Paris airport tests 'virtual' boarding agents

August 18 2011, By GREG KELLER , Associated Press

An airport experimenting "virtual" boarding agent, left, is displayed at Paris' Orly airport, on the southern outskirts of Paris, Thursday, Aug. 18, 2011. The pilot project began last month, and has so far been met with a mix of amusement and surprise by travellers, who frequently try to touch and speak with the strikingly life-like video images that greet them and direct them to their boarding gate. (AP Photo/Francois Mori)

An airport in France is experimenting with "virtual" boarding agents in a bid to jazz up its terminals with 21st century avatars who always smile, don't need breaks and never go on strike.

The pilot project at Paris' Orly airport began last month, and has so far been met with a mix of amusement and surprise by travelers, who frequently try to touch and speak with the strikingly life-like video images that greet them and direct them to their boarding gate.

The images materialize seemingly out of thin air when a boarding agent - a real live human - presses a button to signal the start of boarding.

They are actually being rear-projected onto a human shaped silhouette made of plexiglass. Three actual airport boarding agents were filmed in a studio to create the illusion, which the airport hopes will be more eye-catching and easier for passengers to understand than traditional [electronic display](#) terminals.

"Bonjour! I invite you to go to your boarding gate. Paris Airports wishes you a bon voyage," the image appears to say, while the name of the destination flashes in front of him.

Airport authority AdP came up with the idea for what it calls "2-D [holograms](#)" earlier this year, when it was brainstorming ways to modernize Hall 40, one of the dozens of boarding gates at Paris' second airport, south of the capital.

"Children like it, it's fun. They're attracted to it and try to play with it," said Didier Leroy, the airport's director of operations. "There's finally very few who find it useless or just a gizmo."

The technology behind the images was developed by a Paris audiovisual marketing agency, L'Oeil du Chat. Similar virtual agents are in place in airports in London and Manchester since earlier this year.

Hall 40 serves about 30 or 40 flights a day, Leroy said. Around 1 million passengers a year pass through it, mainly on their way to destinations in the south of France and Corsica. The airport decided to make it a "laboratory" for testing new ways of organizing its boarding gates. It received an overhaul this spring that created 40 percent more space and 20 percent more seats so that it can now hold up to 400 waiting passengers.

As passengers boarded a flight to Bastia in Corsica, one small boy of about five years old approached the hologram, this one showing a middle-aged man in a striped shirt and neatly trimmed beard. "Hello!" the boy greeted it. The pre-recorded image smiled, blinked, folded his hands, glanced to the left but said nothing.

Leroy said the airport's experiment with virtual reality will be evaluated by the end of the year, after which it could be expanded to other boarding halls at Orly or to Paris' larger Charles de Gaulle airport.

Not all passengers were as taken with the virtual hosts as the boy.

"It spooks me the way his eyes seem to follow you," said Cedric Olivier, 32, an Air France pilot waiting for his flight. Other passengers hurried past with barely a glance at the hologram, more concerned about boarding the plane and finding space for their carry-ons.