

HOW THE TEENAGE INVASION CHANGED HABBO OR AGE-SENSITIVE DESIGN IN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

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Abstract

Inclusive age-sensitive design considers both empathic design methods and accessibility. This article explores the social shaping of Habbo, a virtual world popular among millions of teenagers. Although Habbo was designed by and for young new media people, this changed during the first year after market launch. The decreasing average age of new users had significant effects on the service. The role of the developers changed, old features were removed, new features were rethought, and the moderation of the community became increasingly important. Interviews with users revealed an emerging time-sharing of the service, a geography of age, and frustration among older users about the chat filter. In Habbo, age was considered a resource, and older users were sometimes given more responsibility, a moderator role. This study raises the question whether other online services that feature cartoon-like user characters (not photo-based), need to better consider expressing age for its characters. The traditional way of thinking about services for ageing users is to think about distinct services. However, this case suggests that a services for "all" might be age-segregated within a particular service.

Keywords

New media, age, design, Habbo, teenagers, age-sensitive design, inclusive society, virtual worlds.

1 INTRODUCTION

Inclusive age-sensitive design is often about two things: 1) overcoming the age difference between developers and users through the use of various empathic design methods, and 2) making the technology accessible to ageing users. The traditional design thinking regarding ageing users is to provide special aids and appliances. However, some studies report opportunities in the socio-economic and macro perspective. For instance, the People & Product company found distinct trends in the areas of secondary occupations, connectivity, dignity and the way time and space is perceived amongst the elderly [13].

In the ambition to create an inclusive broadband society, researchers are concerned about the digital divide between younger users of new media and older non-users. Form and content (texts and images) of new media, as well as life events, gender, and education are considered important factors that influence new media use. However, there is a risk that the debate neglects the role of active users during development and use of the new media.

This article explores the case of Habbo, a virtual world popular among millions of teenagers. Habbo was originally designed in the year of 2000 to be a graphical and better ICQ (an instant messaging service) for the then 20-year old developers themselves. Already during the first year after market launch, teenagers become a more visible user group. The decreasing average age of new users had significant effects on the service, as it was transformed to suit the new majority user group.

The topic of this article is the relation between target group age and new media design. More specifically, why did Habbo become popular among teenagers? This question is divided into two subquestions. First, what Habbo features attracted the teenagers? Second, how did the decreasing average age of new users change Habbo? In the latter question we analyse the role of the developers, the established and future technical features, and the governance of online interaction. The research approach draws on science and technology studies and human-computer interaction studies. More specifically, the social shaping of technology tradition and recent studies of how users, developers and technology are co-constructed.

Some readers might have developed an allergy towards the concept of the user. It is understandable as the term is sometimes used interchangeably with actors, participants, humans, consumers, customers, and so on. In human-computer interaction studies, users are sometimes thought of as cognitive information processors. However, other approaches include users as social actors [8], users as participants [2,6], and users as co-constructed and

configured [9,16]. In this study, users are thought of as a particular relationship to a service, distinct from developers, vendors, educators, paying customers, and so on. Users use a service through the user interface, where as developers and other stakeholders have other means of shaping the service.

The consequence of such a conceptualisation of the user is that the same person has multiple simultaneous user roles in the case of Habbo. In addition to being a user of Habbo, the person is also a user of a computer, of a web browser, of an operating system, of some internet access service, of a mobile phone (in case of SMS-billing), and of electricity. The list could continue with chair, apartment, clothes, eye-glasses, and so on, but here we focus on being a Habbo user and what emerges as relevant from the perspective of sensitivity to age.

The research data stems from interviews with both Habbo developers and users. The interviews are complemented with texts written by users and available online in user forums or websites. In addition, the author leans on participant observation, a user profile survey, and various interactions with the Habbo production company Sulake, as part of a three year research project during 2003-2006 [4].

2 SOCIAL SHAPING OF HABBO

A key question in studies concerning social shaping of technology (SST) [10] is how social context affect the development of technology. The approach criticizes technological determinism by coupling technology to designers' conceptions and values. In addition, political, economic, and cultural interests as well as established social categories, like class and gender, were seen as shaping technology [15]. Since the early 1990s, some researchers have shaped an approach that studies the "configuring of the user" [12,16], which can be seen as an extension of the broader social shaping research community [15].

Common to many of the nuances in the SST-tradition, is a focus on different social groups related to technologies, for instance engineers, advertisers, and consumers. In this article, the focus is put on what happens when one social group is marginalized and another social group becomes the mainstream. Early on in Habbo's history, the service was intended for the developers themselves and their friends, that is, young new media people. However, soon enough, the developers realized that teenagers had "taken over" the service.

This study analyses the consequent dynamics in the social groups related to Habbo and how the service was reconfigured. Different reactions to the teenage invasion among the other social groups, and the emergence of a new social group. Not only did the typical user change, but we also look at how the role of the developers changed, as both the users and the developers were reconfigured.

2.1 Age-sensitive design or design research sensitive to age?

Age-sensitive design is often about two things: 1) overcoming the age difference between developers and users through the use of various empathic design methods, and 2) making the technology accessible to the target user group.

With emphatic design methods (e.g. [7]) researchers and developers try to get closer to the lives and experiences of users and apply that learning in the design process. In regard to difference in age, the question is often about style, social network size and activity, as well as characterising more or less symmetrical social relations to friends and family. There are many strategies in this research field to gather knowledge about age-groups, however, these are not elaborated on, since this study is more about particular features targeted to a particular age-group, and the reactions from different social groups.

There are many web design guidelines for particular age groups. They can usually be grouped into interaction design (e.g. menus, navigation, scrolling, buttons, links, system feedback, search), information architecture (e.g. labeling, wayfinding, redundancy), visual design (e.g. fonts and type size, contrast, white space) writing and reading on the web, as well as advertising [11,14]. However, like with the design methods, these guidelines are not elaborated on here, due to the focus of this study.

This study aims to relate age with a internet service, Habbo. In particular, the ages of the target user group and the developers, as well as particular features developed for the target users. Doing so, this study studies the inscription and interpretation of age in artefacts, following the SST tradition. Habbo is seen as a socio-technical product, that in addition to certain features, also embodies power relationships, social goals and structures. The question is how age is inscribed in Habbo — considering e.g. online governance, anonymity, etc. — and what design research can learn from it. Does targeting a particular age-group automatically exclude other age-groups? How do different age groups cohabitate an online community?

2.2 Study setup

This paper is part of a larger research undertaking where I study the slowly paced dialogue between different developers and users through material software. Because the Habbo software has several design cycles in a year, it has been possible to study a dialogue that starts from the developers' vision of future use. The vision is realized during game development into Habbo features. Next, the users appropriate the hotel features for their own purposes and invent their own ways of using it. Soon after, the developers learn a little about these more or less unexpected use practices through various forms of user feedback. This feedback modifies the designers' original vision about future use and, as new features are developed, the cyclical dialogue continues with the next loop.

In this case study, the author had the opportunity to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research to understand the Finnish Habbo communities. The project started in 2003 with participant observation in Habbo, a pilot interview, and an explorative survey on the visitor profiles. Fansites became an important source of knowledge about the user communities [3]. In 2005, the author conducted ten thematic 2-3 hour interviews with ten Habbo developers. This was followed by 2-3 hour individual, pair, and group interviews with 11-16 years old users (N=6), and 30+ users (N=6). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, as all developers and the author are fluent speakers of Finnish. All of the interviews were recorded and content logs created. The interviews were transcribed in detail and excerpts translated to English by the author as needed. The different data sources have afforded triangulation [17] of the slowly paced user-developer dialogue.

3 WHAT ATTRACTED TEENAGERS TO HABBO?

Habbo is a virtual environment where teenagers meet, socialize and play all kinds of games. It was first launched in August 2000 in Finland as Hotelli Kultakala ("Hotel Goldfish"), which was based on the developers' two earlier online services. At the time of writing, there are Habbo hotels in 33 countries, and 11,5 million users visit Habbo each month (Sulake, n.d.). Instead of an entrance or a monthly fee, the profit model is based on micro-payments in the hotel. Virtual furniture, mini-games, and membership in the Habbo club are bought with so called Habbo credits. These credits can be purchased with pre-paid cards, bank transactions, or special text messages that add a specified amount of money to the customer's mobile phone bill.

The social interaction in Habbo is multifarious. In the design of Habbo clear winning conditions and gameplay rules have been avoided, and instead the players have always been encouraged to create their own objectives – besides chatting, room decoration, and meeting friends. The provided environment for these activities is a hotel consisting of public and private rooms, where the virtual hotel visitors, so called Habbos, chat, buy virtual furniture, decorate rooms, play mini-games, and arrange social events. Most of the teenage users log on after school, and on average they spend around forty-five minutes per day in the hotel or on its related discussion forums.

Even though Habbo is currently popular among children and teenagers, the virtual environment was not originally designed for teenagers. In 2000, when Habbo was conceptualized, it was intended as a graphical and better ICQ (an instant messaging service) for the then 20-year old developers themselves, as one developer explained:

"And all the features were intended for people of our age, and the guys that tried it, they were of all ages, but mostly new media friends". (S1)¹

At that point in time, broadband internet and graphical online applications were not as widespread as today, so the developers wanted to show that it was possible to make cool interactive graphics online, not just on multimedia cd-roms. Habbo was first adopted by the developers' friends and colleagues, new media people.

¹ The index refers to a particular developer interview.



Figure 1. Habbo characters in a room decorated as a lounge.

Compared to other game-like virtual environments at the time (Active Worlds, The Palace, Everquest, Ultima Online), we begin to understand why Habbo appealed to teenagers. All virtual worlds are designed with the idea to make a on-going synthetic world, where users get to choose a character for themselves, move around with it, and communicate with other users. However, the general similarities stop there. In contrast to most virtual worlds at the time, Habbo did not require users to install a separate program on the computer, only a plugin to the web browser. This made it technically easier to enter the virtual world.

Some of the virtual worlds were free to enter, like Habbo and The Palace, but many relied on paying a monthly subscription. As few teenagers could transfer money online, such games were out of reach for many. Habbo had no entrance fee, and it relied on SMS billing, which made Habbo economically accessible for teenagers. In addition, Habbo characters were easier to operate than, for instance, Everquest or Ultima Online characters. Those virtual environments, where users are supposed to fight monsters and other characters, require more flexible character movements and fine-grained control. The drawback is that it takes longer to master the necessary skills, whereas in Habbo the character movements are more limited, but easier to manage. This made Habbo comparably easier to learn and memorize.

The Habbo environment and characters were aesthetically influenced by cartoons and pixelated graphics. The appearance of the Habbo characters — faces, clothes, postures, colors — made them resemble young people, not elderly. There were few ways of signifying the passage of time in Habbo. Habbo characters could not have wrinkles, wear glasses, become fat, or crouch. Because of the crude graphics and the particular style, Habbo characters give an impression of youth.

It appears that Habbo met a demand — an increasing number of teenagers were online, and there were few services for that target group. Before the millennium shift, most Internet users learned the ways of the Internet at workplaces in certain technical domains or during university studies. Although Habbo was not intended to be a teenage service, it fitted the teenage audience for technical, economic, and aesthetic reasons.

4 THE INFLUENCE OF DECREASING AVERAGE AGE OF NEW USERS

As more and more of the new users were teenagers, several things happened with the online service and its developers. The role of the developers changed, old features were removed, new features were rethought, and the moderation of the community became increasingly important.

4.1 The responsible adult

Habbo early on was characterized as by the developers as "a fun thing for us, and hopefully for others too" (S4). This developer approach changed as the users' average age decreased and the sociocultural distance between the developers and the users increased. Teenagers are not "new media people", and most of them are not of age — they are the responsibility of their parents. A developer described the change in the user-developer relation as follows:

"...it started fading like our participation in the community, because we did not really experience the same natural feeling of belonging to the crowd that was there. We had to approach it more

professionally and understand the new target group and what to develop for them, instead of developing for ourselves” (S4)

The developers experienced a gradual exclusion from the user community. That happens on some level with all successful web services, as the number of users increase [5]. New users become experienced users, of which some become widely known users, some active gurus, and some old-timers in the growing community. After a while developers are not self-evident insiders in the community.

In this case the gradual exclusion of the developers was not only the unavoidable exclusion based on growth in the number of users. It was also an exclusion based on a change in the mainstream characteristics of the users. Early on the mainstream users were new media people, like the developers, but the mainstream changed to teenagers. That meant that the developers could not recognize themselves to the same degree in the mainstream users anymore.

The change in the user-developer relation also added to duties of the developers, the business could not go on as usual. The difference between developers and users was not like a change in domains, like having different professional backgrounds. It became a difference in age, initially not that many years, but enough to create the difference between people working and people going to school. Since Habbo became a place for teenagers, and neither teachers nor parents were present, the developers had to take on the role of the responsible adult.

4.2 A change in features

Some of the features developed early on express how Habbo was made for the developers themselves and others of similar age. One of the new public rooms in Habbo designed for the UK market launch was modeled after a typical English pub. Socializing at pubs is associated with adults, not teenagers. As meeting new people, both for conversation and dating purposes, was one design driver, the developers implemented a match-making feature. Based on two user profiles, the match-making feature returned a percentage signifying how good a potential match would be. The developers also envisioned that the hotel would feature pets at some time, perhaps a moose:

”...already then we decided that there should be pets, we should have a moose that sits in front of the TV and drinks beer when left alone, and stuff like that...” (S1)

However, due to the decreasing age of the target user group, the pet feature was not implemented according to the initial vision. The pets became friendly cats and dogs, to be taken care of like tamagotchis. The match-making feature was also withdrawn at some point, and the designs of new public rooms did not relate to pub life or drinking.

4.3 Stricter online governance

The decreasing average age of the new users not only shaped the technical features in Habbo, but also influenced the developers’ communication about Habbo. In the Habbo online magazine published by the developers, one issue (Kultakalankuvalehti 3/2001) was devoted to safety. The importance of keeping passwords private and different kinds of scams were addressed. Habbo became marketed, not only to future users, but also to their parents. A developer explained how this change in intended readers influenced the image of the service:

”At that stage the tone of it... if it says outright that it is a cheerful and safe place for teenagers to hang out, would any of us go there?” (S1)

The developer was referring to the age group of himself and the author, around thirty, at the time of the interview. The point being that people of that age do not normally visit to places marketed to teenagers, but rather are discouraged by such an image of the service. Also, users under fourteen were asked to get the permission of a parent or guardian before registering to the service (Habbo Way 2001).

A set of norms for online behaviour in Habbo, called the Habbo way, was developed in 2001. It encouraged respectful socializing and discouraged sharing of personal information, bullying, as well as online activities referring to sexual acts. To enforce these rules, several measures were taken. A chat filter that turned swearwords into rubbish was developed in Q2/2001. The filter replaced swearwords with the word ”bobba”. Already from the start, the developers and their trusted friends acted as moderators in the community. This moderation activity got a more visible role, an age limit to become a moderator was set, and the moderators got improved special powers. They could ban disrespectful users from the service for a time period and ”kick” them out of a particular room if reprimands failed.

In 2003, a limit was also set on how much users could spend on virtual furniture per week. The limit was at first 10 euros, but in negotiations with the Finnish consumer ombudsman the limit was decreased to 7 euros per week [1].

4.4 Hacking prohibited

Among more technically interested users a practice of hacking the service was witnessed during the early years. The motivation was most often to show off technical competence, and one popular way was to change the skin color of the Habbo character's body parts or make them invisible. This was achieved through the means of memory hacking, that is, changing values in the client computer's RAM memory to trick the server. This was first perceived among developers as harmless and a tribute to the service, since the developers could not really believe that anyone would be so interested in Habbo that they would devote much time to hack it.

However, as many younger new users entered the service, encounters with Habbo characters with invisible character parts (heads, arms, legs) became more open to interpretation. Less technically savvy users had to come up with some explanation for why some Habbo characters were whole and others not. For some reason, a rumour about a Habbo chainsaw murderer started spreading among users who did not understand the possibility of memory hacking. According to the developers, this induced fear among younger users, because they did not know what to expect: would they be the next victim?

After a while the developers felt increased pressure to take a more responsible standpoint towards concerned young users. As a consequence, the memory hacking possibilities were reduced after extensive technical investigations.

5 REACTIONS IN THE USER COMMUNITY

How did the user community react to the new moderation features, and the decreasing average age? Interviews with users revealed an emerging time sharing of the service, a geography of age, and frustration among older users about the chat filter.

5.1 Time sharing

It appears that Habbo has a daily rhythm. The majority of the users, the teenagers, are not online during the daytime, but log on after school in the afternoon. During the school hours, only children that are home from school because of some illness are online. In the evening hours, there are more older users online. A focus group with 30+ users (in October 2005) commented on the daily rhythm:

"And the kids that are ill at home, they always ask what illness you have, because you are at home".

"After 11 [pm] all the young ones go to bed, then it starts to be... [a place for a good crowd]".

The first comment refers to a typical situation when the 30+ user had logged on from work, and received a comment from a younger user that made it clear that the younger user thought that the 30+ user was ill at home too. The second comment shows how older users might feel more "normal" in the service later in the evening, as younger users have to go to bed. These assumptions about the daily rhythm of Habbo were shared by almost everyone interviewed by the author. The daily rhythm can be thought of as different age groups time sharing Habbo.

5.2 A Geography of Age

Another common assumption related to the age of the Habbo users was that older users tend to hang out in the public rooms, where as younger users tend to hang out in the more private guest rooms. One of the reasons mentioned for this geography of age was that one could only exchange furniture and play games in the guest rooms, not in the public rooms. In the speech of the users, older age was connected with (just) socializing, where as younger age was connected with playing games and collecting furniture. Developer interviews revealed that purchase behavior is more complex than that, based on purchase statistics. However, age still remained an important orientation factor in the service.

5.3 Watching Over Younger Users

According to interviews with the developers and 30+ users, some 18+ users chose to remain in the service and volunteer as moderators. Also some parents and grandparents registered as users to be able to spend time with and watch over the younger users. In this sense, an age-based division of labour emerged.

5.4 Chat Filter Frustration

The 30+ users were not particularly happy with the chat filter. They remembered with nostalgia those days when users could say anything they wanted. It was not that they wanted to use curses, but that the chat filter intervened in what they considered normal discussions:

"There is sometimes bobba even in normal chatting."

The word "bobba" refers to the term that the chat filter replaces swearwords with. When asked about how Habbo could be made more suitable for 18+ users, the 30+ focus group had some ideas, of which removing the chat filter was one. Evidently this request was commonplace enough that in 2008 the chat filter was made optional for 18+ users.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Ageing users are most often seen as "less" than what is considered normal or mainstream users. Elderly users are typically perceived as those who need help and support with access to the services. These assumptions are put in a different light by the case study in this article. In Habbo, an online service intended for children and teenagers, the role of older users was not diminutive. In contrast, age was considered a resource, and older users were sometimes given more responsibility, a moderator role. In the cases that older users referred to grandparents using Habbo, the service become a medium for communication across generations.

A complex questions is, could there be a "Habbo for grannies"? In developer interviews, the connection between age and the current design concept became clear. The current design of Habbo is about a certain degree of freedom of self-expression and, on the other hand, safety and moderation. According to the developers, two things should happen if an older age-group is targeted. The degree of self-expression should be increased and the degree of real-life anonymity should be decreased. Self-expression here refers both to what users can talk about, their activities, and what bodily expressions are possible with the current Habbo characters. Real-life anonymity here refers to that it is forbidden to share personal information, such as real name, phone number and street address in the service. However, this elaboration stems from contrasting teenagers with young adults. What happens with self-expression and anonymity when contrasting young adults with older adults is a question for future research.

The case study revealed a geography of age in Habbo and that different age groups practice time sharing of Habbo. Younger users log on after school, where as older users log on later in the evening. Younger users seem to visit private guest rooms, where as older users are connected with the public rooms. Generalizing these findings, might it be so that other services also feature time sharing and geography of age? The traditional way of thinking about services for ageing users is to think about distinct services. However, future research needs to assess to which degree current services for "all" are age-segregated within a particular service.

Age is commonly viewed as an economic factor and a factor that influences access to technologies. This case study revealed that aesthetics is also related to age. Especially regarding user characters, one reason for Habbo's popularity among teenagers, might be the lack of symbols to signify age and ageing. This study raises the question whether other online services that feature cartoon-like user characters (not photo-based), need to better consider expressing age for its characters. It might also be the case that the cartoon genre or cartoon aesthetics is heavily associated with a younger age group. It would be interesting to compare with findings regarding cartoon readership, that is, whether there are cartoons that are popular in different age groups.

This case study also highlighted the relation between different generations within a service designed for teenagers. One expression of this relation is the moderator role, or giving more power to certain supporting trusted users. This raises the question if supported trusted users need technical considerations in services for different age groups. For instance, could a service for ageing users implement limited rights for family members or caregivers? In some cases, supporting limited rights would increase the privacy of ageing users. Take for instance banking services, a person paying a bill for another user would not need to see the balance of the account, nor the transaction history. In many current services, as long as users are considered to be stand-alone

individuals by service developers, a disabled ageing user has the choice of give away everything or nothing. Considering users as part of their relevant social fabric could improve quality of service.

The study gives a detailed example of how age can be inscribed in new media technology, and the co-construction of users, developers, and technology. By exploring what makes new media appeal to a particular age group, we gain an increased understanding about inclusive age-sensitive design of the broadband society.

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