

Chapter 9

Tourism in Virtual Worlds: Means, Goals and Needs

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, tourism is a very important business area. Using virtual worlds technologies as a new means of information for potential tourists is a challenge where the actual means, goals, and needs still need to be exactly identified.

Within the MetaverseI project, Innovalia Spain (in association with other partners from the consortium) has developed a new island in Second Life, which represents the hot spots of Gran Canary. This is a starting point of developments about tourism in virtual worlds, and a part of the related research activity. The INRIA Talaris team in France has developed multilingual tools, which intend to make the tourist's experience in a virtual world even more interesting.

This chapter aims to analyze why and how virtual worlds may become an important way for touristic areas to promote their services. We will also present the first prototypes of the multilingual tools which we have incorporated in the virtual area.

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INTRODUCTION

There are some factors that make tourism an attractive sector to develop different kinds of technologies, such as information and virtual technologies. On the one hand, tourism promotes and commercializes activities offered away from the location of the client. On the other hand, tourism needs specific technologies based on promotional tools, which look interesting and attractive for the potential tourist (Buhalis, 1998).

Nowadays, virtual technologies are offering a great deal of facilities, especially for business models. We assume that the future of navigation will be in a 3D space, but still interfaced with the 2D-web and using it as a data repository. Furthermore, the virtual worlds developed within an open source policy will offer new kinds of possibilities, through interaction, communication, training, etc. But over all, these virtual worlds will offer opportunities to develop creative skills (<http://www.hispagrid.com/>).

The use of virtual technologies is becoming increasingly important, especially in the tourism sector. They offer multiple possibilities, not only for the potential tourist, but also for the destinations which are implementing this kind of technologies. While visiting some important virtual platforms like Second Life, we can notice that important tourist destinations are creating their own virtual environment. There, the virtual tourist can access many types of information, such as pictures, general information, tourist information and walk around different parts of these places. There is also the possibility to contact the tourist information office, in order to help the tourist if he wants to prepare a trip to this destination. The main goal of this kind of virtual places is to motivate the real traveller there. Thus, the virtual technologies can be a strong marketing tool. These kinds of initiatives show a clear change for promoting a tourism destination.

More and more virtual platforms are created with a specific purpose, where the tourism sector

takes an important role. Thus, virtual environments offer different possibilities to the user. That is to say, the new virtual platforms are working on common areas, focused on enhancing the collaborative environments and training, realistic simulations, and the implementation of Web 2.0 technologies with social networks tools, such as wikis or blogs with immersive 3D tools.

TOURISM: A GLOBAL VISION

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Within the last 50 years, tourism in Europe has grown to be a sector of major economic importance. This fact can be seen in several indicators as the development of the number of international arrivals, which has importantly increased since 1950. For instance, international arrivals in Europe went from 25.3 million in 1950 to near 480 million in 2007 and are forecast to rise until 717 million in 2020 (see Figure 1), which means they will have nearly doubled in two decades (2000–2020).

According to the figures, Europe is growing above average. With a share of over 50% of the total international tourist arrivals, Europe has become the world's largest destination region. Destinations like Turkey (+18%), Greece (+12%) and Portugal (+10%) or Italy and Switzerland (both at +7%) are proof of the positive impact of the continued economic pick-up of the region in 2007.

The contribution of the tourism sector to the European Union's GDP is situated between 4% (tourism industry) and about 11% (tourism economy). Also, the number of people employed in the tourism sector moves between 7.3 and 20.6 million, representing about 4 and 12% of total employment.

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