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Local visitor at the India Gaming Show South 2018, Bengaluru / India. Photo by Xenia Zeiler, 20 January 2018.

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Special Issue

Video Game Development in Asia: Voices from the Field

edited by

Gregory P. Grieve, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Xenia Zeiler
and Christopher Helland

An Ethnoludography of the Game Design Industry in Kathmandu, Nepal

Gregory Price Grieve

Abstract

What counts as the field site when researching Nepali video game developers? Concentrating on the company Arcube Games and Animation, in the summer of 2017 I used the ethnoludographic method to research game development in the Kathmandu Valley. I recorded my findings in field notes, photographs, written documents and other material culture. My usual ethnographic method developed in two ways. First, I engaged in ludography, a humanistic qualitative method for interpreting gaming. Second, Nepal proved not to be an isolated location, but rather a vortex of global flows. I found that in the Kathmandu valley these flows are often focused on a fantasy of *Shangri-La* that poses Nepal as an underdeveloped traditional nation, full of picturesque poverty, and over-determined with religious culture, but blessed with beautiful Himalayan landscapes.

Keywords: Nepal, Video Game Design, Asia, Ethnoludography, Fieldwork, Cultural flows, gameenvironments

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Supported by the University of Helsinki's Future Development Fund, in the summer of 2017, I began the first stage of mapping video game development in Nepal. My ongoing project, part of a larger multi-scholar study of Asia, investigates how the value-system of cultural heritage is implemented in video games and utilized by Nepali game developers. This initial field report details approximately a month of research exploring game development in Kathmandu through the ethnoludographic method.



Figure 1. Mr. and Ms. Shakya playing on Mobile (© S. Shakya 2017).

During my fieldwork, I worked with game developers, visited their offices, played their games, and also observed and interviewed fifty-three other people about gaming. My participant observation, along with other findings, was recorded in field notes, photographs, written documents and material culture. I concentrated on the design team of Arcube Games and Animation, located at Thulo Kharibot Marga Kathmandu. *Arcube*, founded in 2015, consists of five individuals. It was one of only a dozen research teams working on games in Kathmandu Valley. All the game designs in Nepal were fairly simple, but still pushed the envelope of what was technologically possible with limited means. As in many Asian nations, Nepali game design depends on the rise of mobile phones. At the time of writing, the number of mobile subscriptions has outnumbered Nepal’s population with 105.15 percent of the population possessing a mobile phone (Nepal Telecommunications Authority 2018).



Figure 2. Arcube Games & Animation(© Raj Kuman Shreshta 2017).

Ethnography proved to be the most effective method for understanding game design in Nepal. The ethnographic method refers to the study of human behavior in the natural settings in which people live. Through fieldwork, ethnographic researchers describe cultural systems by immersing themselves in the ongoing everyday activities of a specific community for the purpose of describing the social context, relationships, and cultural processes relevant to the topic under consideration. Ethnographic analysis is inductive, building upon the perspectives of the residents studied, and emphasizes the analysis of people and communities through long-term relationships between the researcher and research participants.

A question that quickly arose in my research, however, was what counted as the field site of Nepali video game developers. The myth of the ethnographic field as a discreet, bounded geographic locale is proving to be increasingly outdated and untenable as globalization blurs the boundary between *here* and *there*. As James Clifford writes, in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography*,

Literature, and Art, "[w]hen one speaks of working in the field, or *going* to the field, one draws on mental images of a distant place with an inside and outside, reached by practices of physical movement" (Clifford 2002, 54). In short, it quickly became apparent that Nepal, like any nation-state, is not just a physical location, but also an imagined place created and held together by various media technologies and cultural flows.

My ethnographic method expanded in two directions because of the need to enlarge the field to include transnational flows. First, I realized that besides ethnography I would also need to engage in what I call ludography, a humanistic qualitative method that extends textual exegesis, method studies, and ethnography, to the play of video games (Grieve 2016). Thus far I have played through many Nepali designed games and have analyzed player comments on several websites. The main primary source I researched, however, was the Arcube-designed game *polyTricks* (2016). Developed as an Android mobile application, *polyTricks* is an endless-runner game, in which the player can tilt their device left or right to move the character across the screen. It follows a corrupt politician as he works his way from rookie to president.



Figure 3. *PolyTricks* (Arcube Games & Animation, 2016).

The second critical challenge that arose during my ethnoludographic study was that I came to realize that game development in Nepal is not isolated, but rather part of a turbulent vortex of global flows (Appadurai 1990). Cultural flows describe the multidirectional movements of people, material objects, capital, images, concepts, information, and technologies within global, national, and regional areas. Traveling as they form different combinations of hybrid-interdependencies, which mutate existing social and political structures; the trajectories of cultural flows are not bounded territorially, but describe ever-changing cultural landscapes, that tend to erase imagined boundaries and reform existing institutions.

What do these transnational flows look like in the Kathmandu Valley? In many ways, Nepal's game development is similar to other Asian nations. It differs, however, because it is imagined through the fantasy of *Shangri-La*, a fictional place described in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by British author James Hilton. As an isolated Shangri-

La, Nepal is posed as an underdeveloped traditional nation, full of picturesque poverty, over-determined with religious culture, and blessed with beautiful Himalayan landscapes. Reeking with a Romantic Orientalism, Hilton describes Shangri-La as a mystical, harmonious valley, gently guided by Buddhist Monks. The name has become synonymous with an earthly Himalayan utopia, a permanently happy land, isolated from the world.

The Fantasy of Shangri-La challenges Nepal game designers, but this myth of isolation has nothing to do with reality. The Kathmandu Valley is far from isolated – with tourists flooding in from developed nations, and Nepali guest workers flooding out to mainly work in Malaysia and the Gulf States (Liecthy 2017). I have not yet researched the effect of guest workers on video game design, and this will be a fruitful area for future research. What is important for the current study, however, is that the flow of people outward from Nepal shows that the nation is not an isolated country but actually has one of the highest rates of international travel in the world, and is heavily entangled with the global economy. Moreover, this is not only a modern phenomenon. For instance, for hundreds of years Nepalis have been long distance traders, and have also served as Ghurkas in the British Empire.



Figure 4. Rabin Shilpakar, Arcube's team leader. (© Gregory Grieve, 2017).

Using the ethnoludographic method to study locally designed Asian games illustrates the value-systems of actual people rather than the reiterated arid landscape of often-essentialized orientalist visions, such as the fantasy of Nepal as Shangri-La. While circulated as mere entertainment, local games such as *polyTricks* are weapons of the weak that resist the often-implicit dominant hegemonic view of Asia that many AAA-video games proffer. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue in *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, gaming embodies the cultural, political, and economic forces of global capital, while also providing a means of resistance (2009). In short, video games are not something that has happened to Nepal, but are an encounter between groups that share complex, historically constituted mediascapes. Nepali game development is not derivate or imitative, but rather contemporaneous and active. The makers of *polyTricks* depict Nepal as underdeveloped, corrupt, and peripheral to the world economy, but a land of immense beauty (mountains), cultural heritage (temples) and potential for economic development. As Rabin Shilpakar, Arcube's team leader said, in an interview by Ashish Bikram Lamichhane,

“The main purpose to build this game is to uplift the gaming industry in Nepal. The gaming industry can be next career building opportunities for many IT students and artists. The gaming industry can help us to present our folk, mythological stories, our history, culture, [and] art in the form of the game. This can also educate our current generation, future generations to come and entertain them as well” (Shilpakar 2016).

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