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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.*

Corresponding author's address: Arkabrata Chaudhury,Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India, PIN-735101. E-mail: arkabrata.englit@gmail.com

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 mythography 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 (Javalgekar 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 remediatory 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 ludo-narrative 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 ludo-narrative 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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