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**Press F6 to Reload: Games Studies and the Future of the Digital Humanities in India**

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As the digital humanities gathers global impetus, with recent initiatives such as Global Outlook: DH and Around DH in 80 Days, seeking to extend the reach of the discipline beyond Anglo-American institutional portals (both virtual and architectural), it might be an appropriate moment to reflect upon what indigenous digital humanities forged in an Indian context might look like. What might it mean to have an Indian homegrown digital humanities? Why is it even a necessity? One obvious answer would include the assumed digital divide between the Western world and the developing world, but also we would argue, in response to the need for a ‘poor theory’—a term Ngugi wa Thiong’o coined in a 2012 essay—a theoretical framework that endeavours to ‘accord dignity to the poor as they fight poverty’. He elaborates: ‘Poor theory and its practice imply maximising the possibilities inherent in the minimum’.

To those of us working in an Indian context, this is all too familiar, being borne out in practice by the Indian practice of *jugaad*, the endeavour of creating ingenious solutions by yoking disparate technologies or parts together. In recent years, this form of informal iterative working has been gaining recognition in the West, often drawing parallels to hacking. The semantic differences of the two words, however, deserves close attention, alerting us to philosophical differences that are consequences of that digital divide. To ‘hack’ contains within it both the meaning of subverting the authority of proprietary systems through some sort of destructive action as well as to come up with a quick solution, whereas the aim of *jugaad* is almost always constructive, often unaware of the capitalist systems it undermines, and truly born out of necessity. The practice and theoretical shape of the digital humanities thus far, almost exclusively determined by wealthy institutions in the global North, has failed to make space for such circumstantial necessity, and it is only with the Maker/DIY movement in the West that an alternative paradigm has been forged. The concept of minimal computing, for example, dwells on the dichotomy of choice versus necessity built on the understanding that computing resources in the developing world are not necessarily high performance, and that much can be done by streamlining low-cost single-board computers such as the Raspberry Pi for use in these contexts.

The inevitable lacunae formed by the absence of this awareness in the Western academy has meant that the discipline has been remarkably tone-deaf to the noise made by cultural criticism in the mainstream humanities post ’68—as Tara McPherson writes in a 2013 essay:

Much of the work in the digital humanities also proceeded as if technologies from XML to databases were neutral tools. Many who had worked hard to instill race as a central mode of analysis in film, literary, and media studies throughout the late twentieth century were disheartened and outraged (if not that surprised) to find both new media theory and emerging digital tools seem indifferent to those hard-won gains.

However, as the discipline matures, Alan Liu advocates that digital humanists should become sharper critics of ‘how the digital humanities advances, channels, or resists today’s great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporate, and global flows of information-cum-capital’. We believe that the local flavours of such analyses, as well as the particularities of our relationship with technology in India as exemplified by the philosophy of *jugaad* mentioned earlier, necessitates a particularly Indian approach to this area of critical thinking and doing.

If, as digital humanists, our aims are to create resources that help us perform the act of cultural criticism and to study the objects of such criticism, we must accept that our vision is necessarily circumscribed by cultural specificity and particularity. These concerns operate both at the level of content and interface: for example, much humanities work in Indic languages has been, until relatively recently, impeded by the lack of optimised character recognition software. Katharina Reinecke’s seminal work on how national culture influences our perception of good design has shown how, for instance, Google struggled to get a foothold in the Korean market, as Korean users preferred much more colourful and graphically populated interfaces. This demonstrates how international technology players can be disadvantaged by their failure to tailor their offerings to local tastes and visual habits.

Our research into gaming in India endeavours to demonstrate how these local tastes, habits, and practices are shaped by global forces, but how local context still uniquely shapes digital culture—however homogeneous that culture itself might be—and how questions of access, infrastructure, economic and government policy, technological obsolescence, relevance, and lag might all contribute to more nuanced understandings of what it might mean to practice games studies and the digital humanities in the global South.

The Indian market is growing exponentially, especially with the undeniable popularity of mobile gaming. While India has long been considered a destination for outsourcing animation and visual effects work for games made abroad, the local industry is beginning to take shape. Indeed, the nascent, emergent Indian videogame industry with its growing player base is a marker of how digital technologies are shaping contemporary culture in this developing nation. However, videogames based on original intellectual properties created in India are still few and far between. Commentators have assumed that industry expertise combined with visual vibrancy, narratives rooted in myth and legend, and the multimodal richness of a certain sort of India, embedded in ethnic otherness, could result in a watershed moment for the industry. Indeed, in 2009, eminent game designer and commentator Ernest Adams felt that India’s lack of progress in the field could be rapidly compensated for by relying on adaptations of grand epic narratives such as the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*.

While this promise is yet to be fulfilled, predictions have been heady and optimistic—with KPMG forecasting a growth of 17 billion INR by 2017, and NASSCOM (India’s flagship computing association) anticipating an eight-fold surge in casual gamers over the 2010–2015 period, with the vast majority (approximately 60%) playing on mobile, approximately 38% on PC, but a paltry 0.3% on console. However, there has been almost no academic research on the business of selling games, game design and how it might be shaped by its Indian origins, nor any rigorous analysis regarding the kind of games that are being enjoyed and played in the country.

To this end, we undertook an online (via surveymonkey.com) and offline survey of game developers and gamers, across sociocultural and linguistic communities in India (covering platform reach, importance of storytelling, gaming practices, problems of accessibility). SPSS, MAXQDA 10, and Wordle were the tools used to yield quantitative and qualitative data analyses of the total of 185 responses, which mostly came from major Indian urban centres. The paper will showcase our findings, which include a range of anecdotal responses to open-ended questions as well as empirical data. The scope can certainly be enlarged, and the final paper will reveal how the data sample is indicative.

Our research on videogames very usefully addresses the conference’s theme of ‘global’ digital humanities as it is possibly the most international of contemporary media forms, and as our data demonstrates, individual engagement with such a phenomenon is always mediated through its local context but inextricable from its global condition—and we feel these are significant revelations for the future of storytelling, narrative, and digital cultures.

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