Nothing is True; Nothing is Permitted:

A Cultural Analysis of Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles & Assassin's Creed Brahman

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Introduction to Cultural Studies

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Assassin's Creed series has consistently portrayed religion, class, state, and gender dynamics as elements of a dystopian power struggle. Originating with a single game in 2007, the series has expanded to encompass 30 games, four movies, various books, and other media, each set in different historical periods and locations. Across these iterations, two clandestine factions, the Assassins and Templars, vie throughout history to secure sacred artifacts enabling them to shape the world according to their vision, while thwarting the opposing party's efforts. Initially depicted as a liberating and secularizing force, the Order of the Assassins aims to emancipate historical societies from the influence of the (Catholic) Templar Mind-controllers. This essay will primarily focus on analyzing two titles, Assassin Creed Chronicles India and Assassin Creed Brahman, through the lens of cultural studies.[1]

Assassin's Creed Chronicles India follows Arbaaz Mir in Amritsar in 1841, amidst a conflict between the Sikh Empire and the East India Company, two years subsequent to the events depicted in the graphic novel Assassin's Creed: Brahman. Arbaaz endeavors to retrieve the renowned Koh-i-Noor diamond, a potent Piece of Eden once possessed by the Assassin Brotherhood, from a newly arrived Master Templar. Concurrently, he must safeguard his Mentor Hamid and his beloved, Princess Pyara Kaur. Assassin Creed Brahman, a graphic novel serving as a prequel to the game, unfolds in India in 1839, focusing on Arbaaz Mir's struggle against a longstanding adversary who has oppressed Mir's people and territory, along with his contemporary counterpart, Monima Das. The Brahman V.R., an entertainment product based on Animus technology, was introduced in India by MysoreTech in 2013. Abstergo Industries collaborated with MysoreTech to launch the Animus in the Indian market as the Brahman V.R., functioning similarly to other Animus devices but uploading users' genetic memories to the Abstergo Cloud. Consequently, Abstergo's primary objective was to access the memories of individuals linked to the Koh-i-Noor, notably Arbaaz Mir and Pyara Kaur.[2][3]

In dissecting a game with such profound thematic depth, particularly one delving into aspects of the Indian subcontinent, numerous theoretical frameworks become pertinent. My analysis will revolve around the conceptual tools provided by Michel Foucault's exploration of space, power, and knowl-

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1. Referrenced from Assassin's Creed Fandom.

2. Referrenced from Wikipedia: Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles.

3. Referrenced from Wikipedia: Assassin's Creed: Brahman.

edge,[4] Judith Butler's notions of performative gender[5] and Janice Radway's examination of the Matrix of Romance[6]. I will also be very briefly touching upon Stuart Hall's representation theory.[7]. Additionally, I will employ Dick Hebdige's framework to comprehend Assassins as a subculture within the Indian context, while offering my critiques.[8]

II. ANALYSIS

Foucauldian Analysis: Space, Power, and Knowledge in Assassin's Creed Brahman and India Chronicles

Throughout the series of the game, we explore how individuals grapple with questions of power, authority, and the desire for freedom in the face of oppression. We see it with respect to struggle between Assassins and Templars, manipulation and influence, quest for artefacts, exploration of morality and even theme of individual agency (represented by Assassin's Brotherhood) and Collective Control (represented by the Templar Knights).

Here framework given by Michel Foucault in his essay Space, Power and Knowledge becomes very relevant and for multiple reasons. Lets take the one step at a time and examine the events of the game/novel at surface level first. The game deals with the use of a VR headset with which you can access the memories of your ancestors. Foucault in his essay starts with how the innovation of building chimneys and putting them inside the house changed the dynamics of how people interacted. Infact the text highlights, **"architects and social managers cannot guarantee that their designs will secure liberty or rationality. Instead, what matters is the fit between the material reorganization of space and the broader social practices, values, and discourses. Only when this fit is right can social managers effectively enhance what the text refers to as practices**

4. Michel Foucault, "Space, Power and Knowledge," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 134–141.

5. Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 340–353.

6. Janice A. Radaway, "The Institutional Matrix of Romance," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 564–576.

7. Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 507–517.

8. Dick Hebdige, "The function of subculture," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 441–450.

of liberty.[9]

He says that architects are not like doctors, priests, or prison wardens who directly control people, they design buildings and spaces, but they don't have power over individuals' lives like those other figures do. While I agree with most of what he had to say, we must also give heed to the time when it was getting theorized. There was no internet or an idea of virtual social space, let alone a virtual reality. Let us extend the concept of panopticon to a tool of surveillance and not a piece of architecture; back in his time it would be a compendium of medical records, books, archives, police files, housing bills. [10] Internet would serve the absolute model of this extended panopticon with the new regime of surveillance and control it brought about. Infact internet serves as a demonstration of accuracy of things he wrote back then. **"Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition. This is not to say that the exercise of freedom is completely indifferent to spatial distribution. The panoptic qualities of Guise could perfectly well have allowed it to be used as a prison"**[11]

I would like to deviate from Foucault's core ideas and argue that the development of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and VR headsets (including the Brahman headset in the game) is akin to the installation of chimneys in our homes. However, while the architects of chimneys had little control over directing discussions, the architects of the internet wield immense power. In this regard, they hold as much influence as doctors or lawyers, as Foucault theorized. The internet functions as the perfect panopticon because, despite our low awareness of who is watching us, we are cautious in revealing and disclosing information about ourselves. Since these spaces are not physical, we can move about in the realm of knowledge; we can become part of greater public sphere[12] where we may become audience of particular ideas; except here we may not have full control over the accessibility of these ideas. In the game, Abstergo Industries, the modern-day patrons of the Templars, seek to find the whereabouts of the Koh-i-noor. To achieve this, they collaborate with MysoreTech to distribute and sell Brahman headsets in India. While consumers may merely use them for entertainment, their data belongs to Abstergo, which will be utilized for their own ends. Here, Abstergo is not depicted

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9. Foucault, "Space, Power and Knowledge."

10. Panopticon of the state before the internet was archive of paper work we generated; now it is our data in the servers

11. Foucault, "Space, Power and Knowledge."

12. Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *Media and Cultural Studies* 2 (2006): 73–76.

as fearing the risk of revealing their nefarious motives because they control the discourse in the space they themselves have crafted. We are not consumers; we are the product. Our social media information is sold to governments and third parties to market products and influence elections.

This scenario is made much worse by the dawn of virtual reality because while I previously had the choice of the friends I make on the Internet, I still had this separation of concern on being outside the internet (physically). But with VR, even that power is stripped. I now no longer even have control of what my surroundings will look like; it will just be an illusion of choice[13].[14] Public spheres [15] were supposed to be this third independent space different from the state and the individual where discourse was curated. But with the advent of social media, public spheres have been subsumed and brought under the realm of Big Brother[16]. We interact with social groups aptly called algorithmic bubbles which we feel were constructed by us; but in reality, they were constructed for us by Meta, by Google, by Abstergo. And this is the real power. The theory given by Michael Foucault will only get more relevant in this regard as the VR market matures and improves, to a point where the distinction between virtual reality and reality is diminished[17]

Marry the culmination of these topics: the powerlessness in the virtual space, hegemony, panopticon, artificially constructed public spheres, media, and representation; and we have created for us a perfect dystopia, one akin to those shown in game series. No power operates outside of knowledge. Nowhere does Foucault mention whether this knowledge has to be factually true. Does this not further resonate with the motto of the Assassins? **"Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted"**.

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13. Theodor W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 31–41.

14. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Media and Cultural Studies* 2 (2006): 18–40.

15. to be understood as artifacts of architecture; be it cafeterias, saloons, etc.

16. 1984 reference; here, I am theorizing the the big villain need not be the state by default. It could even be an organization, an ideology, a conglomerate, etc.

17. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Media and Cultural Studies* 2 (2006): 453–481.

Analysis through the Lens of the Matrix of Romance and Gender/Desire

In the graphic novel of Assassin's Creed: Brahman, when Jot Soora leaves the VR headset unattended for the night, he wakes up the next morning to find it being used by his fiancée, Monima Das. While the highlight of Soora's experience with the headset was the quest to unravel the history of his ancestors, Monima Das's highlight was indulging in reliving the sexual experiences of her ancestors. This point is pivotal as we are shown later on how this gives birth to a dissonance between the couple, as Monima feels unsatisfied with the sexual reality she was living in.

My first qualm is against the heteronormativity of the roles Jot and Monima acquired in light of access to such a powerful instrument as Brahman [18]. While Jot takes up the role of a world savior who must dive deeper into the workings of the headset [19]; Monima is shown to be a naive user whose use of the device was for sensual pleasures. Here, no benefit of the doubt can be given to Monima as from this moment, this is the only depth in character she is allowed to carry (before her anticlimactic demise due to drowning). In fact, it will not be far-fetched to claim that Monima existed (and died) only to give character depth to Jot (who is not even the successor to Arbaaz Mir and Pyara Singh; it was Monima).

Pyara Singh also has the sole characteristic of being the love interest of Arbaaz Mir. She is portrayed as a damsel in distress who falls for the knight in shining armor and immediately develops feelings for Arbaaz upon their first encounter. She is depicted as lacking any ambition or personal purpose. We have struggled to find the male equivalent of what a romance novel is to women. One could equate it to straight-up pornography. One might even argue, given the current context, that it is video games. However, as Janice Radway mentions in her essay, "The Institutional Matrix of Romance," one must also attempt to understand that women's craving to consume 'rom-coms' is not natural. It exists due to various reasons that, at face value, seem utterly stochastic.

Radaway, in her essay, emphasizes repeatedly that the consumption of content and the consumer cannot be reduced to a simple interaction. She implicitly suggests that when a woman goes out to buy a book, there isn't much choice available. This is not because there is a lack of good variety or writers, but because writers/publishers already know what the person wants to

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18. Brahman: name of the VR headset by Abstergo Industries and distributed by Mysoretech

19. In the novel, he is shown to be worried about where the data of his memory sequences was getting logged and within his memories, he was busy exploring his origins and history

consume, creating artificial demand. But how did the romance genre become significant within the mass-market industry?

The immediate success of the category had much to do with the special characteristics of its audience, specifically the unique situation of women in American society. It relates to the ready access to romance novels at grocery stores and drug stores, and the fact that women had time available while men were at work and children were at school, allowing the market to capitalize on this free time. Besides, do individuals really know what they want before they have seen it? The availability of the romance genre at that time was hit or miss. This section of society got exposed to it and felt like they wanted it. Here, I would also like to bring in the concept of performativity by Judith Butler.

This new quirk of 'rom-com consumer' became internalized by the female gender as a stark dissimilarity with the male sex. Women around the world, or at least those within the grasp of capitalism, underwent a software update and conditioned themselves to add this new rule to the compendium of what it means to be a woman. Over time, the exact artifact, the book, underwent transformations with the rollout of technology. If a new way of dispensing media, I claim, comes into being, it will be appropriated and adapted to serve the genre of romance. It could be movies, Wattpad, or smut literature. So what Monima did was something that was going to happen eventually. Perhaps through that act, she was able to perform her 'conditioned' woman-ness. While the exact depiction of how it came about in the novel was shallow and uncreative (if not straight-up crass and in nuanced lingo, heteronormative), we can at least imagine where Monima would be coming from. [20] [21]

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20. And while we are speaking of the performativity of gender, perhaps we can also consider the logic behind the sexist roles a man and a woman take on in video games. Video gaming is a male-dominated sphere, and this dominance also dictates that these games be male-centric to drive sales. So perhaps the developers and story setters at Ubisoft (again, a predominantly male organization) were performing their own gender by being gendered in their stories and being sexist. This, by no means, is a free ticket to continue what they are doing, but rather an attempt to understand what could be happening.

21. We could however, have had better expectations from a game like Assassin's Creed, a game which revolves around the theme of how our everyday lived reality is just a derivative of objective social structures. There is no natural order underneath these structures of caste, class, gender or race. That how **'Nothing is True; Everything is Permitted'**. Forget transformative justive, Ubisoft has long been found amidst charges of workplace sexism and sexual misconduct allegations. Moreover there were reports of how developers were forced to reduce the relevance of female characters. It also completely fails bechdel test.

Stuart Hall's Model of Cultural Representation

Stuart Hall, a prominent cultural theorist, is renowned for his contributions to the field of representation and cultural studies. His theoretical framework offers valuable insights into analyzing cultural representations. Hall's model of encoding and decoding proposes that cultural products, such as video games, are imbued with specific meanings by their creators. However, these meanings are not rigid; they can be interpreted diversely by audiences depending on their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. When examining Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles, it is imperative to consider how the game's portrayal of Indian culture is encoded by its developers and subsequently decoded by players.

Hall contends that representation extends beyond mere reflection of reality; it encompasses power dynamics. He delves into how certain groups wield the authority to depict others and how these representations can mold perceptions and influence social hierarchies. In the context of Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles, analysis could focus on how the game's developers, many of whom were not be of Indian origin, depict Indian culture and history. The portrayal of India in the game is often characterized by Orientalism, presenting it as a land steeped in mysticism and populated by snake charmers, employing motifs that oversimplify its cultural richness. Moreover, the naming of the VR headset as "Brahman" [22] not only lacks coherence but also reflects a lack of thorough research on the part of Ubisoft, the game's developer.

Exploration of Subculture Dynamics

In "Functions of Subculture" by Dick Hebdidge, the concept of subculture is explored as a means of resistance and identity formation within broader societal structures. Applying Hebdidge's framework to Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles allows for an analysis of how the assassins in the game constitute a subculture and how various elements such as economic status, fashion, and representation intersect within this context.

Assassins as a Subculture: Hebdidge defines subcultures as groups that emerge as a response to mainstream culture, often embodying resistance or oppositional practices. In Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles, the assassins can be seen as a subculture operating on the fringes of society, challenging oppressive forces such as the Templars. The assassins share a common ethos and purpose, driven by their commitment to freedom, justice, and the protection

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22. apparently the word has got nothing to do with the Brahmin class; I could not find what it is representative of

of the oppressed. Their clandestine operations and secretive nature further emphasize their status as a subcultural group.

Economic Superbase of Subculture: Hebdidge suggests that subcultures often emerge from marginalized economic positions. In Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles, many assassins, including the protagonist Arbaaz Mir and his mentor Hamid, come from humble beginnings. This economic disadvantage serves as a driving force for their involvement in the subculture, as they seek to challenge societal inequalities and empower the marginalized. Despite their economic constraints, the assassins possess skills and resources that allow them to combat the Templars and uphold their values, highlighting the resilience and resourcefulness inherent within subcultural groups as these skills become part of identy of a subculture.

Fashion of Subculture: Hebdidge also discusses how fashion plays a crucial role in subcultural identity, serving as a form of expression and solidarity. In Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles, the assassins adopt a distinctive guise to blend into their surroundings and maintain anonymity. However, the game's portrayal of the assassin's attire, particularly the similarity to Altair's[23] outfit, raises questions about cultural authenticity and representation. While Altair's attire may have been appropriate for the Middle East setting of the original Assassin's Creed game, its replication in India lacks cultural sensitivity and fails to accurately reflect the diversity of Indian clothing traditions.

Race and Ethnicity in Subculture: Hebdidge acknowledges the significance of race and ethnicity in shaping subcultural identities and experiences. In Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles, the protagonists Hamid and Arbaaz are depicted as Muslims in colonial India. While the inclusion of Muslim characters adds diversity to the game's narrative, Ubisoft's portrayal of race and ethnicity within the subculture may lack nuance. The focus on Muslim protagonists in a predominantly Hindu society could overlook other marginalized groups and perpetuate stereotypes. Ubisoft's handling of race and ethnicity within the subculture highlights the complexities of representation in video games and the importance of cultural sensitivity in portraying diverse identities.

III. CONCLUSION

In the essay, the chief arguments made include an exploration of cultural representation in Assassin's Creed: India Chronicles and graphic novel

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23. Altair is the assassin from 2007 game who founded the brotherhood of assassins

Assassin's Creed: Brahman through Orientalist portrayal of India by Ubisoft and the power dynamics involved in representation. The analysis extends to the game's exploration of power, authority, and freedom using Michel Foucault's framework of space, power, and knowledge, emphasizing the relevance of these concepts in the context of virtual reality and surveillance. Furthermore, the essay critiques the heteronormative portrayal of characters, particularly the shallow depiction of female characters and their consumption of explicit content, drawing parallels to societal constructs and gender performativity. Lastly, the essay discusses the assassins as a subculture, analyzing their economic background, fashion, and representation of race and ethnicity, while highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity and nuanced portrayal in video games. While the closed reading of the game and the novel may only disappoint us because of failure in representation of its characters, especially female characters and the given Indian context; the study of the developmental studio Ubisoft along with the game gives valuable insights into the realm of videogaming industry through the lenses of cultural studies.

Here, more frameworks of likes given by Donna Haraway in her Cyborg Manifesto[24] could be applied for analysis. And given the repetitive themes of the games in the series being put out by Ubisoft,[25] texts like The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction by Walter Benjamin[26] and The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno[27] also become relevant. However, if the text is to be expanded depthwise and not breadthwise, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation) byLouis Althusser can be used to understand the dynamics used by factions of Templars and Assassins within the game[28].

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24. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (1999): 271–281.

25. which is also the reason why I felt the **India** and the **Brahman** missing in the game and novel,

26. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

27. Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception."

28. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Cultural Studies Reader* 2 (2006): 79–88.

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