Curating a Boardgames Museum in India: The Case of the Gautam Sen Memorial Boardgames Museum; An Interview with Souvik Mukherjee and Amrita Sen

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Abstract

Indian scholars and boardgames museum curators Souvik Mukherjee and Amrita Sen speak with Zahra Rizvi and Souvik Kar about the Gautam Sen Memorial Boardgames Museum. This interview delves into the conception, creation, and curation of the museum, before launching into a deeper discussion pertaining to the geopolitical dimensions of studying and curating boardgames in India. Mukherjee and Sen shed light on the past, present, and future of boardgames and play in India and the Global South.

Keywords

Boardgames; museum; India, archive; South Asia.

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Setting Up the Adda

This interview[1] is designed as a small adda, or "an informal symposium-like conversation with multiple speakers where everything under and beyond the sun can be discussed" (DiGRA India, 2021, para. 1). In this iteration, the interviewers, Zahra Rizvi and Souvik Kar, and interviewees, Souvik Mukherjee and Amrita Sen, may be imagined as sitting over an animated game of a version of *Gyan Chaupar*; play and study merging to give a crucial insight into India's first boardgames museum and its socio-cultural underpinnings.

Over a Cup of Chai and a Board

Zahra Rizvi (ZR): Hi Souvik and Amrita, thanks for accepting our invitation to talk about your boardgames museum for this special issue titled "The Playful Postcolonial: Culturing Videogames in India." Your museum is a comprehensive archive of a curated selection of boardgames that has not yet found an equal in another collection.

Souvik Kar (SK): I can personally say that it has stayed with me as a boardgames player even afterwards. I probably speak for a number of your visitors when I say that it makes one feel as if one has travelled the entire world in the span of a single visit, where one can observe and learn about boardgames (see Figure 1–2). I was thinking that we could talk more about the conception and creation of the museum to begin with, and then more about how you structured its content and grouped it according to the complex geo-cultural connections that inform your collection.

Figure 1–2. Two views of the GSBM Museum, and the space in which it is housed. Photos taken by Souvik Kar.

[1] The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Laying Out the Board, or the Origins

SK: I would like to begin by asking you to briefly describe when you began to conceive the idea of creating the museum? We are interested in knowing the socio-temporal context within which the idea took root or, in case it had been a long-gestating idea, then, how it has retained its potency for all these years?

Souvik Mukherjee (SM): The "museum" began as a private collection that I started to assemble ever since I got interested in boardgames, somewhere around 2013–2014, when I started writing my monograph *Reading Games and Playing Books* (2015). Although the book itself focuses mainly on videogames, one of my discoveries while researching the book's content was the Indian original of *Snakes and Ladders*, *Gyan Chaupar*, a Karmic game whose origins in Indic philosophy[2] have been entirely ignored in its Western adaptation.

As the collection grew and as I saw, on the one hand, the burgeoning of a boardgames culture among richer Indians who could afford the very expensive Eurogames and similar boardgames, and as I saw, on the other hand, the distinct lack of any museum devoted to India's ludic culture, I decided to take the plunge and start a boardgames museum. The boardgames museum, therefore, is more of an idea rather than a sophisticated museum in the traditional sense of the term. The Gautam Sen Memorial Boardgames Museum (GSBM) is an assemblage and perhaps conforms to the divergent idea of the museum that is stated in Fiona Candlin and Jamie Larkin's 2020 essay "What Is a Museum? Difference All the Way Down." The idea was to bring boardgames to people from all over the country and, firstly, to remind them of their own engagement with boardgames and, secondly, to alert them that such engagement is a culturally rich and serious phenomenon that shapes their identity in multiple ways. In short, boardgames are not just puerile pastimes but have a major significance. As the Dutch historian of games Johan Huizinga (1949) says, culture is "*sub specie ludi"* or "in the guise of a game" (p. 173).

SK: Your museum is hosted in your home and is named after Amrita's father. Please tell us a bit about how boardgames, or games in general, touched your relationship with him.

Amrita Sen (AS): My father, the late Gautam Sen, was an avid chess player. He could not take up chess as his profession in those days because of family commitments; nonetheless, he remained deeply committed to the game and was promoting it. I remember going to chess tournaments with him and interacting with chess grandmasters and world champions,

[2] For more details, see Mukherjee (2020), where the game is described as one which "people could play over and over until they reached Vaikuntha (the sacred domain of Vishnu) after journeying through many rebirths and corresponding human experiences" (para. 5).

such as Vasily Smyslov, who visited Calcutta in 1994. My father was associated with organising many of the Alekhine Chess Club tournaments. In fact, some of my earliest childhood memories of him are connected with the chess board and chess pieces.

SM: My father-in-law was a chartered accountant by profession, but also a polymath of sorts—chess was one of his key interests and he would play against the formidable *Fritz* software from the 1990s until he passed away due to COVID. The connection between software and chess was obviously appealing to me as a game researcher. We would have conversations about chess and a myriad of other things. The museum is just one way in which we remember him.

ZR: That sounds beautiful. Also, hosting a museum that is open to the public as an extension of your home sounds very special. In a number of Indian families, a lot of us grow up playing boardgames like *Snakes and Ladders* or *Ludo* or *Carrom* with our friends and family. Though one may expect to see some of these ludic artefacts in museums, seeing a museum of them in one's home sounds very novel to a lot of us. How do you bring together the home and the museum? Is there something specific to boardgames that makes this spatial connection possible?

AS: Some of the earliest European museums started off as collections in the home, so the division between the home and the museum is actually fairly recent. There were always wonder cabinets and studios that one could visit in the homes of collectors once upon a time, not too long ago. As someone whose own research has to do with the early history of collecting and museums, I actually find it quite comforting and natural that we have a small museum at home.

SM: For me, the museum at home is a matter of practical convenience. I had contemplated asking museums and art galleries to host my collection, but after sensing an initial reluctance from some of them (after all, how could one even think of a boardgames museum!), I decided to do it on my own in the balcony of Amrita's house (see Figure 1). It is kind of like a museum version of a "mom and pop" store where the people living in the house connect to the artefacts displayed. In fact, even our six-year-old daughter can play *Bagh Chal* with you after hearing adults discussing boardgames when her dad takes them on museum tours.

Regarding the home and the museum, there is one caveat that I would like to point out. I do not see the museum and the home as an outside/inside binary just as I do not see such a binary occurring in the case of boardgames. While boardgames are usually connected to the homely, the sedentary, and the indoors, there are many such games that are played in open outdoor spaces.

ZR: The museum is an entirely non-profit venture and managed by both of you on a volunteer basis. Are there any challenges that come up, naturally, when managing such a project from home while also working as full-time faculty members in academic institutions? How do you go about organising visits and footfall?

SM: The museum is indeed non-profit and maintained on a volunteer basis. It is maintained mostly by me, entailing the procurement of the artefacts, the labelling, the lighting, the furniture, the tour bookings, and, finally, the tours themselves. Amrita renders crucial assistance with logistical advice and, sometimes, hands-on maintenance work. Like I said, we are a small and informal outfit, and the challenges are, therefore, numerous—from petty thefts to regular no-shows. As academics, we have to organise the museum timings according to our daily work schedules, and there are times when we need to sacrifice our full weekend to museum tours. The entry to the museum is by appointment only, and there is no charge for visiting. Nevertheless, many people do not turn up or cancel their visits at the last minute. To avoid such inconvenience, we have instituted a token booking fee, which is refunded when the person visits the museum. Seeing the interest, however, it seems quite worth our while to address the problems.

SK: The museum opened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when Kolkata, the site of the museum, and India were wracked by mass death, breakdown of public health infrastructures, and an essential overhang of grimness and morbidity. How does one mentally go about preparing the creation of a boardgames museum within this extraordinary temporal moment? Not a lot of museums would be able to boast being opened for the first time within once-in-a-century world-transforming cataclysms. You, Souvik, have written extensively in your scholarship about games and mortality; we are interested to know what thoughts may have been running throughout your mind during the entire process.

SM: The museum opened only after the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic in all its three waves had been over. Of course, the memory of COVID still looms over us in the way it was responsible for the untimely demise of my father-in-law after whom the museum is named. While I have written on games and mortality, the museum is not really connected to mortality in any other way. Unless you consider it as a memorial as well, as its name suggests. And then again, an archive is always already about memory and the remembering of things that are dead or dying. In a sense, it is in videogame terms a "reloading" of games that are supposed to have died.

Preparing the Tiles, or Curating the Museum

SK: Are all the boardgames in the museum from your own collection? Can you please tell us a bit about the process of acquiring them and the

economic procedures that may or may not govern importing (if that is the case) boardgames into India?

SM: Yes, the boardgames are from my own collection, but a couple have been gifted by fellow academics. The museum is happy to accept gifts of boardgames from donors. Most of the boardgames have been bought by us during our travels and some have been bought using standard online shopping channels.

ZR: I am even more interested now to hear about some of the history of how these boardgames came into your possession. Would it be possible for you to pick some of your most prized boardgames in the museum and tell us the story of how they came to your collection?

SM: Each and every boardgame in my collection is a prized possession. The *Royal Game of Ur*, for example, was bought in the British Museum's replica shop even when I had not seen the original artefact and was not as interested in boardgames. The Burmese chess set was bought by Amrita during her trip to Yangon, Myanmar, after miles and miles of walking before she managed to find it.

SK: What are the factors that influence your curation of the museum? You, more than many, have written elsewhere about the global interconnectedness of boardgames. How do you see these interlinkages in the way you placed specific boardgames in the vicinity of each other? What schematic did you inherit from existing game museums, and what did you follow (and did not) from them?

SM: The organisation and display of the artefacts do not necessarily follow the interlinkages that you may have seen in my work on transculturation and boardgames. Much of the display is governed by the spatial constraints of the museum. Like I said, this is a really small, self-funded initiative that is housed in a private balcony.

There is, however, some method behind all this. One cabinet displays some of the ancient boardgames from all over the world and another displays the varieties of chess, from *Chaturanga* (said to be the earliest form of chess) to *Shogi* (Japanese chess). The interconnections of the various boardgames emerge more clearly during the tour itself, when I get the opportunity to point them out. Of the existing game museums, I have not visited too many. I have so far been to the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, United States; the Computerspielemuseum (Computer Games Museum) in Berlin, Germany; The National Videogame Museum in Sheffield (formerly the National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham), United Kingdom; and the Finnish Museum of Games (Suomen pelimuseo). These are all excellent museums with substantial funding, and while I have learnt a lot from how the artefacts are displayed, it is indeed difficult to put this into practice.

Nevertheless, my discussions with Niklas Nylund, researcher at the Finnish Museum of Games, have given me some important ideas regarding how to use multimedia to address issues of interactivity. I have also recently worked with the Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) in a joint workshop on boardgames where I learnt a lot about possible improvements for our museum.

ZR: An offshoot to this discussion, I also notice that many of your boardgames not only have geographical linkages, but also teleological ones. Your visitors have talked about how the museum is curated along the lines of moving through history with boardgames. How does the curation and presentation of the artefacts reflect this?

SM: The artefacts on display are indeed arranged somewhat to provide a historical sense of boardgame cultures globally, but the collection is a mix of the chronological and the thematic. Much of the organisation is contingent on the space available in the site of the museum. The museum is indeed an assemblage (*agencement*) in the sense used by French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980/1987) rather than a space organised in any arboreal logic. The presentation of the artefacts in the tour does not follow a strict chronology; what is more evident is a sense of the back-and-forthness of the history of boardgames. In a certain way, it is more the playful that prevails here—literally, as some tours end with a game of *Bagh Chal* and a cup of tea—rather than a chronological presentation (see Figure 3–4).

Figure 3–4. Another view of the assorted boardgames and the space of the museum. Photos taken by Souvik Kar.

ZR: *Gyan Chaupar* figures prominently in your work on game studies and India. The museum carries several derivates of this boardgame (see Figure 5) as well as other boardgames that have several commonalities with it. What does this tell you about the format of this class of boardgames? How do you take into account this kind of connectivity between different artefacts in your museum?

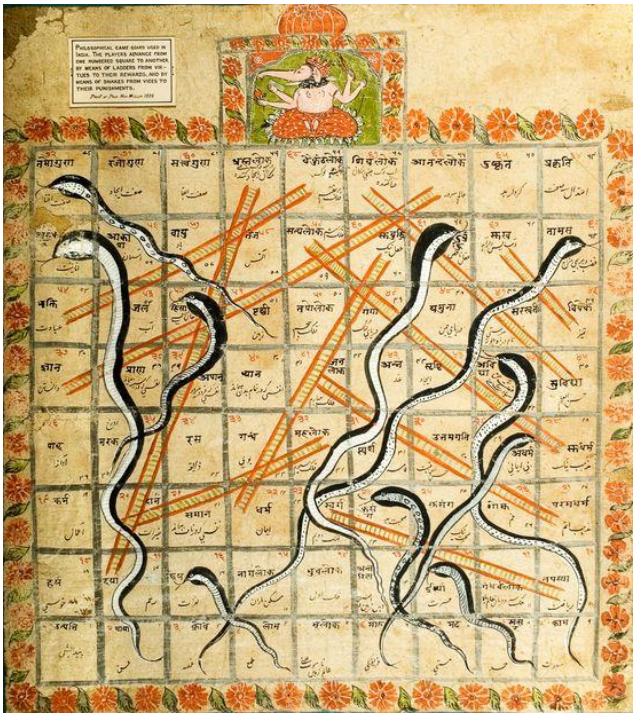

Figure 5. One of many variations of *Gyan Chaupar.* Pitt Rivers Museum.

SM: The interesting thing about the *Gyan Chaupar* adaptations—say, *Sa lam rnam bhzag* (also known as *The Tibetan Game of Rebirth*) or *Golok Dham*—is that they mediate the Karmic journey in their different religious contexts through the boardgame medium. The same holds for the Sufi game *Shatranj i Irfani* [Chess of the Wise], although the underlying theology is different from the original *Gyan Chaupar*. I would not think that there is one format but many. What it is not is a race game, and while mathematicians such as Marcus du Sautoy unlocked the fascinating mathematical possibilities of the outcomes of the boardgames, the philosophy behind the game is not that of completion but that of experience and learning. The GSBM exhibits prints of the *Gyan Chaupar* game and its variants.

Players on Tiles, or Identities in the Museum

ZR: In a previous conversation with Chandrima S. Bhattacharya (see Bhattacharya, 2023), you, Souvik, talk about how *The Royal Game of Ur*, which was played in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago, has rules that were discovered only recently, and that the Jewish community settled in Kochi used to play this game and called it *Aasha*. Your museum illustrates these connections that are entrenched in the identities of people in India (see Figure 6–7). Would you agree that these ludic artefacts carry these identities and cultural heritage within them? How does this change the way in which visitors might interact with these games?

Figure 6–7. Two views of some of the boardgame collection. Photos taken by Souvik Kar.

SM: Games always carry their cultural heritages with them. I was recently reading a blog post by a Tibetan woman in the United States on how she has rediscovered *Para Sho*, the Tibetan game played during Losar, the Tibetan New Year. Incidentally, there are multiple *Para Sho* sets in GSBM. The way in which visitors view these games depends on them really and I do not wish to impose my viewpoints, but in most cases, the cultural heritage connected with games keeps coming up. For example, one visitor remembered that he played the Sylheti game *Dosh Pochish* [Ten-Twenty Five] when he saw the *Pachisi* board. Other visitors remembered seeing their grandmothers playing the *Golok Dham* game.

ZR: Fascinating! It seems that with games, socio-cultural identities have also travelled across time and space and your museum is an archive of these as well. How about *Mancala*, which is known to have arrived in Southern India as *Pallanguzhi* before travelling to the Philippines and has been described by you as a "proof of maritime exchanges" (see Bhattacharya, 2023, para. 12). What does colonialism do to these identities and how has the history of colonization affected your museum?

SM: *Mancala* has travelled from East Africa via the Arab merchants to Southern India, where it is called *Pallanguzhi. Mancala* could be possibly derived from the Arabic word *naqalah*, which means "to move." The game probably travelled a lot by sea, but it has also been found in places all over the world. I do not personally know much about the role of colonization in the way *Mancala* has travelled. Lindsay Grace, in his 2021 book, *Black Games Studies: An Introduction to the Games, Game Makers, and Scholarship of the African Diaspora,* notes how academic readings of the game are in a way colonial in that they privilege the views of those who appropriated the game against the views of the original producers of the game. If you are asking about colonialism and

the history of colonisation in general, then there are multiple artefacts on display in the museum that are reminiscent of colonial history; for example, the Incas versus the Conquistadors chessboard from Peru.

ZR: As a leading scholar of postcolonial games criticism, how does your work come into practice within the museum? Have there been instances where you have felt the weight of colonial history as a challenge that your archive may feel the brunt of?

SM: Thank you for the compliment. I do not know whether I am a leading scholar of postcolonial games criticism, but my work, which has to do mainly with postcolonial perspectives on videogames and now boardgames, is a small part of the entire scholarship on postcolonial games criticism. Then, again, such games criticism often tends to focus on colonial sports such as football and cricket, on which there is considerable scholarship. That is the weight of colonial history which constructs the archive for and of the majoritarian. GSBM is a museum of boardgames, where the material is ephemeral and rendered less important in the dominant discourses by Global North scholars, dependant on Eurocentric methods of archiving. Unlike the "Eurogames" and other examples of modern boardgames in the Global North that involve games that have been preserved in gaming cultures, there are many games that have disappeared from public memory. I have these boardgames in the museum today, but I might never see them again. Some of them are made of cloth and paper, and so the material itself is also not the kind of things that last. The object is going to disappear because many things are not stored in the archives or cannot be stored. For example, many boardgames in rural India are often etched on the ground with a tree branch and then wiped away after the game ends.

ZR: I believe your boardgames museum is an important intervention into game studies from what is often called the Global South. Do you feel there are connections between your identities as scholars from the Global South and the production of this museum? How do your identities inform the archival politics of this space?

AS: I am sure that our identities as Global South scholars play a part in this. After all, this is perhaps the only museum of its kind in India. And the displayed games set up our balcony as a cosmopolitan space where the game boards, with their distinct histories, materialities, and ludic cultures all come together. But to be honest, I think Souvik would have set up the boardgames museum even if we were not from/in the Global South.

SM: The importance of this project vis-à-vis the Global South is something that is a much loftier consideration than what was originally envisioned. I do not know if there are other such museums in Global South countries and although certainly the stark difference in possibilities, funding, and even scope is evident in the case of this

museum, there are indeed many extremely well-funded museums in South Asia, for example. There are challenges of funding archives everywhere in the world but more so in the Global South, but the biggest challenge for me comes from the lack of cultural awareness about the importance of boardgames.

Moving Across Tiles, or Playing the Museum

ZR: This brings us to the audience of your museum, but before we delve into that, would you like to tell us about the inauguration of the museum and its programme?

AS: The inauguration took place in the evening, which makes sense for a "mom and pop" museum. Friends and colleagues who were interested in boardgames joined us. My uncle, Prosenjit Dasgupta, who is also someone who has written on Indian heritage as well as on his travels with my late father, also joined us.

SM: The inauguration was a fairly humble affair, and colleagues, students, friends, and other collectors were invited. Souvik Kar, you were also there. The "programme" as such was a brief introduction by Amrita about her father and then a tour of the museum, which at the time occupied half our balcony space.

ZR: How does one browse the museum? Are there different ways to do this?

SM: Browsing the museum is easy and there are three ways to go about it: 1) You could use the museum's mobile devices to scan the QR codes on the exhibits for detailed information (see Figure 8). We have tried to consult authoritative sources and, in most cases, the codes will direct you to the Ludii Portal (https://ludii.games/), which is one of the authoritative research sites on boardgames. When the Ludii website does not have the information, we have referred the visitors to similar academic forums. 2) You could also use the online index we have created and read the entries following the numbered exhibits (https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1V9JdKVOXFPxamjv4a-CqSUYSOq7V0wy_/edit#slide=id.p1). 3) If you are feeling chatty and want an *adda* over a cup of tea, just ask me about an exhibit and I will jog my memory for information and of course, anecdotes. This information is also available in handwritten cards accompanying the displayed boardgames (see Figure 9).

Figure 8–9. Two views of how the boardgames are arranged; handwritten notes and scannable QR codes that visitors can access for information on the games. Photos taken by Souvik Kar.

SK: How does "play" work within boardgames museum visits? Do visitors get to play specific games and is there a particular procedure according to which you choose boardgames to be played, or is it a choice open to visitors?

SM: The only game that we play with visitors is *Bagh Chal* and that is because of the simplicity of its rules and the portability of the game. Boardgames are expensive objects (at least for someone on an academic's salary), and some of those in my collection are not easily replaceable. As such, these games are not for play sessions. For that, a boardgames cafe that charges a hefty cover-charge is the best place to go.

ZR: Tell us a bit about your museum visitors and how it has been received by both your audience as well as in the media.

AS: This has been the truly wonderful part of having a museum in our home. We have had visitors from all over, and actually even re-connected with old family friends and acquaintances after decades. So, the museum brings people together, much like what boardgames were intended to do.

SM: We get quite a few museum visitors from all walks of life. Many students also come, and there is mostly a lot of enthusiasm about

boardgames. Generally, there is an interest in the local media as well and we have been covered by two English dailies and a Bengali blog.

Moving Across Ladders, or the Future of the Museum

ZR: We are nearing the two-year anniversary of your museum. Congratulations! Looking back, how has the museum grown and how has the experience been for both of you?

AS: It has been an amazing experience!

SM: We are thrilled that we have come this far. The collection is growing, and it is an enriching experience to meet people and share our love of boardgames.

ZR: What do you envision for the future of this museum? Are there any boardgames you would like to host in the near future? Are you open to showcasing new boardgames, and how may creators contact you for exhibiting their boardgames?

AS: I really hope the museum grows. I personally like to keep an eye out for indigenous games or different versions of games, like the two Terracotta chess sets—one from Chinatown in Montreal, Canada, and another one from Bengal—that we have. In the future, I would also like to have an additional educational/creative space for more workshops, game making, etc.

SM: I am unsure what you mean by hosting boardgames, but if you are referring to boardgame creators donating their games to the museum, that is always welcome. For example, Zain Memon has donated his excellent *Shasn: Azaadi*, and it was the featured game in the museum for months.

ZR: Your museum already has an excellent collection of both ancient and modern boardgames. With the survey of your collection, what can you tell us about the future of boardgames, especially in India?

SM: With the growing interest in boardgames, I suppose boardgames are always going to be popular. India has always been a hub for boardgames culture and always will be. I am not worried about boardgames being played in India in the future. What I worry about is the systematic removal of discussions on boardgames from the Indian cultural space and academic discussions.

ZR: With digital boardgames and the overall collapse of the traditional boundaries between the digital and the analog, how has the form of the boardgame evolved or transformed? Do you think this would have a bearing on the Indian audience of boardgames?

SM: It already has. For example, one of the most popular videogames played on the mobile phone during the pandemic was *Ludo King* (Gametion, 2016), a remediated version of *Ludo*. Many boardgames also

remediate the interactivity and complexity of digital games today. I do not see the two as a binary of digital versus board, and it is not a case of "video killed the radio star."

ZR: Wrapping up, are there any other Indian collections, archives, or museums you would recommend to fans and visitors of your museum?

SM: I would recommend Apurba Kumar Panda's Tarar Chhayay, which is a four-storey museum of everyday things. He also has some boardgames in his collection.

ZR: That is wonderful! It has been an immense pleasure to be able to interview you and we cannot wait to see the museum continue to flourish and grow in the future. Thank you for your time and patience with us. If there is anything you would like to share with us, please let us know.

SM: Nothing else comes to mind, right now. Keep playing boardgames! To adapt Descartes's famous maxim: I play, therefore I am.

Conclusion

As we interviewed Souvik and Amrita, we realized that the GSBM is uniquely situated within a vibrant network of relations. On the one hand, the museum is a rich repository of understandings of play and boardgames rooted deeply in the founders' locale. On the other hand, its transcendence of geopolitical borders also showcases the founders' transnational connections with academics and game enthusiasts in other countries and experience of boardgames across the world. As both an archive and a memorial thoughtfully curated by two postcolonial scholars aware of the problematic legacies of Euro-American museums with colonial acquisitions that remain unreturned, the museum transcends the traditional characteristics of capital-intensive and highly curated museums. The GSBM does this by positioning itself as an alternative to these museums. As a small, localized space that crystallizes the scholarship of its two founders while possessing the personal touch of their generous welcoming of the public to the museum, the GSBM represents those rare spaces of coming-together of decades of academic labor with a meticulously gathered collection aimed to entertain, educate, and foster interest in boardgames. The museum's efflorescence as a space of future workshops, invigorating conversations about pan-subcontinental, transcultural, and transnational linkages of boardgames play, and as an important archive of material culture thus represents a step forward in the ongoing conversation between postcolonial studies and games studies.

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