

Presence and digital tourism

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Abstract This paper provides an introduction to digital tourism as mediated by presence research as a means to create substantive user experiences (UX) for visitors. Tourism is a rich and varied socio-economic activity that permeates our global society. Digital tourism is the digital support of the tourist experience. In this paper we introduce and survey both fields and introduce a number of examples of tourist experiences based on our blended spaces approach. Cutting across this is the sense of presence that visitors can experience in real or digital tourist experiences. We conclude the paper with a discussion of designing the user experience in blended tourist spaces.

Keywords Tourism · Blended spaces · Design · User experience · Usability

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1 Introduction

Tourism is a large global industry, both in terms of numbers of participants (both tourists and operators) and in terms of the overall expenditure. According to UNWTO forecasts, international tourist arrivals are expected to exceed one billion in 2012, having grown to 980 million in 2011, up by 4.4 % from the 939 million recorded in 2010 (UNWTO 2011). Tourism as a leisure activity is a pervasive aspect of our local, national and the global economies. For some, it is their leading source of income for goods and services. The number of motivations people have for undertaking tourist experiences—from ecotourism to medical-tourism—emphasize that this is a very loosely coordinated yet important socio-economic aspect of life.

Consider, for example, that in 2009, five of the top ten visitor attractions in Scotland were Museums or Galleries, with in excess of 4.3 million visits. Unpacking these visits reveals a rich array of reasons for each visit including weather, serendipity, school visits, research visits, special events and in response to marketing activity by the venue, region or country. Developing technology to support visits based on such a broad range of human interests and motivations is challenging. In the US National Parks Service, there are hundreds of tourist attractions ranging from the great parks themselves such as Yellowstone to historic houses, chapels and reconstructed villages. Each attraction presents its own challenges in terms of interpretation, language, isolation or popularity, along with numbers and diversity of visitors.

Broadly speaking, digital tourism is concerned with the use of digital technologies to enhance the tourist experience. This may be as mundane as posting recommendations on a tourist Website, but increasingly, it concerns the mixing of the real world with digital content designed to