Gimme a Break!

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By now, the holidays are a distant memory, and spring is just a vague vision in the future. If you are like I am, you would probably like nothing better than to jump on the next flight out of here (aerophobia not withstanding) and begin exploring some new scenery. (However, if you are like I am, you probably also realize that those holiday credit card bills must be paid and that going to work is the only option.)

As an alternative to taking an expensive, time-consuming vacation, how about trying out the next best thing to being there—virtual vacations. The Internet is awash with web sites that can help you explore the world without the expense of an actual vacation. The following web sites are a few of my favorite places to explore the world. After you return to the real world, be sure to check out the game of the month and “Product Snapshots.”

WEB SITES

The Global Online Adventure Learning Site (GOALS) [www.goals.com] is a great place to start your online vacation. At the GOALS web site, you can indulge in a little adventure. The adventures featured on the GOALS web site emphasize how you can combine science, technology, and nature to make a memorable experience. For example, you can travel the world with Bill and Helen Thayer as they go on expeditions to Antarctica, the Amazon, or the Sahara Desert.

Many of the adventures on the GOALS web site feature ocean voyages. For example, you can follow Mick Bird in the Oceanic Rowing Expedition as he attempts the world’s first solo circumnavigation of the globe by a rowing vessel. Bird’s vessel “REA CH” is propelled only by oars—the craft has no motor. Bird does carry a small, emergency mast and sail, which he can mount and use in the event of imminent danger that he is unable to row clear of.

Bird rows approximately 10–12 hours a day, covering 35–40 miles a day. Bird sends regular updates to the GOALS web site regarding his experiences and geographical position.

For years, NOVA and PBS have taken television audiences on expeditions around the world. Fortunately, both NOVA and PBS have taken advantage of the interactive nature of the Internet to enhance virtual travel.

The NOVA/PBS Online Adventures web site (www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/adventures) enables you to tag along with scientists and explorers as they report on science as it happens. If you happen to visit the NOVA/PBS Online Adventures web site while an expedition is actually taking place, you can participate with the actual explorers via e-mail. It’s almost like being there—well maybe not. But if you can’t actually uncover the secrets of Egypt’s pyramids, at least you can talk to someone who can. Plus, you avoid all the expense and physical risk. For example, the NOVA/PBS Online Adventures get me as close as I want to get to actually climbing Mount Everest.

After you are finished exploring, be sure to check out NOVA’s other web pages (www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/onlinelibrary.html). These web pages provide enough opportunities to discover the world that you may never leave your computer screen again.

Known for its incredible photography and insight, National Geographic is one of the most respected names in virtual travel—and with good reason. The National Geographic web site (www.nationalgeographic.com) is easy to navigate and provides an around-the-world tour experience.

For example, you can click “Travel” and choose from several features, such as the Galapagos Islands or the 50 Places of a Lifetime. In the travel section, you will also find resources for real-life travel experiences, such as destination guides, currency-conversion calculators, and language translators.

If all of this virtual travel makes you ache to get out and do some real-world traveling, you can experience a National Geographic expedition firsthand. National Geographic offers more than 3,000 expeditions from which to choose.

The Virtual Tours web site (www.virtualfreesites.com/tours.html) is a veritable clearinghouse of links to virtual vacations. For example, the Virtual Tours of Museums and Exhibits area provides links to more than 300 museums, exhibits, and points of interest that offer multimedia-guided tours. As a result, you can visit the Smithsonian, the Sistine Chapel, and museums in St. Petersburg all in one day.

If you know someone else who can really use a vacation, consider sending him or her on a mini virtual vacation. At VR Vacations (www.vrvacations.com), you can send an electronic vacation that includes a photo of a scenic vista accompanied by ambient sound effects. For example, you can choose a beautiful ocean scene with the sound of waves crashing along the shore. Or, you can vacation in Manhattan with the sounds of the big city. The web site is a little bit corny, but who knows—it just may give someone the break he or she needs.

Despite the excitement of taking a virtual vacation, nothing quite compares to actually seeing the sights, hearing the sounds, and smelling the smells of your destination. If you decide that you need an actual vacation, you can research your options on Lonely Planet Online (www.lonelyplanet.com).

GAME OF THE MONTH

So you want to rule your own empire, do you? Our games guru, Eric Quigley, suggests that you try Call to Power II from ActiVision Inc. Call to Power II is one of several empire-building games that allow you to virtually rule the world.
As a sequel, Call to Power II retains much the same personality of the original Call to Power game: To build your empire, you must command your people using military, economic, scientific, and cultural strategy. You must also manage the growth of your cities, explore new land, and use the world's resources as you vie for power.

Call to Power II offers players several new governing tools, diplomatic options, and trade features. For example, a new diplomatic interface allows your diplomatic strategy to play a large role in how your civilization develops: Enemy states survey your diplomatic landscape before attacking or forming their own alliances. Call to Power II's diplomacy interface helps you choose your political stance and allows you to make counter proposals when dealing with other civilizations. (However, the rulers of the other civilizations do not have well-rounded, realistic personalities. They merely react to what you are doing.)

In addition, you can consult ministers and advisors for recommendations. After a city is well established, you can continue to manage the city manually, or you can assign the city mayor to manage the city automatically—a feature that leaves you free to pursue bigger tasks.

One of my favorite features of Call to Power II is the ability to make history fit my own needs. Call to Power II includes built-in scenarios that allow you to relive some of the world's greatest battles, or you can use the map and scenario editor to build your own situations.

Visually, Call to Power II includes several new features and enhancements: A city's achievements over the centuries, and many units are presented with new graphics and animations.

A civilization has revamped the military units in Call to Power II to make combat more realistic. Each historical period contains defensive, offensive, flanking, and ranged units. Combats take place on a mostly noninteractive tactical screen. The screen shows the advantages of the different unit types.

Call to Power II supports Windows 98 and 95 and is available through retail channels for the suggested price of U.S.$49.99. For more information, visit www.activision.com.