

Matt Baldwin¹

Marc Böhlen²

Shawn Rider³

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Easier-Travel.com: The Ultimate Travel Experience

This paper gives an overview of the net.art installation Easier-Travel.com, a travel service that reduces travel to its core: anticipation and memory. To provide an introduction to some of our critical inquiry, manifest in Easier-Travel, we will discuss the project's relevance and relationship to the ideas of Mieke Bal, Susan Sontag, and Hakim Bey.

Easier-Travel is a web based robotic messaging system that mimics common online travel services in style and appearance. Visitors opting to use Easier-Travel.com receive electronically transmitted travel documents synched with the itinerary of a trip they would like to embark on. Once the trip, which never physically takes place is over, visitors receive vacation photos from the destination they imagine to have visited. Easier-Travel.com offers the ultimate convenience in travel: *the null trip*.

Travel in the Age of Electronic Reproduction

Travel is escape, travel is respite. Travel is desire for the authentic made experience. But the reality of travel is so very different from the hopes that spark it. We travel and visit the same cities, sleep in the same hotels, eat the same dishes, see the same exotic plants and animals, and buy tickets to the same museums. Our hunger for the authentic is

¹ baldwinmathew@speakeasy.net, San Francisco

² marcbohlen@acm.org, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, Toronto, Zürich

³ srrider@buffalo.edu, University at Buffalo, Buffalo

boundless, yet we easily assimilate the facts and anecdotes of canned docent patter and vacation guidebook capsulized histories into our experience of unknown places.

Opposed to this boundless need for the real is the economy of convenience of the networked world of electronic transactions. Pseudo real-time images from globally distributed web cams, headlines from news agencies marketed for believability, and continuously updated weather maps from every corner of the world bring the remote close and the exotic near; a digital spillover builds a variously distorted foreknowledge of the other. The travel experience becomes saturated with anticipation and remotely acquired e-knowledge before any real trip begins. Physical travel, the displacement of the body, becomes but an appendage to the desire for travel. Might one not seriously consider the benefits of pure e-travel, given the endless cues at security obsessed airports, the hassle of visa hunting, the innumerable ways of falling ill abroad, and the chance of falling prey to cunning criminals? Back home, vacation memories are selective, sketchy, and bound to diminish over time. If every vacation must come to an end, why bother with messy travel; why bother, when the gist of travel could be had so easily, so conveniently?

Traveling With Easier-Travel

Appropriating the representational techniques and rhetoric of the travel industry, Easier-Travel replaces travel with satellite events *reminiscent of travel*: messages, confirmations, welcome notes, warnings, advisories, rules and regulations, e-tickets and finally, memories. The website has the visual appearance of a typical online travel site. Its upbeat color palette suggests excitement, its font and structure suggest expertise. The continuously expanding list of destinations accessible via Easier-Travel include locations

in the USA, Australia, Canada, Singapore, France, Switzerland, Malaysia, Kenya, Egypt, Italy, Oman, Malta, Russia, Spain and Croatia. The list hardly differs from that of commercial vendors. Easier-Travel organizes a trip in the same patterns as travel agents do. Visitors choose destination, date, and travel preferences. The Easier-Travel messaging agent then confirms their choices, notifies them of their booking, and confirms flight details and issues travel documents. Usually, everything goes according to plan.

Automating Narratives of Anticipation and Recollection

Taking a cue from Mieke Bal's analysis of the elements of narrative and story (1997), the Easier-Travel archives and databases can be understood as a particular type of intelligent fabula. Data stored in a large dynamic database are related directly to the individual user based on an array of values input at the configuration, the booking, of the vacation experience. These narrative elements are not only accessed and cued by the user's choices, but also altered according to the system's knowledge of the user. With the assistance of our robotic messenger, who functions as a supporting character, the user effectively creates a first-person narrative of his/her travel experience. The elements delivered by the fabula form the core of the experience, but only with significant connective work on the part of the traveler. As with actual travel, the experience becomes reified through the remnant media and records, a saved itinerary or semi-mysterious snapshot of some distant destination.

The rhetorical structure of Easier-Travel diverges from the hyperlinking typical of electronic literature. Rather than focusing on the non-linear or random presentation of narrative elements, Easier-Travel centers on being dynamically reactive to the user. The

elements are delivered along a timeline, lending a feel to Easier-Travel akin to other time-based media, such as cinema. But Easier-Travel is also different from traditional time-based media in that the timeline each experience follows is determined in part by the user. Physical interaction with the site, pointing and clicking, is not the goal of the user experience. Rather, these virtual vacations participate in narrative information structures found in net-based consumer interfaces. These structures mediate the rhetoric of many activities that have become bound to the computer and network, among which are the activities of preparing for, executing, and remembering travel. We have made use of this rhetoric, taking as our advantage the given automated flavors of disembodied language to which users have grown accustomed.

Furthermore, much of the narrative stems from the user's reaction to, and interpretation of, the vacation photos returned after each journey. In her essay, "Plato's Cave," Sontag (1977: 9) writes, "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of a space in which they are insecure." This is the dynamic Easier-Travel works with. The vacation photos "offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had" (Sontag, 1977: 9). These bits of documentary evidence can be shared with friends, memorialized in a display, and revisited again and again. The user is confronted with imagery that must be accounted for. Just as one might embellish or fabricate a vacation adventure, Easier-Travel users are asked to imagine an experience and given the resources to reify that experience.

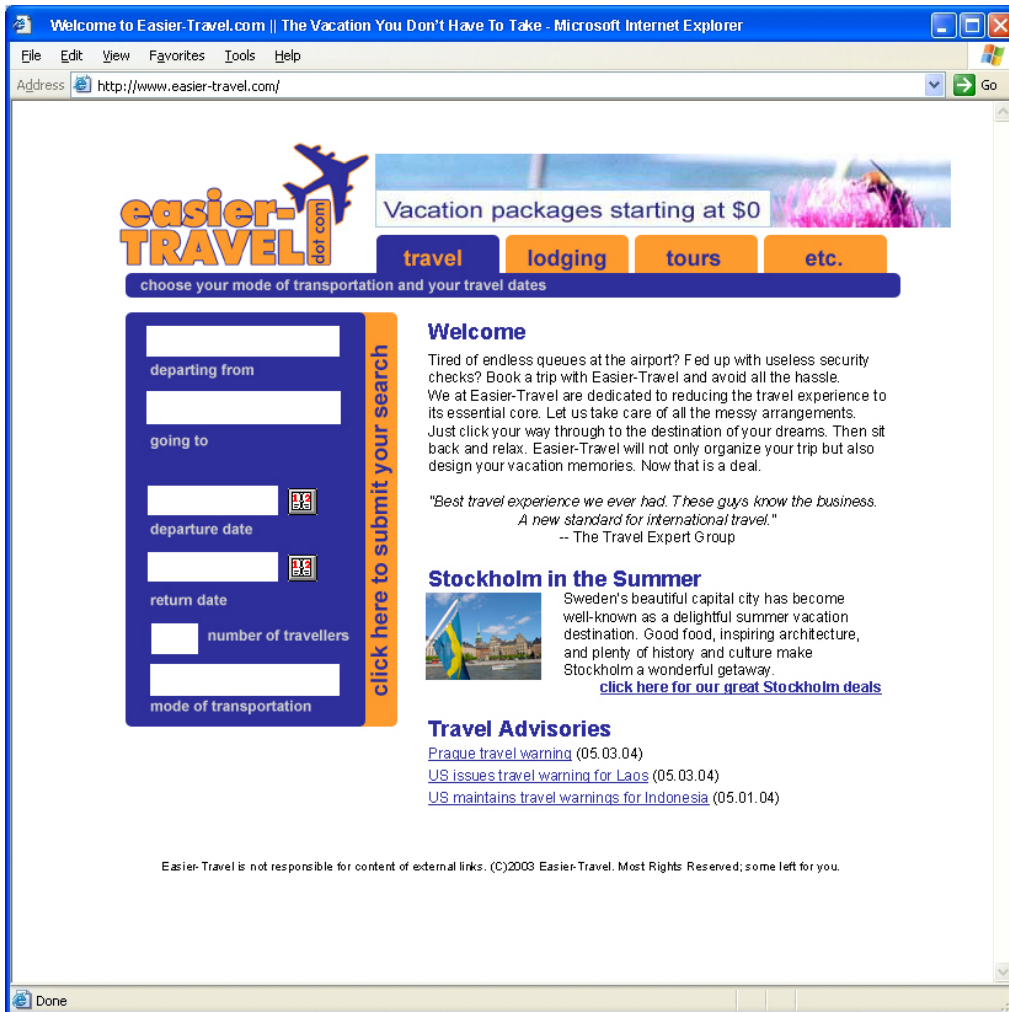


Figure One

Steve Smith Goes to Stockholm

The easiest way to discuss the experience Easier-Travel offers is to follow a customer through a potential trip. Therefore, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that a customer by the name of Steve Smith had booked a weeklong vacation to Stockholm from September 20th to 27th 2004 with Easier-Travel. The first message he would receive from Easier-Travel might read like this:

Hello steve@smile.com

Greetings from Easier-Travel.com

This is Amanda sending you a welcome note. I am your travel agent and will assist you with your travel preparations. You will be receiving a few notes from me prior to your departure. They will contain important information regarding your trip – be sure to check your email regularly.

Best regards.

-Amanda

Easier-Travel: the ultimate travel machine

<http://www.easier-travel.com>

A dedicated and named robotic travel agent—promising to ensure customer satisfaction—monitors each trip. All travel agents are *named*, such that visitors might believe that a caring human is contacting them. Easier-Travel makes use of the standard endearing, hopeful, familiar vernacular that e-commerce sites, automated support systems, bulk mail senders and spammers routinely harness.

As Steve's departure date draws closer, he receives more preparatory messages from his agent. Here, the agent reminds him of the various items he might need:

Hello steve@smile.com

Make sure your passport is valid throughout the duration of your trip. Some countries require 6 months validity on your passport for entry. Expired personal documents may prevent you from international travel.

Best regards.

-Amanda

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Of course the e-ticket itself is also dispatched via email. Here the standard legalese of limited contractual agreements and the vernacular of anticipated customer complaints become a vehicle of simulation. The commercialization of travel and

virtualization of travel meet to form an alliance of convenience, offering the world, yet delivering, in the end, an elaborate disappointment:

DATE: 08 MAY 2004 ITINERARY OUR REF: LFSQ02
 SMITH/STEVE MR AGENT: 28SRMB

SATURDAY	SCAN AIRWAYS	FLIGHT SC 904	ECONOMY CLS
20 SEPT 04	DEPART: 545P		NONSTOP
	TERMINAL 78		
21 SEPT 04	ARRIVE: STOCKHOLM, SW (ARN) 740		CONFIRMED
	AIRCRAFT TYPE: AIRBUS A330 JET		
	FLIGHT DURATION: 7:55		
SATURDAY	SCAN AIRWAYS	FLIGHT SC 903	ECONOMY CLS
27 SEPT 04	DEPART: STOCKHOLM, SW (ARN) 1040A		NONSTOP
	TERMINAL 4		
28 SEPT 04	ARRIVE: NEWARK, NJ (EWR) 110P		CONFIRMED
	AIRCRAFT TYPE: AIRBUS A330 JET		
	FLIGHT DURATION: 8:30		

THIS TICKET IS NON REFUNDABLE.
 DATE CHANGES ARE PERMITTED TO THE INBOUND SECTOR ONLY
 AND SUBJECT TO AVAILABILITY. SOME RESTRICTIONS MAY APPLY.

All messages occurring prior to departure utilize the template rhetoric common to web-based travel service communications. Everything changes once the date of the anticipated trip occurs. Easier-Travel shifts its language from one of customer service to one of direct confrontation. During the trip, which occurs only in the mind of the traveler, the system ponders, via electronic messages, the hidden needs and undisclosed fears of the travel hungry.

Here is the kind of message Steve might find in his mailbox while he is *in* Stockholm:

Hello steve@smile.com

What do you seek so urgently?

-Amanda

Easier-Travel: the ultimate travel machine

<http://www.easier-travel.com>

or

Hello steve@smile.com

You will understand nothing.

-Amanda

Easier-Travel: the ultimate travel machine

<http://www.easier-travel.com>

When the trip that never happened is over, the messaging system reverts back to its friendly, impersonal tone:

Hello steve@smile.com

Thanks for traveling with Easier-Travel. We hope you had an excellent experience.

-Amanda

Easier-Travel: the ultimate travel machine

<http://www.easier-travel.com>

Finally, a few days after the fictitious return, the Easier-Travel messaging agent sends its customer a final message with a link to a photo gallery.

Hello steve@smile.com

You can pick up your vacation photos at this URL:
www.easier-travel.com/gallery.php?t_id=324&c_id=92

-Amanda

Easier-Travel: the ultimate travel machine

<http://www.easier-travel.com>

Steve Smith Was in Stockholm, *or* Souvenirs in the Age of Electronic Reproduction

All of Easier-Travel's destinations are represented by dozens of photos that have been collected on site. They are all real in the sense that real people actually traveled to the destinations and collected the images. They are fictitious in the sense that they represent borrowed memories. These images constitute Easier-Travel's archive. It is a representation of the real, selectively mined for the convenient virtual.

Travelers often collect physicalia to remind them of places visited and sites seen. The souvenir is the embodiment of the temporally bound experience that refuses to die in the mind of the beholder. The travel diary and the traveling artist's sketchbook are honored methods of creating such objects of personal significance. With the advent of the camera, the act of collecting visual proof of travel becomes commonplace. Digital photography and vast storage space allow quaint collections to grow into archives of size beyond reason. The convenience of the digital format cuts many ways, and Easier-Travel works with this potential. Should an Easier-Travel visitor choose to travel to the same location a second time, the messaging agent's photo selection might include zoomed-in details of the very same photos sent the first time, as a reminder of what might have gone unnoticed. Further use of the service with repeat visits to the same vacation sites may lead to even more varied imagery. Some memories might become blurred, others might remain underexposed.

If physical travel is passé or too cumbersome, the vacation photos of others, of bolder travelers from simpler times, become historical documents that transcend personal experience. In an increasingly finite world with instantaneous access to limited resources, the past experience of some can become fodder for the imagination of many. If the

history of television and film can be used as indicators for the future of tourism as entertainment, then Easier-Travel might tell one vision of what is to come.

When Steve accesses the above mentioned website, he might find a page just like the one below (Figure Two). Each image can be enlarged, scrutinized and even directed

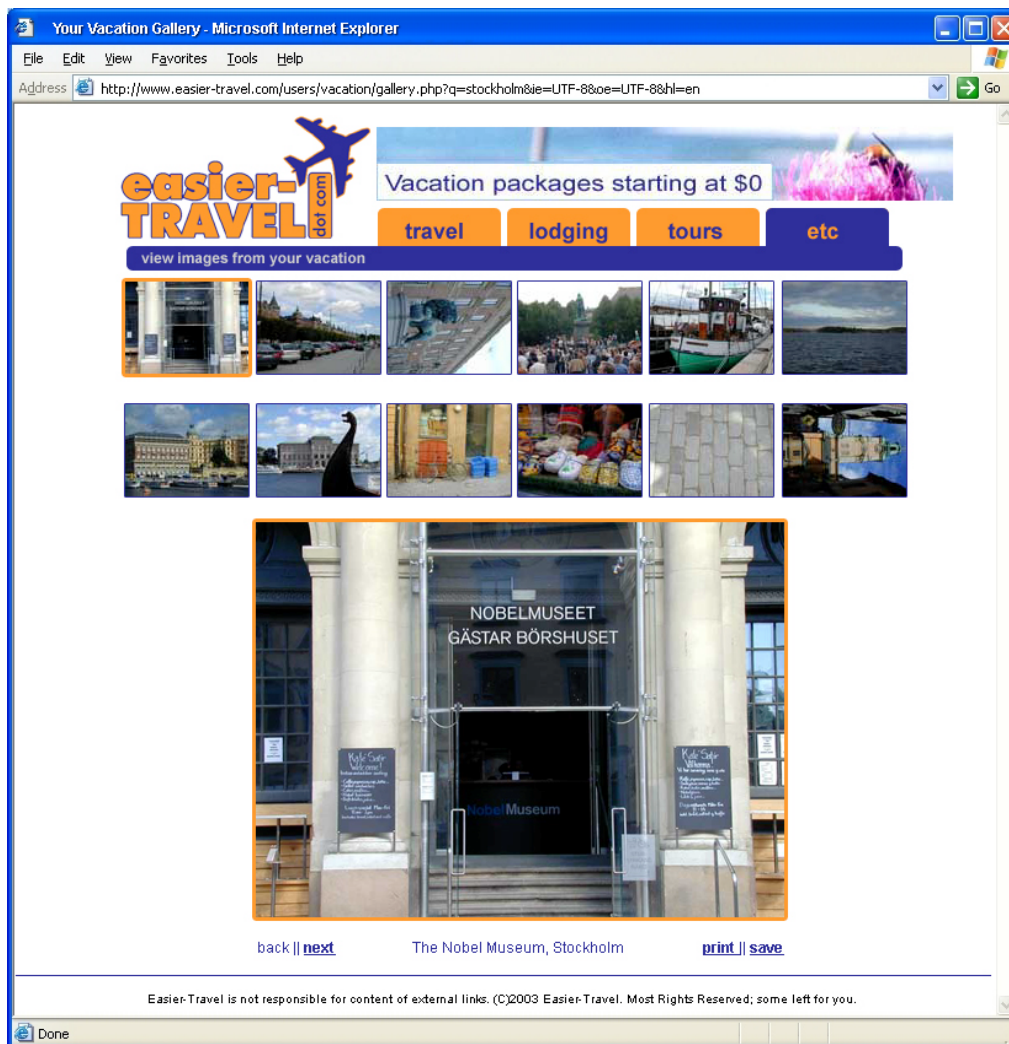


Figure Two

to a local printer, where the transition to the paperbound state shifts the imagined real at the same time one step closer to a lived reality and one step closer to an elaborate fiction.

Final Remarks / Please Come Again

In a world that values efficiency over experience, tourism reduces travel to a zombie experience. In a world that clicks in real time, the distances between places and events contract, differences are nullified and contours lost; instantaneous ubiquitous uniformity is the consequence of the hyper efficient information society that makes travel too easy, too convenient. A powerful source of revenue, tourism has the power to shift economic realities. Once quaint exceptions, tourists are a plague today, and sometimes prime targets for cons, murdered or taken hostage, as Hakim Bey (2004) notes in “Overcoming Tourism.”

Maybe we should stop travelling. Maybe it is time to reconsider the idea of travel altogether. Overcome your inner tourist. Stay at home and contemplate the potential of reinventing travel, aimless, with attention and patience.

In the mean time we invite you to make use of Easier-Travel.

References

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