



**STUDIO PROFILE**

# **NODDING HEADS GAMES**

How an Indian studio defied the odds to develop a culturally rich adventure

**By KHEE HOON CHAN**



**Founded** 2017

**Employees** 13

**Key staff** Shruti Ghosh (co-founder, game artist), Avichal Singh (co-founder, game designer), Ian Maude (co-founder, game artist)

**URL** [noddingheadsgames.com](http://noddingheadsgames.com)

**Current projects** *Raji: An Ancient Epic*

**S**hruti Ghosh and Ian Maude, two of the co-founders of Nodding Heads Games, are exhausted. Fatigue is etched on their faces, clearly visible even through the grainy video footage of our Skype conversation. In the background, a dog yowls off-camera, while a few others slump onto a sofa, soon dozing off under the hot and humid weather in Pune, India. Both developers, sometimes accompanied by the studio's third co-founder Avichal Singh, joining the call remotely from his place, have been out most nights feeding over 200 stray dogs on the streets. This is in addition to the work they've put into their game: *Raji: An Ancient Epic*. "There's always rescue cases and accidents, and all these we have to take care of as well, because we just love them a lot. So the last few months have been really, really difficult. We've hardly had any rest. Avi [Singh] has been looking after Snowy" – their dog – "and working on the game," Ghosh says.

Over the past few years, Nodding Heads has barely had a moment's rest. Faced with a depleting pool of personal savings, the studio was caught in a frantic rush to seek funding for *Raji* within a few months, ever since the game's Kickstarter campaign failed to gain traction in November 2017. "We had the rug pulled from beneath us, and we had no backup plan. And this was really scary for us," Maude says. "But what we always do is we just adapt. That's what we've always done. And we were initially looking at, how far can our funds go? What are we going to do? Shruti ended up selling her apartment to work to help fund the team.

"We were literally looking at the bank balance and thinking, 'We're gonna have to tell the team to disperse because we can't afford to pay anyone any more,' because we were paying people out of our own pocket, as well as paying rent and [putting] food on the table for ourselves. Yeah, and we were looking at getting employment ourselves. So we were really close to ending this."

**As luck would** have it, Nodding Heads not only found a publisher in UK-based studio Super, but also received the Unreal Development Grant (Epic Games awards one million dollars to 37 indie studios) in June 2018. The studio was finally on the cusp of change. Growing from a three-person team to one that's 13 people strong, Nodding Heads' founders saw their efforts culminate in *Raji*'s high-profile appearance on Nintendo's Indie World showcase in August this



**Members of the Pune-based studio Nodding Heads Games at NASSCOM 2017, a trade event for the Indian IT industry**

year – the first Indian game ever to do so – accompanied by a timed exclusive release on Nintendo Switch.

For an indie studio based in India, this was a staggering accomplishment that belied years of effort; after all, *Raji*'s concept had been brewing since 2013. The game was first influenced by a trip Singh made to Jaisalmer, the 'Golden City' in the Thar Desert within the state of Rajasthan. The town got its namesake from the yellow sandstone used to construct its buildings, its majestic towers and stretching fort walls a dominant landmark. It

## THE FOUNDERS SAW THEIR EFFORTS CULMINATE IN RAJI'S APPEARANCE ON NINTENDO'S INDIE WORLD SHOWCASE

is this Rajasthani architecture that makes up the platformer's sprawling environments, set against a backdrop of rich Hindu mythology.

"I was looking at this place called Patwonki-haveli, which is a medieval architecture from the early 18th century. I felt there was this frame in front of me without any virus – without any people – and I felt teleported back to that era," said Singh. He shared this brainwave with Ghosh, who was teaching at DSK Supinfocom, the design college from which Singh received his Master's Degree, and who he quickly bonded with over a shared interest in games such as *Bastion* and *Transistor*. Maude, a lecturer at the same college, met them a year later in 2014.

Yet the idea didn't turn into anything more substantial till 2016. That was when the three of them discussed *Raji*'s concept in greater detail. The trio weren't new to the game industry: Singh graduated from college to join Zynga as a game designer in 2014; Ghosh worked as a game artist at numerous local studios before getting hired by EA as an art development manager in

2016; and Maude had an expansive career across various triple-A studios, including Ubisoft, Rockstar and Acclaim Entertainment.

Yet India's games industry is predominantly known as a workforce to which development work is outsourced, and it's still relatively nascent when compared to those of America, Europe and Japan. One of the earliest Indian videogame companies, Dhruva Interactive, was set up in 1997 and started as an outsourcing studio, collaborating with major studios on the development of triple-A games. It was acquired by Swedish developer Starbreeze Studios, which later sold its stake to Rockstar Games and absorbed Dhruva into its Rockstar India studio. This was what the team thought might have

given international publishers some pause when it came to signing them.

"I have worked in these outsourcing studios in India, where it was like, a section of the game has been just given to a company in India, where you have to turn up the assets and give it back to the head studio," Ghosh explains. "It's a very different approach to how work is handled." In these studios, artists who want a bigger creative involvement within the game development process are usually prohibited – even actively discouraged – from doing so. Usually it's just like, they would hand you the model sheet, or the concept art or stuff that you have to do, [like] the specification. So it's very much like..."

"...blinkers," Maude chips in.

"Yeah," Ghosh nods. "You cannot think, you cannot do much... The effects, art animation [...] these parts are sent to these kinds of companies. You do not have much creative involvement. I've known artists who've been working for ten, 15 years doing this same process, they probably [progressed] from junior to senior to an art

## STUDIO PROFILE



LEFT *Raji: An Ancient Epic* was the first Indian indie game to be shown at E3, after Microsoft included it in 2018's ID@Xbox. ABOVE the team attending a Twitch event, with co-founders Avichal Singh (centre), Ian Maude (mid-right) and Shruti Ghosh (right) on stage

lead, but they become... like a robot. [Working in these studios is] like a competition within the team, that you have to make sure that you do the best in copying something you've been asked to deliver. That's sad, but the reality of how outsourcing companies work."

**In a bid** to appeal to publishers, Nodding Heads committed to the ambitious decision of slicing their development timeline by almost half. "Since we are an untested team – a team from India doing this for the first time – maybe people are not ready to trust us yet, and it's a big ask," Ghosh says. "We actually changed the entire timeline and the budget of the game. We literally cut down our original timeline from 24 months to 14 months, and the budget as well, so somebody would actually fund us."

Nodding Heads has emerged as one of the first few Indian studios to receive international acclaim for their game. From landing *Raji* a featured spot on Microsoft's E3 ID@Xbox 2018 ("We are the very first Indian indie game ever to make it to E3!" Maude announced on the Kickstarter page) to receiving the funds from Unreal Dev Grant – the catalyst that turned things around – the journey has been an emotional rollercoaster for the studio. And as it's the first Indian game to be so prominently featured across international showcases and platforms, Ghosh admits the team are constantly pushing themselves to deliver something that's worthy of representing India on the international games scene.

"We did want to put India on the game dev map, we wanted to make sure that the motive we started this studio on was to make a quality game that can compete in the international market. There isn't any studio from India that was doing that, and we wanted to set the path," she says.

Yet as *Raji*'s popularity has grown, it has also attracted some criticism. A Vice article, published

in October, points that out *Raji*'s vision of Indian history and culture has largely been influenced by Hinduva, a form of Hindu nationalism that has become mainstream in Indian politics in recent years. The author suggests that *Raji* has inadvertently erased Muslims from its narrative, despite the prominence of Mughal architecture, a type of Indo-Islamic art style that has heavily inspired the game's setting. When asked about this, the trio insist, with some frustration, that this author is "blowing this out of proportion".

"We are not professing its history [of Hinduism]," says Maude. "When he talks about the Asuras as being Muslim, and then *Raji* being Hindu, he's drawing those parallels. And if he's

people have fallen in love with what we've created, it's as simple as that."

Since the game's release on Switch, *Raji* has been making waves back home in India. Singh enthusiastically shares that a popular Indian YouTube personality, Tanmay Bhat, broadcast the *Raji* trailer while livestreaming. "He mentioned it a few days ago, what *Raji* is, and that it's an Indian game, and then yesterday he finally played the game. He said on the stream that he will definitely buy and support it, and play and review it. And I think his video already has around a million views now, so people know about the game." Another celebrity, Indian rapper Raftaar, has also introduced the game to his

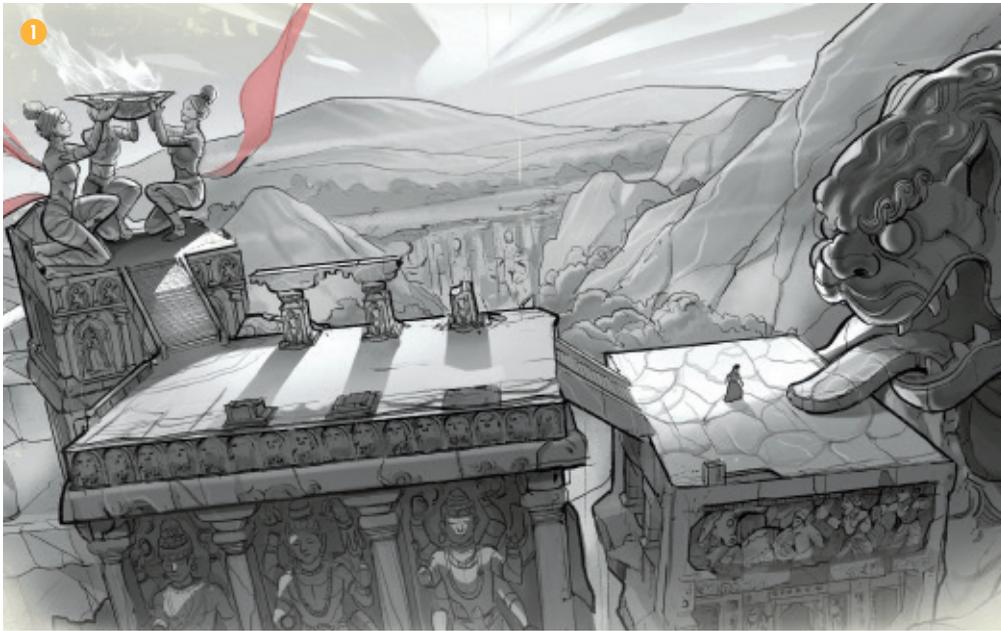
**"WE DO KNOW THAT WE WILL ALWAYS MAKE GAMES THAT REPRESENT INDIA, OR TELL STORIES THAT ARE HEARTFELT"**

not careful, he could spark a lot of hatred unnecessarily towards the development team. And it could quite easily get out of hand." Rather than being an accurate depiction of Hinduism, the team say *Raji* is largely inspired by its religious stories, as well as Indian mythologies. "We wanted to tell the stories of the gods, because this game was made for western audiences, this game was made for people who do not have an idea about Hindu mythology. It's just to give an idea [of what Hinduism is]," Ghosh says.

Do they believe political and personal beliefs have a place in games? The answer is a resounding 'no'. "Games have been around for an awful long time, whether it's videogames, boardgames, card games, whatever games... there's no political motive in there at all. Our game has a story," Maude says. "And we hope

following of 3.1 million Instagram fans. "These are signs that when we actually launch, the news will pick up," says Singh.

As our interview concludes, Nodding Heads is hunkering down for the game's launch on other platforms, before taking a deserved rest. Ghosh explains that they will take time off before embarking on any other creative endeavours (such as a second game) as a studio. "We do know that we will always make games that represent India, or tell stories that are heartfelt: that are closer to our heart, that we can represent the world [with] Indian culture and myths or anything to do from India. That's always been our motto. But what we don't know, right now, is what's going to be next." Maude is quick to respond: "Well, we just bought some books, ready to sit down in December and do nothing but read." ■



❶ An early piece of concept art for the entrance of the Durga temple, in which the game is set. ❷ *Raji's* aesthetics are heavily influenced by Hindu mythology and medieval Indian architecture – this scene is strongly reminiscent of Chand Baori, one of the most famous stepwells in India. ❸ Illustrated in the Pahari style, *Raji's* environments are a patchwork of hand-painted textures, which are then rendered in 3D. ❹ Intricate sketches of the temple including the mandala, which inspired the numerous mini-puzzles in *Raji*

