
ZAHRA RIZVIJamia Millia Islamia
rs.zrizvisasuke@jmi.ac.in**& SOUVIK MUKHERJEE**Centre for Studies in Social
Sciences
souvik@cssscal.org

“Your Subaltern is not my Subaltern”

Intersectionality and the Dangers of a Single Game-story

ABSTRACT

Despite the recent research on the role of the postcolonial and the Subaltern in videogames, the discourse of game studies remains restricted to titles that are focused on and developed in the Global North. Often, games made in the Global South tend to get ignored even as they engage with history and culture. Their discourse and procedural rhetoric are rendered Subaltern – especially, if there is a different language involved, if the game is made in the Global South, or if it addresses issues that are considered marginal. This double marginalization along the lines of language, region, and culture presents a lack in the otherwise intertextual positionality of discourses around caste, religion, South Asian queer studies, disability studies, and Dalit studies in relation to game studies. The Global South is often passed through a filter of sameness, with the ensuing popularization of the grand-narrative of a “single game-story”, where issues of caste, the diversity of religion and faith, queerness, and affinity are not commented and reflected upon. The epistemology of the digital requires revaluations of the kind that are already happening outside game studies. The authors of this paper seek to outline and analyse discursive absences and omissions that are widespread in current scholarship, interrogating and unravelling game-stories that are given precedence *vis-à-vis* game-stories that are not being told, and endeavour to bring the latter to the forefront. Looking in further depth at discourses of intersectionality and Subaltern studies, beyond what has been attended to in games research, this paper seeks to reconfigure the Subaltern in videogames to make a case for intersectionality and against the dangers of “the single game-story”. This involves centring critical analyses of the discursive and participatory politics of representation in a variety of game-stories from South Asia, through a critical and reflexive reinvestigation in the epistemological, linguistic and geopolitical hegemonies of Subalternity in games research and game-stories.

KEYWORDS: Subaltern, postcolonial, South Asia, diversity, intersectionality

In his celebrated essay on “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts” (1998), historian Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies a gap between the historian’s reading of the past and historical evidence. As Subaltern Studies historians contend, colonial historiography presents the indigenous *Santhal* populations¹ of the Jharkhand region of northern India as a people without history. Conversely, as the possible ways of describing the past are vastly different from those deployed in Global North paradigms, the Subaltern Studies historian attempts to reclaim the *santhal* as agents or subjects of their own actions. In fact, as we read it, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (2008) is more about whether the subaltern can be heard by majoritarian forces. In his formulation of minority histories, however, Chakrabarty brings up yet another important point. After their defeat by the British troops, the Santhal leaders are questioned about the reasons for their violent rebellion and the answer they give is enigmatic: they claim to have acted at the behest of their god, whom they call *thakur*. Chakrabarty comments that “between the insistence of the Subaltern Studies historian that the Santhal is the agent or the subject of his own action and the Santhal’s insistence that it was to their god Thakur that such sovereignty belonged, remains a hiatus separating two radically different experiences of historicity” (Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 477). He goes on to say that “we treat their beliefs as just that, ‘their beliefs’. We cannot write history from within those beliefs. We thus produce ‘good’, not subversive, histories”² (Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 477).

In media such as videogames, the plurality of experiences is key to the gameplay. As such, to fix the parameters of cultural experience is both risky and limiting for the space of possibilities (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) that videogames have been described as representing. Chakrabarty’s points about minority histories is relevant here. Now that after many years of Game Studies (and after going through the many hoops of the ludology-narratology debates that raged from the late 1990s to the early 2000s: see Frasca, 2003; Murray, 2005), it is by and large conceded that videogames can tell stories. Issues such as race and colonialism in videogame cultures are also beginning to be addressed in recent years. Following the recent postcolonial criticism of videogames, the concept of subalternity has also been introduced in Game Studies. “Subaltern” itself is a term adopted from Antonio Gramsci’s work on hegemony where it refers to social groups who had been othered or marginalised from the established socio-economic system; the term was adapted by the Indian historian Ranajit Guha, who initiated what is called “subaltern studies” as a response to colonial historiography where the writing of history was contingent on the availability of written or printed archival sources and which, consequently, did not represent a vast section of people who do not have access to structures of written archives. The concept was further developed by the entire Subaltern Studies group in multiple ways and besides Spivak’s now famous essay, there has been important work by Partha Chatterjee (2012, 2013), Gyanendra Pandey (2006, 2010) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (1998, 2000, 2013) among others. It is such thinking that has recently been carried into

1. For more on this and the Santhal rebellion of 1855, see Guha (1988).

2. Wherein good histories begun as oppositional, they are focused on undoing exclusion and prioritize incorporation, that is, they seek to find place in the already-existing mainstream narrative while subversive histories critically examine, question and disrupt the existing narrative itself.

Game Studies almost three decades after Spivak published her essay and after almost twenty years of the formal recognition of Game Studies. Why such a delay occurred is a question that merits an altogether separate discussion. In 2016, the player/gamer subaltern was introduced in Souvik Mukherjee's article "Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism" (2016); in this article, Mukherjee's original position is developed on and rethought from two particular perspectives.

The question addressed here is not merely "can the subaltern game?", which is to say "can the subaltern take up controls, make decisions and exercise game choices, and win?", but also: "can the subaltern game-stories reach mainstream media focus?". In a review of DiGRA India's panel proposal abstract on "DiGRA India - Gaming the Sleeping Giant", submitted for the DiGRA –Digital Games Research Association 2022 Conference, the panellists were advised to structure India and Indian game studies research as and within "regional game studies". Paul Martin and Bjarke Liboriussen's essay on "Regional Game Studies" (2016) firstly presents a well thought-out explanation for their usage and choice of the term "region" itself (in comparison to "global," "international," "local," "glocalized," or "situated", for instance). It also provides an excellent rationale for providing space to research from different and diverse regions: "[we] see in regional game studies the potential to inscribe in game studies this progressive sense of place or, to shift into a philosophical vocabulary, to develop an academic field that is sensitive to the complex dynamics between space and place" (Martin & Liboriussen, 2016). However, with reference to the aforementioned review, to pigeonhole already contextualized research inside the general box of "regional game studies" is to demand research from and about the margins to remain peripheral³. There is also an anxiety behind a question that Chakrabarty touches upon and Martin and Liboriussen also ask: "What if the periphery became the centre?" (Martin & Liboriussen, 2016). Though we do not consider the abovementioned review as either ill-intentioned nor lacking in usefulness in a global game studies research perspective, where considering the diversity of various regions is now being recognised as of paramount importance, the deployment of 'regional' as a concept still needs to be more carefully thought through. "Regional", in the example of this review, seems to almost suggest non-Western, where research from the Global North is the norm and anything falling outside of it is relegated to subalternity: this is the positionality of being caught between language and silence(d). It is, therefore, important to rethink the concept to avoid reinforcing the centre-margin binary even further.

As the scenario stands today, research from and about the Global South escapes the margins if it continues to engage with primary sources in/of the Global North; in the case of Game Studies, this still means writing and participating in discourses about games and titles that represent the Global South which are being produced in and distributed from the Global North. This creates a field where even deeply-tied Global South-ist theoretical issues of global capitalism, neocolonialism and postcolonialism are ultimately conducive to discussing the

3. See footnote 2 and Chakrabarty's aforementioned point about good versus subversive histories.

Global North. While the intersection between postcolonialism and Game Studies is still a relatively newer phenomenon, it is of great value to scrutinize the kind of discourse stemming from this rich convergence. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's (2009) study of *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Grand Theft Auto* examines AAA games created in the West in a powerful critique of global capital, its connection to video games, and the networks of association between the virtuality of games and the prominent concerns of the real world. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter present the underside of the global game industry, including critical discussions of atrocities in African mines and the state of Indian e-waste sites. Souvik Mukherjee's (2015, 2016) work on postcolonialism and videogames, with its radical ideas of subversive play, cartography and postcolonialism in games, sheds light on the direct connection between postcolonial critique of games like *Empire: Total War* and *East India Company* and Indian player responses to playing games that have a gameplay navigating colonial history. Mukherjee discusses the uneasy affiliation between the figures of the player and the coloniser/colonized, and how the player, in playing the game, "has to become the Other" and "there is dominant tendency to force a resolution" (Mukherjee, 2016). We would suggest that this tendency is not just an underlying trait of videogames but also games research which struggles to decisively and overtly affiliate postcolonial critique to media production from postcolonial spaces. Dom Ford (2016) utilizes postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and affect theory to make sense of the player's role in writing history. Another example of a videogame produced in the West and featuring a game-story of empire and colonialism – which Ford (2016) carefully teases through to and directly refers to the scrutiny of subaltern studies – is *Civilization V* (2010). This is a game that can be discussed while keeping in mind Spivak's (1988) contention of "critics who fail to acknowledge their own ideological framework in which they live, observe and write, merely end up generalizing and co-opting subaltern peoples into the Western narrative". In such games, the subaltern is "inextricably suppressed within the game's rules" (in Ford 2016). Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar's (2018) edited a "special" collection volume that analyses how games "perpetuate past and present global power structures in relation to inequalities in material wealth, exploitation of labor, and hegemonic articulations of history and the Other" and features studies of videogames including *Age of Empires* (1997), *Far Cry 2* (2008), *Witcher 3* (2007), *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), *Clash of Clans* (2012) and *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (2013). In the introduction to this essential issue, Mukherjee & Hammar discuss how the "treatment of colonialism in video games, barring a few notable exceptions, is marked by a Western and, specifically, late 19th-century imperialist bias" and at the same time, "the past years has seen a rather persistent, albeit unexpected, emergence of a pro-colonial or pro-imperialist discourse in mainstream academia that even justifies the continuance of empire" (p. 1). The various contributors of this issue engage with the

space in between these categories of imperialism and neo-imperialism, the space of postcolonial critique from diverse perspectives, and a majority of the contributors select games produced in the West to discuss the problems of representations of various places and peoples from the Global South, game mechanics, and gaming cultures in and through them. Two years later, Mateusz Felczak (2020) analyzes the cRPG *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* using a postcolonial framework inspired by Achille Mbembe (2001, 2003, 2019), also includes a reading of Spivak's (1988) argument, which is another example that uses postcolonial criticism to examine the self-conscious narrative of a commercially mainstream game where the subalterns "truly do not speak, as their underprivileged predicament, conditioned both by the colonial subjugation (in this case: by the Rauataians owning the town of Sayuka) and the petrified state of the inequal societal relations effectively alleviates any form of meaningful in-game agency that could alter their state" (Felczak, 2020). To circle back to the introductory passages of this paper, the question remains, whose subaltern is it who is deemed as "silent" in the networks of power and discourse that surround questions of aurality, oriented on the critical examination of silence(d). Would the subaltern call themselves subaltern, if at all? And then, borrowing Chakrabarty's terminology, the question that arises is: is the games discourse creating "good" or subversive histories?

Returning to the issue of regionality, the very construction of the Global North-South binaries has been criticized in academia. Attributing an umbrella location (North/South) to countries that have very distinct and fragmented cultural constructions that homogenizes them into distinct blocks has been questioned by scholars who seek to understand the situation as far more complex. Of course, geographically (in the sense of the position relative to the Equator), the classification of the North-South binary does not hold as many countries such as Australia and New Zealand are considered to belong to the Global North. Further, claims like the ones made by Francis Fukuyama ('the end of history') and Thomas Friedman ('the world is flat') also work against the North-South binary. Nevertheless, others such as Arif Dirlik (2007) are cautious about the term and point to the complexity of the South-South relations. Alfred J. López makes it clear that the Global South is not geographical or even regional and as such the category can also describe subaltern peoples in countries that are affluent:

What defines the global South is the recognition by peoples across the planet that globalization's promised bounties have not materialized, that it has failed as a global master narrative. The global South also marks, even celebrates, the mutual recognition among the world's subalterns of their shared condition at the margins of the brave new neoliberal world of globalization. (López, 2007, p. 3)

Echoing this sentiment, Walter Dignolo describes the Global South as not a geographic location but, rather, "a metaphor that indicates regions of the world at the receiving end of globalization and suffering the consequences" (2011, pp.

184). Taking this into account, Phillip Penix-Tadsen, in his analysis of videogames in the South-South context, clarifies that “the global south is a movable and situational term referring to many areas with internal political and socio-economic divisions as well as previously colonized societies that still endure the effects of colonialism” (Penix-Tadsen, 2019, p. 7). The relevance of the term is, therefore, clear; however, the Global South exists as something very different from and much more than a geographical region. Therefore, speaking of the subaltern in videogames, one needs to go beyond the regional perspectives and to consider certain very important factors that have been left out in recent post-colonial critiques of videogames that (mostly) emerge from the Global North.

Taking the Indian Subcontinent as a case in point, Shantanu Chakrabarti (2017) argues, there is a further North-South divide in terms of the main languages that are spoken; there is the issue of the caste system, which has led to deep and widespread debates and critiques from Dalit Studies; further, there are deep diversities and problems with the ways in which class, gender and religion are addressed within the Global South countries themselves and also in who is rendered subaltern and under which context. It is no surprise that videogames also reflect such issues.

For example, *Unrest* (Pyrodactyl Games, 2014) is a videogame that directly addresses the caste-system prevalent in India: “you play as individuals straddling the social divide of India’s rigid caste system. [...] *Unrest* is not a game that provides easy answers to complicated issues. Instead, you are rewarded for your ability to intelligently weave your way through conversations, suppressing any penchant for a brazen response. Yielding to the social laws is hardly virtuous, but it could keep you breathing” (Woolsey, 2014).

Similarly, Padmini Ray Murray’s game *Darshan Diversion* (Padmini Ray Murray, Joel Johnson and KV Ketan, 2016), which was made during a Global Game Jam 2016, addressed the restrictions that prevented women from entering the temple in Sabarimala, Kerala. According to a commentator, the inspiration for the game was rather complex:

While attempting to conceptualise a game that would fit the theme, Ray Murray came across a news article describing the entry ban at the Sabarimala temple. “There was this amazing quote [...] which] said that the only time they would consider allowing women into Sabarimala is when there is a scanner that checks if they are menstruating,” [...] She was also inspired by a woman activist who bragged that she would use helicopters to storm temples that banned female worshippers. (Kulkarni, 2018)

Taking two such hyperbolic positions as influences for the game mechanics, Ray Murray created a platform that revealed the deeper problems in such ritualistic constructions, particularly when gender-related issues are in the forefront. Incidentally, the game’s relevance was revealed when two years later a court ver-

dict (Jamal, 2020) to allow women to enter the temple was opposed massively by protestors, thus revealing the deeply entrenched patriarchy in the region.

Taking into account both gender and religion, despite the bans on *PUB-G* by some Islamic organizations (Batool, 2020), the videogame remains popular and as Umer Hussain et al. contend that Muslim women players of eSports in Pakistan “felt liberated and empowered through online video games, despite showing the white color inferiority complex” (Hussain et al., 2021). Summarizing their claims, the researchers state that “these complex behaviors illustrate the participants’ entrapment in the patriarchal system and the grave infringement of colonization. However, within the entrapment, we found that online competitive video games allow the participants to show their oppositional agency against the normative system” (Hussain et al., 2021). The findings of the survey are complicated and do not restrict themselves only to gender or to colonialism and religion but consider the interactions of all of these factors and the attempt to establish a sense of agency in a world where this is lacking.

These examples from the Indian Subcontinent are merely reflective of a larger set of examples that relate to the subaltern in the Global South. Consider the work by Rhett Loban and Thomas Apperley (2019) on the erasure of Indigenous cultures from Western games and how Loban used mods to rewrite the indigenous into videogames; similarly Vit Sisler’s description of how often Arab producers need to be “exploiting and reversing stereotypical depiction, narrative and gameplay known from European and American games” (Sisler, 2008) is also a case of how certain cultural differences are elided and therefore rendered subaltern. Games in the Global South are increasingly attempting to express their diverse cultures as *A Space for the Unbound* (Mojiken, 2022), a game based on Indonesian rural town life in the ‘nineties does: “It’s unafraid to just be Indonesian, and trusts you to either roll with it, or Google the words you might not understand” (Law, 2023). The game addresses problems such as depression and teenage anxiety, it combines the familiar of Indonesian street food, music and festivals with jarringly explicit paranormal events thus creating a sense of being unsettled.

These stories, however, rarely get told in Game Studies and unfortunately, already, the fledgling postcolonial analyses in the field have become lopsided as they tend to be more and more engaged with AAA titles from the Global North, leaving game creation and production in and from the Global South neglected in the history of game studies and therefore, missing the deep play involved in the diversity of issues, cultures and unsettlings that these games could bring to the field. One wonders if left unattended what this phenomenon would end up creating. Could this be a story that is not so different from the colonialist “non-histories” of the Santhals? A single game-story, really, of postcolonial game studies which have a mere, and yet often overlooked, smattering of videogames from actual postcolonial sites. It is almost as if postcolonialism is something that happens in the Global North while colonialism is something that *happened* to the Global South. This is not to say that one must abandon all

analyses of AAA games or games produced in the Global North. Nor does it mean that engagement with representations of the Other, the subaltern and the Global South can or should be stopped; the authors engage with such analysis (Mukherjee, 2017, 2018, 2022; Rizvi & Chowdhury, 2021) routinely, as it is a practice that is essential to game studies as well as game production, and we will continue to undertake it in this paper as well. Mukherjee (2017) writes about the hybrid subject and identification with the same, "In the videogame *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (*Freedom Cry* here onwards), the player finds himself or herself in the shoes of Adewale, former slave and now a pirate captain. *Freedom Cry*, an add-on to the piracy-adventures of *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, is probably one of the few games where the player takes on such an avatar" (p. 53) and comments on how "identity is a vexed question for the postcolonial subject" (p. 54). The mediation and mediatization of the subaltern in a field of constantly negotiated identity begs the question of not just constructed or construed identities and implementation of a certain idea of subalternity, but of how in reality videogames can reveal so much more about subaltern affinities across the intersections of life, experiences, histories, community, affiliations, and situatedness. This makes way for not just South-South affinities to come to the fore but also to complicate regional affiliations that are, in reality, fractured with differences. Such differences result from one's living amongst a meshwork of gender, class, race, caste, religion and sexuality. Therefore, whither does the subaltern go? Rizvi and Chowdhury (2021) in their double keynote for DiGRA India's inaugural conference in 2021 suggest that it is a compulsory spectrality that is worked upon the 'Other'. Chowdhury brings in autoethnography to talk about the experiences of a brown Bengali woman navigating videogames and online co-op spaces and chat rooms, diversity and female rep, as well as socioeconomic layers to gaming and gameplay in India (and the popularity of mobile games, for instance), while Rizvi discusses the terrains of religion, class and caste in India and its (mis)representation in popular videogames and the need for diverse game production teams, the importance of local consultants, and fandom power and politics by focalizing on the figure of the Indian Muslim in videogames and gaming communities. This challenging of the spectral is also the challenging of generalized notion of what has become a spectre and spectacle rooted in what Siddharta Chakraborti calls the creation of "a need, even desire for continued western intervention" (2015, p. 139) in his chapter on "From destination to nation and back: The hyper-real journey of incredible India". This desire is one that lurks in the subtext of AAA games set in India; Chakraborti studies *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), *Tomb Raider III* (Eidos Interactive, 2010), *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* (IO Interactive, 2002), Cabela's *Dangerous Hunts 2009* (Fun Labs, 2008) and *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (Treyarch, 2012) but acknowledges that even this selection needs to be problematized.

What this paper is calling for is something not so different from existing postcolonial analyses in game studies but rather a sharper, more inclusive and

intersectional method of doing so. What is being proposed here is a reevaluation of game studies research in the same manner of reevaluations that are happening in studies of media and of the digital outside the arena of game studies. At Digital Diversity 2015, Indian Digital Humanist Padmini Ray Murray remarked that “Your DH is not my DH”, stressing that this difference stemming from real, lived experiences in diversity “is a good thing” in that the field doesn’t just have a want for it but also an intrinsic need if it has to continue to do the work of Digital Humanities. In 2016, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously said “[Beyoncé’s] feminism is not mine” and while she respected Beyoncé’s use of a sample from her “We should all be feminists” (2013) TED Talk in the album *Beyoncé* (2013), Adichie also describes the “resentment” she felt at Western media’s attempt to appropriate her feminism and her work under Beyoncé’s figure and brand (in Rogo, 2020). Just as there is a plurality of feminist thought, Adichie stresses that this plurality and its intersectionality is one that should not be subsumed under a singular label. In her 2009 TED talk “The danger of a single story”, Adichie⁴ had already begun to articulate what Western media does to the psyche of those who engage in it from non-Western contexts but also to the form and content of the ‘story’ as a whole. Growing up, the majority of literature Adichie had read were about ‘foreign’ lands and ‘foreign’ people and as a young impressionable child, she began to believe that these were the people and places that were allowed to exist in book,

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn’t have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to... (Adichie, 2009)

It was only when she was able to access literature by Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye that she began to imagine people like herself in her writing. For the South Asian, there is ample representation in videogames, especially when it comes to spatial depiction, however, not all representation is good representation. As an Indian gamer, one has often seen someone who is supposed to be “me” in a place that is supposed to be “my home” in the videogames one plays but more often than not such representation is caught between fantasy or backdrop. Between these twin poles, the Indian finds place as a stereotype or a playground where the player plays *on*. Mukherjee discusses a game popular in India, *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991), and its Indian character, Dhalsim, “portrayed as kicking out in “yogic” posture and as wearing a torn saffron shorts and necklace of skulls so as to emphasize his oriental Indian mystique.

4. It is imperative to note that what Adichie is saying here is something that is symptomatic of a multifaceted position on representation.

He can spew fireballs, levitate and likes curry, and meditation. To add to his image of the oriental, he is very protective of his son Datta and his wife, who rather strangely is named Sari (after the dress worn by Indian women)!" (2016). One of the authors remember playing as Dhalsim with friends, laughing as his character stretched its limbs in superhuman fashion, or watching in awe as he breathed fireballs, wondering if any of them ever related to him or even thought of him as Indian. To the players, Dhalsim is a powerful yet exoticized caricature, a playable character who "loves curry" (in some origin stories, Dhalsim can breathe fire because of his consumption of spicy curry, apparently) and whose name is inspired by an Indian restaurant near Capcom's office in Osaka (*dhal* from lentils and *shim* from Hyacinth beans). Even the nomenclature is one that isn't automatically obvious to actual Indians – *Reddit* user Espada32 commented, "Wow I'm brown and I've never made that connection before lmaoo" (2020). Dhalsim's character went on to inspire Capcom's production and sale of "Dhalsim curry" in 2014. Extremely spicy and on the expensive side, Brian Ashcraft, via *Kotaku*, explains it as "But can you really put a price on Yoga Fire?" (Ashcraft, 2014). The summation of a prominent Indian character into "yoga fire" is a stereotype, a cybertype (Nakamura, 2002) that permeates digital interaction and gaming with singularization of narrative that is perpetuated by popular media, including videogames.

Adichie calls the reduction of the multiplicity of lives and narratives into one single idea of them as the creation and proliferation of "a single story". She shares an anecdote about visiting her family's domestic staff's village and being surprised to see beautiful art in the form of patterned baskets, "I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them" (2009). The dangers of a single-story are not just restricted to being represented as a stereotype but they also encompass the appropriation of creativity, skill, technological know-how and knowledge creation as a luxury not afforded to those from the Global South. Stories are powerful and awfully cruel when they become singular in that the "single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie, 2009). The truth about the Global South is that it is a multitude of stories, stories that represent the diversity of language and script, culture, religion and faith, gender, queerness, and community, and then some. Within the peoples, cultures and histories that live in the stories of the Global South, are more stories, all forced to exist under the same single story, the label of the 'subaltern' and all the elements of "single game-story" that come with it. Just as Adichie's "single story" represents the reduction of multiplicity and diversity of peoples and their lives as a singular 'type' in popular culture and media, this paper points to a derivative concept: the single game-story, the curtailment of different,

intersectional, multiplicitous stories of and about diverse peoples into a single type of narrative about them in and through videogames. This single game-story haunts game studies discourse as well where there continues to be wanting intersection with the stories of South Asia. In the purview of some of the most promising work in videogames, from representations of (Arab) Islam (Sisler 2008) to (Western) queer game studies (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) and beyond, the single game-story still presents a conundrum where there is little to no intersection with South Asia – a lack that creates, produces, packages and reproduces a singular idea of the Subaltern. The most obvious consequence is the erasure and erosion of the diversity of identity when intersections with, for example, studies of minority religions representation (Rizvi, 2021) or gender and queerness in South Asia (Dasgupta, 2017) or the vibrant Dalit studies discipline (Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016), are not brought to the fore in global game studies. The codified, hyperperipheral, spectral and anti-locale Subaltern is both a remnant and a function of the traditional global power asymmetries that need to be challenged in the discipline. The absence of the plethora of South Asian stories means that at the heart of postcolonial discourse and subaltern studies in and of videogames, there is a lack that both upholds the current discourse and prevents the acknowledgement of game-stories that allow “minority histories” (Chakrabarty, 1997) to populate them, that give space South Asian “sexual subaltern subjects” (Chatterjee, 2018) to reconfigure themselves into, that take note of queer intimacies and belonging in digital cultures and media in India (Dasgupta, 2017), that understand the complexities of South Muslim rep (Rizvi, 2021) and gamer communities, Dalit rep, activism, and the cyberspace (Nayar, 2014), alternative feminist historiographies (Shafiq, 2017), and more.

These stories (and their respective game-stories) of South Asia struggle to make it to the surface as they’re often codified into ideas and narratives of a space that exists in fantasies of the pristine past or fears of an irreparably violent present. One can choose from amongst many videogames and still reach the same end result—the single game-story. *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dog, 2017) presents Belur and Halebidu, lived, real town and city, but in an Indian gameworld of lush green forests and exotic treasure and temples reminiscent of pop culture tropes of a pre-modern, pristine India-land of elephants and snake charmers, against the backdrop of a violent Civil War, imaginings that are constantly created, catalogued, programmatized, distributed and reproduced as the single game-story of India. This game-story is then magnified and made to co-opt the diversity of stories of South Asia and present South Asia as a subaltern monolith. This monolith is celebrated and advertised for housing the single game-story, just as *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy’s* Playstation page lauds that the game is “an exotic mix of urban, jungle and ancient ruins environments” (Playstation.com, 2017). This is the South Asian single game-story in a nutshell and why it is imperative to puncture this narrative with the variety of game-stories about and, more importantly, from the subcontinent.

Indian videogames, themselves, have come a long way from the single game-story as described here. Rather than having India as a backdrop for the very interesting and important actions of protagonists who are usually not from the region or are non-resident expatriates (as Ajay Ghale in *Far Cry4* is), there is an increasing number of games made in the region where the focus is on a multitude of issues relevant to the region rather than on a protagonist with a white-saviour complex who is out to save the world with the superior knowledge, resources and culture that the West has to offer. Some of these games address problems that have never before been tackled in the videogame medium; for example, *Missing: A Game for a Cause* (Chakraborty & Kejriwal, 2019) is about women-trafficking and is set in one of the largest red-light areas in Kolkata, India: Sonagacchi. The protagonist is a trafficked woman trying to escape her life as a prostitute. Marcus Toftedahl et al note that "As stated by *Missing's* lead game designer, the story based on interviews with trafficking victims was the starting point for the game production and then finding game mechanics to fit this narrative" (Toftedahl et al., 2018, p. 19). In itself, the game (also available in Bengali) is the product of a multiplicity of narratives and as a serious game, it can compare with other indie games that do not have a single game-story such as *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios, 2014) and *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013). Another example is Studio Oleomingus's game series that contains titles such as *Timruk* (2015), *In the Pause between the Ringing* (2019) and *The Indifferent Wonder of Edible Places* (2020). As the developers state:

With our games we attempt to study colonial power structures and the histories that they occlude and how interactive fiction might be used to pollute a single reductive record of the past or of a people. We are keenly interested in languages, translations and questions of authorship, of bodies and territories, and of transactions and movements across borders. But most of all we study stories or narratives or fragments of data that can be recorded in the form of hypertext. (Studio Oleomingus, 2014)

The focus, here, is evidently on fragments rather than a single story or reductive record. In one of the games by Studio Oleomingus, the people of the fictitious city of Kayamgadh cannot or do not speak because they fear that their interlocutors' voices and speech will alter their identity. In the narrative, ostensibly discovered by a colonial official, Charles Henry Connington, the people of Kayamgadh are rendered subaltern as their stories can never be known; however, it is not that they cannot speak but that they will not. This is because speech itself becomes an aporia here. Studio Oleomingus's games are open-ended and fragmentary and their critique of colonialism is interspersed with multiple other perspectives. Two other recent examples come to mind and they are both about memory and forgetting in many different ways. *Forgotten Fields*⁴ (Frostwood Interactive, 2020) literally addresses this in its title and is about the

protagonist trying to get over his writer's block by revisiting locations from his childhood. *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023) has a somewhat different way of approaching the question of remembering - an expatriate Indian family in Canada reconstructs their memories of home through a recipe book, parts of which are lost. Another example of a game about memory and identity-formation is Afrah Shafiq's *Nobody Knows for Certain* (2023) which is about the popularity of Soviet children's books in India from the 1960s to the 1980s and the way in which these books are remembered by generations of Indians whose childhood and identities they influenced. Such memories too are multiple and fuzzy and just like the beginning of many Russian folktales, the title of the game testifies against the single story: nobody knows for certain.

These game-stories are amorphous, loud and messy. They speak to take apart and repurpose language and memory. They poke fun at easy binaries and instead ask "whose subaltern is it anyway?". These game-stories puncture the domination of the single game-story and instead reveal the double marginalization of relegated subaltern and singular by hegemonic forces that underpin the power networks of academia and game development, making easy conclusions impossible. Subversive game-stories tell subversive histories, not clean, 'good' histories. This requires acknowledgment of the very unique intersectionalities that exist in regions across the Global South, of which South Asia has been mostly overlooked in the past decade of game studies. This paper is a call for an updated, more inclusive acknowledgement of these oversights and the required remedies.

Game practice, the practice of design, development, creation, production and dissemination of videogames and their game-stories, as well as gameplay and game criticism, must become intersectional and more self-reflexive. Game practice as intersectionality stems from a desire to imagine the technology and design of games beyond the centre-periphery binary, and instead to aspire to be approach what the Design Beku founders described as their "decolonial, local, and ethical" approach (Ray Murray et al, 2021). Bagalkot's manifesto for "Infrastructuring for Community Care" in India, is a reminder that the ideal is to "democratize the design of digital technological tools" and "locate it as part of communities and their everyday life" (in Ray Murray et al, 2021). Game practice which is able to (re)locate and situate itself in the everyday lives of people from diverse locales must also tap into a "Place-Based Network of "Care" (Srivatsa in Ray Murray et al, 2021) and champion collaboration with grassroots level creators. It is not enough to be postcolonial, game practice must embody decoloniality⁵, and game studies must actively highlight decolonial game practices from the Global South to combat the proliferation of the anti-locale Subaltern that haunts the postcolonial discourse in game studies presently.

5. Armaan Sandhu, on the development of *Forgotten Fields*, talks about Goa, India, as the main inspiration for the game, "It also hit me that I knew Goa and the vibes inside out, whereas I was relatively new to Mumbai. If I decided to make a game set in Goa, I knew I'd nail the atmosphere. At that moment I just knew I had to make a story based here, related to the situation of people moving on, and combined with the earlier idea of a creative block, it all eventually came together to form the seed for *Forgotten Fields*" (Doke, 2021).

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