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The influence of video games on travel intention (Case study of Assassin's Creed Mirage)

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the influence of video games in shaping an intention to visit a destination, the objective was to identify how video games may contribute to one's intention to visit a destination through main experiential pillars such as technology integration, world dynamics, level of immersion and freedom, character connection, realism and sense of the place. Online questionnaires were shared to collect data from a sample of respondents considering of players of Assassin's creed mirage through discord servers and groups, the data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, results showed that video games have a significant role in shaping a positive perception about destination and enhancing players' travel intentions to in-game destination.

Keywords: Video games; Tourism marketing; Intention to visit; Video games induced-tourism.

Jel Classification Codes : XN1, XN2.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of digital entertainment and destination marketing has emerged as a transformative force in today's tourism research, with video games increasingly considered as a powerful tool for framing destination image and impacting travel intentions. As immersive technologies advance, scholars have begun to investigate how virtual environments can serve as effective platforms for tourism marketing, particularly for destinations seeking to overcome negative perceptions or limited international visibility. Recent empirical studies have demonstrated experiential factors namely immersion, realism, and character connection can effectively shape players' destination perceptions and translate into measurable tourism intentions (Hou, 2024; Wardaya et al., 2024). However, despite growing interest in game-induced tourism, significant theoretical gaps remain, particularly regarding the limited geographic diversity in existing research, with minimal attention given to Middle Eastern destinations and their unique and rich cultural heritage contexts.

The Assassin's Creed franchise represents a particularly compelling case study for examining game-induced tourism effects due to its commitment to historical accuracy, cultural authenticity, and immersive world-building across diverse global settings. Previous research on Assassin's Creed has demonstrated positive correlations between perceived realism, sense of place, and tourism intentions, suggesting that historically grounded gaming experiences can effectively promote cultural heritage destinations (Carvalho & Silveira, 2024; Kontogiorgakis et al., 2024). However, the release of Assassin's Creed Mirage, set in 9th century Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age, presents a unique opportunity to examine how video games can influence perceptions of Iraq, that facing significant tourism challenges due to geopolitical difficulties and limited international marketing presence. The game's focus on authentic cultural representation, historical accuracy, and immersive exploration of Islamic civilization offers a new platform for

investigating how virtual experiences can reshape destination images for culturally rich but unreached locations. This context given Iraq's vast cultural heritage resources, including ancient Mesopotamian sites and Islamic architectural treasures, which remain largely unknown to international audiences despite their historical importance.

Building upon the theoretical foundations of destination image formation and the emerging body of research on game induced-tourism, this study investigates the specific mechanisms through which Assassin's Creed Mirage influences players' intentions to visit Iraq. The research addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how six key gaming dimensions (technology integration, world design elements, immersion, level of freedom, character connection, and realism/sense of place) contribute to destination image formation and tourism intention development. The primary research question shaping this study is: **How does playing Assassin's reed mirage impacts players' intention to visit in-game destination (Iraq), and which gaming experience pillar considerably supplies this influence?** The study tests a comprehensive theoretical model through the following hypotheses: **General Hypothesis (H1): Video games significantly impact players' intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.** This general hypothesis is supported by six specific sub-hypotheses examining the individual contributions of each gaming dimension:

Sub-Hypothesis 1 (H1a): New technologies integration significantly impacts players' intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.

Sub-Hypothesis 2 (H1b): Game's world design and elements significantly impact players' intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.

Sub Hypothesis 3 (H1c): Sense of immersion significantly impacts players' intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.

Sub-Hypothesis 4 (H1d): Level of freedom significantly impacts players'

intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.

Sub-Hypothesis 5 (H1e): Character connection significantly impacts players' intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.

Sub-Hypothesis 6 (H1f): Realism and sense of place significantly impact players' intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's Creed Mirage at a significant level of α=0.05.

By testing these dimensions, this paper provides aa theorical understanding of video games' influence on shaping players' intentions to visit Iraq, as well as practical insight and innovative approaches for destination marketing.

2. Literature review:

2.1 The cross-road of video games and tourism in the digital era

The contemporary landscape of entertainment and travel has witnessed a remarkable approach between digital gaming and tourism, creating a new paradigm for destination marketing and traveler's engagement, Gaming concentrates on electronic games, often played on electronic devices and smart phones and primarily involves interactive software artefacts. Focusing on providing players an immersive and interactive entertainment experience by enabling real-time interactions with the game's environment, local communities and fellow players(Xu, Tian, & Buhalis, 2016).

Video games sector bring together a significant components of the creative industries, from the game design to visual arts and music, software development, advertising and marketing strategies (Long & Morpeth, 2016). Video games are based on gamification which defines as the use of game like-components, mechanics, dynamics in everyday situations that are not directly related to games structures to non-gaming contexts (Gatautis et al., 2016). Through gamification, players engage with local attractions, uncover mysteries, and complete challenges, enhancing their motivation to visit (De Freitas Verdugo et al., 2022).

Video games have gained substantial interest as an influential tool

across various sectors such as tourism that evolves into an experience-driven industry focused on co-created, personalized services as using games in this sector may potentially provide great marketing opportunities. (Xu et al., 2013). Unlike traditional media consumption, like films, video games provide players with the ability to make independent decisions while playing in a virtual world (Christoph et al., 2009). Compared to virtual reality tours, video games permit players to explore destinations, but at a higher level of interactivity and immersion (Rainoldi et al., 2022a).

2.2 From virtual to actual destination (Travel motivations)

In the realm of tourism, playing video games impacts players' willingness to visit real-world destinations through enhancing destination image and travel motivation (Sharma et al., 2023). (Rainoldwi et al., 2022) found that the destination image of Greece has changed slightly as a result of playing the game, due to a combination of the previous knowledge or image they have about Greece and what gamers have learned during the game. While Some studies highlight indirect influence of video games on actual travel decisions, with lower efficiency compared to traditional media like cinema (Stevano H. Tobing, 2024a). whereas " Duboi" confirmed that more positive destination image perceptions associate with higher levels of immersion (Dubois et al., 2021). That leads to another factor that impacts the destination choice of gamers, which is immersion (Rainoldi et al., 2022a), This psychological absorption occurs when players experience suspended logical integration of thoughts, emotions, and experiences(Angelica B. et al., 2011). (Angelica B. et al., 2011) explained how an individual can get immersed in video games by the phenomenon of 'flow', Flow refers to the optimum experience a person achieves when performing an activity (e.g., video game playing) and may be induced, in part, by the structural characteristics of the activity itself. Player's experience of historical places in video games maybe similar to a real-world visit to a heritage site and in location-based games, The perception and feeling of heritage authenticity will be interconnected with the feeling of game immersion as they have the same experiential components of 'sense,

feel, think, act and relate'(Mochocki, 2021). sense of immersion within the game, enable gamers to have meaningful interactions with non-player characters or having the non-player characters provide useful information to gamers (Sharma et al., 2023). Games can also facilitate tourists to develop an emotional attachment to the destination (Xu, Tian, Buhalis, et al., 2016), helping players escape from daily routine and forget unhappiness (Shen et al., 2020). In addition, are considered as one of the most effective approaches by leaving a lasting impression on gamers due to the high level of immersion (Rainoldi et al., 2022a), comparing film or TV as a passive media that rely on the absorption of content by viewers, video games generate active participation and immersion (Dubois & Gibbs, 2018a).This sense of immersion fosters the integration of novel technologies such as Virtual reality an augmented reality.

In a tourism context, virtual environment creates by the provision of synthetic or 360-degree real life captured content with a capable non-, semi- or fully-immersive virtual reality system, enabling virtual touristic experiences that stimulate the visual sense and potentially additional other senses of the user for the purpose of planning, management, marketing, information exchange, entertainment, education, accessibility or heritage preservation, either prior to, during or after travel (Beck et al., 2019). Through advanced technology and creativity, game developers can create virtual worlds that closely resemble actual tourist destinations. This can attract players' interest and curiosity, motivating them to explore places that might otherwise be difficult or expensive to visit in person (Stevano H. Tobing, 2024b). Game design is another factor that forms a video game playing experience, refers to the process of designing and developing video games, and consist of various playing elements (conceptual, functional, artistic, etc.). More recently, have found that game design can significantly influence a player's intention to visit a real-world tourist destination by creating immersive virtual experiences and showcasing cultural and historical heritage (Stevano H. Tobing, 2024b). Game dynamics represent the outcome of the game, like emotion, storytelling, development, both

game dynamics and mechanics were realized through the game component which can be consider by all players (Ali, 2020). From another point of view, the dynamic world of games can attract players' attention to a destination by offering immersive experiences that blend virtual and real-life adventures. This interactive approach not only generates interest before the visit but also enhances satisfaction during and after the experience, fostering a deeper emotional connection to the destination (Pasca et al., 2020). The integration of dynamic world elements and player freedom further enriches engagement, allowing players to explore and interact with virtual spaces in ways that mirror real tourism experiences (Porreca et al., 2020). Improving sense of place realism, including social realism and architectural authenticity, are strongly linked to players' enjoyment and tourism intentions, with historical accuracy by enhancing the sense of place and cultural appreciation (Di Mascio, 2021). realism in games is about action as much as accuracy, realistic actions can occur in graphically abstract games and unrealistic activities can occur in graphically rich and realistic games (Shaw, 2015). The open-world design and freedom of movement are recognized as key experiential pillars that enhance player engagement and foster exploratory behaviors (Vandewalle et al., 2023). Freedom to choose narrative paths and interact with the environment supports autonomy and competence, aligning with motivational theories such as self-determination theory (Ryan et al., 2006). From this degrees-of-freedom perspective, the term identification is best suited for the video game experience, as it combines predefined character attributes that players can adopt for their self-perception with individual construction of character/self attributes in the moment of exposure (Christoph et al., 2009). One of the most important factors that may lead gamers towards game induced-tourism was emotional attachment with the respective game. It employs an attachment with overall environment of the game. Including Attachment with the main and supporting characters alongside with story line and specific scenes like romance, love, hate, war (M. Jawad, 2018). (Dong, n.d.) state that the better you use your imagination to think about the

settings and the characters' feelings, the more you will immerse yourself in the action of the game, most of the conversations took place around their character. Participants expressed that they tend to imagine themselves as the character when playing. It was difficult for them to distinguish between virtual worlds and reality in the middle of gaming (Dong, n.d.).

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Context of assassin's creed mirage:

Assassin's creed mirage is a narrative-driven action-adventure video game, takes place in the 9th-century Baghdad, the game was developed with collaboration of historians and institutions such as The Digital Lab of Islamic Culture (*Assassin's Creed Mirage on Steam*, n.d.). Gamers in the game plays the role of the main character of Basim Ibn Ishaq, a cunning street assassin with nightmarish visions seeking answers and justice, players during gaming can virtually explore culture, history, and beauty of Baghdad during the Islamic golden age, and can develop relationships with non-players characters (NPCs)(*Ubisoft (US)*, n.d.).

3.2 Sample and Sampling procedures:

A qualitative approach was used in this study. Questionnaires items were constructed and designed based on previous literature on video games induced-tourism such as (Dubois et al., 2021; Dubois & Gibbs, 2018b; Sharma et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2013). The research questionnaire was shared to 33 participants, with considerable experience playing the game of assassin's creed mirage, were recruited through discord game servers. A total of 28 male and 5 female participants mostly ranging from 18 to 24 years old with a percentage of 84.8% and the rest were aged from 25 to 34 years old. Most of them have Bachelor's degree and from different European countries such as Spain, France, and Belgum, 9 of them have never visited middle east or north Africa before, while most of them had 1 or 2 visits before. On average, participants have already played assassin's creed mirage from 10 to 50 hours several times per week, and had played from 1 to 3 previous games of assassin's creed. 33% of participants had a limited knowledge about Iraqi History before playing the game and were slightly interested in visiting Iraq.

The reliability of questionnaire's items was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient which proved to have a good reliability as it shown in the table:

Table (1): Reliability test for the axes of the questionnaire

(Cronbach's alpha coefficient)

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Technology Integration	9	0.959
World Elements	5	0.918
Immersion	9	0.942
Level of freedom	5	0.916
Character connection	6	0.865
Realism and sense of the place	9	0.933

In this table we notice that the value of Cronbach's alpha of the study axes ranges between (0.865 – 0.959), which indicates that there is a good connection between the items and their axes, and propose that all the questionnaire's items are important to study the contribution of video games on enhancing Iraq as a tourism destination.

Table (02): Descriptive statistics results

	Size	Mean	Deviation	Skewness coefficient	Kurtosis coefficient
Technology Integration	33	4.6212	0.48461	-0.657	-1.416
World Elements	33	4.5758	0.45279	-0.657	-1.416
Immersion	33	4.5303	0.44964	-0.657	-1.416
Level of freedom	33	4.4394	0.48019	-0.657	-1.416
Character connection	33	4.3182	0.46466	-0.657	-1.416
Realism and sense of the place	33	4.4091	0.49140	-0.657	-1.416
Intention to visit	33	4.5000	0.46771	-0.657	-1.416

The results of the table show that the mean of the technology integration index is 4.62 with a standard deviation of 0.484, the mean of the world

elements index is 4.57 with a standard deviation of 0.452, the mean of the level of immersion index is 4.53 with a standard deviation of 0.449, the mean of the level of freedom index is 4.43 with a standard deviation of 0.480, the mean of character connection index is 4.31 with a standard deviation of 0.464, the mean of the Realism and sense of the place index is 4.40 with a standard deviation of 0.491. The skewness coefficients of the variables range between [+1.1-] and the kurtosis coefficients range between [+3.3-], which indicates that the data of the variables follow a normal distribution.

3.4 Hypothesis testing results:

To test the hypotheses and reach conclusions and recommendations that achieve the study's objectives, we used appropriate statistical methods for hypothesis testing, namely the One-sample t-test, to test the main hypothesis and sub-hypotheses using SPSS 25. The following table show the results of the One-sample t-test of the experiential marketing pillars on the contribution of an intention to visit a destination.

Table (3): t-test results of the experiential marketing pillars on the contribution of an intention to visit a destination

Variables	Sample Size	Mean	T Value	Significance value	Significance level
Intention to visit	33	4.6212	55.271	000	0.05
Technology Integration	33	4.5758	54.780	000	0.05
World Elements	33	4.5303	58.053	000	0.05
Immersion	33	4.4394	57.878	000	0.05
Level of freedom	33	4.3182	53.108	000	0.05
Character connection	33	4.4091	53.385	000	0.05
Realism and sense of the place	33	4.5000	51.543	000	0.05

The results shown in the table indicate that the mean value of the visit intention is equal to 4.62. As for the indicators of technology integration, world elements, level of immersion, level of freedom, character connection, realism and sense of the place are as follows: 4.57, 4.53, 4.43, 4.31, 4.40, 4.50. The values of the statistical test t, which are 55.27 for the Intention to visit and 54.78, 58.05, 57.87, 53.10, 53.38, 51.54 for the indicators: technology integration, world elements, level of immersion, level of freedom, character connection, realism and sense of the place. These values are statistically significant values with a significance of 0.00 because it is smaller than the significance level α=0.05. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis as follows:

General Hypothesis: H1: Video games significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

Sub-Hypothesis 1: H1a: New technologies integration significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

Sub-Hypothesis 2: H1b: Game's world design and elements significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

Sub-Hypothesis 3: H1c: Sense of immersion significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

Sub-hypothesis 4: H1d: Level of freedom significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

Sub-Hypothesis 5: H1e: Character connection significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

Sub-hypothesis 6: H1f: Realism and sense of the place significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed

mirage at a significant level of α=0.05

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study conceptualizes six main experiential marketing pillars that are influential to in-game experiences and one's intention to visit Iraq, namely technology integration, world elements, level of immersion, level of freedom, character connection, realism and sense of the place (Figure 1).

Figure (01): In-game Experience factors



The study results confirmed the validity of the hypotheses, assuming that video games significantly impacts player's intentions to visit Iraq after playing Assassin's creed mirage at a significant level of α=0.05, by enhancing gamer's emotional attachment and providing immersive experience, through 6 main pillars, technology integration, world elements, immersion, level of freedom, character connection, realism and sense of the place, with an overall mean of 4.62. This result was consistent with the results of previous studies that demonstrated the positive role and impact of video games on promoting destinations and impacts players intentions (Dong, n.d.; Ryan et al., 2006; Sharma et al., 2023; Vandewalle et al., 2023). Below, we will attempt to interpret and discuss the results for each indicator separately:

Technology Integration and the intention to visit Iraq: The findings indicate that technology integration significantly effects gamers' intentions and build a compelling destination image, with an overall mean of 4.57. This means that majority of game players agree that integrating high quality of graphics and visuals with a well-designed audio leads to create a positive intention to visit Iraq. For example, they agree that the high-quality of graphics made Baghdad feel realistic, likewise visual details and authentic Arabic dialogues and environmental sounds enhanced their cultural appreciation about destination, helping creating a positive perception about architecture and history.

Game World Elements and the intention to visit Iraq: The study results showed a positive relationship between world elements and the intention to visit Iraq, with an overall mean of 4.53. Most of the gamers were aware that the game represents 9th-century Baghdad, validating the diverse aspects of Iraqi/Middle eastern culture were showed by the game and representing cultural practices, social dynamics and historical events that seem believable and authentic. This means that the most of participants highly agree that world dynamics plays a crucial role in shaping their visit intention about Iraq, historically, culturally and environmentally.

Immersion and the intention to visit Iraq: The study results revealed that, according to assassin's creed mirage gamers, immersion plays a direct role in improving gaming experience, leading to the intention to visit Iraq. The mean for this indicator was 4.43. Most of respondents affirm that the game made them lose track of time while playing and felt like they were actually connected to the historical period of the 9th-centry Baghdad through visual and audio elements, that helped in enhancing the sense of being there.

Level of freedom and the intention to visit Iraq: The outcomes of this study highlighted a positive correlation between level of freedom and the intention to visit Iraq, the mean was recorded at 4.31, suggesting that exploration freedom, narrative freedom and game play choices are significant factors that helps in increase the level of gamers freedom during the game. For example, most of respondent's state that they could freely

explore areas, discover cultural elements and interact with the environment during their gaming experience, with the ability to control and choose how to engage with the cultural content, allowing them to pursue storylines and focus on cultural aspects they found appealing.

Character connection and the intention to visit Iraq: The results showed that character connection contributes significantly to gamer's intention to visit Iraq, with an overall mean of 4.40. This means that most of participants agree that the higher they feel connected to the character the more they want to visit in-game destination, which is Iraq (Baghdad). During the game, gamers plays the role of the main character "Basim Ibn Ishaq", they confirmed that they felt connected to Basim and his cultural background, this enhanced their eager to know more about the Iraqi culture.

Realism and sense of the place and the intention to visit Iraq: The findings showed that realism and sense of the place in the game plays a key role in influencing gamers' intention to visit Iraq with an overall mean of 4.50. Most of the participants highly agree that the cultural practices seem realistic for the time period, they accurately believe that assassin's creed mirage content presents Iraqi culture. likewise, they confirmed that they developed a strong sense of Baghdad as a real place, and they felt emotionally connected to Iraq as a location, they even visualized themselves visiting the areas depicted in the game.

Final results show that most of the participants are likely to visit Iraq in the next 5 years, with a percentage that ranges between 61% and 80%, and are interested in exploring culture and heritage, religious sites, local cultural institutions and are willing to try local cuisine experiences in real world. Assassin's creed mirage as a non-touristic context game, indirectly impacts gamers intention to visit in game destination and changed their perception of Iraq in a positive way, made them more interested in the middle eastern culture and motivated them to learn more about the Islamic history.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling empirical evidence for the significant

impact of video games on destination image formation and tourism intention, specifically highlighting how Assassin's Creed Mirage influences players' intentions to visit Iraq. The findings validate the research hypotheses, revealing that video games can serve as powerful destination marketing tools through six critical dimensions: technology integration, world elements, immersion, level of freedom, character connection, and realism and sense of place. The overall mean score of 4.62 indicates strong agreement among participants regarding the game's positive influence on their travel intentions toward Iraq, with 61-80% expressing likelihood to visit within the next five years. The results make significant contributions to existing theoretical frameworks in tourism and media studies. The findings align with and extend the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, demonstrating how game features (stimuli) influence players' internal states specifically destination image formation, which subsequently drives behavioral intentions (response).

The research particularly supports the experiential design framework proposed by (Rainoldi et al., 2022b), which identifies five key pillars of game-induced tourism: world dynamics, immersion, freedom, character connection, and realism. Our study extends this framework by demonstrating how technology integration and sense of the place serves as additional crucial dimensions, with high-quality graphics and authentic audio elements significantly contributing to destination image formation (mean = 4.57). Furthermore. The strong character connection scores (mean = 4.40) demonstrate how players' emotional bonds with the protagonist "Basim Ibn Ishaq" enhance their cultural curiosity and destination attachment.

The findings offer significant implications for destination marketing organizations, particularly those representing destinations with limited tourism infrastructure or challenging international perceptions. The study demonstrates that video games can serve as effective "soft diplomacy" tool, reshaping international perceptions and generating tourism interest through

immersive cultural experiences. Tourism stakeholders in Iraq and similar destinations can leverage these findings to develop strategic partnerships with gaming companies, potentially commissioning or supporting games that authentically represent their cultural heritage and historical significance. The expressed interest in cultural sites, religious locations, and local cuisine experiences provides clear direction for tourism product development. For game developers, the research highlights the importance of cultural authenticity and historical accuracy in creating games that can positively influence destination perceptions. The high scores for technology integration and realism suggest that investment in high-quality graphics, authentic audio design, and culturally accurate content can yield significant returns in terms of destination promotion potential.

Future studies should also investigate potential negative effects or unintended consequences of game-induced tourism, including over-tourism in gaming-featured locations, cultural commodification, or disappointment when reality differs from virtual representations. The ethical implications of using entertainment media for destination marketing also warrant further examination.

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