Chapter 15
Where Is Hanuman?
Hindu Mythology, Transmigration, and the Design Process of Immersive Experiences in Museums

Patrizia Schettino
Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

The chapter presents the interpretative strategies used by designers of an immersive environment on Hindu mythology and Hampi, an archaeological site in India, and their own knowledge of Hindu deities and their attributes. The process of animating an Indian Hindu deity for a potentially international audience means not only mastering 3D computer graphics and producing high-quality panorama of the sacred and historical place, but also working carefully on the interpretation and representation. The chapter uses concepts and theories from different disciplines (iconology, hermeutics, design research, museums studies, etc.) with the aim to describe, deconstruct, and understand the design choices. The study uses as main method the grounded theory: data are interviews and observations and the patterns emerging from qualitative data are compared with previous theories, during the process of theoretical comparison.

INTRODUCTION

The paper has the following structure: in the first part, I will present the theoretical background of this paper. In the next section, I will present a specific case study on Hindu mythology and digital media. The following section provides a summary of the methodologies used to collect and analyse data regarding the case study and outlines the categories emerging from data.

BACKGROUND

Migration of Images, Objects and Narratives, Cultural Appropriation and Hermeneutic Circle

Aby Warburg used the term migration of images to describe the process of using and transforming images from East to West and from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (Cieri Via, 2018, p.56). Wittkover (1987) shows that images cannot migrate without human beings: "people move about and may transport objects across wide spaces. Such transmission may be accomplished in a great many ways: by migration of whole populations, by wars and conquests, as well as by wandering craftsmen, traders, travellers, embassies, pilgrims and missionaries". The artists and craftsmen adapted those images within their own context, in order to produce their own artefacts. The process of image migration implies a process of cultural appropriation, the adoption and translation by an artist or craftsman of an image from one context to another; Schneider (2006) studies how craftsmen in Argentina use symbols and images from ancient meso-American cultures to produce pottery and other artefacts and he calls this cultural appropriation. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, with its rich collection of ethnographic objects and works of art, is a good example of a museum re-built with the goal of showing these exchanges between cultures and image migration by appropriation. Image migration and cultural appropriation are complementary processes: there is no migration without an image and without an interpreter, who summarizes in one image or object different sources and symbols, including the attributes of Gods and Goddesses (mediated by other images or text descriptions), narratives (biography of saints, heroes, etc.), local elements and non-local elements (local and exotic animals, etc.), knowledge of astrology and the link between astrology and mythology, using the style of the time and local context or adapting a style from the other culture, etc. Wittkover also shows that, during the Renaissance, Italian artists and writers, when they wanted to use stories and images from Greek mythology, didn't always have classical sources available in their language and so they had to read texts from North Europe (x, p.51). Wittkover explains that, during the Middle Ages in Italy, some elements from classical mythology were adapted to represent Christian stories, for example using the dress styles from the Middle Ages and overlapping a completely different religious meaning (pp. 34-36).

The role of the iconologist is to deconstruct and reconstruct this creative process, using different sources but also the dialogue between elements within the images, comparing the whole and the details. The Atlas produced by Warburg is a visual tool, as proto-hypertext, with texts and images to deconstruct and reconstruct the artistic process of creating a new image from the migration of several images in different times and spaces. Interpretation is the key process analysed in the domain of iconology but also in hermeneutics. Panofsky (1955) wrote that iconology is based on synthesis, more than on analysis and Gadamer (1983) sees this synthesis, made by an interpreter, as a circle: the comparison between details and the whole are the key elements of the "hermeneutic circle". The importance of the detail is in understanding the whole expressed by Warburg's sentence: "God is inside the details" (Ceri Via, 2018). In the next paragraph, I will add more concepts on the interpretation process, from iconology and hermeneutics.

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