Urban beaches, virtual worlds and ‘the end of tourism’

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Abstract

This paper revisits John Urry’s ideas on ‘the end of tourism’, or the de-differentiation of tourism and everyday life under disorganised capitalism (to the extent that the former ceases to be ‘special’ and the latter ‘mundane’). Against the backdrop of the recent and exponential growth in the number of tourists and migrants flowing to and from the countries of the world that comprise the ‘pleasure periphery’, it takes the notion of everyday space (including cyber-space) being reconfigured as tourism space one step further with reference to two quite distinct, but theoretically intertwined phenomena: urban beaches and virtual worlds (the former represented by a case study of Paris Plage, and the latter by examples of the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online Social Games or MMOSGs, including Second Life and There). In exploring what these case studies have in common reference is made to ideas about liminality and liquid modernity, which provide a context for understanding the contemporary relationship between tourism and the everyday. There follows a brief conclusion that reflects upon the consequences for tourism-related research of the turn to mobilities in the social sciences.

Keywords: ‘The end of tourism’, globalisation, Massively Multiplayer Online Social Games, Paris Plage, Second Life, tourism mobilities, urban beaches, virtual worlds.

Introduction: ‘the end of tourism’
Thanks to advances in transport and communications technologies long-distance travel is now a routine activity for the masses in developed, and the elites in developing, countries (Hall, 2005). Indeed, the number of international passenger arrivals has increased exponentially from 25 million in 1950 to 846 million in 2006, and is forecast by the World Tourism Organisation to reach 1 billion by 2010 and 1.6 billion by 2020 (WTO, 2004, 2007). The creation of new and previously inaccessible and undeveloped destinations, and a preference for independent and special interest holidays in non-resort locations, has reduced to a handful the number of places that, by dint of their natural characteristics and remoteness, are yet to be appropriated for tourism purposes (e.g. extreme environments such as the deserts and polar icecaps, as well as isolated islands). Consequently, there is little of the world that is left to be ‘discovered’, leaving the most enterprising and affluent of tourists to contemplate travel to new destinations beyond existing frontiers (which might explain the recent interest, or at least hype, in space and deep sea tourism); alternatively, and more obviously, they rediscover earlier (terrestrial) pleasure peripheries and their own origin regions (the latter being of significance to this paper).

Meanwhile, a paradigm shift in the mobility of people, goods and services, capital, information, governance, and so on across national frontiers (that is, where these movements have become so common as to constitute some kind of norm) has brought the remote, the exotic and the ‘Other’ closer to home, evidenced by the way in which fashion, architecture and other features of our immediate environment increasingly reflect distant places and ages. Globalisation, in this sense, signals the importation of tourism into the everyday (i.e. the realm of the ‘taken-for-granted’), as embodied in any number of post-industrial urban areas from world cities to former mining,
manufacturing and market towns, which ‘model themselves on tourist resorts and generate a kind of holiday atmosphere all year around’ (Franklin, 2003a, p.79). Tourism even penetrates the office and the home via the internet, which is significant not only as a means of booking discounted flights and self-packaging holidays, but also as a device for exploring virtual environments (thus functioning both to complement, and as a substitute for, leisure travel). In addition to importing tourism into everyday spaces, we also export the everyday into tourism spaces in the form of tourism-induced migration, which initially comprises labour migrants to a destination who are later joined by retirees, entrepreneurial migrants and second-home owners attracted by what they perceive to be a leisure lifestyle or landscape, their presence generating further tourism flows as they are visited by friends and relatives (see O’Reilly, 2001; Williams & Hall, 2002; Casado-Diaz et al., 2004). The desire of many such migrants to seek out a ‘home away from home’ is reflected in the multitude of overseas property exhibitions, agents specialising in international relocations, and reality television programmes following the lives of expatriates in Spain, Australia and other parts of the world that we would instantly recognise as tourist destinations, in the UK alone. This has even confounded the up until now obvious distinction between estate and travel agents (cf. de-differentiation, as discussed below), with the former using imagery normally found in tourist brochures to promote foreign real estate and the latter offering more flexible services to clients with no need for accommodation at the destination (notably peripatetic migrants and the VFR market). Similarly, with regards to trips of a less permanent nature, portable media such as digital cameras, mobile phones and laptop computers also problematise the distinction between tourism and everyday life when away on holiday or a business
trip, in heightening the sense in which ‘home and [routine] work are sometimes felt to be too close at hand’ (Jansson, 2007, p.7).

Globalisation, then, has facilitated the exponential growth over the last few decades in the number of tourists and migrants flowing to and from those countries that comprise the ‘pleasure periphery’ (after Turner & Ash, 1975), and has also ‘stimulated new forms of travel, tourism and migration whose production and consumption are intricately bound together’ (Coles & Timothy, 2004, p.3). It is globalisation that marks the transition from what Franklin (2003a) calls ‘Mobilities 1’ to ‘Mobilities 2’, in his account of tourism and the mobility of people and objects. The former describes a relatively sedentary period of some 150 years, from the expansion of railway networks within the countries of the West to the sudden increase in car ownership and commercial airline operations that signalled the end of post-war austerity, in which capital and labour were comparatively immobile and concentrated in industrial areas (with exceptions, naturally), the bicycle was the most common form of transport, and tourism was limited to an annual holiday week and a small number of Bank Holidays when factories were closed and communities decamped to their nearest seaside resort.

The latter pertains to an accelerated ‘liquid modernity’ (after Bauman, 2000; see later), characterised by cheaper and faster forms of transport, more flexible production practices as pioneered in the creation of new goods and services, experimental and unpredictable consumption patterns and lifestyles, the removal of restrictions on credit and foreign holidays (leading to arguably unsustainable levels of personal debt and air travel, respectively), a shift from blue- to white-collar occupations populated in the main by holders of further and higher education qualifications (who over the course of a career might experience considerable labour mobility), the consolidation
of a large number of local firms into a small number of national businesses (often owned by or affiliated to trans-national corporations) making increasingly ‘footloose’ capital investments, and in-migration of unskilled labour to ‘carry out tasks that the ethnic majority will no longer do’ (Franklin, 2003a, p.78). Under ‘Mobilities 2’, the distinctions between work, rest and play and the spaces and times in which we would expect to encounter them become blurred, new tensions emerge between what we consider to be strange and what we consider to be familiar, and touristic experiences become very much part of everyday life rather than a temporary means of escape from it.

These enhanced mobilities hold significant consequences for leisure travel. In a world seemingly saturated with tourism, they further undermine the importance of agglomeration and demarcation processes that distinguish ‘here’ from ‘there’ (as discussed by Gordon & Goodall, 2000 and Rojek, 1997 respectively) and, in turn, weaken the socio-cultural inversions that sustain tourist flows (e.g. thrift/self-indulgence, nudity/formal clothing, tranquillity/stress, etc.; see Burns, 1999, p.88), at least according to traditional theories of motivation (e.g. Iso-Ahola, 1982). As a consequence, tourism ceases to be concentrated in highly circumscribed spaces and periods (e.g. holiday resorts, the annual vacation), and pleasure/delight and pain/despair can be encountered anywhere and at any time. In short, tourism is no longer special, thanks to recent innovations such as low-cost air travel and the internet and, more generally, time-space compression to the ‘nth’ degree (with the caveat that the vast majority of people in the developing world, and a significant number in developed countries, do not enjoy meaningful access to tourism and, therefore, are unlikely to perceive it as such).
We have recently witnessed the addition of an intriguing new phrase to the vocabulary of the tourism researcher, or at least those researchers attempting to make sense of the above changes, viz. ‘the end of tourism’. It first appeared in Lash & Urry (1994) and then in Urry’s (1995) discussion of tourism consumption and societal change, before featuring in a number of works that focus on tourist behaviour and experiences (e.g. Shaw et al., 2000; Jansson, 2002; Uriely, 2005). Drawing on the work of Lash & Urry (1987, 1994), Urry (1995) argued that societies pass through a series of historical states (i.e. pre-capitalism, liberal capitalism, organised capitalism and disorganised capitalism), each of which is associated with a particular form of travel and tourism. The last of these is marked by the dissolving of ‘tourism’s specificity’, when tourism becomes blurred with other forms of production, consumption and mobility, and people are for the most part tourists, ‘whether they are literally mobile or only experience simulated mobility’ (Urry 1995, p.148). Urry would later expand on these ideas in the conclusion to the second edition of The Tourist Gaze (2002), as follows:

There is much less ‘tourism’ per se that occurs within specific and distinct kinds of time-space; there is what I have termed the ‘end of tourism’ in the more general ‘economy of signs’. Rather, there are countless mobilities, physical, imaginative and virtual, voluntary and coerced. There are increasing similarities between behaviours that are ‘home’ and ‘away’…Tourism sites proliferate across the globe as tourism has become massively mediatised, while everyday sites of activity get redesigned in ‘tourist’ mode, as with many themed environments. (Urry, 2002a, p.161)
Hence, ‘the end of tourism’ is essentially an argument about de-differentiation. To explain, whereas earlier forms of capitalism and the modern era in general were marked by the development and differentiation of institutional, normative and aesthetic spheres of society (including work, leisure, class and gender identities, high and popular culture, the past and the present, etc.), disorganised or late capitalism has seen the de-differentiation or blurring of boundaries between each sphere, under what has been termed ‘the postmodern condition’ (after Harvey, 1989). Oft-quoted examples of relevance to this discussion include the increasing resemblance between museums and retail outlets (e.g. in respect of their merchandising and displays), and the sense in which much work involves travel and vice versa (e.g. management ‘away-days’, serious leisure), as discussed in Hewison (1987) and Uriely (2001).

Suffice to say, this is not the appropriate place to engage with debates on postmodernism except to mention that as a cultural formation or experience, as distinct from an artistic or intellectual movement, it is characterised by the mediatization and aestheticisation of the material and symbolic aspects of any given way of life, including past or relict cultures, and the apparent ease with which these may be mechanically or electronically reproduced so as to be gazed upon by others, often out of their original context. As a result, cultural objects are reduced to visual signs, or simulacra where the original is not present (see Baudrillard, 1983), which are not just ‘symbolic expressions’ but also ‘expressive symbols’ used in the marketing and exchange of commodities (Gottdiener, 1995, p.27). It is worth adding that in postmodern societies the sign-value of a commodity is often more attractive to consumers than its use-value, but is rarely sustainable over the long term (which explains the shorter lifecycles of many contemporary products). Furthermore, people
construct their identities through consuming and being seen to consume a particular set of commodities whose sign-values correspond to a desired lifestyle, and not so much by means of what they do in work or at home (as in modern times). These identities are arguably more flexible, fragmented, transient and dissident than in the past, which explains why consumer preferences are more volatile and mass-produced products less desirable (the response to which has been the take up of post-Fordist production and distribution practices on the part of the manufacturing and service industries, as summarised in Ioannides & Debbage, 1997).

This discussion could be developed further but, as intimated above, to do so carries the risk of entering into a laboured and almost certainly counter-productive debate on postmodernity that adds little to our understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Instead, it is more useful to explain what is meant by ‘postmodern tourism’. This has been used to describe a variety of developments coinciding with the alleged transition from modernity to postmodernity as historical periods or epochs within the major source or origin countries, including the possible demise of mass or ‘old’ tourism and, somewhat less contentiously, the emergence of alternative or ‘new’ forms of tourism, some of which are thought to be based on sustainable ideas (see Poon, 1993). Examples of the latter include heritage/cultural, eco- and adventure tourism, and visiting theme parks/mega-shopping malls (Shaw & Williams, 2004, p.119). The first of these examples encompasses both high and popular culture (e.g. heritage centres as well as art galleries), and all exhibit degrees of de-differentiation in overlapping with non-tourism activities and spaces. They may be distinguished from earlier forms of tourism by the extent to which either ‘the authentic’ (natural) or ‘the contrived’ (artificial) is deliberately reflected – celebrated even – in the production
and consumption of associated products and destinations, with links to MacCannell’s (1973) and Boorstin’s (1964) competing theories of the tourist experience, respectively (which predate but, more to the point, *prefigure* postmodern tourism). We may even speak of ‘post-tourism’, at least in the global North/West, where one does not have to leave the confines of the home in order to see objects of the tourist gaze as a consequence of the mass production of colour television sets and video cassette recorders (Lash & Urry, 1994), to which we may add (cheap) personal computers and wireless broadband.

For the most part, what Urry (1995) meant by ‘the end of tourism’, as explained above, has been obfuscated in a wider debate on the future of tourism that anticipates various, more literal ‘endings’ (Gale, 2008). These include an end to tourism in a given locality, as intimated by the decline of cold-water resorts in northern Europe (see Gale, 2007) and along the eastern seaboard of the United States and, more seriously, the likelihood of a reduction in or a redistribution of arrivals and receipts associated with global environmental change and a perceived lack of political stability and security in source and destination countries alike (not to mention radical contingency measures such as carbon taxes or offsetting and more invasive security checks at airports). However apposite these other interpretations might be, there is a need to recall that original meaning if one is to make sense of the contemporary relationship between tourism and the everyday and, in writing this paper, the author aims to do just that. It focuses on how this relationship is played out in tourist generating, as distinct from destination, regions (after Leiper, 1979) although, as we will see later on, this is merely a matter of perspective. Specifically, it considers how the landscapes of the latter are simulated in the spaces of the former, including the
home, with the result that we can be(have like) tourists ‘on our own doorstep’ (and sometimes without crossing it at all).

To this end the paper presents two unusual, but paradigmatic case studies, namely Paris Plage (or ‘Paris Beach’ when translated into English) and virtual worlds accessed via the internet such as Second Life and There (which ‘provide a more immersive and satisfying diversion than other forms of entertainment media without requiring a physical journal to a faraway destination’, according to Book 2003, p.1). These phenomena, arguably, represent manifestations of tourism in otherwise unremarkable environments that are ephemeral, yet strangely enduring (one an annual event, the concept for which has since been exported to other European and world cities, and the other a series of digital touristscapes that, although capable of being turned off, are ever present online). They were investigated by means of participant observation, made possible by a visit to Paris Plage in July 2005 and logging on to some of the virtual worlds mentioned in this paper (although the emphasis was very much on observing rather than participating), and secondary data pertaining to each phenomenon (e.g. press releases and online discussion forums). This approach to acquiring the research material for each case study was not without its limitations (see later), but it should be noted that the observation of mobile bodies in certain spaces and at certain times, whether directly or in digitally enhanced forms, is one of a number of methods for mobilities research advocated by Sheller & Urry (2006). Having presented the case studies and suggested how they might be emblematic of ‘the end of tourism’, the paper then draws out what they have in common, focussing on two concepts of relevance and substance: ‘liminality’ (see Turner, 1974, 1977) and ‘liquid modernity’ (after Bauman, 2000). Finally, it concludes with some critical
reflections on the mobility turn in the social sciences and its articulation with the field of tourism studies, as a means of synthesising the various themes emerging from the two case studies and as a preliminary to further engagement with, and a better understanding of, ‘the end of tourism’ as an idea of some significance.

**Paris Plage**

The brainchild of the socialist mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, ‘Paris Plage’ is the name given to an annual event that sees the closure to traffic from mid-July to mid-August of the Georges Pompidou expressway alongside the Right Bank of the River Seine (the banks of which have been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO), for three kilometres from the Pont des Arts bridge near the Louvre to the far tip of Île Saint-Louis, and its transformation into what is widely thought to be the world’s first ‘urban beach’ (Figure 1). Launched in 2002, and costing over €2 million (paid for by the City, in partnership with various public agencies and private companies), Paris Plage is created by importing some 2,000 tonnes of fine sand, grass and wooden decking to form three distinct ‘beaches’, which are adorned with palm trees, deckchairs and hammocks, beach huts and other seaside paraphernalia, and complemented by various amenities including a 28-metre swimming pool (as an alternative to bathing in the Seine, this being precluded on account of poor water quality), an adventure playground, a stage for open-air concerts, a venue for beach sports (alongside the City Hall), numerous cafes and a library. During the one month in which it is operational, it attracts somewhere in the region of three million visitors (including Parisians, suburbanites and tourists, both nationals and foreigners), mostly for the purposes of strolling and sunbathing. It has also spawned a wide variety of
related merchandise such as T-shirts, caps, mugs, watches and other souvenirs. Such is its success that, in 2006, the organisers took the decision to extend the attraction along the Left Bank of the Seine, from the Pont de Bercy to the Pont de Tolbiac, incorporating a second sandy beach and a floating swimming pool.

[Figure 1 about here.]

A few distinctive features of Paris Plage are worthy of consideration. Firstly, admission is free; indeed, the installation is operated on the pretext of providing a recreational space for low-income residents who cannot afford a holiday (without mentioning those urbanites who are cash-rich but time-poor), the various means of self-improvement provided at the site serving to underscore its social tourism credentials (e.g. painting and writing workshops, tai chi sessions for the elderly). In this respect, Paris Plage symbolises the politics of Mayor Delanoë, who was elected in 2001 on the back of a pledge to ‘give Paris [here represented by its riverside] back to the Parisians’, especially those living in the poorer suburbs (not forgetting the middle classes, forced out of the City by soaring real estate prices). The result is an unusually diverse, socially-inclusive space, as characterised by La Pradelle & Lallement (2004, pp.137-138):

Businessmen in three-piece suits rushing from one appointment to another would cross paths with a handful of kids from the suburbs sauntering along in small groups “to watch the girls in bathing suits”; elderly people sitting on the sides, as they would in a park, commenting on everything; and whole families settling on the sand with their picnic baskets, towels, and beach toys.
Of course, sceptics will argue that there were other, not so altruistic, agendas behind Delanoë’s ‘pet project’, not least the desire to garner publicity for Paris’s ultimately unsuccessful bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. In addition, and in stark contrast to its egalitarian origins, Paris Plage appears to have developed a reputation as a chic hangout which, judging by a recent operation to prevent vagrants from begging on or near the site, the authorities are keen to preserve. Hence, it is not quite the ‘playground of the poor’ that some might have anticipated at the time of its launch.

Secondly, Paris Plage would be nothing without the presence and actions of its visitors (Figure 2). For some, principally the joggers, roller-bladers and cyclists, their experience is fleeting; for others, whether soaking up the sun or playing pétanque, it is more enduring. However, regardless of what they do and how long they spend doing it, those who participate in this spectacle are performing the beach. In other words, they behave as they would if visiting the seaside for real, but are all too aware that they are not. Like a real beach, Paris Plage offers visitors the opportunity to invert, albeit temporarily and within limits, the codes of conduct that govern their everyday lives (or, in layman’s terms, to ‘let their hair down’). Thus, it appears to fulfil the criteria of a liminal space (see Shields, 1991), as discussed later in this paper. Where it differs is in respect of the sea or, rather, its absence (La Pradelle & Lallement, 2004). Were the sea present, Paris Plage would be just another beach; with it removed, and replaced with props such as water atomisers and showers, it becomes a theatrical production acted out by its visitors who, consciously or otherwise, follow a script (e.g. by walking on the asphalt and laying down on the sand), in front of an audience of spectators gazing down from the various bridges that cross the river at this point. Indeed, many spectators and ‘performers’ appreciate the ironies of Paris
Plage: that the sand is too fine to have been mined from a real beach (it being shipped in from nearby quarries), that visitors will be fined for sunbathing nude, topless or in revealing swimwear, that the conduct of participants in general is ‘too good to be true’ (there being remarkably few acts of vandalism, theft and so on, despite the relatively low-key surveillance and policing of the site), and that it is a contrivance designed to project an image at home (to a diverse and, arguably, disenchanted population) and abroad (to would-be visitors and, in the early years of its operation, the International Olympic Committee) of ‘a new Paris that is not a simple juxtaposition of neighbourhoods and segregated spaces but a “good-natured, convivial” Paris’ (La Pradelle & Lallement, 2004, p.144). Paris Plage, therefore, is both a place ‘to play’ and a place ‘in play’ (to quote Sheller & Urry, 2004).

[Figure 2 about here.]

Finally, despite the fact that Paris Plage owes its existence to the unusual, if not unique, conjunction of various local and national contingencies (e.g. Delanoë’s election and the tradition of providing holidays to the poor in France), it is easily reproducible and, indeed, has been copied by a host of other European cities (e.g. Rome, Berlin, Brussels, Amsterdam, Budapest and Bristol and, elsewhere in the world, Brisbane and Tokyo), in the name of urban regeneration (and cultural renaissance). This is somewhat ironic for, having pla(y)giarised the likes of Deauville and Nice (on the north and south coasts of France, respectively), Paris Plage is now being ‘ripped off’ by other holders of, and aspirants to, world city status. In response, the team of scenographers and sociologists that were tasked with realising Paris Plage back in 2001 have attempted to differentiate the event from its imitators by adopting a different theme for each year, starting in 2005 with ‘Brazil’ (the three main zones that
comprise the installation being renamed Ipanema, Macarana and Copacabana for the occasion, with samba and beach volleyball on offer), and continuing in 2006 with ‘French Polynesia’ (accompanied by craft workshops and displays of Tahitian dancing). However, this tactic is, itself, easily copied (e.g. a recent press release by Berlin Tourism, announcing the German equivalent of Paris Plage, also makes reference to recreating the feel of Brazil’s world famous beaches). Hence, just as the development of holiday villages and entertainment complexes that are based on artificial beaches and ski slopes (such as Center Parcs and Xscape in the UK) has contributed to the stagnation and decline of traditional summer and winter resorts, so the proliferation of urban beaches in an era of ‘tourism reflexivity’ – defined by Sheller & Urry (2004, p.3) as ‘a system of governmentality that ensures that increasing numbers of places around the world monitor, evaluate and develop their “tourism potential”’ – seriously calls into question the sustainability of Paris Plage as the prototype. Furthermore, in subverting the rule of spatial fixity in tourism, whereby the supply of tourist experiences tends to be fixed to particular places and slow to respond to changing economic and socio-cultural conditions, installations such as Paris Plage that have only weak, if any, ties to a physical place are even more vulnerable to reproduction in the short- to medium-term, compared to the places they mimic. It seems, judging by the number of places that now boast an urban beach, that what began as an innovative experiment in setting Paris apart from other world cities in terms of its tourist product is now, potentially, yet another example of the ‘serial reproduction of culture’ in tourism (see Richards & Wilson, 2006).

The advent of the urban beach, then, has potentially far reaching consequences for tourism as we know it. Not only is it a significant part of a broader cultural ‘offer’
(including open air theatres, outdoor ice-skating rinks, etc.) in large cities that dissolves the lines that demarcate tourism from everyday life (i.e. ‘the end of tourism’), but it also offers an alternative to visiting the beach for real thus taking custom away from established destinations and their constituent attractions and, in turn (or, more precisely, *in time*), contributing to their decline.

**Virtual worlds**

This next case study highlights the potential of so-called Massively Multiplayer Online Social Games (or MMOSGs), also known as ‘virtual worlds’, to introduce tourist experiences into the everyday space(s) of the home (in addition to the internet cafe and, where permissible or in the absence of surveillance, the workplace). If we accept, for the moment, that these ‘digital destinations’ may act as surrogates for the real thing (this is not beyond the realms of possibility given the significant amount of leisure time given over by members of the online gaming community to exploring them, which might otherwise be used for corporeal travel), then it is possible to group virtual worlds and other variants of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) under the category of ‘virtual reality tourism’ (or VRT, to use yet another acronym). Indeed, they meet the criteria laid down by Cooper *et al.* (2005, p.781), in that they allow users to visualise destinations through simulation and to immerse themselves in, and interact with elements of, those destinations. MMOGs, in taking place in the ‘here and now’, also represent a refreshing alternative to the ‘strap on the bodysuit and plug into the program’ variant of VRT which, despite being some years off commercial production, tends to monopolise – along with excursions into outer space.
– commentaries on the near future of tourism (much to the frustration of this particular author).

Virtual worlds come in many different shapes and sizes (see Figure 3 for an example), but have the following qualities in common (adapted from Book, 2003):

- they are accessed by means of an online interface such as Microsoft Internet Explorer and allow many users to participate simultaneously (typically numbering in the hundreds or thousands), with the emphasis on socialising and community building rather than competing against one another (as in the case of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, or MMORPGs);
- computer graphics are used to simulate space, from cartoon-style two-dimensional imagery to more immersive three-dimensional environments that lend themselves to movement and exploration; likewise, visitors are represented by an on-screen image known as an ‘avatar’, which is often an approximation of a(n idealised) human being chosen from a predetermined menu or customised by the user (images of animals and inanimate objects are also used as avatars);
- users can interact with online objects and other users in real time and, with the necessary privileges secured by subscription, can add or edit content (e.g. buildings, signs), transforming large expanses of ‘land’ with a few basic ‘physical’ features (topography, vegetation, etc.) into virtual villages, towns and cities that are loosely based on real places, with recognisable landscapes and landmarks;
- MMOSGs continue to function regardless of whether anyone is logged in (notwithstanding downtime for maintenance), and cannot be ‘finished’ as in
single-player games (nb. the persistence of virtual worlds stands in contrast to the perishability of tourism products, as evidenced by empty hotel rooms/seats on aircraft and unused places on tours).

**[Figure 3 about here.]**

Active Worlds, Cybertown, Muse, Project Entropia, Second Life, The Sims Online and There are all well-known examples of virtual worlds, several of which have only been in existence for a few years. The average player of online games spends 20 to 30 hours a week engaged in them (according to Yes, cited in Herman *et al.*, 2004, p.203), and they have been brought to the attention of non-participants through recent press coverage, which has centred on the purchase of virtual property for not inconsiderable sums of money and the educational and charitable possibilities of MMOSGs (e.g. the development of a game by a major US bank to instruct young adults in managing their finances, and the construction of a memorial within Second Life to the victims of Hurricane Katrina in order to raise funds for the relief effort).

A compelling case for treating virtual worlds as tourism spaces is provided by Book (2003). She suggests that, like holiday destinations, MMOSGs offer a means of temporary escape from everyday life, where the emphasis is on play and not work. Furthermore, the objects of the tourist gaze are, sometimes painstakingly, re-created in virtual worlds, from palm-fringed sandy beaches to ancient monuments such as the Great Pyramids and Stonehenge, as are familiar attractions and amenities (e.g. casinos, funfairs, racetracks and miniature golf courses). These are supplemented by welcome signs, information booths, street furniture such as park benches and telescopes, guided tours (whether official or not), and various other ‘markers’ (after
MacCannell, 1973). Book’s analysis of the relationship between tourism and photography (screen capturing) in virtual worlds reveals further parallels with genuine tourism production and consumption in respect of, firstly, the assorted images used to promote them in print and online (including in-game) advertising, which tend to correspond to the postcard and travel poster formats favoured in conventional destination marketing and, secondly, the text on official websites and in corporate press releases that, more often than not, describes MMOSGs ‘in much the same way as 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”’ (Book, 2003, p.18). She also mentions the popular practice of compiling and publishing online photograph albums containing screen captures of particular views or events (along with travel journals or blogs), including images taken from a third-person perspective in which avatars are seen posed in front of virtual tourist sites that one would recognise in the real world (presumably with a view to accumulating social capital, much as real tourists do when showing their ‘holiday snaps’ to friends and relatives).

Opinion is divided as to whether VRT, of which MMOSGs are but one instance, may mean an end to traditional tourism. For example, Cooper et al. (2005, p.781) argue that such ‘cocooning behaviour increasingly places the home as a central and secure base for leisure activities...[thus] depress[ing] demand for the real thing’ (see also Roberts, 1989 on ‘home centeredness’), whereas Jansson (2002, p.430) maintains that ‘most people uphold the distinction between simulations and “real experiences”...[and that] mediated spatial phantasmagoria reinforces the desire for “first-hand tourism”’ (see also Urry, 2003 on the internet and mobile communication
devices as accessories to, rather than substitutes for, corporeal travel). Then there is Franklin (2003, p.266), who claims that:

\[
\text{[t]he Internet has made us ‘supertourists’ speeding around the world faster than any machine could possible travel and we have become sated with viewing the world in this way: it can make seeing the real thing something of an anticlimax.}
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Certainly, it is difficult to dispute the overlap between physical forms of tourism and VRT, as depicted here, even if one does not subscribe to the view that the emergence of the latter signifies an era of ‘post-tourism’. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to consider virtual worlds, or some at least, to be another example of themed tourism spaces, alongside theme parks and shopping malls (see Shaw & Williams, 2004, p.255 for a typology, to which we might add MMOSGs). In this respect co-presence might be the only significant thing that separates, say, a visit to the World Showcase at Disney’s Epcot from teleporting to ‘America’, ‘England’ and other zones representing particular nations in Active Worlds, with the latter taking Eco’s (1986) concept of hyper-reality (in tourism) to the next level (Book, 2003).

**Liminality and liquid modernity**

The above case studies would appear, on the face of it, to have little in common. However, they may each be construed, firstly, as examples of liminal (or, rather, liminoid) zones and events and, secondly, as evidence of the move away from a hardware-focussed/heavy ‘solid modernity’ to a software-based/light ‘liquid
modernity’. Indeed, Victor Turner’s anthropology and the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman are especially pertinent to understanding the tourism mobilities discussed in this paper. For this reason they feature in the brief discussion that follows.

Liminality, according to Preston-Whyte (2004, p.349), ‘is an elusive concept’. Derived from the Latin word *limen*, signifying boundary or threshold, it was first used in van Gennep’s (1960) description of the transition from adolescence to adulthood and other rites of passage in traditional or pre-modern societies, whereby the separation from and suspension (or, more to the point, *subversion*) of the dominant social structure and its norms creates in participants a state of ambiguity and an opportunity for them to reflect on the past and idealise about the future before, inevitably, being reintegrated in and reconciled with everyday life (all the better for the experience). It is, however, Turner that is credited with incorporating the term into the Western imagination, thanks to his highly influential writings about liminality and *modern* societies. Significantly, he proposes the term ‘liminoid’, meaning ‘not quite liminal’ (Turner, 1982, p.32), which has since been used in reference to phenomena ‘[o]f less life-changing status…[including] the Web, vacation resorts, theme park environments not to mention specific holidays and events’ (Shields, 2003, p.13).

Liminoid spaces and genres allow for ‘brief moments of freedom and an escape from the daily grind of social responsibilities’ (Preston-Whyte, 2004, p.350) but, unlike liminal phenomena, develop outside or on the margins of central economic and political processes, are more idiosyncratic and quirky, are continuously generated and subject to change, are plural, fragmented and experimental, and are to be found in modern leisure instead of tribal ritual (Turner, 1977).
Certainly, these characteristics may be ascribed to urban beaches and virtual worlds alike (which, as with all liminoid phenomena, show how ‘liminality has been stripped of its transformative power to become a commodified experience’; Shields, 2003, p.13). Furthermore, given that these simulations share a common referent in the form of the beach (a recurring feature in most virtual worlds), which has been described as a liminal space by both Shields (1991) and Preston-Whyte (2004), it is possible to infer that they are, or at least have the potential to be, liminoid (see the former on the transformation of the beach at Brighton, during the mid-nineteenth century, from a site for medical treatment to a carnivalesque pleasure zone, and the latter for a discussion of the liminal properties of various beaches, for example surfing and nudist). However, in the absence of research into how producers and consumers perceive such things, it is difficult to assert liminal (or even liminoid) status for either the urban beach or the virtual world, and there is the added complication that (as pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper) the experience of the urban beach is fragmented and interwoven with that of everyday life in the city, while the same could be argued of virtual worlds with regards to the frequent switching between online and offline engagement with liminoid and everyday situations, thus undermining the ‘differences [that] produce distinct kinds of liminal zones’ (Urry, 2002a, p.12). Nevertheless, the notion of liminality/liminoidity does help articulate these case studies to ‘the end of tourism’ argument, even if it demands further consideration that is beyond the scope of this paper (i.e. in respect of the motivations and experiences of participants).

In making the distinction between liminal and liminoid phenomena, Turner (1977, 1982) sought to account for some of the specifics of contemporary societies that we
would recognise in Bauman’s (2000) description of ‘liquid modernity’. This refers to
the liquefaction of *social forms*, or ‘structures that limit individual choices,
institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behaviour’
(Bauman, 2007, p.1), which during the previous phase of ‘solid modernity’ cohered
around nation state formation and the pursuit of a better, more equitable blueprint for
humanity than the inflexible, hierarchical social order of traditional society.
Consequently, these no longer function to restrain freedom of choice and movement
for many people in advanced industrialised countries, which goes some way to
explaining the recent explosion in international tourism (and migration) whose
gradual incorporation into everyday life has prompted Bauman (1998) to talk of ‘the
tourist’ (and the alter ego of the tourist, ‘the vagabond’) as metaphors for
contemporary society and the individual(ised) members thereof (see also Franklin,
2003b).

If solid modernity ‘was born under the stars of acceleration and land conquest’
(Bauman, 2000, p.112), then liquid modernity is what happens when efforts to speed
up movement reach their ultimate limit (i.e. instantaneous communication), and when
there is nowhere left to be or capable of being conquered (cf. Bauman’s, 1998 notion
of the ‘full planet’). Because it is comparatively easy in these ‘liquid’ times to travel
from one place to another, at least for a significant number of people, space ceases to
count for much at all and the world is reduced to a series of places to visit that,
whether closer to home or further away, are of equal value (i.e. no one place, or part
of space, is privileged by the friction of distance). In such circumstances, and with
limited scope for the extension of the pleasure periphery, it is little wonder that
attention switches to the tourism of everyday life, ‘where the inbound flows of goods,
peoples and cultures – the ebbs and flows of a global world – exceed the differences and pleasures that are typically experienced by travellers and tourists’ (Franklin & Crang, 2001, p.9). Bauman’s ideas, then, are a useful accompaniment to the earlier discussion of de-differentiation and ‘the end of tourism’, but they also help reveal certain things in relation to the case studies themselves. Compared to solids, liquids ‘cannot easily hold their shape’ and are capable of ‘extraordinary mobility’ (Bauman, 2000, p.2). So, too, are urban beaches and virtual worlds which, being fashioned out of innumerable grains of sand transported by barge or truck from a nearby quarry or an arrangement of pixels stored in a remote server and transmitted via electronic signal to one’s VDU (visual display unit), are light and portable (unlike the solid/heavy destinations and tourist sites on which they are modelled). In addition, they could be examples of what Bauman, in reference to community, calls ‘fraudulent substitutes for the absent real thing’ (Franklin, 2003b, p.214). That is to say, these simulations generate brief moments of ‘communitas’ amongst participants and strangers in/of the city (before they go their separate ways), thus compensating for the absence of local solidarities and social ties that were first weakened by solid modernity and then, more or less, eradicated under liquid modernity (which were perpetuated, in an earlier era of organised mass tourism, by the ‘wakes weeks’ popularised in the North of England from the mid-nineteenth century onwards).

Conclusions

This paper seeks to make a contribution to the body of recent work that ‘has begun to challenge the traditional distinctions between home and away, the ordinary and the extraordinary, work and leisure, everyday life and holidays, by arguing that in
transnational times tourism moves into less obviously touristic places’ (Larsen et al., 2007, p.248). Through combining an essay on ‘the end of tourism’ (and a review of relevant literature) with case studies highlighting the tourism-like properties of the prototype urban beach, Paris Plage, and the category of MMOGs represented by the likes of Second Life and There (as potential replacements for the ‘real thing’, i.e. holidays), it offers new theoretical insights into the apparent blurring of tourism space and everyday (including cyber-) space under disorganised capitalism and, specifically, the reconfiguration of the latter so as to resemble the former (for reasons that are contingent to the places in which this is happening and the people who inhabit them).

Significantly, each of the case studies demonstrates the interconnections between the five forms of contemporary mobility that maintain social networks and produce travel demand, namely:

1. physical travel of people, primarily for work, leisure, family life and migration;
2. physical movement of objects (raw materials and finished goods) to producers, consumers and retailers;
3. imaginative travel to other places, by means of the written word, photography, film and television, and memories of physical travel;
4. virtual travel on the internet; and
5. communicative travel via, for example, letters, greetings cards, telephone calls, emails, text messages and videoconferences. (adapted from Larsen et al., 2006, p.4; see also Urry, 2002b)
For instance, to experience Paris Plage first-hand one must travel to the site at the appropriate time of year but, for residents of the City or its suburbs, not nearly as far as is necessary to visit a real beach. This is because the objects that come together to create this particular installation have themselves been moved from their respective points of origin (e.g. builders’ yards and storage warehouses) to the location in question, which happens to be ‘a beach within reach’ from the perspective of a large number of visitors. (Of course, one may also encounter Paris Plage at a distance through representations of it in the media, possibly to find that such imaginative travel generates a desire to visit the real [sic.] thing at some point in the future.) In a similar fashion, spending time in virtual worlds and on social networking websites in general shows how virtual and communicative travel intersect, as in the case of ‘Virtual Bali’, a series of meetings in Second Life organised by OneClimate.net that were timed to coincide with the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali, where ‘delegates’ could chat to one another, watch live video of the presentations, and post questions to real world participants.

There are implications for both theory and method in tourism-related research arising from the turn to mobilities in the social sciences, which legitimise the use of ‘the exceptional case, the abnormal and the heterodox’ (to quote Botterill, 2003, p.107); phenomena such as urban beaches and virtual worlds might otherwise be overlooked by researchers on account of the fact that they do not require travel to a recognised tourist destination and a stay of at least one night away from home (as the two criteria that feature in most traditional, or technical, definitions of tourism). Indeed, recent work exploring the links between leisure and tourism, transport and communications, and migration reveals numerous points of departure from conventional ‘ways of
seeing’ (or, rather, ‘not seeing’) in the field of tourism studies (see, for example, Franklin & Crang, 2001 and Hall, 2005). Firstly, there is a movement towards ‘de-exoticising tourism’ so that we are no longer preoccupied with tourists and travels to distant lands, which are rendered intelligible by ‘middle-range theories of motivation, decision modelling, and even destination image’ (Coles et al., 2004, p.464). Instead, we recognise the interconnected mobilities of a variety of individuals, including leisure shoppers, second home owners, entrepreneurial migrants, business travellers, ‘gap year’ students and a whole host of other people voluntarily on the move, and also the ‘networking’ as well as ‘sightseeing’ properties of tourism (see Larsen et al., 2007). Secondly, the processes that have enhanced the mobility of some people(s) have also served to highlight and to heighten the immobility of others (Hannam et al., 2006), yet this has been overlooked in much tourism research. (Tourism) Mobilities, on the other hand, addresses those who cannot or do not travel (for leisure purposes), and not just those who do. Thirdly, there is the potential for imaginative, virtual and communicative (in addition to physical, or corporeal) travel, thanks to a range of digital devices that allow us to access other places and people at the touch of a button, without the need for co-presence (that said, see Larsen et al., 2007 for examples of social obligations that cannot be fulfilled in this way). However, few studies of tourism to date have recognised this (see Prideaux, 2005 on ‘cyber-tourism’, for an exception). Lastly, mobilities research entails a concern for the undesirable and unforeseen consequences of living a mobile life that lie outside of our control and which, in turn, threaten that very mobility. Dangerous climate change, the transmission of infectious diseases such as SARS and avian flu, and recent terrorist atrocities are all by-products of human movement, and engage us with the ‘risk society’ (after Beck, 1992). Tourism is especially vulnerable to these risks and
disasters, but the response of academics specialising in this field has been more concerned with contingency planning and crisis management at the scale of an individual destination (e.g. Ritchie, 2004), rather than evaluating the medium- to long-term consequences for leisure travel as a whole (which, by and large, defy such interventions).

How is this relevant to the urban beach and virtual world? To begin with, there are few better illustrations of the claim that places, and specifically tourism spaces, are not fixed and given but, instead, ‘are implicated within complex networks by which “hosts, guests, buildings, objects and machines” are contingently brought together to produce certain performances in certain places at certain times’ (Hannam et al., 2006, p.13). This deals with the first ‘point of departure’ mentioned above. Next, these simulations are predicated on the immobility of (many, if not all) users, be they the socially-excluded residents of the poorer suburbs of Paris who, but for the urban beach, might not participate in tourism (or something approximating to it), or the members of Second Life or There who can spend hours at a time sitting at their computer terminals whilst logged on to these virtual worlds, in partial fulfilment of their need for imaginative, virtual and communicative travel. Thus, the case studies selected for inclusion in this paper can be seen to resonate to the second and third of the aforementioned ‘points of departure’. Finally, and although it still seems fanciful to talk of the urban beach and virtual world as alternatives to ‘proper’ tourism, given the likely constraints on long-distance travel imposed in the low-carbon societies of the not-too-distant future it is conceivable that much tourism will occur in simulated environments such as these, when the majority are compelled to seek out tourist experiences closer to (or at) home. Indeed, such (web)sites may even be actively
promoted as ‘green’ alternatives to flying or driving long distances for sun and fun (cf. ‘sustainable mobilities’, as discussed in Holden, 2007).

Finally, to make sense of contemporary mobilities we need to employ mobile methodologies. It was earlier noted that observation, as practised for the purposes of this paper, qualifies as an example of what Sheller & Urry (2006, p.217) call ‘mobile methods’. However, there are limits to what can be achieved by employing this in isolation, hence it is important to acknowledge other methods that can help us attain a deeper understanding of phenomena such as urban beaches and virtual worlds. Mobile and multi-sited ethnographies are, arguably, the most effective means of achieving this. These broadly entail conducting ethnographic research on the move, often by accompanying subjects as they travel through particular spaces or space per se and then interviewing them individually or in focus groups (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). Hence, they are distinguishable from those employed in conventional ethnography, with its highly localised strategies (D’Andrea, 2006). Similarly, it is possible to explore the imaginative and virtual mobilities of people through analysing their contributions to ‘websites, multiuser discussion groups or listserves, as well as through the use of computer simulations’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p.218) or, put another way, by doing ethnography on the internet. Ethnographers are drawn to this medium by its accessibility (which stands in contrast to much ethnography, with its potentially complex and protracted access procedures) and by the fact that so-called ‘netnography’, defined by Kozinets (2002, p.62) as ‘a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications’, is comparatively unobtrusive (thus suited to sensitive research topics) and inexpensive
(Langer & Beckman, 2005). There is also the added value of incorporating offline methods into netnographic studies (such as face-to-face meetings with online informants, or observing and conversing with people in cybercafes), as with Carter’s (2005) ethnography of living and working in a virtual community and Miller & Slater’s (2000) study of the significance of the internet to Trinidadians. That said, there are potential problems and challenges with netnography, not least in respect of the ethical issues raised by conducting covert research in cyberspace (and whether adherence to the principle of informed consent is necessary when analysing discourse within a given online community), and the difficulty of verifying the authenticity and truthfulness of internet communication (Langer & Beckman, 2005; Carter, 2005). Furthermore, netnography (as with ethnography in general) requires a long-term commitment to investigating an online (or offline) social setting. For example, Miller & Slater (2000) talk of spending up to eight hours at a time communicating with informants in chat rooms, while Carter (2005) went online at least once a day over a period of some three and a half years ‘in the field’, which gives an indication of what is required in order to develop ‘thick descriptions’ of participants and their life worlds (after Geertz, 1973). This is certainly worth bearing in mind, should anyone be inspired by this paper to undertake an ethnography of the urban beach or virtual world as a site of contemporary tourism/mobility.

In conclusion, the move ‘to an “experience” economy where “tourism experiences”, whether natural or artificially generated, will be sought’ (Cooper et al., 2005, p.669) has resulted in the introduction of new tourism practices that resist orthodox or ‘sedentary’ definitions, explanations and investigative techniques, which are often grounded in particular disciplinary traditions (see Coles et al., 2006 on post-
disciplinary studies of tourism). Two such practices, visiting urban beaches and virtual worlds, have been explored in this paper as examples of ‘the end of tourism’ (Lash & Urry, 1994; Urry, 1995). While there is more to be said about each of them (e.g. the ethics of permitting behaviours in virtual worlds which would be impossible or intolerable in the real world, or in using them to gain access to a person’s thought processes, as highlighted by Prideaux, 2005), it is hoped that these case studies stimulate further discussion of tourism’s relationship to everyday life in these ‘liquid times’ (Bauman, 2007), together with empirical work on the interconnected mobilities of people, objects, etc. implicated in their production and consumption (or, rather, their productive consumption).
References

Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e)).


Figure 2. A view of Paris Plage from the Pont Notre-Dame, looking east (photograph by author).