

PERSPECTIVE

Of gods, tricks and weirdos—A perspective related to content, practices and aims in the usage of AR for touristic experiences and spatial storytelling

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ABSTRACT

The complicated and interwoven relationship between the tourist as an explorer and, at the same time, the audience of digital content is the background of this perspective. The topic is strictly based on the work and its impact, made in 10 years by the group “Komplex” in the field of creating augmented reality experiences in urban space, mainly for social enterprises funded by cultural agencies. The transformation of citizens into tourists able to discover “further experiences” hidden in the urban environment and also the bridging of this experience with specific imaginary diffused in the web is the scenario that this perspective wants to highlight in order to achieve a multilayered set of impacts such as: i) slow tourism, ii) cultural and technological activation of neglected areas, iii) twisting narratives related to specific neighbors, iv) inclusion of slices of urban society far from the touristic hot spot.

Keywords: augmented reality; slum; slow tourism; analog horror; creepy pasta; counter cultures; audience; urban exploration; neglected areas

1. Introduction

The case of THELEMA Abbey the derelict house of Aleister Crowley in Cefalù (Sicily). The most discussed figure of modern magic, which inspired music, arts, and movies was living in Sicily exactly in the period in which the Fascist party was taking control. He was expelled, but the small rural house in which he lived became legendary. A strange kind of tourist for decades trespassed the threshold to explore it and to take pictures of the sultry and spine-chilling frescos that Crowley’s crew painted inside the small rooms. Even international rockstars were secretly interested in that unique location. Quite a weird scenario considering that Cefalù is not missing traditional tourist attractions; the small town was recently the location of the last Indiana Jones. The Abbey of Thelema became, in time, a secret place for incredible pilgrimages occurring even at night and involving not only tourists but even Sicilian boys and girls interested in catching a thrill out of that place.

2. Perspective

The perspective here extended is based on the results, impacts, and monitoring related to 30 projects of augmented reality set in urban space across 10 years (2013–2023^[1]) in cities like Rome, Turin, and many

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others. These AR projects were funded by Italian social enterprises in very peculiar cities with huge touristic assets and attractions, and even peculiar problems arose from that: overcrowded areas. The topics of these projects are various and in some cases spooky.

AR is a computer vision application where digital content (video, audio, interactive object) appears on the screen of the user if the user follows specific instructions: i) go to a place, ii) install the application, iii) visit the Google map, iv) frame a specific surface. The discovery of the content and its narratives is the prize of the user, a revelation out of urban surfaces. Italy presents a very huge amass of tourist hot spots but out of that location the rest of the urban areas are completely neglected, they don't exist in the perception of the tourists and in the perception of the citizens, they are more than places to visit.

I can easily observe in Rome that the aims of “slow tourism” are completely unattended, together with the UN Dev Goals linked with those ambitions to slow down tourism and reduce consumption. The Italian context is filled with extraordinary attractors, and it is indeed a unique lab from which to transform citizens into tourists and tourists into a new kind of explorer of what I define: “Further touristic experiences”, FTE. That definition takes some hints from the “creepy pasta^[2]” and the cornucopia of urban legends flooding the unthwarted Internet and moving a global audience very eager to the discoveries of impossible and weird scenarios. That rich and pulsating arena is represented by content, where the attitude to explore liminal areas in urban space and even in rural areas, is the main challenge for people searching the “Thelema’s thrill”. Once this kind of video documentation was possible to find only on the deep web, now there was regular posting activity on YouTube, without any censorship. The audience is composed of NON-Tourist, even cinemagoers who are enticed by the viewing of a real adventure in a real place that resonates like a movie.

Outside the official touristic maps, and thanks to smart technologies (BYOD^[3] approach), it is possible to insert and activate in the physical space specific narratives and take advantage of the liminal spaces present in every city.

The trick of the tail is to structure narratives in the wake of pop/weird/nerd cultures and so in order to activate un-touristic places through content and genres that are already in the imagination of the people: the bogeymen, ghosts, slender men, and other oddities. The business of ghost tourism in Wales is an official offer^[4] of the Welsh Government. The no-man’s-land where we have active tourists and people not interested in traditional tourist experiences is getting very thin and indeed they use the same tool to catch a more compelling experience: their smartphone. The strategy I stress here is aimed at expanding the behavior of the tourists and to blur this genre of consumer/audience. Through that kind of audio-visual production, we could be able to face specific kinds of crises like pandemics and climate change. There are locations that can interest people who are not tourists, but they will have touristic behavior. The traditional attractions will stay in their place, somehow even empowered by immersive technologies (AR XR VR). But with the same technologies, we can open the “stargate” to further experiences in neglected, unvisited places where special stories are thriving. The liminal narratives are creating and moving new kinds of tourists into a realm where they are thrilled with powerful emotions like a sense of discovery, pure adventure, and the astounding feeling of the unexpected. On YouTube, exploration content related to such kinds of tourism is burgeoning, and the same vloggers offer the audience special services to enjoy special excursions even in dangerous zones (like Centralia^[5] or even more dangerous places). Randonautica is in fact “further tourism”, and it invokes even quantum technologies, quite in a philosophical way, to entice the “tourists” to get the app and start the journey guided by random coordinates. In the case of Randonautica, the experience of the participant is simply documented by the participants themselves, and then the video is shared as pure storytelling on social video platforms; there are Randonautica tellings even in podcasts available on Archive.org.

My practice is to probe and study the counter cultures thriving on the web and even the traditional mythology of a place to expand the palette of tourist entertainment and its content. The impact of my work consists of an essential fact: it has finally implemented slow tourism in areas that are not touristic at all. Analog horror, backrooms series, folk horror AI-assisted, 4n0maly^[6] series, and the dozens of urban legends transformed unknown places in the location of the imaginary, places to be visited, exactly like the humble rural house of Cefalù that became a place for mystical pilgrimages. At the same time, as my professional experience demonstrated across 10 years, the neglected areas, or tourist areas, are the interzones^[7] of the cities where the presence of such experiences activates an awareness that twists narratives, often not positive, related to that neighborhood. The AR project “Stalker 451^[8]” twisted the narrative of an area of Turin famous for the drug labs and not for immersive technologies opened over the urban surfaces.

The transformation of the cities into “cyberpunk” districts, where even the brutalist architecture became essential in the narratives for FTE, is highly needed to reach the aim of slow tourism sustainability but also to activate the process of inclusion of the population that cannot afford a real trip. Special narratives and cultural awareness are activated in the AR project 6IMITO^[9] (it sounds like You are mighty), which I have imagined through the apparitions of young gods in the ancient Latin myths. The user could discover the real mythical gods in urban places in Rome, and those places are out of the touristic spots. That discovery is not only grounding mythology out of museums but it is also revealing that superheroes are coming from that lore. In another case, I used the ancient myth of ASTARTE^[10], a goddess very popular across the whole Mediterranean Sea in ancient times. She makes her appearance in the nightscape of Sant’ Antioco island in Sardinia, and she is tall like Godzilla. The overcrowding of tourists in many cities in Italy is creating unsustainable situations, and recently, climate change has made these areas very crowded during every period of the year. To offer other experiences from the classical Colosseum is a way to reduce the environmental impact and spread the people in much more vast areas.

The final picture I work for consists of a fresco where accurate content production and dissemination are able to make every place on this planet touristic, activating even small economies and human relations otherwise impossible to trigger, again including people with some sort of disability. My aim is to create exits from the tourist cages and from the bridles of the tour operators, and so to reveal a new kind of tourist who is already exploring on the web weird scenarios and liminal mysteries: the searchers of the “rabbit hole”. More than a gamification of tourism, I work for the ratification of the tourist, giving everybody, even the citizens, the power to explore impossible places hidden in the liminalities of the cities. Using some of the best tricks of Lacan, we could imagine a sphere where all the impossible objects and sensations are waiting for fruition, and my work is to trigger the jouissance of the audience, which is going to probe that sphere to reach unexpected discoveries.

People who have a limited chance to trip and to have regular vacations can afford and make a viable urban mystery experience set in their neighborhood, simply following the “rabbit” next door using their smartphone.

3. Conclusion

In my personal opinion and considering my experience on the ground, novelism is the new paradigm to be considered in this strange land of content for the tourists of the 21st century. We are in uncharted territory, it is an interzone between video games, alternate reality games, AR, VR, literature, and urban/rural lore, and we wander in it scanning with our smartphones to discover what lies “behind” the surface of our journey. The book “*The Official Guide to Randonautica*”^[11] carved a sharp definition of novelism: “... is the paradigm of exploring the hidden corners of human awareness to find new potential.” Despite the weird

assumptions of Randonautica founders to bend space and time dawdling around, the horizon of their intuition is really inspiring in the creation of new content able to transform normal citizens into tourists and normal tourists into a new kind of “citizen”: the one of the Rabbit Hole Nation. But probing the endless cradle of the past century, what is evident is that Alfred Jarry and his Pataphysics, together with Walter Benjamin, are embedded in some way in Randonautica’s theories.

Reading the aforementioned book using the glass of Alfred Jarry and the definition of the flaneur^[12] by Walter Benjamin, it is quite evident that a parody of science evoking the free mindset of the flaneur could lead to new content to expand the digital content thread. It indeed does exist as a flaneur in our digital age, an idler, a free, aimless wanderer of spaces, and often we call it the Internaut, a web surfer. So, at the end of my essay, what matters is the pleasure, or even the thrill, of the flaneur, and it does not matter if he/she is a tourist or not; it’s the narrative that will build up the “universe”.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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