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These Indian board game designers are distilling Indian politics into an immersive, gaming experience

GQ does a deep dive

By Bhanuj Kappal

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Hey Aayush, I think we’ve found a fatal flaw in this new board,” game designer and Memesys Culture Lab co-founder Zain Memon calls out to one of his team members across the room, and the two go into a huddle. It’s a rainy day in September and we’re at the Lab’s office in Bambolim, Goa, an old spacious villa tucked away in the middle of a big green estate. Formed in 2015, Memesys is a cinema and new media studio that works at the intersection of science, philosophy and culture. Across the villa, different teams are busy working on feature films, documentaries, VR and –

judging by the contents of one room – experiments with robotics.





Memon and his team are busy with a new vertical: games. The huge table that functions as the team's main workspace is littered with board games from across the world. In one corner, two team members are busy cutting out and gluing together the parts of a 3D wooden puzzle. On the smaller table in front of us is an experimental version of Shasn, the political strategy board game that Memon and his team have been developing for the past year-and-a-half.

Over the next two hours, Memon, fellow game designer Mayuresh Paradkar and I come up against questions on policy and political issues, trying to balance ideology with the need for resources in an effort to buy voters and “win” constituencies. We’re playing the India 2020 campaign, though the game has three others – USA 2020, Earth 2040 and Rome 40 BCE, with a Brexit campaign also in the works. Throughout, Memon and Paradkar keep up a running commentary on the new board, and how it incentivises or inhibits certain strategies. When the game ends, developer Aayush Asthana walks over for a quick debrief. “I guess it’s back to the drawing board,” he says.

Announced in July, Shasn (the Sanskrit word for “governance”) has built an incredible amount of buzz already. Its Kickstarter crowd-funding campaign reached its \$25,000 goal in just 22 hours, eventually bringing in \$3,39,045 from 4,209 contributors, most of them from the US and Europe. But Shasn isn’t the only Indian board game that aims to get young people thinking about policy, politics and social change.

In fact, it’s not even the first to market – the Kickstarter pre-orders will only ship out in June 2020.

This January, journalist-turned-game designer Abeer Kapoor launched The Poll, an India-specific board game that mimics the country’s election process on paper, as well as the corruption and strong-arm tactics that sometimes mar the polls in practice. There’s also Mantri Cards, created by Pune-based initiative Reach, a much simpler trading card game that hopes to educate people about their political leaders, by turning that data into trump cards. In the non-consumer space, Bengaluru-based non-profit Fields of View has been using games since 2012 as a tool to help students, government officials and researchers learn about the intricacies of policy-making.

“I think [political board games] is just an idea of the zeitgeist,” says Memon. A high school dropout, he started working with Memesys co-founder and CEO Anand Gandhi in 2012, when the latter was figuring out distribution for his film Ship Of Theseus. The self-taught ludologist has always been an avid gamer, and strongly believes in the power of interactive media. “Since the 1970s, we haven’t had a more

turbulent political time. And people from every walk of life are saying that whatever work I do, I need to get more political. The music scene is doing that, films are doing that. And the few game designers and gamification practitioners in India are also doing the same thing.”

In 2017, Memesys released *An Insignificant Man*, Vinay Shukla and Khushboo Ranka’s award-winning documentary chronicling the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party and its national convener Arvind Kejriwal. For over three years, Shukla and Ranka were given unprecedented access to the inner workings of a political party. They came away with invaluable insights on what it takes to build a political organisation, and how politicians use different policies to mobilise voters. Once they’d wrapped up the film, the Memesys team began thinking about how they could use these insights to help further meaningful political dialogue.

“We wanted to build a media piece that allowed people to talk about politics – to disagree – in a safe space,” says Memon. “It couldn’t be digital, because if digital communication made people happier, then Twitter would be the best place on Earth. I wanted people to sit across the table from each other and talk to each other. And that’s when we said, let’s build a tabletop game.”

Memon put together a small team. The project initially started as a low-stakes experiment, one of many at Memesys. Much like Google, it allows employees significant leeway to work on personal projects. The only caveat is that they tie in with the lab’s larger vision: to take complex scientific or philosophical ideas and translate them into accessible narrative experiences.

About three weeks in, by the end of January, Memon was ready with a working prototype. He put up a post on Facebook, asking friends and acquaintances to come over to his Mumbai residence and try out the new game. More than a hundred people played the game over the next month-and-a-half, with Memon and his team taking constant notes on what worked and what didn’t.

“Every day, you’d probably be playing a different version,” says Memon. “We were iterating all the time. At that point, I went to [Memesys Visual Designer] Soumik [Lahiri] saying, I think this is a real thing now. We’re actually doing this.”

After that, the project picked up steam. The team spent months discussing politics and policy with Shukla and Ranka, as well as an array of political theorists, academics and journalists, in order to ensure the game had a solid grounding in political reality. Lahiri got to work, creating an aesthetic and visual language, going through 30-odd designs before settling on the current version. It took about four months before Memon was confident enough to take the game to Gandhi.

“He came to me with a piece of paper that he’d drawn something on, and he made me play the game,” remembers Gandhi. “And it blew my mind. I didn’t believe it was possible to have such an experience with a piece of paper with a pen-drawing.”

Gandhi thought the game was ready to release, but Memon wasn’t satisfied just yet. He sent prototypes out to friends and acquaintances in the global board-gaming community for feedback, conducted more playtests in India – and continued to work on refining the basic mechanics of the game. In fact, he says the team will probably continue to tinker with it, till the time comes to send out the pre-orders next summer.

The way Shasn works is simple. Every round, players are asked a question with two possible responses. For the India deck, these questions range from the pragmatic (“Should the Goods and Services Tax be abolished?”) to the more controversial (“Do you support capital punishment?”). Each response is associated with one of four political archetypes, each with its own powers. The answers also earn you resources – media, clout, funds and trust. You can use the resources to buy voters with the aim of creating a majority in each of the nine constituencies on the board. Your resources also allow you to buy “conspiracy cards”, with which you can gain advantages or sabotage your enemies. There are also “headlines”, which mimic the effects of political controversies. When all the constituencies have a majority, the player with the most majority voters wins. At the end of the game, the winner will get a “cost of victory” card, based on the strategies they employed to win.

“That card paints a hypothetical future of what the country looks like in the next five years after the victory,” says Memon. “So you can work the machine to win, but at the end you’ll be faced with the consequences of that action.”

Memon’s team has worked painstakingly to ensure that you can win by sticking to

your ideology – even as an idealist – but the game constantly tempts you to compromise your morals in order to gain an advantage. You can also form alliances, but players are free to stab their allies in the back when it’s convenient. This often leads to frayed nerves and high tempers during gameplay, like Monopoly on steroids. A friend who received an early prototype tells me about a newly-wed couple who got into an hour-long argument after one partner chose the “wrong” response to a question about “marital rape”. There have been heated moments during the team’s playtests as well. But generally, the response has been positive.

“Many of my friends have come back to me and said, ‘Hey, this allowed me to talk to my mom about politics’,” says Memon. “There have been groups of friends that have become more empathetic to someone else’s political point of view. We’ve had students in schools talk to their friends about reservation issues, and reach common ground.”

Memon’s team plans to release new decks of policy cards annually, in order to keep the questions up to date. The decks will also serve as a time capsule, a sampling of each year’s major political issues.

Shasn functions as a plug-and-play election simulation, ie, changing the card deck means it works just as well with wildly different political environments. The result is that the game doesn’t always reflect some of the unique peculiarities of Indian elections – like booth capturing or election fraud. For that, you have to turn to The Poll.

It was on the campaign trail in Karnataka in May 2018 that journalist Abeer Kapoor first came up with the idea to create a board game.

“When I started covering elections, I realised that the problems people encounter – each state, each set of issues – is different, but the political parties that are serving them are the same... They’re offering solutions. Elections, by design, are a problem-solving mechanism.”

Delhi-based Kapoor and his team of two researchers picked 50 constituencies from across the country’s 543, mapping their major problems by looking at the issues raised in the Lok Sabha and the media. In Aurangabad, for example, the problems

include groundwater depletion due to illegal borewells and the demand to equip village households with biogas cookers. In Amritsar, the issues are drug trafficking and the rising cost of healthcare.

The game starts with three constituency cards on the board, and players get to pick from a deck of policy cards to build a manifesto that offers solutions to those problems (so you can pick up “better police recruitment” to help with Amritsar’s narcotics problem). The policies are mined from actual manifestos of different political parties. But in order to translate policies into influence, they must convince a majority of the other players that their promise can actually solve a problem.

“The core mechanic of our game is argumentation,” says Kapoor. “It’s conversations about difficult things. You argue, you scream, but at the end of the day we can trick you into thinking it’s fun.”

After that, players hit the campaign trail. Each player gets a set number of followers, and money they can use to buy cards that either increase their own influence, or reduce that of other players. You can also mobilise voters on caste or religious lines, or use media cards to boost your strategies. There are also “Change The Election” cards – which simulate the effects of riots, wars and other external processes that can turn an election upside down. The Poll pulls no punches when it comes to the darker side of Indian politics. Players are allowed to break the law in a number of ways, from using black money to booth capturing and inciting communal violence. And while the Election Commission can punish infractions like over-spending, it requires the players to intervene by playing the EC card.

“The game doesn’t really pass a moral or value judgement; it leaves that to players,” says Kapoor. “Because we want to say that democracy requires accountability, but it is we who have to be accountable.”

Since its launch this January, Kapoor has taken the game all over the country, including Lucknow, Mumbai and Tiruchirappalli. In Modinagar in Uttar Pradesh, he played with students who were affected by the riots in nearby Muzaffarnagar in 2013.

“The sort of fluidity with which these young people were able to argue, and also listen, was beautiful,” he says. “You find them to be more nimble-footed, to be more ready to listen to other people’s narratives.”

Kapoor hopes that the people who play The Poll walk away with a better understanding of Indian politics. But he’s quick to caution that the game doesn’t aim to inspire direct action. “I’m looking for gradual, incremental ways to bring about these conversations.”

Shasn and The Poll both focus on enabling conversation and political engagement as their goals. In recent years, academics like Jane McGonigal and game developers like Matthew Lee have argued that games can be used to do even more. The core argument is that the skills and hours that gamers spend on shooting monsters or solving dungeon puzzles can – with the right game – also be directed towards solving real-world problems. But for such games to be most effective, they usually must be embedded in an institutional framework.

In India, this approach has been pioneered by Fields of View, which uses games and simulations to improve the public policy-making process, which it realised was flawed in a number of ways. For one, it failed to account for the diversity of needs and perspectives in the country, which makes finding consensus a gargantuan task. There’s also an unwillingness to experiment with radical ideas, which is understandable given the real-world impact of these policies.

“There’s a lot of theory about games that draws from different disciplines – rhetoric, philosophy, design, user experience, behavioural economics,” says co-founder Bharath M Palavalli. “So the idea was, how do you bring those disciplines together to design a tool that’s more relevant to people?”



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To do this, Fields of View partners with government agencies, research institutions and civic organisations to create its games. These are also embedded within a specific programme – either a workshop or an educational curriculum – to ensure that players reflect on the lessons they’ve learned during gameplay, and hopefully put them into action. The organisation has designed over 12 games so far – eight physical, and four digital – that address issues such as urban planning, waste

management and public transit.

One of their most popular ones is `ubbish!, a game that allows players to step into the shoes of the people who run dry waste collection centres in Indian cities. Created using real data from Bengaluru, the game encourages players to think about the need to segregate and recycle their waste. Another, City Game, gets participants to build the city they want to live in. Fields of View has run the game over 200 times with diverse audiences – ranging from orphaned kids to retired bureaucrats – and come away with some remarkable insights on the role culture and background play in how people approach policy. In one playthrough, an eight-year-old child and an environmental activist convinced a real estate developer to move a housing colony’s sewage treatment plant to a more appropriate location, despite its impact on his profit.

“I don’t mean that in the real world they’ll automatically have that dialogue,” says Palavalli. “But you can actually facilitate that conversation, because it’s in a non-threatening space. And we’ve seen that happen again and again in our games.”

A new game, that takes place both in physical and digital space, is Transport Trilemma. For this, the team worked with the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation to collect data on the needs of marginalised communities in the city, so that it could plan better routes for its bus service. Palavalli says that government agencies have been the easiest partners to work with. “They face these challenges on a daily basis, so you give them any tool that makes their life easier and they’re eager to lap it up,” he says. “They want to use them immediately. They’re willing to experiment, they’re willing to bet on such tools.”

The past few years have been dubbed the “Golden Age” of board games, as tabletop gaming sees a resurgence after being sidelined by videogames for decades. According to the BBC, industry forecasters predict the global board game market will be worth approximately more than \$11.36 billion by 2023. India is still behind, with a 2017 report by Euromonitor pegging it at `330 crore. But that’s changing. In cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru, board gaming cafés and clubs are on the rise, and it’s not uncommon to see people at the pub playing a game of Cards Against

Humanity or Settlers Of Catan. In July this year, a team of research associates from INSTUCEN (India Study Centre) organised Playing With The Past, the first national conference on India's traditional board games. And last December, over 3,000 people turned up at MeepleCon, India's only board game trade fair.

“There are a number of reasons for the resurgence of board games,” says Memon. “One, lack of open spaces. Two, the internet happened, and everyone started playing online, with DRM [digital rights management] necessitating that everyone buy a copy of the game. Three, literally nothing to talk about after a point. When you meet the same friends for the tenth time in a year, it's great to be able to just set up a game and play.”

Memon believes that the Indian board game ecosystem is going to grow at a rapid pace, as games find a new audience among young, globalised adults. Memesys has two more games in the pipeline, as well as a full-fledged Indian board games store, that will bring games from all over the world to India at competitive prices. It also plans to create on-ground gaming events at cafés and bars to generate more interest in the space.

For his part, while Palavalli is bullish about the potential for the gaming ecosystem – and politics or policy-focused games in particular – he does caution that not every social or political problem can benefit from this approach. He gives the example of waste management games that incentivise waste segregation with points. Players want to win, so they will sort and segregate as much as they can in the game.

“But in the real world, nobody is giving you those incentives, so how do you sustain this behaviour?” he says. “There are limited contexts in which a game is an appropriate tool to use. It's not like you have a hammer so the whole world becomes a nail.”

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