
Generic words
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The Last of Us
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funeral
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religion
representation
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symbols
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dungeon
skill
discussion
genesis
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gamevironments

Issue 23 (2025)

GV Research Day Reports

Peer-reviewed article

Cards Against Anarchy: The Survival of Art and Game in the *Dashavatar Cards* of India

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Abstract

The word avatar that is so commonly used in videogames and media today has a well-known Eastern origin in Hindu mythology and loosely translates as reincarnation although the more correct thinking is perhaps re-descent of the gods in various forms to set the world right. The digital game concept has a more tangible, ludic physical version in the *Dashavatar cards* of India. Depicting the ten avatars of the Indian god, Vishnu, these are commonly circular or rectangular hand-painted cards that have a religious significance and are also works of art that are adaptations of the Persian ganjifa cards that presumably made their way into medieval India in the 15th or 16th centuries. Today, the makers of these cards are few and those who know how to play them are even fewer. The game survives as an art form associated with the narrative folk paintings or the patachitras and is nevertheless struggling to survive even in the artistic communities of the chitrakars who used to paint the cards in different parts of India. This paper looks at how a game is displaced almost entirely by competing ludic practices from Europe and then survives almost entirely as an art form, thus highlighting the important co-dependence of games and art but from a Global South context. In doing so, it focuses on the apparent struggle between the play and the artistic traditions of the card game while addressing how the existence of the cards as play and artistic objects continues to be threatened even as attempts to revive these traditions are underway.

Keywords: Art, Avatar, Dashavatar, Ganjifa, Global South, Playing Cards, Survival, gamevironments

To cite this article: Mukherjee, A. and Mukherjee, S., 2025. Cards Against Anarchy: The Survival of Art and Game in the *Dashavatar Cards* of India. *Gamevironments* 23, 77-99. Available at https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/.

Introduction: The Slow Disappearance of Dashavatar as Art and Play

Depicting the ten *avatars* or incarnations of the Hindu god, *Vishnu*, *Dashavatar cards* are hand-painted circular playing cards that have a religious significance and are also works of art that are adaptations of the Persian *ganjifa* cards that presumably made their way into medieval India in the 15th or 16th centuries. Today, the makers of these cards are few and those who know how to play them are even fewer. The game currently survives as an art form associated with the narrative folk paintings or the *patachitras* (Ghosh 2003) and is nevertheless struggling to survive even in the artistic communities of the *chitrakars* who used to paint the cards in different parts of India. This paper looks at how a game is displaced almost entirely by competing ludic practices from Europe and then survives almost entirely as an art form, thus highlighting the important co-dependence of games and art but from a Global South context.

Along with its play form, currently even the artistic value of the cards is under threat (Pati 2015). The artists of these cards, some of them national award winners like Banamali Mahapatra, who is a patachitra and Ganjapa[i] artist from Odisha, reveal deep tensions regarding the survival of the Dashavatar cards while paradoxically claiming that they are the only remaining authentic source of the art form. In interviews conducted on the field in places such as Bishnupur in West Bengal, Raghurajpur and Puri in Odisha, Sawantwadi in Maharashtra and Mysore in Karnataka[ii], a concern that emerges is the artists' increasing reluctance to make these playing cards because they are no longer economically viable. These cards contain elaborate suits and numbers, each hand-painted, thus making them highly priced and therefore difficult to sell.

Post-Covid prices are much higher and the number of customers, those mainly buying the cards as curios, is lesser. There are, of course, reinventions of the craft

where only some of the more decorative cards are made, either to adorn drawing rooms or just to tell a story, as the patachitra scrolls do do – the question that then arises is whether the game is entirely lost to retain the art. Then again, some card artists do not compromise and will only sell the full set of cards that can be used to play the game. In this delicate balance of art and game, the Dashavatar cards continue in their exalted aim to save the world from evil by invoking the avatars of Vishnu but whether the art and the game survive is a question of worry, today. This article, drawing on field interviews, analyses this complex interplay of ludic and artistic practices with local tradition, religion and stories while also addressing the question of how games and art coexist in these painted cards. It goes on to examine as its key research question the contention that art and play cannot be seen as completely separate elements in a binary relationship, as evident when viewed in connection to the Ganjifa cards. Even when viewed within the backdrop of how the cards are being forgotten in most parts of India and how simultaneously the attempts to revive them also alter the ethos of the cards, questions of art and play and how they relate to each other keep emerging will be raised further in this article.

Playing Cards in India and the Case of Ganjifa

Playing cards are a popular pastime in India and there are even digital versions of the games such as Rummy, Poker and the more local Twenty-Nine (itself a variation of the Dutch Jass games). The arrival of the French suites of fifty-two cards with the European colonizers has, for various reasons, displaced the older *Ganjifa* cards (von Leyden 1982). In fact, in some Indian languages such as Bengali, the names of the card suits, *Haratan*, *Ruiton* and *Ishkapon*, come from Dutch *Ruiten*, *Harten* and *Schoppen*. The Dashavatar cards are, therefore, relegated to marginal spaces in terms of play – only a handful of people know how to play them and the number keeps

decreasing. The rules also vary from region to region which makes uniformity in play traditions difficult. In the past five decades or so, these cards were previously sold mainly as handicraft items and curios to foreign tourists because they are expensive to make as each set contains a hundred twenty cards, where a hundred are number cards and twenty are ornately drawn and painted depictions of the ten avatars of Vishnu. The cards are made on handmade paper with handmade organic colours whose preparation techniques go back centuries and the iconography is typical of the art form of the region or also part of the temple sculptures in India, often recreated in paint as stylised versions of these gods and mythical creatures. The stories of the ten avatars are also, as it were, coded into the public imagination when the game is played and the cards are used. The play and the artistic elements seem to be worked in seamlessly in the experience of the Ganjifa but a more thorough explanation may be helpful here, especially to unpack the deeper connections with the complex cultural milieux in South Asia.

A brief note is required here to explain the Dashavatar concept. *Avatar*, in this context, is used in the sense of the incarnations of the Hindu god *Vishnu*; the literal meaning is descent and derives from *ava* and *tri* meaning below and crossing respectively – thus an avatar is the crossing-down of a god to free humanity from evil (Parrinder 1997, for a detailed discussion of the difference of the videogame avatar vis a vis the Hindu concept see Snodgrass 2023 and Mukherjee 2012). The first avatar is *Matsya*, the second is *Kurma*, followed by *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Vaman*, *Parasuram*, *Ram*, *Balaram* or *Krishna*, *Jagannath* or *Buddha* and lastly *Kalki* avatar, who will mark the end of the *Kaliyug* or the age of darkness and misery. The avatars of Vishnu are supposed to descend to earth and combat and dispel anarchy. As such, the dashavatar cards are religious in their ethos but they are also representative of aspects of life, as are ganjifa cards in general as they too depict elements such as

power, wealth, martial prowess, record-keeping and music in their respective suits. While Dashavatar is the most popular variant that branched from the older Persian Ganjifa cards, there are also other variants that emerged like *Ramayana Ganjifa*, *Astadikpala*, *Saptamatrika*, *Navagraha* or *Navagunjara* of Odisha, *Chamundeshwari Chad* of Mysore and many more.

Even while taking cognizance of the Hindu connections of the Dashavatar concept, it must be remembered that Ganjifa itself is a product of transculturation in Mughal India or earlier. Ganjifa cards possibly originated in Islamic Persia or Mameluke Turkey and as far as their travel to India and their reconfiguration as the Dashavatar cards that show clear Hindu iconography, Hopewell (2010, 11) comments:

> "The general assumption is that cards were brought to India by the Mughal Emperors early in the sixteenth century but it is equally possible that they had come with Turkman princes who emigrated to the central part of India known as the Deccan in the late fifteenth century. Once established the cards spread to most regions of India either in the original form with eight suits, known as Mughal *ganjifa*, or in its slightly later Hindu form with ten suits known as dashavatara ganjifa."

Ganjifa cards are mentioned in the Mughal archives by Gulbadan Begum (1522-1603), the sister of Emperor Humayun (1508-1556) and later, at length by Abul Fazl (ca. 1565), the celebrated biographer of the Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) who describes the ganjifa set at length. The Mughal set consisting of ninety-six cards (eight suits of twelve cards in each suit) depicting the emperor himself as well as high officials from different parts of the administration and the kings of neighbouring states. The Mughal ganjifa spread to multiple parts of South Asia but has since disappeared from all but a few places in India. As Rudolf von Leyden (1982, 10), an authority on Ganjifa, states "one can say with some degree of certainty that foreign (e.g., European) cards had no influence on the development of the eight-suited ganjifa." Following the

Mughals, the Maratha rulers preserved the tradition of the Mughal deck but with their own adaptations. The art and play of ganjifa also influenced the Mysore ruler Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar III in the nineteenth century, whose ludic legacy extended in many boardgames of South Asia and he was not only was familiar with the Dashavatar cards but also experimented and developed other variants of ganjifa cards, such as the *Chamundeshwari Chad*. Wodeyar designed many variants featuring different iconography and in the number of card-suits and of course, multiple rules of play. According to Kulkarni et al. (2019, 30)

> "(i)t is in the interest of the local religious beliefs and practices [sic] the cards also adopted the local Hindu imagery. Though conceptually they rejected the power of the Mughals, in the case of Ganjifa, it continued to produce Mughal sets side-by-side."

Currently the playing cards are made in Sonepur and Raghurajpur (Odisha), Bishnupur (West Bengal), Sawantwadi (Maharashtra) and Mysore (Karnataka). Nirmal (Andhra Pradesh), was another centre where the cards were made but with the demise of the last ganjifa artist, the tradition there is now at an end. In Sawantwadi, Khem Sawant Bhonsle III (1755-1803), a Maratha chief in the eighteenth century, became a patron of the arts and very likely brought the Mughal ganjifa into his kingdom. In an interview with Yuvrani Shraddha Bhonsle (Indiaboardgamearchive 2025a) of the Sawantwadi royal family, while sharing the beginning of the art form of ganjifa, she mentioned that the introduction to these playing cards came from the people who migrated from Andhra Pradesh to Sawantwadi to study *Dharmashastra* under Khem Sawant Bhonsle III who patronised the play tradition and the art form of ganjifa cards.[iii] Together with the toy-making and other decorative arts, Sawantwadi became a major hub of ganjifa making and more recently, the royal family has further revived the tradition of both making the traditional deck of Dashavatar cards along with other experimental sets like musical Ganjifa and zodiac Ganjifa cards. The family

has even brought the ganjifa cards into their hospitality business and their palace-hotel now contains dashavatar-themed rooms.

The transition of the cards from the Mughal rule to present times is not as clearly chalked out in the other traditions of ganjifa in Eastern India such as Bishnupur in West Bengal and Raghurajpur in Odisha, although both claim to have started with royal patronage. Also, the change in the iconography of the Mughal suits of the ganjifa to the more Hindu, both religious and secular sets, is not clearly documented and still an object of research. Nevertheless, both in the Bishnupur and Raghurajpur sets, there are also sets that bear a closer connection to the Mughal ganjifa. Both these traditions of ganjifa also have multiple card-suits in addition to the dashavatar cards. The forty-eight card *Naqsh* of Bishnupur and the eight-suited *Navagunjara* of Raghurajpur (Pati 2015, 70) are such examples. It appears that despite probable independent origins, European cards did at some point coexist with ganjifa cards. In fact, the forty-card, *firangi ganjifa* (loosely European Ganjifa) is recorded by ganjifa scholar Gupta (1979) as being played in Jaipur, Rajasthan. The more compact European card sets would have been easier to play with and the mass-produced and printed cards were obviously much cheaper. Today, it is a wonder that games of European origin such as *teen patti* are identified as iconically Indian, even digitally; the ganjifa set is by contrast more of a rarity and the rules also make play rather cumbersome for modern times. As such, the ganjifa card is becoming more of a handicraft item than an actual game. The subsequent sections will discuss both the artistic and playful elements of this fast-disappearing phenomenon.

Ganjifa and Art

Ganjifa cards were made of two kinds. One is called the *durbar kalam*, or the court-

style and the other is the bazaar kalam, or the commoners' style (bazaar: market). The durbar kalam, or the ganjifa made for the elite, was made of gold foil, ivory, tortoise shell and mother of pearl while the bazaar kalam was made of cloth/mound board or other ordinary materials. Only the bazaar kalam are now available and that too mostly as handicrafts.

These playing cards are handmade out of cotton cloth. In some traditions such as Mysore, it is made of cardboard as well. As seen with play tradition, styles of painting and use of colours, the material at times differs from region to region. According to the Fouzdar family, who are artists of ganjifa from Bishnupur, the raw materials are dried in the summer months and the glue to attach the cloth is made from tamarind seeds. The layers of the cards have been glued together and dried. Subsequently, the cloth transforms into a hard board like material. These cloths are cut out into round shapes to make them into ganjifa cards.[iv] To thicken the base another mixture of terracotta clay is added to the rounded shape of cards. An iron die helps in cutting these cards into standard shapes based on requirement. Further, they are pressed by a mortar and pestle to remove irregularities. And lastly natural colours are added to paint these cards into what they look like during completion. The artisans from Raghurajpur also make their own paint from raw minerals. Banamali Mahapatra (Indiaboardgamearchive 2025b), one of the last makers of the Odisha ganjapa, explained the process of making the colours in detail and with actual samples during our interview. He mentioned natural pigments such as *Hingul* (red pigment from mercury ore), *Harital* (yellow pigment) and *Sankh* (white pigment from seashells). Black colour comes from *kajal* or kohl.

It takes over a month to make one set of Dashavatar cards, comprising one hundred and twenty cards; naturally, with time and changing cultures, the usage of materials

to make these cards has evolved. While ganjapa in Odisha and Bishnupur continues to be made with cotton cloth to this day, the material holding the cards together is lac in Bishnupur while Raghurajpur artists have moved to using varnish. Cards in Sawantwadi are also made of cardboard or paper that is less durable. Similarly in the Mysore tradition, the cards are not made of cotton cloth at all; the artists have also stopped using natural pigments and have moved to artificial colours.

Where the material of the cards is so varied, the iconography is even more picturesque and changes across regions. While there are continuities among the different regional ganjifa traditions, there are also some very unique areas of difference, While the ten avatars of Vishnu are common to all the current sites of ganjifa art, as has been said earlier, there are multiple other sets of imagery that are drawn in very disparate ways. Even the dashavatar ganjjfa has different avatars of Vishnu featuring in the ten suits. For example, in many regions the eighth and ninth suits may feature different avatars: in Odisha and West Bengal, Jagannath, an avatar of Vishnu appears in the ninth suit because of his popularity in the region, whereas Krishna appears in other regions like Sawantwadi. In some cases, the Buddha appears in the ninth suit but this is less common. As von Leyden (1982, 22) comments

> "(b)y and large, the iconography of dashavatara ganjifas follows established popular imagery. But the composition and sequence of this list of avataras is not uniform, varying according to the divergent texts of the *Puranas*."

The individual suits within the Dashavatar set are also portrayed with different symbols: for example, Vamana or the dwarf avatar (the third in sequence) is portrayed by either a *Kamandalu* (a vessel to carry holy water) or a *Chatri* (an umbrella) and the cards are variously painted in colours of yellow, brown, red and green usually while in Odisha they are blue. Similarly, the king card in Odisha is always shown on a *Ratha* or

chariot which is popular to the art form of the region. The Mughal ganjifa, too, have a multiple and varied iconography: for example, the Taj or the Crown suit varies significantly:

> "(t)he shape of the crown is derived from Persian examples [...] which evolved into the ornamental and jewelled crown of rulers, In some Rajasthani cards the crown is reduced to a golden blob with green and red spots to intricate jewels. In Madhya Pradesh and Kashmir the three-pointed crown turns into a three-petalled lotus while in Odisha it becomes a fanciful flower and the suit is called *fula* or *fuli*." (von Leyden 1982, 17)

Von Leyden makes an important comment on how it is difficult to standardise the patterns and the design of the Indian cards because they are hand-painted and there are considerable variations even in the same place. In Bishnupur, for example, there are multiple branches of the same family painting the cards so there is a degree of uniformity in the iconography and artistic work, which probably is part of the family tradition that has been handed down for generations but even here some of the artists claim to be more authentic than the others. There is also a diverse range in their iconography about which more shall be said below. In comparison with the other ganjifa traditions, one of the unique attributes of the ganjifa cards made by the Fouzdar family in Bishnupur is their comparatively larger size: in contrast to the usual six inches or four inches diameter of the ganjifa cards in Odisha and Rajasthan respectively,[v] the Bishnupur ganjifa cards are eight inches in diameter and contain larger images and motifs. Historian Chatterjee (2017) notes in her unfinished paper that the Malla kings of Bishnupur were influenced both by the Gajapati kings of Odisha but that they also adopted and modified elements of the Mughal-Rajput aristocratic culture and that gives the Bishnupur cards a Mughal flavour but also mark their location within a sphere of cultural and artistic influence from Odisha. Chatterjee (2017, 44) also makes an important point in general regarding the iconography:

> "In fact, the iconography on playing cards of historical vintage have often attracted the attention of scholars because they were reminiscent of miniature paintings. The especially finely painted and delicate playing cards may have been used mainly for display purposes, as souvenirs and for purposes of gift-giving. These types of ganjifas also underscore the popularity of cards among royalty and aristocracy – a point that is further confirmed by artistic representations depicting kings, courtiers, nobles and women of elite households engaged in card-play."

This multiplicity and range in iconography are further complemented by floral and animal patterns appearing in ganjifa sets. The religious significance of the Dashavatar sets has already been mentioned; add to that the cards from Sonepur that depict scenes from the epic Ramayan or those from Puri that show the *Navagunjara*, a form of Vishnu from the Odia Mahabharat, which is a legendary creature comprising nine different animals. The Navagunjara is a common motif in the Patachitra art of Odisha and in the Odisha ganjifa and that in Bengal, the artistic connection to Patachitra, or the scroll-paintings that tell stories, is clearly evident. In a recent interview, Mysore ganjifa artist, Chandrika Padmanabhan, mentioned that her style was deeply influenced by the Mysore school of painting and that her late sister and father, who was the court painter of the Mysore kingdom, were also raised in the same tradition. Chatterjee (2017, 56) makes a similar point borrowing from von Leyden's insights

> "(t)he artistic styles and iconography favoured in different regional locales where dasavatara cards were used and manufactured provides an excellent insight into such processes. The kingdoms of the Deccan, particularly their courts attracted artists and artisans from Delhi and as far away as Iran and Central India. But the majority of Deccani artists who created the embellishment on cards were indigenous to the region and in von Leyden's words, 'carried the traditions of Vijaynagar art in their blood.'"

As von Leyden (1982) observes, the variety of the art of the ganjifa cards is quite

noticeable. The material, iconography and styles are all extremely varied across the Subcontinent. Unfortunately, the scenario has changed in recent times as there are not enough artists painting the cards, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic as our recent fieldwork conducted in December 2024 and months of 2025 have revealed. We were able to locate one or two families of artists who carried on the traditions of their respective regions but nevertheless, the variety is still impressive. While the art of the ganjifa draws heavily on surrounding local artistic traditions and in many cases, the ganjifa card has become a decorative art object, there is still a uniqueness about these round-shaped cards. The cards, in their multiplicity and variation, can arguably be said to embody a degree of playfulness in the way their art breaks from the uniformization that is prevalent in the play-decks in the European card suits.

Perhaps in the same spirit of play, the ganjifa card now exists in multiple variations starting from the inspiration of King Wodeyar to the contributions of collector and scholar Kishor Gordhandass who himself invented numerous card-game variations such as Stars and Planets and commissioned many artisans to make sets such as the Ashta Dikpala Ganjifa "from the information and colour slides made kindly available to me by Yale University Library" (Gordhandass 2019, 9). Other artists have also brought their own creativity into the art:

> "Ganjifa Raghupathi Bhat has been acclaimed for the revival of Mysore style ganjifa cards with an absence of style despite the renewed authorship." (Bhattathiri 2019, 133)

Innovations based on the Ganjifa cards continue such as in the recent adaptations characterised by "[a]mbiguity in terms of appearance" and the idea that the

> "surface of an ideal ganjifa card seems to be the most democratic space that not only accumulates an eclectic range of theme, beliefs, rituals and practices but

also refutes the dominance of one over the other." (Kumar 2019, 153)

While the eclectic nature of the Ganjifa, which brings together multiple religions, historical periods and cultures together, it is important to note the spirit that these cards embody: that of play. This is again important for countering any binarism of art versus play in the experience of the Ganjifa cards.

Ganjifa: Play Traditions

The aesthetically intriguing looking round Ganjifa cards Dashavatar, Naksha, Navagunjara, Ramayana, and many other variations differ in their play traditions. Given their regional differences ranging from varying rules to the number of cards and suits, understanding these the games is a are known to be complicated task and with a dwindling number of players, it is increasingly difficult to codify and describe the play experience. The number of suits in Dashavatar is ten depicting the ten avatars or incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The total cards round up to one hundred and twenty (ten card-suits, each suit comprising of a king card, a vizier card and ten numeral cards). As mentioned before other variants differ in number of card-suits, total number of cards and their varied forms of rules of play.

The different variants of the Dashavatar game itself have their own rules, varying across regions: in some variants, the game starts in the daytime with the earlier avatar suits and at nighttime with the later avatars. When it rains, the game starts with the Matsya (fish) or Kurma (tortoise) suits as these are aquatic animals. In Sawantwadi, the Ram suit is the trump suit during the daytime and the Krishna suit takes its place at night. In Bishnupur, the scenario is different and the Narasimha suit becomes the opening suit at twilight and the matsya suit opens the game in the daytime. The most

powerful card as it is with the mughal ganjifa is the king followed by the mantri or the vizier. In case of dashavatar cards, there are two face cards such as the raja and mantri cards (king and vizier respectively) of the avatars and ten numeric cards as mentioned. In these cards, the number is depicted by the counting of symbols of the particular suit (number of fish in case of Matsya). In the first five suits the numeric card one is the highest after the raja and mantri card while ten is the lowest.

> "The number of players also vary from region to region. While Mughal Ganjifa is usually played by three or four people which is also the case for players in parts of Odisha, in Sawantwadi the game is played by three players whereas in Bishnupur the game is played by five." (Lochan 2019, 98)

While uniformity in the varied rules is difficult to comprehend, with the struggle of the survival of these playing cards, authentic rule sets are also difficult to find. Moreover, the play tradition is at a steady decline with the passing away of the last few players of the generation and the lack of interest in a game that goes on for hours and has a complicated set of rules that are difficult to learn. Gopal Krishna Chingari, a *sebaiyat* or priest at Jagannatha Temple in Puri, is one of the last remaining players of Ganjapa in Odisha and in an interview with the authors (Indiaboardgamearchive 2025b), he wistfully remembers the glorious days of the game in Puri and how they used to play for hours from the evening into the early morning after their daily worship in the temple. He also mentioned how each trick lasted a long time and how sometimes the game would not end resulting the cards having to be dealt again.

With the departure of the remaining last players, the rules of the game are likely to be lost as the artists who make the ganjifa cards do not know how to play the game. For example, Ganjifa artist and miniature painter, Padmanabhan, mentioned how neither she nor her father who was also a ganjifa artist had seen anyone play the

game in Mysore. In Sawantwadi, however, the royal family of Khem Sawant Bhonsle have researched the game from existing players and have begun to revive the play tradition by conducting workshops of ganjifa. In Bishnupur according to Shital Fouzdar, there is an attempt at reviving play traditions of the Dashavatar cards by some of the few remaining players like Ranjit Kumar Karmakar (Dey 2022). There are also some rules of the game mentioned in some texts in Bengali (Singha Mahapatra 2021), as played in Bishnupur but the authenticity is difficult to trace as the information also varies from one source to another. Some common points of the rules briefly mention that the points of the first five avatars are counted from ten to one and the last five from one to ten. One hundred and twenty cards are distributed amongst five players where each of them has twenty-four cards and the ultimate winning point of the game is also twenty-four.

Ganjifa as Storytelling

The diversity in the art of the ganjifa and the play traditions is, in itself, a deeply playful affair. Instead of following rigid structures and rules, the game's experience seems to cut across and subvert set ideas regarding play. There is also another significant aspect to these games: narrative. The Dashavatar suits are directly associated with divinity and the playing of the game involves the taking of the god's name again and again by the player. All the avatars of Vishnu have mythological stories connected to them. In the Mughal suits, as well, there are multiple narrative possibilities given the nature of the iconography: the crown, the coin, the bolster (signifying comfort) and the sword are among the many icons representing aspects of life.

Then there are even more direct narrative presentations such as in the *Ramayan* suit

of Sonepur, Odisha, which depicts incidents from the Ramayan and could be seen as telling the story of the epic. Every ganjifa set has some story to tell and with these, of course, merge the stories of the players themselves and the legends behind the origin of the game. Satyanarayan Maharana of Sonepur narrates the story of the hero Rama in his battle with the demon Ravana who has abducted Rama's wife and taken her to his Kingdom in Lanka. The card suits reflect the epic's narrative as this article from MAP academy (2022) asserts:

> "(t)he suit signs represent key aspects of each character's role in the *Ramayana*. The Ram suits and their respective suit signs are: Ram and arrows; Lakshman and quivers; Sugriva and monkeys; Jambavat and bears; Hanuman and hills or mountains; and Vibhishana and swords with shields. The Ravan half of the deck has only two named suits: Ravan, whose suit sign is a mace, and Indrajit, whose suit sign is a *nagapasha* or a noose made with snakes. The remaining four are unnamed 'follower' suits with uniformed kings on chariots. Their suit signs are swords, daggers, a spear and a *koont* (a two-pointed Odia spear) respectively. Although he belongs to the Ram suits, Vibhishana, as shown in the king card of his suit, is dressed in the same coat and trouser uniform as the kings and ministers of the Ravan suits. In the *Ramayana*, he is described as Ravan's brother, but defects to Ram's side during the battle of Lanka, and his apparel in the suit's design is likely meant to reflect this change of allegiance."

The Sonepur deck of cards is a veritable storytelling device in that it represents key characters and events in the epic traditions of *Ramayan* and indeed is an important instance of playing cards attempting to narrate a story. Indeed, this is reminiscent of Italo Calvino's (1977) famous storytelling Tarot cards in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. There is a further layer of complexity added to the narrative traditions that the Sonepur Ganjifa cards embody because of recent archaeological contentions that Sonepur was the site of Lanka in the Ramayana (Mishra 2023). Every time the Ramayan stories are told in the region, the Ganjifa cards become as relevant as other cultural practices. With all these issues in play, the definition of ganjifa within watertight categories becomes difficult.

Art and/or Play

The Ganjifa card in its current cultural milieu is a conundrum. Is it art or is it play? With the dwindling play traditions all over South Asia (and indeed the world over), the survival of the cards is more as a handicraft or an art form. Ornately carved in ivory or wood or meticulously painted on specially handcrafted paper, the cards survive in the ateliers of a few artists who still carry on their family tradition of making these cards. Sometimes the cards are not even sold in the full set because buyers cannot afford it and prefer to buy the richly painted and colourful face cards. What does this make the Ganjifa cards? Have they lost their ludic character?

Sharp (2015, 8) notes that "(f)or game-minded communities, chess is a thing unto itself, whereas for art-minded communities, chess is an idea space and a material from which art can be made." While this may be true in other contexts, for the Ganjifa artist, the scenario is different. Even when the rules are not known fully, the sense of the game as a game remains. Sharp mainly speaks of scenarios where the game is created by artists for a specific message or scenario; the ganjifa artist while drawing the ten avatars of Vishnu is performing a religious function and an artistic function but he or she also has in mind that he is making a game and one that has its own rules and experience. Sharp mentions how Marcel Duchamp's obsession with chess and his artistic chess sets has been reflected in other art installations such as Takako Saito's many sensory chessboard art installations such as Spice Chess whose experience is olfactory mainly. Saito's installation is art but it also considers inherently the rules of chess. Speaking of videogames, eminent film critic, Roger Ebert (2012, (in)famously announced that videogames are not art. Responding to Ebert, videogame scholar Parker (2018) calls for a more nuanced thinking of the games as art debate and points out the problems in such loose definitions and the comparisons with earlier media and the need for media-specific analysis.

Ganjifa artists, on the contrary to such binarism of art versus games, have been working with a medium that has carried within itself a multiplicity of media comprising game, artwork and narrative. The rich materiality of the cards and the elaborate process of their creation is complemented by the purpose of playing them. The iconography, with its often varied motifs, may be a means of instilling religious worship and creating an atmosphere of storytelling but it is also intrinsically connected with the rules and affordances of the game; the suits themselves are painted in elaborate design and they connect to the ways in which the game is played. The art and the play element are not separable in the ganjifa card. Looking at this from the framework of supplementarity posited by Derrida (1976), one may see play and art as being supplementary rather than either being in opposition to each other or in a relationship of predominance over each other. The supplement in Derrida does not exist in a centre-margin relationship but rather as an entity that modifies and defines the centre instead of being external to it or even an addition. One could argue that the ganjifa cards themselves embody such a supplementarity that problematizes any such art-game binary. Instead of raising such oft-repeated questions regarding games and art, it will be worthwhile to consider games such as ganjifa as a way into further exploring the relations between game and art. In the same way, the notion of narrativity in Ganjifa cards is also a supplement that complicates our understanding of art itself.

Conclusion

The art-game supplementarity could also be extended to narrativity but that is perhaps the topic of a separate discussion although some of it has been briefly adumbrated in an earlier section. What is evident, however, is that art and play

cannot be seen as completely separate elements in a binary relationship when viewed in connection to the Ganjifa cards. The artistic value of the cards, from the intricately carved ivory set belonging to Lord Clive (and now in Powys Castle) to the detailed paintwork of the patachitra-like work of Banamali Mahapatra of Odisha, is undeniable. As far as the reality of play is concerned, our interview with one of the last remaining ganjifa players in Puri made it clear that this game was a dying tradition and that the game cannot keep up with the fast tempo of life of modern times. The art of ganjifa is also under threat. Saptarshi Roy and Arindam Ganguly (2016, 15) echo the sentiment of the ganjifa makers and museum staff: "No one knows exactly how to play Ganjifa. The current digitally-hooked generation isn't interested in such traditional games nor is it interested in the pure art form." As Roy and Ganguly rue, the courtly cards have now ended up as coasters for tearooms. The ganjifa cards themselves are not made in full sets nowadays; instead, the ten figure cards or *raja* (king) cards are sold in separate sets. There is a rise in the popularity of related art forms such as the *patachitra* that have now flooded the handicrafts fairs all over India but the art and the play of ganjifa cards is almost rendered invisible. Perhaps the decline of the play tradition is intrinsically linked with the disappearance and modification of the artistic aspects of the game. Those interested in conserving ganjifa as an artistic tradition also need to consider ways of preserving the ludic practices of the game. As eminent anthropologist and theorist of games, Huizinga (1949, 5), famously stated, culture is *sub specie ludii* or "in the guise of a game." The complex status of ganjifa cards as game and art is an important contribution to such thinking around games and art. In the Dashavatar form of the game, as the cards are dealt out and played, the ten avatars of Vishnu are invoked time and again to combat the reigning chaos and anarchy; in the divine play that ensues, now arises a new question regarding the survival of art and play.

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[i] Ganjapa is the name used for ganjifa cards in Odisha in Eastern India.
[ii] The interviews were conducted in Eastern, Western and Southern India.
[iii] We thank our research intern Abhyudit Manke for conducting the interview.
[iv] Ganjifa cards are sometimes rectangular-shaped as well.
[v] The smallest card is 1" in diameter. This is found in Sawai Madhopur of Rajasthan.