Article:

"Raji's* Burden*"

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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.[1] 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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[1] 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.[2] 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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[2] 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*.[3] 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).

[3] 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.
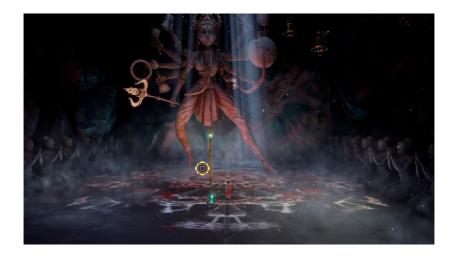

Figure 5: Raji: *An Ancient Epic*, developed by Nodding Heads Games,
published by Super.com in 2020 (screenshot by author).

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 banters 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 pronunciations 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

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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.

Soraya Murray

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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