

Article:**A Psychoanalysis of Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) in the Context of India 2020–2021****Achintya Debnath***Abstract*

This article is based on field surveys and interviews among mobile users. It provides a heuristic framework for understanding the dynamics of violent content, recent issues regarding banning PUBG (player unknown's battlegrounds) video games, and the complex characteristics of its perspectives. More precisely, it brings up an explanation and relation between violence and certain video games primarily focused on mobile user gamers who play PUBG (or Free Fire or both). Furthermore, this study throws light on the hot debate of banning PUBG in India in 2020–21 and the context of oversimplified assumptions behind its ban. The entire frame of this article is based on individual interviews of mobile users and their thoughts and experiences on the matter. For this purpose, fifty interviews have been conducted among gamers—players who play PUBG, Free Fire, or both. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the video game debate that has been going on regarding the relation between violence and games which started as early as the 1970s (Kowert and Quandt 2021).

Keywords

video games, PUBG, Free Fire, violence, gamers, mobile users

Introduction

On December 20, 2017 *PUBG* (Lightspeed and Quantum, *PUBG* Corporation 2017), was released. Soon after the release of the *PUBG* (Player Unknown's Battlegrounds) video game, it attracted almost one billion mobile gamers within a very short time (as of March 2021). Then, *PUBG Mobile*, developed by LightSpeed and Quantum Studio and owned by Chinese company Tencent, was released in March 2018 as one of the biggest games in the Indian gaming industry. It quickly took over the market, leaving its rival Battle Royale games like Garena *Free Fire* (111 dots Studio 2017; Mayank 2023a) and *Rules of Survival* (NetEase Games 2017) far behind in player count (Mayank 2023b). Yet the video game is a subject of severe scrutiny for being a violent video game¹. Furthermore, in the context of banning it, many countries such as India have oversimplified the psychoanalysis of violence in video games throughout the year (2020–21). This ban on *PUBG* (2017) sparked genuine concern for many gamers while for others it signaled a political opportunity². However, the ban did not last long and soon it returned and then got banned again³. Hence, the ban on *PUBG* (2017) shows the complex geopolitical issues and the problematic international relations among countries. Regarding the ban on this video game in relation to the geopolitical issue Mayank's statement is worth noting:

¹ Many claim that a video game is simply another piece of violent media that is responsible for corrupting society, however, few people though see a video game as what it truly is, a playable piece of art (since like any piece of art a video game is a form of expression, further, it takes a lot of artists to design characters and environments). Recently, the discussion on morality in video games has started receiving immense attention, particularly with the release of games where the choices have a moral background. Furthermore, Mukherjee pointed out that conflict has always been viewed as an essential element by early theories of video game design and is still the mainstay of most video game research. Early theorists such as Chris Crawford associated in-game conflict with safety or the assumption that "the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models" (Mukherjee 2010).

² As Ferguson (2008) has argued that in the context of the United States, violence in games is a political topic that has the unusual capacity to appeal to voters on both the left and the right, on the grounds of pacifism and religion respectively (Schott 2016). The same is happening in India for instance *PUBG* was not banned because of spreading violence rather it was because of some internal policies that have been taking place due to the India-China controversy.

³ *PUBG*'s newest ban in India comes less than two years after the developer released its self-published India-exclusive version of the mobile game. Alongside the change in publishing, Krafton also made several other changes in *PUBG*'s return to the Indian market. The game would feature heavier censorship from players starting matches clothed to shifting the game's aesthetic into a "virtual training ground" setting. Krafton had also made arrangements to shift *Battlegrounds Mobile India*'s data to Microsoft Azure servers, further distancing itself from Tencent in the region (Ingram 2022).

Though the game received accolades from its users and is still regarded as one of the best battle royale games the cause for concern for the local authorities were the game monetization methods and the location of user data storage. As the developers are based in China, all the user data was stored in a server located there. Therefore, the game was banned on September 2, 2020 along with 117 other Chinese apps. (Mayank 2023b)

The ban on this game came at a time when all gaming platforms were expecting positive growth in the number of users due to the COVID-19 lockdown in the country, which also happens to be *PUBG Mobile*'s biggest market with its 25 percent of users being Indians (Yadav 2020). This makes mobile games also susceptible to problematic and excessive use (Mäyrä and Alha 2021, 116). This is widely prevalent and applicable to *PUBG* and *Free Fire* players, as mobile users quite easily access these games. Just like the PC version, *PUBG Mobile* became instantly popular, especially in India. The game had more than forty million monthly users in July in India alone (Bhushan 2022). So, the ban also came as a shock to professional gamers dedicated to this game who were left jobless resulting in a serious loss to their fan base (Yadav 2020). Nevertheless, this article suggests that violent content and issues in video games such as *PUBG* or *Free Fire* do not affect how people act rather it depends on many primary factors such as perspectives, mental state, the ability to consume facts, et cetera, and also it shows that the governmental ban on *PUBG* is rather political in nature and a consequence of international relation among countries than a simple assumption of preventing violent behavior. Since mobile gaming is arguably the biggest subset of video games currently on the market today (Mäyrä and Alha 2021), this article focuses on mobile users as well as its potential impact on *PUBG* (Lightspeed and Quantum, *PUBG Corporation* 2017) and *Free Fire* (111 dots Studio 2017) players and their behavior.

Generally, it has often been taken for granted that video games are associated with violence, and youth are assumed to be particularly vulnerable to possible negative effects of violent video games because most of them are particularly associated with shooters, such as *PUBG* and *Free Fire*. Both share the

characteristics of violent content, like murder, guns, and many other mature concepts, therefore giving them a bad reputation. Mayank points out that several incidents of kids stealing money from parents started surfacing in different parts of the country (Sengupta 2020). People even started betting money while challenging each other to a match of *PUBG Mobile* (Mayank 2023b). In more extreme cases, physical harm and loss of life (Team G2G 2022a) were also involved after parents started to stop children from playing the game (Mayank 2023b). According to Anderson, there was a significant positive relationship between moral disengagement and aggression among players of violent video games (Anderson 2004). This extension is important because it shows that exposure to violent video games can cause immoral behaviors, especially among people high in moral disengagement (Anderson 2004). Nevertheless, initially in the 1970s when video game play was introduced, the debates about the negative effects of playing video games have been started (Kowert and Quandt 2021). Therefore, the one billion mobile gamers accumulating *PUBG* has revived these concerns, reinvigorating old debates and generating brand new ones in many countries in general and India in particular. To this contrast, my study will be a psychoanalysis understanding of controlling violence through playing the *PUBG* game⁴.

Regarding the debate about the relationship between video games and violence, Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt argued that:

Debates about the relationship between violent video games, aggression, and violent crime continue. In February 2020, the American Psychological Association (APA) released a revision to its 2015 resolution on violent crime and video games. In it, they note that violence is a complex social problem that likely stems from many factors. However, just like in the 2015 release, they conclude that there is not enough evidence to conclude whether or not violent video games directly contribute to aggressive and violent outcomes (Kowert and Quandt 2021, 2).

⁴ As Schott (2016) said, violent behavior largely depends on personal factors, such as difficulties coping with loss or failure or becoming the object of persecution, and being bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others.

Henceforth, the article is rather a continuation of the earlier legacy than a brand new composition of thoughts and its contribution would be, in the field, in the process of evaluation of each individual who plays video games and documenting their own experiences as mobile gamers. This article will trace their game experience and the actual behavior of gamers which is enmeshed within it and will reveal how playing *PUBG* or *Free Fire* affects them. Most of the interviewees are mobile users and school students; they borrow their parents' mobiles whenever they play these games since mobile gaming sessions require less preparation than most other games and can be played anywhere, anytime.

Frans Mäyrä and Kati Alha in their article “Mobile Gaming” (2021) argued that the pervasive character and ease of access of mobile gaming is connected with several social and cultural changes: suddenly, almost everyone seems to own a gaming-capable device, and while there has been a celebration of mobile gaming helping games to “go mainstream,” there have also been concerns (by gamers and nongamers alike) that the associated changes have not all been for the good. They also briefly outline the success story of mobile games, describe the associated developments in the culture of mobile gaming, and highlight several of the relevant debates and research trends of this quickly developing field (Mäyrä and Alha 2021, 107). Regarding the initial development of mobile games, it has been stated that:

The early phases of mobile game design were often focused on the miniaturization and simplification of existing video games, largely due to the limitations of the available computing power, memory, and the restricted user interfaces in small handheld devices. As research and development moved forward, it became more apparent that mobile games could have unique strengths that other gaming platforms could not provide. Our own research group in Tampere, Finland, was taking part in this development in the early 2000s, and it is interesting to reflect on how the early expectations and analyses of the time have come true (or not) during the first two decades of the “mobile era.” (Mäyrä and Alha 2021, 111)

Scholarships for violent video games

There has been no dearth of sophisticated scholarly analysis on the psychological effect of video games such as the extensive initial works of Craig A. Anderson, introduced at the beginning of this century, which largely shows the negative moral disengagement as a consequence of playing video games (Anderson 2004). Whereas, Gareth Schott (2016), Souvik Mukherjee (2010)⁵, and Lavinia McLean and Mark Griffiths (2013) tried to show the intricate complexity of violent video games' ethics and their effect. Though the concept of moral disengagement involves the provision of contexts and pointers that make the player's action more justifiable within the gameplay, however, this notion too cannot be applied universally to all video games (Mukherjee 2010).

Moreover, many recent scholars have shown the artistic effect of video games in their studies and considered them a piece of art. In this contrast, Grant Tavinor (2011) takes one step ahead and argues, that video games are one of the most significant developments in the mass arts of recent times. It might sound too much optimistic, however, it does possess some quality of truth. Therefore, he continues, "in commercial terms, they are now among the most prominent of the mass arts worldwide" (2011). It is clear, that the commercial and cultural success does not exhaust the interest in video games as a mass art phenomenon. Video games are structurally completely different from the previous forms of mass art. The ontology of video games is instanced as a departure from the familiar mass arts of film and popular music. The nature and identity of art can be imposed on video games to understand

⁵ See, for instance, his *Ethical Conflicts and Call of Duty*, where he showed that the ethical conflicts in video games are quite varied and that game affordances and ethics frameworks may deviate from the ones that players may be used to in real life. However, trying to judge player responses to these by referring to a fixed and higher moral order has yielded problematic and incomplete analyses. With the possible increase in the number of sandbox-type games that allow numerous combinations of possibilities and choices, an increase in scenarios of ethical dilemma is very likely and the problem of understanding ethical implications within video games will become more challenging. The way forward would be to recognize that the responses vary according to the player and the total environment within which the choices are made so the analyses need to be carried out on a case-by-case basis rather than by appealing to a higher moral order. As observed earlier, in comparison to a response such as "What must I do?" within the video game scenario (and arguably in life as well) the more preferable response to decision trees formed in cases of ethical dilemma is "What are my capabilities and how can I do my utmost?" Therefore, when the player overcomes a situation of dilemma and makes a choice, a possibility is actualized and an imminent ethics has come into play. (Mukherjee 2010)

the ontological artistic value of video games. The subjective experience of the effect of video games is associated with creativity, expression, and construction. It inherited art and technology simultaneously. The evolution of art dramatically engaged with technology.

So the emotional aura of video games is appealing to a broader perspective. Effectively, the comprehensive effect of video games is carrying a stronger notion of artistic sense in the complex historical process of modernization. Brian Massumi (1995) explains and discusses the philosophy of effects. He elaborates on the metaphysics of affect in his essay where he opined that:

The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, infrastructural as a factory. Actually, it is beyond infrastructural; it is everywhere, in effect. Its ability to come second-hand, to switch domains and produce effects across them all, gives it a meta-factorial ubiquity. It is beyond infrastructural. It is transversal. This fact about affect—this matter-of-factness of affect—needs to be taken seriously into account in cultural and theory. (Massumi 1995, 106–107)

Assuming playing video games causes violent behavior simply shows a basic and oversimplified argument. Nevertheless, Miguel Sicart argued that Computer games are complex cultural objects: they have rules guiding behavior, they create game worlds with values at play, and they relate to players who like to explore morals and actions forbidden in society. The ethics of computer games have to take into consideration all these variables (Sicart 2009, 4). Nevertheless, the research on the negative effects of playing violent games has been based on the same theoretical frameworks used to test the impact of exposure to television and movie violence (Arriaga, et al. 2008). However, video game contains specificities of their own. Interactivity, for instance, allows players more active participation in the environment, also requiring higher attention and concentration. Factors like previous experience, perception of control, competence, frustration, competitiveness, involvement,

and sense of presence should also be taken into account (Arriaga, et al. 2008). Furthermore, Sicart argued that players are creative, engaged, ethical agents. Players no longer are passive moral creatures, exposed to unethical content: computer game players reflect, relate, and create with an ethical mind. And the games they play are ethical systems (Sicart 2009, 4).

Mukherjee (2010) points out that virtue ethics is certainly a popular choice among commentators on video game morality. He continued and argued that the experience of playing combat video games causes the player to experience a kind of trauma. However, this trauma is not comparable with that experienced in the real war (or any other real conflict), but rather that the player experiences milder forms of some of the characteristics of war trauma. The symptoms that video game players experience that emulate those experienced by the combatant include disorientation due to a loss of visual markers, fear of injury to their screen self, tension due to ever-present danger, and pressure to protect their comrades. Hence, Mukherjee commented that it is too simplistic to allege that this experience of trauma desensitizes the player. Rather, such an experience increases their awareness of the realities of war and primes the player for the kind of emotions that they might experience in the battle zone: anxiety, tension, fear, loyalty, and guilt. Like the simulations used for training within the military, exposure to such emotional responses better equips the player to prepare coping strategies, but it would be unwise to suggest that killing a figure in a video game would enable a soldier to kill the enemy without any emotional response in the battle zone. It depends on what rhetoric is used in their construction, but, inevitably, our actions depend on our emotional responses to these games (Mukherjee 2010).

To this vibrant scholarship done on the relationship between violence and game, notwithstanding, a significant study has not been done so far on specific games such as *PUBG* or *Free Fire*, precisely in the discourse of mobile users in the recent context of banning *PUBG* in India. Therefore, my analysis is greatly deepened by surveying mobile users and interviewing mobile gamers. As the “perfect” study does not exist in any domain of science, including video game research (Anderson 2004), it is highly unlikely to expect the infallibility of this article or precisely *PUBG* and *Free Fire*’s positive side effects.

Methodology

This research study followed a very basic and simple methodology. Primarily it deals with collecting interviews with mobile gamers and then shifts to the practical experiences of those gamers. For this purpose, I simply went to the various spots where gamers play the games and asked very basic simple questions for this article. The questions are as follow here: (1) When did they start playing the game? (2) How much do they play? (3) Have they ever thought if it is okay to hit or shoot someone in real life? (4) Does *PUBG* or *Free Fire* cause violent behavior? (5) What are the side effects? (6) Their religious affinity, et cetera?

I have generalized their answers into certain categories. For example, if anybody gave a “yes” answer to Questions 3 and 4, I categorized them as negative. In this way, the “no” answer to the same questions is categorized as a positive one. If someone gave a “no” answer with a logical explanation based on keen observation and general experimentation, that is, one’s cognitive ability to comprehensively experience effects, I categorized them as positive and opinionated, whereas the same answer without any logical observation and detailed explanation termed as mostly positive. Furthermore, if someone failed to answer with no experience or observation, I put them in the category of unaware and confused while those who are highly critical about playing video games are considered skeptical and negative answers.

Thirty interviewers out of fifty replied with a positive answer, whereas only six participants out of fifty replied with a negative answer. The other fourteen participants are either confused or have mixed feelings. The total percentage of positive answers is 60 percent whereas 12 percent give negative answers. It means only 12 percent of participants think playing video games causes violent behavior whereas 60 percent was against it, and 28 percent of participant was neither opposed to it nor accepts it. According to these statistics, it is highly unlikely to assume that playing *PUBG* causes violent behavior.

My survey includes a diverse group of 50 people coming from different social, religious⁶ (four of them belong to the Muslim community whereas the rest of them are Hindus), and economic backgrounds (two of my participants are extremely rich whereas the rest of them belong to the middle class except two unskilled laborers), as well of different ages. I interviewed 20 school boys and girls (10–17 years old), a PhD scholar (31 years old), four waged laborers (one 23 and another 28 years old), three engineers (29–30 years old), an electrician (30 years old), a government employee, a school teacher, one homeopathy student who is practicing medicine, a professional cricket player, a shopkeeper, two businessmen, a policeman (24 years old), a private tutor, eight unemployed college students as well as pass out–dropout students (24–27 years old), and four random gamers⁷. Bubai Debnath⁸ told me that one of the players had married his *PUBG* squad partner. His friend had not even known the girl whom he married. It all happened while they were playing as a squad team. This girl is not even from Nabadwip, she belongs to Jharkhand⁹. I have come across many similar incidents while interviewing participants. Bubai Debnath stated that:

We play as a squad team among others in the internet. Then one of my friends from the squad gets involved romantically with this girl from Jharkhand without seeing each other. They liked each other so much that they got married after they meet. *PUBG* is the platform where two of them meet for the first time¹⁰.

⁶ Mukherjee (2010) mentions, that discussions on morality are very popular in video-game-related blogs and websites which posit opinions ranging from the description of moral choices in video games as an inadequate feature in game design to reading video game morality in terms of religious views like Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

⁷ I do not know what job those random gamers do because they were too busy playing *PUBG* as a squad team when I met them, they did not even tell me what their names are, however, eventually, one of their friends came and told me all of their names.

⁸ Debnath, Bubai, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, January 20, 2022.

⁹ Debnath, Bubai, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, January 20, 2022.

¹⁰ Debnath, Bubai, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, January 20, 2022.

Three of the participants are my students: Rohan Barman, Dipayan Bhowmick, and Kanchan Pal whom I know very well. All of them said that *PUBG* does not lead players towards violence. Six of my participants, Rajat Debnath, Prosenjit Barman, Prodip Biswas, Lakhi Kanta Das, Tutul Debnath, and Sanjit Chaudhuri are my direct friends from school and college. Two participants belong to my friend circle, meaning, I am not directly friends with them but they are my friends' friends or known relatives of my friends. The rest of them are picked from various spots of playing. These spots include river banks and Ghats, playgrounds and open fields, besides lonely roads, local tee shops–cafés, under tree shades during midday scorching heat. These spots are chosen by the gamers only because these places have better internet speeds than their house respectively. Some of them play *PUBG* in their bedrooms at home. When I ask Prosenjit Barman if playing *PUBG* causes violent behavior? He answered:

Violence has complex roots and origins. Playing *PUBG* is neither the root nor its origin. No game can teach violence. I play only to enjoy it. I don't think I have violent behavior. Violence is not that simple. Only because you play *PUBG* that's why you got violent behavior doesn't make any sense. At least I don't think playing *PUBG* damages our behavior.¹¹

Nevertheless, all of my participants either play *PUBG* or *Free Fire* or both. Many of them were eager to talk to me while others were busy playing the game as I have mentioned about the squad team. Most of those who did give me an interview started playing the game in the year 2018–19. However, some people have started much later. This Thursday (November 10, 2021) evening, I was going to the market when I saw a ten-year-old boy playing *PUBG* in front of the balcony of his home. So I asked him whether he would give me an interview or not. At first, he was scared of me, however, his mother knows my family (and me perhaps) and soon she pursued the child for an interview. Kanchan, the ten-year-old school boy informs me that his mother scolds him if he plays *PUBG* a lot, however, his mother is also

¹¹ Barman, Prosenjit, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG–Free Fire Cause Violent Behavior*, November 8, 2021.

a *PUBG* player. When I asked his mother about the *PUBG* game and if she could give me an interview, she smiled at me (that means no) and told me that she allows her son to play because outdoor playing is too risky, however, she claimed that playing *PUBG* can damage Kanchan's conventional learning abilities because of the so-called violent behavior which is why she scolds him. Kanchan told me:

My mother plays *PUBG* very well. She is like a professional gamer. She plays it a lot. But she scolds me whenever I wanted to play it. However, only in the weekend she says yes for *PUBG*.¹²

This shows a rather complicated issue where a mother believes playing *PUBG* can cause mental disturbances for children, however, it does not affect her. Mother concerning her child's safety is primitive in nature. The game has no immediate concern for the mother. However, here the mother experiences some sort of paradoxical dilemma where she is protecting her child from the game she enjoys playing too.

One of the schoolboy participants, Dipayan Bhowmick, is a professional football player. So when I asked which he liked the most he replied that he liked both games. Then I asked the difference between playing football and *PUBG*¹³. He got confused and said both are enjoyable¹⁴. Also, he said his mother restricted him from playing too many *PUBG* games. His mother has this list of free days when he can play *PUBG* for an hour or two. However, it seems he is fooling his mother because on that day when I interviewed him he was playing *PUBG* though he was not supposed to be, it seemed like a simple enjoyment or an innocent sin for him. These types are prevalent

¹² Pal, Kanchan, interviewed by author. Does Playing *PUBG* Cause Violent Behavior, November 10, 2021.

¹³ Bhowmick, Dipayan, interviewed by author. Does Playing *PUBG* Cause Violent Behavior, November 10, 2021.

¹⁴ It is worthy of mention, Schott pointed out that a soccer player is not physically inhibited from handling the ball or crossing the boundary lines of the pitch as they play. Yet the player seeks to avoid blatantly doing so whenever possible to avoid penalties from a referee and—losing possession of the ball to the opposition. Despite a player's best efforts or intentions, the ball may still make contact with a hand or go out of play momentarily. However, in these moments, when breaches of the rules do occur, there is no guarantee that they will necessarily be upheld or enforced. This is where factors such as sportsmanship, the perspective of players, and the ability of a referee to be in the right place to observe violations come into play (Schott 2016, 29–30).

among schoolboys. While I was interviewing a thirteen-year-old schoolboy, Deb Majumdar, I realized that he was afraid of his mother because his mother forbade him to play the video game. However, he somehow managed to hide it from his mother and told me with a laugh how he was fooling his mother¹⁵. Anyway, he plays it regularly. Amit Debnath said a very interesting phrase while I was interviewing him. He mentioned that:

PUBG helps me on focusing and concentration with my work. Playing *PUBG* also keeps me away from depression and boredom. During the lockdown of Covid19 Pandemic playing *PUBG* is the only thing that keeps me positive.¹⁶

Most of the participants who are over twenty years old disagree with the fact that *PUBG* can cause violent behavior¹⁷. Some of them laughed at the question of whether playing *PUBG* cause violent behavior because for them this is a very stupid question¹⁸. However, all of them agreed with the fact that like any other thing, the video game has also two sides, that is, positive and negative. Lakhi kanta Das depicted that the spread of violence through video games depends upon many primary and key factors such as the mental state of the player, circumstances of the player et cetera, only playing *PUBG* cannot spread violence¹⁹. It is up to us which side we are going to choose. In this context, Gareth Schott opined that the public and political debates that prompt the notion of a relationship between games and violence have not emerged in response to logical events that permit game violence to be considered in dispassionate terms (Schott 2016, 29). Furthermore, as the above survey suggests, children and young people are mostly confused about whether or

¹⁵ Majumdar, Deb, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

¹⁶ Debnath, Amit, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 12, 2021.

¹⁷ Basak, Sudip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behaviour*, November 10, 2021. Das, Rakes, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021. Barman, Prosenjit, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG-Free Fire Cause Violent Behavior*, November 8, 2021. Mistri, Gopal, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

¹⁸ Debnath, Suvankar, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent behavior*, November 11, 2021.

¹⁹ Das, Lakhi Kanta, interviewed by author. *Does Playiing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

not playing video games can damage behavior though there are exceptions. Pushpendu Mondal who is practicing medicine is also quite skeptical about the fact that violent video games cause violent behavior. He told me that:

I have been playing *PUBG* for more than two years. I have never felt angry or gone violent just because I play *PUBG*. It does not lead towards violent at least for me²⁰.

When I asked how much they played the game, some of the teenagers told me that it depended on whether they had a girlfriend or not. However, all of them agreed that playing *PUBG* during the lockdown increased a lot despite them having a girlfriend or not. Many of them started playing *PUBG* or *Free Fire* to get out of boredom during the lockdown. Playing *PUBG* might have a way of expressing personal relational agony, Gopal Mistri, an unskilled laborer, got emotional when I was asking him about the *PUBG–Free Fire* game, and somehow he ended up telling his failed love affair. He said:

I can't get her whom I love. Playing *PUBG* keeps me busy and helps me to forget the pain of her absence in my life. *PUBG* doesn't lead me to violence at all rather keeps me away from pain²¹.

Nevertheless, I interviewed a twenty-year-old teenager Sudip Basak who is a sophomore; surprisingly, he is not the only one who condemned the fact that video game does not promote violence²². More precisely six people gave a negative skeptical approach and confessed that they sometimes got angry causing violent behavior. When I asked him about the violent disturbances he caused, his answer was him being silent and showing me a broken wooden chair²³. So it does fit with Anderson (2004), as he points out that each time people play violent video games, they rehearse aggressive scripts that teach and reinforce vigilance for enemies (i.e., hostile perception bias), aggressive action against others, expectations that others will behave aggressively,

²¹ Mistri, Gopal, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 11, 2021.

²² Basak, Sudip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behaviour*, November 10, 2021.

²³ Basak, Sudip, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behaviour*, November 10, 2021.

positive attitudes toward the use of violence, and beliefs that violent solutions are effective and appropriate (Anderson 2004), however, my focus will be on the actual discrepancy within this dichotomy rather than agreeing to it²⁴. As many recent scholars on the field such as Souvik Mukherjee opined, it would be unwise to suggest that killing a figure in a video game would enable a soldier to kill the enemy without any emotional response in the battle zone (Mukherjee 2010). Hence, my focus would be rather on the context of controlling violence through *PUBG* than the oversimplified view, that is, *PUBG* causing violence²⁵. As for instance another participant, Prodig Basak, stated:

Playing *PUBG* has many positive outcomes. Gamers can know and learn about names of historical artifacts (various types of guns and battles), historical events and other knowledge by playing the video game. It helps learn many divers and positive elements of the society, reasoning skills, even taught us how to make friends online.²⁶

²⁴ As Sicart (2009) successfully points out, computer games have been a mass media target for a good part of the last two decades. Accusations that games are training devices for teenage serial killers with serious social issues made them a usual suspect in terms of creating a moral panic. One common media argument claims that games lead to violent behavior and desensitization in the face of violence. This has even led certain groups to actively seek legislative restrictions on the distribution of violent computer games. Computer games are now what cinema and rock and roll once were: the bull's eye of morality. This moral panic is a symptom of a larger cultural issue. In our postindustrial societies, we understand and promote computer games as a valuable medium for entertainment, creation, and socialization. Developed and developing societies, from China to the United States, are witnessing the economic and cultural benefits of computer games as a dominant cultural industry. Academia too now focuses on these games as objects of research, validating their importance in the configuration of our cultural landscape. Despite all this interest, we know little to nothing about the ethics of computer games (Sicart 2009, 3).

²⁵ As “videogame playing has been found to help improve perceptual skills and visual attention, [...] visuospatial cognition, [...] and spatial skills,” (see for instance the psychological effects of video games). “Research has explored the impact of videogames on a variety of different levels with a particular focus on learning as it appears that videogames can offer a unique avenue for learning to players. [...] videogames are potentially powerful learning tools because they support multi-sensory, active, experiential, and problem-based learning. They also favor activation of prior knowledge to allow progression within a game and provide immediate feedback thus allowing testing of a hypothesis and immediate learning from ones actions. Videogames can also include opportunities for self-assessment and are often becoming important social learning environments that allow for additional learning from different perspectives. The emergence of videogames as a key learning tool has been highlighted by researchers due to their reinforcement ability, the emphasis on distributed practicing of skills, and the active involvement and motivation of the learner in the task.” (McLean and Griffiths 2013, 121).

²⁶ Basak, Prodig, interviewed by author. *Does Playing PUBG Cause Violent Behavior*, November 8, 2021.

The context behind the ban on *PUBG*

Now coming to the context behind the banning of the video game; *PUBG* was banned under Section 69A of the *Information Technology Act, 2000* (Mayank 2023b). According to Mayank, the following are the three major reasons behind the ban on *PUBG Mobile* in India: national security concerns, getting children addicted to in-app purchases, and youth committing thefts and acts of violence due to the game. One of the biggest reasons behind the ban of *PUBG Mobile* in India is concerns regarding the data privacy of users. Michael Brandon Ingram stated:

A recent report revealed *Battlegrounds Mobile India* has been banned by the Indian government reportedly citing “national security concerns” once again, due to Tencent’s partial ownership of Krafton. While the Indian government has yet to make a direct confirmation, players in India found as early as Thursday that the game was no longer available on either Android or iOS stores. The delisting was confirmed by Krafton with the studio reportedly “seeking clarification” into the reasoning behind the ban. (Ingram 2022)

Also, the servers of the game are located in China, and it was believed that user data were being stolen and transferred (Mayank 2023b). The central government issued a press release regarding the ban, stating:

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has received many complaints from various sources, including several reports about misuse of some mobile apps available on Android and iOS platforms for stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users’ data in an unauthorized manner to servers which have locations outside India. The compilation of these data, its mining and profiling by elements hostile to national security and defense of India, which ultimately impinges upon the sovereignty and integrity of India, is a matter of very deep and immediate concern which requires emergency measures. (Sayal 2020)

This is the reason that the government of India banned both *PUBG Mobile* and *PUBG Mobile Lite* applications in the country. Both mobile games are developed by Tencent Games, which is situated and registered in China (Arora 2020). However, of the two, only *PUBG Mobile* has a Chinese publisher, Tencent, with its servers majorly based in China. On the other hand, *PUBG* for PC is operated by a Korean publisher, the PUBG Corp. This appears to be the reason why the game is still available on PC, even as it remains banned on mobiles in India (Talwar 2020). According to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, *PUBG Mobile* has been banned under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, on the grounds that “they are engaged in activities which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order” (Talwar 2020).

Free-to-play games like *PUBG Mobile* use an in-app or in-game purchase model as an important source of revenue. While *PUBG Mobile* was not the only game with this method of monetization, it also included *Gacha* mechanics (Mayank 2023b). *Gacha* mechanic in a game is also known as a pull method where players get an opportunity to get a reward from an assorted list (Vicente 2020). This is also dubbed as the initial exposure to gambling for young players, which in turn can lead to a habit growing up (Mayank 2023b). An important aspect to note is the in-app purchases in *PUBG Mobile* were usually made in a way which indirectly promoted the next one. The purchase would give variable in-game currency required to purchase a specific item. This made the players think they needed currency to be able to play the game in a complete manner which encouraged them to make another purchase. This method is used not only by *PUBG Mobile* (Benny 2022) but also by most other modern free-to-play games (Mayank 2023b).

With rising popularity of *PUBG Mobile* in the Indian gaming sector, several kids were playing the game together and comparing game statistics with each other. The game became a new medium to show off among kids. With in-game cosmetics, the game started creating disparities among these kids as some were able to purchase them while others were not. Watching other friends paying for in-game items led many youngsters to steal money

from their parents (Mayank 2023b). Several incidents of kids stealing money (Sengupta 2020) from parents started surfacing from different parts of the country. People even started betting money while challenging each other to a match of *PUBG Mobile* (Mayank 2023b). In more extreme cases, physical harm and loss of life (Team G2G 2022a) were also involved after parents started to stop children from playing the game. While the game was banned, a similar game called *Battlegrounds Mobile India* (BGMI) was released only for the Indian market but was banned (Team G2G 2022b) later after it was found to be a similar game leading to the emergence of similar incidents (Banerjee 2022) which caused the Indian authorities to ban *PUBG Mobile*. Therefore, the game was banned on September 2, 2020, along with 117 other Chinese apps. One of the biggest reasons behind the ban of *PUBG Mobile* in India is concerns regarding the data privacy of users. The servers of the game are located in China, and it was believed that user data were being stolen and transferred. (Mayank 2023b)

In the latest attack against Chinese apps, the government of India has now banned 118 new apps, in addition to the ones that it had announced a ban on earlier. Interestingly, the new list also contains applications such as *PUBG Mobile*—a game that enjoys great popularity in India, with thousands of users logging into the application every day (Talwar 2020). The government has announced that it is also banning *PUBG Mobile Nordic Map: Livik*, *PUBG Mobile Lite*, *WeChat Work*, and *WeChat reading*, in addition to the *PUBG Mobile*. However, what's interesting is that among the list of banned apps, the one name that is missing is *PUBG* (Talwar 2020). India banned *PUBG Mobile* following heightened tensions between India and China in late 2020, due to *PUBG Mobile* being published by Chinese gaming juggernaut Tencent. *PUBG* would return to the region with an India-specific version published by Krafton a few months later. Now, however, *PUBG* has once again been banned in India (Ingram 2022).

Conclusion

Since media are deeply related to the way we live our everyday life (Melzer and Happ 2014, 2), we are subjected to be affected in both ways, that is,

positive and negative. Furthermore, digital media are used widely and across all generations. At the same time, a general decrease in altruism, empathy, and charity, as well as an increase in selfishness in our society are recurrently discussed (Melzer and Happ 2014, 2). Some humans are prone to violence; this is a common philosophical truth. Hence from the beginning of the initial days of civilization to the very end of the 20th century, there were ample numbers of wars, battles, and the two great evil wars which had shaken the basis of humanity. All these happened much before the invention of violent video games. Violence is indeed an intimidating, unnecessary though embedded feature of human character (and it is a philosophical truth). Therefore, day by day civilized men tried to condemn violent warfare and tried to stop casualties by forcing laws and regulations. After years of turmoil, civilized humanists are trying to eradicate hundreds of evil effects caused by the gruesome horror of warfare. They turn into more rational ways of thinking like in the other ways where physical punishment acquiring virtual, that is, instead of death sentence or physical torture now people are more dependent on counseling, psychological treatment, et cetera. Even though civilization has grown to a point where violent behavior is no longer an opportunity to express superiority, some people still have the initial urges that their predecessors used to have, that is, thrust for violence and war as their favorite game of manhood. To stop them from violating the rules of humanity, they needed to diverge their energy into another program of new thoughts and a new level of game such as *PUBG* or *Free Fire*. So, these games are rather a divergent phenomenon that can prevent damages than a straight reason for causing damages. Therefore my conclusion is that violent content does not affect how people act rather it depends on many primary factors such as perspectives, mental state, the ability to consume facts, et cetera. Nevertheless, the Governmental ban on *PUBG* is rather geopolitical in nature than the simple assumption of preventing violent behavior. This is why India is developing its own alternatives to *PUBG Mobile* like *Raji: An ancient epic*. According to Karanveer Singh, we will see more and more Indian alternatives pop up as the Indian government is also supporting “Made in India” mobile game hackathons to keep Indians entertained and self-reliant (Arora 2020).

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