

# The Intersection of Interactivity and Art: Narrative-Driven Video Games and the Emerging Indian Indie Development Scene

**Aditya Kumar Rai**

Assistant Professor

Amity School of Fine Arts, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, India

**Abstract:** *The debate regarding video games as a legitimate art form has persisted for decades, most notably crystallized by film critic Roger Ebert's assertion that "video games can never be art." This paper examines how interactivity distinguishes video games from passive media, explores the tension between competitive multiplayer games and narrative-driven experiences, and analyzes the unique challenges and opportunities facing India's emerging indie game development industry. Drawing on interviews with Indian developers, academic research, and current market data, this study argues that narrative-driven games represent a distinct artistic medium while acknowledging the structural barriers that have limited their mainstream adoption in India. The analysis further investigates the cultural turn within Indian indie development, where regional specificity and mythological narratives are increasingly deployed as aesthetic strategies, and evaluates the market conditions that may enable or constrain this creative trajectory.*

**Keywords:** Video games as art, Interactive narrative, Indian indie games, Cultural specificity, Narrative-driven games, Game development, Player agency

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pick up a controller. Make a choice. Watch the story change. No film can do that, no novel either. Yet when legendary critic Roger Ebert declared "Video games can never be art," he spoke for a generation that viewed games as little more than glorified entertainment—juvenile and emotionally hollow (Parker, 2018). The dismissal missed one element that makes games unlike any other medium: interactivity. Unlike a passive audience, a player does not merely witness a story; they inhabit it.

This paper examines the evolving perception of video games as art, with particular attention to India's burgeoning narrative-driven indie game sector. Through analysis of industry interviews, academic discourse, and market trends, this research demonstrates how interactivity challenges traditional definitions of artistic authorship while exploring why story-based games remain niche in the world's fastest-growing gaming market. The study further investigates how Indian developers are leveraging cultural specificity as a creative asset, transforming regional heritage into interactive narrative experiences that challenge both Ebert's assertions and the global industry's tendency toward cultural homogenization.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond academic classification. As India's gaming market expands—valued at \$5.91 billion in 2025 and projected to reach \$16.72 billion by 2034 (IMARC Group, 2026)—the question of what constitutes legitimate gaming content carries economic, cultural, and pedagogical implications. Understanding why narrative-driven games struggle for mainstream acceptance in India illuminates broader tensions between commercial imperatives and artistic ambition within emerging creative economies.



### **Theoretical Framework: Interactivity as Artistic Medium**

The fundamental distinction between video games and traditional art forms lies in player agency. As media scholar Felan Parker (2018) notes, Ebert's primary objection centered on the belief that player choice represents "the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control." However, this perspective overlooks established artistic traditions that incorporate audience participation, from improvisational theater to oral storytelling, and fails to account for how digital interactivity reconfigures rather than eliminates artistic intentionality.

The philosophical underpinnings of Ebert's position reflect what Parker (2018) identifies as "commonsense" notions about art derived from Kantian ideals of disinterestedness blended with Romantic notions of personal expression—concepts that struggle to accommodate interactive, goal-oriented experiences. Yet this framework inadequately describes how contemporary artists across media have long embraced collaboration, chance operations, and audience participation as legitimate aesthetic strategies. From John Cage's aleatoric compositions to Marina Abramović's durational performance works, the art historical record demonstrates that authorial control exists on a spectrum rather than as a binary condition.

Athul George, game director of *Thekku Island*—Kerala's first 3D horror game—articulates this synthesis with particular clarity: "Games combine multiple art forms into one: visual art, music, writing, performance, and also interaction. And unlike movies, they let the player participate in the art" (personal communication). This participatory dimension creates what Parker (2018) terms "expressive processing," wherein authorship manifests through the design of rule systems and fictional worlds that enable player agency rather than imposing total control. The game designer constructs possibility spaces—narrative architectures within which player choice generates meaning through structured interaction.

This theoretical repositioning has significant implications for how we evaluate games as cultural objects. If we accept that artistic value need not require passive reception, then the question shifts from whether games can be art to how specific games deploy their interactive dimensions toward aesthetic ends. The emotional resonance of this interactivity is evident in player testimonials. Sreelekhman S, a data science postgraduate from Sacred Heart College, reflects on his experience with the *Assassin's Creed* trilogy: "The first time I played, I felt really connected to the character of Ezio. As the character went through his ups and downs, it felt as though I was also experiencing it" (personal communication). This identification represents what game scholars identify as the unique spatial and emotional immersion that distinguishes interactive narrative from passive consumption—the phenomenological quality of "being there" rather than merely observing.

The immersive potential of interactive narrative has attracted increasing academic attention. Scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan and Janet Murray have theorized digital immersion as a distinct mode of aesthetic experience, one that combines the spatial presence of virtual environments with the emotional investment of narrative engagement. Murray (1997) describes digital environments as "procedural" narratives—stories that emerge through the execution of rules rather than the linear arrangement of events. This procedural quality gives interactive storytelling its distinctive texture: the player experiences narrative not as a predetermined sequence but as a personal trajectory through a designed possibility space.

### **The Spectrum of Game Classification: Art, Sport, and Entertainment**

Whenever the debate regarding video games as art resurfaces, a question inevitably arises: Can all games be considered art? Narrative-driven titles such as *The Last of Us*, with their complex characters, stunning visuals, and cinematic soundtracks, present the strongest case for artistic classification. However, competitive multiplayer games such as *Battlegrounds Mobile India* (BGMI) and *Free Fire* complicate this categorization, suggesting that "video game" functions as an umbrella term encompassing radically different aesthetic and functional categories.

While competitive titles contain artistic elements—including map design, animations, and character concepts—their primary function centers on gameplay mechanics as a form of competition. Though they provide enjoyment, this enjoyment derives largely from player interactions rather than the artistic merit of the game itself. This approach aligns more closely with sport than with traditional art forms, raising questions about whether the aesthetic components of



competitive games serve artistic purposes or merely functional ones. The visual design of a battle royale map, for instance, may prioritize tactical clarity and competitive balance over expressive or thematic concerns.

The classification challenge, therefore, lies not in denying artistic elements within competitive games, but in recognizing that different game genres engage with artistic principles in fundamentally different ways. This distinction has practical consequences for how we allocate cultural and institutional resources. If competitive gaming functions primarily as sport, then public investment might appropriately emphasize infrastructure, regulation, and competitive integrity rather than creative development. Conversely, if narrative-driven games constitute a legitimate art form, they may warrant subsidies, educational support, and critical attention analogous to those provided to film, literature, and visual art.

The sport-art distinction also illuminates why the “games as art” debate often generates more heat than light. Participants frequently conflate aesthetic questions with cultural legitimacy, assuming that art status confers value while entertainment or sport status implies deficiency. A more productive framework might recognize that video games, like film or literature, comprise multiple genres with distinct aesthetic conventions and cultural functions. Just as we distinguish between documentary, experimental film, and blockbuster cinema without insisting that only one category qualifies as “real” cinema, so too might we evaluate different game types according to appropriate criteria rather than imposing a uniform standard of artistic legitimacy.

### **India’s Gaming Market: Structural Barriers to Narrative Games**

Although the concept of video games as interactive storytelling grows increasingly relevant globally, it remains peripheral in India’s mainstream gaming culture. Multiple factors contribute to this disparity, creating what developers identify as a challenging ecosystem for narrative-driven content. According to Athul George, “Most players prefer mobile and fast games. Developers focus on safe ideas and quick money. Story games need time, money, risk, and a long development time, so many people won’t risk it” (personal communication).

Market data substantiates this assessment. India’s online gaming industry expanded to 488 million gamers in 2024, with projections reaching 517 million by 2025 (DemandSage, 2025). However, the market remains dominated by mobile platforms, with 79.29% of revenue generated through mobile devices in 2025 (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). Mobile platforms led with 51.46% of market share, reflecting the smartphone-first nature of Indian consumers (IMARC Group, 2026). The accessibility barrier proves significant: as commentators on the subreddit r/Indiangamers note, “Playing a free mobile game on a mid-range phone is much more accessible than paying Rs 200 to Rs 3000 for a game on a computer or laptop that will cost you at least 70k.”

The economic structure of Indian gaming further disadvantages narrative content. In-game purchases captured 63.49% of 2025 revenue, reflecting gamers’ preference for microtransactions over upfront payments (IMARC Group, 2026). The free-to-play model with optional purchases has proven particularly effective in a price-sensitive market where consumers resist full-price game purchases but willingly spend on incremental enhancements. This monetization structure favors games designed for continuous engagement and repeated microtransactions rather than finite narrative experiences with defined conclusions.

Additionally, cultural attitudes toward gaming in India’s highly competitive society often frame such expenditures as wasteful or distracting. When even traditional art forms face devaluation, video games—typically perceived as juvenile distractions—rarely receive serious artistic consideration from mainstream Indian society. The stigma attached to gaming as a leisure activity creates a double bind: parents and educators who might support music or visual arts education often view gaming as antithetical to academic and professional success, depriving potential developers of early encouragement and institutional support.

The dominance of specific genres further constrains narrative development. Shooter games generated 50% of all in-app gaming revenue, while RPG titles contributed only 2% (DemandSage, 2025). This revenue distribution signals market preferences that discourage investment in story-driven development. Adventure and role-playing games may represent 41.2% of the market by type (IMARC Group, 2026), but this figure encompasses action-oriented titles with minimal narrative depth alongside genuinely story-focused experiences.



Regional infrastructure disparities compound these challenges. While 5G infrastructure expanded to 518,854 live radio sites covering 99.9% of districts by December 2025 (Mordor Intelligence, 2026), reliable high-speed internet remains unevenly distributed. Cloud gaming services promise to democratize access to premium titles by eliminating hardware requirements, but latency and connectivity issues persist outside major metropolitan areas. For narrative games that may require substantial downloads and stable connections for digital distribution, these infrastructure gaps limit audience reach.

### **The Rise of Indian Narrative Indie Development**

Despite these challenges, a steady growth trajectory emerges within niche communities that appreciate games for their artistic relevance. Story-driven global hits such as *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *The Last of Us*, and *God of War* have gained substantial popularity among Indian audiences. Concurrently, India has witnessed an influx of domestically developed games emphasizing local narrative, mythology, and folklore—a trend scholars identify as a “cultural turn” within the indie development sector.

*Thekku Island*, developed by Ales Devs Games and RedWills Interactive, represents a deliberate attempt to position games as regional storytelling vehicles. Set on a mysterious island in 1980s Kerala, the game leverages psychological horror and atmospheric design to create culturally specific interactive experiences. Scheduled for PC release on February 27, 2026, the title marks a significant milestone for Indian indie horror development, emphasizing handcrafted environments over asset-store templates (Kerala Technology, 2026).

The development story of *Thekku Island* illustrates both the potential and the constraints facing Indian indie developers. Athul George, a self-taught developer who began building the game after completing Class 12, collaborated with other young gamers discovered through social media to form a bootstrapped team (Kerala Technology, 2026). Their decision to target PC rather than mobile platforms reflects strategic positioning within the global market: while mobile dominates Indian gaming, desktop and console players still anchor the premium global gaming segment. This platform choice, however, also limits domestic accessibility given the hardware costs that constrain Indian PC gaming adoption.

The team’s commitment to cultural specificity extends beyond setting to aesthetic methodology. Rather than relying on AI-generated imagery, the developers create visual assets by hand, prioritizing originality and texture over production efficiency. “We create everything by hand. I don’t think AI can deliver the depth and texture of our drawings. As it is our first game, we wanted it to be perfect,” explains Jaivin, the team’s 2D visual artist (Kerala Technology, 2026). This artisanal approach, while potentially limiting production scale, establishes a distinctive visual identity that differentiates *Thekku Island* from both international indie horror and domestically produced mobile content.

The cultural resonance of *Thekku Island* has already demonstrated significant audience appetite for regionally specific gaming content. The game’s teaser, featuring the Malayalam line “Njungalude veetilekku swagatham” (Welcome to our house), generated thousands of comments from gamers across India and attracted international attention, with viewers from South Korea requesting subtitles (Kerala Technology, 2026). This response validates the developers’ intuition that cultural specificity functions as an asset rather than a limitation in global market contexts—a lesson reinforced by the international success of the Chinese title *Black Myth: Wukong*, which demonstrated that Asian mythological themes can achieve commercial and critical heights previously reserved for Western narratives.

Academic analysis supports this cultural turn as a broader industry trend. Xenia Zeiler, Associate Professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Helsinki, and Souvik Mukherjee, Assistant Professor of English Literature at Presidency University, Kolkata, note in their research that “indie game developers increasingly use aspects of cultural traditions, practices, and heritage from regional Indian contexts to shape the form and content of some of their games” (Zeiler & Mukherjee, 2022). This trend reflects both market differentiation and cultural assertion within a globalized industry—an effort to claim representational space within a medium historically dominated by Western perspectives and narratives.

The commercial viability of this approach finds precedent in *Raji: An Ancient Epic* (2020), developed by Pune-based Nodding Heads Games. Inspired by Indian mythology, the action-adventure title crossed 2 million players, earned an



Unreal Dev Grant from Epic Games, and generated approximately \$930,000 in Steam net revenue. The game secured nomination for Best Debut Game at The Game Awards 2020 and won multiple accolades at the Taipei Game Awards 2021, demonstrating that culturally rooted narratives can achieve both critical and commercial success (Outlook India, 2025).

Shruti Ghosh, one of Raji's developers, articulated the motivating vision in an interview with Unreal Engine: "There was nothing that showcased our architecture or told the stories that we've heard from our parents and grandparents—it was something that we thought we could bring to the world and that we could do to a really good quality, so that it could compete with games that are made in the West" (Ghosh, 2020). This statement encapsulates the dual ambition driving India's narrative indie movement: the desire to represent Indian cultural heritage authentically while meeting international standards of production quality and design sophistication.

The emergence of these titles suggests that India's indie development sector is negotiating a complex position within global gaming culture. Rather than merely emulating Western narrative conventions or retreating into purely local appeal, developers like Nodding Heads Games and RedWills Interactive are attempting to synthesize international game design standards with regionally specific content. This hybrid strategy may prove essential for building sustainable audiences both domestically and internationally.

### **Changing Perceptions and Future Trajectories**

Perception regarding gaming is changing, albeit gradually. Audiences increasingly widen their preferences while developers assume greater risks in creating story-driven experiences. Games such as *Asura* (2017), *Missing* (2016), and *Raji* (2020) exemplify this phenomenon, representing what industry observers identify as India's independent games movement. These titles demonstrate that narrative-driven development, while commercially risky, can establish critical reputations and cultivate dedicated player communities that sustain long-term creative careers.

The structural conditions supporting this shift continue to evolve in potentially favorable directions. India's gaming market, valued at \$5.91 billion in 2025, is projected to reach \$16.72 billion by 2034, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 14.6% (IMARC Group, 2026). The proliferation of homegrown game development studios, coupled with increasing foreign direct investment, positions India as both a consumption hub and an emerging content creation center for global audiences. Notably, Krafton announced a \$670 million India-focused Unicorn Growth Fund in December 2025, signaling substantial corporate commitment to India's digital entertainment ecosystem (IMARC Group, 2026).

Government initiatives are also reshaping the regulatory landscape. The Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill (August 2025) prohibited real-money skill games while promoting social gaming and recognizing esports as legitimate sport, potentially redirecting investment toward narrative and competitive gaming content. The creation of dedicated task groups for animation, visual effects, gaming, and comics, alongside official esports recognition, has opened new opportunities for infrastructure development and policy support (OpenPR, 2026).

The rise of vernacular content represents a particularly significant market driver. Over 40% of Tier 2 and beyond users prefer regional language content as of 2024, while developers have introduced festival-themed events and regional avatars that deeply resonate with domestic audiences (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). Games featuring Hinglish interactions, Indo-futuristic concepts, and culturally relevant gameplay have demonstrated stronger retention and engagement compared to English-only alternatives. This localization trend creates openings for narrative-driven games that incorporate regional languages and cultural references as core design elements rather than superficial add-ons.

Technological infrastructure improvements may further democratize access to premium gaming experiences. The proliferation of 5G infrastructure—518,854 live radio sites covering 99.9% of districts by December 2025—reduces latency barriers for cloud-based gaming experiences (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). Cloud gaming services offered through telecom partnerships enable players to access console-quality titles without expensive hardware investments, potentially expanding the audience for narrative-driven PC and console games beyond affluent urban centers.

However, significant challenges persist. The paying audience, while substantial at 126 million people, represents only 26.5% of India's total gamer base (WNHub, 2025). The prevalence of free-to-play models and advertising-supported



games—capturing 46.18% of 2025 revenue—reflects market conditions that discourage premium pricing for narrative content (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). Additionally, the 28% goods and services tax on online gaming transactions creates pricing pressure that particularly affects smaller indie developers with limited margins.

The gender dynamics of Indian gaming also merit attention. Female gamers increased from 22% in 2020 to a projected 40% by the end of 2025 (WNIHub, 2025). This demographic shift may influence content preferences, as research in other markets suggests that women players often show stronger engagement with narrative and character-driven content than with purely competitive experiences. If Indian studios can effectively address this expanding audience, narrative-driven development may find new market opportunities.

## II. CONCLUSION

The debate regarding video games as art, ignited by Roger Ebert's provocative declarations, ultimately transcends the binary question of artistic legitimacy. As this analysis demonstrates, interactivity constitutes not merely a technical feature but a fundamental reorganization of the relationship between creator, text, and audience. The Indian indie development scene, exemplified by titles such as *Thekku Island* and *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, illustrates how regional cultural specificity can merge with interactive storytelling to create distinctive artistic expressions that challenge both Ebert's specific assertions and the broader puritanical frameworks that have historically constrained definitions of legitimate art.

The trajectory of Indian narrative game development suggests that cultural specificity functions as a creative asset in global market contexts. Rather than viewing Indian mythology, regional settings, and vernacular languages as limitations that constrain international appeal, developers like Athul George and the Nodding Heads Games team have demonstrated that these elements can differentiate their products within a crowded global marketplace. The success of *Raji* and the anticipatory buzz surrounding *Thekku Island* indicate that audiences—both domestic and international—respond positively to authentic cultural representation that avoids exoticization or superficial theming.

Yet structural barriers—including mobile-first market dynamics, accessibility constraints, cultural stigma, and challenging monetization environments—continue to limit narrative gaming's mainstream penetration in India. The dominance of free-to-play competitive games, the hardware costs associated with premium PC and console experiences, and the persistent perception of gaming as juvenile distraction rather than legitimate cultural practice create headwinds that individual developers cannot easily overcome.

The path forward likely requires coordinated action across multiple domains. Educational institutions could develop game design programs that emphasize narrative and artistic development alongside technical training, cultivating a generation of developers equipped to create culturally resonant interactive experiences. Government policy could extend beyond esports recognition to include funding mechanisms, tax incentives, and distribution support for narrative-driven indie development. Industry stakeholders might explore hybrid monetization models that sustain narrative content within price-sensitive markets—perhaps through episodic releases, subscription integration, or patronage platforms that connect developers directly with supportive audiences.

As market maturation continues and developer risk tolerance increases, narrative-driven games may transition from niche appreciation to broader cultural acceptance. The question is no longer whether video games can be art, but whether the institutional, economic, and cultural conditions exist to support artful games within specific national contexts. For India, the answer remains emergent—tentatively affirmative but contingent on continued investment, evolving audience sophistication, and the sustained creative courage of developers willing to build possibility spaces from the stories, landscapes, and mythologies they know most intimately.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. DemandSage. (2025, September 11). Online gaming India statistics (2026) – Growth & market size. Retrieved from <https://www.demandsage.com/online-gaming-statistics-india/>
- [2]. Ghosh, S. (2020). Interview with Unreal Engine. Unreal Engine Developer Interviews.



- [3]. IMARC Group. (2026). India gaming market report 2026-2034: Size, share, growth. Retrieved from <https://www.imarcgroup.com/india-gaming-market>
- [4]. Kerala Technology. (2026, February 17). Another Kerala game aims for the world: Thekku Island. Retrieved from <https://keralatechnology.com/blog/another-kerala-game-aims-for-the-world>
- [5]. Mordor Intelligence. (2026). India gaming market size, share & industry analysis, 2031. Retrieved from <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/india-gaming-market>
- [6]. Murray, J. H. (1997). Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace. MIT Press.
- [7]. OpenPR. (2026, April 1). India gaming market overview: Size, share, key trends, industry growth & forecast report 2026-2034. Retrieved from <https://www.openpr.com/news/4449817>
- [8]. Outlook India. (2025, October 15). Top Indian indie game studios in 2025. Outlook Respawn. Retrieved from <https://respawn.outlookindia.com/gaming/gaming-guides/top-indian-indie-game-studios-in-2025>
- [9]. Parker, F. (2018). Roger Ebert and the games-as-art debate. *Cinema Journal*, 57(3), 77–100.
- [10]. WNHUB. (2025, December 1). In 2025, India's gaming market revenue will exceed one billion dollars — analysis. Retrieved from <https://wnhub.io/news/analytics/item-49429>
- [11]. Zeiler, X., & Mukherjee, S. (2022). Video game development in India: A cultural and creative industry embracing rich regional cultural heritage(s). *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

