

From Chariots to Local Trains: A Look at Characters and Stories Inspired by the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in Animation Series and Video Games

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Abstract

The paper explores the reimagining of epic narratives from ancient India into the contemporary milieu in children's animation series and mobile video games, be it Shiva fighting with guns or Chhota Bheem chasing thieves in a Mumbai local train. It can be said that through multiple interpolations, retellings and translations across languages and media, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have remained living epic traditions in India. These narratives have simultaneously been kept alive through oral and folk-theatre performances (*Jatra*, *Ram Lila*, *Ras Lila* etc), through televised versions like B. R. Chopra's *Mahabharata* and parallelly, through literary retellings like Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, Kamban *Ramayana*, Kaliprassana Sinha's *Mahabharata* or more recently Ashok Banker's *Mahabharata Series* and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* among many others. Thus, re-telling or re-thinking the epic narratives is nothing new.

The paper, however, preoccupies itself with the transformations that digitality and interactive systems can bring to the re-telling of these primary epics. The paper also questions how the games that summarily adapt popular runner game formats like *Subway Surfers*, infuse a distinct Indian-ness into the visuality of these narratives, even if not the gameplay format.

When seen in the context of the sacrality of the texts, these gameplay forays seem transgressive and perhaps profane the paper argues that these Interactive Narratives have the potential to realise the interpolatory and oratory nature that these inherently multifarious epic narratives embody.

Keywords: Interactive Digital Narratives, Video games, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Epic

The paper delves specifically into a few mobile gaming apps and animated cinematic series, which are based on characters from the Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. This paper aims to understand what the format of interactive digital narratives is or isn't able to do when it comes to locating 'Indianness' while retelling these age-old narratives.

As we know, many Ramayanas and Mahabharatas are living and circulating within India and abroad. A prominent landmark in the multiple stories of the same story emerging from across the country was documented in A.K. Ramanujan's famous essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas". It gives us a clear picture regarding the plurality of these epics and how this multiplicity becomes a marker of the vastness of cultural domains to be accommodated within the idea of India. These epics still co-exist in their many versions across media.

Indian folk theater performances like Ram Lila, Ras Lila, Yakshagana, etc., traditionally left the scope for interpolations and subversions to these epic narratives. Within literature as well, there have simultaneously existed differing versions of these epics, for instance, the texts from medieval India like Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas and the Kamaban Ramayana. In television, B.R. Chopra's serialized Mahabharata heavily impacted the circulation of the epic and normalized a standard version of it. There have subsequently been many televised serials based on both of these epics. A more contemporary and 'modernised' (so far as the structure of the novels, their genre is concerned) take on these narratives became popular with works like Amish Tripathi's Shiva trilogy and Ashok Banker's Ramayana series.

It is against this backdrop that this paper tries to understand how games come into the arena of the circulation of mythology and how, in recent times, they have emerged as a marker of what we consider quintessentially belonging to India in terms of visuality. The games to be briefly discussed to this end are *Little Krishna*, *Chhota Bheem* and also refer to *Prachanda: Shiva Game Mahakal*. These are based on the three mythological characters of Krishna, Bheem and Shiva. As the names suggest, both Little Krishna and Chhota Bheem are young child characters, unlike the grown-up adult Shiva in the other game.

Each of these three presents a unique case of how they've been adapted from the epics. The most loosely based character here is Bheem. There are certain literary and film texts that, when being adapted into gaming formats, may at times have to undergo a lot of transformations (keeping in view the necessities of the media and format in question, and the popular demands of said media's consumers) and might end up becoming quite unrecognizable, making the label of adaptation itself inadequate, if not problematic. For instance, the character of *Bhima* from the primary epic *Mahabharata* has undergone multiple adaptations and transformations through the ages and changes in media, be it in cinema or novels. The later animated cartoons of the character Bheem, which give the character a completely different back story, wherein Bheem is a commoner in medieval India rather than a prince from the ancient era of the *Mahabharata*, veer so far away from the story of the epic that it may not even be deemed as an adaptation in the broadest sense of the term.

The creators of the game, however, explain how the inspiration for the character of Chhota Bheem emerged from the character of the mythical hero of the epic narrative. This character has since ended up as the playing character of mobile application games like *Bheem Galaxy Rush* (2018), amongst many others, becoming one of the most lucrative endeavours of its creators ("Rajiv Chilaka"). Most of these games have almost nothing to do with the character

of *Bhima* from the epic; they simply utilize the herculean strength that the epic character is famous for and adapt this superhuman ability to familiar game formats where the protagonist may vanquish foes. Given the specificities of the mobile device and the target audience intended for these games (primarily children who also watch the cartoon series), *Chhota Bheem* games adapt the runner game format akin to *Subway Surfers*. Narrative complexity is kept at a minimum, sometimes *Bheema* may be chasing a thief on the train, and sometimes simply riding a jeep in rocky terrain (which makes the rudimentary game narratives of these apps anachronistic even to that of the animated TV series featuring Chhota Bheem).

Neither of these game-story instances has any similarity to the originary character of *Bhima* from the epics, being observably anachronistic to the primary epic's era, amongst other things. Here we find an instance of stretching the definition of what can be considered an adaptation beyond its permissible limits, to the extent where there is an inevitability of the need to relinquish it. This is not to say that it would not be possible to more faithfully adapt the narratives and characters of the *Mahabharata* into the Interactive Digital Narrative format; there indeed have been instances of such attempts, albeit not gaining anywhere near the phenomenal success of the *Chhota Bheem* games.

These instances substantiate that the ability for these different and differing adaptations of literary and cinematic texts into the interactive format demonstrates that the texts must have the capacity for such transformations. With the advent of technology, which could facilitate these transformations, the demand for such gaming texts, which are adaptations from popular literary and cinematic texts, has also increased. Literary texts that enable the conquest-like structure of the early adventure games would appear to be easily transformed into video games, for instance, texts that have treasure hunts, wars, vanquishing evil demons, etc. Instances of evil demons are found in the runner games inspired by the character of Krishna from the *Mahabharata*.

Little Krishna and Chhota Bheem had both been animated television series before they were turned into games. Little Bheem in the animated series lives in a village in medieval India called Dholakpur. The makers of the show as well as the game, gradually transformed the setting, making it contemporary, albeit with the character of Bheem still dressed in the wrap-around orange clothes which his epic alter ego would've worn. This anachronism, if at all it is objectionable to the player, can be dealt with by purchasing contemporary clothes for Chhota Bheem.

Apart from his extraordinary strength, another defining feature of Chhota Bheem's character is his love for laddoos or sweets. Now, if you're familiar with Indian myths, you'll know that it is the elephant-headed god Ganesha, who is associated with an insatiable appetite for laddoos. This feature however, seems to seamlessly be attributed to Chhota Bheem (in the games laddoos earned denote the points and power-ups earned by the player). This character now becomes a symbolic melting pot that stands in for the inherited tradition of the Mahabharata and is then plotted onto a contemporary game aesthetic topography that is distinctly reminiscent of other immensely popular games.

Moving on to Krishna. The animated series is indeed based on the mythological character, as is clearly stated at the beginning of the show, so unlike Bheem, it is not merely an overarching influence. Similarly, the Little Krishna games are also not divested of the mythological elements. Lord Krishna is also popularly known as makhan chor or butter thief, and the Krishna games start off with this aspect. As we see, this game too is highly reminiscent of Subway Surfers, and the only thing differing is the originary story or reason which allows the 'run' of the game to begin. While for Bheem it was recovering a watch from a thief in the Mumbai local trains, for Krishna, the setting of the myth is retained, and the reason as well. His foster mother, Yashoda, who would admonish the butter thief, is pursuing the playing character, and Krishna is dodging bullock carts and a demon sorceress in his endless run.

Looking at these two games, we can ascertain that the narrative element is minimal in the sense that what occupies the player is the running and accumulating points and power-ups and escaping and avoiding obstacles; the narrative is but an excuse to execute this gameplay. It offers the player a different cultural imaginary than Mario or Subway Surfers for sure, but it becomes evident that generating alternate narratives for these mythological characters is not the game's concern.

The third game in this regard, *Prachanda*, has not been developed from a pre-existing series. This game is markedly different from the other two, as also are its developers, the marketing, etc. The game intends to liken the mythical character of Shiva to an action-hero figure, borrowing from visual graphics reminiscent of famous games like *Assassin's Creed*. The gameplay that emerges is once again reminiscent of popular games playable in non-Indian storylines, and it is the mythological backstory of the characters that arguably becomes the site of executing 'Indianness' within the game text.

In these video games, though the possibility of multiple narratives does not happen, it allows for only one outcome: clearing levels and finishing a task, collecting points, but this in itself is a departure from what Bheem or other characters originally stand for in the myth. This, in itself, has to be seen as a subversion. There is an alternate outcome being provided here but there is no plurality or multiplicity of outcomes. Though the character is being made non-serious and treated and traversing non-serious environs and performing non-serious acts, the very act of transposing the mythic character into this non-serious scenario is not at all non-serious.

While looking for creative modes of expression that can accommodate the multifariousness inescapable in Indian literary texts, it appears games and animated series have fallen short. For all the plurality, multiplicity and interactivity that we ascribe to the digital medium, it may not be capable of executing the extent of plurality that we presume it to be capable of.

So, through this comparative look at a few of the video games based on the Indian epics, one can conclude that these games do not, in fact, in any way change the narratives of the myths themselves or the gameplay formats inherited from non-Indian contexts. There is nothing in the format that may be claimed as distinctly ‘Indian’, whereas the costuming or the front-end display of the gameplay is the primary claim to its ‘Indianness’. The very act of taking these mythic characters, characters who are indeed worshipped as gods by the multitudes and playing with them is itself a major subversion which is not to be taken lightly. That these gods can be deployed to do something as mundane as gain points and cross levels in a game is quite a subversion from the sacrosanct manner in which these characters are usually deified in the cultural and religious domain. Having said that, let us now understand what exactly these games do with their contact with the mythological.

The essence of myths lies in their possibility of being, and becoming, multiple narratives with multiple outcomes. But in most cases, we end up ossifying these myths. Traditionally and through ritualistic practices, we end up canonizing the myths. Therefore, the original possibility of multiplicity encoded within the myth and its mythological universe allows for several recensions, several alternatives and decensions wherein an Indianness across the retellings stays intact, accommodating a wide variety of cultural differences and the differing stories that these cultural differences allow for. While it may have been expected that the digital interactive format would offer further possibilities in this regard for user interventions to bring in further versions of narrative differences from the oral domain to the digital, in reality, it appears that this format adopts a global gameplay format to the Indian context, in only so far as the visuality of the games and the narrative scaffolding for that visuality is concerned.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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