

**Traveling Through Cyberspace:  
Tourism and Photography in Virtual Worlds**

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In 1985 a new type of technical project launched for members of the QuantumLink online service. Participants in the project used their computers to dial up to the Internet with 300-baud modems. They met in a virtual space and communicated with each other in a cartoon-like environment where each attendee was visually represented by a picture on the screen called an avatar.<sup>1</sup> It was a place called *Habitat*<sup>2</sup> and it was the world's first large-scale, multi-user, graphical virtual world. A decade later, an entire wave of virtual worlds launched, including 2-dimensional (2D) environments like *The Palace*<sup>3</sup>, *Virtual Places*<sup>4</sup>, and Microsoft's *Comic Chat*<sup>5</sup>, and 3-dimensional (3D) environments like *Active Worlds*<sup>6</sup>, *Cybertown*<sup>7</sup>, *Traveler*<sup>8</sup>, and *WorldsChat*<sup>9</sup>. The original *Habitat* was re-launched by Fujitsu with the new name *WorldsAway*<sup>10</sup>. This first wave of virtual worlds was influenced by a variety of cultural and technical sources, including cyberpunk science fiction, video games and text-based Internet chat rooms.<sup>11</sup>

While most of the early virtual worlds survived the "dotcom crash" of 2001 (so far), many of them experienced major changes in ownership, management, and pricing structures. Several companies abandoned their virtual world projects in 2001, at which point they either disappeared or were taken over by small groups of loyal devotees. After a brief lull in new virtual world launches, a second wave is now emerging with the recent launch of projects like *The Sims Online*, *There*, *Habbo Hotel*, *Second Life*, and *Coke Music*. The second generation of virtual worlds is a collection of groundbreaking, immersive 3D spaces with high-end graphics, influenced as much by their online and video game counterparts as by their first-wave predecessors.<sup>12</sup>

This paper will demonstrate how several first-wave and second-wave virtual worlds are presented and experienced as exotic travel destinations for "online tourists" and how they make extensive uses of travel and tourism metaphors. It will show how virtual world owners use travel industry imagery and messaging to attract visitors and how virtual "photography" serves to reinforce each world's conceptualization as a tourist destination. Along the way, readers will be taken on a sort of virtual tour of these worlds themselves. Each section of the paper contains several illustrative "photographs" of virtual worlds that can be viewed by clicking on the blue underlined text of each image title.

## **Virtual Worlds as Tourist Destinations**

Virtual worlds easily lend themselves to travel and tourism metaphors because, much like offline holiday destinations, they also serve as places of escape from the humdrum reality of everyday life and workplace responsibilities. The modern concept of tourism is based on the idea of workers using holidays to rejuvenate psychological health damaged by the stress of long periods of work (Ryan 2002). In the 21st century, entertainment media like television, movies, and video games offer short-term diversions while holiday travel excursions offer a more long-term reprieve. Somewhere between these two extremes lie virtual worlds, which attempt to provide a more immersive and satisfying diversion than other forms of entertainment media without requiring a physical journey to a faraway destination.

Even though they provide quite engaging visitor experiences, today's virtual worlds are not a truly compelling substitute for a real holiday trip. However, they do offer a more feasible everyday alternative for those who enjoy socializing regularly with people in other parts of the world. It is logistically and financially easier for someone to visit a virtual world than it is to travel to a remote destination, particularly when the visits occur on a regular basis.

John Urry observes that tourism is constructed by and mediated by a "tourist gaze" (2002). While all senses may be engaged during an offline tourist experience, it is primarily the act of gazing at (and photographing) various objects, landmarks, and views that defines the tourist's experience. Some virtual worlds include sound effects and voice chat but a virtual tour is above all a visual experience because of the nature of the medium. The visual consumption of artificially constructed sights is even more central to a virtual tourist's experience than it is to an offline tourist's experience only because virtual worlds do not yet fully engage the other senses.

Urry also notes that many offline tourist sights have become increasingly "hyper-real" with the "construction of 'themed' environments waiting to be viewed by the omnivorous

visual consumer."<sup>13</sup> Virtual worlds are the epitome of "themed environments." In fact, many of them have multiple themes in one world, making them the online equivalent of theme parks. They take the concept of hyper-reality to the next level by leaving corporeal reality behind altogether. And yet most virtual worlds feel like familiar places. They use the same visual semiotic systems that are used in the offline world, and in the case of tourist metaphor, replicate them as closely as possible.

### **Recreation = Re-creation**

In virtual worlds, "recreation" equals "re-creation," not just of a visitor's work-weary psyche, but of reality itself. Thousands of objects, sights, and views are re-created and enhanced in virtual worlds. Vacation/holiday themes are so abundant even the most casual visitor is sure to notice the preponderance of travel-related imagery. Common travel references include visitor information booths, reproductions of famous landmarks, guided world tours, sweeping scenic views, and even tourist outfits for avatars.



**Fig. 1:** *Active Worlds* tourist avatars



**Fig. 2:** Visitor information booth in *There*

2D worlds like *The Palace* and *VZones* place more emphasis on chatting and socializing as the main activity and therefore tend to use travel and tourism images simply as scenic backgrounds, props, and costumes to provide a relaxed setting for socializing. Travel and tourism imagery in 3D worlds is more complex. 3D worlds allow visitors to move more freely through an immersive space, therefore movement and exploration through the world is emphasized as much as socializing. The end result is that more travel and tourism imagery exists in 3D worlds than in 2D worlds and the 3D imagery tends to be more literal. Some worlds make passing references to tourism while others actually model their visitor experience on a comprehensive, idealized tourist experience.

The emphasis in virtual worlds is always on "play" as opposed to "work." Each virtual landmark, house, tour, and online event exists mainly to provide entertaining diversion. Although some visitors may have "jobs" in worlds they visit regularly, these are usually conceptualized either as hobbies or as part of a role-playing project, rather than being thought of as actual "work."

Virtual worlds are typically divided into several different zones, with unique themes modeled on familiar places of leisure like game rooms, casinos, resorts, boardwalks, carnivals, fairs, racetracks, amusement parks, and theme parks. The architectural designs of virtual play spaces are directly influenced by offline American tourist destinations like Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Coney Island and Disney World. The interactive play spaces in some of the older worlds are not terribly impressive (like *Cybertown's* Theme Park area, for example, which is little more than a collection of moving objects) but the Atlas Casino in the recently launched *Second Life* rivals the grandeur of anything found offline, and its Boardwalk area, still under construction, is shaping up to be quite an interesting online attraction.



Fig. 3: *Second Life's* Atlas Casino



Fig. 4: *Second Life's* Boardwalk area

One particularly interesting object in the Boardwalk area is a miniature golf set with a blue and white castle that recalls Disney World's Magic Kingdom castle. Many objects in virtual worlds are obvious references to offline tourist attractions, but this one is interesting because the object it references is also a reference to another real-world object (the *Schloß Neuschwanstein* castle in Germany). In other words, the mini-golf castle in *Second Life* is a third-generation simulacrum that takes the concept of hyper-real simulacra one step further into the realm of the completely virtual.<sup>14</sup> The mini-golf castle

exists only as a sign, as part of the vast semiotic network of virtual worlds. Such is the case with all tourism-related objects in virtual worlds. They are a new order of simulacra, even more hyper-real than the classic simulacra of Disney World.

### **It's a Small (Virtual) World After All**

Disney is, in fact, a pervasive influence in virtual worlds. The virtual world called *There* is particularly influenced by Disney's theme park design concepts. *There's* senior art director, Don Carson, was a senior show designer at Walt Disney Imagineering for six years and helped design a number of offline theme parks during his time there. In a recent chat with *There* visitors, Carson explained how offline theme parks are based on the concept of telling a linear story to an audience as they move through the park. *There's* goal is to offer a themed environment that allows visitors to experience a more free-form "interactive narrative" as they move through the virtual space, where they can actively participate in the creation of interactive stories.<sup>15</sup> To set the tone for this, *There* collapses a variety of historical references into one space (a tactic also commonly used in Disney theme parks), which visitors are then encouraged to explore and "discover" as part of their tourist experience. But unlike Disney World, no central storyline connects the disparate images in *There* and the settings are constantly changing.

The result of all this is a virtual world that is not exactly like an online version of Disney World<sup>16</sup>, but one with distinctly "Disney-like" qualities. While *There* has no direct references to a blue and white Germanic castle or to Disney characters, its product is branded much the way Disney theme parks are branded - as a tourist "getaway." *There* is a pleasant place, filled with beautiful views and play spaces called "funzones" where visitors can drive colorful buggies on specially designed tracks. The avatars of *There* have an animated, cartoon-like quality with generally happy dispositions by default. The world is programmed to be free of graphic violence so that avatars can never be hurt or killed even when run over by a stray buggy. Like many other virtual worlds, *There* replicates beautiful and interesting things from the real world, then improves upon its contents with a touch of idealistic fantasy. Hence, avatars can fly or jump off cliffs

without getting hurt. (Even the best offline tourist experience can't provide that!)

*There* may not have a single overarching storyline for visitors to follow but it does have a ubiquitous "tropical island" theme that provides visual and thematic consistency to the visitor experience. For a world positioned as an "online getaway," the tropical island theme is a perfect match, as there is no better symbol of "holiday" or "vacation." While there are other parts of *There* dedicated to non-island themes, the Tiki tropical island areas are the most popular with visitors. Images of Tiki are also used in most of *There's* marketing and advertising messages to date.

*There* emphasizes the tropical island theme more than any other virtual world, but it is certainly not the only world containing references to tropical islands. In fact, there are so many virtual islands and beaches online it is nearly impossible to find a virtual world that does not have one. Sometimes a tropical island environment is offered as one of many options, as in the *Cybertown*, *Muse*, and *Traveler* worlds. There are also worlds that include beaches or islands as smaller sections of a larger space, like the island-themed rooms on *Palace* servers and the small beach areas in *VZones*. In *Second Life* a tropical island setting is used in a tutorial section that is completely separate from the main world. The relaxed setting of a tropical island is ideal for welcoming new visitors and making them feel relaxed while learning how to navigate the world.



**Fig. 5:** Tiki islands in *There*



**Fig. 6:** Prehiti island in *Muse*



**Fig. 7:** *Second Life* tutorial island

Tropical island themes are popular in virtual worlds precisely because they provide the perfect setting for welcome areas and socializing areas. An open-air environment with sweeping views helps give the illusion of space, making even a small *Palace* room feel less cramped. Some of the background images in the 2D worlds are offline tourist

photographs taken during an offline vacation. 3D worlds use entirely computer-generated images of tropical islands, some of which are so realistic it can be hard to believe they are not photographs.

### Artificially Natural - Scenic Views in Virtual Worlds

The ever-popular tropical island theme is just one of many ways an idealized version of nature is portrayed in virtual worlds. The malleability of the digital medium allows it to be used as an interactive canvas upon which tech-savvy artists create all sorts of beautiful "views" and interesting landmarks. Unlike traditional art, however, the audience is invited to participate in an ongoing process of creating and developing the artwork. Typically, world owners will launch an environment with basic geographical elements like large, empty stretches of land and water with forests, deserts, fields, and a few basic buildings. Then visitors are encouraged to fill the landscape with more buildings, signs, and other objects of their own design. Owners and visitors work together to create artificially naturalized landscapes meant to provide visual pleasure and entertainment for an audience of virtual tourists. The creator(s) of a view or landmark may indicate its status as an official tourist attraction by marking it with a sign or by placing objects like benches or "viewfinders" nearby.



Fig. 8: "A quiet place" in *There*



Fig. 9: Scenic overlook in *There*

Despite the fact that virtual views and landmarks are completely fabricated entities, regular visitors can become quite attached to them and even come to think of them as "natural resources" that need protection from overzealous real estate projects and "litter" like unsightly large signs and billboards. In worlds like *Second Life* and *Active Worlds*, which place a high value on object-building, this is less of an issue, but in worlds like

*There*, which place more emphasis on idyllic natural-looking settings, regular visitors are particularly sensitive to this issue. The increasing presence of advertising billboards that block scenic views and landmarks in *There* have caused regular visitors to mount protests against "sign spammers" and to petition the world's staff for more restrictions on sign placement. This situation recalls MacCannell's description of a similar offline resident protest in Tacoma, Washington against an oil company whose large billboard blocked the view of Mount Ranier (1976). The protests in *There* have taken various creative forms, including writing protest graffiti on offending signs and placing blank signs in front of advertisement signs to block the original sign.



**Fig. 10:** Advertising billboards in *There*



**Fig. 11:** Protest poetry graffiti on advertisement in *There*



**Fig. 12:** Sign placed in front of another sign in *There*

The dynamics of markers and sights analyzed by MacCannell (1976) work exactly the same in virtual tourist settings as they do in offline tourist settings. The only non-controversial signs are those that designate a sight as an official landmark or provide relevant information about it. The markers are easily recognizable to visitors because they take the same forms as offline versions: welcome signs, engraved plaques, informative posters, and information booths. As with offline tourist attractions, a sight's marker will typically be the first thing visitors encounter and they may interact with it as much as they interact with the sight itself. For example, when visiting *Muse's* Prehiti island, the first image that loads is a sign that identifies the sight with the island itself appearing in the distance. The sign is carefully worded to convey a "holiday" tone by inviting the visitor to "sit back, grab a drink, and enjoy the blissful wonder of this enchanted island hideaway." In *Active Worlds'* Yellowstone Park, one of the first objects a visitor encounters is a rather large collection of official signs inviting visitors to click for more information about the park. The Giza Plateau sign on *There's* Egypt island has

an "engraved" map of the pyramids for visitors, plus some informative text about what will be added soon ("...a fabulous verdant oasis, gift shops and more!"). Virtual tourists love to interact with these markers, especially when they can click them for more information.



Fig. 13: *Prehiti* welcome sign



Fig. 14: Yellowstone Park in *Active Worlds*



Fig. 15: Giza Plateau sign in *There*

### National and Cultural Landmarks in Virtual Worlds

Some of the most interesting tourist attractions in virtual worlds are landmarks meant to represent a particular nation or culture. Sometimes these objects are direct copies of recognizable landmarks placed randomly in the landscape, while other times they may be part of a larger area meant to represent a country. Whether there is an attempt at placing the sight in its "proper" context or not, national and cultural landmarks in virtual worlds are like the previously mentioned virtual theme parks in that they tend to resemble hyper-real simulated versions of nations more than the actual nations themselves.

The Route 66 area in *Second Life* is a classic example. It contains many of the images one would expect to see on a holiday road trip across the western American landscape, including a highway, a gas station, a seedy motel, and a fast food restaurant, and displays them together in one small area meant to convey the entire American road trip experience. The creators of Route 66 also gave their creation a distinctly nostalgic style (based on the year 1966), making this environment a shift in time as well as a shift in space.



Fig. 16: Route 66 in *Second Life*



Fig. 17: *Muse's* Turner Gallery

An even greater time shift occurs in *Muse's* Turner Gallery, which is based on the display gallery of the 19th century British artist, J.M.W. Turner. The original Turner Gallery was located in Turner's house in London's West End. It no longer physically exists today but *Muse* has produced an exact replica of it in virtual space, based on historical photographs and documents.<sup>17</sup> *Muse's* Turner Gallery has a greater historical "aura" than *Second Life's* Route 66 because it goes back even further in history, represents a smaller segment of the general population (the British upper class), and re-creates a unique historical space that no longer exists. Of course, the virtual version of the Turner Gallery is more perfect than the original ever could have been. There are no architectural flaws in the *Muse* version, no dust or dirt, and every detail is rendered in meticulous perfection. While it is a beautiful virtual space that provides a visually satisfying virtual tourist experience, the clean perfection of the virtual Turner Gallery is an extremely ironic contrast to Turner's paintings, which are renowned for their loose, freeform, impressionistic style.

While *Muse's* Turner Gallery may have associations with British culture, but it is not meant to symbolize Britain in the same way that *Second Life's* Route 66 is meant as a cultural symbol of America. The Turner Gallery exists in a thematic vacuum as one of several demo projects on the *Muse* site meant to showcase the technical achievement of the company's graphic rendering capabilities. Other virtual worlds contain better examples of patriotic tourist attractions.<sup>18</sup>

For example, *Active Worlds* boasts an "International Teleport" area just outside the main welcome area. The choices offered at the teleport area include "England," "Greece," "Russia," and "America. Each "nation" in *Active Worlds* typically contains a variety of welcome signs, explanatory markers, and replicas of the country's most popular and

recognizable national landmarks. In *Active World's* "America" visitors are greeted by a very large sign that says "Welcome to America" and a replica of the Statue of Liberty has been placed behind the sign for further visual effect. Buildings with neoclassical architecture recalling the government buildings along the Mall in Washington, D.C. lead the eye down roads meant for further exploration. The "America" landmarks in *Active Worlds* function both as expressions of national pride, and as practical identifiers that let tourists know which world they are currently visiting.



**Fig. 18:** International Teleports in *Active Worlds*



**Fig. 19:** "America" in *Active Worlds*

The very fact that there are "nations" in *Active Worlds* helps reinforce the tourism metaphor by directly referencing international travel. The collection of several nations made accessible from one central location recalls offline tourist destinations with similar models like international expos, world fairs, and the World Showcase at Disney's Epcot Center. Both offline and online versions are hyper-real but the time-space compression online is even more pronounced because each area is instantly accessible with one click of a mouse button.

Occasionally objects that are recognizable as national tourist attractions do not appear in themed spaces, but are placed in unusually incongruous settings. For example, the Washington Monument in *Second Life* is located in a seemingly random part of the world next to several other unrelated buildings. It is replicated with the same painstaking detail as the virtual Turner Gallery, but its inclusion in the main world and its bold punctuation of the virtual landscape suggests that it is meant as more as a marking of territory and perhaps as a political statement (the creator's *Second Life* name is "George Busch").

A slightly different example of de-contextualized sight placement is found in *Active Worlds'* Atlantis, where a large Sphinx sits in the middle of an ocean setting. The image

of the Sphinx in the exact opposite of its normal desert surroundings only makes sense when one realizes that this world is rife with new age symbolism. In this setting, the Sphinx loses its associations to the nation of Egypt and its religious and mystical qualities are emphasized instead.



Fig. 20: Washington Monument in *Second Life*

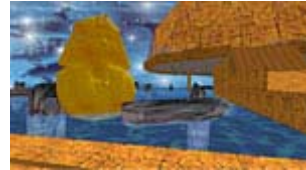


Fig. 21: Sphinx in Atlantis world in *Active Worlds*

### Ancient Landmarks in Virtual Worlds

Images of the Sphinx appear quite often in virtual worlds, as do images of the Great Pyramids, Stonehenge, and similar ancient landmarks with mystical associations. On a basic level, these types of landmarks give virtual tourists something exotic yet recognizable to gaze upon. They indicate that the world is meant to be a place of exploration, adventure, and discovery. They also place the world within a larger historical continuum. Their religious and supernatural elements remind visitors that they are visiting an "otherworldly" space outside the realm of the everyday. The cuneiform and runic writings on ancient structures are re-inscribed as codes on their virtual forms, symbolizing the programming code used in the creation of the virtual structure.



Fig. 22: Cuneiform writing on *There's* pyramid

Ancient landmarks like Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids also remind virtual tourists of the hard work and manual labor originally required to build each structure. The fact that

they still exist thousands of years later is a testament to the architects and workers whose lives were spent (and lost) on their construction. MacCannell notes how several offline tourist attractions make a spectacle of "work" in the sense that the goal of the sight is to ensure that visitors are duly impressed by the amount of labor required to build it. In this scenario tourists "become a moral witness of its masterpieces of virtue and viciousness."<sup>19</sup> Although the issue of physical labor does not exist for virtual worlds, a related dynamic is at work, as the programmers who build the most visually and technically impressive objects are rewarded with respect and social status. This is particularly true in the worlds that place greater value on object building as opposed to event planning or socializing. By replicating an object already associated with technical and cultural achievement, the builder borrows some of the prestige associated with the original landmark.

## World Tours

With so much to see in virtual worlds, from tropical islands to ancient landmarks, it can be difficult for visitors to decide which sights to view first. To help familiarize new arrivals with their offerings, many virtual worlds have developed world tours. Tours are more common in 3D environments, where continuous movement through virtual space is emphasized. Nearly every 3D world offers an official guided tour given by an employee. Many also offer unofficial tours with volunteers who welcome visitors to the world in a more informal way.



Fig. 23: *Active Worlds* tour sign



Fig. 24: Island Tours area in *There*

For those who prefer to tour at their own pace, a few self-guided tours are available which are modeled on offline walking tours. Each destination is marked by an easily

recognizable sign containing information about the sight and further directions for continuing to the next destination. Of course, one distinct advantage of the tourist experience in virtual worlds is that instead of being required to walk to the next sight, one can simply click a link and "teleport" there. *Second Life's* self-guided tours are aptly named "Teleport Tours."



**Fig. 25:** *Second Life's* Teleport Tour Kiosk

For new visitors, world tours are a great way to learn about the basic layout of the world while making new friends. Regular visitors, who think of themselves more as "residents" than "visitors" take great pride in showcasing their favorite attractions, especially when they were involved with building the sights being shown. One important difference between offline tours and virtual tours is that the goal of the tourist may be slightly different. In offline tours, it is generally understood by both tourist and resident that the tourist's visit is a temporary, one-time event. In virtual worlds, tours are given with the implicit understanding between the tourist and the guide that the tourist will want to return often and become a resident if the world is to their liking. In other words, they are not necessarily touring to witness the authentic living experiences of the "natives" (unless they are journalists or academic researchers). They are simply looking for a social diversion and a place to visit regularly. Of course, not all virtual world residents welcome new visitors and not all new visitors are courteous and respectful of the world's residents. In offline tourist areas it is common for local residents to look down on tourists. This happens online as well. Virtual tourists may annoy or offend residents by being unfamiliar with the etiquette and customs of the place they are visiting, and residents can appear unfriendly or abrupt to tourists if their questions are ignored.

## Screen Captures as Tourist Photography

Urry (2002) illuminates several ways in which photography is central to the offline tourist experience and how it functions within the dynamic of the tourist gaze. Not surprisingly, a form of "photography" is developing in virtual worlds as well. A photograph in a virtual world takes the form of a screen capture: a digital image of the computer's screen captured at a specific moment in time.<sup>20</sup> Virtual tourists take photographs for the same reasons offline tourists take photographs. They want to commemorate their travels, obtain a visual record of enjoyable experiences, and show evidence of their experiences to friends and family. The most enthusiastic virtual photographers create elaborate online photo albums and corresponding travel journals to record and share their virtual world adventures. *There* has some engaging samples of this activity, including a Photo Club, a Screen Shot club, and several photographic travel journals.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 26: *There's* Photo Club



Fig. 27: Digital\_Signal\_X's  
*There* Photo Diary

Many screen captures recall the composition of offline tourist photographs. For example, Chrisher, a regular visitor to *There*, has taken many screen captures in which her avatar is "posed" in front of a recognizable landmark, mimicking the poses and gestures that an offline tourist might make in a tourist photograph. Another image from Chrisher's album shows an entire tour group of avatars posing on top of a pyramid on *There's* Egypt island.



Fig. 28: Chrisher at Nada Island



Fig. 29: Chrisher's tour group on pyramid

Just as there is an art to taking a good offline photograph, there is an art to taking a good screen capture. Serious virtual photographers put a great deal of thought into the screen capture's content. Capturing a desired composition requires some degree of skill and technical knowledge of the online camera controls. Most 3D virtual worlds provide a variety of technical options for capturing images. In addition to a standard first-person view, most include a variety of third person perspective views as well. This gives avatars the ability to take self-portraits without the aid of another person and allows them to use a variety of camera angles to do so. Most virtual photographers choose to include their own avatar in each photo in some way, although the first person perspective is more effective for some scenarios like large group event shots.

Online photo albums and travel journals help visitors form community bonds with others and serve as a non-corporate endorsement of the world. Most of them are independent projects created by virtual world enthusiasts but in one interesting case, *Second Life* has an "embedded journalist" in its world. Wagner James Au, a freelance writer and contributor to *Salon* magazine, now provides regular "travel commentary" and screen capture material for publication in a "New World Notes" column on *Second Life's* Web site.<sup>22</sup>

### The Promotion of Virtual Worlds as Tourist Attractions

The "embedded journalist" of *Second Life* is one of many interesting promotional ideas

used by virtual world companies to advertise their product. Descriptive text on informational Web sites and in corporate press releases describe them much the same way a travel brochure might describe an offline tourist destination: as an exotic vacation spot, an online theme park, or even a "home away from home." Many print and Web advertising images from virtual worlds are clearly influenced by offline travel industry formats like postcards and travel posters. The more closely a world is modeled on a tourism metaphor the more it will borrow from tourism industry advertising practices in its own promotional practices.

For example, several worlds including *Cybertown*, *Second Life* and *There* use postcard images as promotional materials. Linden Lab, the owners of *Second Life*, recently produced offline print postcards showing various images of scenery, avatars, and events in the world with taglines like "*Second Life* at night," "The glorious Yamamoto pavilion" and "Win your own private island!" (for an "island giveaway" promotion in May 2003). *Cybertown* and *There* offer online postcards for visitors to share with interested friends. The postcard designs are based on the style of offline tourist postcards, with idealized views of the world's most beautiful or intriguing attractions.



**Fig. 30:** *There* Postcard

Because virtual worlds usually consist of a collection of several different themed areas rather than one unified environment, it is common to find in-world advertisements in the form of travel posters or billboards in high traffic areas that let visitors know about other parts of the world. For example, one of the first things visible in the *Active Worlds'* *Alpha World* welcome area is a collection of billboards advertising various *Alpha World* attractions and sights. In a similar fashion, *There* places travel posters in information booths scattered throughout the popular Tiki area to entice visitors to travel to other parts

of the world. Like their offline counterparts, virtual postcards and travel posters are meant to create a desire on the part of the viewer to visit these "exotic" places. The postcards also serve as souvenirs for visitors that can be shared with others, much like the online photo albums.



Fig. 31: Billboards in *Alpha World*



Fig. 32: Travel posters in *There*

Some Web sites advertising virtual worlds contain copy samples that sound like text inspired by a travel brochure. In a curious attempt to give its virtual space an impossible aura of authenticity, *Adobe Atmosphere* gives its product a hyper-realistic spin by stating that a visit to these replications of ancient landmarks will be just as gratifying as visiting the original versions. Site copy on *Atmosphere's* "sample worlds" Web page shows an image of an Egyptian pyramid along with text that reads, "...it took 100,000 people working over a 20-year period to construct, and now you can walk through this wonder yourself." Next to this, similar copy promoting a replica of Stonehenge reads, "Always wanted to see Stonehenge but never got around to it? Now you can be at Stonehenge, with *Adobe Atmosphere* and the Web. Walk around this monument and get a feel for the wonder that it is..."<sup>23</sup> The description of each "wonder" makes no distinction made between the original landmark and its corresponding simulacrum. It is both interesting and ironic that Adobe chooses to focus on the one thing that cannot possibly be true, while neglecting to mention the one thing visitors can do that they can't in a visit to the offline versions - fly over them.

*Second Life* strikes a better balance with its promotional Web site copy by highlighting the world's best attributes while emphasizing that the experience of touring it will be unlike any previous tourist experience: "Fly through an ever-evolving 3D landscape and encounter wonderful places and things - all created by residents like you. A lone cabin on

a peaceful island. A growing city. Mysterious ancient ruins. A Wild West town. There's no end to what you can discover, and it's never the same twice."<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If it is true that the tourist experience requires something outside the realm of the ordinary to gaze upon, virtual worlds are the ultimate tourist environments. They may not offer satisfactory replacements for offline holidays, but they can offer new types of experiences that are not possible in the offline world. They also offer more options for leisurely diversion beyond regular entertainment media. Virtual worlds that manage to combine an attractive depiction of reality with a small dash of fantasy offer the most compelling experiences.

Visiting a virtual world is like stepping through the proverbial looking-glass, where everything seems familiar and yet is slightly different. They are liminal spaces, existing somewhere between work and play, conscious and subconscious, real and unreal. While this paper has demonstrated that there are many sign systems within virtual worlds modeled on the offline world, they also have otherworldly qualities that are continuous visual cues reminding visitors they are in a virtual space.

Gazing into the looking-glass of virtual worlds tells us many things about ourselves. The sign systems of the offline world are reflected back to us in condensed form, giving us more perspective and making semiotic systems more readily apparent to us. The looking-glass of the computer screen also functions as a camera, continuously mediating all experiences and recording them when desired. When MacCannell wrote about offline tourism in 1976, he believed that studying tourism was an effective way to study modernism, as the development of modern society was closely related to the increase of mass leisure time and the growth of international tourism. Studying virtual worlds offers a similar opportunity today as greater numbers of people choose to spend their leisure time online. If the study of tourism is a study of the modern, the study of tourism in

virtual worlds is the perfect opportunity to study the postmodern.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term "avatar" is used in Hindu mythology to describe the bodies gods use when taking corporeal form on the earth. It is used in virtual worlds as the term for the image that represents each visitor. Avatars can take many forms - human, animal, or inanimate object. Some virtual worlds have visitors choose their avatars from a pre-set menu, while others allow more detailed customization of each body part.

<sup>2</sup> Morningstar and Farmer in Benedikt, ed. (1992), PP. 273-301.

<sup>3</sup> The Palace was originally developed by Jim Bumgardner for Time Warner Interactive in 1995, The Palace software has since been owned and developed by several failed companies, the latest of which (Communities.com) shut down in 2001. In spite of this, hundreds of palaces still exist, maintained by dedicated palace citizens across a network of palace servers. More information is available at <http://www.thepalace.com>

<sup>4</sup> Virtual Places was originally developed by Excite. Excite stopped developing and supporting Virtual Places worlds in 2001 and several smaller companies started developing and supporting smaller networks of VP worlds, including Halsoft Chat (<http://vpchat.com>).

<sup>5</sup> Microsoft shut down the Comic Chat servers in February 2001. Like The Palace and Virtual Places, smaller independent chat servers now continue to provide service to Comic Chat visitors.

<sup>6</sup> Alpha World currently exists as part of the larger Active Worlds network, currently owned by Active Worlds Inc. (<http://www.activeworlds.com>). AW beta launch was in 1995, with public launch two years later in 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Cybertown (<http://www.cybertown.com>) is one of the few first-wave virtual worlds still developed by its original creator, Blaxxun Interactive.

<sup>8</sup> Originally called "Onlive! Traveler," the Traveler technology has been adopted by The Digital Space Commons and maintained by a group of Traveler devotees.

<sup>9</sup> WorldsChat is now called Worlds.com (<http://www.worlds.com>).

<sup>10</sup> WorldsAway is now called VZones. VZones is currently owned by Stratagem Corporation, Inc. which maintains the original Dreamscape world developed by Lucasfilm and Fujitsu, plus two other worlds called newHorizone and Second Kingdom (<http://www.vzones.com>).

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed overview of first-wave virtual worlds, see Damer (1998).

<sup>12</sup> This paper focuses on examples of virtual worlds also known as MMOSG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Social Games) as opposed to MMORPG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). While the categories themselves are tenuous and there may indeed be role playing in virtual worlds, MMOSG's are defined more by their status as spaces for socializing rather than role playing or gaming. See <http://www.virtualworldsreview.com> for a list of MMOSG's.

<sup>13</sup> Urry (2002), P. 124.

<sup>14</sup> Many examples of offline simulacra, including Disney World, have been analyzed by Baudrillard (1983) and Eco (1986).

<sup>15</sup> Carson discussed this concept in a chat event with There visitors on May 8, 2003 and explained further in private e-mail correspondence with the author.

<sup>16</sup> The Disney company launched a gaming virtual world called "Toontown" in June 2003 which could more accurately be called an online Disney World, although it is more like being in an interactive version of a Disney animated feature than visiting a Disney theme park. Information about Toontown can be found at <http://play.toontown.com/about.php>

<sup>17</sup> Believe it or not, Muse's Turner Gallery is not the only virtual replica of the Turner Gallery. The Tate Gallery Web site has a similar feature at its web site at <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turner/gallery.htm> although it is less immersive than Muse's version.

<sup>18</sup> The nations represented in virtual worlds tend to be Western nations or idealized depictions of environments that have been colonized by Western nations. Colonial themes are nearly as abundant as themes of tourism in virtual worlds. After virtual world visitors have embarked on "adventures of exploration and discovery" they are commonly invited to become cyberspace "pioneers" and to "colonize" each world by building or furnishing virtual residences and civic buildings. The topic of colonial themes in virtual worlds is a large topic worthy of separate analysis.

<sup>19</sup> MacCannell (1976), P. 7.

<sup>20</sup> PC's commonly have this functionality built in as a "Print Screen" key that will capture an exact image of the desktop at the moment the button is pressed and paste it to the Windows clipboard. The user can then paste the image into an image editing program and "process" the image by cropping, resizing, and saving it. Most serious virtual photographers use one of the many screen capture utility programs available to help automate this process. Most of the images included in this paper were captured with Gadwin PrintScreen (<http://www.gadwin.com/printscreens>).

<sup>21</sup> See the References section at the end of this document for a list of URLs to sample online photo albums.

<sup>22</sup> New World Notes is available on the Web at <http://secondlife.com/notes/> (last visited June 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Adobe Atmosphere Sample Worlds page: <http://www.adobe.com/products/atmosphere/worlds/sampleworlds.html> (last visited June 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Second Life's "About Second Life" Web page: <http://secondlife.com/about/> (last visited June 2003)

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Urry, J. (2002) *The Tourist Gaze* (second edition). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

### **Online Photo Albums**

Chrisher's Online Photo Album

<http://photos.yahoo.com/bc/chrisher/lst?.dir=/There&.src=ph&.order=&.view=t&.done=http%3a//photos.yahoo.com/>

Digital\_Signal\_X's *There* Photo Diary

<http://www.missouri.edu/%7Eglsd2f/there/>

*There* Photo Club

<http://mobynuke.com/tpc/>

### **Virtual Worlds**

*Active Worlds*

<http://www.activeworlds.com>

*Adobe Atmosphere*

<http://www.adobe.com/products/atmosphere/>

*Coke Music*

<http://www.cokemusic.com>

*Cybertown*

<http://www.cybertown.com>

*Disney's Toontown Online*

<http://play.toontown.com/about.php>

*Habbo Hotel*

<http://www.habbohotel.com>

*The Palace*

<http://www.thepalace.com>

*Second Life*

<http://www.secondlife.com>

*The Sims Online*

<http://www.thesimsonline.com>

*There*

<http://www.there.com>

*Traveler*

<http://www.digitalspace.com/traveler/>

*Virtual Places / Halsoft Chat*

<http://www.vpchat.com>

*Worlds.com / WorldsChat*

<http://www.worlds.com>