Ancient cultures a click away

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Portals used to launch you, Stargate-style, to bizarre places brought to life by science fiction writers. Today, thanks to European research, portals can take you to fascinating virtual destinations - both ancient and new - and all just a click away.

They may not have been inspired by Stargate's wormhole to alien and parallel universes, but European researchers know that today's virtual "internauts" are just as keen to explore the world, its cultures, languages, ethnic differences and the objects that help to define who we are, or once were.

"We took note of the evolution in social networking and Web 2.0, and how society, especially the youth, uses ICT in more and more ways for work and play," says Raphael Attias of ORT France who heads the Mosaica project which is using the latest semantic web technology to bring cultural heritage to the virtual stage.

"Mosaica was an opportunity to carve a niche in the semantic web for cultural diversity; to transfer young people's inherent fascination for technology into a learning experience; and to galvanise communities around important topics like preserving cultural heritage.

"We've created a platform for playing and learning; with games as a hook for younger generations whose attention is harder to get - and keep - these days," Attias explains.

Games like Cultural Pursuit - featuring multi-gamer functionality with

different play levels to sustain interest - are built round the idea of transforming "gamers into learners".

Bring the world to the classroom

According to the European Resolution of Cultural Diversity (ERCD), cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. Cultural heritage is a vector of our identity, values and meaning, and must not be treated as mere consumer goods, the Resolution suggests.

The EU-funded Mosaica's goal is equally as ambitious as the Resolution, to bring "the world to the classroom … and every home". To do this, it developed a working demo around Jewish cultural heritage. The demo supports three main modes of use - explorative, guided and collaborative - which draw on the functionality of Mosaica's so-called 'conceptualisation platform'.

Users can explore Jewish heritage (the current example) in their own time, and as often as they wish with semantic-rich data searches, or they can take a guided tour or virtual expedition following prompts and "must-see" recommendations on dynamically generated maps.

Working together, teachers and students can share knowledge, make notes on particular cultural objects - either free-text comments, or semantically annotated using dynamic ontology creation - and they can also directly contribute content, including photos. Students can even record their own virtual expeditions enhanced with helpful, educational pointers and activities, such as treasure hunts and 'learn more' folders.

Ready-made solutions

"There was so much high-quality digital material (including audiovisuals) available on Jewish culture that we felt it was a subject we could demonstrate quickly and effectively," explains Attias on Mosaica's demo choice. "Building the technology and handling the legal and property rights issues was much easier as well."

At the conclusion of the EU-funded part of the project in 2008, the technology is ready, the portal-building toolkit is ready, the demonstration shows that it works, and trial users are suitably impressed.

But the story doesn't end there. Attias tells ICT Results that Mosaica's end-user partners are interested in taking up aspects of the work, as are the technology partners.

As a non-profit organisation, ORT France has expressed interest in further public support to improve the ergonomics and aesthetics of the end product, as suggested by the trial group.

Technology bricks

"We are speaking to the French industrial cluster Cap Digital to help realise potential commercial spin-offs and the continuance of Mosaica's good work," confirms Attias.

Mosaica has also been in contact with a Christian organisation in Poland about providing data and information to create a similar portal to the Jewish cultural heritage one, and has had talks with an Italian group about using what Attias calls their "portal-making technology bricks".

From the start, Attias had a sense that Mosaica was achieving not only an elegant technological solution but doing something much more - safeguarding diversity in all its guises; cultural, ethnic, linguistic.

The project offered "a real boost to the research environment and, quite frankly, the best opportunity to meet the challenges posed by the European Resolution of Cultural Diversity," says Attias.

"It's worldwide web, worldwide research, and worldwide impact - that's real cultural diversity," Attias sums up.

More information: Mosaica project www.mosaica-project.eu/

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