Ethnicity in Video Games: A Study Identifying Prejudice against Minority Groups of India

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Abstract

Video games have found immense popularity among adults and children equally. The industry reaps profits every year and seems to have grown in demand among their consumers. As games developed, they became more than just achieving the goal. Games became more about the experience. Therefore, game developers invested time in constructing stories and solid characters. With time, as graphics developed and 3D games grew in demand, developers began to bring in diverse cultures and ethnic groups to their games to hook their consumers. This was received well among the gaming community. But with it came flak, as developers were accused largely of appropriation of culture and ethnic groups. This research paper aims at identifying this problem in 3D games that were released between the years 2011 and 2020. For the purpose of clarity and understanding, the researcher has chosen to select games that have featured India.

Keywords: Video games, India, appropriation, culture, stereotypes

Introduction

The video game industry has easily found popularity among both adults and children as well. Like any other forms of media, video games are capable of influencing the consumers' ideologies and perceptions of the society and its constructs. If not directly, we indeed face the repercussions of problematic video games indirectly in our society. Starting from 1971, when

arcades were invented, games such as Pac-man found immense popularity. But with time came the invention of consoles, PC games, and other devices that conveniently engaged the gamers at home. As companies explored and invested themselves into multiple genres, games found immense popularity among the gamers. It demanded concentration and encouraged players to be patient. Some of the popular 3D games include the Assassin's Creed series, Alien: Isolation, The Phantom Pain, Hitman etc. The popularity of video games grew over time through their ability to indulge the players. This led to a dramatic transformation of the video game industry from just a mere form of entertainment. Games began making socio-political commentaries that could possibly influence the gamers. Researchers for a long time now have been trying to understand the effect video games have on the players. Countless studies have also studied the portrayals of culture and ethnic groups in these games. Though the results are contradicting, the study still continues.

In 2020, India saw an evident rise in the consumption of games in the country. It only saw an upward rising with the beginning of the lockdown period. 2D games like Ludo King and 3D games like PubG skyrocketed in terms of popularity. As families were huddled together during the lockdown period, they consumed simple games like Chess, Ludo and other board games on a large scale. On the other hand, the youth who were apart from their friends largely found solace to keep in touch with their friends and have a fun time through online games like PubG. The lockdown had witnessed a downward trend in traditional media consumption like television, film and print to digital media and gaming. Unlike other forms of media, games overcame a lot of barriers like geographic and social. People could interact in a safe space within the bubble of the game and indulge in quality fun time without putting the identity or safety of the other person at risk.

Over time, games have evolved from 2D to 3D and VR (Virtual Reality). The origin of 3D games can be found way back in 1974. 2D is referred to as flat and only have two dimensions, whereas 3D gives an image more volume and depth. This improves the experience of the gamer. For the purpose of this research, the researcher will be adopting 3D games.

Review of Literature

'**From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation**' is a paper written by *Richard A. Rogers* that discusses the prevalent cultural appropriation and how it gets tampered with. To understand cultural appropriation better, the concept has been divided into four; exchange, dominance, exploitation and transculturation. On the other hand, the paper**Cultural Appropriation in Games: A Comparative Study Between Far Cry 3 (2012), Overwatch (2016) and Horizon Zero Dawn (2017)** by*Tova Svensson*attempts to understand the cultural appropriation that takes place in video games. This thesis does a comparative study between three games. It shows how the game designers represented the minority cultures in the game play.

Whereas the article '**Theorizing Religion in Digital Games Perspectives and Approaches**' by *Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki*, discusses why it is necessary to expand the focus on religious and cultural studies in digital games that so far has been the most neglected field of study. The author points out that digital games are artifacts of contemporary popular culture and therefore they reside and influence the social realities of people who play. The paper '**Racism in Video Gaming: Connecting Extremist and Mainstream Expressions of White Supremacy**' by *Jessie Daniels* and *Nick Lalone* attempts to understand the problem of racism that exists in 4 games. It was found that in the games created by the movement of White Supremacists, racism has prevailed blatantly and unapologetically. Another conclusion drawn was that many of the samples that were made to play these games with subtle racism were color-blinded to the minority classes. They did not notice that there was a problem with theserepresentations and saw it as common or generic.

In the '**Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live**' by K. L. Gray, the paper realizes how deep rooted is the cause of misrepresentations and ultimately the problem of racism is. Keeping this in mind this paper tries to find out the racism that gamers face online from other gamers within the gaming world because of the lack of representation or proper representation and ultimately making it a white man's world.

Methodology

Research Questions
How have the game developers in the West portrayed India in their video games?
Does the lens that was used to portray the Indian culture in video games have a racist tint?

Hypothesis
If the selected video games have resorted to any of the variables identified below without giving value to India as an ethnic group, then an appropriation and/or stereotype has occurred

Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to determine how India as an ethnic group also categorized as a third world nation was portrayed in 3D video games from the year 2011-2020. The thesis tries to recognize how games from the years 2011 to 2020 have portrayed India in their games. The researcher will try to understand whether there has been a changing trend in the portrayal of India throughout the years in the game.

Limitations of the study

The researcher has identified four 3D games that featured India between the years 2011-2020 and has decided to depend on gameplays that several gamers have uploaded on platforms like YouTube. Therefore, there may be more elements in the vast universe of that particular game that the researcher might have missed.

Quantitative Analysis:

Games that featured India were selected through systematic sampling. The researcher identified that from the years 2011 to 2020, India was featured a couple of times in certain games. Most of these developers are industry giants too. Based on the data identified of the games, the researcher will then set out to identify common variables used in video games that will adhere to this research paper.

Qualitative Analysis:

The researcher has decided to do a qualitative analysis of the same, recognizing that video games are so dependent on visuals and audio, that the study will only do justice if the same is added. Adding to that, the researcher also understands that India is very rich in culture and tradition.

Data Collection

Quantitative Analysis

The researcher identified that from the years 2011 to 2020, India was featured a couple of times in certain games. Most of these developers are industry giants too. Based on the data collected, the following are the games that were identified by the researcher from the years 2011 to 2020.

Year of release	Name of the 3D Game	Name of Developer(s)
2011	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer Games
2013	Splinter Cell: Blacklist	Ubisoft Toronto
2017	Uncharted: The Lost Legacy	Naughty Dog
2018	Hitman 2	IO Interactive

Table 1.0, 3D games featuring India(2011-2020)

The researcher is focused on examining the 3D games that satisfies the above-mentioned criteria. Therefore, every 2D and 2.5D game that was published in this period was eliminated. To get a better understanding, the researcher has identified certain variables through which every game mentioned above would be put through. In order to get a clear picture as to how the games have resorted to the portrayal of India both visually and otherwise, these variables will help.

Variables Identified
Politics
Religion
Corruption
Magic/Supernatural

White Savior Narrative
History/Historical Elements
Indian NPCs (non-playing characters), Language etc.

Table 1.1, Common variables identified in video games

Through a quantitative analysis, the researcher intends to identify how the selected games have portrayed India. The intention is also to understand whether there has been a revolution or a shift in the factors that influences the storylines of these games. The factors identified by the researcher are as follows.

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher has adopted a qualitative form of analysis understanding that video games are dependent on visuals to garner interest in the minds of the gamers. Also bearing in mind that India is a country with rich culture and heritage, the researcher intends to find out if the developers have added flavor to the India they have created in their games and how. The study will be dependent on the following method of analysis;

a) Visual Analysis

The researcher identifies this analysis part as an important contributing section of the research paper. Video games of recent times, as revolution in technology emerged have largely depended on visual elements to sway the gamers. Here the researcher brings in the chosen five games for the study to understand how they have adopted the Indian culture and location to their benefit to fit the game's storyline.

Data Analysis

Through the analysis of the data collected in the previous chapter, the researcher aims to identify what the selected 3D video games in a period of time were, and how it shifted.

Quantitative Analysis

The paper has adopted the method of systematic sampling for the selection of games. But on examination, the researcher has found that the 3D games

featuring India were released in uneven intervals. Therefore, systematic sampling could not be executed. The common variables that the researcher identified were picked out on the basis of commonality identified in 3D video games generally. Many studies have pointed out these selected variables as a factor that was used to understand the behavior of the game in portraying culture and ethnic groups. Some of the variables that the researcher identified are as follows:

- **Politics:** Among the games selected for the study here, the researcher has recognized a few have also adopted politics in their storyline. Not only the gameplay, but also the political and historical overtones they use have made this variable very popular among the gamers.

- **Religion:** this variable was recognized as India is a very culturally diverse country where religions have a huge influence on people and their practices. Developers have also depended on this variable to enhance the game experience of the gamers.

- **Corruption:** India is recognized as a third-world nation. Therefore, the developers have used this as a prime reason to add corruption to their storyline to give depth to the game's story.

- **Magic/Supernatural:** India's culture circles around stories of spirits and ghosts. Therefore, developers have used this variable to give a unique storyline in games. The researcher intends to identify this in the games selected from the years 2011 to 2020.

- **White Savior Narrative:** The White protagonist is shown as a messiah as the non-white characters are shown as not being able to solve their problems and in turn having to depend on the eligible White man to save the day.

- **History/Historical Elements:** India is a country that has a rich history, starting from early mythology to stories about brave rulers who fought against the invaders for their people. The researcher aims to identify whether this variable has been used extensively.

- **Value for NPCs, Language etc.:** The researcher aims to understand through this variable,

whether the developers have attributed to the culture of the place they have chosen to depict or gained inspiration from. This includes languages, attire and other cultural elements.

Variables	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	Splinter Cell: Blacklist	Uncharted: The Lost Legacy	Hitman 2
Politics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Religion	No	No	Yes	No
Corruption	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Magic/Supernatural	No	No	No	No
White Savior Narrative	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
History/Historical Elements	No	No	Yes	No
NPCs, Language etc.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1.2, 3D games are tested against the variables

In table 1.2, the games are selected through the identified variables that are commonly seen in games. The subsequent result of this table shows that politics have been a dominant variable that were adopted by the games that featured India in these years. Another dominant variable is value for NPCs, language and India's culture. This means that they have been featured more than just a mere location and somehow gone in-depth to portray a little more of the place. On the other hand, the least popular variables were found to be religion and magic/supernatural. Notably there has not been any evident shift in variables through the years in the games that followed. This shows that games in no way have evidently shifted in these aspects as the years passed by.

Another dominant variable among these four games is the white savior narrative. In the game Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, the civilians are shown as mere NPCs in the game either shown dead or hiding behind buildings on the streets as a result of the war between the American and Russian armies. Though the game is being set in India, the Indian army is

nowhere shown to be in sight. Even in Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Blacklist, the storyline narrates how the White protagonists are after a Russian intelligence organization- Voron. Voron is trying to steal the warhead from the Indian missile. The Indian inhabitants are already shown dead. The White protagonists ensure that the missile is safe before the Indian authorities arrive. White savior narrative is a prominent tool in this mission. But in Uncharted: The Lost Legacy dealt with their storyline a little differently. Chloe Frazer, a White woman being the protagonist, is on the hunt for the Tusk of Ganesh in the Western Ghats. Chloe's father, who is no more, was an Indian archaeologist who died before he could find the Tusk of Ganesh. It feels like the developers made a conscious decision keeping in mind the white savior narrative and gave Chloe an Indian root purposefully.

Qualitative Analysis

A. **Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3**

As a first-person shooter game, the game featured Himachal Pradesh, a northern-eastern state in India. This game has only used Himachal's mountain range for the sake of an aesthetic location. The NPCs are mere props and the developers did not dwell into the culture to bring any of that into the game.

Figure 1.0, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (Screenshot)

B.   **Splinter cell: Blacklist**

As an action-adventure stealth video game Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Blacklist had featured

India's Bangalore in a co-op mission. Unlike Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, Splinter Cell acknowledged India a little more in detail. The Bangalore mission began at a missile base in Bangalore as an Indian army man was seen walking past an Indian flag that was stuck on the wall. As soon as our White protagonist attacks this army man, his fellow colleague, another Indian, asks our protagonist in fluent Hindi "Who are you? Put your hands up in the air!" But the protagonist's accomplice knocks him down unconscious too. The Indian army soldiers are shown as mere incompetents here, who are not able to defend themselves or even put up a fight.

Figure 2.0, Splinter Cell Blacklist [Bangalore] (Screenshot)

C.   Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

Chloe Frazer, the protagonist, is shown walking in the busy streets of Tamil Nadu and the war torn region with a sense of ease and familiarity. Like she knew or belonged to that place. She doesn't gasp at anything or view the place as exotic. She even explains to her accomplice about the history of the Hoysala Empire that is in ruins and hidden away in the deep jungle. Uncharted does a very good job among all the games picked here in portraying India in quite a depth. From the costumes of the characters including the NPCs to the subtle inclusion of regional languages among the NPCs, the developer has done quite a good research. The game shows the NPCs keeping their cool and living about like things are normal even though the militants have taken over and the region is in ruins due to continuous bombing and war against the Indian army. The game has also given adequate references to the Hindu mythology and done quite a decent representation of it. With the game design and amazing graphics, it makes India quite a

desirable destination with the many colors used in the game.

Fig 3.0, Uncharted: The Lost Legacy (Screenshot)

D.   **Hitman 2**

Hitman 2 featured Dharavi in its 'Murder in Mumbai' mission. Through Dharavi, the game portrayed the poverty-stricken densely populated slum atmosphere and India's dream world-Bollywood. In this mission, Hitman attempted to explore an alternate reality with respect to the Indian ethnicity and culture. Despite the fact that the game struck an original representation of India, many questioned the choice of Dharavi.

Fig 4.0, Hitman in Dharavi [Hitman 2] (screenshot)

The game design was constructed in a way that the gang members were shown roaming the

streets of Dharavi armed with semi-automatic weapons hanging behind them on their backs. The streets are shown to be very much crowded by the civilians and despite being in broad daylight, the NPCs do not seem to react in terror or even act surprised when The Crow members patrol the roads in heavy weapons. This makes it seem like it is a common occurrence even in real India, where goons holding huge weapons in civil crowded areas is normal.

In the streets of Dharavi, as Hitman walks by the NPCs; one of them can be heard complaining of a tummy ache. The NPC very quickly connects the dots himself and blames the tummy ache on the street food he ate from a nearby street vendor. This is a very common problem that has been raised in studies. Hitman 2 also portrayed Indian NPCs to stereotypes of being loud. Unlike other episodes in the game, none of the NPCs seemed as noisy as the Indian NPCs. From roads to the insides of buildings, the NPCs were pretty loud in conversations and tended to use more cuss words than Hitman usually portrayed in other missions taking place in other countries so far. This was a first of its kind in Hitman 2.

In the Hitman 2's Mumbai mission, a Mumbai street gang named 'the Crows' is introduced. The street gang is said to have begun as a street gang for children in the early 90s.The introduction video to the mission shows clips of the location they usually hang out in large numbers. Apart from being heavily guarded by the members armed with weapons, the location was either displayed with numerous crow skulls hanging from the ceiling, or a broken human skull fixed on a staff. This gives a sense of black magic and cold-blooded gory-like aura to the game.
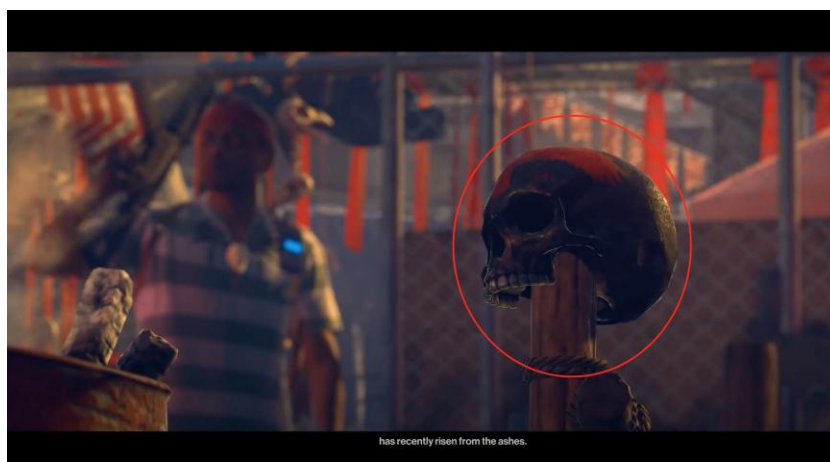

Fig 4.1, The Crows [Hitman 2] (screenshot)

Fig 4.2, The Crows patrolling in Dharavi [Hitman 2] (screenshot)

Another important character in this mission is 'the Kashmirian'. His original name is Karan Dhar and he is an Indian-American assassin who was born in Austin, Texas. It was revealed that he returned to his mother's place in Kashmir after being a prime suspect in a serial shooting. India's infamous dispute over Kashmir with Pakistan has been a problem since a very long time. Kashmir's militant problem is something that the government has been fighting against for so long now. In a way, the game also adopts a similar narrative where it opts to choose a Kashmiri to be an assassin playing an important side character in the game's plot. The game interestingly says that he is widely called 'the Kashmirian'.

Fig 4.3, Hitman meets The Kashmirian [Hitman 2] (screenshot)

Vanya Shah is also a target that appears in the Mumbai mission of Hitman 2. She is termed as a

callous, ruthless woman who is the self-appointed queen of the Mumbai *chawls*. Vanya Shah is not given much of an ancestral background, though the game does suggest that she rose through the Mumbai underground to the top as a result of her ancestry and the skills she acquired in her youth. The researcher has identified that a couple of Vanya Shah's traits very much represented the women of the Rabari tribe.
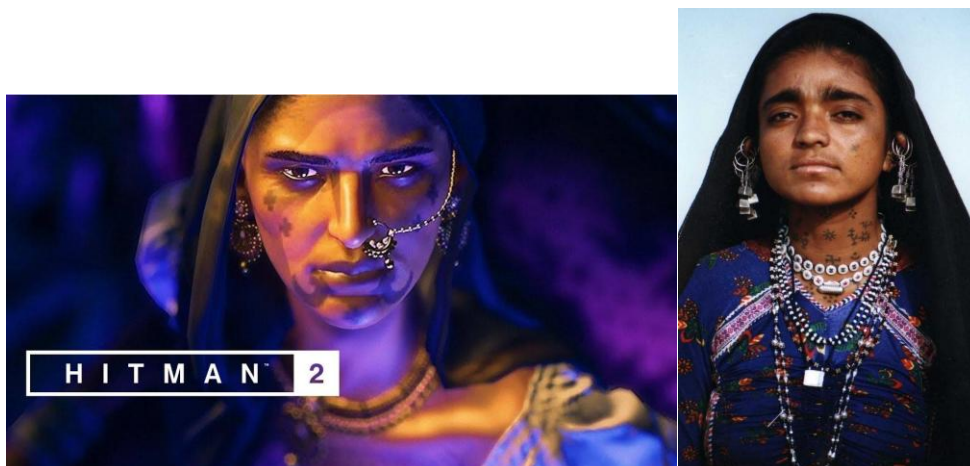

Fig 4.4, Vanyah Shah [Hitman 2] (screenshot)Fig 4.5, A Rabari woman (Google Images)

The above figure shows a woman from the Rabari tribe. Some of the identifiable traits are the facial tattoos and the use of dark clothes. Rabari married women and Rabari women of age mostly wear black skirts and black cloth over their heads. It is their cultural trait. Similarly, Vanya Shah can be seen wearing a black skirt and black shawl over her head. Though facial tattoos are limited to a similar '+' sign on the faces of Rabari women, extensive tattoos are drawn on the neck. In the case of Vanya Shah, one can identify that multiple '+' signs are tattooed on the face with visibly none of her neck. But the developers of Hitman 2 did not attribute this adoption of cultural traits to the Rabari tribe.

Discussion

Games are no different when it comes to being capable of influencing people. False information in media such as stereotypes can lead to the audience being unable to distinguish this false information from true information in real life (Burgess 2011).

The developer of Hitman 2, IO Interactive, has been adopting cultures in the Hitman series from the advent of the game itself. Whereas Sledgehammer

Games and Infinity Ward as game developers have been focused on Call of Duty series not indulging much in the nuances of the culture. But industry giants like Ubisoft have been adopting cultures in some of the many games produced by them. The Assassin's Creed series is Ubisoft's standout game series where medieval cultures and their histories have been adopted to give the gamers a unique experience.

A game designer at Reliance Games, Armaan Naveet, rebutted this argument put forward by the researcher. He argued that games were mere fiction, and developers only tend to adopt culture because they focus on experience. He said that artists designing the game universe sometimes tend to bring in his creativity into the process. But Melinda C. R. Bugress, in her article '*Playing With Prejudice: The Prevalence and Consequence of Racial Stereotypes in Video Games*', says that people who are exposed to a false reality filled with stereotypes in games will find it hard to distinguish between reality and fiction and their behavior and feelings can be altered.

The researcher understands that the conclusion drawn from 10 years may not be a result that can be relied upon. But this result can help us understand the direction the developers were going through the variables that were used in the games. Many developers have tried to eliminate the problem of appropriation in their own ways. As mentioned in 'A Comparative Study Between Far Cry 3 (2012), Overwatch (2016) and Horizon Zero Dawn (2017)' by Tova Svensson Fac, an example of a game that has approached cultural appropriation in a more sensitive way is Assassin's Creed III (Ubisoft Montreal 2012). The main character of this game is a man whose mother is Native American, and during the development of the game Ubisoft brought in an adviser from a Native American cultural center (Sinclair 2012).

Conclusion

The data analysis has shown that the 3D games between 2011 and 2020 that featured India had adhered to one or more variables in the plot of the game's story. This meant that variables like politics, culture etc. as a means of spicing up India's storyline has been a popular tool in video games. Passive White savior narratives were also identified in the storylines of most games from the early stages of 2011. Though Uncharted also did something similar, it seemed that they

were aware about the narrative. Instead they linked Chloe Frazer to India saying that her father was an Indian archaeologist. But games like Call of Duty and Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell did not make efforts to contain their narrative. The storyline suggested obvious White savior narratives, where the West had to save the Indian civilians or prevent the Russians from infiltrating and stealing assets of India and becoming a potential threat to the country. Similarly Hitman 2 had waltzed over the possible predictable narrative of India as it brought Mumbai's Dharavi and Bollywood to the game. Therefore, this research paper that has identified that games have snuck to certain variables to represent India concludes here. A possible further study on this topic can ascertain as to why the developers have chosen to represent India the way they have in these games.

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