First Chinese 3D Virtual Tourism Site - Virtual Forbidden Palace

What did I do over the last long weekend? Touring in the Forbidden City, literally. In 2008, IBM launched the first Chinese 3D virtual tourism platform - Beyond Space and Time (The Virtual Forbidden City). In partnership with the Forbidden Palace Museum, IBM invested 3 years of time and over 3 million dollars to reconstruct a 3-dimensional replica of the world largest Imperial Palace standing today, the Forbidden City of China.

The Forbidden City was built from 1406 to 1420, consists of 980 surviving buildings with 8,707 bays of rooms and covers 720,000 square metres. It is also the largest collection of preserved ancient wooden structures in the world.

Similar to the Great Wall of China, Forbidden City has been one of the "must-see" tourist places in China. The Virtual Forbidden City enables visitors to interact with others and with a growing knowledge base of the historical site. Learning materials are being generated by tourists, volunteers, staff and data collecting scripts.

As they explore the Virtual Forbidden City, visitors can choose to simply observe the buzz of activity, participate in activities that provide insights into important aspects of Chinese history, or even take guided tours that uncover new insights into the stories of the Forbidden City. It's a combination of 3D Simulation and Machinima experience. There are also a few mini-games embedded in the exotic gardens and amazing architecture to keep the audience entertained.

To get started, go to the Registration Page to get an account and an avatar icon. This will allow you to save, share your virtual tourism experience with others. During your visit, you will be represented within the Virtual Forbidden City by a figure known as an avatar. Your avatar can take the form of any of several people dressed in Qing-era clothing. Registered users can select any of the available avatars and your choice will be saved for future visits.

Upon the completion of the simple registration process, you will be led to a page that allows you to download the software which will run the Virtual Forbidden City tour on your computer. Please note, you don't have to have a registered account, you may visit it as a guest after installing the software.

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To help you find your way during your visits, maps are available to both show you your current location and a history of your journey, and also to help you find interesting places to explore. You can find majestic halls, animated scenes from Qing life, and even activities that give you an opportunity to learn by interacting with computer-controlled characters. Another excellent way to explore is to join your fellow visitors on one of the many guided tours that wind throughout the Virtual Forbidden City. These tours cover a range of interesting topics and lead you to places that help explore important themes about the design and use of the Forbidden City.

As you explore, there are many ways to gain a deeper understanding of the things that you encounter. Many of the most impressive artifacts and buildings have additional information and even photos available to provide a deeper understanding of their purpose and construction - when available, the information is only a mouse-click away. To get an even closer look at the intricate details of select items, you can virtually hold a copy of them in your hands.

Expert's Opinion

Good: The Virtual Forbidden City is the perfect way to improve your Chinese culture knowledge not only by reading, but also by experiencing and interacting with other persons. The 3D representation gives you a very real space and time feeling. Not only will you be able to take a relaxed tour, but it will also be private and you won't have to wait in line.

Bad: Although the application seems to be encouraging the development of a community of the Forbidden City enthusiasts, the forum discussions are mostly in Chinese, which makes it very difficult to follow if you are a foreign visitor.

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