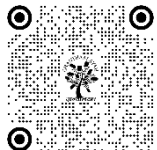# INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY ON OTT SERIAL STORYTELLING: A STUDY ON THE PILOT OF *SACRED GAMES*

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century has witnessed various kinds of technological innovations which have contributed to create different approaches to how stories are told visually. Every new film technology that has been invented, has pushed the boundaries of narrative techniques to a new direction. This study attempts to trace how different technologies at different periods of time have influenced the narrative process. It also seeks to investigate whether the twenty-first century's most significant digital innovation, the internet, has contoured the approaches to screenplay writing and narration in Indian television storytelling. Complex TV, as proposed by Mittell (2015), marks the paradigm shift in American television, which occurred as a result of the internet and Video-on-demand services. By analyzing the pilot episode of the Indian OTT serial *Sacred Games* (2018), the study will analyse if the facets of complex TV which are already apparent in the West, are also present in Indian OTT services. It is found that the OTT streaming services in India have in fact given television programmes a special platform that goes beyond the restrictions of network airing. A pilot episode in the Indian OTT context, is found to have the following characteristics - establishing narrative thrust, guiding the viewers to watch the serial, and encouraging the process of continued consumption. These parameters were outlined by Mittell (2015) as requisites for complex TV. It is found that the poetics of complex TV has also made its way to Indian OTT series.

Keywords: Complex TV, Sacred Games, Netflix, OTT, Video-on-Demand Services

1. INTRODUCTION

The art of telling stories visually has evolved significantly over the last hundred years. The twentieth century witnessed various kinds of technological innovations which have contributed to different approaches of how stories are told. Compared to ancient art forms such as painting and music, cinema is a young medium that is still evolving, stretching its boundaries, and exploring new possibilities every day.

Every new film technology that has been invented, has pushed the boundaries of narrative techniques to a new horizon. The aesthetics and methods of narration

have grown parallelly along with the strides made in the realm of technology. First, the camera was introduced as just a recording device; the introduction of editing made narrative cinema a reality, and then sound arrived. Shortly after that, colour was introduced to cinema. The advancement of such technologies allowed filmmakers to extend their creativity and use every new feat to increase the boundaries of storytelling Bordwell (1997). Every generation of filmmaker had to adapt to the new advancements and gradually explore the possibilities the technologies came with, until it was absorbed into the organic storytelling process. New technological tools have given filmmakers more choices and they are able to discern which ones are best suited for a given production.

This study will attempt to trace how different technologies at different periods of time have influenced the narrative process, particularly how the twenty-first century's digital innovation, the internet, has contoured the process of screenplay writing and modes of narration, especially in the context of streaming services. By taking into account the standards established for complex TV and confirming its presence in the Indian Video-on-demand series *Sacred Games*, the study will also investigate if the tenets of quality TV have made it to the streaming services available in India.

1.1. TOOLS OF THE EARLY AGE OF CINEMA

Early attempts to make films by pioneers Dickson and Edison included short glimpses of sport persons, vaudeville acts or dances, and acrobat performances Bordwell & Thompson (1985). The equipment that was available to them limited what they could achieve with it. The kinetoscope invented by Edison was a heavy machine with a peephole and the audience needed to bend down to watch the recorded reel. Only one person could view the reel at a time. Edison used film strips which ran with the speed of 48 frames per second. This tedious process increased the cost of production. Longer reels could not be projected as the audiences were required to maintain a difficult posture to watch a film.

Following the footsteps of Edison, the Lumiere Brothers invented the cinématographe which liberated artists from the limitation of the studio and allowed them to embark on shooting on location. The cinématographe could record, print, and project the film to a larger audience. It was operated "hand cranked" with 16 frames per second Bordwell & Thompson (1985). It was very compact and light, allowing it to be moved with ease. This instrument allowed the initial movies of the Lumiere brothers like *Workers leaving the factory* (1895) and *Arrival of a train* (1896) to be shot entirely on location. With this technological advancement, global filmmakers had a new set of tools to make their films. Edison's invention gave filmmakers the option to shoot in a studio with a controlled atmosphere for lighting, while the Lumiere brothers' invention gave them the opportunity to take the camera out and shoot on location Piccirillo (2011).

Even after the Lumiere brothers started making short films, they didn't really believe that there was any scope for their invention. They were of the opinion that the cinématographe didn't have any future. The idea for using their device to make a narrative cinema never occurred to them. It took a magician and theatre artist, George Méliès, to figure out the potential of the cinematography. He created his own model of the equipment and exploited the invention and pushed it to various limits. He created many fiction films, which had their own narrative style Monaco (2009). One of the key contributions of Méliès was his editing techniques which were used to achieve illusions.

American film director Cecil B. DeMille's *The cheat* (1915), utilised analytical editing, including multiple shots that were recorded from varied distances for the same scene to capture emotions and to show details Bordwell & Thompson (1985). This technological innovation in combination with cinematography and editing led to the emergence of narrative cinema.

The continuation of this is most visible in the formalism-influenced, Soviet montage movement of the 1920s. Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov identified that film generates meaning based on the interaction of one shot with the next. He conducted experiments and found out that a desired psychological and emotional response from the audience can be achieved by juxtaposing shots in a particular manner. The audience generated meaning by watching a sequencing of shots. This discovery revolutionised cinema since until that moment, editing was merely used as a tool to arrange shots in a continuous manner. The role of the editor was simply to arrange the shots maintaining spatial and temporal continuity Piccirillo (2011). Kuleshov's experiment led to the development of an editing system called relational editing, as opposed to structural editing. The interaction between shots was given more emphasis than just the sequencing of shots. Bordwell & Thompson (1985) explain that Dziga Vertov, a filmmaker of the montage movement, for instance, stressed that a director must be able to imagine the variations among different types of shots – light or dark, slow motion or fast paced, high angle or low angle, and the like.

These innovative applications of cinema enabled the filmmakers to tell the stories with new narrative tools. The impressionist used a camera to achieve the desired effect meanwhile the German expressionists used mise-en-scene where all the props that were positioned in the frame, were manipulated to convey the story. The setting, properties, costume, hair and makeup, and blocking were made use of to convey the psychological disposition and emotion that a character on screen went through.

1.2. THE ARRIVAL OF SOUND IN CINEMA

Silent films had certain limitations in storytelling, such as the absence of dialogue and the need to tell a story only through action. Due to these constraints, the faculties of narration were honed to convey everything visually. The silent film laid out many sets of rules, which we now call film language and film grammar Monaco (2009).

In the mid-1920s when sound was introduced to cinema, it brought about enormous changes. The film studio giant, Warner Brothers, used the vitaphone technology that recorded sound on a disc made of wax which was then synchronised with the film by the projectionist. But this advancement was perceived as difficult by the filmmakers who were used to making silent films. Many careers were ruined because they couldn't adapt to the technology Chion & Gorbman (2009).

The introduction of synchronised sound in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) sparked concern among filmmakers, who feared that use of an abundance of dialogue scenes in films, such as those which were popular in plays, would terminate the flexibility of the camera placement and film editing during the silent era Piccirillo (2011).

After the arrival of sound, the cameras were not able to move freely due to the heavy sound boxes that were attached to them. The acting techniques changed because sound had to be captured by microphones, which were usually hidden somewhere, preventing the actors from changing their position. Initially, filmmakers did not know where to put the microphones. They placed them in

flowerpots. Then, they started hanging them. Giant microphones called cylinder microphones, weighing 20 pounds were used. The industry had to write their scripts completely differently and some couldn't adapt. The microphones used were quite insensitive, therefore, studios asked the actors to learn to speak clearly with proper dictation and to speak slowly Piccirillo (2011).

It took a lot of effort to come up with better instruments that made capturing sound easier and would free the camera and the actors from restriction of movements. However, the addition of dialogues and conversation in the screenplay changed the way stories were told. Cinema became more lifelike. But since cinema was still primarily a visual medium, the dialogues and conversation had to be used only as an additional tool; incidents, situations, reactions, and responses of characters were used as the primary tools to convey stories. Nevertheless, the arrival of sound forever changed the script writing process and film aesthetics Bordwell & Thompson (1985).

The Jazz Singer (1927), one of the first full-length motion pictures with synchronised dialogue, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), an early example of a film that made significant use of sound effects and music to create a sense of realism, are examples of films that were released around the advent of sound.

Since *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was a musical movie, the screenplay had to incorporate lyrics and music as well as conversation, and it had to be carefully timed and coordinated with the action on screen. This was a substantial change from silent movies, which tended to rely on the emotional effect of the tale to be enhanced by background music.

In order to add realism, the use of sound also required screenplays to include detailed directions for sound effects like footsteps, door slams, and other ambient noises. The composition of screenplays underwent a new degree of technical difficulty as a result of this development, which forced authors to consider the use of sound more carefully in order to improve the storytelling experience Piccirillo (2011).

The establishment of sound was a significant step forward in the technological evolution of film, but in order for it to be used profitably, the technique had to undergo a self-contained evolution. Arrival of sound in the initial years did not translate to quality of film immediately. Many movies in the early talkies were slow-paced and the performances were perceived stilted to the ears. Over the period of time, the multiple track sound recording method, sync technology and better microphones slowly enabled the filmmaker to employ sound in cinema effectively Bordwell & Thompson (1985). Many filmmakers realised that when used creatively, sound can offer a new narrative device to cinema. The combination of visual aspects of cinema and the newly enhanced sound technology led to a lot of narrative strategies which were not possible earlier.

1.3. THE ADVENT OF COLOUR IN CINEMA

Colour in cinema evolved gradually much like sound in cinema. Initially, many films from the silent era utilized processes like toning and tinting to produce overall colour in the film Bordwell & Thompson (1985). Colour was able to convey pertinent context on the narrative situation and therefore convey a story clearly to the audience, similar to the use of mise-en-scene and photogénie by the expressionists and the impressionists.

In films like *the great train robbery* (1903) by Edwin S Porter, portions of the frames were hand coloured using stencils after the recording of the scene. Colour on

film became mainstream after the three-strip colouring process was introduced by the film studio Technicolour in the 1930s. Since shooting in colour spiked up the budget of the production by nearly thirty percent, not every filmmaker immediately started to use colour. Although audiences regard colour as a realistic aspect of contemporary cinema, in the thirties and forties, it was generally associated with spectacle cinema and fantasy cinema.

The introduction of color in cinema changed the screenplay writing process in several ways. One of the most notable changes was the increased emphasis on visual storytelling. With the advent of color, filmmakers were able to use different hues and tones to create a more immersive and visually striking experience for audiences. This led to screenplays that paid more attention to the use of color as a storytelling tool, including specifying the colors of costumes, sets, and lighting in specific scenes. Another change was the increased use of special effects and visual techniques to create a more dynamic and engaging visual experience. Color films allowed for the use of more elaborate special effects, such as the use of miniatures, matte paintings, and other techniques to create a more believable and visually compelling world. This led to screenplays that included more detailed instructions for visual effects and special effects Piccirillo (2011).

Additionally, the introduction of color also meant that screenplays had to be more specific about the color of the characters and background. This allowed to create a deeper sense of emotion and atmosphere in the film. This required writers to think more critically about how color can be used to enhance the storytelling experience. Examples of movies that used color in a significant way include *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which used color to create a stark contrast between the drab, sepia-toned Kansas and the vibrant, Technicolor land of Oz, and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which was one of the first films to use Technicolor to create a sense of realism and historical accuracy. Other notable examples include *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) which used color to enhance the musical numbers and *The Sound of Music* (1965) which used color to enhance the beautiful alpine landscapes Piccirillo (2011).

The technological innovations in cinema are ever evolving. New technologies keep being introduced into filmmaking, after being practised and perfected. Over the years, digital film equipment has been introduced and has completely taken over filmmaking, which was once dominated by photographic film. Bordwell (1997) notes that many professionals, especially cinematographers, designers, directors, and some movie fans were perturbed at the possible death of photographic film, but the transition to digital cinema was inevitable. But this fear and feeling of loss is not new to cinema. Every technological advancement was met with initial hesitation and suspicion, but they also brought numerous new possibilities to tell stories.

1.4. THE ERA OF TELEVISION

The arrival of commercial television in 1949 in the United States of America gave a new medium for visual storytelling. Stories entered the living rooms of viewers and were no longer contained within the ambit of the theatre. Many believed that the arrival of television would mark the end of cinema, but history proved otherwise. TV became just an additional platform for storytelling.

It took many years for television to produce original drama content. In the initial years, television was mostly used to repurpose radio content. Variety shows, situation comedies, news casts, and dramas were borrowed from radio. Only by 1955, television began to create original content, but again, the stories were

borrowed from Broadway theatre and adapted for television movies. Even the cast was kept intact Stephens (1999).

Television borrowed the soap opera concept from radio networks and started to create serials which, unlike cinema, had continuing plots that were narrated in an episode-by-episode manner. This platform opened up a possibility of longer versions of storytelling. Films had a time limit of 120 minutes, and the story had to end within that time frame. When television serials emerged, they provided the flexibility to extend the storyline beyond the time limit, and thus created more episodes which involved multiple plot lines and multiple characters.

The regular approach for script writing had to be reworked to suit the demands of television series. The three-act structure, which suggests a paradigm for a screenplay under the categories: beginning (the establishment of the plot and character), middle (the confrontation created against the protagonists), and end (the resolution), had to change. Each episode had to follow a three-act structure within itself, along with a larger three act structure for the whole series. But the traditional television networks tried to reach a broader audience and hence came up with a story that appealed to everyone. Simple and least objectionable stories were chosen Mittell (2006).

However, after the advent of cable television channels like CBS, NBC, and ABC in the 1980s, audiences became more diffused. Stories which appealed to smaller, more fragmented audiences emerged. This led to what Mittell (2006) terms as "complex television," which refers to the use of intricate and nuanced narrative techniques in television series. This period of complex television created a platform which is beyond the traditional broadcast networks and catered to niche audiences.

HBO's arrival into the American television industry in the 1990s marked the creation of original programming content, with milestone programs such as *The Sopranos* (1999) and *The Wire* (2002) Mittell (2006). The concept of tailor-made content for different groups of audiences emerged. HBO projected itself as distinct from other television networks and created series for audiences who preferred more quality content with complicated plot lines and high budget productions.

1.5. VIDEO ON DEMAND SERVICES

During the 1990s, cable providers in the United States of America started the VOD service and tried it on a small-scale experimental basis. They failed to achieve great success. Only by the 2000s, did these VOD services become popular when internet bandwidth and equipment became much cheaper. On cable television, VOD systems functioned by storing video content on servers, and offering them to their cable network subscribers through pay and view services. Even gaming services like Xbox adopted VOD and provided content to audiences through pay and view methods. But this cross-platform concept was not well-received by the audience. Media rental companies started to adopt this method online. Media consumption in the US was also increasing and people started shifting from traditional media to new media Stephens (1999).

The Internet was perceived as a different platform from television channels and other such services. Players such as Netflix, Amazon, Apple TV, Hulu, Roku, and Boxee started replacing the dominance of the traditional television media as the main entertainment source over the last few years. A sea of content is made available for consumers, and they have the freedom to choose what they like. They can watch programs anytime they want and stop and re-watch anytime as well. A greater number of youngsters have become the primary consumers of this content

online. The service providers are able to closely monitor the consumer behaviour on the internet and this has helped fine tune the storytelling process Ma & Shin (2002).

1.6. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF QUALITY TELEVISION

The phrase quality television was proposed by American TV critics in the third quarter of the twentieth century to encapsulate the meteoric success of shows like *Rich man, Poor man* (1976) and *Hill Street blues* (1981). Although the exact definition of the term was not established, it was seen that audiences knew what quality television encompassed when they viewed it Thompson (1997). There were certain defining characteristics of quality television such as programs that did not skimp on production budgets, engaged with nuanced subject matters, had detailed character development, and featured critically acclaimed acting. Such shows also bore the precise stamp of its author, who was responsible of having a distinct filmmaking style and trademark set of aesthetics. The ostensible feature of quality television, however, stemmed from its distinction of being different from traditional television Schlütz (2016).

Quality television is therefore comprehended as a subset of television programming which was not confined by the constraints of old-school television conventions. It allowed for subtle and refined stories to be told. They could be intriguing, mysterious, intertwined, and cerebral Buckland (2009). Such content was also made for niche audiences who were not seen as a homogeneous entity, but as fragmented groups with specific tastes. Quality television altered the course of how content was created, disseminated, promoted, and consumed.

1.7. NETFLIX

Among all the online video-on-demand services, Netflix is the most successful one. It operates in over 190 countries and has over 300 million subscribers Netflix Investor Relations (2018). This is followed by Amazon Prime with 100 million users. However, Amazon Prime is not a stand-alone online VOD service; it provides other types of e-commerce activities as well.

Netflix started off as a DVD rental company and then moved to a subscription based streaming service with a huge library of films and television programs, including original content produced in-house and available only online.

More than films, Netflix focuses on creating original content for television series. People perceive Netflix as an alternate platform and not as a replacement for theaters. Primary importance is given to series. Netflix has completely altered the viewer's experience compared to traditional television. It has given audiences more freedom and choices. Television series no longer need episode recaps to previous storylines or reminders within episodes to refresh the audience's memory about what happened earlier. Audiences can go back to the previous episodes anytime they want. There are no more mass audiences. Any group of people who like certain kinds of stories, can choose only that content and watch. The layout design and functionalities of the service also influences how the script is written. The concept of binge watching, where audiences sit and watch the entire season at one go, is getting increasingly common. They no longer have to wait for incremental installments of weekly episodes. This alters consumer behaviour, and that in turn alters the writing itself Sharma (2016).

Another technical aspect is accessibility of content across various digital platforms. Audiences can watch the content on their laptop, desktop, tablets, or

mobile phones. Every device creates a different experience for the audience. The filmmaker has to approach the cinematography which will suit multiple screen sizes. The advent of such content delivery characteristics and technical aspects are changing the approach to the process of script writing as well as aesthetics of television series.

1.8. SACRED GAMES (2018)

Adapted from the 2006 book by Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (2018) is an Indian neo-noir streaming series. It was the foremost Netflix original series to be made in India, and it was helmed by directors Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane.

On July 5, 2018, eight episodes of the first season of *Sacred Games* were made available on Netflix in 191 different countries. More than 20 languages were used as subtitles for the series. Critics largely gave it excellent reviews, praising the writing and acting in particular. It was the only Indian television series to make *The New York Times*' list of 'The 30 Best international TV shows of the decade'. A third season was being thought about by the producers after the second season, which debuted on August 15, 2019, received a mixed reception. However, according to the producers of the show, there would not be a third season because the finale of the show was left open-ended.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A survey of over 30,000 individuals by Nielson across 61 countries, revealed the evolving nature of VOD preferences and viewing habits of global audiences. The findings showed that films were the most watched content on VOD platforms with a whopping 80 percent of participants saying that they consume films online. Nearly half of all respondents watched TV shows. The most popular categories of shows were sitcoms and original series, supplemented by sports shows and documentaries. A quarter of all participants watched short form videos. The predominant reasons provided for consuming VOD content was that it offered different viewers the choice to view a diverse range of shows on multiple devices simultaneously, without interruption. Nearly two-thirds of the people surveyed shared this opinion. It was also seen that the practice of binge-watching was significant, with 66 percent of people stating that the provision to view numerous episodes of a show in a single sitting, was a big incentive for subscribing to VOD content Nielsen (2016).

Streaming services permit audiences to engage with content in a multifaceted way. Instead of being passive, they actively participate by engaging with the platforms. A user has the ability to select, pause, continue, skip ahead, go back, search, and exit based on their preference Ma & Shin (2002). In America, three services dominate the market. Netflix leads with services to 36% of all the households, Amazon with 13%, followed by Hulu with 6% Nielsen (2016). As internet adoption has increased worldwide, irrespective of distance or borders, access to online services has become the norm.

With regard to VOD services, many studies have been done on VOD as a business model and its marketing possibilities. However, not many research studies have been done on how this platform is influencing storytelling aspects. Among the few, 'Complex TV - The poetics of contemporary story telling' by Mittell (2015) is the most prominent. Mittell examines how contemporary television series are changing. He argues that the advancement of technologies in television platforms,

such as rental and VOD services influence the screenplay for television series. Audiences no longer need to be reminded about previous plot points or shown recaps. These facilities liberate the story telling from considering each episode as unique and as a story on its own, to what he terms as complex narrative Mittell (2015).

Netflix uses the internet as its content delivery platform. This enables it to have a close watch at user behaviour and viewing experience. It has complete data about how many people watch a particular episode, when they pause, stop, or replay content, or when they discontinue watching a series. This helps them in better understanding of trends and user's likes and expectations. But Netflix never releases its viewership details because it has no advertisers, and it is not obligated to.

Bruce (2020) speaks about a certain feature demonstrated by online shows which allows for binge-watching behaviour. He states that binge-watching behaviour is defined by two factors – immediacy and isolation. In broadcast television, all viewers watch a show at the same time when it is aired. However, on Video-on-demand services, the aspect of choice is added. The option of immediately available episodes is witnessed in the streaming interface itself since the next episode plays automatically without any effort by the viewer. The provision to choose what a user watches and when they watch it has become a norm on the platform. The second attribute of binge-watching is what Bruce (2020) refers to as the audience's experience of isolation. He argues that viewers binge-watch as a way to escape from reality. Snider (2016) also presents findings of a correlation between depression and binge-watching, since this activity provides a reprieve from unpleasant feelings.

Guadiana (2020) makes recommendations for Netflix's content strategy. He argues that as the ecosystem of Video-on-Demand services becomes increasingly competitive, Netflix, which was a pioneer in the field, cannot maintain its stronghold on audiences. The platform must distinguish itself from its streaming rivals. Although Netflix created a disruption in the space of broadcasting and delivering content, the true transformation could be executed in the nature of the content itself. Netflix is not limited by the technical, technological, advertising, or production aspects of storytelling seen in film and television.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
3.1. THE POETICS OF COMPLEX TELEVISION STORYTELLING

Mittell (2015) developed the poetics of contemporary television storytelling based on Bordwell's Poetics of Cinema. According to the seminal work, one must analyse narrative complexity in an attempt to dissect and comprehend the storytelling modalities utilised in contemporary televisual content.

Bordwell (1997) posited that a narrative mode is a conventionally identifiable collection of rules and practices used while creating a story. It is one that cuts beyond themes, singular authors, and aesthetic trends to produce a cohesive framework. There could be numerous narrative categories, such as the spaghetti Western, film noir, horror, sci-fi, to name a few, each of which embody a unique narrative technique while drawing on and evolving from preceding forms. It is believed that cinema has a tremendous effect on how television content is also produced. It is possible to identify a narrative model, similar to cinema, and apply it to the longer storytelling framework of serial television. Mittell (2015) states that creating a distinct structure for television narratives would be more useful. Compared to works of literature, theatre plays, and movies, broadcast television

content seems to be the closest medium to study and understand the features of episodic and serial storytelling seen in VOD content.

Mittell (2015) approaches television's formal aspects from a wider notion of television as a form which is a product of constantly evolving societal contexts, cultural realities, technical innovations, and methods of practice. He develops nine operational characteristics that can be used to analyse any modern television text: beginnings, authorship, characters, comprehension, evaluation, serial melodrama, orienting paratexts, transmedia narrative, and endings.

3.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY TV SEEN IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIALS

The changes in visual technology and audience needs served as a catalyst for the creation of complex television serials such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-08), and *Orange is the new black* (2013-19). These shows were regarded as groundbreaking in terms of their format and content. They altered audiences' consumption habits, requiring absolute engagement with the story's narrative to comprehend and cherish what was being viewed. These shows embarked on uncharted terrain by rewriting the rules of traditional television norms, structures, and genre expectations, resulting in the creation of a newly identifiable set of features that were frequently linked to high-quality television Schlütz (2016).

Quality television has the following distinguishing characteristics:

1) Complexity

According to Schlütz (2016), the central component of quality television is narrative complexity. This refers to an amalgamation of the techniques of series and serials, which gives rise to a complex flexi-narrative. This includes a multi-layered story with diverging plots and sub-plots, a diverse cast, and a flow that permits continuous storytelling with incremental growth of characters. Quality serials often spill over from the primary media text to other platforms as well, resulting in a more extended and immersive experience (Brooker and Manovich, 2001 as cited in Schlütz (2016)).

One example would be the gamification of the TV show *The Walking Dead* (2010-22). By creating an interactive game which stemmed from the popular AMC show of the same name, ardent viewers were allowed to extend their engagement with the program. Such related content could come from an array of sources, including graphic novels, comic book adaptations, wiki pages, fan forums, DVDs, product merchandising, and user-generated content such as fan fiction Schlütz (2016). These additional materials become an extension of a series, building on the original text's storylines, protagonists, plots, and themes Gray (2010).

2) Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the second feature of narrative complexity. Schlütz (2016) explains it as moments which are undefined, making certain parts of a series seem double-barreled. These could include cold openings, ostensible oppositions, unexplained actions, and hidden motives. In order to resolve the sense of ambiguity and the unease it elicits, viewers must be attentive, engaged, and capable of joining the dots in order to generate meaning. The greater number of open-ended situations a series creates without appropriate closure, the more exploration is essential.

3) Anti-hero

High-quality television shows are also characterised by the inclusion of an anti-heroes or morally evasive characters. These are characters that cannot be

dichotomously defined as good or evil, instead, they traverse the boundary between the two. Such characters who do not conveniently fit into a binary, provide the creators of the show to construct character arcs and show growth.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research paper seeks to examine the narrative structure and storytelling components of the Netflix original series *Sacred Games* by applying the poetics of complex TV. Since *Sacred Games* is the first original Indian drama series which Netflix chose to debut its original programming in India, it was the obvious choice.

The study will make use of the complex TV narrative structure that Mittell (2015) refers to as the new form of storytelling. Many current American television shows have already employed this structure.

4.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

R1. Are the characteristics required for a pilot of complex TV seen in the Indian OTT serial *Sacred Games*?

4.2. STUDY DESIGN

Poetics is defined as "an emphasis on the concrete ways that texts make meaning, preoccupied with formal qualities of media more than problems of content or broader cultural effects," according to Mittell (2015), who utilises it as the foundation for his work. He analyses the elements that define complex television and suggests ten facets of it. Beginnings, authorship, characters, comprehension, assessment, serial melodrama, orienting paratexts, transmedia narrative, and ends are the order in which they should be addressed. In this study, the researchers will focus on the first of the 10 components - beginning, a parameter that characterises the components seen in any complex TV series' pilot episode. The researchers will try to determine whether complex TV has made it to the Indian VOD services by looking into the existence of these features in *Sacred Games.*

4.3. OPERATIONAL PARAMETERS

According to Mittell (2015), a pilot offers the audience a taste of what to expect from a series on a routine basis and provides a substantial amount of narrative exposition to assist viewers to become familiar with a complex story universe. It should swiftly build a cast of characters whose attributes and interrelationships are clearly identified, but in adequately distinctive approaches that they do not come across as stereotyped or hackneyed portrayals of normal characters. A series has to establish itself as different enough from other shows that audiences have already watched. The program's genre must be immediately identified in order to set up the viewers' expectations. Each new series must be both distinguishable and recognisable. Therefore, the pilot episode should be simultaneously unique and at the same time similar to conventional formats of of pitching television, which would be shown to networks and presented to audiences.

4.4. INSPIRATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL POETICS OF PILOTS

The primary objective of a television pilot is to inform the audience and guide them on how to watch a series. The pilot episode of a series must offer viewers a sense of the aesthetic conventions which will be followed, defining the show's

narrative approaches, and storytelling modalities. The viewer may learn a lot about a pilot's ability to convey its story by watching the first few minutes of the episode, because such storytelling strategies are usually evident in the beginning, serving as invitation to consume the series in a particular way.

Mittell (2015) demonstrates that a pilot should.

1) establish the narrative thrust,

2) teach the audience how to watch the following serial, and

3) encourage them to commit to serial consumption.

The researcher will examine the pilot episode of *Sacred Games* to see if these parameters are present.

5. ANALYSIS

Sacred Games follows the events that occur after a disaffected police officer in Mumbai, Sartaj Singh, receives a phone call from mobster Ganesh Gaitonde, telling him to save the city within 25 days.

In order to fully understand the instructional and motivational tactics employed, the researchers will pay particular attention to the formal structure and mechanics of the pilot. This method allows for an exploration of the strategies utilised to make the episode a microcosm of the entire series. It also becomes a representation of the wider goal of pilots and provides an insight into how a possible new audience could interpret this serialised pilot episode. We may understand the complex storytelling that *Sacred Games* explores so compellingly by looking at the episode's narrative strategies.

The pilot episode of *Sacred Games* starts with a scene of a dog falling from a skyscraper. It falls down on the road and bleeds to death as helpless children on the road watch it dying. The shot is immediately contrasted with the shot of a woman's legs. She drags herself almost like an animal bleeding with a bullet wound. She then gets killed by one of the lead characters, Ganesh Gaitonde. This application of match cut immediately sets off the tone of what is yet to come, which is, lots of bloodshed and cruel violence where there is no difference between human beings and animals. We then hear Gaitonde start his voiceover narration as he kills the woman. This technique of using voice over narration has been a tool often relied upon in complex TV to tell complex stories.

Mittell (2015) points out that the audience has absolute control over what they want to watch on VOD services. Within a few minutes into the story, if they don't get hooked onto it, they can simply move on to another piece of content. He claims that the pilot episode is a very crucial one which is going to determine whether the audience is going to stay with your story or not. Using voiceover narration is often used in complex TV as it gives a sense of intimacy right away when the character directly speaks to the audience. He/she is addressing the audience saying that they are also someone like the viewer. This technique of creating an immediate dialogue between character and audience in the pilot episode helps the story by making it more personal and intimate.

The setup of the first scene starts in the middle of an action. We do not know how the dog was falling down or how the woman got shot? Who is she? This approach of starting a scene abruptly from the middle of an action immediately raises questions and curiosity in the audience's mind. Traditionally, this narrative tool is called an inciting incident. We then see Gaitonde narrating that this is his story; he reveals important information that the world is going to end. This cuts to

a shootout happening parallelly and people dying trying not to give out information about some consignment. These three inciting incidents create what Mittell referred to as a narrative enigma and leaves the audience with a lot of unanswered questions. Audiences understand that the whole series is going to be about finding how the world is going to end. After the credits we get introduced to our protagonist, Inspector Sartaj Singh on duty, investigating a crime scene. We see the text 'Day 25' appears on screen which reminds us of the exposition that Gaidonte revealed about the end of the world.

After introducing the audience to some thrilling events, the episode settles down to tell us more about the protagonist. The next few scenes follow Sartaj Singh. We get to know that Sartaj has a conflict with his higher officials over an encounter case and his career is at risk. We also get to know that he is a struggling police officer, and he has not solved any cases so far. On top of this, his wife has left him, and he is trying to get her back. All of this puts him in a disadvantaged position. In serial television, it is important that there is a substantial character arc for the main character. There should be sufficient character growth and character evolution as the audience are going to follow this character for the next 8 to 10 episodes. Introducing the main character in a disadvantaged position, with good emotional intention can make the audience immediately root for the character. Audience would want the character to evolve and to succeed in their endeavours. The episode continues to reveal Sartaj's backstory, his relationship with his father who put his duty before family and how it inspired him to become a good policeman.

After taking time to establish the character of the protagonist, the story moves back to exploring the plot. Sartaj gets a phone call from Gaitonde, he speaks in riddles to him. He reveals some of Satraj's past to him and mentions Satraj's father's name to him which makes Sartaj curious, and he starts to track his location. Gaitonde tells him that he has a tip that could save his career. He asks him to save this city and he also tells him that they are going to kill him. Audiences are now pulled back to the plot and are curious to know what this is all about and who is the person calling Sartaj. The episode then takes the audience to the flashback of Gaitonde. Audiences see him as a child from Islapur where we see him with his Brahmin father earning a living by begging and his mother having an affair. His father then murders his mother which makes Gaitonde leave his hometown and go to Mumbai. Meanwhile, in the present Sartaj tracks his call and drives to metro where the track location is pointed out. At this point Sartaj creates a conflict with Gaitonde by insulting him and Gaintonde warns him for not taking him seriously. He gives him a case number and asks him to go check, to find out who he is. In a series of intense sequences, we see now that the RAW agency is also listening to their call and Sartaj's colleague Katekar gets shocked hearing the case details and leaves his house in a rush.

We then see Sartaj going through all the confidential files from 1984 and finds out the identity of Ganesh Gaitonde, one of the most wanted criminals from both RAW and ISI. This is the midpoint of the story where in a traditional screenplay a big reveal happens. It occurs exactly 25 minutes into the story. The first half of the pilot episode uses the technique of narrative enigma as mentioned earlier. The questions raised are who is this person calling Sartaj? What is going to happen to the city? The first question is answered by midpoint. The story then takes us back to another flashback of Gaitonde where see him getting into drug business and then to gold smuggling. He has huge aspirations to become a big shot and no patience. He murders his own boss and take over the gold smuggling business. We are then brought back to the present plot where we see Sartaj Singh identify the building that Gaitonde stays at and asks him to come out. Gaitonde denies this and tells him that everyone will be dead in 25 days and Sartaj should stop it from happening. Gaitonde

reveals another person's name to Sartaj which could be a potential lead for the next episode of the story. When Sartaj finally manages to break the walls and enter, we see Gaitone shoot himself and die before the eyes of Sartaj. This comes as a surprise to the audience as they would be hoping to know more about the character, but he dies. This leads to more curiosity from the audience to know more about the situation and to find answers as to who is Gaintode? Why did he kill himself? Why is everyone going to die in 25 days? This concept of cliffhanger where the last incident of an episode is a twist which makes the audience want more of the story, is also another quintessential technique of a complex TV.

The pilot episode has a clear set up, confrontation and resolution with Gaitonde murdering someone as an inciting incident, Sartaj Singh finding out the identity of Gaitonde as the mid-point and Gaitonde killing himself as the end. Within the fabric of this plot structure, audiences are also made aware of the overall arc of the entire season, in which something is going to happen to the city of Mumbai in 25 days. Audiences also get to know more about Sartaj and his personal story and therefore they want to root for him and want him to solve the case and save the city and himself.

6. FINDINGS

Mittell (2015) posits that a pilot should establish the narrative thrust, guide the viewers on how to consume the serial, encourage them to return to the series.

The *Sacred games*' pilot episode clearly established the focus of the story by introducing two major story threads - a stranger calling Sartaj and the revelation about a major destruction that is about to happen to Mumbai in 25 days. Without wasting any screen time, the story immediately jumps into the plot, and we start following it. A direction for the entire narration of the series is set up within the first 10 minutes. By the end of the first sequence, a deadline has been set and the audience knows that the story is going to move towards solving the case and saving the city. It also creates a sense of urgency to the story.

Sacred games don't just follow a simple save the world story but uses that context to explore the intricate relationship between politics, religion, and crime in any given society. It attempts to reveal another side, the dark side of all these three major aspects of society. We get to know this from Gaitonde talking about how the city of Mumbai comes to life during the night, when Satraj says that Mumbai is nothing but forts among garbage dumps; Gaintonde says that is the beauty of the city that anything is possible. Thematically, the series explores the underbelly of this city: the crime, violence, deception and corruption of politics, religion, police, and cinema. The genre of the series and what to expect from it is very clearly established from the first scene where we see a woman getting murdered in comparison to the previous scene where a dog bleeds to death.

Sacred Games is a crime thriller, and the formal narrative methods and style of a crime thriller are revealed to the audience in the pilot episode. They are informed of what to anticipate in the subsequent episodes as a result.

The dramatic questions that come up in the beginning and at the middle of the narrative and the cliffhanger at the end of the episode, undoubtedly encourage viewers to commit to serial viewing.

7. CONCLUSION

The internet as a technology has in fact given television programmes a special platform that goes beyond the restrictions of a network airing. With access to it offering a veritable buffet of never-ending shows, fans now have the freedom to watch any content whenever and wherever they choose. The requirement to keep the plot straightforward or the requirement to start and finish any story within one episode have both been rendered obsolete by the availability of all episodes at all times. Filmmakers and writers now have the opportunity to tell lengthy tales that allow them to thoroughly explore characters and plotlines thanks to VOD services. Even though this has become the new standard in American streaming platforms, it was unclear whether Indian television programmes had used these components. It is clear from this analysis of *Sacred Games* that the poetics of complex TV series has also made its way to Indian VOD services.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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