

"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Panel 3: Changing Media and Religious Renegotiations

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„Renegotiating Hinduism via Digital Media: Indian Digital Games provoking Global Debates on ‚Being Hindu‘“

Abstract

By today, digital media are inherent part of popular culture in contemporary India. One of the increasingly important digital media genres – especially for a broad urban middle-class audience – is digital gaming. Though it rapidly evolves and though, by today, it has to be counted among the media genres which define the new media configurations in South Asian contexts, research on digital games so far primarily concentrates on European and U.S. settings. But digital games influence cultural and social transformations in India, in general, and also contribute to reshape and (de)construct details of religious ideas and beliefs. As such, this popular media genre serves as one of many platforms to negotiate religious identity and authority in contemporary India and representations of Hindu symbols, ideas and beliefs, on the subcontinent as well as in the ‘West’.

Digital games – produced in the West as well as in India – included some ‘Hindu’ topics ever since digital media emerged. But already the first entirely India-developed digital game based on Hindu mythology in detail, ‘Hanuman: Boy Warrior’ (SONY 2009 for PlayStation 2), caused heated debates on representations of Hindu values and an alleged disregard of Hindu deities in gaming environments. Significantly, the protests against the game focussed on one particular genre specific issue, namely on the possibility to allegedly control and manipulate a deity’s representation through technical means of the gaming genre. The changes from solely representing a deity in textual or visual narrative frames, as in filmic genres, to actively modifying the narrative, as in the gaming genre, led to completely new lines of argumentation in recent negotiations of Hinduism. The changes in media and media practices then led to altered religious renegotiations.

This paper analyses the intense debate initiated by Hindu organisations in India and in the Indian diaspora and aims at disclosing underlying processes of renegotiating religious identity and authority. It also wishes to address some of the key questions emerging in the new field of research on Indian digital games. It discusses the role of digital games as an important new media genre and as new platform for renegotiations of religious, cultural and social identity and authority in contemporary Indian and Indian diaspora popular culture and society.