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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

From Controllers to Immersion: Exploring the Sense of Place in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop an understanding of how video gamers develop a sense of place within video game environments. Through semi-structured interviews with 40 video gamers, three key themes were identified: interactive experiences, exploration and immersive experiences. Data analysis has demonstrated that interactive experiences, including those with game inhabitants and objects, add life to virtual worlds. The ability to suspend gameplay and explore virtual environments created a sense of place as video gamers sought to go beyond game objectives. Through immersive experiences, video gamers establish a connection between virtual and real-world places. Overall, this study demonstrates the potential for video games to influence travel intentions and experiences in tourism destinations that feature prominently in video games.

1 | Introduction

Video games are increasingly recognised as powerful tools for creating immersive environments that influence players' perceptions of real and virtual places. This study examines the intersection of video gaming and tourism, focusing on how gamers develop a sense of place in virtual worlds, a phenomenon closely tied to the growing trend of video game-induced tourism. For instance, Japan's Universal Studio houses a Super Nintendo World, and Tokyo has used its historical connections to video games to create game-themed attractions and promote video game landmarks (Kirk 2023). It has been reported that Shanxi Province, China, which contributed 27 scenes to the popular video game *Black Myth*, saw travel bookings increase by 50% in July 2024 (Cheng and Zhu 2024). In 2021, a popular travel guide released *'The Rouch Guide to Xbox'*, featuring over 50 game locations from eight popular video games. Furthermore, some games, such as the series of *Assassins Creed*, *The Division*, *Spider-man* or *Forza Horizon*, replicate real locations or their historical geographies while others, such as *Grand Theft Auto V*, *The Witcher 3* and the *Yakuza* series, create fictional environments heavily inspired by

real-world settings locations. This influence is evident in popular social media content, such as the YouTube video *'Grand Theft Auto vs. Real Life'* by Levitt (2022), which has generated over 4.4 million views and highlights the detailed comparisons between the game's landmarks and their real-life locations.

Related academic research has focused on gamification in tourism rather than video game tourism, suggesting that gamification facilitates deeper travel experiences (Xu et al. 2017; Cha et al. 2024), enhances positive emotions and creates memorable experiences during a trip (Lee 2023). By facilitating immersion, virtual reality and Metaverse technologies are said to create new experiences for tourists and provide destinations with new opportunities to build brand awareness (Buhalis et al. 2023).

Recently, a growing body of academic literature has explored the phenomenon of game-induced tourism (Dubois and Gibbs 2018; Sharma et al. 2023; Jang 2024; Yin et al. 2024; Żemła and Bielak 2024). The literature on game-induced tourism draws heavily from research on other forms of mediated tourism, particularly movie-induced tourism. These studies have identified two

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key aspects: first, video games influence the intention to visit in-game locations, and second, having an in-game location serves as a marketing tool for destinations (Żemła and Bielak 2024). However, as Di Mascio (2023) notes, video games allow users a freedom of movement that cannot be experienced in any other media. Indeed, video games differ from movies in that they require longer engagement and offer immersive experiences that transport players to virtual worlds (Uzunogullari 2023). Thus, while the association between movie and video game tourism is significant, we argue for a more nuanced and critical understanding of how gamers are induced to travel, one that considers how they form a deeper attachment to the places they navigate in virtual worlds. To this end, it is also noted that virtual experiences intersect with real-world experiences, as in-game representations and narratives shape and influence expectations of locations (Jang 2024). Furthermore, as Sharma et al. (2023) demonstrate, gamers develop emotional solidarity with destinations and local customs through gameplay. It is acknowledged that while game-induced tourism is still in its infancy, further research is needed to better understand how potential game-induced tourists experience virtual worlds (Dubois and Gibbs 2018). To address this gap, the present study focuses on how gamers develop a sense of place within video games, offering new insights into this emerging area of research.

The concept of sense of place has been widely studied in various fields, including tourism, as it plays a crucial role in understanding an individual's perceptions, experiences and connections to environments (Abou-Shouk et al. 2018). Studies specific to video games have examined how games evoke a sense of presence for players (Caroux 2023) and the immersive qualities of video games (Therrien 2023). This includes their application in tourism, where immersion in a game adds to the perceived authenticity of heritage sites (Mochocki 2021). In this study, we use the concept of a sense of place to bridge the gap between game studies and tourism studies, providing insights from a tourism perspective.

The specific aim of this study is to explore how gamers develop a sense of place within video game environments. To achieve this, the research adopts an explorative approach; thematic analysis of qualitative data is used to identify emergent themes closely associated with the concept of a sense of place, including interactive experiences, exploration and immersive experiences. By providing insights into these themes, this study seeks to advance our understanding of how gamers interact with virtual worlds and, by extension, influence mobility and experience at real-world game locations. In terms of practical implications for the tourism industry, this paper highlights the importance of being featured as a location in a video game. Destinations aiming to capitalise on game-induced tourism might facilitate exploration within tourist environments, create interactive experiences tied to video game features and develop immersive experiences linking games to specific destination sites.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Place and Sense of Place

Humanistic Geographers Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977) were among the first scholars to use the term a sense of place to explore people's relationship to places. Tuan (1977) differentiates

place from space, suggesting that while space is an open area for movement and action, place is 'located' as a stopping or a resting point in space. This transformation from space to place is what makes it meaningful (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Many authors have challenged the idea of place as solely physical, redefining it as an experiential phenomenon shaped by individuals' emotions, memories and interpretations (Peng et al. 2020). A sense of place is, therefore, a combination of physical form, activity and meaning as people attach social and personal significance to locations through interpretation, perception and imagination (Soja 1996).

Whilst humanistic accounts emphasise people's rooted attachment and experience of places, Massey (2005) calls for a more dynamic understanding of a sense of place that takes into account the processes of globalisation, digitalisation and mobility. This approach considers the profound changes to how we perceive and inhabit the world, such as travel, tourism and through global and virtual words. Turner and Turner (2006) note that the existing literature on the sense of place can contribute to understanding such virtual spaces and environments. Here, it can be argued that new technology and media, such as video games, can contribute to a meaningful sense of place.

2.2 | Tourism and Sense of Place

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 (Abou-Shouk et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2022). In tourism, like other disciplines, the sense of place is often used interchangeably with 'place attachment' to explore tourists' relationships and emotional bonds to a place (Abou-Shouk et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2021). Formed primarily by experiences in tourist destinations, place attachment theory involves the analysis of four interrelated dimensions (Han et al. 2019). These dimensions are *place identity*, which explores the connection between place and the personal identity of the individual (Han et al. 2019); *place dependence*, characterised as a functional attachment to place (Gross and Brown 2008); *place affect*, which focuses on the emotional bonds and attachments to physical environments (Gross and Brown 2008; Kastenholz et al. 2020) and *social bonding*, which examines the connections between individuals, communities and a specific place (Han et al. 2019). It is argued that having a strong attachment to a place positively influences intentions to revisit and encourages destination loyalty and that this may be enhanced by using local narratives, heritage and sensory elements to evoke a deeper sense of connection (Isa et al. 2019; Styliadis et al. 2020). By extension, it can be argued that video games, through immersive storytelling and interactive experiences, can add an additional layer of narrative, allowing players to connect with virtual representations of real places and to create bonds similar to traditional forms of place attachment (Mochocki 2021; Jang 2024).

Advances in media and technology are often seen as prioritizing virtual worlds at the expense of the significance of 'place' (Chen et al. 2021). However, a sense of place continues to play an important role in human experiences, encompassing both real and virtual worlds. Chen et al. (2021) argue that technology has allowed places to break down their physical barriers, expand their

reach in tourism and create global awareness and engagement with the attributes of destinations. Indeed, advances in media and technology allow bonds to extend to virtual destinations. Furthermore, studies on gamification and tourism argue that gamification has great potential to attract new tourists and increase brand awareness and loyalty (Xu et al. 2017).

Moreover, others have noted that it is possible to become attached to places in virtual worlds (Plunkett 2011; Oleksy et al. 2023). Schweizer (2021), using the example of San Francisco, demonstrates how, through immersive gameplay experiences, video gamers can explore and interact with virtual places, thereby transforming space into place. In addition, the concept of metaverse is intimately connected to the world of video games (Zhang and Quoquab 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 (Tsai 2022; Buhalis et al. 2023). It is believed that the metaverse will have a profound impact on tourism management and marketing (Buhalis et al. 2023). Indeed, Zhang and Quoquab (2023) highlight that many Chinese gaming companies are investigating the integration of gaming and metaverse with tourism, as this relationship can have numerous benefits. Thus, developing knowledge of how places are experienced in digital environments, like video games, is essential for understanding contemporary tourism and how tourists may connect with, perceive and make sense of places.

2.3 | Virtual Places

New media and communication technologies have significantly transformed everyday life, altering our personal and social experiences of space, place and time. These changes have ongoing implications for how we experience ourselves and our place in the world (Lister et al. 2008). Virtual worlds often create real perceptual and cognitive spaces for users, even in the absence of physical spaces (Saunders et al. 2011). Falconer and Scott (2018) argue that virtual worlds share ontological qualities as physical 'real' worlds, while Holmes (2001) notes that interacting in virtual spaces mirrors tangible experiences of daily routines. Relph (1976) foregrounds the role of imagination and art in cultivating vicarious experiences of place, suggesting emotional attachment can form without physical presence (Fazel and Rajendran 2015).

Falconer and Scott (2018) argue that virtual worlds are not mere representations of physical places but become places, allowing interaction between people and these spaces. Similarly, Maggini (2017) emphasises that digital screens function as true places by enabling engagement. Virtual places provide sensory experiences, social interaction and a sense of attachment (Heudin 2004). Casey (2013) highlights the emergence of a 'virtual place', which, despite its immaterial nature, possesses unique properties and boundaries. However, Turner and Turner (2006) note that not all virtual spaces evoke a sense of place equally, with artistic mediums often being more effective than photo-realistic imagery. Nitsche (2008) explores the experience of virtual places in video gaming, emphasising how these spaces integrate a player's identity and personal qualities.

Unlike physical spaces, virtual spaces have fluid definitions, with boundaries such as inside or outside being less distinct. Nitsche asserts that virtual spaces arise from human knowledge and rely on logic, software and hardware (191). Their structures are algorithmically shaped to enable embodiment, interaction, navigation and participation, often creating multi-sensory experiences. These technological advancements have transformed how people experience places, suggesting that the sense of place emerges from individual perception, interpretation, engagement and immersion within these virtual environments.

To understand how gamers develop a sense of place in virtual worlds, it is important to consider video games' immersive qualities. Indeed, immersion is particularly relevant to the context of this study as recent research on game-induced tourism suggests that playing video games cultivates a high level of immersion that can generate an intention to visit real-world locations (Jang 2024; Yin et al. 2024; Żemła and Bielak 2024). Hansen and Mossberg (2013, 212) defined immersion as 'spatio-temporal belonging in the world that is characterised by deep involvement in the present moment'. It is argued that immersion draws players into digital worlds that feel real, creating emotional connections and lasting memories tied to these virtual places (Zhang 2020). Immersion is often divided into psychological and perceptual definitions (Carr 2006). According to Blumenthal and Gjerald (2022), in tourist studies, immersion has been primarily considered from a psychological perspective characterised as a state of being that includes a deep involvement in the moment, lack of awareness of time and loss of self-consciousness. Meanwhile, gaming studies tend to focus on perceptual perspective, with immersion being an outcome of technological features where 'aspects can monopolise a player's senses and attentional resources' (Blumenthal and Gjerald 2022, 724). In both academic literature and the gaming industry, immersion is viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon involving *presence* described as a sense of 'being there', *engagement*, and *engrossment* (Brown and Cairns 2004; Hanes and Stone 2019). In this study, immersion is a key aspect of a sense of place, serving as a critical bridge between gaming and tourism studies. In both disciplines, immersion involves an emotional connection, presence and interaction with the environment.

2.4 | Towards a Sense of Place and Video Games

Like tourism, the concept of a sense of place helps explain how gamers connect to virtual spaces (Nitsche 2008; Andiloro 2022). However, while the concept of a sense of place has received only limited attention in research on video gaming, many related themes are explored in the literature. Investigating the sense of place in gaming is essential for understanding how players emotionally and psychologically engage with virtual worlds (Robinson and Bowman 2021). Furthermore, this perspective offers an opportunity to explore how gamers interact with virtual worlds from a tourism studies perspective.

Bogost (2007) highlights video games' capacity to simulate real or imagined physical and cultural processes, offering personal experiences within virtual spaces. Likewise, Nitsche (2008) also points out that video game places are connected to player identity, transforming game environments

into meaningful places for dwelling rather than mere territories. This sense of place is constructed through the emotions, memories and personal meanings players attribute to these spaces (Manzo 2005). As Seamon (2014) notes, the process of meaning making is inseparable from experience. Research on the Assassin's Creed video games by Seif El-Nasr et al. (2008) demonstrates how player experiences are linked to one's emotional values, expectations, knowledge and attitudes, and each player can have a different experience based on their cultural and personal viewpoints. Each player's interaction with the game, therefore, translates into a distinct 'experience-in-place'.

Many games present a great degree of detail about the world and its locations, inhabitants, cultures, technologies, flora and fauna, which contributes to its formation, understanding, immersion and experience (Wolf 2018). Video games also simulate various aspects of reality, including people, places, events and cultural identities (Balela and Mundy 2015). Similarly, Andiloro (2022) suggests that the experience of an atmosphere is an essential component of the spatial experience of players. Furthermore, spaces in video games do not challenge the concept of reality but rather 'introduce new means and practices, disconnecting from older and more common practices and means' (Luz et al. 2008, 4).

Place in video games can be defined by the intensity of behavioural repetitions and visual and musical elements in space (Andiloro 2022). Digital spaces of video games, like those in literature and cinema, are filled with meaning, allowing players to craft scenarios and even reflect cultural narratives (Meinel 2022). Playing a video game is not merely a ludic activity but also an act of visiting and temporarily inhabiting places (Andiloro 2022; Uzunogullari 2023). Through games, players escape the obligations of daily life, entering new realms of time and space (Harambam et al. 2011; Uzunogullari 2023). According to Gröber (2014), by 'linking media space with geographical space, video games have the power to challenge conventional concepts of space, reinventing the role and meaning of location with respect to social interactions and digital networks' (Gröber 2014, 17). Especially with today's technical opportunities, video games are able to construct virtual worlds that resemble modern reality in detail, making it feel like a lived place rather than just a stage for gameplay (Harambam et al. 2011). Furthermore, contemporary games frequently employ techniques to reproduce the familiar experiences of physical space, sometimes even representing existing geographical sites and landmarks (Gröber 2014). Thus, video games can introduce the players to another place that creates a sense of familiarity with artefacts and experiences. In other words, virtual spaces presented by video games offer individual experiences that are highly linked to involvement, immersion and presence (Witmer and Singer 1998). Just as tourists develop a sense of place through their experiences in physical environments, video games enable players to form emotional connections to virtual spaces.

3 | Methods

The aim of this study is to understand how video gamers develop a sense of place within video game environments. Given

the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative inductive approach was employed, enabling the collection of rich, insightful and informative data (Denzin 2005). Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to express their unique gaming experiences through thick descriptions (Geertz 2008), disclosing profound personal insights and facilitating an organic flow of conversation. By using this approach, the study identified emergent themes directly from the participants' narratives, shedding light on the sense of place within video games.

3.1 | Participants

The research was conducted during 2023 through semi-structured interviews with video gamers. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min. The interviews were based on purposeful sampling, whilst convenience sampling was used in order to create the sampling frame aiming to obtain the perspectives of video gamers who wanted to participate voluntarily. In order to reach more video gamers and, at the same time, exclude non-gamers, the study also used a snowball approach. Following Morse (1994), this approach creates the grounds for the participants to have the appropriate knowledge and substantial experience in order to reflect and articulate their own feelings and experiences.

3.2 | Sampling

Although in qualitative research, the literature does not provide an exact calculation of a sampling frame (usually varies from a minimum of one single participant [Leavy 2017] to a minimum of 15 respondents [Brinkmann 2013]), the study aimed to stop the research until reaching data saturation. This is considered the most appropriate method for concluding qualitative research (Bryman 2016), and it is also widely used in the tourism domain (Farmaki et al. 2022). Data saturation was finally reached in 34 interviews, where six more interviews were conducted (a total of 40 interviews) in order to confirm the saturation. The sample included diverse genders, age groups and countries of residence, with a significant representation from European countries (Table 1).

3.3 | Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English. Each interview was initiated with general questions aimed at establishing rapport and understanding the respondent's profile, such as asking them to share about themselves, how long they had been playing video games, or their all-time favourite games. Then, the interview progressed by asking questions derived from a predetermined list, aiming to examine the video gamer's feelings and experiences.

The respondents were asked to reflect on games that left a strong impression in terms of environment or setting, describe where the game takes place and discuss their interactions within these games. These questions were followed up with several more narrowly focused or probing questions. For example, the respondents were asked, 'What are the factors that influenced your

TABLE 1 | Sample characteristics.

Demographic	Number of participants (N = 40)
Gender	
Male	20
Female	18
Non-Binary	2
Age range	
18–24 years	14
25–34 years	16
35–44 years	8
45–54 years	2
Country of residence	
Italy	11
UK	8
USA	7
Spain	4
Netherlands	2
Other Countries	8
Slovakia	1
Canada	1
Czech Republic	1
Morocco	1
Belgium	1
Hungary	1
Peru	1
Brazil	1

sense of place in that video game?’ or ‘Can you name specific elements that contributed to your sense of place?’. Additionally, they were encouraged to articulate their wider interpretations related to the topic of the study with ‘What does a sense of place mean to you?’

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, while Nvivo 12 was used for the performance of the transcripts’ thematic analysis, including data coding and thematic development and comparison. The thematic analysis was selected since it is perceived as one of the most common approaches for the data analysis of qualitative findings (Robson and McCartan 2016) and allows the encapsulation of the respondents’ meanings, realities and experiences (Langmann and Pick 2018). 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.

4 | Findings and Discussion

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. As expressed by Player 18, who posits that sense of place in video games is where you ‘actually feel you are there’. Indeed, video gamers frequently establish a deep emotional connection with a video game’s setting, often feeling as if the video game environments they inhabit within the games were real places. Thus, the study showed that immersion in the game setting and interaction with the environment (including its objects, non-player characters (NPCs), animals and other video gamers) and exploration are crucial in this context. We argue that this relationship is important for advancing understanding of game-induced tourism, as it demonstrates how interaction, exploration and immersion contribute to a sense of place, bridging the gap between virtual and physical worlds and travel.

4.1 | Interactive Experience

The interviews revealed that there was a significant amount of interaction between the video gamers and the environment, as well as the objects and inhabitants of the virtual places. Therefore, the findings of the theme essentially confirm the interactive nature of video games, which sets them apart from other forms of cultural media. The quotes below offer insights into the theme by emphasizing the diverse interactions video gamers experience within game environments:

The interaction is impressive. All the narrative and how the characters pass through all the difficulties bring you a lot of emotions. It is so well done that you can actually share and feel all the pain and sadness in every moment.

(Player 29)

I definitely feel the sense of belonging produced by the interaction with the characters in the game.

(Player 24)

The game allows you to almost interact with all the objects, isn’t it? You can climb up to pretty much every single building and you can run through the baskets of fruit and things like that. You see everything is almost like it has its own physics and which, you know, almost. It asks you to play and explore and mess around. In the tombs, they always have the ushabtis [funerary figurines used by ancient Egyptians], which are these little ceramic figurines

of like small standing men that are. Well, there's different ideas about what they're for, but they're basically like servants for the afterlife. They're all in tombs, and they're all stacked kind of like dominoes, and you can run through them and they all fall over like dominoes and you can kind of kick them around. That's my favourite. It's super fun. It's probably my favourite interaction in the whole game is kicking over those little figures.

(Player 38)

[...] you're like, you're the main character, but each NPC. They've got their own little lives ahead and things like that. So yeah, I think they're definitely ones that give you a sense of you know, you are part of the world and not just the world's there for you to navigate, if that makes sense.

(Player 29)

The video gamers revealed how interaction within video games affects their sense of place by drawing attention to their ability to do things, manipulate objects in the virtual environment and interact with both Non-Player Characters (NPCs) and other players on some occasions. Therefore, interaction enables players to become part of the gameplay, challenging the conventional notion of media consumption where users are merely passive spectators (Caroux et al. 2015). In video games, players are not merely observers; they actively shape their experiences by interacting with the environment, characters and objects, much like how tourists engage with artefacts and people at tourism destinations. In a similar vein, Jenkins (2004) notes that game players have a deeper engagement with places than film viewers through activities such as interacting, inhabiting, learning and memorising. Both in video games and tourism, individuals are not passive recipients of a place; they actively engage with it, making choices that influence their experience and connection to the space.

Through interactions in the game, players develop a sense of agency, mirroring how tourists engage with real-world places. As noted by Yang and Kirillova (2023), a tourist agency, although often perceived as unconstrained, is influenced by the specific context of a destination, including its geography and the temporal factors at play. The geographical and temporal context of tourism significantly influences how tourists navigate their experiences and make choices. Similarly, in virtual worlds, as Player 38 notes, activities such as 'climbing buildings' and 'messaging around' actions not possible in most real-world places, provide players with a unique sense of agency. This agency is an important aspect of gamers' sense of place. Indeed, it noted that places for both gamers and tourists are shaped by their interactions with objects, activities and social encounters (Saunders et al. 2011).

Hudson et al. (2019) state that virtual environments with interactive elements can lead to more profound engagement as well as enhance one's sense of deep involvement and belonging. Another support for the importance of interaction comes

from a study concerning the digital creation of Maasai Mara Basecamp in Second Life (Huang et al. 2016). Interactive communication tools that display community-created artwork and images, particularly those made by local women, enhance not only the understanding and awareness but also the authenticity of the Kenyan Maasai tribal culture. Moreover, these interactive elements in the virtual destination create an opportunity to connect tourists with the place by promoting engagement and enabling a sense of connection (Huang et al. 2016).

4.2 | Exploration

By their very nature, video games can take players to diverse settings where they may experience and explore places and their icons, sights, sounds and culture. The theme of exploration unveils the players' intention to explore game worlds beyond the objectives of the game, often with the purpose of discovering new areas and views of the places. The following quotes set the scene for this theme:

Sense of place? You feel like, wow! This is a good environment I can explore.

(Player 10)

It's fun to do the missions, but I want to explore. So, I always say, you know, I would spend, make equally as much time, if not more time, riding my horse around the beautiful landscape and getting on my ship and sailing around to the islands and just exploring the beautiful places that they've recreated from the ancient world. [it is] more than just doing any of the quests.

(Player 32)

You can pretend you are safe, you are rich, you are free to take your car, you can choose your car, and you can play the tune. You choose the radio channel. You go by the beach, by the coastal road. Yeah! And follow anything you want. Follow the sun, follow the seagulls. You can almost feel like there's the wind against your body, your face. So, for me, the experience was more like this. [It is] More optimistic than the game portrays. [...] So I guess that would be my experience, the identification with exploring, much more than playing like the design of the game intended by the developers.

(Player 16)

Offer so much for the player to explore, so they basically had really large amount of options. So I was really happy about it and I also could like see the pyramids from the bird's eye view because like you

can use your some kind of bird to like track people. But you can also fly as you wish. So I was flying around here. Yeah, exploring the whole continent.

(Player 1)

The interview data revealed that players may form a connection to a game's setting due to the opportunity to explore new areas and elements within the virtual world. This observation corresponds with Dubois et al. (2021), who assert that many major game franchises now allow players to virtually explore the geography of a city in a manner similar to a tourist using a map, while also learning about historic monuments and events. Indeed, tourism literature acknowledges that the exploration of both real and virtual worlds is an important aspect of how tourists develop a sense of place (Chen et al. 2021). While older video games like *Tetris* featured static, abstract spaces with no room to explore, virtual travel has become a common experience in modern video games (Nitsche 2008). As players navigate through game worlds, they dwell in enticing landscapes and form personal connections through their emotions, cognition and perception.

Exploring games' settings allows players to form cognitive and emotional attachments, much like the bonds tourists create with physical locations. Through seeing and playing, players immerse themselves in a new kind of virtual *flânerie*, engaging in the pleasure of exploring (Dalal 2014). The interviews revealed that the games may do more than just entertain; they can also educate players and raise their knowledge of places. This pre-trip engagement is an important aspect for tourism destination marketing organisations, as exploration in video games can create emotional connections to sites and landscapes featured within them.

Schweizer (2021) highlights the distinct pleasure found in exploring video game worlds, especially those that are detailed recreations of well-known places. He suggests that curious players document their experiences beyond the typical play. In these instances, the game world transcends its intended functionality, transforming space into place through the eyes of the gamer-tourist (Schweizer 2021). In this research, through engagement and exploration, game environments evolve from generic spaces into meaningful places imbued with personal and cultural significance. The data also highlights the sensory aspects of gaming, such as *feeling the wind on their face* (Player 16) or being *captivated by landscapes* (Player 32), which mirrors how tourists connect with and experience environments in real life.

4.3 | Immersive Experiences

The concept of immersion emerges as a key element of the player's experience, as highlighted by the interviews. Players described how video game series like *Assassin's Creed* and *Red Dead Redemption* recreate historical settings and natural environments, with a high level of detail in environments, architecture and character design. In addition to that, players shared gaming experiences of feeling connected to locations that they have never visited in person.

When I played *Assassin's Creed* games, for example, I was struck by how accurately the game world was recreated. The level of detail in the environments, the architecture, and the people all made me feel like I was actually in that time and place. And the audio, such as the ambient sounds, music, and voice acting, also contributed to the overall immersion. It's amazing how these elements can transport you to another world and make you feel like you're really there.

(Player 15)

For *Red Dead* especially, you feel quite immersed in the environment and that as a character. [...] I feel more immersed if I think it looks real, if it looks nice if it's aesthetically pleasing to look at. Even if it's little things in the environment, like little touches of wildlife or if there's a bit of wind and the tree moves a bit and you can see that happening in front of you. I think it's got to look good for you to feel really immersed and enjoy it.

(Player 7)

I remember that the place setting of the video game always amazed me. It was such a beautiful place, somewhere in Peru. It felt so magical and mystical. It had a bit of Incas history and that only made it seem more unreal. I still remember it now, 10years later. It really is painted in my brain. I loved it so much. I dreamt about going there one day and being able to actually visit all the places that I felt so emotionally connected to through this game. Although it also sort of makes me feel like I've already been there, and considering how many hours I spent playing that game. It truly feels like I have lived a full life there, through *Lara Croft*. If I think of Peru and places like that, my mind immediately connects it to the excitement I felt playing that game.

(Player 9)

Immersion emerged as a key element of players' experiences, with participants describing how detailed environments in games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Red Dead Redemption* transported them to another time and place. For example, Player 15 reflected: 'The level of detail in the environments, the architecture, and the people all made me feel like I was actually in that time and place'. This demonstrates how high-quality visuals and audio contribute to the sense of presence, echoing findings by Zhang (2020) on the role of sensory immersion in creating lasting memories. Similarly, Player 9 described their connection to a Peruvian setting in *Tomb Raider*, noting: 'Although I've never been to Peru, I feel like I've lived a full life there through *Lara Croft*'. These examples illustrate how virtual environments can create personal and emotional

bonds, paralleling the connections tourists form with physical locations.

In tourism studies, immersion is often framed psychologically, focusing on the emotional involvement of users and their sense of presence. This contrasts with the gaming perspective, where immersion is typically understood from a perceptual viewpoint, emphasising how technological features monopolise a player's senses (Blumenthal and Gjerald 2022). For instance, Player 15 describes how the combination of audio and visual cues in a game transports them to another time and place, demonstrating the psychological aspect of immersion. Player 7, on the other hand, appreciates the aesthetic realism of wildlife and the movement of trees in the wind, underscoring the perceptual side of immersion, where sensory details hold the player's attention. These player experiences illustrate the multifaceted nature of immersion, blending both psychological and perceptual dimensions.

In their analysis of the Assassin's Creed Odyssey video game, Rainoldi et al. (2022) emphasise how the game's level of immersion, emotional attachment, interactive freedom and realistic depiction of Greek locales captivate players. In fact, after playing the game, the players were more interested in visiting Greece and seeing its attractions. The study also found that participants' perceptions of Greece as a tourist destination were altered. Player 9's own experience with *Tomb Raider* similarly illustrates how virtual environments can frame physical travel. The emotional connection to virtual locations can transform them into spaces of personal significance. Immersion also leads to deep involvement in the virtual world, often resulting in a loss of self-consciousness and awareness of time. Player 9's recollection of their time in *Tomb Raider* demonstrates how immersive experiences can create lasting memories, even years after playing. This deep involvement in a game world can influence players' perceptions of real-world locations and create future travel intentions.

5 | Conclusion

Although video games play a crucial role in the modern leisure and entertainment industry, it is evident that they have been somewhat overlooked in tourism research. Therefore, a significant lacuna remains in understanding how individuals cultivate ideas about real-life places within the transformative digital environment of video games. Therefore, this study's aim is to understand how video gamers develop a sense of place within video game environments. Through interviews, the findings revealed three key themes: interactive experiences, exploration and immersive experiences. More importantly, developing an understanding of a sense of place in video games ought to be seen not as an end in itself but, instead, as a foundational step in understanding how people experience and connect with digital environments.

First, interactive experiences, the ability to interact with game *inhabitants*, which include other players, game characters, NPCs, wildlife and *objects* such as weapons, power-ups and outfits, created a sense of place by adding life to virtual worlds. Interactions with inhabitants within games yielded anticipated

emotional benefits, such as belonging, while also facilitating social engagements for participants. Backgrounds, objects and other decorative items that players can interact with but do not directly affect gameplay often serve an aesthetic purpose, adding life and depth to the game environment. This interaction, as opposed to passive observation, allowed video gamers to take an active role in the narrative of the virtual environment and helped to facilitate a sense of place.

Second, exploration emerged as a key theme in player experiences. Many of the video gamers spoke enthusiastically about getting to know places, forming strategies and devising routes around the virtual world. Very often, exploration occurred outside of the game's objectives and participants were delighted to discover new areas within the game. In other instances, video gamers would travel by foot, vehicles, or other mounts, going somewhere just to capture views and take screenshots, similar to real-life tourists. It is this freedom of movement, the ability to roam at their own pace, that allows for a sense of exploration and personal agency within the game world, creating an endearing sense of place.

The final theme to emerge from the interviews 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. Game worlds can be entirely fictional but are often inspired by real-world environments, and video gamers often describe feeling connected to places they have never visited in person. In addition, immersion included a suspension of disbelief as video gamers believed they were part of the game world, for instance, by becoming or embodying the game character. This immersion created a sense of place, allowing video gamers to feel a genuine connection to the virtual environments.

Comparisons of this kind are difficult to make directly, and themes presented by the study very much relate to the visitor experiences of real-world tourist environments. For instance, interactive experiences in video games, such as engaging with NPCs or manipulating objects in digital environments, mirror tourists' behaviour of interacting with residents or guides or getting involved in interactive exhibits in visitor attractions. In a very literal sense, exploration of game worlds resonates with the appeal of visitors wandering a touristic city or attraction at their own pace. Similarly, games create a sense of immersion, much like tourists become immersed in the emotional and sensory experiences of cultural or historical destinations. Indeed, Tjostheim and Waterworth (2023) suggest that digital platforms provide a glimpse of what it's like to be in a destination, and they might even substitute actual travel for some people. Likewise, the conclusion reached by Uzunogullari (2023) is that armchair travel through video games can offer a diverse range of sights and experiences similar to actual travel, fostering feelings of leisure, relaxation and happiness.

Consequently, this study offers practical implications for the tourism industry and destination marketing organisations. Just as other media forms enable individuals to form connections with places, video games also offer a link between digital experiences and real-world destinations. The ability to establish a sense of place through gaming and fetch cues about real-world

places can potentially foster curiosity and create intentions to travel. Therefore, it is important for destinations or visitor attractions that feature prominently in popular games to leverage this exposure by incorporating game locations into their marketing campaigns, an approach that has proven effective with existing media-induced tourism strategies, such as movie tourism.

The results from this study indicate that video gamers place a high value on immersive experiences in video games where they have agency and freedom of movement in virtual environments. Thus, digital tourism platforms should revise their designs and draw inspiration from video game principles that promote discovery and immersion to enrich user experiences. Collaborations between tourism organisations and game developers or publishers can also bring significant benefits. Destinations and attractions should consider securing their inclusion in future video game titles, as being featured in video games can help create awareness and introduce them to potential visitors. Taking into account the specifics of this study, video game developers can support tourism marketing organisations in creating more engaging and immersive virtual representations of destinations.

The limitation of this study is the lack of examination of the in situ behaviours of video gamers, leaving room for further studies. Consequently, future research could analyse video gamer-tourists' behaviours, experiences and attitudes on the tourist sites they have previously experienced in games. The current study paves the way for future research examining how games could impact real-world spatial navigation. For instance, to ascertain if video gamers follow routes and patterns they are familiar with in video games at destinations. In addition, future studies could also draw on existing research on media-induced tourism and assess the demand for game-induced tourism. Moreover, given the market potential for video game tourism, it would be important to capture the views of destination stakeholder groups on such tourism. This should also include different resident groups' perceptions of video game tourism and destination marketing organisations' awareness of and attitudes towards the use of video games as a promotional tool.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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