# 2013

# Unplay: Using new technologies to tell age-old stories

**Padmini Ray Murray; Avinash Kumar; Abhinav Mishra**

## Executive Summary

Antariksha Sanchar is an Indian speculative science fiction adventure game videogame that is significantly shaped by Indian history, culture and mythology and draws on learnings from the prototype, Meghdoot, which was created under the aegis of the Unplay fellowship. AS is India's first game-led transmedia product, whose universe will be extended over a graphic album, merchandise and audio-visual performances. It is an independently made point and click game using Unity, a cross-platform game development platform and will be commercially released in late 2014. This project has also yielded a number of research papers and presentations, as well as the first survey of its kind that investigates the experiences, interests and working practices of Indian game creators as well as players.

## Researchers and Project Partners

- Dr Padmini Ray Murray, University of Stirling
- Dr Souvik Mukherjee, Presidency University
- Gameslab, Quicksand (Avinash Kumar, Romit Raj, Girish Krishnan & Abhinav Mishra

# Summary report

**Please provide details of the collaborations that have developed during the project, whether planned or serendipitous, especially your Indian collaborations. How have these collaborations brought added value?**

- Jayalakshmi Eshwar: The work and choreography of this prominent Bharatnatyam exponent shaped the narrative of this game; drawing on a piece that she created around the evolution of flight and air machines in Indian mythology, posing philosophical and practical questions regarding man's abilities to explore the universe.
- Khoj: Khoj is an art incubation space that plays a central role in the development of experimental, interdisciplinary and critical contemporary art practice in India. They host an annual gaming residency entitled 'Of Games' and both Padmini Ray Murray and Souvik Mukherjee have worked with residents and contributed to workshops hosted by the organisation.
- Interviews with figures from the games industry in India: Padmini Ray Murray conducted a number of interviews with figures working in different parts of the industry, such as Shruti Varma (Manager, Gaming Forum at NASSCOM), Shailesh Prabhu (independent game designer, Yellow Monkey Studios); Vijay Sinha (game designer, Tiny Moghul); Tathagata Ray (games journalist, Ill Gaming.In); Amitesh Grover (performance maker and new media artist).
- Multi-institutional collaboration: "Gaming Across Cultures: Perspectives from Three Continents" is a UKIERI funded research network between Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi), University of Bangor (UK) and West Virginia University (USA). Padmini Ray Murray and Souvik Mukherjee were invited to deliver the keynote address at the conference hosted by JNU in Delhi, and are collaborating with colleagues from this initiative on a spcial issue of Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds entitled 'From hegemonising gamification to gameifying hegemonies"

These collaborations have helped to positively helped to shape the ongoing research outputs of the project, opening up a window on the Indian games industry and its workings, most of which is quite opaque due to the emerging nature of the field.

**Please describe how the project has evolved over the period of funding.**

Today, with the game more than a year in development - often in excruciating

constraints of resources - the greatest appreciation is for the immense complexity of creating games, that too those that are imagined as transmitters for cultural expressions. When these cultural expressions are emanating from a culture as extensive as India, the process and outcomes can be further complex to manage. For the studio, the lab and the research team, a heightened understanding of the game development process - including all its pitfalls, oddities and joys - on the back of a tangible end product has been extremely invigorating creatively and intellectually. We hope that the demo and transmedia universe of the game will further catalyse the next iteration of our learnings as a laboratory for games.

The project as it now currently stands is a much more commercially savvy and consumer facing game, as compared to *Meghdoot* which was always intended for use in cultural institutions such as museums and galleries to increase visitor engagement, but not for direct consumer sales. The decision to move away completely from *Meghdoot* was largely influenced by the pre-existence of assets that could be usefully repurposed for a game called *Antariksha Sanchar*, as well as the fact that the cultural heritage institution that *Meghdoot* was conceived in partnership with was no longer available to participate in the project.

*AS* is based inspired by the life of Srinivas Ramanujan, one of India's greatest mathematicians who approached his subject with religious rigour as opposed to the secular paradigms of the West. The game is located in a storyworld that is based on his experiences of living in a small South Indian town at the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century, a space shaped considerably by the temples and associated religious practices. However, it reimagines and reinterprets these spaces, events and experiences in the same way the genre of steampunk reimagines the Victorian era – drawing on another aspect that shaped the aesthetic of the original project *Meghdoot.*

In some ways *AS* has exceeded my expectations, as it has offered me a transmedia object of study which was not initially part of my brief. Given my personal expertise in publishing studies, this has added an extra element of interest to my explorations of how intellectual property can travel between different modes of media, and what the implications of such transfer is for both the production and consumption of these works. The use of Indian games, mythology and historical events in the game as it currently stands makes it an intriguing object of study and I look forward to continuing my involvement with the project as it approaches a public launch.

**What lessons have been learnt during the project?**

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Working with partners internationally can be a challenge, especially in this case where one partner is an organisation rather than an individual – keeping abreast of the nuances of changes in direction and methodologies occurring in-house are difficult to monitor if a researcher is not on-site, however efficient reporting mechanisms might be.

If the outcome is planned to go beyond the prototype stage (as was the case in this project) there will be other exigencies such as finances and in-house capacity that will shape the project, rather than being only led by the research question. Having said that, I feel that *Antariksha Sanchar*, despite its distance from the originally conceived *Meghdoot* project, remains true to the spirit of our initial research question, which was to explore how a videogame might be 'culturally specific' and still be a viable product.

For a project such as this, the limitations of technology, and financial wherewithal to afford technology should also be borne in mind – with a limited budget and time to raise funds, more ambitious projects should be scaled down to available resources wherever possible.

## What future plans have developed out of the research?

- To publish an article based on the findings of the survey (Mukherjee and Ray Murray).
- To publish a monograph based on cultural specificity and videogames – Dr Ray Murray is currently on a fellowship at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi conducting initial research for this project.
- Dr Ray Murray has been invited to act as Guest Editor for the forthcoming issue of *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies*, which will explore videogames in India.
- Public launch of demo of *Antariksha Sanchar* and transmedia collateral such as a six city tour of BLOT! featuring the game and toys (Quicksand).
- Launch of crowdfunding campaign to support the creation of the transmedia content, such as the graphic novel and album (Quicksand).

## Please describe the methods of dissemination and outreach you have used during your project.

- Peer-reviewed academic dissemination: Poster: 'From the outside looking in: Creating a serious 'art' game in India – a case study.' *Games and Virtual Worlds for Serious Applications* (VS-GAMES) Conference, Bournemouth, September 2013.
- Peer-reviewed publication: 'From the outside looking in: Creating a serious 'art' game in India – a case study.' *Games and Virtual Worlds for Serious Applications* (VS-GAMES), 5th International Conference Proceedings (2013).
- Public outreach: showcased *Meghdoot* as part of GameCity 8's 'Open

Arcade', October 2013.

- Academic engagement: Talk: 'Gamification and Publishing', The Society of Young Publishers Conference, Oxford, November 2013.
- Academic dissemination: Talk: 'Where in the World is Indian Gaming: Internationalisation, localisation and globalisation.' Gaming Across Cultures, JNU, January 2014.
- Peer-reviewed academic dissemination: Poster: 'How to make games more GLAM-orous: developing game prototypes for the museum and cultural heritage sector in India,' Digital Humanities 2014, Lausanne, July 2014.
- Public outreach: Talk: 'Transmedia Tales and How to Tell Them', Jumpstart, Delhi, August 2014.

**Please describe the impacts or potential impacts that your project has had (these could be within the areas of people development, collaborations and knowledge exchange or the creative economy/economic impact)**

For GamesLab:

"The project that started as *Meghdoot*, and eventually became the starting point for the present production - *Antariksha Sanchar* - has had a very favourable impact on individuals and the Quicksand GamesLab. *Meghdoot*, the Gameslab's debut project and served as a catalytic agent in the evolution of the studio's competencies in this domain.

There are two phases that one can consider this catalytic impact with - the first relates to the fellowship experience at the UnBox Festival, which pushed the studio to look beyond familiar project domains into more independent, unfamiliar and academic pursuits. It also created a situation to think strategically about a transient team that could explore the brief setting and resolutions within this project. Based on our own experiences of hack jams and design sprints at the studio, we understand some of the opportunities and limitations of a short format collaborations, hence the evaluation of its impact was based on its ability to create a first iteration of the practice of a new lab. The manifest of this first iteration of a gameslab was *Meghdoot.*

It was implicitly understood that the positive fate of ideas inspired by the first phase of the fellowship relies on the ability of researchers and project partners to take the spirit of these ideas and collaborations and re-iterate this as a post-fellowship, real world project. This project turned out to be *Antariksha Sanchar*, the need for which arose as a reaction to various considerations of the studio, its team, calendar of work and overall

motivations. It was felt that we wanted to continue to explore the focus on  exploring cultural narratives of *Meghdoot*, but with an involved, self referential process  that enriched Gameslab's strengths as a multidisciplinary  studio.

The original intent of GamesLab - to explore independent gaming processes and outcomes - we can say with a high degree of confidence that the projects that  comprise *Meghdoot* and *Antariksha Sanchar*, have had a transformative impact on the  individuals and collectives building this project. Supporting as it has, the first steps of several  young and non-traditional professionals interested in developing game and new media   projects in India, we look forward to building on the impact afforded by the AHRC's support to create a memorable game franchise in India in coming  years."

For Dr Ray Murray:

"The opportunities offered to me by the Unbox fellowship have been myriad – being  able to get an insight into the working processes and the evolution of a small  independent games studio in India has been a unique and rewarding experience. My research    over the last year or so has been shaped by these insights, and has demonstrated that   there is a keenly felt need both in the industry and in games studies for more   empirical research to be done in the area of gaming in India, and the support of the AHRC  has allowed me to explore these areas fruitfully. The dissemination of my research has  made gaming in India more visible to a wide range of audiences, both academic and  non-academic, and have paved the way for collaborations (for example, I held a workshop  at Khoj with Shailesh Prabhu and Amitesh Grover – two games professionals I met  while collecting ethnographic research for this project), publications (articles, journal special issues and a monograph) and data (the survey currently under analysis, conducted  by myself and Souvik Mukherjee with the help of Mukherjee's students at Presidency College). The occasions on which I have presented talks to students and fellow  academic colleagues has raised awareness, especially in India, of games studies as a discipline.   My own professional development has been enhanced by the research I have conducted  as part of this project – my new academic position at the Centre for Public History at  the Srishti School for Art, Design and Technology was made possible due to   my demonstration of *Meghdoot* and how games can be invaluable in transforming   spaces such as museums by making interpretation more enjoyable and engaging. My invitations to speak to publishers about games and transmedia products demonstrates how dissemination in this area can engage with a number of stakeholders across the creative industries, and how growing knowledge in this area is essential, especially in    an emerging digital economy like  India."

**References and external links**

Mishra, Abhinav. *Antariksha Sanchar: An Indian Speculative Science Fiction Adventure Game*. Diploma Project, New Media Design, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, 2014.

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Ray Murray, Padmini. academia.edu How to make games more GLAM-orous*: developing game prototypes for the museum and cultural heritage sector in India,* Digital Humanities 2014, Lausanne, July 2014.

Arts & Humanities Research Council

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The UnBox Booster funding scheme aimed to enable teams who have met through the UnBox fellowships to sustain, develop and expand creatively upon the collaborations formed.

Dr Emma Wakelin, Associate Director at the AHRC said:

*'The AHRC was delighted to work with the British Council, UnBox and the Science and Innovation Network India to support the UnBox festival 2013. Finding new ways to support UK researchers in the arts and humanities to work in collaboration with partners in the creative and cultural sectors is one of our priorities, as is encouraging international networks.*

*We were particularly pleased that all five UnBox Fellows in 2013 were successful in gaining AHRC booster funding, enabling them to continue to develop the collaborative projects and the fruitful partnerships they began during their time in India, and which they showcased along with their creative sector partners from the UK and India at the UnBox festival in Delhi in February 2013. This funding was intended to support the researchers to continue the innovative worked inspired by UnBox, to build on the valuable and creative networks initiated in India, and to explore research ideas that will have a tangible impact and would not otherwise have been possible.'*

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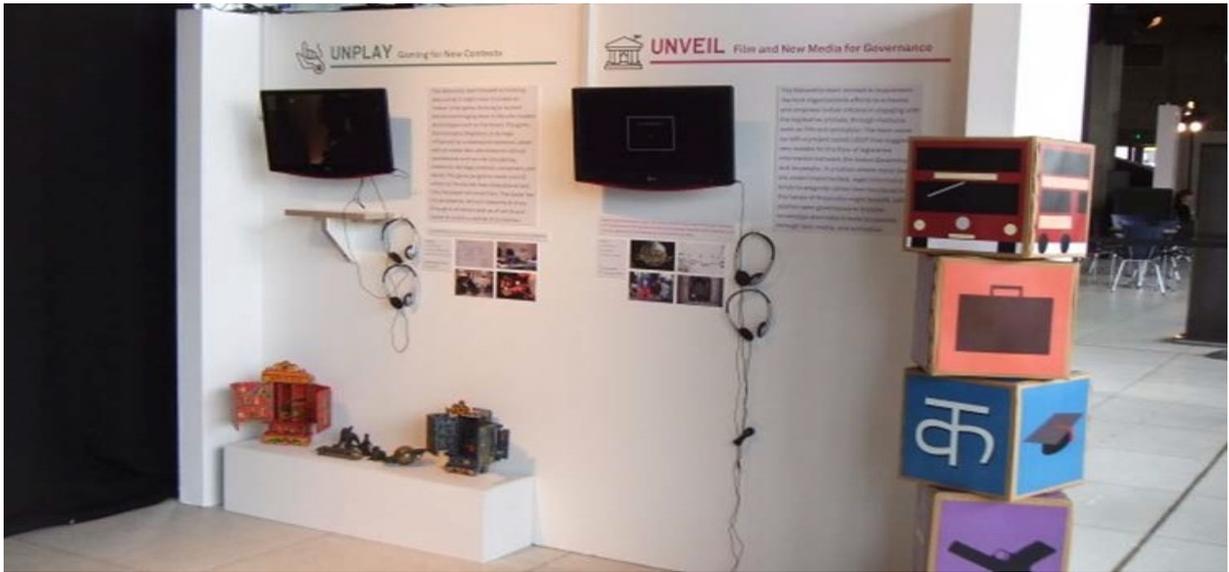


Images: Professor Jon Rogers and Laura Bones