

## **Around a New World in Over 750,000 Words**

by Michael Duling

It's an ancient formula that has persisted through millennia of storytelling: The hero ventures into a strange foreign land and lives to tell the stories of his wild experiences. The worlds these authors create serve as a testament to the power of myth and imagination, and have influenced storytellers from Homer to Jules Verne. The narrative shifts, however, when this "strange, otherworldly" place is an actual location. When an author decides that reality is truly stranger than any fictional place he could imagine, the author suddenly has a great responsibility to be an ambassador to this place and the people who live there. There is an understanding that is represented on paper will be the face of this place for many years, and when an author, either intentionally or unintentionally, gives a fictional picture of a nation, there are unquestionably consequences to this revision.

Such is the case of Jules Verne's epic *Around the World in 80 Days*. First printed in the height of Victorian England, the text served as many people's first exposure to countries that weren't Great Britain or the Americas. Because of this, Verne's depiction of foreign lands needed to accurately represent the places it depicted while also telling a thrilling and exotic tale of exploration. It can be expected that the author will take license when describing worlds that the common reader will never experience for themselves.

When this artistic revision becomes a tool of oppression and stereotype, there must come a time for dialogue so that the represented can offer their own depiction of their homeland, and this is the aim of Meg Jayanth's interactive novel *80 Days*. A revisionist retelling of Verne's original work, *80 Days* seeks to more accurately

represent those people and communities who were not given the opportunity to represent themselves for the decades which followed the original novel's publication. To achieve this goal, Jayanth employs a fantastical approach to the Victorian earth, using steampunk elements to augment her world as she herself augments Verne's text. In this fantasy context, Jayanth now has the opportunity to represent Verne's subjects not only as they actually were, but now as she believes they rightfully should be. By employing artistic license, Jayanth is able to not only represent the oppressed in a just way, but represent them in a just society where their agency is felt beyond the confines of truth.

Jayanth's world begins its task of painting a more complete picture of the world, by being physically large enough to cover the entire world Jayanth's work is over 750,000 words long, and uses its interactivity to allow the reader to explore this new earth at their own pace. The cities and countries represented are allowed to tell their own stories in a way that Verne could never have done.

Jules Verne had a well established history of writing grand works of science fiction. His previous novels *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* were some of the earliest popular works in the genre, but with *Around the World*, Verne presented for the first time, an adventure set in the here and now. His Novel features the eccentric businessman Phileas Fogg as he wagers that he can circumnavigate the globe within the span of eighty days, an unthinkable feat of the time. Assisted by his valet Monsieur Passepartout, Fogg just barely succeeds in his goal, and the audience gets taken with him on a grand tour of the countries of the world (Verne).

One of Verne's most memorable locales in the novel is Verne's depiction of India. Still a colony under British rule at the time, Verne writes of India as if he himself is

owner of it, and his central character Fogg acts accordingly. Upon arrival in Calcutta, Fogg and Passepartout are appalled at the unorthodox nature of the locals who intend to burn a local woman alive in the Hindu practice of Sati. Normally a voluntary act of grief, this woman has been manipulated with such exotic drugs as marijuana and opium, so Fogg and Passepartout devise a plan to rescue her. In only one day, they have ended the brutality of this “savage” religion and using their power as members of the sovereign nation and agents of the monarchy, the white savior has ruled the day (Verne).

Verne’s depiction is nearly as inaccurate as it is reductive. The event as it is depicted in the book is based on a single, uncorroborated account from a British periodical published during the Victorian era. The practice of Sati was rare at the time, and was quite often only performed symbolically to represent the strength of the bonds of marriage in the Hindu tradition (Ramusack). Regardless, Verne could have elected to depict any one aspect of Indian culture in this slice of the novel, and he chose a practice that he could use as a platform to espouse the superiority of Christianity and further stigmatize the local practice of government in India. His writing worked to reinforce the idea that the British control of the Indian peninsula was justified and that without intervention by the moral white populous, these people would murder countless more innocent young women. Examples like this pepper Verne’s novel and other literary works of the era. Their effect can even be felt in modern works. The recent documentary *The Problem With Apu* highlights a system and history of oppressive and racist depictions of Indian characters in western art which can be traced back to Verne’s exoticizing of a very real group of people.

Verne's cavalier approach to other cultures is one emblematic of the British experience in the Victorian era. When writing about the novel that inspired her game, Meg Jayanth writes "Verne's novel is an adventure story, but it's also a story of empire and colonialism - really, it's about one Englishman stalking the boundaries of his estate, and that estate is the world. Verne's attitudes to other cultures might seem outdated and racist to us now but they're not completely alien. We live with the legacy of colonialism, with slavery, and the oppressions that Verne sort of glances at in his novel but doesn't quite address." Whether or not Verne was aware of the colonialist implications of his writing, the Victorian public that consumed his work took great pride in their domination of foreign cultures, and this work reinforced the idea that their bounty was bestowed upon them by God and rightfully so. Being the child of parents who grew up in one of these disenfranchised cultures, Jayanth saw the need to create a work which captivated an audience and satisfied a thirst for global adventure, but which represented the cultures it depicted with tact and accuracy. To achieve this, Meg Jayanth created the interactive novel *80 Days*.

*80 Days* is most commonly described publicly as a video game. It's marketed and sold on the video game marketplaces Steam and the Apple App Store among others. In form, its interface and presentation are very akin to those of an adventure game. There is money to manage, health to preserve, and of course, a timetable to keep. In content, however, *80 Days* is probably best described as an interactive novel. In the three or so hours it takes a player to complete a single run through, the activity a player is asked to perform the most is simply reading. Plot, character, and setting are expressed through lines and lines of text written by Jayanth and her team, and if there

were a significant market for interactive storytelling, it would probably be better marketed there. The interactive elements do have a unique effect on the reader's experience though. While following Fogg through his circumnavigational romp, the player, as Passepartout, is put in charge of which cities are visited, for how long, and by what means of travel. The entire journey is customizable, and through the 80 in-game days, the player can see these decisions play out across the globe.

Jayanth's retelling of Verne's story comes with a very specific set of changes. In adapting the book for modern gaming audiences, Jayanth has elected to set the story in an alternate "Steampunk" version of Victorian earth. The concept of steampunk as it exists today is often attributed to Verne and the aesthetic he cultivated in his early science fiction novels, but in *80 Days*, Jayanth applies this aesthetic of automated carriage drivers, mechanical flying birds, and artificers' guilds to the framework Verne laid out a century prior.

One extremely important distinction between Verne's science fiction and Jayanth's steampunk world is scale. Jules Verne wrote an enormous body of work which laid the groundwork for what would become the common idea of "European Steampunk." Grand machines are crafted by European men to be used by European men in conflicts between groups of European men. *Around the World in 80 Days* defies a Eurocentric approach to steampunk because the story is by definition a global one. If the story is to encompass an entire planet, then the definition of steampunk as we know it must be expanded as well. On the subject, Jayanth says "Between fantasy and history, there's a third axis here, for me, and that's respectfulness. We wanted our inventions and devices to be grounded in local cultures rather than overwrite them with

a purely British notion of steampunk. [...] I did not want to exoticize or stereotype the indigenous steampunks I invented, and so informing the fantasy with historical research was enormously important to me. I tried to think about what kinds of resources are available, what kinds of pressures a culture might be facing, how our fantastical inventions are going to impact the geopolitics of the region and the wider world. The history of the period is so fascinating and tumultuous, our retrofuturist lens just skews it a little.” (Jayanth). Jayanth could’ve very easily put the commonly held European tools in the hands of indigenous and foreign cultures. The goggles, dirigibles, and welding hoods of classic steampunk could’ve been the mainstay of every culture in the game, but Jayanth’s goal is to create a world where people and cultures exist on their own terms and with their own identities intact. By tailoring the definition of steampunk to each individual culture’s definition of humanity, she showcases all the brilliant ways in which cultures are different, and not just how they’re similar.

Because of the nonlinear nature of Jayanth’s writing, it is possible to traverse the entire globe and never set foot in any of the locations from Verne’s original novel save for the starting line in London. In *Around the World*, only three Indian locations are ever explored in earnest, but in *80 Days*, one dozen cities just within India are fully explorable on the player’s journey. Most central of these is the famous Indian city of Agra. Home of the Taj Mahal, Fogg and Passepartout arrive in Agra to find that the city is itself a giant mechanical contraption. Jayanth’s city of agra walks on four great legs, and was built by the local artificer’s guild along with a number of uniquely indian contraptions. In writing such an absurd premise for this city, Jayanth is actually exploring a very nuanced political idea. If the city itself has the agency to travel

wherever it pleases, including outside the boundaries of British-controlled India, then Agra cannot technically be claimed as part of the British empire. All throughout her game, Jayanth gives the local people of each city the very Verne-ian ability to design and build the most ingenious inventions, but the citizens of Agra have taken the agency Jayanth gives them and crafted the means to break free of their own oppression. To many players, this outrageous set piece may appear as just another exotic finding on the way to London, and to even more, Agra probably won't even be a stop on the journey at all. To Jayanth though, Agra is symbolic of a people who were beaten down by an imperialist regime long in the past and continued to be beaten down by inaccurate and offensive depictions in media for decades. Through *80 Days*, the people Jules Verne portrayed as godless savages can finally be seen as complex, intelligent, and powerful.

This act of creating a new world where marginalized groups find power and community has serious literary implications, and Jayanth is not one to shy away from them. Throughout her work, she continually elevates the voices of the oppressed and unheard, and supplies a vision for a world where all are truly equal. *80 Days* features a conspicuous number of female characters in positions of power who run cities, commandeer airships, repair automata, and display their power unapologetically. In addition, several LGBTQ characters appear throughout the journey, and Meg Jayanth deliberately portrays them as normal, active members of society. In Jayanth's world, queer identities are normal almost to the point of being uninteresting, and even Passepartout is implied to be somewhere on the spectrum of bisexuality.

It could be argued that Jayanth is creating a work of utopian literature with *80 Days*, but this misses the point of the work. A utopia is a world imagined as perfect or completely balanced (Mason). Citizens of Jayanth's world don't have perfect lives, and the world she creates is not without oppression. In fact, Jayanth often highlights the struggles faced by oppressed peoples as a result of colonialism and imperialism.

In one scenario, Fogg and Passepartout find themselves on the island nation of Haiti. Largely French-speaking, the Frenchman Passepartout has the opportunity to try communicating with the local citizens in their native tongue. If he attempts this, he is met with incredible disdain and revulsion by the Haitian people. France colonized Haiti long before the nineteenth century. The empire stole their land, enslaved their people, and worked the soil with sugarcane farming until it was practically unplatable. The French that the islanders speak is a scar leftover from years of persecution, and as a white European man, Passepartout has no metric by which to empathise with their struggle. Even though they speak the same language, their experiences are anything but equal.

This exchange makes clear just how nuanced Jayanth's rewriting of history is. She does not take the opportunity to right all the wrongs of the past because to erase them would be to suggest that they did not happen. In giving voice to these atrocities, Jayanth doesn't clean them up or forgive them. Still, she does what Verne failed to do in his famous novel, and allows these stories to be told as they occurred, and most importantly, to be told by the people who actually lived through them.

One final example of Jayanth's refusal to shy away from the unpleasant truths of colonial life is a late-game decision that players may or may not be forced to make. On



the last leg of the race, if the player stops in Porto Novo in West Africa, they are given two alternative routes to the next city of Freetown. They can travel via a commercial airship for ten times the regular price, or they can hitch a ride on a west african slave ship. At this point in the game, the player will likely be running out of money and supplies, and it's possible that the only option left could be the morally reprehensible one. Upon choosing this option, the player is taken to Freetown at little cost, but once there, Jayanth forces players to confront the reality of their choice. As a consequence of their arriving on a slave ship, Fogg and Passepartout must find passage through the jungle with the transatlantic slave traders. This journey turns out to be a slave hunting expedition, and there is no course of action that allows Fogg and Passepartout to avoid participating in the disgusting act of hunting and capturing humans on the expedition before continuing on to their next location. With this choice, Jayanth is making very clear her desire to use *80 Days* to address powerful issues that Verne either whitewashes or excludes entirely. The conditions faced by the inhabitants of her world don't have any more say in their lives than the inhabitants of the real world did, but by forcing the player to face their own disregard for human life, Jayanth shows that all people have the capacity for the truly horrible.

The Victorian era is one known well for oppression and imperialism. The unfortunate conditions that subjects of Britain's empirical grasp were forced to endure made it an unthinkable idea that these nations would find their own place in the cultural conversation of the time. In writing *80 Days*, Meg Jayanth has tried to repair this injustice through her writing. Even in a fantasy setting, countries which had very little agency in the nineteenth century can have their stories and their cultural identities

represented in a nineteenth century narrative. Most importantly, through her careful revision of history, Jayanth makes clear her idea of a fair and just society where oppressed communities are given the agency to participate on a global stage with the same technological advancement as any superpower. If she had wanted to offer a rebuttal to Jules Verne's reductive and often racially insensitive work, Jayanth could've done simply that with much less work, but her portrayal of underrepresented peoples as powerful and respected shows her dedication to a world that actually embodies these values. *80 Days* is a blueprint for a society which may not have automated men driving cars and giant robotic Taj Mahals, but one which treats people with dignity and where every person has a voice.

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