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## **A Sense of Place in Video Games: Interaction, Exploration and Immersion**

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As a widely recognised form of modern entertainment (Tripp et al.2021), video games have become integral, providing players with immersive experiences that transport them to virtual worlds. While the concept of place in virtual environments has received attention from academia within tourism (Liu & Park, 2024), the intersection of video games and place, which could also hold merit in terms of tourism, has been overlooked. To address this gap in knowledge, this study focuses on understanding how video gamers interact with and explore virtual worlds. The research aim is to understand how video gamers develop a sense of place within video game environments. A sense of place has been described as a fundamental concept for tourism research, one that is often applied to denote personal meaning, attachment or belonging to a place (Chen, Hall, and Prayag 2021; Zhang, Guo, Ji, 2022). Whilst a sense of place in the worlds is sometimes considered as difficult to achieve (Chen, Hall, and Prayag 2021). Other studies have noted that it is possible to become attached to places in virtual worlds (Oleksy, Wnuk and Piskorska, 2023). Contemporary studies have investigated tourism within virtual environments, often focusing on interactions between tourists and destinations in the metaverse, citing that such experiences can be interactive and engaging. The research was conducted during 2023 through semi-structured interviews with video gamers. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, whilst Nvivo 12 was used for the performance of the transcripts' thematic analysis, including data coding and thematic development and comparison. More specifically, the study has established preliminary data codes through the identification of significant statements. These initial codes and statements were re-analysed, also taking into consideration the relevant theoretical concepts and literature. The final codes were confirmed, and the prominent direct quotations from the respondents were selected for the thematic exemplification of the study. Three themes were identified from the interview data that represent the player's perception of place in video games: interactive experiences, exploration and immersive experiences. Firstly, interactive experiences, the ability to interact with game inhabitants, which include other players, game characters, NPCs, wildlife and objects such as weapons, powerups, and outfits, created a sense of place by adding life to virtual worlds. Exploration was expressed as a freedom of movement, the ability to roam at their own pace, that allows for a sense of personal agency within the game world, creating a sense of place. The final theme to emerge from the interview is immersive experiences. Games provide detailed and rich environments, and video gamers become immersed in the game world through a combination of storylines, aesthetics and audio. Overall, this study demonstrates the potential for video games to influence travel intentions and experiences in tourism destinations that feature prominently in video games.

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