

THE IMPACT OF VIDEO GAME *GRAND THEFT AUTO V* ON PRESENTATION AND PROMOTION OF LOS ANGELES AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

Abstract: *With increasing popularity and rapid technological advancement, modern video games manage to vividly and intricately recreate real-world destinations, offering players immersive experiences. This paper analyzes how the renowned destination of Los Angeles is presented and promoted in one of the most popular video games, Grand Theft Auto V. The case study revealed that, through its fictional virtual world, the video game effectively presents and promotes the attractions, culture, atmosphere and environment of this American metropolis. Furthermore, through its plot, mechanics, detailed design and high graphical fidelity, the game fosters players' connection with the destination, increases awareness, and enhances its image and popularity.*

Keywords: tourism, video games, destination, promotion, marketing

UTICAJ VIDEO IGRE *GRAND THEFT AUTO V* NA PREZENTACIJU I PROMOCIJU LOS ANĐELES A KAO TURISTIČKE DESTINACIJE

Apstrakt: *Sa rastućom popularnošću i brzim tehnološkim razvojem, moderne video igre uspevaju da živopisno i detaljno rekreiraju destinacije iz realnog sveta, pružajući igračima imerzivna iskustva. Ovaj rad analizira kako je renomirana destinacija Los Anđeles predstavljena i promovisana u jednoj od najpopularnijih video igara, Grand Theft Auto V. Studija slučaja je ustanovila da preko svog fiktivnog virtuelnog sveta, video igra efektivno predstavlja i promoviše atrakcije, kulturu, atmosferu i okruženje ove američke metropole. Dodatno, preko radnje, mehanike, detaljnog dizajna i kvalitetne grafike, video igra produbljuje povezanost igrača sa destinacijom, podiže svest i poboljšava njen imidž i popularnost.*

Ključne reči: turizam, video igre, destinacija, promocija, marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent video games, due to the dynamic development of technology and constant improvement, manage to present their virtual world to players in an almost realistic way, immersing them in the world and the plot of a video game, thereby creating a high psychological impact on players, shaping their attitudes, thinking and decision-making (Jawad Sajid et al., 2018; Jiahui Dong et al., 2021). In some video games, the world is created based on the motives of real destinations with all their attractions, thus allowing players to get to know these destinations better through the virtual world of the game. Video games not only represent, and therefore promote these destinations, but through the plot and activities, they allow players to immerse themselves in this world, thereby bringing them emotionally and psychologically closer to these destinations. This way of presenting a destination to a certain extent leads to the motivation of players to visit these destinations in the real world (Shavneet Sharma et al., 2023).

Taking the mentioned into account, the aim of this paper is to examine the way in which one of the most popular video games of all time, Grand Theft Auto V, presents and promotes the destination Los Angeles, based on the motives of which the world of the video game was created. The intention is to prove the existence of a promotional factor for a tourist destination through the world of video games, as well as to point out the existence of incentives for players to visit the destination where the plot of the video game is located.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing academic literature on the impact of video games on tourism and the promotion of tourist destinations is relatively scarce. By far the majority of information and data can be found among non-academic sources. However, some authors have conducted research in recent years that examine this issue, specifically the impact of video games on players' perceptions of destinations presented in video games and players' motivation to visit these destinations in person. Michal Zemla and Mateusz Bielak (2024) provided theoretical framework based on a review of the literature and the video game market on video game-induced tourism. In their research, guided to some extent by the known knowledge of film-induced tourism, they examined how video games have presented destinations. They conclude that video games have a positive impact on tourists' motivation to visit destinations represented in games and that destinations should see the potential of using video games as a medium for communicating with players as potential tourists. Similar research was conducted by Ismail [Shaheer \(2022\)](#). His research was focused on tourist attractions themselves, especially historical landmarks, and the study makes a similar conclusion. The author notes that video games can be a driver for the restoration and preservation of historical landmarks in tourist destinations. Similar research is conducted by Michal Mochocki (2021) which represents the connection between video games and historical landmarks that can be seen in the world of video games, and which also represent significant tourist attractions in the real world. The research of Luis-Etienne Dubois and Chris Gibbs (2018) is focused on the potential of video games as promoters of tourist destinations, which marketing experts who

manage destination marketing should be aware of. Some research that studied the impressions of players who, motivated by video games, decided to travel on tourist trips concluded that video games have an impact on tourism, both in a positive sense, by raising the image of the destination, and to a significantly lesser extent in a negative sense, which is reflected in a poorer perception of the destination (Dubois et al., 2021). Research that deals with the psychological impact of video games has also been conducted, primarily by creating a state of immersion, nostalgia and imagination that psychologically influence the creation of an emotional connection between the player and the destination that is presented through the world of a video game. The subject of this research was also the way in which video games motivate players to travel (Dong et al., 2021). Considering that the subject of this paper is an examination of the way in which the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* presents and promotes the Los Angeles destination, it is also necessary to highlight the literature that focuses on the impact of video games on tourism in urban destinations, both in urban tourism planning itself (Ko Koens et al., 2022), urban tourism promotion (Chin-Feng Lin et al., 2021), and in the presentation of urban destinations through the world of video games as a new form of tourist destination promotion (Shi Na Li et al., 2021).

3. LOS ANGELES THROUGH THE WORLD OF VIDEO GAMES

Today, almost all large cities are urban tourist destinations with an increasing number of tourists. One of the renowned urban destinations that records a large number of tourists from all over the world is Los Angeles. Tourism has become a key component of the economic development of this city and has influenced its social structure (David Gladstone and Susan Fainstein, 2001). Today, it is almost impossible to imagine Los Angeles without the elements of one of the most significant tourist destinations.

Los Angeles is the second most populous city in the United States, after New York City. It is located on the east coast of the North American continent and is home to over 13 million inhabitants. This metropolis has managed to overcome its natural disadvantages through urban development in the twentieth century and has become a significant center of trade, industry and tourism. Los Angeles is a place of high ethnic and racial diversity, primarily due to immigration, but also its Mexican past, with a pronounced difference between the rich and poor segments of the population (Leonard Pitt, 2024). It is estimated that more than 50 million tourists visit this destination each year (Carla Vianna, 2024). Visitors are mostly domestic, with a smaller proportion of foreign tourists coming mainly from Mexico, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Although high, visitor numbers are still not at the level they were before the coronavirus pandemic, but if the increase in the number of tourists continues, a higher number of visitors than in 2019 can be expected in the upcoming years (Catie Owen, 2024). It is no coincidence that this destination is so popular on the tourist market. In addition to its location, numerous events that are held regularly, as well as history and traditions, Los Angeles has all the necessary attractive, receptive and communicative factors. Investments have been made in the development of tourism for decades,

which has resulted in tourism being one of the most important economic sectors of Los Angeles, and this destination is one of the most significant in the world.

In a growing and highly competitive market, in order for cities to become and remain popular tourist destinations and attract tourists regularly, it is necessary, in addition to many other factors, to adequately present and promote the destination. Promotion implies communication with existing and potential consumers, which presents the services or products to consumers in order to first gain awareness of what is offered, and then encourage them to purchase a given product or service. The goal of promotion is to increase sales, inform and expand the market, and create better brand recognition (Jennifer Rowley, 1998). Based on the above mentioned, it can be determined that the promotion of a tourist destination is the presentation of the destination with its attractive, receptive, and communicative factors with the aim of getting tourists to become more familiar with the destination, increasing its reputation, and creating a motive for tourists to visit the destination. The above certainly applies to Los Angeles. Although Los Angeles is a recognizable tourist destination with a wide range of tourist services and attractions, in order to remain competitive in the dynamic tourism market, adequate promotion is needed.

In addition to the many popular ways of promotion, Los Angeles is also regularly promoted through digital media. For decades, this city has been the setting for a large number of films and TV shows, and more recently, the setting for video games. Namely, some video games have taken Los Angeles as a base for creating the world of the video game, thus presenting this destination to a large number of players around the world, of different ages and backgrounds. Some of the popular video games such as *Need for Speed: Underground 2* from 2004, *True Crime: Streets of LA* from 2003, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* from 2004, *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* from 2008, *Dead Island 2* from 2023, *LA Noire* from 2011, represent and promote Los Angeles from various aspects (Rie Takumi, 2024). There are numerous other video games that have taken Los Angeles as a motive and a baseline to create the world of the video game, but one of the most popular, most recognizable and best-selling video games of all time, *Grand Theft Auto V*, stands out for its influence. *Grand Theft Auto V* is an open-world action-adventure video game released on September 17, 2013 for consoles and in 2015 for PC. It was published by Rockstar Games. The game was so highly anticipated that it broke the record for the best-selling video game in the first 24 hours of release, earning over \$1 billion in sales during that time period. This is also the highest revenue generated by any entertainment product in 24 hours (Kevin Lynch, 2024). Even after its release, the game continued to generate significant revenue. By 2018, it had sold 90 million copies and generated \$6 billion in revenue, more than any other entertainment title (Max Cherney, 2024), and by 2024, it surpassed 200 million copies sold, placing it in third place on the list of best-selling video games, after the video game *Minecraft* with over 300 million copies sold across multiple platforms, while the best-selling video game is *Tetris* with over 520 million copies (Nikola Jovanović, 2024).

The game follows the life story of three protagonists, Michael, Franklin and Trevor. Players gradually get to know the characters and their past through the game, and shape their life story through crime and violence. The video game tries to present a

parody of American modern life through a high degree of satire and offers players as much freedom as possible in creating their own gaming pleasure, focused primarily on violence, crime and adventure. There is also an online version of the game that allows players to create their own character, which then represents a solo protagonist with whom the player achieves goals by playing mainly with other players on online servers. This version is far more popular and is responsible for the long lifespan of the game. This was recognized by the developers, so this version is constantly supported and has add-ons that are regularly released, leading to constantly increased and improved content.

4. PROMOTING LOS ANGELES AS A TOURIST DESTINATION THROUGH VIDEO GAMES – A CASE STUDY OF GRAND THEFT AUTO V

The story and action of the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* are set in the fictional city of Los Santos and its surroundings. Although the city is not named after the city that served as the motive for creating the world of the video game, Los Angeles, it closely resembles this city, both in its appearance and architectural attractions, as well as in its impression, culture, and other characteristics. In addition to the city of Los Santos, which is located in the southern part of the map and represents an urban area, a little more than half of the map is made up of a rural area. The map area is just over 75 square kilometers, which is the largest virtual world in the series (Bryson Maddock, 2024). The focus of the case study is the southern part of the map, namely the city of Los Santos, since it was created based on Los Angeles, while the rural landscape is more generic with the aim of completing the world and, together with the city, form the fictional American state of San Andreas.

The video game features advanced graphical quality which is especially evident when exploring the open world of this video game. It should be taken into account that the game was released more than a decade ago, which is a long time in technological terms, but the game has solid graphics even by today's standards. Photorealism, which is what video game development strives for, has not yet been achieved by even the latest titles, but this series has always been ahead in terms of image quality compared to its competitors in accordance with its time. With high graphic capabilities, the video game raises the level of realism presented to players and thus further immerses them in the world of the video game. In addition to high graphic capabilities, the immersion and realism of the video game are also contributed by the well-made mechanics, activities and the way in which players interact with the video game. From driving cars or other means of transport, through shooting to the story itself, missions and activities in the game, one gets the impression of the high quality of this game and the ability to create a strong player experience. Even the basic mechanics such as walking, running, swimming, shooting, are done with great attention to detail and in accordance with the goal of creating the best possible player experience (Eugene Panikidis, 2024). The mentioned, but also other elements that affect the interaction with the game and create the player experience are described by the term *gameplay*, which primarily represents the way players interact with a video game and the overall experience of the game (Joey Morris, 2024). In addition to advanced graphics and good *gameplay*, what emphasizes realism and

immersion of the player is the attention to detail. From the detailed gameplay elements to the detailed creation of the video game world and the characters in it, it is clear that there is a great focus on details that improve the quality of the game. This can be seen in the way the characters move, their interactions and actions. The same can be seen in the details on the vehicles, buildings, streets, and all other segments of the game that contribute to players having a realistic and interesting experience of the video game. All of the mentioned creates a player experience that has led to the great popularity of this video game for years.

The city of Los Santos, which is modeled after Los Angeles, is unique, but closely resembles the American metropolis. The Los Angeles skyline is characterized by centrally located skyscrapers, with a large area of surrounding low-rise buildings, a mountain range in the distance, and a long beach on the Pacific coast. The Los Santos skyline is similar. Although the city in the video game is much smaller than Los Angeles, the aforementioned elements are clearly visible. In the center of the city there are skyscrapers, around them low-rise buildings, with a hilly and mountainous area to the north of the city.

On the east coast of the city there is a beach with a promenade. This part of the city is called Vespucci Beach and is modeled after a combination of the famous beaches of Los Angeles, Venice Beach and Santa Monica. A beach on the seashore, and behind it a promenade with numerous small shops, as well as a bike path, a skate park, an outdoor gym, a basketball court, and many other attractions complete this area and make it one of the most attractive in the world of video games. This is also the case with Los Angeles. Namely, Venice Beach is a renowned attraction of this city that attracts about 28,000 to 30,000 people daily. It is estimated to be the second most visited attraction in Southern California with an average of over 10 million visitors per year (City of Los Angeles, Department of Recreation and Parks, 2024). In addition to the forementioned attractions, an attraction taken from Santa Monica is also included in the game, namely Del Perro Pier, modeled after the Santa Monica Pier, a famous tourist attraction and one of the most popular places for photography in Los Angeles. Built in 1909, this pier attracts a large number of tourists who, in addition to taking photos, can walk and enjoy the scenery, fish, buy souvenirs, dine in restaurants, participate in numerous events held throughout the year. Tourists can also visit Pacific Park, famous for its Ferris wheel, called the Pacific Wheel (Santa Monica Travel & Tourism, 2024). The video game, quite close to the original, also presents its own version of this pier, with a Ferris wheel, shops, beautiful scenery, and all this complemented by numerous characters who increase the attractiveness of this pier. Not only is this location shown in detail and presented to players as an attractive tourist attraction, but certain missions and activities additionally motivate players to interact with this location.

In the center of Los Angeles, one of the most significant buildings of this city is located, a skyscraper that is a symbol of the city, the US Bank Tower. The building is 310 meters high and is one of the tallest in the United States. It was built in 1989 and has since been an integral part of the city's attractiveness (DTLA Alliance, 2024). The video game has its own version of this skyscraper. In the center of Los Santos players can find the Maze Bank Tower, which, as the tallest building in the video

game, symbolizes the famous Los Angeles skyscraper with its status and appearance. Parachuting from the top of this building, as well as landing a helicopter on the roof are some of the activities that motivate players to interact with this building. Other skyscrapers that are in the video game further beautify this area of the city center and create the impression of the player being in a big American city. A little further south of this building is the Maze Bank Arena, based on the Crypto.com Arena, which is a multi-purpose indoor arena. It opened in 1999 and has hosted a number of sporting, musical and other events. It is home to one of the most famous sports teams in the world, the Los Angeles Lakers basketball club (Crypto.com Arena, 2024). Although this arena, like the rest of the Los Angeles Convention Center, is a significant tourist attraction, in the video game Maze Bank Arena doesn't have that much significance. Aside from its appearance and size, this arena doesn't have much of an impact on the single player experience. On the other hand, in the online version of the game, this arena serves as a battleground where players race and battle each other in specialized vehicles, thereby promoting this attraction.

In the northern part of Los Angeles, there is a famous and highly visited tourist attraction, the Griffith Observatory. This building, which offers a view of the entire city, has been featured in numerous films and is one of the symbols of this city. Inside the building, visitors can find various exhibitions as well as telescopes. Admission is free, and in front of the building, there is a large park, while the back part of the building has a balcony which gives quite a picturesque view, which is most expressive at dusk (Tripadvisor, 2024). In the game, this building is called the Galileo Observatory and it is also located in the northern part with a view of the entire city. This building, which looks almost identical to its real world counterpart, does not have an interior that players can explore, but it is a major focus of the game because some key missions take place around it. Certainly in the game, it is one of the most significant attractions of the city of Los Santos. However, the biggest symbol of Los Angeles and the most recognizable element of its attractiveness is the Hollywood sign above the city. Hollywood is the symbol of this city as the largest and richest film production in the world, symbolising the American film industry, and the sign indicates that Los Angeles is the home of film art and a city of actors (Laura Carollo, 2024). The video game also presents its city of Los Santos in this light. There is a sign with the same symbolism above the city, but under the name Vinewood. This attraction often motivates players to take the bike path to get to the sign itself. Film industry is also significant for Los Santos. Throughout the story, missions and activities, players get to know and interact with this element of the game. Although the game presents all this with a lot of satire and mockery of modern film trends, the similarity with Los Angeles as a city of film is clearly noticeable.

As indicated in the previous chapter, there is a clear difference between the richer and poorer segments of the population in Los Angeles. The video game also depicts this difference. While the southern part of the city is clearly presented as poorer, the northern part of the city is presented as wealthier. This can be seen in the buildings, vehicles on the streets, clothing styles, the behavior of the characters, and many events that bring the world of the video game to life. The story of this video game focuses on ridiculing the concept of the American dream, as well as ridiculing and

criticizing consumerist society, social pretense and falsehood, American politics and lifestyle, as well as their culture, primarily the cultural decline of American society (John Wills, 2021). The neighborhood in the northern part of the city, which is a major focus of the story and action of the video game, is called Rockford Hills and its creation was motivated by the famous neighborhood, Beverly Hills which is a home to a wealthy segment of the population. This neighborhood is considered the home of a large number of celebrities and is often mentioned in films, from which it draws its greatest popularity and recognition.

Although the focus of the video game is on violence and crime, where players constantly participate in illegal activities, there is a large number of non-criminal activities, which are also among the activities that tourists use on their trips. In the game, players are given the opportunity to participate in cycling, hiking, diving, skydiving, tennis, golf, and many other adventure activities that not only complement the gaming experience, but also create motivation to apply these activities in real life. Some of the activities are accompanied by in-game missions such as cycling, diving, or skydiving, while some are completely optional and players choose whether they want to do them or not. Other characters in the game can also be seen engaging in these activities. Thus, hikers can be seen in hills and mountainous areas, cyclists on bicycle paths, people on beaches relaxing on the sand, and many more. One of the significant activities, or rather a set of activities, are those that players can undertake on water. Given that the video game world is surrounded by water, boats, ships, speedboats, and yachts are a very important part of the video game, and are also popular among tourists at summer destinations. The video game has created a very detailed seabed where players can explore and find numerous secrets and interesting things, either by diving or using a special vehicle. All of these activities further promote Los Angeles as a summer tourist destination. Even in addition to the summer activities, the atmosphere of the city of Los Santos itself gives players the impression that this is a renowned and popular summer tourist destination that has a large number of services to offer to its visitors. One of the tourist attractions is a panoramic bus ride in which players can participate. In front of one of the many movie theaters that make up the city's tourist offer, players can board this bus, which then tours famous locations in Los Santos, and the guide introduces passengers to their characteristics. Although this segment is presented satirically in the game, in accordance with its tone, this is something that is an integral part of many tourist visits not only to Los Angeles, but also to many other tourist destinations around the world. Los Santos even has a Tourism Organization of the city, which unfortunately has an insignificant role and only in a few cases can players notice its existence. There are also many other small attractions such as parks, clubs and panoramic areas that certainly complement the attractiveness of this virtual world.

One of the shortcomings of this video game is the small number of accessible interiors due to the focus on the open world. Getting to know and using hotels, galleries, museums and similar buildings in a video game would have a significant impact when it comes to promoting a tourist destination. Another drawback is the insufficient number of vehicles on the streets. This is the case in order to make fast driving around the city easier for players, but also due to technical limitations when creating

the game. The mentioned does not give a realistic impression given that Los Angeles has a large number of vehicles with usual traffic jams, even on highways. There are also many minor attractions that could not be covered in this case study, but the overall impression is that the video game *Grand Theft Auto* adequately represents and promotes the destination of Los Angeles with its attractive elements.

5. CONCLUSION

A case study of the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* determined that the video game, through its virtual open world, presents the destination of Los Angeles vividly and in detail. Attractions, as well as their importance and popularity, potential tourist activities, culture, lifestyle, history and tradition, as well as the overall feeling and experience of Los Angeles as a renowned, summer, urban tourist destination, are presented and promoted in the game. The video game, through missions, activities, plot and story, focuses on almost all key elements of the tourist attractiveness of the city of Los Angeles, on whose motives the world of the video game is created. High-quality gameplay elements facilitate interaction with the game, thereby allowing players to immerse themselves even more adequately in the world of the video game and become more familiar with the destination presented in the game. Based on the above mentioned, it can be observed that the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* adequately presents and promotes the destination of Los Angeles.

The main limitations of this paper are that a case study cannot fully explore all aspects of the impact of a video game on tourism destination promotion. A broader analysis, using additional methods, could better assess the game's effect on recognition and image of Los Angeles. Additionally, this study does not measure the motivations for players to visit the destination. Research using surveys or interviews could provide more precise insights.

Given that the paper analyzes only one game, further research on other video games and their impact on tourism is desirable. Case studies across different genres could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how video games promote destinations and influence players.

The impact that video games have, and especially the impact that they will have in the future, on tourism and its development has largely been neglected by both the tourism industry and the video game industry (Dubois and Gibbs, 2018). In this regard, it is necessary for further research directions to enrich and improve the academic literature and create an incentive for cooperation between these two growing industries in order to achieve mutual benefits. Video games are constantly improving. They will become even more detailed and realistic, and the presentation of tourist destinations could move to a higher level if tourism professionals are involved in the process of creating a video game. This would not only ensure that video games have a greater and more significant impact on the development of tourism, but also make the world of video games more attractive and interesting to players, which would increase their popularity.

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