Chapter 6

Two Tickets for Paradise: Gaming and Tourism

Ashleigh K. Shelton
University of Minnesota, USA

ABSTRACT

While popular commentary about information technologies rages, little academic inquiry has actually sought to understand and explain advergames as either an extension of travel information seeking behavior in general, or as a unique phenomenon. The use of digital media speaks to larger issues in cultural, psychological, and behavioral studies, and so this chapter also should be relevant not just to new media scholars and social scientists, but to a range of those working in the hospitality industry as well.

This chapter begins by identifying linkage points between advergames, tourism and three major mass communication theories/approaches—media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989), uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974). These will serve as examples of how advergames and hospitality can be integrated into theories and models attempting to explain the impact of information technologies. They will also provide a springboard for considering the nature of advergames with regards to tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

Travel and hospitality is an important sector of our economy. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism (e.g., lodging, restaurants, attractions, transportation, and cruise lines) accounts for the world’s largest industry, generating more than $852 billion in 2009, and is expected to provide 296 million jobs by 2019. “Today, the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. Tourism has become one of the major players in international commerce, and represents at the same time one of the main income sources for many developing countries” (UNWTO, 2010). With business booming, travel websites have become increasingly prevalent and are commonly used by those planning trips and vacations.

While popular commentary about information technologies rages, little academic inquiry has actually sought to understand and explain online environments (e.g., advergames) as either an extension of travel information seeking behavior in general, or as a unique phenomenon. The use of digital media speaks to larger issues in cultural, psychological, and behavioral studies, and so this chapter also should be relevant not just to new media scholars and social scientists, but to a range of those working in the hospitality industry as well.

This chapter begins by identifying linkage points between advergames, tourism and three major mass communication theories/approaches — media system dependency theory (Ball Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989), uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and the uses and gratifications perspective (Blumler & Katz, 1974). These will serve as examples of how advergames and tourism can be integrated into theories and models attempting to explain the impact of information technologies. They will also provide a springboard for considering the nature of advergames with regards to tourism.

Within each of these sections/research areas, attempts will be made to identify concepts related to advergames (e.g., persuasion, knowledge acquisition) and discuss their place in the tourism and hospitality industry. In addition, future directions for research involving the relationships will be laid out. Ultimately, this chapter will highlight the importance of advergames to considerations of tourism, and in doing so it will shine new light on different strategies and approaches for those working in the industry.

VIDEO GAMES

Not unlike the internet and cellular phones, video games are such a predominant part of our popular culture that it is hard to imagine a time before they existed. Originally seen as an experiment, novelty, or toy, video games were created in the early 1970s and developed into a product of mass consumption. They quickly expanded into a multi-billion-dollar industry by the mid-1980s (Wolf, 2001), and this was just the beginning. The popularity of video game entertainment has boomed in recent years; in 2008, the game industry reaped colossal profits of $21.4 billion in the U.S., up a record-shattering 19.4% from $18 billion the previous year (NPD Group, 2009). According to a 2005 Nielsen Entertainment study, individuals are now spending more money on video games than on music, and more Americans play video games than go out to the movies (NPD Group, 2009), lending support to the suggestion that video game play is displacing other media use (Slocombe, 2005). Yet, what do we actually know about online gaming (e.g., advergames) in regards to tourism and hospitality?

ADVERGAMES

There is a growing awareness in the corporate world of the pervasiveness and importance of virtual consumption, or the way players behave