

Review: *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent: Development, Culture(s) and Representations*, by Souvik Mukherjee. 2022. Bloomsbury. 256 pp.

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Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent: Development, Culture(s) and Representations (2022) by Souvik Mukherjee highlights the nuances and complexity of the gaming cultures in the Indian subcontinent. This is a mammoth task that the book mostly accomplishes well. The book is divided into three sections respectively titled "Development," "Cultures," and "Representation." The first two sections have two chapters each, while the last contains three. The first section presents a thorough history of the advent of computational technologies across the Indian subcontinent. It traces a wide history, beginning from when computational machines were brought to India by researchers like Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis and Homi J. Bhabha until the exit of IBM, the end of the Licence Raj,¹ to the current situation of the gaming market. The timeline is also presented as a much more succinct table as an appendix, which allows the reader to better understand the data. In the second section, Mukherjee talks about how the game market developed in India and traces the hurdles it faced due to import costs and the License Raj. As Mukherjee explains, both the early computers, meant for industrial use, and later the game consoles or personal computers have always been too expensive for the general public to afford. In his analysis, Mukherjee stylistically combines the advent of video games with a broader history of the advent of computational technology. Lastly, the third section focuses on the representations of the Indian subcontinent in locally made and non-locally made videogames and the lack of diversity within gaming cultures themselves.

¹ The Licence Raj refers to the time period in the history of Independent India (from the 1950s to the early 1990s) when licenses were required for building companies, starting businesses, or expanding production, and these licences were known for being rather hard to obtain.



Methodologically speaking, the first section is historiographic in nature, where Mukherjee uses available secondary material to study gaming cultures. In contrast, the second and third sections carry a deeply personal perspective that mostly aligns with the work that Mukherjee has been associated with, including the formation of game studies in India and the foundation of the Indian chapter of the Digital Game Research Association, DiGRA India. It is important that we navigate our biases, and for a project of this nature, I cannot help but wonder how much an author can really distance themselves from what they have been involved with. If they distance themselves too much, will they be faithful to the work? Will it not be an improper representation, then? At the same time, not distancing enough could create a further issue of bias.

India takes up the largest chunk of the entire book (probably due to the author's own location), followed by other countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. As Mukherjee shows, these unique gaming cultures must be brought to light so that the Indian subcontinent and its political contestations around video games reach a wider audience and start to be perceived as a multifaceted space with defining cultural markers, rather than as an exotic curiosity. The sections dedicated to each country start with a description of their IT and telecom developments, followed by a description of governmental policies and how they were implemented (Chapter 1). In Chapter 2, Mukherjee examines the development of the game market in India and the hurdles it faced. Of all the countries except for India, Pakistan is featured in the greatest length, and Mukherjee describes how it has entered the realm of game design, development, and the market since the 2000s. He also highlights the personal achievements of artists like Mir Zafar Ali, who won an Oscar for best visual effects for his work on *The Golden Compass* (Weitz, 2007); Arslan Ash, who won the WePlay Ultimate Fighting League (WUFL) Tekken 7 tournament; and the game scholar Umer Hussain, known for his work on Pakistani women esports players. As Mukherjee highlights, an interesting area of governmental commonality between Pakistan and India is the implementation of the Digital Pakistan Policy, which can be compared to the Digital India campaign and the ban of the popular game *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds Mobile* (Lightspeed & Quantum Studio, 2018). Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives also have a similar journey in terms of IT development and policy implementations. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh find particular mentions concerning their locally designed games and the establishment of game forums after the turn of the century. However, there is a marked delay seen for Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, which entered the video game market only after the 2010s due to their smaller economy and their IT development.

I found certain choices made in the book rather amusing. One of them is a rather lengthy deliberation about cricket in Chapter 3. Maybe it was

done considering the semi-divine stature of the game in India, or maybe Mukherjee was trying to hint at the connotations of the word "game." While this word comes from the Greek "gamen," in the Indian context, its meaning is influenced by cricket, as Mukherjee explains. Nevertheless, the broad engagement with the history of cricket in *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent* felt a little out of place in the broader video game-related context of the book. In that specific chapter, the author builds on the idea of gaming and explores the concept of "gamer" by referencing Adrienne Shaw's (2013) question: "How do you say gamer in Hindi?" (p. 109). I cannot help but wonder if we really need a translation of this word in Hindi and what it would do for game studies in India. Can't the word "gamer" itself be used in different languages? The word "game" comes from "gamen," which means "amusement," but that no longer constitutes the sole meaning of "game." What does it mean to enter a quest of seeking an alternative like "khiladi" in Hindi?

In Chapter 4, the question of localization is expanded in the context of avatars and Hindu mythology, a topic on which Mukherjee (2012) has previously worked on. It was a little surprising to me that Mukherjee did not examine the important factor of player-making/avatar creation in games, especially in sports games. I distinctly remember once when I was playing the "Be a Pro" mode in *Fifa 11* (EA Canada, 2011) in a local cyber cafe and a man advised me to make my character White because "that's obviously cooler." Mundane activities like avatar creation can highlight colonial mindsets we still harbour, and I would have liked to hear a bit more on that topic. Chapter 5 extends the earlier thread and explores the politics of local representations and the importance of creating a positive image of the region away from global and often racist tropes. Perhaps the most memorable example for me (which is not mentioned in the book) is *Grand Theft Auto Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2000) Bangla version, which was made by Bangladeshi developers and had a memorable line for Bengali players: "hay re amar honda nie gyalore" (oh god he took my Honda). Lastly, Chapter 6 explores the lack of diversity in game cultures and in the game industry, with a focus on the Indian subcontinent. More specifically, it looks at the issues of gender and the digital divide, reminding us that gaming still remains confined to privileged sectors and is still very male-dominated, but is being slowly diversified.

Overall, Mukherjee tries to map the history of the field and its practices in the Indian subcontinent, where he has been involved for years. To counter the risks of this book becoming too autoethnographic, Mukherjee interestingly seems to grapple with the issue by deliberately not citing himself while talking about games he has previously worked on, like *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991), *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), and *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010). This tension can also be fathomed at a broader level in the book's conclusion

(Chapter 7), which seems to be an optimistic speculation about the future of game studies in the Indian subcontinent and how it should take a decentered life of its own.

Having had the privilege to work with Souvik Mukherjee and DiGRA India since its inception, I have had a front-row seat to most of the events and works mentioned in the book, especially those in the later sections. Reading *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent* was, for me, a good old trip down memory lane. Hence, my unique situatedness can be seen as a bias. Another important factor that must be remembered while reading this book is that it was written and finished mostly when the COVID-19 pandemic peaked in India. As a result, the aims and ambitions of the book appear larger than what it delivers. *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent* ultimately serve as a launchpad for other localised projects to follow suit and should thus be seen as a provocation, an act of futurity for other works to germinate that will perhaps solely focus on regional locations and contexts within India or other less studied countries like Nepal and the Maldives.

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