs), it is surprising that the game does not carry any substantial exposition of human-*rakshasa* interaction, human resistance, or intricacies of the said conflict. Throughout the gameplay, it is mostly Raji against the hordes of the demon army. Furthermore, the architectural and spatial design of the game precludes any logical positioning of inhabited space. Prasad and Rajavel cite scriptural evidence, such as *Agama-Shastra*, to suggest that the ringing of bells in places of worship has been a part of Hindu religious practices historically, and state "a well designed bell is an indispensable and an important part in most Hindu worship (pooja) and prayers" (Prasad and Rajavel 2013, 145–146). In the initial temple

of Durga, the player finds giant bells hanging from the roof of the cave, beyond the reach of any human being. Similarly, *diyas* are placed in broad daylight, with no apparent object to illuminate or offer reverence. Throughout the game, almost all the NPCs that appear are either fainted, corpses, or charred bodies. Such design elements indicate that the game's sole focus is on the exploitations of Raji alone, and thus it loses out on the prospect of forming a possibility space representing a hitherto mostly ignored sociocultural spatial entity.

### *Enemy Design*

Even in terms of enemy design, *Raji* appears to rely on the stock of enemy profiles well-established in the arena of digital games. The player encounters assassins who look like ninjas wearing Japanese *Kasa* hats, which are topped with large crescents. The concept art of the game available for the enemy design even uses names like Ninjasura (Nodding Head Games 2021). The *Vayusuras* seem to draw inspiration from the gargoyles found in Medieval European Gothic architecture, and some demon chieftains are heavily reminiscent of the trolls in Nordic folklore. This cultural mishmash reveals not only a tendency for self-exoticisation but also for using well-known cultural symbols from across the world to make the game more presentable to the cosmopolitan consumer.

### *Raji as the Protagonist*

Where *Raji* seems to be progressive, at least at first glance, is in presenting a progressive feminist narrative of Indian mythology. Credit is deserved centring the narrative around a female protagonist, the eponymous Raji, a young circus performer. For Booker "overcoming the monster" plot involves a trope where "the monster often also has in its clutches some great prize, a priceless treasure or a beautiful 'Princess'" (Booker 2005, 23). While Raji appears to exhibit a simple adoption of the age-old "overcoming the monster" plot, it takes notable diversions in terms of the dominant tropes. The narrative in the game turns the familiar trope of the male saviour rescuing a distressed damsel on its head, with Raji attempting to save her younger brother Golu from the *Rakshashas*. However, this feminist facade seems superficial, even regressive when put under closer scrutiny.



The character of Raji severely lacks dynamism, in terms of her interaction with the world and the narrative is bereft of any nuanced exposition—her singular concern being saving her brother. She largely seems unaware of anything else, let alone her place in the greater scheme of things. This implicitly enforces the patriarchal notion of the female individual existing solely for the benefit and welfare of her male relatives. Moreover, Raji's fate is constantly controlled and channelised by divinities beyond her grasp, leaving her with no genuine agency over her actions. This is unlike the precedents set by Indian mythology, in which many female figures, such as Sita and Tulasi, resist, and even sometimes challenge, the will of mortal and divine forces of masculine nature. Though the divine forces are unceasingly benevolent towards the protagonist, negating the need for resistance and challenge, the game could have accommodated a space of considerate and conscious devotion of a devotee, instead of the blind following of an acolyte. Viewed from this perspective *Raji* ceases to appear as a step towards progressive gender ideals, but a reversal from standards set millenniums ago.

### *The Myth of the Mother Goddess*

Raji's divine mentor, the goddess Durga, is also characterised by an acute loss of agency in the game. She plays the chief role among the divinities in the game and is portrayed as a formidable warrior goddess. It is she who selects Raji as the tool for their divine designs despite reservations of Vishnu, and it is in her temple the gameplay starts. In fact, Durga's temple, along with Vishnu's and Shiva's, constitute the three major temples of the game. Thapliyal (2020, n.p.) views this as a (re)imagination of the Hindu trinity by replacing Brahma, the creator, with Durga. However, a more than cursory understanding of Indian mythology makes it apparent that this is not an improvement of Durga's rank, but a downgrade. The origin story of Durga, as described in the *Devi Mahatmaya*, depicts her as an amalgamation of the power of all the divinities of Hindu pantheon, "the union of the individual strengths of various gods" (Pattanaik 2018, n.p.), making her greater than all the individual deities. Instead, the game presents Durga as a peer of Vishnu, whom Vishnu questions and doubts numerous times over her selection of Raji. Erasure of her superiority over the male-dominated Hindu trinity finds its analogue in the absence of

the lion as her *vahana* (divine mount). Her control over the tamed lion, the greatest symbol of masculine prowess in the Indian social context, represents her dominance over masculine energies. Thus, the game places Durga on her own two feet, but it robs her of her critical authoritative status.

Another aspect of the game's mythological treatment that deserves some scrutiny is the depiction of alternative aspects of *Shakti* in Hindu mythology. The game hinges on the almost active participation and manipulations effected by Durga and the player goes through large cavernous temples dedicated to her, one of which tells the story of *Nava Durgas*, the nine avatars of Durga as worshipped during the North Indian festival of *Navaratri*. However, even the constitution of such a group varies with region, as Jehanne H. Teilket's article (1978, 82) on the *Nava Durga* worship in the Bhaktapur region of Nepal shows a different collective of mythical figures. In contrast, the shrines of goddess Kali are presented in the game as stone steles with Kali's image drawn on them. In terms of game mechanics, Kali's shrines provide Raji with energy, that allows her to perform devastating attacks, based on how much damage the player deals to the enemies. This resonates with not only the popular idea of Kali as a goddess of power and destruction, but also with her tribal roots where Kali is located as an aspect of Durga in the tribal societies of the Vindhya Hills, fond of wine, flesh, and human blood (Mazumdar 1906, 356–358). Mazumdar, through his study of the *Virata Parvan* of *Mahabharata*, finds the goddess depicted as “living permanently on the Vindhya,” who “is very dark in colour” and “as Kali, is fond of wine, flesh, and animals” (1906, 356). He further opines that at one time “Durga was merely a non-Aryan tribal goddess” (1906, 358). While *Raji* goes on to narrate many other mythical stories that are unrelated to the gameplay or plot, it abstains from delving deeper into the historical roots of *Shakti* worship in the subcontinent. Though the game tells the story of *Nava Durgas* through murals, it does not attend to the myth of *Dasa Mahavidyas* who “are the ten wisdom goddesses of the Shakta cult,” manifestations of *Shakti* which establish “the Goddess's superiority over her male counterpart,” Shiva (Javalegar 2012, n.p.). Explorations into the mythology surrounding divine female power could have proved fruitful seeing that the game intends to depict religious and historical aspects of the space with women characters in the forefront.

## Representation of Social Milieu

### *The question of Caste*

The erasure of key aspects of ancient Indian lived experience is a recurring problem with the game, the most important being caste. Here again, the game makes a superficially progressive decision by selecting the profession of circus performer, of obvious low social status, for its protagonist. In exchange, it blatantly refuses to address the crucial issue of caste and the accompanying systemic discrimination on the basis of birth. A hint of such determinism based on birth is expressed as Durga fleetingly mentions the “bloodline” of the protagonist, though the game does not further explore the theme seemingly to be revealed in future as the game leaves scope for a sequel. Similarly, a *mandala* in the land of the mystics renders clues regarding the fated birth of her and her brother. Nevertheless, *Raji* conveniently renders a sanitised iteration of ancient India which would be easily palatable to the global audience. Notably, *Raji* initially did not have any Indian localisations and only after popular outrage the developers added them, and one can argue that these are barely lacklustre translations of a script originally in English. Nonetheless, the larger gaming community remains yet unaware of the deplorable system of caste-based social and political hierarchy in India, and *Raji* has refrained from showing intention to analyse the intricacies of this system of power relations.

### *The Question of Ethnicity*

*Raji*'s flaw in its treatment of caste issues (or lack thereof) pales in comparison to its treatment of ethnic issues. *Raji* continues the ancient tradition of literally demonising the Asura, a living ethnic community of human beings, and justifying their genocide. Pragya Shukla notes how the Asur community living in different areas of eastern India believe that “Mahishasur was a just, liberal king, a valiant protector of all his subjects” opposing the narrative of him being an evil demon spun by the Hindu upper castes (Shukla 2022, n.p.). Shukla mentions that, according to the Asur community, Mahishasura “has been wrongly portrayed as an evil character” and “while one section of the society rejoices in the festivities of Navratri, the Asurs mourn the death of their king”

(2022, n.p.). In a binary of good versus evil, with no provision for grey nuances, the Asuras are depicted as violent, chaotic monsters destroying the proper order of things. The continuous othering of Asuras in a post-colonial world forces us to rethink and rework the older paradigm of the Occident versus the Orient as laid out by Said, to adapt to a more complex scenario of power distribution, with its numerous sets of oppressors and oppressed.

### Remediation of Mythology

That *Raji* sacrifices factual accuracy over a feeling of authenticity in its game design is clear by now. After the release of the game, Ian Maude, one of the co-founders of the studio, stated that the game is neither a historical tale, nor does it aim to rewrite Indian mythology, using religion only as a source of inspiration (Chan 2021, n.p.). Indeed, the mythography in the game veers significantly from the established traditions of Indian religion and philosophy.

The game also disappoints in effecting innovative weapon designs to reflect Indian philosophy. Except for Vishnu's *Chakram*, the supreme weapon available to the players only at the final boss level, the rest of the three weapons are elemental in nature. Though these weapons, the *Trishul* (trident) of Durga, *Sharanga* (a bow crafted by Vishwakarma), and *Nandaka* and *Srivatsa* (a sword and shield combo) have stylised Indian characteristics. Meanwhile, the elements they can be imbued with, namely lightning, fire, and ice, are some of the genre staples of hack-and-slash games. A more appropriate move would have been to represent the notion of *Panchamahabhutas*, or the five great elements which are the constituents of creation according to Indian philosophy, that is, *prithvi* (earth), *jala* (water), *agni* (fire), *vayu* (wind) and *akasha* (space) (Sankari and Rajalakshmi 2016, 168), through the combat mechanics. Moreover, the weapons in the game are imbued with elemental powers through the blessing of deities: Durga grants lightning, Vishnu grants fire, and Shiva grants ice. This is contrary to Indian mythology as, in Hindu pantheon, Indra is the god of lightning, Agni is the god of fire, and Himavat, the personification of the Himalaya, can be considered the god of snow and ice (Leeming 2001, 8–9, 79–80, 180).

The didactic nature of *Raji*, as can be noticed in the constant commentary provided by the two divine beings, namely Durga and Vishnu. The repeated interposing of spectacles narrating mythological stories, fragmenting the flow of the gameplay, hints at the sermonizing attitude of the game. Harsh Pareekh mentions how the “conversations between gods [...] sound like the game giving Indian mythology lessons to 10-year-olds” (Pareekh 2020, n.p.). At every level, the player comes across walls filled with paintings that tell stories of particular characters and entities from Hindu mythology. Yet, the fact that these murals are in no way directly connected to the storyline of the game raises doubts regarding their narrative and ludic relevance. Byrd opines how “these snippets of Hindu mythology washed over [him] because their trivia is not otherwise interwoven into the fabric of the game” (Byrd 2020, n.p.). While digital games possess a unique persuasive capability manifested “through rule-based representations and interactions,” (Bogost 2007, ix) a form of mediated persuasion Ian Bogost terms *procedural rhetoric*, *Raji* misses out on this possibility of properly executing its representational vision through incorporating cultural meaning into the gameplay.

One of the more ludified elements of spatial design in *Raji* is the use of *mandalas*, incorporating a culturally significant iconography into the gamespace. Susan M. Walcott describes how “Mandalas are distinctive features of religious art throughout the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist world” (Walcott 2006, 74–78). In Hinduism, a *Yantra* with a protective deity in the centre acts as an aid to one’s spiritual journey as well as attracting divine energy to a place, and in Buddhism a *Mandala* “is composed of all the elements the observer/practitioner must develop in order to achieve the enlightened state of the central deity who is the focus of the mandala” (2006, 74–78). Rosita Dellios explains that “in its Hindu-Buddhist formulation [a *mandala*] seeks to impart the view of the illusoriness of the world” (Dellios 2019, 3). As a result of orientalist obsession with appropriating Eastern religious and cultural symbology through reconfiguring their complex symbology into a more navigable one, as undertaken by Jung in his study of *mandalas* (Terrana 2014, 56–57, 66–67), and through cultural appropriation of Eastern, especially Buddhist, images and ideas to serve the interests of the capitalist market (Bao and Willis 2022, 45–47), the image of the *mandala* has been stripped of its cultural intricacies

in contemporary popular imagination. *Raji* too makes an attempt to use the image of the *mandala* as both a storytelling device and a ludic mechanism in a simplified and palatable manner. The game's treatment of the *mandala* displays a tendency of self-exoticisation devoid of nuanced cultural exposition. Here, the popular symbolic construct is re-inscribed with the purpose of showcasing the world of a young girl, with *Raji* and her family members at the centre of the pattern. Even such a use of *mandalas* fails to properly integrate with the main storyline as the flashbacks to *Raji*'s past, as seen in the *mandala* puzzles, are never really fleshed out in the game. Pareek, while lauding the concept as interesting, notes how these “are poorly integrated with the game's core story and feel like an afterthought” (Pareek 2020, n.p.). Hence, severed from the cultural and religious roots, and yet failing to establish itself as a system for understanding the gameworld in its own right, the use of *mandalas* in *Raji* appears to be one significant missed opportunity.

As video games are increasingly being produced in regions outside the Global North, access to more diverse and accurate representation of hitherto under-represented cultures becomes possible. Representation of indigenous myth and history can provide “youngsters with a convenient source of cultural symbols, myths and rituals, all of which help them to form their own identities” (Šisler 2013, 171–172). Martens quotes Shruti Ghosh, the co-founder of Nodding Head games, as she declares they “wanted to do a game that represents Hindu culture” for they “didn't see any game that was made from India that had that” (Martens 2020, n.p.). This stance raises more than a few questions regarding the world that *Raji* is aiming to portray. The idea of a unified religious entity called “Hinduism” is itself often considered to be an orientalist construct undertaken in the colonial era. Richard King claims that the “notion of ‘Hinduism’ is itself a Western-inspired abstraction, which until the nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious belief and practice” (King 1999, 162). Gavin Flood has noted how only in the 15th century Kashmir “the term Hindu is used by the Śaiva historian Śrīvara to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims” and it is only towards the end of the 18th century the term was used by the British to refer to the people of Hindoostan who were not Muslim, Sikh, Christian, or Jain (Flood 2003, 3). The endeavour to search and establish an ancient Hindu cultural landscape, then, is itself a reductive practice as it

homogenises numerous threads and strains of religious faiths and philosophical schools. A spokesperson for the studio, Ash Parrish, notes, that delineated on the journey that the player takes as one of revival of a lost glorious reality: “Essentially you’re healing the environment by returning it to its former glory, ridding the corruption left behind by the demons” (Parrish 2020, n.p.). This evidently points to the development of the fantasy of a glorious past that harkens to a golden age free of corruption introduced by the “other.” Thapliyal, in this context, makes a scathing critique of the game, stating *Raji* “finds it easier to flatten Indian history and mythology into a caricature than try to probe beyond the narrowly defined Hinduism enshrined by Brahmin elite” (Thapliyal 2020, n.p.). The striking lack of diversity and proper representation in the game’s projection of what it claims to be an ancient Hindu–Indian heritage points to a missed opportunity, in place of the possibility of a historically accurate interrogative exploration.

### A Commercial Epic

The overall approach of the developers in terms of world-building and narrative structure leads one to question the supposed target audience of the game as a product. Souvik Mukherjee has noted how the game has been ported to the Nintendo Switch game console, “which is prohibitively expensive in India and as such does not have a large user base” (Mukherjee 2022, 14). Mukherjee also quotes Akhil Arora’s review of the game who writes that *Raji*’s lack of localisations in Indian languages suggests the game is “aimed at the international audience” (2022, 114). Though Nodding Head Games later patched the game with localisations in multiple languages, including a full voice-acting in Hindi, it is indicative that Indian indie developers are primarily targeting the global market due to financial constraints. Sonia Sikka, writing on Elizabeth Gilbert’s novel *Eat, Pray, Love*, notes how the desire for mastery over narratives of non-Western experience informs the Western penchant for travel. Sikka writes that “the views of non-Western others that these and other Eurocentric discourses convey are so firmly entrenched within the Western imagination that transcending them requires both a critical awareness of their existence and a deliberate effort to adopt a different approach” (Sikka 2016, 13–16). The prominent question, then, is whether *Raji* manages to adopt a different

approach that can free the medium from its Western remedial tendencies of reducing the East to a marketable hodgepodge of religious symbols and exotic locales.

Mahima Jain notes how Nathaniel Gaskel has opined that “the amateur photographer of today has been largely influenced by the professional of yesterday” (Gaskel 2019, n.p.), including figures like Steve McCurry, who has represented “very exotic, highly saturated and visually splendid idea of India, one that is firmly the product of the Western imagination” (Gaskel quoted in Jain 2019). This has led to the Indian amateur photographers mimicking that style leading to a self-exoticisation. In his essay on the development of Filipino game culture, Christoffer Mitch C. Cerda warns about the danger of self-exoticisation inherent in game development when grounding narratives in indigenous material culture. Writing about games that hinge on Philippine myth, Cerda, following Jema Pamintuan, opines that “the game’s use of its Philippine influences can also lead to self-exoticization because, although it was made for a Filipino audience, its success hinged on its commercial success in the international market, and an exotic setting and non-Western characters helped differentiate it from the competition” (Cerda 2021, 53). *Raji* seems to have fallen victim to this trap, flaunting an assorted fare of lotuses, peacocks and diyas. The orientalist imagination that has come to colour the Western observer’s evaluation of the East, especially India, seeks to locate the ideal Indian Spatiality in an atemporal manner. As Jukka Jouhki observes, the “Indo-Orientalist discourse has equated Indian present and past, and has imagined India in a timeless vacuum, an India that is essentially ancient and stagnant” (Jouhki 2006, 14). Todd Martens mentions how the game made him “feel like a traveler called to dig deeper, to learn more outside the game about the Hindu and Balinese legends, stories and settings” (Martens 2020, n.p.). Possibly, an interest in presenting an image of India that builds upon touristic expectations of the exotic East was instrumental in giving the game its aesthetic and narrative direction. As Gilmore and Pine have asserted, the idea of authenticity has increasingly become a key factor in the commercially available idea of authentic experience, but the judgement of authenticity and consumerist decision of purchase depends on “who they are and who they aspire to be in relation to how they perceive the world” (Gilmore and Pine 2007, 5).



## Comparison with *Unrest*

How can ancient Indian mythic reality be more appropriately represented in video games? The colonial–Imperial binary of the self and other has long been a staple in the worlds and narratives of digital games. *Raji* seems to internalise this construct as a quest to overcome the monster essentially forgoes the possibility of conveying a larger gamut of motives, identities, and interests, by assimilating the limiting binary of good and evil. Another indie game developed and produced by an Indian studio, titled *Unrest* (Pyrodactyl 2014), provides a contrasting example. Iranian video game author Bahram Broghei notes how their objective of representing Iranian stories and culture was better communicated through the role-playing game genre, “since it allows for communication with non-player characters and various interactions other than fighting” (quoted in Šisler 2013, 187–188). We contend that *Unrest*, embracing the genre practices of role-playing games, takes a more nuanced approach towards a representation of different strata of social, political, religious, and racial identities. *Unrest* shines in its embracing of a multidimensional morally ambivalent portrayal of mythical India instead of the binary of good and evil. Instead of playing as a single character with a singular intention, *Unrest* puts the player in the shoes of six different characters, four female and two male, with disparate, and often conflicting motivations and worldviews. The different NPCs remind the player that none of the viewpoints are inherently incorrect, thereby none are completely correct either. Thus, the players draw their own conclusions according to their own moral compass as it closes with an ambiguous ending.

Free from divine dictations, *Unrest* allows the player to chart their own paths for the characters through their actions and words, the consequences of which reverberate throughout the game. The game has a strong cast of female leads who, though hindered by sociocultural hurdles, make their own destiny. Asha, the princess of the fictional city of Bhimra, becomes the face of rebellion against the usurper Vijay who staged the assassination of her parents; Chitra serves as an ambassador for the Naga Empire trying to negotiate a deal with Bhimra; Taniya, a peasant girl, dares to decide her own fate in the face of an arranged marriage; Shreya, a priestess of Banka-Mundi who acts as a spy

for an influential Naga merchant. The sociocultural projection in *Unrest*, thus, provides a more interactive, progressive and diverse access to the structural intricacies of historical Indian society.

*Unrest* is vocal about the rigid social hierarchy and the accompanying problems of discrimination and mobility, both social and literal, plaguing ancient India from the inside, instead portraying it as a utopia that only outside forces are attempting to corrupt. Religion has not been shown as a pure force for good, but as an element of society that muddles with power. Significantly, the portrayal of women characters in *Unrest* provides a more varied window into the different experiences of womanhood in a historical worlding of the subcontinent. Kimberle Crenshaw's argument situating marginalised experiences in an intersectional framework, noting how those "who are victimized by the interplay of numerous factors" may emerge as "multiply-burdened" (Crenshaw 1989, 151–152), has established how the experience of being a woman is characterised by intersecting lines of different fields of identity. Bell hooks also notes how privileged Western feminisms have failed to understand "the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression" (hooks 2015, 15). *Unrest* shines by portraying multiple female characters whose experiences are formed through intersectional play of gender, race, class, caste, and spatiality. For example, Taniya's sufferings stem from her intersectional position formed by her gender identity as a woman, class identity as a peasant, and spatial identity as a rural folk.

*Unrest* stands in sharp contrast with *Raji* regarding the depiction of mythical beings. Like the Asuras in *Raji* who were and are a real-life community of people on the margins of Aryan culture, the Naga in *Unrest* are also believed to have been a tribal ethnicity of Sri Lanka who were later assimilated. Indrapala notes that the Nagas were one of the most mysterious people on the island of Sri Lanka, and around 300 C.E., the area around Jaffna peninsula was known as *Nagadipa*; but by the 9th century there was no mention of the Nagas which leads Indrapala to opine "by that time, or very probably long before that time, the Nagas were assimilated" into other major ethnic groups of the island (Indrapala 2011, 72–74). The game brilliantly navigates this conundrum by depicting the Nagas as serpentine creatures according to Indian mythology while also

humanising them. Nagas are depicted as virtuous and flawed as human beings. They are a group of refugees in Bhimra who have been largely forsaken by their empire, facing discrimination and humiliation, deserving our sympathy, whereas also capable of brutal massacre of humans when there is opportunity.

Recent developments in game studies have noted how video games can provide an engaging access into a historical space. Anderson notes how “affective game design aesthetics” can “create a learning experience,” which he terms as “the interactive museum” (Anderson 2019, 178). Alexander Vandewalle points out that while real neutrality is impossible in a mythography, modern mythographies, including in video games, are “*impacted by contemporary cultural contexts*” and “*constructive of public memory of these myths*” (Vandewalle 2023, n.p.). *Raji* has little or nothing to offer to a contemporary person other than a fabricated version of ancient India. On the other hand, *Unrest* dwells on issues like refugee crisis, social discrimination, separation of church and state, ghettoization, women’s autonomy, and so on. While *Raji*’s level and gameplay design omits any meaningful interaction with non-playing characters, *Unrest* recreates an intricately woven society where the diverse cast of characters dot a space of nuanced mythic and historical experience. Crucially by showcasing an environmental cause, namely the failure of monsoon, as the root cause of all of Bhimra’s plights the game puts the issue of climate disaster, the defining concern of the 21st century world and the greatest existential threat that humanity faces today, at the forefront.

## Conclusion

Mukherjee, in his 2017 monograph, studies video games through their tangled yet topical relationship to postcolonial approaches to understanding. Here, he notably introduces the idea of playing back through digital games:

Playing back, here, is the playing of the plural; it disrupts linear chronologies and centers of truth; implicitly, it speaks for those voices that cannot be heard in the colonial archives; and it presents scenarios where both colonial stereotypes can be simulated and anticolonial alternative stories can be told. (Mukherjee 2017, 105)

The effort for shedding off the colonial vestiges of cultural norms is then to be directed towards a conscious decentering of established ludic methods to accommodate more diverse modes of play from the peripheries. This is exemplified in Elizabeth LaPensée's *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), where the design of the gameworld and related movement that takes place is situated on a map that abandons the established traditions of cartography instituted by the state in favour of an indigenous understanding of land and traversal (LaPensée 2020, 288–290) where the natural landscape serves the role of a veritable playground for the native American clans as experienced by the player. Thus, *When Rivers Were Trails* seeks to explore modes of ludonarrative representation that destabilise the prospecting and pioneering logic of the Oregon Trail games. Again, in Studio Oleomingus's *In the Pause Between the Ringing* (2019), the player finds an explicit decentering of colonial histories through the exploration of a space infused with magic realistic narratives. It is, then, at best, disappointing to note how *Raji* fails to deliver on its ludonarrative potential, as it sticks to both the established gameplay modes of the hack-and-slash genre (Wen 2020; Byrd 2020) and embraces the narrative of binary between self and other. Wen feels that *Raji* “even plays a bit like an isometric Prince Of Persia [...] with the stunning landscape and architecture of its mystical realms” (Wen 2020), which in spite of being a note of praise can be seen as a proof of how the game fails to reinvent gameplay to fit its own unique vision.

In spite of its somewhat flawed execution, *Raji* can be counted as a significant step in the field of Indian game development in particular, and the ludic expression of the Global South in general. In some aspects, the game does project an alternative voice to dominant Western practices that define much of the cultural and narrative definition of video games. It, unfortunately, fails at reinventing or subverting established gameplay logic to better suit its aim of retelling ancient Indian mythical stories. A different approach to world-building and gameplay could have accommodated a possibility space for accessing Indian social, historical, and mythic reality that incorporates more diverse and intersectional experiences, allowing a distinctly Indian narrative to reach a global playerbase.

Ultimately it has become apparent that *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, viewed from a point of accuracy, is a flawed representation of the ancient Indian mythic. It is not ancient, as we have already established through instances of anachronisms. Nor it can be deemed an epic; let us not consider the form and medium in our judgment, but only the spirit. The ancient Indian epics, namely the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, are extremely nuanced texts with multiple versions presenting different perspectives and interpretations. Contrastingly the game provides a monolithic saga. As such the game rather seems like a modern fantasy, that is aimed at getting the experience of authenticity and engagement to meet the expectations of individual players, generally unaware of the intricacies of Indian mythology, culture and history. The Indian mythic, with its rich and vivid mosaic of stories, would hopefully receive a more nuanced treatment in the future.

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**Review:**

**Mukherjee, Souvik. 2022. *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent. Development, Culture(s) and Representations.* Bloomsbury**

**Xenia Zeiler***Abstract*

The book *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent. Development, Culture(s) and Representations* is the first ever comprehensive presentation and discussion of material spanning over all nations of South Asia, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Discussed by the leading expert on the theme, it offers both an overview of as well as numerous detailed examples of both, historical and contemporary developments. Appropriately, this work also situates the regional characteristics in larger global contexts and cultural flows, and contemporary developments in historical contexts.

*Keywords*

*videogames, games, South Asia, India*

The book *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent. Development, Culture(s) and Representations* is noteworthy for several reasons. Among but not limited to these are that, firstly, it stands out as the first ever comprehensive work focusing on the yet still (very) understudied field of games and gaming in and as related to South Asia. The book, appropriately, focuses on India with the region's longest history and most complex gaming landscapes but also summarizes central information for Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—material that only existed in scattered sources so far. Secondly, the book fittingly situates these regional characteristics within larger global contexts and cultural flows, applying, among others, transculturation and glocalization as frames. And thirdly, the reader can rely on a solid embedding of all the aforementioned discussions of contemporary developments in historical contexts, largely building on the author's own accomplished research work.

The book's 249 pages are structured to begin with an introduction to videogames in the Indian Subcontinent, to then proceed in three main sections: development; cultures; and representation. Each of these sections opens with contextualizing discussions and ends with concluding remarks. The book's concluding part contains, among other regularia such as a bibliography and an index, two long appendices: on the timeline of the discussed developments in each nation as well as on the detailed results of a survey that was done in preparation for this book. The survey asked several specific questions around the overarching theme “how far videogames influence culture, and are seen as cultural artifacts in the Subcontinent” (p. 228).

In its opening part, the book introduces not only earlier scholarship, the used theoretical lenses, and its own structure, but also points the reader to a number of specifics that impact researching games and gaming in the geographical area. For instance, extracting information on especially historical developments in games and gaming needs to rely on the regions' “scattered archive” (e.g., p. 7). That is, with the lack of organized collections, “oral history accounts and ephemera prove to be important sources as do tangential references in histories of computing” (p. 8). Another important factor is that

“gaming as a phenomenon is mostly studied as a Western preserve” (p. 5), and the frames, discussions and results that have emerged from this previous research are not always and certainly not directly applicable in or comparable to the region’s diverse and complex (cultural, social, etc.) settings.

The main part opens with a section on Development, divided into a history and a current scenario part. The history section encompasses not only videogame history but also discusses digital technology history in the region, as a necessary preamble for the arrival and prevail of videogames. In the current scenario part, the author uses, e.g., material from interviews with game developers, to highlight exemplary interesting and successful videogame developments.

The book’s second section on Cultures contains two parts, as well. This section’s first part offers contextual backgrounds on ludic cultures beyond videogames, that is, on the long and diverse non-digital game cultures of the Subcontinent, discussed by the leading specialist in this field of study. The following part on digital gaming cultures puts the spotlights on the gamers and summarizes prior studies on gaming cultures in India. It also makes some exemplary recent public debates and controversies around games and gaming in the region available to the reader, underlining the fact that without any doubt, games and gaming have become influential factors in the shaping of culture and society everywhere around the globe.

In its last part, the book focuses on the region’s representation in globally produced games. Namely, the author discusses the “pervasive, if mostly unwitting, orientalism in the portrayal of the region and its culture” and “cultural (mis)representation” (p. 135). Fortunately for the reader, the author can yet again rely on his own extensive and acknowledged previous work on this theme when giving numerous examples for this. This section, Representation, also contains parts on regional game studies, on local cultures and representations in and of videogames, and on videogames as represented in other local media. It concludes with a subchapter on diversity (including but not limited to issues of economic and linguistic disparities, gender, race, caste, and subalternity), summarizing that “While the Subcontinent has



neither seen an overtly vast gender divide and discrimination [...] nor such movements corresponding to the Black Lives Matter [...], it is still to witness issues of digital divide based on gender, class, caste, economic prosperity and religion.” (p.173).

In summary, *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent. Development, Culture(s) and Representations* is a must-read for anyone interested in games (videogames as well as non-digital games) in South Asia. For the first time, a book offers a comprehensive, reliable presentation and discussion of material spanning over all nations of South Asia, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Yet, this is by far not the only applaudable achievement of the book. Specifically notable features making this a highly valuable resource also, of course, include the author’s outstanding expertise, as the leading researcher on this theme for decades, and the accessible writing style and structure of the book. All these qualities combined allow both academic audiences as well as readers not yet familiar with or not with an explicit or sole academic interest in the theme a pleasant and inspiring reading experience, to become acquainted with and deepen their understanding and knowledge of the diverse, complex characteristics of videogames in South Asia.