Who are the Habbo Hotel Users – and What are they Doing There?

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Abstract

Who are the Habbo Hotel users, and what is so important in this virtual world that one quarter of the Finnish 10-15 years old population like to spend time there regularly? We present user categorisations based on empirical data from participant observations, a survey, user interviews, and fansite articles. Our results show a learning curve of about 3-4 months in average regarding Habbo behaviour and opinions, and we found some correlations between demographics (mainly age and gender) and online activities. The study found no single motivation for Habbo use, but instead points towards diversity, open-ended use, and creative content production. The users take part in the innovation process, since what active users do in Habbo becomes both a fundamental part of the use experience and a source of inspiration for the Habbo developers.

1. Introduction

This is an account of our research driven by our curiosity towards the Habbo Hotel users, who they are and why Habbo fascinates. Habbo is many things: a software product for digital communities; a social networking site for children and young teenagers; a playful and non-violent virtual world where parents can trust their children to be reasonably safe, etc. However, Habbo is also an example of a change in technical innovation that has gained an increasing amount of attention during the past five or ten years.

In many cases, technology users have not had much of an impact in technology production compared to other actors involved in the production of technology: technology sponsors, innovators, vendors, service providers, educators, architects, designers, tech support, etc. The users do not hold a very favourable position, since traditionally the innovation is seen to flow from the different developers via the other mediating stakeholders to the user (technology push), and not vice versa. The interests of the users are not the ones that are served first, because in most cases business and technology production come first, giving the interests of the users a very challenging position. (Kling 1977)

On the other hand, examples of successful products emerging from close cooperation between producers and customers have led to an increased attention to user-driven innova-

tion (Nordic Council of Ministers 2006, Hyysalo et al. 2007). User needs are in the center of such approaches as participatory design (Greenbaum & Kyng 1991, Schuler & Namioka 1993), user-centred design (Beyer & Holtzblatt 1998, Norman & Draper 1986), usability engineering (Nielsen 1993) and lead-user design (von Hippel 1988). In some cases, the users take matters in their own hands by modifying existing products, a few even forming own companies. In other cases, researchers and product development companies have developed user-centred methods ranging from early user involvement, making flexible products that support customisation (Laukkanen 2005, Nardi 1993), to representing and modeling users and their activities (Bødker 1998, Maguire 2001).

However, also value-production has changed as computing technology has become cheaper and more pervasive. Community builders and researchers (Hagel & Armstrong 1997, Kim 2000, Preece 2000) argue that software for communities gain a great deal of value after the launch of the product/service/community. Effort is needed from the community moderators and value is created by the content-producing community members. This means that the traditional maintenance phase in the software lifecycle, when many considered the software project to be completed, has changed to something important, because now there are both significant costs and value involved.

This shift in the design-use relationships raises many new questions. Producers need to know when and where to adjust their processes to meet the new demands on the production and collaboration with users. How can large amounts of simultaneous users be supported technically and socially, as well as represented in design? Revenue models need to take into account content produced by users, and the roles of consumers and users in innovation policies need to be attended to.

One way of approaching this problem area is to study who the Habbo Hotel users are and what they do there. In the Mobile Content Communities research project that started in 2003 (Turpeinen & Kuikkaniemi 2007), the authors followed the development of the Habbo Hotel: the users and communities, new features, and the design-use collaboration. Sulake Corporation, the producer of Habbo, was an industry partner in the research project and based in Helsinki, which enabled research access to product development. Early in the project Habbo become an interesting case study for several reasons:

- its innovative revenue model with no entrance fee, but rather micro-payments for online activities, which makes it possible for the users to try out the product first, and pay more if the product quality continues to meet expectations
- the producers' success in making Habbo a reasonably safe place for its young users
- its unique position on the virtual world market: retro, playful, and non-violent

During the project, Habbo continued to fascinate the authors, because of its

- active users taking part in the content production (Salovaara et al. 2005)
- user-created Habbo-themed websites (Johnson & Toiskallio 2005)
- developers' responsible role in governing different users' interests (Johnson 2007)
- input to the discussions on the concept of community (Johnson & Toiskallio 2007)

This article aims to open up the category of Habbo users – what different users are there and how do they differ? We studied demographics and online activities with both quantitative and qualitative methods. The next section gives a brief background to Habbo and the starting points for the study: multiplayer games studies and user research.

2. Background

Habbo has its origins in the experiences from multimedia cdroms and two Internet chat rooms, Mobiles Disco and Lumisota. In terms of Internet technologies, Habbo is a graphical chat environment on the Web accessible with a web browser with the Shockwave plug-in. This chat environment is designed as a virtual hotel where people can hang out and make new friends. When checking in to the virtual hotel one creates one's own cartoon-like Habbo avatar that can walk, dance, eat, drink and chat in the cafés, restaurants, swimming pools and games rooms. Besides experiencing these common rooms in the hotel, one can decorate and furnish a room of one's own. In contrast to many online games, there is no entrance fee to the virtual world, which allows the majority of users to chat for free. The profit model is based on micropayments in the hotel instead. Virtual furniture, minigames, 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.

Figure 1. Screenshot from Habbo Hotel (Sulake 2006)

The research approach in this report is based in user research and games studies, research fields that aim at understanding users and players. *User research* (Hackos & Redish 1998, Beyer & Holtzblatt 1998, Kuniavsky 2003) is based on the idea that knowing more about the users will help designers create better products that meet the user needs. User research typically includes identifying user groups, understanding their context of use (ISO 9241-11 1998) by visiting user sites and making interviews and observations of the users in their own environment. However, the underlying assumption of many user research models is a product development model where the user needs are fairly well stabilised. Design for digital communities on the other hand does not assume an existing target market; especially online entertainment products strive to facilitate the formation of new communities around the product. This, and because entertainment products are used in a leisure context and usability is not concerned with gameplay, is why it is difficult to apply mainstream usability and user research models to understanding Habbo users.

Games studies have researched computer games for more than a decade from technical, aesthetic and socio-cultural perspectives by a growing number of researchers with different backgrounds (Aarseth 2003). Closest to Habbo is the research on MUDs (textual chat environments) (Cherny 1999) and virtual worlds (Bartle 2003, Book 2004, Brown & Bell 2004, Mulligan & Patrovsky 2003, Yee 2002). Most attention has been paid to the gameplay itself, the question of what constitutes a game, and structural game elements (Kon-

zack 2002). There is some research on player models (see below) and also other motivations to participate. For instance, the "Children and Young People as Players of Game Cultures" -project (Ermi et al. 2004) report that 75 % of the 10-12 y. children (N=284) play digital games at least once a week, that owning games is a good argument for inviting friends, and that games aid in learning English. Playing online games is not only a question of the game itself, but rather a mix of online and offline matters.

The question why do people play massive multiplayer games has been asked many times in games studies. Table 1 presents four player models that have acted as inspiration for our Habbo research. Bartle's (2003) infamous socializers-achievers-explorers-killers model has been applied in many cases, but since Habbo is a non-violent game environment[1], the killer category does not fit[2]. Following the hermeneutic rule that if the parts change, then the whole needs to be revisited, we engaged in looking for other models.

Table 1. Player models for virtual worlds (from Bartle 2003).

Bartle 1997	Farmer 1992	Hedron 1998	Yee 2002
MUD	Habitat (graphical chat)	Ultima Online	Everquest
Socializers Achievers Explorers Killers	Passives Actives Motivators Caretakers Geek Gods	Survival Competence Excel Prove Mastery Seek New Challenges Everything Is One	Achievement Grief Leadership Relationship Immersion

Farmer's model of passives, actives, motivators, caretakers, and geek gods from Habitat seemed to fit Habbo fairly well. It made sense to understand motivators as those few who create games for the others in Habbo (playmakers in Salovaara et al. 2005), caretakers as the Habbo moderators, and geek gods as the Sulake game developers. However, Farmer's model lacked a lot of context and demographics to satisfy us, which motivated us to move forward with the aim of finding suitable player categories for Habbo.

3. Methods and Research data

When talking about users we made the following initial distinction: demographics and Habbo activity. This distinction was elaborated on during our survey work (Table 3), but it enabled us to break down the initial who-is-the-user question in to three different questions: 1) what is the demographics of the Habbo users? 2) What are the popular activities in Habbo, and 3) Does the demographics correlate with the Habbo activity?

Table 2 summarised the empiric data in the Habbo case. Here we focus on the survey data, fansite articles, and player interviews. For data analysis, we have used both quantitative methods (frequencies, cross-tabulation, cluster analysis) and qualitative methods (qualitative content analysis and membership categorisation analysis).

[1] Because of the non-violent characteristics of Habbo compared to Ultima Online and Everquest, we have not discussed Hedron's and Yee's models in relation to Habbo.

[2] If we stretch killing towards grief play (disturbing other players), one could potentially apply it to Habbo as well, but since Habbo is a moderated environment and grief play is not acceptable, that still leaves the killer category in an illegitimate position compared to the other motivations.

Table 2. Empiric data in the Habbo case.

Main empiric data	Background data
survey[3]: Habbo visitor profile, 06/2004 • N = 10000, 21 questions with structured answer alternatives, 6 open questions **fansite (Habbo-themed website) articles** • Habbo's own amateur "mediaworld", 2004, selected articles from ~25 fansites with 5-50 articles each, 150 MB downloaded material **developer interviews, 04-05/2005** • 10x 1,5-3h open-ended thematic interviews, some development documents • client developers, server developers, graphic designers, ADs, project managers **player interviews, 10/2005** • 12 players interviewed in 2 individual, 2 pair, and 1 group interviews **artefact analysis of Habbo Hotel** • stereotypic images, affordances	**First-hand Habbo experiences / participant observation** • once or twice per month sporadic visits to Habbo Hotel **project meetings** • at Sulake once every 2-3 months • 5 recorded meetings, ~10 informal Confidential **work with Sulake** • community manager survey, N=4, 2003 • user feedback for release 9, 2006 **2 TKK student assignments** • data gathered by students • usability test, fansite starter kit **Informal second-hand experiences** • friends, colleagues in Habbo • professional media articles

4. Results

The explorative survey (see subsections 4.1 and 4.2) suggested that we needed to go deeper into what the popular activities in Habbo were, to pinpoint the different motivations to participate. Our fansite studies (4.3) and player interviews revealed the diversity in the emergent Habbo activities. We describe the emergent use in section 4.5, but before them we also describe the pre-defined Habbo categories made by the developers (4.4).

4.1. Statistics: Habbo Visitor Profile

Because there were no data available on the Habbo visitors, we decided fairly early in the project to do a visitor profile survey, to get some quantitative background data for our otherwise mainly qualitative analysis. We were interested in both demographics and online Habbo activites, so we created a model of how we understood the Habbo visitor (Table 3). Our objectives was to find out which of these attributes were related to each other, for instance if age or gender says anything about what the visitors do in Habbo.

The survey was carried out as a web-based survey and a link to the web form[4] was put on the Habbo frontpage, under the Habbo News section. We asked 27 questions, of which 21 had structured answer alternatives and the last 6 were open. The survey was open for two weeks, during 22.6.2004-6.7.2004, and we got roughly ten thousand Habbo responses (N=10 613). During this time around 160 000 users visited Habbo, which gives us a re-

[3] Questions and answer frequencies available at http://mc2.soberit.hut.fi
[4] We used a survey research service provided by Digium Research, see http://www.digium.fi

sponse rate of about 6%. We discarded about 300 answers, of which some were intended as jokes, but typically it was empty or double answers, since the survey service did not restrict multiple answers from the same computer.

Table 3. Model of the Habbo Visitor

Traditional background	Other activities	Online Habbo activities	Habbo fansites	Habbo background
Age, gender, region	School, hobbies, other games, friends	Chatting, furniture, decorating rooms, creating games, making friends	Favourite, visit frequency, reading & writing, forum discussions	Age in Habbo, visit frequency, network connection, logon place

We did three major kinds of analyses: a) frequencies, b) cross-tabulation, and c) cluster analysis. We start with an overview of the frequencies (4.1.1), continue with findings from the cross-tabulation (4.1.2), and end with the visitor clusters (4.1.3).

4.1.1. Overview

Table 4 shows an overview of the answer frequencies to some background questions.

Table 4. Overview of survey answer frequencies

Variable	Description				
age	75% of the respondents were between 10-14 year old.				
gender	Roughly 50-50, equal amounts of boys and girls.				
region	All over Finland, not only big towns or countryside.				
access location	93% log on from home				
Habbo age	years in Habbo:	0-1	1-2	2-3	3+
	% of respondents:	29%	26%	27%	17%
Visit frequency	everyday 46%, a few times a week: 40%				
Visit freq. fansites	more than half visit at least once a week				

4.2. Findings

Sulake has reported[5] that 90% of the Habbo visitors don't pay. However, this doesn't mean that these non-paying visitors are not interested in Habbo furniture. Based on preliminary interviews and fansite stories we had got the impression that it is possible to have nice rooms and make careers in Habbo without spending money, for instance by trading or receiving gifts. Our survey showed that a large part of the visitors get furniture through donations, competitions, or as rewards for favours. Of the 26%[6] (2557) who said that they don't buy anything, 57% (1451) still receives furniture donations, 48% (1229) trades furniture, and 31% (782) gets furniture items as pay for "work" in Habbo. Thus, we

[5] Press release 25.10.2004. http://www.sulake.com/press/archive

[6] Disclaimer: The percentages should be read as percentages of the answers to the survey, which is biased towards active Habbo visitors. The share of all users who don't buy anything is much larger than 26%.

can draw the conclusion that from "I don't spend money in Habbo" does *not* follow "I'm not interested in furni". In other words, also people who don't spend their own money in Habbo contribute to Habbo's virtual economy through transactions and value creation.

Before we did our study, we had good reasons to believe that two factors very much influence Habbo behaviour and attitudes: habbo-age and visit frequency. Our data showed that this is indeed the case. Habbo-age has a strong influence on Habbo attitudes. Figure 2 shows a few trends. We can distinguish different types of curves: a) a rising trend that stabilises at 4-6 months (green, yellow, blue), b) a decreasing trend that stabilises at 4-6 months (red, lila), and c) a decreasing trend all the way (orange, brown).

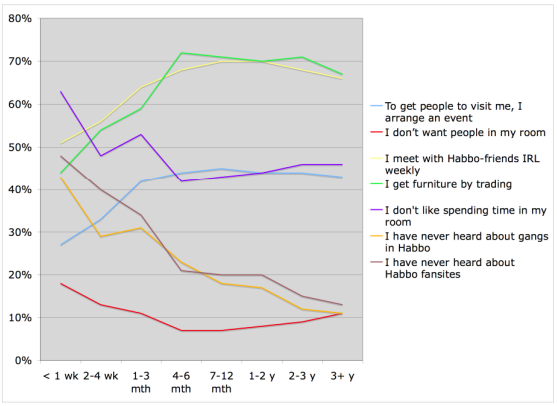

Figure 2. The importance of Habbo-age.

From these curves we can draw two conclusions. First, since it is possible to distinguish trends *at all* means that Habbo-age is a really important variable. Second, the data suggests that there is a learning curve of about 3-4 months, after which opinions stabilise. In addition, the slight change in the later parts of the curve can be interpreted as a decrease of participation in Habbo, foreshadowing the end of their Habbo careers.

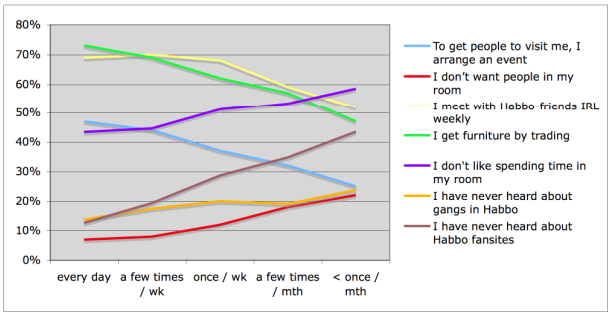

Figure 3. The importance of visit frequency.

The other variable that clearly influences the Habbo career is the visit frequency (Figure 3). The data suggests that those who visit Habbo often are more likely (decreasing trends) to arrange events, trade furniture, meet with Habbo-friends outside Habbo. And, those who visit Habbo rarely are more likely (rising trends) *not* to want people in their rooms, *not* have heard about gangs nor fansites, not like spending time in their own rooms.

The two above figures show that common sense and research data agrees. More time spent in Habbo is related to being active (arrange events, trade furniture, etc.) there. The learning curve was very interesting to note. But is there any underlying variable that can

predict time spent in Habbo? Can we say that people of a certain gender, age, or from a certain region are more likely to be active in Habbo? We will go through these questions (section 4.2.2), but before that we will turn to other patterns in our data. A cluster analysis will show the relevant patterns in the data, which factors make a difference.

4.2.1. Cluster Analysis

The aim of the cluster analysis was to create a manageable number of player clusters to explain the data. (Figure 4). Since this was an explorative questionnaire, the emerging cluster dimensions were considered more important than the exact percentages.

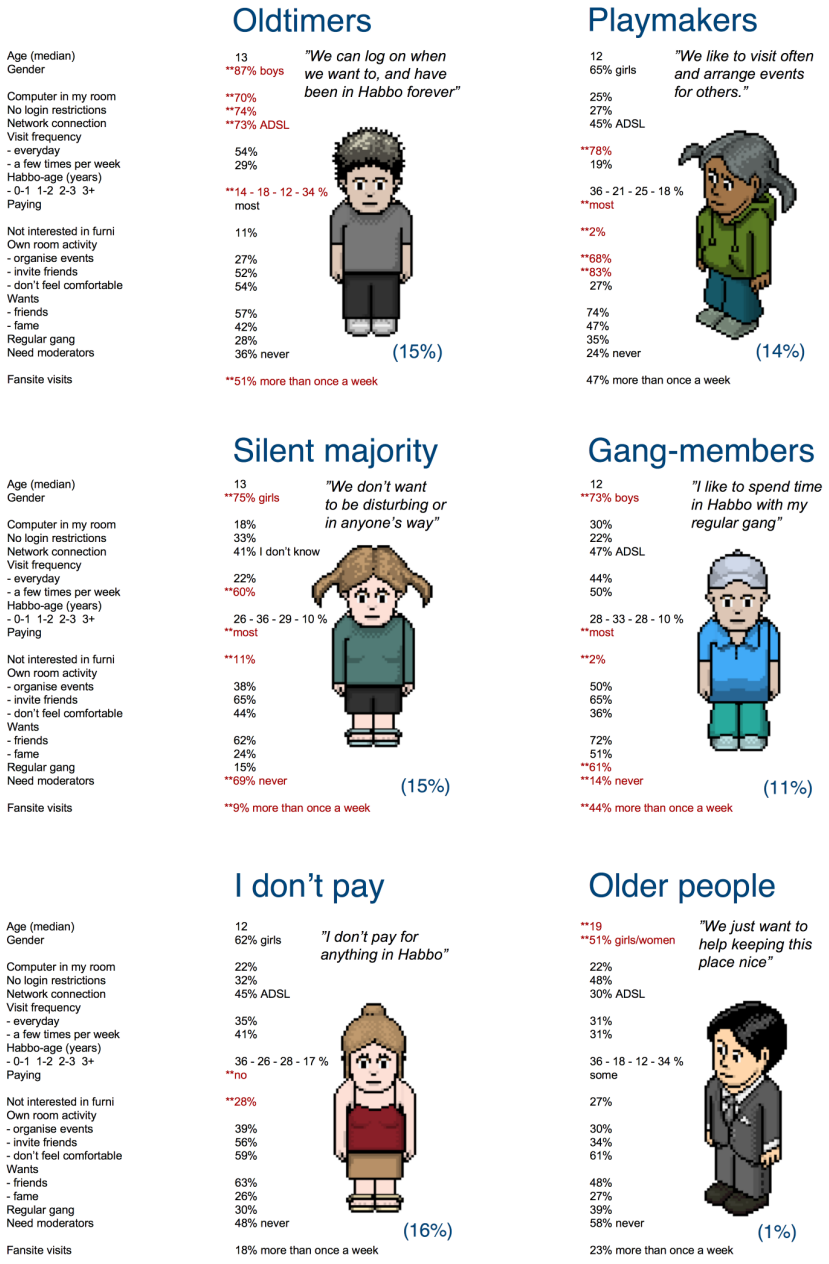

Figure 4. Habbo user groups based on cluster analysis

Three criteria were important in the analysis: a) a strive for groups that one can explain, b) no logical conflicts within groups, e.g. non-buyers and buyers in different groups, c) as large part of the data as possible included, e.g. anything that explains more than 50% is good. The SPSS-statistic program provided the functionality: Two-Step Cluster.

We ran around 30 different cluster analyses to find out what would be a sensible number of groups to meet the above criteria. The first sensible cluster result is shown in Figure 4, and the significant variables that explain the particular cluster are marked with two stars (**). We ended up with 6 groups that we named Oldtimers, Playmakers, Silent majority, Gang-members, I don't pay, and Older people. These groups explained 72% of our data.

However, these clusters were based on all variables, which meant that the background variables (gender, age, etc.) took over. For instance, when we tried to create 7 clusters instead of 6, the next emerging group would have been an all-girls group. To remedy this issue, we decided to analyse background variables separate from habbo activity variables. An analysis suggested that two dimensions were more distinguishing than others: 1) privacy – publicity, and 2) arranging events – not spend time in own room. Figure 5 shows our previous clusters put on these dimensions. In the next subsection we analyse in more detail two of the background variables usually considered important, age and gender.

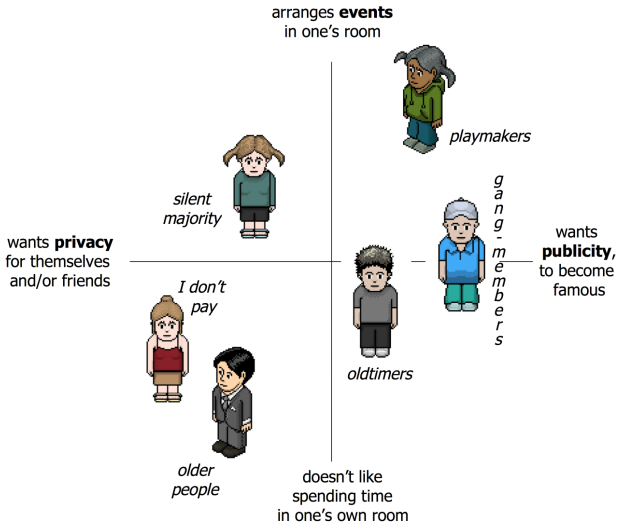

Figure 5. The two most important ingame dimensions.

4.2.2. A Brief Note[7] on Age and Gender in Habbo

"...girls and boys have different things, boys collect all those furni there, and girls chat"
(Pair interview 10.6.2004)

Early in the project, in the first user interviews, we encountered very categorical statements like the one above about boys and girls in Habbo. Because no use statistics was

[7] A gender perspective can be much more than this "within categories" analysis. For a study on gendered self-presentation in Habbo, see Pietiläinen (2004). For a useful contextualisation of gender and online communities from a constructivist perspective, including discussions of hegemonic masculinity and normative feminity, see Sveningsson Elm (2007).

available to confirm or contrast these gender stereotypes, we decided to put them to a test in our survey. Table 5 below shows a cross-tabulation of the topics in the survey and gender. It is based on the question "I am", with the answer alternatives "a boy", "a girl", "a man", "a woman". The age for when someone becomes a man or a woman was not predefined, in contrast, the respondents could define themselves as boy, girl, man, or woman.

The survey showed fairly similar distributions in getting furniture. One difference is that 74% of the boys compared to 65% of the girls report that they get furniture by trading. Another difference is that a slightly larger share of the girls receive furniture as gifts (54% vs. 47%). Based on this survey, rather than finding furniture trading something that mostly boys do, we find that a majority of both boys and girls trade furniture in Habbo.

Table 5. Gender similarities and differences.

	Boys	Girls	Men	Women
Number of respondents (N)	4672	4744	497	317
Percentage of all respondents	46%	46%	5%	3%
Age (median)	13	12	15	15
Age (ave)	12.8	12.6	16.7	17.2
Computer in my room	42%	24%	55%	32%
No login restrictions	41%	32%	60%	53%
Does not know network connection	18%	41%	11%	27%
Visit frequency				
- everyday	47%	45%	47%	42%
- a few times / week	39%	42%	37%	36%
Habbo-age (years)				
- 0-1	31%	31%	25%	33%
- 1-2	26%	28%	17%	23%
- 2-3	26%	29%	27%	25%
- 3+	17%	12%	31%	20%
How do you get furniture? (multichoice)				
- I buy them	66%	64%	61%	63%
- I receive them as gifts	47%	54%	44%	51%
- by trading	74%	65%	62%	58%
- by working (as salary)	30%	27%	25%	26%
- by cheating	4%	1%	8%	2%
- I'm not interested	10%	15%	18%	21%
Own room activity (multichoice)				
- organise events	39%	50%	35%	35%
- invite friends	61%	62%	52%	52%
- don't feel comfortable	44%	45%	51%	51%
Wants with room? (multichoice)				
- furniture	33%	29%	28%	29%
- friends	65%	68%	58%	56%
- fame	48%	26%	46%	24%
- fansite fame	14%	6%	19%	5%
- something else	13%	22%	21%	30%
Spends time with regular gang	38%	26%	38%	34%
Never needed to call a moderator	27%	39%	29%	44%
Visits fansites at least once a week	50%	34%	47%	27%

The similarities in Habbo-age and visit frequency is striking. Among the few differences we note that, like in many previous gender studies (Nurmela 2002), boys tend to have easier access to services (Habbo) compared to the girls. Also familiar from research on gender stereotypes (Svahn 1999), more boys than girls report that they strive for fame. Despite this, a larger share of the girls (50%) reported that they arrange events to get others to visit their room (boys 35%). For some reason the Habbo-themed websites created by users, so called fansites, seem more popular among boys than girls. While leaving a detailed exploration of age for future work, we note that it seems like the men and women tend to be less social compared with the average. This is understandable as they are a marginal group in Habbo.

4.2.3. Bias towards active players

As with surveys in general, also this survey gathered answers from the committed and active community members. This is visible in the table below.

Table 6. Checking Habbo-age and visit frequency is a way of determining bias.

	0-1y	1-2y	2-3y	3+y
Every day	15%	11%	12%	8%
A few times a week	11%	12%	11%	5%
Once a week	1%	1%	1%	1%
A few times a month	1%	2%	2%	1%
Less than once a month	0%	1%	1%	1%

4.2.4. Open questions after the survey

Although we were satisfied with the survey and what we learned from doing it, the survey still left some questions open. First, we targeted the survey to answer the question "who are the Habbo users", not what motivates them to go there. Second, the survey was successful in describing a snapshot of the Habbo community, but community research (Kim 2000) tell us that the motivations for community members to participate change during their career in the community. To answer these questions we studied the Habbo fansites and interviewed Habbo visitors. We will come back to these questions in the conclusion.

Third, when doing the explorative survey we did not fully understand the diversity of all the Habbo activities going on. During our analysis we learned that a Habbo "event", as we called it in the survey, can be broken down in to many dimensions. For instance, the event (or series of events, making it more like an activity) can be described in terms of large or small, long-term or temporary, visible or underground, open or closed. Furthermore, the group activity leading up to the event can be hierarchic or democratic, valuing uniqueness or competition, and the purpose of buying furniture and decorating the room varies from just for fun to becoming rich, to imitating real world games. The point being, in the survey, where people answered that they would create an event to get people to visit their rooms, we lacked data on what kind of event they were talking about. Our fansite studies made us wiser in the above respects, as the next section shows.

4.3. Learning from the Habbo Fansites

We studied 173 Finnish Habbo fansites in 2004. The focus was on what could be learned about the Habbo visitors and their Habbo practices from user research (Hackos & Redish, 1998; Kuniavsky, 2005), focusing on the membership categories visible through the fansites. Since the fansites are accessible without research intervention, the risk of distorting the data by the presence of the researchers is reduced.

The most popular fansites are usually made by a small team of Habbo fans with different expertise and roles. For example, one designs the look and layout of the site, another one writes the stories, and a third has the technical skill to publish the site on the Web. The most active fansites have small updates (such as news and rumors about Habbo) several times per week, but publish reviews and articles once a week or bi-weekly. Some fansites group their articles together and publish them as an issue of a Web magazine. The Web magazines seem to follow a rhythm of one issue per one or two months. The fansite contents were classified and a list of common fansite elements was produced (Table 4).

Table 4. Common Habbo Fansite Elements (based on Johnson & Toiskallio, 2005).

Fansite Elements	Description
News and rumors	Fansites are convenient for Habbo visitors who want to reach a large audience, a fast way of spreading information about Habbo happenings (e.g., competitions, pop idols visiting Habbo), new features, news about Sulake Corp.
Participation	The fansite audience is provided ways to comment on the fansite through discussion forums, guest books, polls, etc..
Links	The fansites link to relevant Habbo places: other fansites, and to the hotels in other countries.
Hints, secrets, guidelines	Fansites teach newcomers both basic and advanced tricks with which to impress others. Guidelines on acceptable behavior are frequent.
Reviews and lists	The fansites keep track of the features and possibilities in Habbo: public spaces, different furniture items, pets, etc.
Histories	Two major histories are told on the fansites: the history of Habbo and the history of that particular fansite
Fashion and celebrities	Habbo “journalists” interview Habbo celebrities, avatars who have become famous in Habbo, and report on fashionable clothing and activities.
Graphics	Edited screenshot pictures are an integral part of many fansites, some even provide pixel graphics drawing schools.
Habbo fiction	A few fansites write fictional stories about characters in Habbo.
About	Who comprises the fansites staff, number of visitors, updates, banners, etc.
Real life	Habbo meetings “in real life,” stuff not about Habbo that is important to teenagers, as well as blogs, e-cards, etc.

Based on the fansites, we clustered the hotel residents into eight groups: a) furniture traders and collectors, b) chatters (in public rooms), c) gang-members and VIPs (insider groups not open to everyone), d) supervisors with administration powers, e) cheaters, f) quiz-makers and players, g) the hotel manager (a Sulake employee), and h) celebrities. Similarly, 11 popular activities were identified: trading furniture, casinos, dating, beauty contests, competitions, dice games, team sports, formula tracks, talk shows, clubs & ho-

tels, and orphanages. More important than the exact details of these listings are two observations about Habbo that they convey: the diverse and commonplace qualities of Habbo. First, there is not one particular Habbo activity that attracts all Habbo visitors, but many different ones. Second, the activities going on in Habbo resemble games with rules and pretend play familiar from schoolyards, playgrounds, youth clubs, and so on.

The Habbo visitors and their practices seem to be strongly influenced by the fansites. They complement Sulake's official Web site by providing more detailed information about the hotel from an experienced visitor's point of view. Hints, secrets, and guidelines, and stories about Habbo fashion influence the boundaries for acceptable behavior in Habbo. The fansites improve the Habbo visitors' awareness of the fan cultures around Habbo, and also reproduce and reinforce social positions (like potential Habbo career paths or legitimized visitor groups).

4.4. Pre-defined Habbo Categories

The Habbo aesthetics de-emphasise bodily differences between visitors. All avatars look like they are of the same length, height, and age. The visitors can choose their own clothing, hair styles, and skin colours from a pre-defined set (Figure 6).

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 6. Self-presentation possibilities for Habbo avatars. Left: the avatar of one of the authors. Right: an avatar from Pietiläinen (2004).

There are two avatar categories visible in the user interface in Figure 6, girl and boy. Unlike many other MMOGs, the Habbo designers chose not to use categories such as race, nationality, region, or alignment (good, evil, etc.). At the time of the study, there was a dozen special Habbo badges that show the special status of certain Habbos. Some of these the visitors can buy, some of these are earnable, and some of them signify volunteers or other workers. Table 10 shows a summary of these badges.

4.5. Emergent Habbo Categories

By combining elements from the pre-defined sets, the Habbo visitors have chosen their own **clothing styles**. Table 7 shows examples of Habbo clothing styles.

Table 7. Some examples of common clothing styles (Kriisipalvelu.net 2005[8])

…	**Punk**	**Gothic**	**Teinix (teenie)**	**Wannabe**	**Own style**	…
…	Bright colours, irokese	White skin, dark clothes	Pastel colours, round cheeks	Strict clothing, smart behaviour	Doesn't care about fashion	…
						

However, Habbo visitors are not only clustered based on their looks, it is also about their textual description, the room decoration theme, their style of chatting, and behaviour patterns. A common way of talking about Habbo avatars is through a their profession. Some Habbo visitors **pretend to have a profession in Habbo**, which involves decorating their room and behaving according to the selected profession. Some fansites have written articles on this role-playing phenomenon and discussed the following professions: journalist, nurse, tv-show host, bartender, pharmacist, actor, police, doctor, fireman, postman, veterinarian (Nerokala 2005, DJ Joneppe 2002[9]).

Figure 7. Two examples of visitors imitating TV-show formats in Habbo: Habbo Idols (left) and The Bachelor (right).

Imitating TV-show formats is another popular way of creating a hotel guest room theme. Figure 7 shows two examples, Habbo Idols (a room visited during a user interview 19.10.2005) and Habbo Bachelor (Unelmien Poikamies in Finnish) reported on the fansite Kriisipalvelu.net (May 2006). We have also found mentions of other tv-shows such as Greed, Do you want to be a millionaire, Big Brother, Survivor, America's Next Top Model, and different Dating-formats.

[8] Kriisipalvelu at http://habbomatic.com/
[9] Nerokala at http://nerokala.com/ and DJ Joneppe at http://www.kolumbus.fi/djjoneppe/index.htm

The diversity of the popular Habbo activities is very large, however one way to **compare activities** is to look at the their **characteristics over time**. For instance, an activity can be open to everyone, or only for selected visitors (closed). It can be fleeting, or continue over a longer time period. The activity can be arranged in a hierarchical way or be more democratic, and it might be very visible or more underground. Below (Figure 8) are three examples highlighting these dimensions.

Figure 8. Three different kinds of social activities: orphanage (left), bingo (middle), gang (right).

To the left is an orphanage, where people come to be connected as child and parents, and continue to roleplay as a family. The room owner stands in the image to the right, the child is in the middle (yellow shirt), the child queue in the bottom left, and the wannabe parents in the upper left. The middle image shows bingo, using a set of interactive dice furni: the person who rolls the same dice number as the room owner wins. To the right is a gang's recruitment room. Table 8 shows some differences in these group activities.

Table 8. Some characteristics of group activities

	Orphanage	Bingo	Gang
Open-closed	Open	Open	Closed
Fleeting-durable	Fleeting	Fleeting	Durable
Hierarchical – democratic	Game master + democratic participants	Game master + democratic participants	Hierarchy with participant ranks
Visible – underground	Visible	Visible	Underground

The virtual world also has other properties that have inspired games. Furniture traps, telerunning, and sumo-wrestling is can be mentioned as examples. Figure 9 shows a furni trap game that **plays with the spatiality of the hotel**. The assistant to the room owner runs the game by moving six tables in a row-like way, one table one square forward at a time, thereby reducing the available floor space for the players. The number of players is reduced as they are trapped. In some games, the trapped players can buy themselves out of the trap to continue the game.

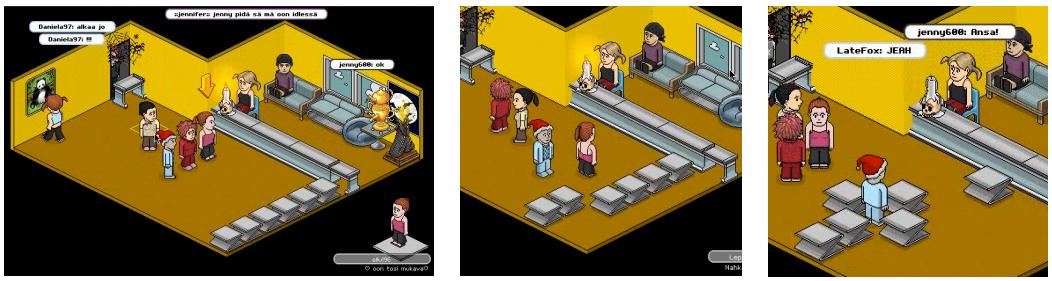

Figure 9. Furni trap game: 1) starting position (left), 2) decreasing available floorspace (middle), 3) one player is trapped (right).

Yet another way of clustering Habbo activities is to look at **the role of the furniture in the activity**. In the previous examples furniture has played a secondary role in the room. It is also possible to consider furni as ends in themselves. For instance, furniture museums have appeared in Habbo: when a room is filled with all different furni items, which the owner has spent much time to collect. Or, when the room owners just want to decorate the room with the aim of making something beautiful. Figure 10 below shows three examples of Habbo furni laid out in a way that should make the room owner very cool.

Figure 10. Furniture that makes you look cool. TV-wall (upper left), lots of writing desks (lower left), icehockey theme (right).

The TV-wall is cool, because it's an original idea in Habbo, since to place a tv-set above another, once has to use a special bug/feature that is not known to everyone. This shows technical competence, patience, and a sense of aesthetics. The room filled with writing desks is cool, since Habbo visitors know that one has to be member of Habbo Club for ten months to get just one desk of this type. This fortune shows that the room owner is a successful trader. The ice-hockey theme on the right is cool because of its thematic decoration, and because the owner show off with several furniture items that have only been for sale during two week periods in the hotel's history. Table 9 summarises the role of furniture items (virtual assets) in Habbo activities. Furniture can be an end in itself, it can be a means for something else, or play no role at all.

Table 9. The role of furniture in Habbo activities

Role of furniture	Description	
Furniture as an end in itself	to collect all different furni items furni as aesthetically pleasing	
Furniture as a means for something else	to make friends to make others happy to become famous to become rich	to show status as props for role playing as props for chatting
Indifferent to furniture	socialisers / chatters that keep contact with friends made in and outside Habbo	hackers (against the system) grief players

Based on our player interviews, we have also looked at how the Habbo visitors talk about the other Habbo visitors. In addition to describing Habbo visitors based on what they do

in Habbo (activities), Table 10 summarises the membership categories that were used during our interviews to explain to us what other kinds of Habbo visitors there can be.

Table 10. Predefined and Emergent Visual and Nonvisual Membership Categories.

Predefined visual categories	Emergent visual categories	Non-visual categories
avatar appearance: boy / girl *purchasable badges:* Habbo Club, Golden Habbo Club, Halloween smile *special badges:* Habbo staff, NGO workers, youth workers, mental support, VIP guests *earnable badges:* Habbo X (guides), fansite authors, Battle Ball gurus	*clothing styles:* punk, gothic, teenie, wannabe (strictly dressed), personal style (independent of fashion) *professions:* journalist, nurse, TV show host, bartender / waitress, pharmacist, actor, police, doctor, nurse, fireman, postman, veterinarian, etc. *TV show formats:* Idols, the Bachelor(ette), Greed, Do You Want to be a Millionaire, Big Brother, Survivor, America's Next Top Model, "Dating," etc. *categories formed from value judgments on others' appearances:* good looking, bad looking	*visitors from other hotels* (nationality / language region) speaking another language *age:* small children, "my age" (teen), older *gender:* combinations of nickname, avatar, real body (e.g., boy with girl avatar but masculine nickname) *Habbo age:* newbie, regular, guru *relation to room:* room owner, visitor, shared rights *friends made in or outside of Habbo:* Habbo friends, real friends *trading furniture:* little by little, skilled traders, cheaters *time of day* (is associated with distinct visitors): daytime (children with flu at home, mothers), after school (preteens), evening-night (older, best discussions)

5. Conclusion

During our Habbo visitor interviews, we tried to find out whether the visitors would identify themselves with one particular visitor category or Habbo activity as presented above. None of the interviewees really accepted to be labelled as one particular category, as they all mentioned that they started out doing certain things in Habbo and then moved on to try other things. They claimed that they got bored of doing the playing the same game or keeping the same room activity after a few weeks.

This brings us back to the original question, who are the Habbo users? During the project, we sought to generate some user groups or categories to explain that the people who visit Habbo can be divided into these and these categories. We started out by exploring Habbo for ourselves and making pilot interviews, ending up with a few preliminary categories: furni collectors, chatters, late-evening party people, mafioso, sheriffs (volunteer moderators), and cheaters. The survey gave us more background data to work with as it confirmed our assumption that time spent in Habbo really correlates with knowledge of and activity in Habbo. A cluster analysis of the data suggested six user clusters that we named Oldtimers, Playmakers, Silent majority, Gang-members, I don't pay, and Older people.

We also found two dimensions of Habbo activities that correlated more strongly than the others: a strive for publicity vs. privacy, and arranging events vs. not spending time in own room. The fansite studies and our interviews opened up the emergent types of use.

We have shown examples of Habbo clothing styles, Habbo professions, TV-show formats, competitions, and other fun ways of being together in Habbo. We briefly analysed some characteristics of and the role of furniture in the Habbo activities. We also provided a listing of the categories our interviewed visitors used when describing Habbo players.

When going through all these different ways of describing the Habbo users, the diversity of the Habbo uses is striking. Answering the question of who the Habbo users are with one particular categorisation does not seem fair. Neither is a simple two-dimensional model enough. What we can do, however, is to provide a summarising list of aspects that are important in Habbo. It is possible to distinguish different user categories based on all of the dimensions in the list. Depending on the motives behind the question, different categorisations can be made. The list can also function as a map for discussing a Habbo career with a Habbo user: which aspects drew the user into Habbo, which aspects made the user come back, and so on.

Table 11. Summary of important aspects of Habbo

Aspect	Description
one's own avatar(s)	clothing styles, character description
one's own rooms and furniture	collecting, trading, decorating, browsing the furniture catalogue
Habbo homepage[10]	your avatar's homepage that is visible to anyone on the web.
friends	school, hobbies, new friends, dating, distant friends
play	beauty contests (popularity), TV shows, games of chance, Habbo-sports, playing with the spatiality of the virtual world
Habbo career	celebrities, getting rich, popular room, in a game or gang, being a fansite author, being a Habbo guide
testing boundaries and rules	expressing self, treating others (e.g. cheating, bullying), finding and using glitches in the hotel architecture

While this study answers the empirical question of what users do in Habbo, the study also highlights a general aspect of many community software products: the users' important roles in the innovation process. The users take part in the content production, some as active playmakers, and others as equally important participants and audience. What the users do in Habbo becomes both a fundamental part of the use experience and a source of inspiration to the Habbo developers.

Our work shows that there are no self-evident ways to group all the users for all situations. For instance, it is not clear how stabile the user clusters based on the survey are over time. On the other hand, Table 11 supposedly presents the Habbo dimensions that won't disappear over time (assuming the technology doesn't change drastically). There are several reasons for why different organisational stakeholders need categorisations. Marketing for instance, needs some knowledge of the demographics of the Habbo users, but since demographics do not necessary correlate with action in the game, it is hard to design for demographics. Therefore categorisations of player activities are more useful for development. However, categorical knowledge is not the only type of knowledge useful in design. Previous research has shown that anecdotal knowledge (a.k.a. stories and narratives) plays an important role in design. Long-term interaction with the users

[10] New feature of February 2007

through various user feedback channels provide the developers a broad resource of anecdotes of what and how the users innovate with the Habbo furniture.

So, the question is not how many personas is enough to represent the users of Habbo, since in the Habbo case there are two particular features that makes developer-user dialogue easier compared to many other product development contexts. First, the developers have easy access to what the users do with and in Habbo, anyone can log on and check it out. Second, the online discussions in the user-created fansite forums provide the developers with loads of user feedback and insights into what the users expect. Then it is possible both to meet the expectations as well as make surprises.

Future work involves reflections on what kinds of user categories one can make. In this report, we have not taken a strong position in advance of what we were categorising but tried to be open towards different things: individuals vs. groups, ingame (rooms, activities) vs. demographics (age, gender, region, etc.). The empirical data could be analysed more to distinguish user careers and lifecycles.

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