

Puja, Pandals and Paratextual Playgrounds: A Case Study of Durga Puja 2023 in Kolkata, India

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we investigate the shifting meanings of play and religion in the recent proliferation of ‘game themes’ in public art and design of the urban street installations and pavilions of the UNESCO Cultural Heritage of Humanity-accredited Durga Puja in Kolkata, India, 2023. A carnival celebrating ten-day worship of the Hindu goddess Durga, the Durga Puja and its annual display of “pandals” (a mix of public installation and pavilion), with an average footfall of 10 million, has recently inspired a spate of scholarly works addressing its distinctive contributions to street art as global commentary, unique economic splicing of late capitalist consumerism with indigenous artisanal crafting communes, and complex interlinkages between political debates in India and undercurrents in Bengali public culture, and even diasporic and digital contestations of identity over organization of Durga Puja across the world (Chakrabarti 2024; Guha-Thakurta 2015; Bandopadhyay 2017; Mukherjee 2022). While much of the scholarship regarding Durga Puja focuses on the aforementioned themes, we will examine the intriguing displays of games—digital as well as analog—put forth in three major pandals of the most recent iteration of Durga Puja in 2023. Triangulating three different modes of ludic thought—Johan Huizinga’s classic “magic circle”, the Hindu religious notion of the universe as “leela-kshetra” [playground] of the supreme deity, and recent political operationalization of ludic

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registers in Bengali political contestations between, popularized as the slogan of “Khela Hobe” [“We shall play”] during the West Bengal State Assembly Elections in 2021 and thereafter, our case study focuses on understanding the pandals as offering an interpretive map of conversations between global game cultures and the shifting histories of gameplay in Bengal, ranging from the ancient Hindu Gyan Chaupar to the postmodern Augmented Reality games.

Part photo-essay, part autoethnographic journalism, part playful travelogue, part critical intervention, this case study blends academic enquiry with lived and embodied experiences of play and ritual through the medium of the highly participatory Puja celebrations. In doing so, this paper explores the rationale behind Puja committees in the city turning their attention to videogames as a medium for commenting on technological modernity in the popular imagination. The form, logic and content of games are employed as paratextual supplements (Genette, 1997; Consalvo 2007, 2017; Mukherjee, 2016; Švelch, 2020) to pique nostalgia, identification and commentary on the past, present and futurity of the collective experience of Durga Puja in the space of the pandal. The ludic architecture of Puja pandals are an instance of incidental gaming, creating a productive avenue for studying the shifting nature of the magic circle within and through ritual, religion and cultural practice which are always already intertwined in South Asia. In this, these are playgrounds which actively resist the dangers of the single game-story (Rizvi and Mukherjee, 2023) by (dis)playing multiplicitous possibilities of game as paratext in non-Western pluralities. This case study seeks to open up this avenue to critical study in the purview of game studies by presenting the playground of the pandal which is populated by the iconography of the goddess as well as that of chessboards, snakes and ladders, and indigenous games.

Keywords

Durga Puja, ritual, religion, paratextuality, incidental gaming

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