Ludifying Digital Protests in the Global South: The Bangladesh Scenario

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While Bangladesh last year was undergoing a radical political overhaul led at the grassroots level, gamers in Bangladesh were not only actively subsuming the unrest into their virtual game worlds, but they were also tying in with networking platforms that are already gamified, creating paratextual layers to the games that add to their textual depth and their reception. Our research studies this phenomenon through digital participant observation.

Although the entry of this South Asian nation into gaming has been late compared to the global North, and much of the necessary technology is still unaffordable to middle-class Bangladeshi households, the revenue generated from gaming in Bangladesh has seen a continued rise (Mukherjee 2022). Gamers in Bangladesh now have a flourishing digitally run network, in two of which - 'Gamers of Bangladesh' and 'Bangladesh Gaming Society'- we have chosen to situate this study. Considering that videogames as a site to practice resistance and for democratic process has been researched (Richardson et al. 2021; Davies 2023; Bashandy 2023), there is not much work in this area for the global South. Adding to that is the issue that much of gaming research in the Indian subcontinent is overshadowed by a focus on India (Mukherjee 2022).

For a brief background, the Sheikh Hasina headed government has had the longest regime in Bangladesh since its Liberation War in 1971. However, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the alleged bias in her governance, as evidenced by a series of anti-government demonstrations before her latest term began in 2024. In July 2024, the unrest erupted into a mass-revolution led by students and organized mostly using social networking platforms. The trigger event was the reinstatement of quotas that mandate reservations in government jobs for applicants whose ancestors were freedom fighters in the Liberation War. In actuality, only those families associated with the Awami League, the erstwhile dominant political party under Hasina, were able to secure those jobs. With rising rates of unemployment and a

stagnant private sector, students in universities took to streets to demand the revocation of said reservations. With the power of the algorithms, the protests reached the global population and brough international scrutiny, while obtaining supporters nationally and internationally who turned it into a revolution. Hasina, the Prime Minister, in an attempt to suppress the resistance, unleashed the National Army, who reportedly killed several students including at least 32 minors (Ahmed and Ashraf 2025). Internet shutdowns were also imposed, but the demonstrations continued. The protestors began demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister and eventually raided her residence. Consequently, she resigned and fled to neighbouring India. This remained the 'trending' topic on digital networks for several days.

Given that a large number of the Bangladeshi gaming community are students (Hossain and Fahad 2024), gamers too were engaged, albeit differentially. Although it is questionable as to what extent their playful engagement with the protest through combat-based videogames such as *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio 2005) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2009) can be considered protest in the democratic sense, their use of these games in convergence with Facebook gave rise to a kind of phenomenon previously unseen to the researchers in the Indian subcontinent. That digital networking platforms are themselves designed on the principle of gamification (Hristova et al 2020) makes this kind of engagement a form of meta-engagement, that occurs in the confluence of two forms of media – gaming and networking. Henry Jenkins (2006) speaks of convergence cultures citing examples such as *The Matrix* film and game series and the age-irrespective democratic engagement in the virtual town Alphaville in *The Sims Online* (Maxis 2002), but here in Bangladesh we find a new kind of convergence culture: one that converges games and networking into a sort of meta-gaming, which includes not only the act of gaming itself, but also the development of original games viz a viz *Bangaboltu More Nai* (Devsuki 2025) and *Internet Blackout* (Palak 2024) as well as using game instances to game the gamified network.

Indeed, networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X played a significant role in the protest, not only amplifying the issue but also "engendering a new narrative of nationalism", as Samata Biswas (2024) writes with reference to memetic creations. In our case, a sub-narrative circulated among gaming communities, that of the protest being a gamelike combat, that was framed in terms of media (in this case, games) produced in the global North. We see this sub-narrative as a kind of "incorporated paratext" (Gray 2010, 210-14) that adds to the storyworlds of the games as well as of the dominant narrative circulating on the networking platforms. Paratextuality has increasingly been recognized as being crucial to reading videogames (see for example, Svelch 2020, Glas 2016, Mukherjee 2023). Adding to the existing discourse, the paratext of protest offers an alternative site for construction of the game text, allowing for the development of political consciousness of the gamers' through the media form of their choice. It is important to consider that the genre of the games used here narrating protest through armed battle could be seen as contradictory to the actual events where the students followed democratic process but the fact that the State ultimately resorted to military violence in an undemocratic manner could well fall into the purview of these games, with the only exception for Bangladesh being that the students, the hero of the "game" according to gamers, were unarmed. It must be noted that these combat games were deployed as representations of empowerment, where the armed protest-avatars in the gamers' fantasy were better equipped to deal with violent state forces as compared to the street protesters. Rather than magnifying the paradoxes, the focus of the researchers here is on the potential of the game as a medium for bringing together its players in solidarity. The

medium and types of paratextual protest are also important to note. Not wishing to impose a typology, nevertheless, it is necessary to classify the paratextual protest in its media-specificity: some of the posts on social media make heavy use of memes (Figure 1) while others resort to photographs (thus claiming more authenticity) (Figure 2). There are even mini-games that were designed as part of the protest such as *Bangaboltu More Nai* (Devsuki 2025)[1] which is downloadable on the itch.io website. Satire and direct criticism are deployed interchangeably across the different responses.

Figure 1: Meme where Sheikh Hasina is likened to Dutch van der Linde from the *Red Dead Series.*
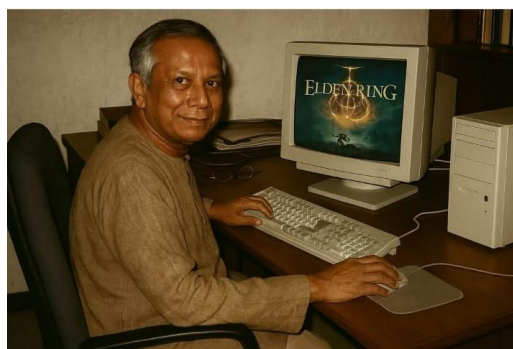
Figure 2: Photograph claiming to show Mohammed Yunus, Chief Advisor of the interim government playing *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware Inc. 2022)

One might argue that the popular networking sites used as media during the protest are also produced and administered in the global North, but it is important to note that the language used by gamers included actors in the global South. For instance, the student protester on the street was juxtaposed with Kratos from *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio 2005) (Figure 3)*, while Hasina was placed next to Dutch van der Linde from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018)*. (Figure 1)*. This led to the creation of a hybrid language among gaming communities, where their local state leaders and fellow students were being placed in the context of an established Global North combat-game narrative. There are differences in the affordances of social media and gaming (Jhee and Wu 2023), with distinct nuances that give different meanings to communication within these platforms: networks offer broader communication features such as archiving features giving continuity to communication, while gaming platforms despite having messaging features offer continuity only for the game itself and not the communication between players. But following Angela Cirucci (2014), the experiences of players and network users, despite such differences, also share some similarities. The players' experience of combat in the videogame was continued beyond the game by tying in with the network through a meta-gaming of the protest, which allowed them to maintain the playful narrative. The game-text gained more depth through the paratexts created by the gamers' invocation of the protest context.


Figure 3: Kratos from *God of War* as the protester
prepared to take bullets

What perhaps stands out in this phenomenon is the merging of play and politics. Joost Raessens (2014) describes such instances as ludification - "play is not only characteristic of leisure but also turns up in those domains that once were considered the opposite of play". Here, in the fantasy world of gamers, the real implications of the revolution on the street are conflated with the war between characters in a videogame. As students on the street revolted with the danger of getting killed, conservatives may argue against the playfulness of the gamers and consider this form of engagement as a dilution of the politics through mockery. But following L. M. Bogad

(2016), we see this phenomenon as radical participation where tactical interactions juxtaposing games and politics, in this context through gaming and "memification" (Davis et al 2018), allows the point of learning for gamers and non-gamers alike, leading to the creation of "knowledge communities" (Jenkins 2006). As Bogad (2016) writes: "Ironic work calls on the unsuspecting passersby to decode, engage and actively get the joke – and maybe even to banter back. It answers hegemonologue with dialogue."

This form of engagement also caused a "mimetic resistance" (Lempert 2014) and started an infinite engagement that goes beyond the protest itself. This is exemplified by its most recent articulations of global politics using game metaphor, even after the end of the revolution and the formation of the interim government. Further, given that the State had increased its surveillance over netizens at the time, and even the networks had been notified by the State to curb protest-related content through systemic censorship (as broadcasted on social media by Zunaid Ahmed Palak, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh), the use of ludic language to narrate the resistance may be seen as a way to escape these forms of censorship. The references to games, that are supposedly 'non-serious' and incomprehensible to the 'serious' surveillance-state and censorship mechanisms, can be seen as a creative way to "jailbreak" the network that was coded to censor the protest. However, this point may be disputed by these photographs (Figures 4 and 5) that made their way beyond the gaming community to even mainstream broadcasting media. Here, the protesting youth recover play station games from the Hasina residence. Ironically, it may be speculated that Hasina, a serious politician engaged in matters of governance, may also be a gamer and could be well-aware of the gaming references. In this case, the idea that politics, a serious matter, is the opposite of play, is challenged by the possible ludic engagement of the Prime Minister herself. Through this research, we find the blurring of politics and play not only within the gaming community, but also in the site of the highest political significance in Bangladesh. Here, the Serious Games initiatives, such as Games for Change, that advocate the use of playing and games for "serious" outcomes may be worth a mention. But again, the researchers here wonder if the implications of this photograph may redefine the level of seriousness in matters of which games make an appearance.
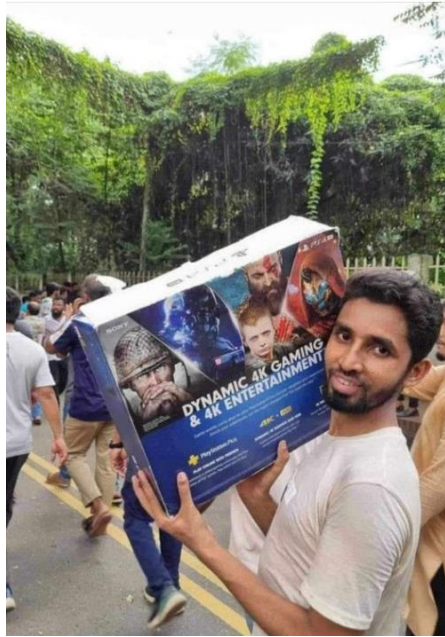
Figure 4: Game retrieved from the Hasina residence.

Figure 5: More games retrieved from the Hasina
residence

In conclusion, this research highlights not only the multiple layers of gaming and playing with politics as observed in the latest developments in Bangladeshi gaming communities but also takes a speculative turn towards the possible ludic significance of Bangladeshi politics. Given the novelty of this phenomenon, further research into this area opens new avenues for the study of digital games.

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ENDNOTES

[1] 'Bangabandhu' or 'friend of Bengal' was the epithet used by Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman, who led Bangladesh to independence from Pakistan. The game parodies this name as 'bangaboltu' or 'the screws of Bengal' and shows Rahman as a moving target to be shot at.