

MISSING GIRLS TRAFFICKED AND SAVED: MEANINGFUL SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH DIGITAL GAMING IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract-

Third-world adaptations of dominantly Western forms of cultural production generally assert the postcolonial nation- as argued by Fredrick Jameson in his 1986 reading of the novel form. Moreover, as Nancy Fraser notes in her 1996 Tanner lecture, claims for social justice are increasingly moving from demands of redistribution to recognition, particularly with the rise of identity politics and the demise of communism. The paper discusses how scholarship and the situation of the majority of digital games from the subcontinent can be read in light of the above two observations, which are presented as postcolonial formulations.

This paper presents the game *Missing* (Flying Robot Studios, 2016) as a text to show that gaming in the subcontinent is now breaking from such postcolonial formulations marking a radical break in the discourse of digital gaming in South Asia in terms of moving away from the postcolonial. Firstly, by refusing to limit itself territorially to a national imaginary and by refusing to historicise itself using a moment from the history of the nation, the game breaks free from any stricture of being a National Allegory. Secondly, by refusing to engage in questions of mere representation while being representative but by reemphasising the need for action, it breaks out in creating a praxis for social change.

Keywords- Girl Trafficking, Digital Gaming, Postcolonial, South Asia

Digital Gaming in South Asia started out with popular titles from the first world, finding popularity amongst the budding console gaming and later personal gaming aficionados of the region. The earliest memories of digital gaming in the subcontinent would be of console games like *Contra* (Konami, 1987) and *Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1983), which retained their popularity well into the 2000s. Later, with the advent of personal computers, MSDOS-based games like *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund, 1990) and *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992) gaming shifted from controllers and joysticks to keyboards and mice. Later, with the return to console with Xbox and PlayStation, mainstream gaming in South Asia continued to be dominated by titles designed and created outside the region, particularly in the advanced first world. At this juncture, it is important to note that I am situating the First World in its traditional sense of being an advanced Western capitalist nation. Strikingly, the second world, that is, the communist bloc, did not significantly influence narrative-based gaming in the subcontinent. However, the megahit popularity of the game *Tetris* (1984) by Alexey Pajitnov proves that there was interest in games produced there. In the Third World, united in its shared history of being postcolonial, besides their features of mixed economies with strong regulations, the gaming industries took some time to take off. As such, the sensibilities and concerns of the games, and by extension, the concerns regarding gaming in South Asia, continued to mimic concerns in the first world. Without going into specifics, the concerns can be divided into two axes. The first is the impact of the depiction of violence, particularly after the popularity of the First-Person Shooter *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) and its sequels. The second, the arguably milder concern, is the place of women in gaming, both as characters in-game worlds and participation as gamers. Recently, there has been a shift to include concerns regarding People with Disabilities (PWD), Dalit, Muslim and Tribal representation in the Digital Media, and this can be borne out by the lengthy debates that have taken place over the forming of the constitution of the Digital Humanities Alliance for Research and Teaching (DHARTI) (2018-20), the first such body for digital scholarship in the subcontinent. Indeed, even a cursory search online brings up many popular narratives, news pieces and “scholarly” articles that argue whether violent video games cause real-life violence or psychological disorders (with a growing consensus that they do not) and debate how women and other marginalised groups are depicted, or how they do not find space as gamers either as playable characters or acceptance within the predominantly male, upper caste, upper class, ableist, gaming communities. Indeed, both these concerns mirror existing concerns within the broader community of gamers and gaming scholars globally, mainly rooted in the discourses of and from the technologically advanced nations who carry the mantle of the first world into our unipolar present.

Today, we must also place digital gaming in South Asia contextually in the context of the fledgling gaming industries of the region. While Pakistan has yet to develop any role-playing games apart from GTA mods, Bhutan has not yet made any games or gaming mods at all. Perhaps it would not be out of place to speculate that authoritarian regimes do not promote digital gaming. Nepali coders released a mod (a slight modification of the original to present cosmetic changes)

of the 1986 *Legend of Zelda*, called *Breath of the Wild*, in 2017, and the gaming industry there also developed after adopting the new democratic constitution. More interestingly, in 2018, the game *Chronicles of the Himalayas* (Sroth Code Games) was released with a storyline about a young Sherpa boy searching for his father. The game proceeds in a semi-open world game map, through exploration and interaction and works hard to establish a unique Nepali voice through set design and architecture, background music, character features, costumes etc. The game also introduces the use of the Nepali exotic- Yetis and other Himalayan mythical monsters make their appearance as antagonists who must be overcome. Unfortunately, the game is no longer in circulation.

Bangladeshi coders, on the other hand, have produced role-playing games based on the Liberation War. Two games, *Arunodoyer Agnishikha* (Trimatrik Interactive, 2014) and *Heroes of 71: Shamsu Bahini* (Mindfisher Games Inc, 2015), exemplify the general concerns that can be found across various spinoffs and sequels that are designed to relive the events leading up to the independence of Bangladesh, including the rounding up of Bengalis in camps, armed uprisings and guerrilla action. The games uniformly present Urdu-speaking Pakistani army uniformed characters as villains who have to be killed in order to liberate Bengali-speaking, lungi-clad, *Mukti-Vahini* guerrillas or saree-clad Bengali women. Sri Lankan games have a wider range, with games like *Koombiyo* (Dilshan Abey Labs, 2018) taking off from the popular TV Series by the same name, *Operation Wannu* and *Wannu 2* (DragonD soft, 2010) based on the war against the LTTE and the epic open world RPG, *Kanchayudha* (Arimac Games, 2017) set in ancient Sri Lanka. As such, even in Sri Lanka, the dominant gaming voice is an assertion of the nation, whether in opposition to Tamil aspirations of armed self-determination in the northern province of the island or by evoking a rich, glorious mythical past. In India, which is disproportionately more extensive in terms of resources, the gaming industry is nonetheless in a nascent stage. With an inglorious beginning, in an attempt to cash in on the Kargil War generated a wave of patriotism, India's first game was *Yodha: The Warrior* (Indiagames, 2000), followed up with low-quality games to popularise Bollywood movies like *Bhagat Singh* (1999), a trend that continued with *Ghajini* (2008), *Ra One* (2011) etc. Most of the efforts of the Indian gaming industry in the early 2000s were eminently forgettable in terms of either narrative, plot or gameplay. However, at least three game developments must be mentioned since they succeed in creating a compelling gaming experience. The first, *Unrest* (Pyrodactyl Games, 2014), while employing a story choice-based gameplay involving voluminous text, bravely foraged into unknown territory, bringing a range of social issues from gender to caste into its gameplay set in a fictional ancient Indian city. The second, *Asura* (Ogre Head Studio, 2017), while having a hack and slash gameplay, involves a backstory that draws from Indian mythology and takes up the issue of caste in its intricate cinematic backstory. Both games use words from Sanskrit and employ background scores that are distinctively based on Indian classical music, besides character and set designs that consider influences from the Vedic to the Indo-Saracenic to clearly place themselves as assertions of the Indian nation.

After this short survey, it is clear that gaming in the subcontinent must primarily be placed in a postcolonial context; that is to say, they are determined by the overarching historical fact of colonialism and the struggle for national identity. This is particularly highlighted by the mature role-playing games from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka that go back to the independence struggle, the search for identity and the horrors of the Tamil uprising and an ancient past, respectively. The games from India, too, all go back to some seminal issues of asserting a post-identity, with gaming beginning with the assertion of the Indian nation during the Kargil war, perhaps somewhat problematised later, along with issues of gender and caste. However, in all the games, the protagonist is in search of asserting a subsumed identity- whether it be of class, race, caste or nation. In some ways, the majority of the gaming experiences being offered would tie in neatly with Fredrick Jameson's observations in his seminal 1986 essay, *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, where he notes that- "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as..."(Jameson) Digital Gaming. I am, of course, suggesting that the allegory of the nation may be different for different groups within the boundaries of a country, especially in large countries with significant diversity- but nonetheless, the dominant expression of imagination- that is, the social imaginaries- articulated through these games is that of a form of cultural identity assertion that is rooted either in a moment of crisis for the nation in the recent present or drawn from some ahistorical, but mythically real past designed to relive some "golden age".

At the same time, we must also note that all the games surveyed also seek to be representational voices. In this context, we must keep in mind Nancy Fraser's observations, first articulated in her 1996 Tanner Lecture on Human Values, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation*, where she observes "In today's world, claims for social justice seem increasingly to divide into two types. First and most familiar are redistributive claims, which seek a more just distribution of resources and goods. Examples include claims for redistribution from the North to the South, from the rich to the poor, and from owners to workers. To be sure, the recent resurgence of free-market thinking has put proponents of redistribution on the defensive." She goes on to further emphasise, "The discourse of social justice, once centred on distribution, is now increasingly divided between claims for redistribution, on the one hand, and claims for recognition, on the other. Increasingly, too, recognition claims tend to predominate. The demise of communism, the

surge of free-market ideology, the rise of “identity politics” in both its fundamentalist and progressive forms – all these developments have conspired to decentre, if not to extinguish, claims for egalitarian redistribution” (Fraser). In this light, it becomes crucial to highlight that the survey of games that we have gone through highlights how there is an emphasis on representing identities- whether it be of a nation, of a caste or a people in the context of that particular postcolonial history. Further, since all of the games that have been produced in the subcontinent stem from after the demise of the Soviet Union and arguably the demise of the second world, the concerns of redistribution and resistance have given way to either concern purely of representation for example in games like *Chronicles of the Himalayas* (Sroth Code Games), *Koombiyo* (Dilshan Abey Labs, 2018), *Kanchayudha* (Arimac Games, 2017), *Unrest* (Pyrodactyl Games, 2014), *Asura* (Ogre Head Studio, 2017) or of a jingoistic, uncritical nationalism instead of meaningful social change, as exemplified in *Yoddha: The Warrior* (Indiagames, 2000), *Arunodoyer Agnishikha* (Trimatrik Interactive, 2014), *Heroes of 71: Shamsu Bahini* (Mindfisher Games Inc, 2015), *Operation Wannu* and *Wanni 2* (DragonD Soft, 2010).

While taking into account the above two theoretical propositions, it must be emphasised that all discussions are limited to only including Role-Playing Games (RPGs) that allow for a plot and game narrative. All casual games naturally, as such, do not feature in this study. However, the existing situation and discourses of gaming within South Asia seem to be largely, overwhelmingly driven and derived from the first world and that too in the representational and not redistributive or resistive sense of a national allegory.

In contrast with all of the above, I would like to present the game *Missing* (Flying Robot Studios, 2016) as a text that breaks out of the postcolonial by introducing a completely different motive- gaming for social change that steers clear either of an explicit location in terms of a “national” imaginary, or of concerns of representation of the national. Taking up the fight against the rampant trafficking of girl children prevalent in many parts of the subcontinent, the game *Missing* was developed for the Missing Link Trust, an NGO created by Leena Kajriwal, a street artist based out of Kolkata, in 2015. The Trust has been working to help track down and return trafficked girls from across India, Bangladesh and Nepal. The game was released as a 2D narrative-driven puzzle game which shows players the horrors and reality of the flesh trade. The game won the NGDC Indie Game of the Year Award in 2016 and is available in eleven South Asian languages besides German. At the time of writing, it has been downloaded on Google Play Store over 500000 times. The game has successfully been utilised to not only raise awareness regarding sex trafficking and how to help trafficked girls, but it has also raised money for the other programs of the Missing Link Trust. Moreover, the popularity of the game has spawned a sequel in 3D, which is currently in production.

It would not be out of place to describe the nature of the gameplay and plot of *Missing* for those who are not gamers. The game begins in *medias res* with the character of the *Missing* girl already kidnapped and locked away in a dark, locked room. The game also involves a textual interface, starting by telling its players, “Hi! I hope you are safe at your home because right at this moment, a girl is being abducted, and nobody will ever know how and why she has gone missing!” The game continues with the first chapter, “Death of Innocence”, already priming the player/reader for future events. It is soon revealed that the player is playing as the missing girl. What is worse, she has been drugged and does not remember either her name or where she is from. The real horror of being missing lies not in the acknowledgement of the missing status of the girls but rather in the impossibility of registering that missing status. There is no memory of what was before- and it is this missing from the self that perhaps accentuates the growing uneasiness of the player/reader as they realise that they will be renamed and recast into their new role as prostitutes, through forced starvation, thirst and finally violence and rape while being slowly cajoled and persuaded by the manipulative female brothel keeper. The interactions between the other women of the brothel accurately depict the mix of limited help, manipulation, false promises and outright violence that make up the reality of forced prostitution. It is only by navigating through this quagmire, gaining money through prostitution and finding time to explore the locality after fulfilling the goals set by the female brothel-keeper that the player/reader proceeds through the second chapter titled “Life of a Whore”.

There is a depiction of alcohol and its role in facilitating the sex trade. Nonetheless, the game refuses to sexualise the female figures, even in its depiction of prostitution. The game proceeds by popularising phone numbers of the Missing Link NGO through the gameplay, besides popularising its street art installations as ways for missing children to reach out for help. Further gameplay revolves around how the reader/player manages to escape back to their village. The plot is realistic and, through its sound and game design, evokes strong responses ranging from claustrophobia, suffocation, terror, hope etc. While the game is located in Bengal, with the setting of Kolkata forming the backdrop of the narratives of the brothel and explorations that lead to freedom, the narrative is open enough to appeal to a wide range of lived experiences across regions that are reflected in the languages that the game has been translated into, apart from English and German- Bengali, Hindi, Maithili, Gujarati, Kannada, Tamil, Nepali, Marathi, Oriya, Malayalam and Punjabi. In scope and spread, the game is perhaps unique in being genuinely South Asian in its linguistic spread, breaking across national boundaries following the routes of missing trafficked children.

To create again an argument for the essential difference between “the West” and “the East” based on meta factors- location, history, technical and economic development, religion, and ethics must be a project fraught with caveats. For

who can deny that overarchingly computer games, even those being created and disseminated in South Asia largely follow the same formulaic expressions that are so native to the genre in general? Nonetheless, to deny the pressures of immediacy on individual cultural artefacts, like the game *Missing*, will be equally misplaced. It is perhaps through the process of resolving this binary between the particular and the general that this paper must proceed in its attempt to theorise the nature of digital gaming in South Asia today, albeit in a limited fashion, keeping in mind the limited scope of this work which at the end of the day looks only at a few digital games, and only one in any details.

It is in this context that we must place the game *Missing* in order to appreciate how it forms a radically differing voice amidst the binaries of mimic gaming and assertions of national imaginaries that form and inform the binary of choices available to the subcontinental gamers. The manner in which the imaginations of the post-colony- complete with the nation and its fragments, as well as the continued concerns of the absent but virtually dominant advanced first world, combine to continue to provide a matrix, a mesh for discourses makes for the postcolonial paradigm that determines the dominant binaries of discourses regarding cultural production today, especially so in South Asia, and even more so in the field of digital gaming. After all, the purpose of the paper is not only to uncover the underlying differences between digital gaming cultures but rather to propose that attitudes towards digital gaming cultures must be based on their immediate materiality as much as it must be placed in any tradition of dialectics between binaries of the postcolonising west and postcolonial east.

Contrary to popular notions that pit the dialectics of violence or participatory or even representational biases as being the actual grounds of contention for digital games, perhaps to escape from the continued shadows of the postcolonial it becomes more important to forge ahead in a radically new manner, and now we must be clear as to how this development is truly radical, truly an intrusion into the roots of existing world imaginaries propped up by the dominant powers. Firstly, the game *Missing* is novel in that the game breaks out of the postcolonial nation cages to reach a subcontinental presence- rather like the issue of trafficking which it is trying to address- freely moves across limitations, indeed despite limitations, of lands and laws. While it is expected that postcolonial spaces centre their cultural production and identities on the postcolonial fact of the nation, the gaming imaginary of *Missing* stands in steadfast refusal to be branded into a national imagination. Secondly, *Missing* stays away from issues of depiction or representation and instead focuses on taking up issues of oppression. This makes for a movement away from purely ludic concerns, which naturally raises questions of participation/representation, like in children's games where someone gets to play a certain role and someone does not. It is no longer important to worry about who is being represented and who is not- the point is the underlying resistive concern. This requires a sort of strategic essentialism since it really will be missing the point if one instead asks why a particular caste, identity or group is being represented and why another is not. As such, it is in this refusal to engage with the games of the (neo) empire that demands that we look upon *Missing* as radical- in going to the root of the issue regarding the nature of representation in cultural texts in the post-colony today.

So to conclude, in short, while most of the games of the South Asian subcontinent either seek to represent constituents of the postcolonial nation or become allegories of the postcolonial nation, the game *Missing* breaks away in order to provide a unique transnational redistributive and resistive praxis for social change, and in doing so makes for an original voice going beyond the frameworks of postcolonialism.

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