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Mystery and thriller tourism: Novel solutions for European cities

Abstract

This paper describes the potential of the mystery and thriller aspect of a new dark, kind of virtual tourism in European cultural destinations in engaging young people in discovering and promoting cultural heritage. One of the ways how this can be achieved is through the game-like apps for smartphones and tablets involving local myths and legends constituting the backbone of local fright tourism and blending them with popular culture, represented by mystery and thriller literary works and films. Further, this paper demonstrates the use of in-depth focus groups to assess residents and tourists preferences for such apps that would enhance access to mystery and thriller cultural heritage in the city of Prague. The results show any potential game-like app should feature a narrative (storytelling), an interactive, GPS-based map, a virtual tour, a "treasure hunt" game with a possibility to play on-line, and it should be offered at both App Store and Android Market Play for a price of 2.99 EUR or less.

Key words: tourism; mystery and thriller tourism; focus groups; e-services; consumer preferences; Czech Republic

Introduction

Although so-called "fright tourism" generate a significant amount of public and research interest (Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Rahman, Holdschlag, Ahmad & Qadir, 2011) and experience a significant popularity due to the increase of global communication and travel opportunities, the fictional (literary or film) aspect of fright, tourism, constituting new dark, kind of virtual tourism and especially its potentials in engaging young people in discovering and promoting cultural heritage of their home cities, still remains underdeveloped (see e.g. Roesch, 2009).

Squire (1996) describes literary tourism as "*premised upon the public's desire to experience a version of the past (or imagined present) and to make connections between past and present, fact and fiction. It therefore trades in images and expectations of people*" (Squire, 1996). Literary tourism (which is often associated with film tourism, since most of the popular literary works are being filmed), attracts tourists and forms a part of the landscape of heritage tourism (Bordelon & Dimanche, 2011; Herbert, 2001). In addition to that, film tourism also has the potential of increase the tourism flows and influence the expectation of the destination (Holcomb, 1999; Beeton, 2001; Carl, Kindon & Smith, 2007).

Despite the growing popularity of the literature and film tourism, few attempts have been made to identify the critical success factors behind this fast-growing phenomenon (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006).

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Riley, Baker and Van Doren (1998) stated that further research on different genres, locations and icons was important in understanding the effect of film tourism, which they claim still remains under-researched and representing a rich area for theoretical exploration (see e.g. Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Bolan, Crossan & O'Connor, 2008; Beeton, 2004; Jia, 2009).

Literary and film aspect of mystery and thriller tourism

One of the most important and fast-growing fields in literary and film tourism is the mystery and thriller tourism. Patterson (2006) describes the genre as having "the intensity of emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness, all designed to generate that all-important thrill". Mystery and thriller tourism might be viewed as a part of literary and virtual tourism. Most of the visitors are attracted to the places associated with mystical and often horror events described in the books or demonstrated in films and TV series, however the majority of these events might be a result of a pure imagination of their creators and have never actually taken place in real life. New technologies enable the tourists (but also the local residents) to get to know the destinations described in books or shown in films, in a better, more profound way.

Tourist destinations play an important role in mystery and thriller tourism. Although the plot of the most mysteries and thrillers does not tie them to any specific location, or sets them in multiple locations, there are some examples when the tourist destination is specifically mentioned and constitutes an important part of the story.

An important aspect of mystery and thriller tourism is something what one can call "fright film tourism". Most of the successful mystery and thriller literary works today are forged into successful films and TV series which increase their popularity and dissemination. In this context, Bordelon and Dimanche (2011) and Vagionis and Loumioti (2011) demonstrate that film tourism might be an effective marketing tool for promoting tourism destinations. Reeves (2001) and Carl et al. (2007) point out that not only "feeling good" or being associate with romance or escapism" constitutes a popular visitor attraction, since towns like Burkittsville, Maryland, the setting for "The Blair Witch Project" have seen an influx of visitors, and the Georgetown house in Washington D.C. which was the setting for "The Exorcist", continues to be a major tourist attraction.

Beale (2012) claims that thanks to the "Twilight Series" set by Stephenie Meyer in a little town of Forks, at Olympia Peninsula in Washington, the local economy experienced a huge tourism boost: in 2008, after the release of the first of the films, the number of visitors nearly doubled to 19,000, and by 2010 it reached 73,000 people.

While of some of the towns and cities that appeared in literary and film mysteries and thrillers seem to profit from that fact, others cannot fully exploit their tourism potential. For instance, it was reported that the local community of Burkittsville, Maryland (the setting of "The Blair Witch Project") claims that the successful film has brought upon the "unwanted popularity and troubles" upon their small community, while the profits from increased fright tourism remained negligible (Fiore, 2010).

Mystery and thriller tourism in European destinations

While it is apparent that mystery and thriller tourism is gaining more importance in U.S. destinations (TIA, 2007), perhaps due to the fact that the country represents the most attractive market for leisure and entertainment, its potential is also high in Europe.

Table 1
Examples of mystery and thriller literary works set in European destinations

Year	Literary title	Author	Set in
1897	"Dracula"	Bram Stoker	Bran/London
1892	"Adventures of Sherlock Holmes"	Arthur Conan Doyle	London
1937	"Master and Margarita"	Mikhail Bulgakov	Moscow
1920-1973	"Miss Marple/ Hercule Poirot novels"	Agatha Christie	various UK locations
1998	"Digital Fortress"	Dan Brown	Seville
1999	"Hannibal"	Thomas Harris	Florence
1997-2007	"Harry Potter"	Joanne Rowling	London
1997	"Harry Hole novels"	Jo Nesbo	Oslo, Bergen
2000	"Angels and Demons"	Dan Brown	Rome
2003	"Da Vinci Code"	Dan Brown	Paris/London
2005-2007	"Millennium Trilogy"	Stieg Larsson	Stockholm
2010	"Postcard Killers"	Lisa Marklund/James Patterson	Stockholm

Source: Author's own results

The Old Continent has always been a very important place for global incoming literary and film tourism and many literary works of great importance were set in European destinations. In this context, it should be mentioned that many mystery and thriller books and films are set in various European destinations. Table provides an account of the most successful mystery and thriller literary works set in European destinations.

Many best-selling mystery and thriller novels found its way into film adaptations. Table 2 provides some example of recent blockbuster films set in European destinations.

The preliminary analysis of the box office reveals that the British capital is, by far and large, the most popular location for film destination on the Old Continent, only beaten by New York (see e.g. James, 2007; Reeves, 2008). For instance, the most recent James Bond film entitled "Skyfall" is for the largest part set in London. The newest and highly popular adaptation of "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" that features the famous detective excessively using his iPhone and Dr. Watson keeping a blog also takes place in modern-day London.

Table 2
Examples of blockbusters set in European destinations

Year	Film title	Starring	Set in
2001-2011	"Harry Potter"	Daniele Radcliff	London, Oxford
2001	"Hannibal"	Anthony Hopkins	Florence
2002	"Blade 2"	Wesley Snipes	Prague
2009	"Angels and Demons"	Evan McGregor	Rome
2006	"Da Vinci Code"	Tom Hanks	Paris/ London/ Edinburgh
2003-2012	"Underworld Trilogy" "Hugo"	Kate Beckinsale Tom Hanks	Budapest Paris
2010	"The Tourist"	Angelina Jolie/ Johnny Depp	Venice
2010	"Sherlock"	Martin Freeman	London
2011	"The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo"	Rooney Mara/ Daniel Craig	Stockholm
2012	"Skyfall"	Daniel Craig	London
2013	Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters	Jeremy Renner	Augsburg

Source: Author's own results

Overall, it becomes apparent that mystery and thriller literary works and films constitute a considerable part of Europe's dark tourism potential. Since the majority of consumers of this type of entertainment are relatively young, developing this aspect of cultural heritage by associating popular books and films with cultural tourism destinations might help young Europeans in the creation of technology-enhanced cultural heritage experiences, enabling them to generate quality transmedia and user-created solutions (interactive city games and quests, mystery tours with the elements of the game and storytelling, etc.).

Proposed it solutions for mystery and thriller tourism in Europe

Although personal computers became probably the most important must-have item in the 1990s, the 2000s belongs to smartphones and (most recently) tablets (while the two are merging into one symbiotic device). Since the introduction of an Apple's iPhone, a revolutionary gadget, that combined the features of a mobile phone and a portable computer, and had a multi-touch screen and virtual keyboard, in 2005, smartphones have gained wide popularity and are currently owned by the majority of very privileged population of high and medium wealthy countries. While most of Apple's devices were relatively expensive and therefore unavailable for the people in the developing countries who live on or below the poverty line, the introduction of Android-based devices by Google made smartphones and tables widely available to larger masses. According to the latest estimates, around 400 million iPhones were sold in the word up until now (Apple, 2013), while the total number of sold Android-operated devices is estimated to be around 2.4 billion (Gartner, 2013).

Smartphones and smartphone-based solutions represent perhaps the most interesting way how to exploit mystery and thriller tourism in European destinations and to attract young European, the notorious users of smartphones, to knowing their cities better. An example of how this might be done are the Smartphone Apps offered either by Apple Store or Google Market Play (until recently called "Android Market"): for example "Dexter's Disciples" (unavailable outside the U.S.) or, most recently, "Chasing Salander" by Norstedts (the publisher of Stieg Larsson's books). The latter one is described in one of the reviews as "not just a game or i-enhanced book, Chasing Salander gives an exceedingly well-known book a new story, for fans and those (three or four people) who haven't read the original" (Fastcocreate, 2011). The app represents an addition to the original story described in the book, complimented by the new facts and details from the world of the "Girls with the Dragon Tattoo". Stockholm Stadsmuseum also understood the potential of the "Millennium Trilogy" launching its "Stieg Larsson Millennium Tour" (both guided tour or a map with a self-guided tour are available). Combining a quest and a game, the tour re-tells the story of Stockholm, introducing its various parts and neighborhoods, using the scenes and parts from "Millennium Trilogy".

One very cheap but effective way how to promote mystery and thriller tourism in European cities might be through a game-like app based in a cultural destination that would involve local myths and legends constituting the backbone of local fright tourism and blend them with popular culture, represented by mystery and thriller literary works and films. This app will constitute quest-like games often played by teenagers and adults in urban locations (known as "treasure hunts") bearing the elements of the legends and the stories, narratives of the city's most interesting parts and neighborhoods as well as including the interactive element of "being a part of the city". As far as the interactivity is concerned, the app should also include a contest-like element of multiple users playing against each other in real time, or competing for a prize or some incentive, thus resembling the "urban games" or "urban quests" that are often organized by the local residents in large cities and include elements of treasure hunt and gaming.

It was decided to attempt to develop a blueprint for such an app that can be used in order to get to know the uncanny side of the city of Prague. After some consideration, the legend of Golem was selected as the basis for the app development through the feedback obtained in focus groups.

Golem is often associated with Prague (see e.g. Wisniewski, 1996) and it found its way into many Czech popular films and cartoons, as well as into fiction literature (see for example Meyrink, 1915). It is also often a popular name for restaurants and cafés in the Czech capital. According to Idel (1990), in Jewish mythology Golem resembles an animated anthropomorphic entity created entirely from inanimate matter (e.g. sand, clay, etc.). Although there are several legends featuring Golem that took place in various parts of Europe, perhaps the most famous legend involves Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the 16th century Chief Rabbi of Prague and the famous Cabbalist of his day who allegedly created the Golem to defend the Prague ghetto and the local Jewish community (Sherwin, 1985). Rabbi Loew constructed the Golem out of clay from the banks of the Vltava (Moldau) river and brought it to life through rituals and Hebrew incantations (in some versions by inscribing the word "emet" ("truth" or "reality") in Hebrew on Golem's forehead or by inserting the small table with incantations into the slot on Golem's forehead). The Golem helped Prague's Jews and carried out difficult tasks for Rabbi Loewm, until one day it became increasingly violent, killing people and causing rampage all around the city. Rabbi Loew had to destroy Golem and what remained of it, was stored in the attic of the Old New Synagogue where, as some legends have it, it can be found nowadays.

The 'Golem' app that would be based on the legend, was envisaged to have a storytelling element (perhaps introducing the new twist to the old legend), as well as the GPS-based map featuring the tour of the Old Town of Prague. The tourists and the local residents alike would be able to stroll around the narrow streets of the Old Town while learning the legend of Golem and experiencing the atmosphere of locations mentioned in the legend.

Research design and methodology

According to Bogardus (1926) and Kreuger and Casey (2000) focus group interviews gained wide popularity in all fields of social sciences as a form of qualitative research analysis in the late 1930s because they helped to improve the accuracy of traditional information-gathering methods. A focus group is typically constituted by a group of people accommodated in an appropriate venue and having a discussion on a suggested topic and expressing opinions and suggestions in an interactive manner. A focus group is usually led by a moderator who channels the discussion and prevents it from deteriorating from its main topic.

A famous American sociologist Robert Merton developed focus groups for the evaluation of audience responses to radio programmes in 1941. During World War II, Merton used focus group techniques to investigate morale in the U.S. Army (Merton, 1987). From the 1950s, market researchers used focus groups as a research tool to identify the attractiveness of their products and related customers' preferences (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). In the 1980s, focus group interviews were rediscovered by social scientists who adopted some of the practical strategies from market research experiences. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups can be used as a preliminary step in the design of surveys for further research, since they could help researchers get a better idea of individual issues to be tackled by questionnaires during the next stage. The purpose of a focus group is to listen and gather information on a well-defined research topic (Morgan, 1997).

The focus groups (FG) are widely used in tourism studies. For instance Vernon, Essex, Pinder and Curry (2003) applied focus groups for investigating the 'greening' of tourism micro-businesses in South East Cornwall, while Strielkowski, Riganti and Jing (2012) describe the use of focus groups for assessing users' preferences for tourism-related e-services in three European cities

The focus group interviews presented in this paper were conducted with a purpose to create a reference framework for the development of a smartphone application available from iTunes and Google Market Play. They targeted the main potential users of an e-services platform represented by Prague residents (who can also contribute to the marketing potential of the destination as the site of mystery and thriller tourism, especially by using the virtual channels) and tourists. With the target population, our focus groups first aimed at discussing which e-services are perceived as lacking and which existing e-services need better integration. Secondly, the focus groups aimed to stimulate discussion with different categories of potential e-users to promote creative and innovative ideas of how a possible platform should look, what features it should contain, and in general how it should work in order to be considered user-friendly. Finally, the focus group discussions were aimed at assessing people's preferences for integrated e-services, e.g. to what extent people would use these services, and which payment vehicle they would deem appropriate, if any. The focus groups were designed and staged similar to other related studies conducted in various European cities (see e.g. Strielkowski et al., 2012).

Focus groups results

In total, 12 focus group meetings with 86 people (48 tourists and 38 residents) were held in Prague between September and December 2012. The participants were tourists visiting the city of Prague as well as local resident who can be perceived both as potential tourists to other destinations as well as citizens and residents of the city. This was done due to the fact that local residents can cultivate their own expectation about mystery and thriller tourism related to their city (and disseminate it through the Internet, for instance in the form of blogs and e-forums). In addition to tourists who might feel the need for specific game-like apps that can help them to know the city better, local residents can help the researchers to identify the attributes of the apps they would like to have in order to access their cultural heritage (in our case mystery and thriller heritage associated with Prague). Local residents live in the city and apart from their daily routine (work, errands, etc.) enjoy the city's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. Together with the tourists, local residents visit museums, galleries, theatres and local fairs and festivals. For the purpose of this research, residents were defined as people who lived or worked in Prague on a daily basis (commuters were also included into the sample).

The tourists' aim is to enjoy the city and their visit; their secondary aim is to understand and explore cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. For the purposes of this research, tourists were defined as people who have come from another city and whose main aim of visiting the city was tourism and who spend at least one night in the city. The results of the focus groups were checked against the demographics and tourism statistics in Prague and found consistent. The response rate in the focus groups was satisfactory and on average met the recommended standards. Summary statistics for both tourists and residents is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Summary statistics for respondents in Prague

Variable		Tourists	Local residents
		Value	
Gender	Males	68.5%	65.0%
	Females	31.5%	35.0%
Age	Mean age	28.75	27.43
	Median age	26	25
Education	Compulsory level or less	8.0%	12.5%
	High school	12.5%	19.0%
	University	79.5%	68.5%
Civil status	Single	16.0%	23.0%
	Married	68.0%	54.5%
	Other (divorced/separated/widowed)	16.0%	22.5%

Source: Authors' own results

Developing focus group agendas is a dynamic process. The agendas were modified and improved from the experience and knowledge acquired during the first focus group attempts. Therefore, it is important

to clarify the rationale behind the focus groups' development, and the major objectives to be achieved in order to develop an appropriate framework that can be easily adapted in due course. The questioning route per each focus group would then follow good practices whilst aiming to tackle the identified objectives and account for major results from previous focus groups.

The main objective of the first focus group agenda was to review and compare the basic attitudes towards mystery and thriller tourism across different participant categories, aimed at understanding how the participants perceived the potential of this type of tourism and what IT solutions they perceived as helpful and useful in order to manage, understand, and explore Prague (with a special focus on the Jewish Quarter and the legend of Golem). The basic aim of the second phase of the focus group agendas was to understand how different groups of participants perceived the potential of game-like apps for mystery and thriller tourism in Prague and how they can better understand, manage, and enjoy the city, further engaging with its cultural heritage (including the legend of Golem) with the help of game-like app. The basic goal of the third phase of the focus group agenda was to understand how different groups of participants perceived the potential of game-like "Golem" app to better enjoy, appreciate, and manage the mystery and thriller potential of Prague. The additional aim of all focus groups was to learn how the "Golem" app should be provided and also to gather ideas about possible payment vehicle and price.

Table 4
Attributes and levels for "Golem" application

App attributes	Description	Mentioned in FG*
Narrative (storytelling)	Listen to the new twist of the old legend of Golem set in Prague's Old Town and featuring the most prominent landmarks of Prague's Jewish Quarter (e.g. Old New Synagogue, Spanish Synagogue, Jewish cemetery, etc.) and get detailed information on a chosen attraction	I, II, III
Interactive GPS-based map	Find one's way in Prague's Old Town, locate one's position on the interactive map and get help in choosing the best tourist route to the next attraction	III
Virtual tour	See (and download) information about the interior (such as important buildings) and the exterior (such as the urban surrounding) of the attraction of choice	I, III
"Treasure hunt" game (off-line and on-line)	Participating in on-line (or off-line) game that features looking for the clues in order to be pointed to the next attraction (possibility of winning a small memorabilia was also mentioned). Exchange opinions about the app with other tourists and residents. Communicate ideas, suggestions and criticism to the local tourism services providers	II, III
Mode of delivery	Both App Store and Google Market Play	II, III
Price	2.99 EUR or less	I, II, III

*Note: I, II, and III indicate the 1st, 2nd and 3rd phases of focus groups
Source: Author's own results

The results show any potential game-like Golem app should feature a narrative (storytelling), an interactive GPS-based map, a virtual tour, a "treasure hunt" game with a possibility to play on-line, and it should be offered at both App Store and Android Market Play for a price of 2.99 EUR or less.

Conclusions

This paper presented the results from 3 consecutive stages of 12 focus groups held Prague and aiming at revealing the potentials of mystery and thriller literary and film tourism conducted with the help of advanced IT technologies and virtual applications. The key findings stemming from this research can be summarised as follows: In general, it appears that mystery and thriller tourism constitute a considerable part of literature, film and virtual tourism potential both in Prague (where the research was held) and in any other European cultural destination. Since the majority of people enjoying this subset of tourism (both tourists and residents alike) are relatively young and keen in using mobile apps and advanced IT solutions, developing this aspect of cities' cultural heritage might help in the creation the new market for technology-enhanced cultural heritage experience featuring novel solutions, such as interactive city games and quests, mystery tours with the elements of the game and storytelling, etc.

In addition, this research presented and tested the specifications for the game-like app for smartphones and tablets (provisionally called "Golem app") that would enable the tourists and local residents alike to enjoy the city's cultural heritage in a new and unexpected way. The research determined that in order to prove itself successful, this app should not only tell a new story featuring the well-known legend (in our case, the legend of Golem of Prague) and to provide a virtual, GPS map-based tour of places mentioned in the old and the new story, but also to include an element of interactivity, such as a treasure hunt game that might include an element of competition and winning a small prize in the end. This mystery and thriller tourism app might be offered for a small payment, or free of charge, depending on the solution of city's tourism authorities.

Note:

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