Reading Interactive Fiction *Samsara*

Akansha Goswami , Srishti, Bharat Choudhary,
University of Delhi

Abstract: In the third decade of the 21st century, literature is evolving alongside digital and technological advancements. The realm of Electronic Literature (E-Lit) and its subgenres, such as Interactive Fiction (IF), exemplify this transformation by merging storytelling with interactivity and multimedia. This paper explores Meghna Jayanth's *Samsara*, a culturally rich work of Indian Interactive Fiction hosted on the StoryNexus platform. Set in 18th-century Bengal, *Samsara* bridges traditional storytelling with modern digital innovation, reflecting themes of karma, dharma, and existential balance. The study examines the narrative techniques employed in the work, such as nonlinear storytelling and the use of Lexia, alongside challenges like accessibility and cultural specificity. By contextualizing *Samsara* within the broader landscape of E-Lit, this paper highlights its potential to enrich the literary experience, serving as a bridge between cultural heritage and digital storytelling. Additionally, it provides methodologies for analyzing interactive fiction within the Indian context, contributing to the academic discourse on this emerging genre.

Keywords: Interactive Fiction, Electronic Literature, Samsara, Meghna Jayanth, Hypertext, Indian storytelling, digital narrative, karma, dharma, nonlinear storytelling.

In the third decade of the 21st century, terms like Electronic, digital, and AI, are no less noteworthy than Literature. The world has gone through a massive transformation in the past few years. Beginning with computers, now the internet has become an extension of living conditions with laptops, mobile phones, smartwatches, and even smart homes. Today, the boundary between virtual and real is obscured to the extent that ordinary minds do not even bother to differentiate. A normal person cannot even imagine a life without the internet, digital services, and electronics. It can be stated that human existence is moving on two wheels the real and virtual. Every day, intellects pursue scientific and technological advancements to erase the virtual and real gap. As Jeanne W. Ross from MIT Sloan's Center for Information Systems Research says, "Clearly, the thing that's transforming is not the technology — the technology is transforming you". Digital and Electronic have changed the ways of the world.

The altered world has its new transformed Literature. Besides the print medium, audio-visual arts, and films, literature is now available in multimedia and interactive media. This paper will analyze one such work of literature by Meghna Jayanth. The paper will discuss her work *Samsara*, the interactive fiction work, as Electronic Literature. The aim is to provide an example of experimental methods and methodologies that can be used by an Indian reader, in the context of Indian E-Lit, to analyze and study such works as hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, etc. Readers will also find a background brief introduction of E-lit and its sub-genres like hypertext fiction and interactive fiction along with their themes and some of the major challenges readers face reading these works. The paper will also describe some significant terms used in the development and analysis of interactive fiction like 'codes', 'Lexia', 'reading space' etc.

Understanding Electronic Literature and Interactive Fiction

Electronic Literature, often abbreviated as E-Lit, is a term used to define literary works that are born digital and primarily consumed through electronic platforms. Katherine Hayles, a pioneer in digital humanities, describes E-Lit as "digital born" and "deeply entwined with the affordances of the medium, incorporating interactivity, multimedia elements, and algorithmic structures" (Hayles 3). This concept fundamentally separates E-Lit from digitized literature, which may merely be a scanned version of print texts.

Interactive Fiction (IF) forms a significant part of E-Lit, defined by its interactive nature where the reader's choices drive the narrative forward. An example of this genre is Meghna Jayanth's *Samsara*. The narrative revolves around themes of choice, morality, and existence, inviting readers to navigate through its complex storytelling by making decisions that lead to varied outcomes. For instance, one of the pivotal decisions in *Samsara* is presented when the protagonist must choose between loyalty to tradition or embracing personal freedom. This choice mirrors the philosophical dilemmas often associated with human agency.

In her work, Jayanth masterfully uses Lexia to segment narratives into meaningful units. Readers navigate these units through hyperlinks, with each click leading to a new set of consequences. The story's fluidity challenges traditional notions of fixed narratives, aligning with Stuart Moulthrop's assertion that "hypertext fiction's beauty lies in its refusal to be boxed into linearity" (Moulthrop 217). The thematic exploration in *Samsara* is emblematic of IF, where the act of reading becomes a collaborative creation between the author and the audience.

Jayanth's narrative style demonstrates a unique blend of Indian cultural sensibilities and modern storytelling techniques. The textual depth and interactive mechanics underscore the potential of IF as a bridge between cultural heritage and digital innovation. As Jayanth notes in an interview, "Interactive fiction allows me to layer stories, not just horizontally but vertically, embedding cultural context, history, and emotion into every choice" (Jayanth, *Digital Dialogues* 12).

Challenges in Reading Interactive Fiction

While interactive fiction offers rich storytelling, its complexity can present challenges for readers. The non-linear structure often disrupts conventional reading habits. For example, in *Samsara*, the narrative path may lead the reader to revisit Lexia, creating an intentional sense of déjà vu. This reflects Jayanth's deliberate strategy to evoke themes of reincarnation and cyclical existence, a central motif in the story. However, such design may alienate readers seeking a straightforward plot, echoing N. Katherine Hayles's observation that "hypertext fiction disrupts the flow of traditional reading, making the act of reading itself a conscious process" (Hayles 19).

Another critical issue is the technological accessibility of such works. Interactive fiction often requires robust digital infrastructure, limiting its reach. For instance, *Samsara* integrates multimedia elements like soundscapes and visual transitions, which enhance the reader's immersion. However, these features demand high-performance devices, making the work less accessible to audiences in regions with limited technological resources.

Moreover, interactive fiction challenges the notion of narrative closure. The multiplicity of endings in *Samsara*, such as the possibility of the protagonist attaining moksha (liberation) or being trapped in samsara (the cycle of rebirth), illustrates this point. Readers may struggle with the lack of a definitive conclusion, which is integral to the genre but can be frustrating for traditionalists. As

Aarseth argues, "Interactive fiction denies closure as a structural necessity, transforming the text into a playground of possibilities" (Aarseth 62).

Language and cultural specificity also play a role. Jayanth weaves Indian cultural motifs and philosophical discourses throughout *Samsara*. Readers unfamiliar with concepts like dharma, karma, or moksha might find it challenging to fully engage with the narrative without supplemental knowledge. This underscores the importance of contextual literacy in engaging with culturally rich interactive fiction.

Interactive fiction, as demonstrated in works like *Samsara*, redefines the literary landscape. Its challenges, while notable, are outweighed by its ability to create deeply personal and transformative reading experiences.

Contextualizing *Samsara* within Indian Interactive Fiction

Meghna Jayanth's *Samsara*, an unfinished interactive fiction hosted on the StoryNexus platform, offers players an immersive experience of the rich tapestry of 18th-century Bengal. The work seamlessly combines historical settings with spiritual explorations, inviting readers to traverse dreamscapes and confront questions of identity and agency. As Jayanth explained in her interview with *Wired*, her goal was to create narratives deeply rooted in cultural specificity, allowing for "stories where players feel both seen and surprised by what they encounter" (Jayanth). Her philosophy of embedding "possibility spaces," which she also explored in *80 Days*, resonates strongly in *Samsara*, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between storytelling and interactivity.

Set against the backdrop of colonial Bengal, *Samsara* juxtaposes historical realism with speculative dreamscapes. Jayanth's narrative draws upon indigenous philosophies, such as the concept of *Maya* (illusion), to explore themes of self-discovery and existential balance. This blending of tradition with digital narrative techniques reflects a broader trend in Indian electronic literature to bridge cultural heritage and innovative storytelling. The StoryNexus engine, used to develop *Samsara*, supports intricate player-driven narratives, as seen in similar projects like *Fallen London*. However, *Samsara* distinguishes itself by grounding its mechanics in the ethos of South Asian storytelling, making it a prime example of interactive fiction as a culturally enriched art form.

Exploring Narrative Techniques in *Samsara*

The narrative architecture of *Samsara* exemplifies the potential of interactive fiction to transform storytelling into an active, player-driven process. Built on the StoryNexus engine, *Samsara* employs lexias—modular narrative units interconnected through hyperlinks—that allow readers to navigate nonlinearly through the story. A single decision, such as whether to confront a dream apparition or seek the counsel of a mystic, not only alters the immediate course of events but also engages broader philosophical themes. Jayanth's approach to nonlinear storytelling aligns with Aarseth's concept of "ergodic literature," where the reader's effort is integral to the narrative experience (Aarseth 1).

In her interview with *Rock Paper Shotgun*, Jayanth elaborated on how cultural context shapes interactive fiction, asserting that "choices in storytelling are not just about agency but about reflecting cultural truths" (Jayanth). For instance, *Samsara* employs the motif of dream-walking as both a narrative mechanic and a metaphor for spiritual awakening, rooted in Indian metaphysical traditions. This use of culturally resonant symbols aligns with the work's thematic exploration of karma and the fluidity between destiny and free will.

The seamless integration of code and narrative in *Samsara* exemplifies how interactive fiction transcends traditional literary forms. The code itself becomes a medium of storytelling, guiding player choices while reflecting cultural motifs. In doing so, Jayanth positions *Samsara* as a bridge between Indian storytelling traditions and global interactive fiction practices, contributing significantly to the discourse on electronic literature.

Examining Cultural Resonances in Samsara

One of the distinguishing features of Meghna Jayanth's *Samsara* is its rich integration of Indian cultural philosophies and traditions, which lend depth and authenticity to the interactive experience. The narrative draws heavily on concepts such as *samsara* (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) and *karma* (action and its consequences), weaving these themes into the player's journey. Decisions in the game often parallel moral and spiritual dilemmas found in Indian epics, where choices are not merely actions but reflections of *dharma* (moral duty).

Jayanth's use of Indian philosophical frameworks is particularly evident in the narrative's cyclical structure. For instance, players might encounter situations where past actions resonate in new contexts, mirroring the karmic cycle. This approach aligns with the storytelling traditions of works like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, where characters' decisions reverberate across lifetimes. By embedding these cultural motifs into the game's mechanics, Jayanth invites players to engage with Indian spirituality on an experiential level.

The visual and auditory design of *Samsara* further reinforces its cultural specificity. Elements such as classical Indian music, vivid depictions of rural Bengal, and references to regional folklore enrich the game world. These aspects not only enhance immersion but also position *Samsara* as a celebration of India's cultural heritage within a modern, digital format. As such, the game serves as an exemplary case of how interactive fiction can be used to preserve and reinterpret traditional narratives for contemporary audiences.

The Role of Technology in Shaping Interactive Experiences

The technological backbone of *Samsara*, the StoryNexus platform, plays a pivotal role in shaping the player's experience. StoryNexus, developed by Failbetter Games, allows creators to construct intricate narrative webs through modular design. This system provides players with multiple entry points and narrative paths, empowering them to influence the unfolding story. In *Samsara*, this technology is harnessed to create a reading experience that is both dynamic and deeply personal.

For instance, the platform's capacity for branching narratives enables Jayanth to present a multiplicity of outcomes, reflecting the philosophical notion of endless possibilities within the cycle of rebirth. Each player's journey through *Samsara* is unique, shaped by their choices and the order in which they encounter story elements. This personalized approach echoes Roland Barthes' assertion that the reader is an active participant in the creation of meaning, a concept that is amplified in the context of interactive fiction (Barthes 148).

Moreover, the integration of multimedia elements—such as ambient soundscapes, evocative visuals, and interactive text—transforms *Samsara* into a multisensory experience. These features not only enhance engagement but also push the boundaries of what constitutes literature. By leveraging digital technology, *Samsara* blurs the lines between storytelling, gaming, and art, exemplifying the transformative potential of electronic literature.

Samsara as a Multilayered Narrative

Samsara exemplifies the concept of layered storytelling, where narratives unfold simultaneously across multiple dimensions—cultural, historical, and philosophical. Meghna Jayanth masterfully interweaves personal, social, and cosmic scales of storytelling, offering readers an intricate tapestry of interconnected themes. The game's narrative design reflects a duality: the external historical context of colonial Bengal and the internal metaphysical journey of the protagonist.

Players encounter layers of decision-making that parallel Indian philosophical ideas, such as the interplay between *artha* (material pursuits) and *moksha* (spiritual liberation). For instance, one narrative path might require the player to navigate the protagonist's struggles for survival in an oppressive colonial society, while another explores their spiritual awakening through encounters with mystical guides. This multifaceted narrative structure resonates with the storytelling tradition of Indian epics, where layers of allegory and symbolism coexist within the plot.

The interplay between layers allows for profound thematic exploration. By juxtaposing historical realism with metaphysical dilemmas, Jayanth creates a rich, immersive experience that engages players on intellectual and emotional levels. This multi-layered approach distinguishes *Samsara* as a work that transcends the boundaries of conventional interactive fiction.

Agency and Ambiguity in Player Choices

Interactive fiction thrives on the concept of player agency—the ability of players to influence the narrative through their decisions. However, *Samsara* complicates this notion by introducing ambiguity into its choice mechanics. Jayanth's design often presents players with morally complex decisions, where the outcomes are neither predictable nor definitive. This aligns with the philosophical uncertainty embedded in the concept of *samsara*, where actions and their consequences are subject to the cosmic law of *karma*.

For example, a choice in the game might involve aiding a marginalized character at personal risk, with consequences that are not immediately apparent. Such choices reflect the nuanced ethical dilemmas found in Indian philosophy, where *dharma* is often context-dependent and multifaceted. The ambiguity of outcomes challenges players to reflect on the broader implications of their actions, fostering a deeper engagement with the narrative.

This approach highlights the potential of interactive fiction to move beyond traditional storytelling paradigms. By placing players in morally ambiguous situations, *Samsara* transforms the act of decision-making into a reflective, almost meditative, process. The game thus becomes a platform for exploring not just narrative possibilities but also philosophical introspection.

Samsara in the Context of Global Interactive Fiction

While *Samsara* is deeply rooted in Indian cultural and philosophical traditions, it also engages with global trends in interactive fiction. The work stands alongside other celebrated titles, such as *80 Days* and *Her Story*, which have redefined the genre by integrating innovative narrative mechanics and

cultural specificity. What sets *Samsara* apart is its ability to balance global accessibility with a distinctly Indian ethos.

Jayanth's use of the StoryNexus platform aligns with the broader trend of leveraging technology to democratize storytelling. Similar platforms, like Twine and Ink, have empowered creators worldwide to experiment with interactive narratives. However, *Samsara* distinguishes itself by embedding cultural nuances into its mechanics, offering a uniquely South Asian perspective within a global medium.

The game also reflects a shift in the global interactive fiction landscape toward exploring underrepresented voices and stories. In this context, *Samsara* contributes to a growing body of works that challenge Eurocentric narratives and expand the possibilities of digital storytelling. By blending local themes with universal mechanics, Jayanth positions her work as both a celebration of Indian culture and a contribution to the global discourse on electronic literature.

Reception and Critical Appraisal of *Samsara*

Samsara has garnered critical attention for its innovative approach to storytelling and its ability to merge Indian philosophical concepts with interactive mechanics. Scholars and critics have praised the game for its cultural specificity and thematic depth. In particular, its integration of Indian cultural motifs, such as *karma*, *Maya*, and *moksha*, has been highlighted as a unique contribution to the global interactive fiction genre.

Critics have also lauded Jayanth's narrative sophistication, noting how *Samsara* challenges traditional gaming norms by prioritizing reflective and immersive experiences over action-oriented gameplay. The work has been discussed in academic forums as a case study in bridging cultural heritage with digital innovation, illustrating how interactive fiction can serve as a medium for cross-cultural storytelling.

However, some have pointed out its unfinished status as a limitation, arguing that a complete version would allow for a fuller exploration of its potential. Despite this, *Samsara* has left an indelible mark as an experimental and thought-provoking piece that continues to inspire creators and academics alike.

Pedagogical Implications of *Samsara*

Samsara offers rich pedagogical possibilities for teaching interactive fiction, cultural studies, and digital humanities. Its integration of Indian cultural and philosophical themes makes it an excellent resource for exploring concepts like *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha* in educational settings. By engaging students in decision-making processes that mirror these philosophical ideas, educators can foster a deeper understanding of Indian traditions and their relevance in contemporary narratives.

From a digital humanities perspective, *Samsara* serves as an effective tool for simultaneously teaching coding and storytelling. The game's use of lexias and hyperlink mechanics offers a practical example of how narrative and technology intersect. Workshops using platforms like StoryNexus or Twine can allow students to experiment with creating their own interactive stories, encouraging creativity and technical skills.

Furthermore, *Samsara* can be integrated into discussions on postcolonial literature, offering a lens to examine how historical and cultural contexts shape narratives in digital formats. Its non-linear

structure challenges students to think critically about storytelling conventions, making it a valuable resource for courses on narrative theory, game studies, and digital culture.

Expanding the Scope of Interactive Fiction in Indian Contexts

The success and impact of *Samsara* highlight the untapped potential of interactive fiction as a storytelling medium in the Indian context. While works like Meghna Jayanth's demonstrate how deeply rooted cultural narratives can be reimagined using digital tools, there is ample scope for further exploration. Themes from Indian epics, folklore, and even contemporary societal issues can find new life in interactive formats, offering immersive ways to engage with diverse audiences. With advancements in technology such as AI and augmented reality, the future of Indian interactive fiction could encompass even richer, more dynamic storytelling experiences, creating new paradigms for global electronic literature.

Conclusion

Meghna Jayanth's *Samsara* exemplifies how interactive fiction can serve as a bridge between traditional narratives and modern digital innovation. By seamlessly integrating Indian cultural motifs with complex narrative structures, *Samsara* enriches the global discourse on electronic literature while offering a model for how technology can preserve, adapt, and celebrate cultural heritage. Through its immersive storytelling, the work invites readers to engage deeply with themes drawn from Indian philosophy, mythology, and folklore, presented in a manner that is both contemporary and accessible to global audiences. This dual focus on authenticity and innovation ensures that traditional narratives are not only preserved but also reimagined for new generations. Despite challenges such as navigating cultural sensitivities and the technical demands of interactive media, *Samsara* showcases the transformative potential of interactive fiction to deepen the literary experience, redefine storytelling practices, and inspire creators in the digital age. Its layered narrative structure, combined with user agency, creates an intimate dialogue between the story and its audience, fostering a profound connection to the text. As Indian electronic literature evolves, works like *Samsara* set a compelling precedent for blending cultural specificity with technological artistry. By bridging the gap between the past and the present, they ensure that traditional narratives remain vibrant and relevant in an ever-changing world, inspiring creators to innovate while honoring their roots. Such works demonstrate that storytelling, far from being constrained by form or tradition, thrives in the fusion of diverse influences, offering a rich tapestry of cultural expression that resonates across temporal and geographic boundaries.

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