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religion gamet analysis simulation ludology narrative



Novigrad in the evening sun. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015)

Special Issue

Gamevironments of the Past.

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

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The Indian Indie Game Development Scene – History and Cultural Heritage as Game Themes

Xenia Zeiler

Abstract

While the Indian indie game development scene is still relatively young, it has already lived through big changes. Like in many regions worldwide, indie game developers in India have to negotiate between practical issues, for example regarding market requirements and expectations, and committed ambitions, for example regarding creative aspirations in art design and game content. On the one hand and in order to persist in the ever extending industry, they need to acknowledge mainstream wants and practical demands from especially (though not exclusively) the Indian game market which at present is characterized by an overall dominance of mobile card and casino games. On the other hand, we see that especially Indian indie developers increasingly reflect on the role of Indian cultural heritage (including elements from history, architecture, music, etc.) for India produced games. This turn to own roots, to implement Indian cultural and historical heritage in games, is now visible in a number of games which have been recently Greenlit on Steam and are in the final production phases, such as *Asura* (2017 forthc.), *Antariksha Sanchar* (2017 forthc.), and others.

Keywords: Indian games, Indian game developers, cultural heritage, *Asura*, *Antariksha Sanchar*, *Sky Sutra*

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The Indian Indie Game Development Scene: 2016

While the monsoon rages outside but the AC provides for a creative climate inside, the game developers at the New Delhi based SuperSike, <http://supersikegames.com/>, on this July 2016 morning brood over their new game(s). The Indian indie game development studio is a start-up company, founded in 2012:

“At that time, back in 2012, there wasn’t much action that we could see in the Indian industry with respect to original ideas created out of India. That is something we always wanted to do, you know, like create our own games, from conception to execution of the game. So, keeping all these things in mind, it felt right to go with our own company.” (Goyal 2016)

It has a background which is arguably more or less typical for such start-ups worldwide: it is built on much enthusiasm, the wish to implement one one’s concepts, and a bit on the fact that many jobs in big game companies go to people with extensive job experience mainly. SuperSike is a good example for the overall Indian indie game development scene, as we see it in 2016. For instance, in order to survive in the rapidly growing market of Indian game development studios, it needs to recognize the massive dominance of mobile games in India:

“I think playing games on the phones is probably the biggest source of game-playing in India. Of course, then you have your niche markets where people still have consoles, people have like PlayStations or Xboxes at home, but that’s like really a small number of people. You have PC gamers here as well ... Right now, it’s primarily smartphones. I’ll give you this example: I love riding on public transport. And in India, I’ve noticed that 5 years ago, people had phones and they’d be listening to FM, radio, on their phones. 2 years ago, they were watching videos on their phones. And these days, they are only playing games when travelling on public transport. So that’s how the shift has been, so fast, it’s happening really quickly.” (G. 2016)

Many free-of-charge international mobile games are also played in India (*Subway Surfers* 2012, *Temple Run* 2011, etc.). But are there Indian games which are popular in

India? Basically all successful mobile games in India since 2015 have been card or casino games: "Primarily, casino games and card based games are really popular. ... For example, Teen Patti and some clones of Teen Patti, and all do well." (G. 2016). *Teen Patti* games, lit. "3 Cards", refers to a number of very similar card (casino) games with very similar names, for example *Teen Patti Gold* (2014, regularly updated) and others, which have been a huge success story in India. Numerous Indian companies have produced such mobile card gamesⁱ. Apart from this, a few Hindu mythology based games with an animation film background, for example from the *Chhota Bheem* franchiseⁱⁱ, or Bollywood blockbuster games with usually a rather brief lifespan, in the summer of 2016 for example on the Bollywood blockbuster *Sultan*ⁱⁱⁱ, have had moderate success. While these themes dominate the Indian mobile game market at present, of course also other topics are taken up – sports (such as cricket), educational themes (such as hygiene), entertainment and politics (such as VIP's), etc.

History and Cultural Heritage as Game Themes: Changes and Challenges

When it comes to the implementation of cultural heritage – be it elements of history, architecture, religion, music, etc. – by Indian game developers, so far this has played a role mainly in indie games. The very few attempts to produce Indian heritage or culture based games on a bigger scale (for example *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* 2009 for PlayStation 2, see Zeiler 2014) have failed. At present, this seems to change:

"More Indian developers have propped up in the last 3-4 years, I think we'll see more people tapping into the old cultural, the rich cultural history which we have, and probably creating games on that." (Goyal 2016)

The most advanced games (all from indie game developers) which currently take this approach are *Asura* (forthc. 2017)^{iv} and *Antariksha Sanchar* (forthc. 2017)^v, both recently Greenlit on Steam, and partly *Sky Sutra* (forthc. 2017)^{vi}, in the final

development phase. *Asura* (forthc. 2017), as explained by the developer from the Hyderabad based Ogre Head Studio, <http://ogrehead.com/>, is “loosely inspired from Indian mythology” (Fahadh 2015) and stages the demon like character Asura based on Hindu mythology. *Antariksha Sanchar* (forthc. 2017) combines elements of steampunk and historical facts about the Indian mathematician Ramanujan. Both games make use of Indian cultural heritage and historical elements in both narrative and aesthetics, such as in landscapes, architecture, clothing, jewelry, and music. *Sky Sutra* (forthc. 2017) mainly incorporates Indian architectural landscapes, and partly meditation backgrounds and music. Reasons for Indian game developers to incorporate such Indian themes into their games, not surprisingly, often have to do with the own cultural backgrounds, as the founders and developers of Yellow Monkey Studios in Mumbai, <http://www.yellowmonkeystudios.com/>, respectively Pixel Ape Studios in Palghat (Kerala), <http://www.pixelapestudios.com/> reflect:

“This is imparting a little bit of what we know, of our culture, into our work. It also makes it unique, and it makes it something only we can do. Because we know what Indian instruments exist, we know what an Indian skyline looks like, and we can use those things much better than anyone else. A little bit more identity, I guess.” (Prabhu 2015)

“Being an Indian, I’m actually in the best position to push it out, this kind of stuff. ... For my next game, I’m thinking more into something really, really Indian.” (Menon 2015)

To sum up: The Indian game development scene rapidly develops, and transforms at present. This is especially true for the indie game developers, who are arguably the more creative (and daring) ones when it comes to exploring new routes. While obviously market wants still dictate large parts of what is being produced, also new creative aspirations in game content and art design become visible. Additionally, to the dominating mobile card, casino and sports games, Indian cultural heritage (including elements from history, architecture, music, etc.) finds its way into India produced games – visible for example in the upcoming *Asura* (2017 forthc.),

Antariksha Sanchar (2017 forthcoming), and *Sky Sutra* (2017 forthcoming).

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ⁱ See, for example, <http://teenpattigold.com/>, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.octro.teenpatti>, or <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.teenpattithreecardspoker>.

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.chhotabheem.com/games.php>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.NNGames.sultan>.

^{iv} See <http://www.asurathegame.com/>.

^v See <http://www.antariksha.in/>.

^{vi} See <http://gadgets.ndtv.com/games/reviews/sky-sutra-is-part-shooter-part-platformer-all-awesome-and-made-in-india-773000>.