

The Role of Video Games in Shaping National Identity Awareness in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine the impact of video games on enhancing awareness of national identity in the Kingdom of Bahrain, focusing on the potential of this digital medium as an educational and cultural tool that instils values of belonging and pride in national heritage. The research addresses a key question regarding the role of video games in solidifying and promoting Bahraini national identity among users. The study adopted a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire administered to a sample of 406 individuals who engaged with video games featuring elements of Bahraini national identity. The study found that video games positively enhance a sense of belonging and revealed that incorporating cultural symbols and elements into games increases awareness of national identity and encourages exploration of its meanings. It indicated that presenting this type of game in an interactive context encourages sustained engagement, as participants interacted in various ways through sharing, researching, conceptual improvement, and learning. The study concluded that integrating elements of national identity into video games enhances national awareness but requires further development and collaboration with additional entities to ensure sustainable impact. However, the influence in some areas remains limited due to the field's novelty in the Kingdom of Bahrain and the scarcity of games.

Keywords: video games, interactive media, national identity, digital education

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution in media and communication has brought about rapid transformations, affecting how users interact with the content and messages they receive. This evolution has generated new objectives that communicators aim to achieve, including promoting a country's brand to shape its global image. A country's brand consists of elements that create positive perceptions and reputation, including national identity, history, heritage, values, culture, tourist attractions, and individuals (Martens et al., 2022). In the Gulf region, countries have begun to recognise the importance of this approach and its benefits for the economy, tourism, and diplomatic relations. The experience of the United Arab Emirates serves as a successful example (Kusumawati & Supriono, 2020). To achieve this, a country must start internally by enhancing national identity and a sense of belonging, reinforcing culture, history, and heritage, and fostering social cohesion, as national identity unites individuals under a common set of values (Saffira, 2021).

With the proliferation of digital media and modern technology, interactive media such as video games have become an integral part of individuals' daily lives, particularly among youth and young adults. This has opened new

avenues for utilising them to shape and enhance national identity, providing innovative ways to engage them in cultural and civilizational interaction. Video games are characterised by deep interactivity, transcending geographical boundaries, and significantly supporting national economies. They also offer a fertile environment for educational and cultural projects with an entertaining character, attracting investments (Roostika et al., 2020). Many games have been developed that incorporate elements of national identity, such as historical landmarks, cultural symbols, and folk narratives, thereby increasing users' awareness of these countries. Examples include the *Samurai Warriors* series, *Assassin's Creed*, and others, benefiting from the exciting gameplay these games provide.

Despite the increasing prevalence and use of video games for purposes beyond entertainment, including education, advertising, training, and culture, there is a noted lack of research studying how to leverage this medium to enhance national identity among individuals, specifically in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The problem this research addresses is the possibility of using video games to solidify national identity, and the need to understand how to leverage this medium to promote and preserve Bahraini national identity. Additionally, it seeks to explore users' perceptions and interactions with games that integrate elements of national identity into their contexts (Roostika et al., 2020).

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, the video game sector is relatively new, having begun to take shape in 2010 with the establishment of the first video game development company. Today, some institutes offer courses and workshops on the basics of video game development, and higher education institutions offer programs in this field. Most of the local video game development companies are considered small, focusing on educational, training, or marketing objectives. Some of these projects have integrated elements of national identity, particularly in educational games, though less so in advertising games. They often rely on foreign clients for developing larger games (Jumaa, 2023).

These factors have raised numerous questions among researchers, prompting them to view this as a problem worthy of study. Therefore, to investigate the role of video games in enhancing Bahraini national identity among users, this study will pose the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: To what extent do current video games enhance Bahraini national identity?

RQ2: How does the inclusion of national elements and cultural symbols in video games affect awareness of national identity?

RQ3: How do users interact with video games that incorporate elements of national identity?

The study aims to understand the role of video games in enhancing national identity among users in the Kingdom of Bahrain. This will be achieved by measuring the effectiveness of video games in influencing users' awareness of Bahraini national identity, identifying the effects of incorporating elements of national identity in video games, and exploring ways to utilise this medium in the future to reinforce Bahraini national identity.

This study intersects with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal, Quality Education, by highlighting the role of video games in fostering awareness of national identity. It also aligns with the eighth and ninth goals in supporting the digital economy by encouraging the development of local games that reflect Bahraini heritage, thereby creating new opportunities for developers and promoting industry and innovation. Finally, it relates to the eleventh goal, which supports the sustainability of communities by utilising technology to preserve and pass on national identity to future generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous studies have addressed the cultural uses of video games and their role in shaping, enhancing, and preserving national identity among generations. To the researchers' knowledge, there is a scarcity of Arabic studies on this topic compared to foreign studies.

Tourism is considered a component of national identity for countries. One relevant study is by Elsayeh (2020), which revealed a positive relationship between video games—as creative communication mediums—and users' perceptions of tourist attractions in different countries. The study found that utilising video games in the tourism sector increases awareness of tourist destinations, drives sales within the industry, attracts new clients, fosters loyalty, and collects data. The results indicated that the audience is receptive to this method and interacts more positively when the game offers an enjoyable playing experience and high quality. The study noted the opportunities to benefit from this technology, emphasising its characteristics of continuity, repeated experiences, and extended exposure for users compared to traditional communication media.

Champion (2020) addressed the use of digital platforms, including video games, for cultural promotion through case studies of various video games and virtual reality experiences that incorporated cultural elements within their contexts. He concluded that these media can enhance audience interaction with cultural heritage and recommended that video game developers design historical sites, incorporate national cultural elements, and create enjoyable, user-friendly gaming experiences to achieve the best outcomes from these media. He emphasised the

importance of educational accuracy and advised balancing entertainment with precision, cautioning against excessive simplification of games to avoid distorting facts and miscommunicating ideas.

McCall (2020) and Chapman (2012) examined the issues of accuracy and bias in the historical narration of events versus the thrilling gameplay experience in video games, such as the *Assassin's Creed* series, which prioritises excitement and engagement over accuracy and realism, potentially leading to historical distortion and misleading players.

From another perspective, LaPensée and Emmons (2019) found that the game *Never Alone* serves as a successful example of neutrality in historical and cultural narration in video games. They involved members of the Native Alaskan community in developing the game's story to ensure accurate and appropriate representation of events.

The study by Fuentetaja & Economou (2019) addressed cultural promotion and the methods used by cultural heritage institutions and museums, comparing traditional means such as brochures with modern methods like digital marketing. Their analysis of promotional activities from 2007 to 2009 highlighted a significant transformation in cultural promotion within these institutions. They recommended a shift towards modern digital applications, such as video games, and designing gaming experiences that allow users to enjoy and learn simultaneously. They called for the use of interactive digital storytelling strategies in these games and employed puzzle-solving and task completion strategies to instil knowledge and increase awareness of heritage.

Among the studies that explored the convergence of cultures in video games and their role in attraction and persuasion is Hanbazazah et al. (2022), which aimed to identify the role of video games in achieving communication goals and the importance of considering their users' cultural differences. By comparing how individuals from the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia interact with the game, the study found that cultural factors influence users' interactions, impressions, and experiences with the brand. It concluded that achieving cultural communication goals through video games is linked to the game's ability to create excitement, enjoyment, and entertainment. The study also indicated that users' cultural backgrounds and the cultural elements embedded in the game affect interactions and the resulting impacts, as influenced by users' perceptions, previous experiences, and ways of interpreting the messages they encounter.

The study by Wanick (2017) also addressed this topic, focusing specifically on advertising video games. It aimed to understand the role of cultures in influencing the behaviours of video game users by comparing samples from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Brazil through semi-structured interviews and content analysis of 40 advertising video games from both countries. Based on the collected data, the study presented a model for designing video games that incorporates cultural elements, concluding that users' cultural backgrounds play a significant role in enhancing attention to the brand, building an interactive relationship with the audience, and creating positive brand attitudes, while considering previous customer experiences with the institution, simplifying the game, and taking into account the capabilities of the target audience.

Additionally, Sisler (2008) conducted an analysis of the content of video games centred on Islamic cultures and incorporated their elements into the context. The results revealed that video games play a role in shaping users' perceptions of cultural and historical narratives. The more popular games from the analysed sample reinforced Western stereotypes about Islamic culture through reductive elements and metaphors such as deserts, wars, and religious extremism. In contrast, other games offered more accurate and neutral portrayals, reflecting the goals behind each game's development. These objectives significantly shape the cultural perceptions of game users. The study indicated that these goals are influenced by the political and cultural context and the developers' backgrounds, which explains the negative, biased stereotypes in Western-developed games compared to those developed in the East, which include alternative images reflecting local perspectives that contradict prevailing stereotypes.

In the same context, Mukherjee (2017) addressed the issue of dual narratives in video games, describing them as means that perpetuate cultural biases or as tools that challenge colonialism and stereotypical representation. He noted the glorification of historical narratives in video games related to colonial histories, due to the dominance of Western companies developing video games, posing a challenge for independent developers from formerly colonised countries to counter these narratives with neutral stories that accurately reflect local perspectives on events.

There is also literature on the use of video games for social awareness and citizenship. Ruggiero (2014) explored the relationship between multimedia and education through gamification to enhance the impact of these games on modern societies, stating that video games can serve as a means of social marketing and promote citizenship values, especially regarding minority issues. Cunningham & Crandall (2019) discussed transforming video games from mere entertainment mediums into promotional platforms for social activities, encouraging dialogue, and preserving heritage and national identity.

Walliander (2021) posits that the authentic representation of a country's landmarks in video game worlds strengthens players' connection to their cultural heritage. His study of players of the game *My Summer Car* found

that players' attachment to their city increased with exposure to the game, which simulates Helsinki, thereby strengthening their connection to it.

Additionally, the study by Balela & Mundy (2019) explored the untapped potential for fostering national belonging and pride in culture and national identity by analysing elements of the Assassin's Creed game, specifically the historical and cultural sites included in the game's stages, and studying their effects and impressions on players.

Previous literature has aided in a better understanding of the research problem, with a variety of studies examining methods and strategies for utilising video games to enhance national identity. There are studies focusing on the components of history, culture, and tourism in video games that incorporate elements of national identity, while there is a scarcity of studies addressing other components, such as religion, citizenship, and social values.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative approach for data collection and analysis, utilising an online questionnaire as the data-gathering tool. The questionnaire was designed to address three main topics: the use of video games, participants' opinions and attitudes regarding the inclusion of national identity elements in video games, and the effects of these elements on participants. The level of influence was measured using a five-point Likert scale.

An initial representative sample of 600 participants was chosen among citizens and residents of the Kingdom of Bahrain. After applying a filter that included a question about exposure to video games and elements of national identity, the final sample comprises 406 participants, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Study Sample

Gender	Male	174
	Female	232
Age Group	Under 15 years	90
	15-19	146
	20-25	126
	26-30	38
	Over 31 years	6
Education Level	Less than High School	104
	High School	212
	Bachelor's Degree	70
	Diploma	16
	Master's Degree	2
Employment Status	Doctorate	2
	Student	320
	Employee	54
	Unemployed	32

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Use of Video Games

The survey results indicate that the majority of participants use video games most of the time (46.3%). Meanwhile, 21.2% of respondents reported using video games regularly, 18.7% occasionally, and 13.8% rarely. These percentages suggest broad acceptance of video games among users in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Smartphones emerged as the preferred device for gameplay, with 28.1% of the sample choosing them. This was followed by gaming consoles such as PlayStation and Xbox (25.3%), tablets (23.5%), computers (19%), and arcade games (4.9%). This trend may be attributed to the accessibility and ease of use of smartphones, their constant availability, and the ability to play without needing additional devices or accessories compared to other platforms. Although gaming consoles and computers offer advanced quality, they require a fixed location for gameplay. Additionally, the popularity of arcade games has declined due to their limited presence in specific locations.

Regarding the motivations for using video games, most participants reported that they play out of a desire to experience new gameplay (30.3%), followed by entertainment and fun (29.3%), learning new skills, languages, or cultures (21.2%), and finally, a desire to compete and interact with others (19.2%). This result reflects players' eagerness to explore innovative gameplay styles, as well as an awareness among some of the cultural and cognitive values that video games offer, despite a lack of interest in the social aspect of gaming that allows for shared experiences with others.

When asked about their interest in Bahraini video games that incorporate elements that enhance Bahraini national identity, most participants (72.9%) expressed strong interest, 22.6% moderate, and 4.4% no interest. This result suggests a clear desire among the audience for locally produced national video games, opening up future opportunities to develop games that highlight elements of Bahraini identity.

The participants were asked about their interaction with video games that included elements of national identity in their context. The results showed that the majority of respondents had played and engaged with these games throughout their availability, with a continuous play rate of 29.6%, indicating their success in attracting players, either due to their quality or the incorporation of elements that connect the game with the player. Additionally, 24.1% of them played the game and shared it verbally with others or requested to play, demonstrating its social impact and user satisfaction with the gaming experience. Furthermore, 14.8% sought further information and reading about the national identity element included in the game after playing it, reflecting the role of games in enhancing knowledge. Meanwhile, only 31.5% played the game once, which may be attributed to a lack of incentives, low appeal, or an insufficiently engaging gameplay experience.

The Participants' Views on Incorporating National Identity Elements in Video Games

The results in Figure 1 indicate strong support among respondents for using video games as an innovative means to define national identity, with 68% supporting this approach. This suggests that this method is effective for cultural communication and enhancing national identity, while 22% opposed it. This opposition may be attributed to the novelty of this technique and concerns the accuracy of national representation or the appropriateness of this method for enhancing national identity.

The results also showed that 67.6% of participants believe that video games incorporating national identity elements have changed some of their concepts about national identity. In contrast, 21.8% of participants felt that these games did not affect their concepts of national identity, while 10.6% remained neutral. Despite the high percentage of respondents influenced by these games, the presence of opponents and neutrals may indicate concerns or inaccuracies in how they reflect elements of national identity. Therefore, it is essential to ensure the accuracy of designs and content and deliver them in a clear and understandable manner.

70% of respondents agree with the idea of cultural uniqueness for the state through the development of video games that incorporate elements of its national identity, while 13.3% oppose this idea and 19% express neutrality. This result also indicates that respondents accept this approach to enhancing national identity. Opposition may stem from fears of restricting creativity, concerns about misrepresenting national identity, and challenges in highlighting it, given the medium's nature.

Despite the respondents' acceptance of this technique, the results indicate a consensus on the need to develop this approach and subject it to further experimentation: 65% of the sample supported the idea, 22.8% opposed it, and 22.2% remained neutral. This is attributed to the novelty of the video game development market in the Kingdom of Bahrain and to the limited number of existing fields and projects.

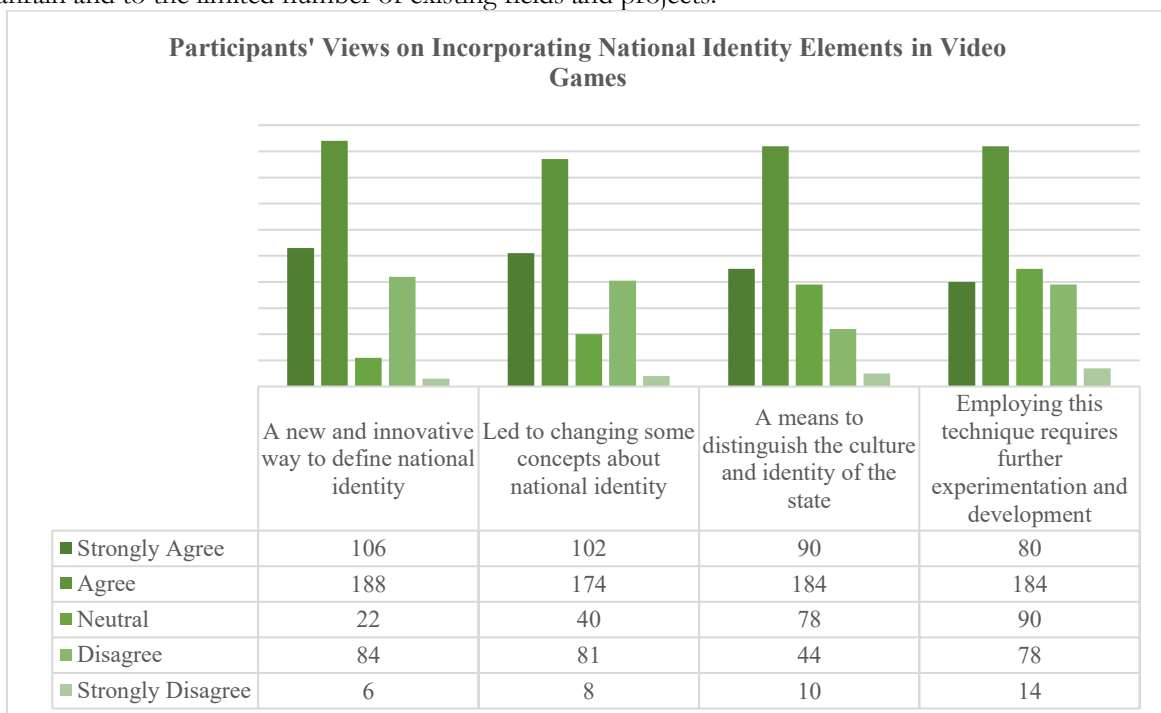


Figure 1: Participants' Views on Incorporating National Identity Elements in Video Games

The Effectiveness of Incorporating National Identity Elements in Video Games

The results in Figure 2 show that 70.5% of the sample reported that video games incorporating national identity elements helped them remember those elements, while 22.2% remained neutral and 7.3% opposed this. This indicates the effectiveness of this medium in enhancing national identity.

When asked how much video games enhanced their sense of national identity, 66.5% stated that this medium improved their perception of national identity, while 11.8% opposed it and 21.7% remained neutral. This is another indicator of the effectiveness of this medium, although there are aspects that need improvement, including the quality of game execution and the accurate transmission of national messages and content.

The results showed that video games incorporating national identity elements contributed to a greater understanding of national identity among users, with 66.5% supporting this. Meanwhile, 13.3% did not recognise this, and 20.2% were neutral. This result emphasises the effectiveness of this medium in raising awareness of national identity when used correctly.

69% of respondents indicated that this approach enhanced their values of belonging and loyalty, while 23.7% opposed it and 7.3% remained neutral. This can be attributed to the narrative style and content that accurately reflect the values of Bahraini society.

The results also indicated that 50.1% of respondents learned about national heritage and history through video games that incorporated elements of national identity. The percentage of opposers was 24.1%, and the percentage of neutrals was 25.1%. The lower support for this aspect may be due to the limited number of games that narrate historical events, making it difficult to measure effectiveness in this area.

The results regarding the importance of effective design and gameplay experience were comparable, reflecting the significance of these two elements in successfully leveraging video games to foster cultural identity and enhance national identity. The percentage of supporters for the importance of attractive design was 71.4%, with 8.4% opposing it and 20.2% neutral. The percentage of supporters for an enjoyable gaming experience was also 71.4%, while 10% opposed it and 18.6% were neutral.

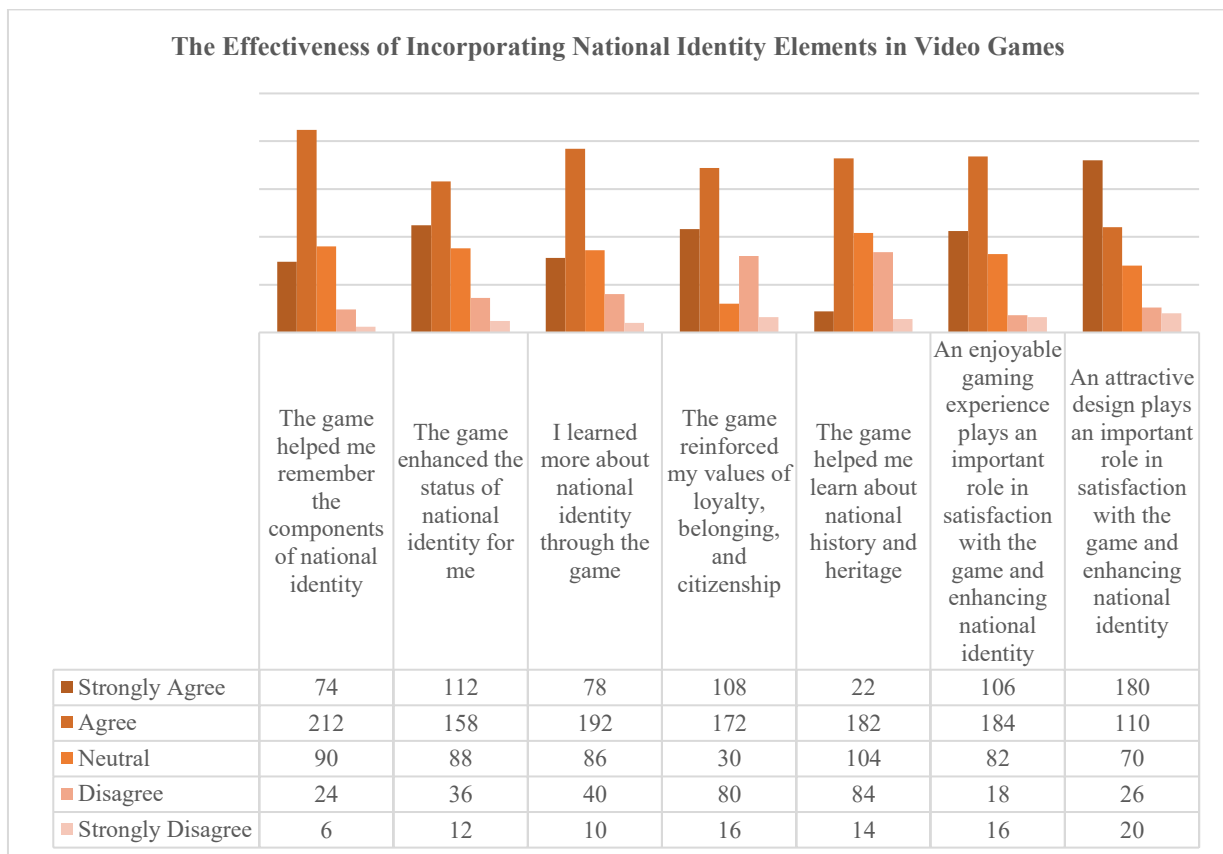


Figure 2: The Effectiveness of Incorporating National Identity Elements in Video Games

The Most Preferred Components of National Identity in Video Games

On the other hand, results in Figure 3 showed that the use of Bahraini dialect (23%), national historical figures (19%), and historical and archaeological sites (19%) are the most preferred components of national identity in video games among the participants. However, the employment of national values and principles, religious values and Bahrain customs and traditions in video games remains less important. This result supports the idea that the

use of local language and physical icons in video games is effective in attracting players through their components of national identity.

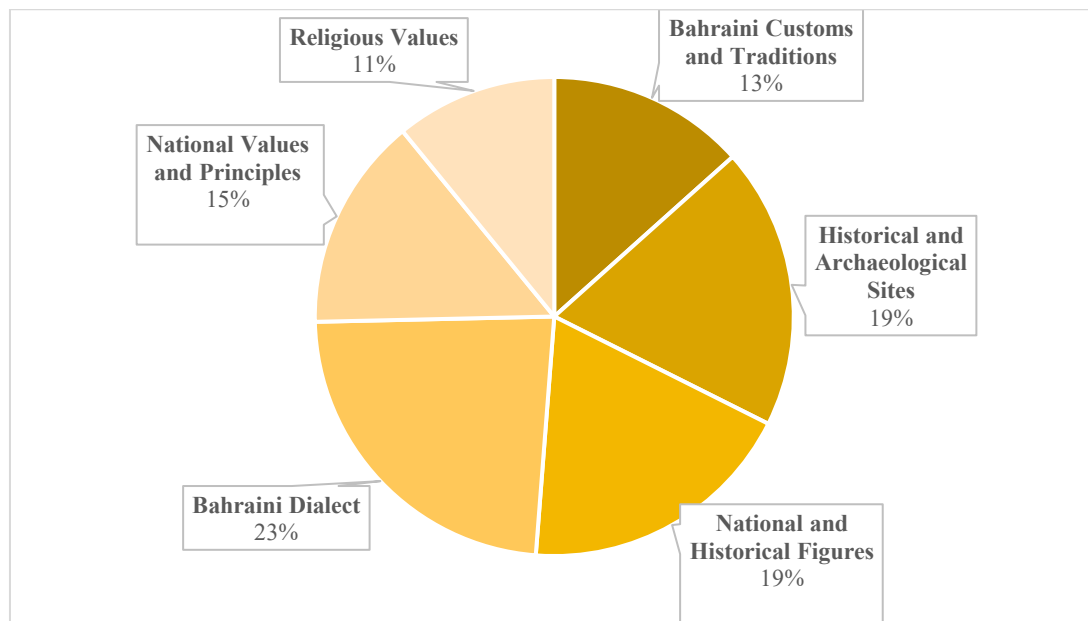


Figure 3: The Most Preferred Components of National Identity in Video Games

CONCLUSION

Video games are a good medium for enhancing national identity in the Kingdom of Bahrain. However, they require further development due to the field's novelty and limited experience, with a necessary focus on design and enjoyable gameplay to achieve the best results. Therefore, it is recommended to enhance the narrative and historical content in games, highlight more Bahraini historical and national figures, improve the use of the Bahraini dialect in games, and incorporate elements of Bahraini culture into game design, given their attractiveness and their ability to create visual and emotional connections with players. Finally, it is essential to stimulate feelings of pride and national belonging through interactive gameplay experiences that reflect situations and challenges that evoke them.

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