ARTICLE **VI** ■

User Involvement, Social Media, and Service Evolution: The Case of Habbo

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Abstract

Understanding user needs and involving users are key success factors for service development. However, it is unclear how to apply old wisdoms from traditional product development settings in a social media context. This article analyses user involvement practices in a longitudinal case study of the virtual world and social networking service called Habbo. The focus is on how particular social media aspects, such as persistent user-created content and developers' easy access to online user action, shaped user involvement and how it evolved over time. In line with previous research, the findings indicate that user involvement becomes more formal as the user community grows and the service-market combination matures. In addition, user involvement regarding social media appears to be an issue of timing, trans-nationality, and governance. The results suggest that the usability practitioner's 'toolbox' needs tuning regarding social media.

1. Introduction

Involving users in service development is a key strategy to build better services and democratize the innovation process [1-3]. While there are mixed results on the cost-effectiveness of user involvement [4], there is an abundance of methods available to bridge the gap between developers and users [5-9]. Many user involvement methods have been created and applied in contexts like commercial development for offices, government health care, but few consider the emerging social media. Is the standard textbook advice 'study first, design second' applicable in social media development, or is it the other way around [10]?

This article gives an overview of user involvement practices from a longitudinal case study: the virtual world and social networking service called *Habbo* that was launched in 2000. The Habbo producer, Sulake Corporation, was involved in a research project in 2003-2006, during which the author followed the user involvement approaches used. In retrospective interviews developers shed light on the first few years of

the service, and after the research project the author has informally followed the case.

In this article, the focus is not on the minute details of a particular user involvement method, but more on a strategic level. During ten years, Sulake developers have explored various user involvement methods ranging from informal observation, focus groups, market surveys, and new social media possibilities. The aim of the case study was to answer the question of what practices social media developers have regarding user involvement. In this article, we focus on two aspects in more detail. First, how the social media context influences the possibilities for user involvement, considering especially persistent content created by users and developers' easy access to online user action. Second, how user involvement practices change as the service evolves, with particular interest in the increased complexity, signified by the increasing numbers of both users and developers.

2. User Involvement Approaches

There are many arguments for user involvement: reducing risks of failure in technological innovations [1], democratizing the innovation process [2], building better products, etc. Despite a consensus that understanding user needs is a key factor in commercial success [3], this is not easily translated into action in a particular innovation context. There is an abundance of methods to solve the 'sticky information' problem: information about users' needs and developers' capabilities is highly contextual, tacit and difficult to transfer [2]. However, which user involvement approach is applicable in which particular design situation is still an open question.

In the same way as using a particular research method implies a particular role for a researcher, any user involvement approach imply a particular user-developer relationship. A researcher can be anything between a detached and uninvolved observer to a fully engaged participant in a group or organisation under investigation. Developers' information about users

Table 1: Pros and cons of user involvement methods [12].

Approach to learning about end-users	Pros	Cons
Surveys and interviews	Systematic approach to data collection Surveys provide the possibility to poll representative samples	May not always feed into programme design Surveys may be designed to confirm existing preconceptions, may fail to bring up new insights Conducting good research may be expensive and require specialized skills
Prior research, particular theoretical perspectives	Sound theoretical base can guide observations and help to make sense of energy-related behaviour	Strong commitment to prior findings or theories may lead to overlooking contextual particularities Overly theoretical background can lead to complex and confusing designs
Experience from prior projects and similar examples	Sound experience creates confidence and practical skills/solutions that are difficult to codify	'Competence trap': overconfidence and failure to learn new skills in new contexts
User-driven project (or pilot project)	End-users know about their needs and circumstances and can contribute to context-tailored and user-friendly designs End-users are motivated and engaged from the start, thus 'less work' is left for the programme manager.	End-users may not be fully aware of their behaviour and all the factors underlying it 'Upscaling' from small user-driven pilots to broader group of end-users can be difficult
Familiarity and informal interaction with the target group	Informal interactions allow for a rich exchange of information (including non-verbal communication) Familiarity creates trust and mutual confidence	It can take a lot of time and commitment to build up the level of familiarity needed to execute a successful programme Contacts may be biased: some end-users are more familiar than others.

originates in similar relations: statistics of user practices can easily be detached from a particular situation, aggregated and analysed from a distance, where as participant observation of situated use implies that actual developers and users meet. In the tradition of designing for usability, developers refer to these situations as usability evaluation with or without users, and methods have emerged that are tuned to diverse design situations [11,5,6]. Table 1 lists pros and cons of particular approaches to user involvement, taken from experiences in energy demand-side programmes.

User involvement methods for established markets differ from the methods that are developed for new markets. Leonard-Barton [3] found that traditional market research methods (latent needs analysis, lead users, surveys, focus groups, mall studies) fit well with an established market and a high maturity of technology design. For new markets, more used were methods like market experimentation, future scenarios, and trends exploration. In the grey area between these typical situations, Leonard-Burton argued for less traditional market research methods under the rubric of empathic design: studying actual observed customer behaviour, direct interaction between developers and users, and considering existing technological capabilities.

Empathic, participatory, and other user-centred design approaches emerged because user requirements engineering techniques at the time lacked an understanding of the culture and practices of users [12-14]. However, while the initiatives recognise the complexity and diversity of user settings, they seem to have had modest influence over system design overall [15]. Stewart & Williams [16] warn against a pitfall they call the design fallacy: the assumption that from the diversity of user needs follows that extensive knowledge about user contexts must be built in the product. In contrast, they report that generic products that can be customised and configured seem to have had more impact on system design than user-centred design [15].

There is no consensus on why potential initiatives such as user-centred design have had little impact. Recent debates suggest that standard methods such as ethnographic field studies or usability evaluations can do more harm than good if not applied carefully [17,18]. This reflective debate can be interpreted as a sign of maturity in the human-computer interaction field as it highlights specific problems that must be addressed when mixing particular research disciplines with product development. Another suggestion is that the boundary conditions of product development projects have not been addressed thoroughly. Svanæs and Gulliksen [19] suggest that the design context needs greater attention, that is, the internal structure of the developer and the client organizations, contractual and tender issues, software engineering tools, and stakeholder agendas and relations.

2.1. Social Media

New online web services often referred to as digital media, web 2.0, and social media have changed the possibilities for user involvement. On the one hand, people discuss particular products and brands in online discussion forums and communities. Product developers can more or less openly visit these forums to get customer feedback. On the other hand, when people use web 2.0 services, they leave an electronic trail. What people click on, what they search for, what they select, and how they navigate on a web site can all be collected and aggregated. Service developers can use this log statistics to fine-tune the service. Furthermore, in some services it is customary for users to openly share their preferences, bookmarks, opinions, and other content with other users. This participative web and user-created content [20] sometimes plays a major role in the service and can also be used by service developers as inspiration for new features.

Social media is clearly not only win-win situations, since many discussions on privacy, advertising, intellectual property rights, and other conflicts between commercial actors and consumers have emerged. Lehmuskallio et al. [21] observed that these discussions relate to communicational changes in access to, scale, distribution, and persistence of computer-mediated communication. For instance, web 2.0 business models and privacy are often difficult to combine, as private information can be used to target ads, be aggregated and sold to third parties, as well as get into unexpected hands when big commercial players buy web 2.0 start-up companies.

As social media change user-producer relationships, new research questions related to user involvement emerge. Do the short release cycles frequently associated with social media – the infamous 'forever beta' approach – give more or less room for user feedback? How do social media developers apply user involvement methods as the service evolves over time? In a discussion of community building, Kim [22] suggests that many online communities start with the developers as central figures in the community, but as the community grows, the developers' roles and influence decrease. Is such a change in the developer-user relationship reflected in the use of user involvement methods?

3. Case Habbo

Habbo is a virtual environment where children and teenagers meet, socialize, and play many types of games. It was first launched in August 2000 in Finland as *Hotelli Kultakala* ('Hotel Goldfish') and it was based on the developers' two earlier online services. At the time of writing, there are Habbo hotels in more than thirty countries, and 13 million players visit Habbo each month [23]. 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 Habbo credits. These credits can be purchased (depending on the country) with pre-paid cards, bank transactions, credit cards, or special text messages that add a specified amount of money to the customer's mobile phone bill.

The social interaction in Habbo is truly diverse. In the design of Habbo, clear winning conditions and gameplay rules have been avoided, and instead, players are encouraged to create their own objectives beyond 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, called Habbos, chat, buy virtual furniture, decorate rooms, and arrange social and game events. Most of the teenage players log on after school, and according to Sulake, the developer company, on average they spend around forty-five minutes per day in the hotel or on its related discussion forums.

3.1. Data and Method

The Habbo producers, Sulake, was established in 2000 and focuses on virtual worlds and social networking. Sulake's strategy is to be a leader in community based entertainment with a portfolio of properties addressing a wide range of target audiences. During 2003-2006, Sulake, together with ten other commercial actors of the Finnish gaming industry, participated in a research project coordinated by the Helsinki Institute of Information Technology [24]. This research context made different design research studies and collaboration with Sulake's product development possible.

The focus of the Habbo study was user involvement strategies in the design and management of social media. Since its launch, the user communities have participated actively in the shaping of Habbo [25,26]. Some as active playmakers [27] and others as equally important participants and audience.

The author had the opportunity to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research to understand the Finnish Habbo communities. The project started with participant observation in Habbo, pilot interviews, a community manager survey (N=4), as well as an explorative survey (June 2004) on the visitor profiles (N=10000) as Sulake's first global youth survey was published two years later. The author participated in Habbo, explored the features and their affordances, analysed default values and users' degrees of freedom as a routine when new features were launched. The

visits to Habbo occurred on the average about twice per month throughout the first three years of research, and a visit every second month from 2007 onwards.

Fansites became an important source of knowledge about the user communities. In 2004, Finnish Habbo fansites were analyzed in detail [28]. Whereas the survey findings provided background statistics, the fansites and forum discussions allowed an insight into active user groups, popular activities, and hotel history. Since its very beginning Habbo fans have kept several sites devoted to documenting changes in the hotel, for instance in kinds and appearance of furniture, characters, mini-games, and bugs.

In 2005, the author conducted ten thematic 2-3 hour interviews with ten Habbo developers, or about two thirds of the game development organization at the time. Six of the interviewed developers (graphical designers, and client and server developers) had been in the organization since the beginnings, five years earlier, while four developers had about one year of Habbo experience. 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) to focus on their participation histories, motivations, meanings they give to Habbo, and groups they participate in.

Habbo has also been a topic of collaboration between the author and other Habbo researchers. A Sulake employee's master's thesis on communication and action in Habbo provided important secondary sources to Habbo data, as did several youth work studies[1]. Usability research students at Helsinki University of Technology also provided secondary data, as part of to their efforts on both a usability test on new 10-12 year old Habbo users (N=8) in 2004, and a software engineering project in 2004-2005 to develop a fansite starter kit for active Habbo users.

After these activities, the author had the opportunity to take part in an intervention study with Sulake. For release 9 of Habbo in 2006, a set of user feedback methods were explored with different stakeholders inside Sulake. This included confidential data sets: database statistics and surveys from two countries on the use of a new feature. In addition to these research activities, Sulake representatives participated in project partner seminars arranged every 6 months, two workshops on virtual economy, and many project meetings arranged by the research project. These meetings made informal discussions and a continuous dialogue with Sulake possible.

Taken together these bodies of data provide an excellent view to the varying forms of dialogue between the users and developers of this virtual world.

The data analysis has proceeded in multiple waves over the years, including quantitative and qualitative clustering of Habbo user profiles [29], coding and examining interviews with regard to participation and development histories in Habbo, analysis of fansite contents and developer views to them [25,28], and here, constructing the changes in Habbo user-developer relations over time.

3.2. Habbo Service Evolution

Like many other digital startups, Habbo is a moving target for many reasons. In 2003 there were four hotels and 1 million users, but at the time of writing, these numbers are more than tenfold. The producer company has grown from a small group to a 300 people corporation, with local offices in many hotel countries. To aid the analysis process, a division of Habbo service evolution into four stages will be outlined below.

Habbo was based on two previous launches, *Mobiles Disco* (Oct 1999) and a snowball game called *Lumisota* (Feb 2000). Mobiles Disco provided the basic hotel infrastructure in the pixelated retrostyle, whereas Lumisota featured payments through mobile phone messages, which at the time was a practical solution for the Finnish market. Starting with the first international step to UK, other payment systems were implemented to suit markets with less wide use of mobile phones among teens. Phone call systems, youth cash cards made of paper, check systems came first, but soon followed payment by credit cards, Paypal, and bank transfers.

With the UK hotel also followed the teen invasion of Habbo [30]. Habbo was not designed for teens at first and the large number of teen visitors also meant a large number of concerned parents. To keep all this together, the community management received a lot of attention. A set of guidelines for good behaviour was established, called Habbo Way, and tools for governing it were developed.

During 2002-2003 Sulake developed its business, the hotel and the community simultaneously. Strategic partnerships were made and brands like Mountain Dew and Britney Spears entered Habbo. Later these brands have disappeared as Sulake tried another approach with Coca-Cola and Warner Cinema. The brands got customised versions of the technical game engine behind Habbo, which helped fund the development of the hotel. The hotel's technical architecture was stabilized and security improvements were made to package the hotel into a product that could be more easily rolled out in new countries.

During 2004-2005 around ten new hotels and local offices were established in different parts of the world.

Habbo actively wanted to become the largest teen brand in the world. The English-speaking UK hotel was split into separate hotels for the US, Canada, and Australia. Also game development recruited more developers in 2004, and new features were packaged into simultaneous releases in all hotel countries.

Sometimes during 2006 and 2007, the strategies changed again as Sulake entered the social networking market. Not only did Habbo get new social networking features, but Sulake acquired *IRC-Galleria*, the most popular social networking service in Finland. As IRC-Galleria users were a little bit older, average age around 20, the strategy to concentrate on teens was opened up to a variety of age groups.

Based on this information, the author has grouped the service evolution into four stages.

Table 2. Habbo Service Evolution Stages

Concept Development	Beta Testing	Expansion	Complexity Management
1999-2000	2001-2003	2004-2005	2006-

Concept Design refers to the first prototypes in 1999 and 2000: Mobiles Disco, Lumisota, and Hotelli Kultakala, while Beta Testing refers to the time period between 2001-2003, when much of the basic functionality was completed. Expansion refers to 2004-2005 when the product was packaged so that it made a roll out possible in more than 10 new countries during one year. Complexity Management refers to 2006 and onwards when the product was extended to a social networking service.

4. Habbo User Involvement Methods

The user involvement methods reported here attempts to be an overview of the methods used by Sulake from 1999 to 2009. The criteria for what counts as a method is a more or less organized practice where developers learn about the users, which then shapes the service. The user involvement methods are organized according to the service evolution stages.

4.1. Concept Development

Avatar activities. Avatar activities refer to what users do online in the service. Developers have easy access to users in the sense that the developers can log on to Habbo and check what is going on. In the same way as users find out what happens where in the hotel, developers can also use the list of most popular rooms or tags to find the trends. In the room, a developer can choose to participate in the ongoing activity and take note of which users are present. The names of the user avatars and their descriptions reveal what kind of Habbo crowd is present. By studying the arrangement of Habbo furniture and guidelines written on virtual post-it notes, the developer learns about how particular pieces of furniture are used in specific user activities.

Developers as users. In the early stages of concept development and beta testing, the developers were developing the service for themselves, their friends and their new media colleagues. The first prototype was a hobby project for a friend's band. The original group of developers started out as insiders in the user community, but as the service become more popular, other insider groups started to form. After a while, the developers became more distanced to the user community as it became more difficult for them to spend time in Habbo. Each time a Habbo developer's avatar was online, it did not take long before Habbo newcomers gathered around and wanted to become Habbo friends, or even asked for freebies. Habbo developers soon invented their own tactics to partici-pate in cognito: they created new avatars, whose real identity they only told trusted friends.

Informal evaluations. Various informal evaluation practices guided the design early on. In interviews, the developers talked about slogans such as "easy access, easy play" and "where else". A developer described the latter one as "We won't make obvious choices, but rather something personal that gives the Habbo world something odd and own, which creates an own persona." (Interview 19 Apr 2005). The "easy access, easy play" slogan was not only a slogan, but among the developers it also had a visual form called the Habbo Ladder that showed the first steps a new user takes.

The Habbo Ladder was made to contrast Habbo with the comparably higher threshold to start playing massively multiplayer online games at the time. The idea was that during the first few minutes that anyone is willing to spend on a new web service, one should be able to login and create an avatar easily, learn the basic navigation, and have a chat with someone else. Each step on the ladder makes more reasons to return to the service, as a developer explained:

"Especially if one gets the first friend on the list of friends, then that it is a reason to return, that you have really got to know someone with whom you might have had an interesting discussion or of whom an interesting image has been conveyed. Then further on, when you have your own room, well that is of course a real investment, even the notion that you have something own going on there, then that is already a good reason to return, especially if you have decorated the room, really purchased something." (Interview 19 Apr 2005).

E-mail feedback. During the first year or so, developers received a lot of e-mail feedback by users,

who suggested changes and new features. This e-mail feedback became a handy storage for design inspiration for the developers, who used to return to it later and browse for good ideas. As the user community grew in size, this direct e-mail feedback became impractical as the number of e-mails became too large. Users not only sent feature suggestions per e-mail, but all kinds of support requests, which then as the organisation grew, became the responsibility of a small but growing number of volunteer community moderators and customer service officers.

Volunteers. Already before Habbo, in Mobiles Disco, there was a need to keep the shared meeting places in order, in case a user did not follow the shared conventions of appropriate online interaction — the netiquette. Trusted friends of the developers or other insider users received special powers, for instance to remove (kick) a disturbing user avatar from a room, and the responsibility to keep the online place neat. These volunteers followed along from the first proto-types to Hotelli Kultakala and Habbo. Later it became possible to apply to become a volunteer, so called Hobba. However handy early on, and applicable in many hotel countries, this arrangement involved more than 1500 volunteers during the expansion phase in 2005. Sulake changed the volunteering practice in 2005, as the special powers were given to paid moderators only, and the notion of volunteer moderators transformed into volunteer guides, who could guide online newcomers.

4.2. Beta Testing

Volunteer forum. To share experiences and mode-ration policies, the volunteers created an online forum for themselves. Along with the internationalisation and more organised volunteer management, Sulake started hosting a local volunteer forum per hotel country. The volunteers soon got an important role as mediators of user opinions: the developers knew that as the volunteers spent the most time in the hotel, they were always the first to know about the current user concerns, wishes and emergent activities.

Weekly newsletter and polls. In an attempt to organise user feedback and create a rhythm of new content, the hotel community management started creating weekly polls and newsletters. The newsletter contained information about new features and events organised by the hotel manager (a Sulake employee). With the newsletter was usually a gallup poll or a competition that the users could participate in. These weekly polls were important to gather immediate user feedback regarding new features.

Fansites. Right from the start, Habbo users started writing about and debating Habbo on their own homepages, and some created totally Habbo-themed websites. Being a Habbo journalist was one way of becoming famous, besides participating in various and creating own online Habbo activities. Some fansites featured discussion forums, which also were an important source for developer inspiration [25,28].

Official Web Fanzine. For two years, Sulake published their own official Hotel Magazine in Finland (www.kultakalankuvalehti.com), but due to limited resources they closed it down. It started out with writings from Habbo developers, and interviews with Habbo users, but soon enough some Habbo users featured as guest authors. In 2004 Sulake launched local competitions in each country to give a few elected large fansites the status of being official Habbo fansites. While these fansites complemented Sulake's community management, they also helped Sulake in regulating sites that were out to scam the users.

Summer Meetings. With the responsibility for teenagers online, Sulake had to develop a policy that discouraged sharing of contact information online and meetings in person. To support this policy, Sulake arranged summer meetings where users could meet each other in person, as part of an organised event. In the first meetings in Helsinki active users and volunteers got to meet the community manager and a few developers. Later on these meetings have been arranged by active users, without much involvement of developers.

Sales Statistics. In contrast to other Habbo stake-holders, developers have an additional perspective to the online activities in Habbo. They have a back-end service that keeps track of what pieces of furniture have been sold and how many in which hotel. This means that developers can compare Habbo features on the basis of their economical behaviour, not only based on functional or aesthetic properties. Even though the use of Habbo is anonymous, the registration process asks users to fill in age and gender, which can then be connected to sales statistics on an aggregated level.

Customer service. The need for dedicated custo-mer service emerged as the user communities grew and the developers could not find time to handle all support requests. Each hotel country got their own country office, where a local manager managed the volunteer moderators and customer service officers sorted out user requests.

4.3. Expansion

Market survey. With the international expansion emerged a need to know whether the user communities were similar or different in different hotel countries. An outsourced market survey in 2004 generated customer segments and their regional distribution. The

named customer segments and their demographics were important in the communication about Habbo. Even though demographics seemed less important than user practices from a game development perspective, customer demographics played an important role in business negotiations, regarding advertisement for instance.

Focus groups. To prepare for the rapid international expansion that happened during 2004-2005, focus groups were conducted. The applicability of Habbo pixel style graphics and use of colours was evaluated for the Asian market. In addition to traditional market research focus groups, two variants of the focus group method from different research traditions were used, usability evaluation and playability testing. Usability evaluation with users is more like a controlled lab experiment in psychology, where users try out the software with the help of scenarios and evaluators measure issues like usefulness, ease-of-use, learnability, and memorability [31].

Usability Evaluation. The first formal usability evaluation in the fall of 2004 was targeted at checking the usability of service registration and those services in Habbo that were subject to a fee, from the viewpoint of 10-14 year olds. The evaluation was outsourced and conducted by usability students at the local university of technology (TKK). After the first usability evaluation, Sulake established an in-house usability process through a pilot project. The pilot project was related to a product extension for the mobile phone market, and was influenced by usability standards in the field, such as the J2ME guidelines made by Idean Research [32].

Playability testing. While the usability evaluation method was appropriate for features such as login, character creation, furniture purchases, usability methods in general are not tuned to assess playability. For these reasons, Sulake's R&D lab used playability testing methods developed at Tampere University's Hypermedia Lab [33] to assess various playability aspects, such as gameplay, game mechanics, appearance, sound, and social playability.

CRM system. As some hotel communities grew larger, pressure emerged for customer service to automate their responses. For instance, in a country with several hundreds of thousands of users, a new feature might spawn several thousands of inquiries per day. In 2005, a new customer relationship management system was introduced. It featured a set of standard questions and responses, which reportedly reduced inquiries with 90 percent.

Release pilots. As the organic beta testing phase changed into a more controlled release management process, Sulake started piloting the release for one month in one hotel country, before diffusing the release to other hotel countries. This means that users in the pilot country acted as beta-testers and could comment on the features in the release before they were finalized. The process of selecting the pilot country has changed several times. In 2005, countries with a relatively small number of users acted as pilot countries. However, translation and language become an issue, which is why piloting returned to Finland sometimes around 2007. However, at the time of writing, UK is the pilot country.

4.4. Complexity Management

Online user panel. In an effort to gather systematic feedback before the implementation of new features, Sulake recruited 200 volunteers in one country to form an online panel. The online panel was given a weekly task consisting of a set of questions regarding design sketches and an opportunity to share opinions regarding the sketches in a forum. The online panel was popular among developers, who queued to be the one who got to get design-time feedback from the users.

Global youth survey. As both the users and competitors change, in 2006 it was again time for a new market survey (GHYS'06). This time the customer segmentation resulted in certain Habbo lifestyles: achievers, creatives, loners, rebels, and traditionals. The report featured extensive country-specific information on teenagers' favourite brands and media usage patterns.

User, group homepages, tags. In early 2007, Sulake launched social networking features in Habbo as every Habbo avatar got an automatic and customisable Habbo homepage. It was also possible to form Habbo groups, which meant a logo, a group homepage and a discussion forum. In addition, users could "tag" their avatars, which meant that users could attach a set of clickable one-word descriptors to their avatar. When a user clicks on a tag, the service generates a dynamic index of all the users and groups with that particular tag.

User experience testing. Following current research terminology, in 2008 Sulake talked about user experience testing in addition to usability or playability testing. While the usability testing has evolved from a more stand-alone practice, to a tight integration with agile software development, Sulake conducts user experience evaluations with both new and old users, internally called "live tests", in one country for every major release, which makes about once a year (Personal communication with User and Market Insight Director, 26 Nov 2008).

Personas. As part of further developing user-centred design processes, during Spring of 2009, Sulake applied the Persona method. Six user

Table 3. Overview of Habbo user involvement methods.

Concept Development	Beta Testing	Expansion	Complexity Management
Avatar activities	Volunteer Forum	Market survey	Online user panel
Developers as users	Weekly newsletter and polls	Focus groups	Global youth survey
Informal evaluations	Fansites	Usability evaluation	User and Group homepages, tags
E-mail feedback	Official Web Fanzine	Playability testing	User Experience Testing
Volunteers	Summer meetings	CRM system	Personas
	Sales statistics	Release pilots	
	Customer service		

archetypes have been constructed from data to represent the users. The idea is that developers have an updated reference to the goals and needs of Habbo users at hand, which can inform design solutions and evaluations. (Personal communication with User and Market Insight Specialist, 2 Jun 2009).

5. Discussion

5.1. User Involvement and Service Evolution

Based on the Habbo case it seems evident that very few service characteristics relevant to user involvement methods remain invariant over time. Some characteristics remained stable: the service concept and the profit model (after small experiments during the first few years), the technical access to online user activities, as well as the service domain and (life-) criticality of the interface. However, a lot has changed over ten years: at least the number of users, the number of developers and resources available, the amount of money involved, competition on the market, the stage of design, the skills and experience of the developers.

As the maturity of the market changed, so did the relationship between developers and users, much like in previous research by Leonard-Barton [3] and Kim [22]. In the Habbo case, like with most social media applications, the developers started developing the service for themselves and their friends. While starting out as insiders in the user community, with commercial success, the developers inevitably end up as excluded from the user community, if for no other reason, just by the sheer number of users and their practices.

The first usability study and succeeding studies marked two changes in user-developer relations. First, as the number of users increased, the margins for errors in the service were decreased, thus more formal methods were valued. Second, developers' gut feeling, that is, undocumented previous development experience and participation in the user community, carried less weight, as not everyone in the growing company could be involved in the user communities. Business and development decisions needed more documented knowledge, which was provided by the use of more formal methods.

So far the results from this case study is much in line with previous research. However, the user involvement practices in this case study stands in contrast with the strategy of developing a method and then using it in the same repeatable way over and over. In this case it has been evident that the history of method usage shapes the succeeding use of methods. For instance, as the service as a whole had been usability evaluated, the usability specialists at Sulake found no sense in repeating the same evaluation again. Usability evaluations turned towards smaller details of the service after the overall evaluation. The same finding was found in the market survey practices. After the first overall customer segmentation, the following surveys could fine-tune specific issues that remained open in the previous surveys. This practice can be interpreted as a sensible ongoing tailoring of methods that becomes necessary when dealing with as complex and changing phenomena as in this case.

5.2. User Involvement and Social Media

It seems that the developers have benefited from particular user involvement opportunities related to social media. User created fansites have been an important source for developer inspiration, and the online user panel is an interesting way of making prolonged contact with a particular user group, which complemented both the more informal feedback that developers get in the service itself and the more formal surveys. The social networking features – user and group homepages as well as tagging – provided Habbo users with new possibilities to express themselves within the service and find other interesting users and groups. On the other hand, these social networking features made it easier for Sulake to get an overview of group activities in Habbo as well as search and aggregate data on users.

Let us return to one question posed in the beginning. What happens with user feedback in a "forever beta" approach, is there more or less room for it compared to traditional product development?

In the Habbo case, it seems that user feedback can shape the service most when the design space is open. How open the design space is, depends on what is going on in development. During concept development and early beta testing Habbo was fairly open for feature suggestions, but it did not take many months for the developers to get more ideas than they could handle for the foreseeable future. Then the question was no longer about getting good ideas, but rather about finding projects and funding to implement the ideas and stabilize the service. And, until the service was stabilized and packaged enough for manageable duplication in the expansion phase, the design space was fairly closed. From a Finnish user point of view, the next window of opportunity to shape the service was probably the implementation of the social networking features in early 2007, which again changed the rules of the game. Then as the new features were tried out, user feedback again helped fine-tune the service.

User feedback varies between Habbo hotel countries. Like with any trans-national service, Habbo developers experience the dilemmas of language regions and differently sized markets. On the one hand, one could argue that, because of Habbo's Finnish origins, hotels with close linguistic ties to strong languages in Finland would shape the service most. However, there are two factors counteracting this simple argument. First, language skills and effective communication among Sulake employees can mediate remote user needs. Second, since some user needs are readily communicated through sales statistics, the market size of a particular hotel country might be more significant than the language in that country.

In a broader perspective, "what happens with user feedback in social media?" is also a question about governance, that is what users get to decide on and the form of their influence. Typically users have less influence on generic products and more influence on customisable products. The impact of user feedback is especially big if the users themselves take the initiative to new development. In contrast, social media is not usually developed as a contract between a developer and a client organisation, but rather on the initiative of a handful of developers. Habbo users have had a big influence on early feature development and issues like community moderation (as volunteers), online discussion about Habbo (as fansite authors), but have never been invited to decide on pricing, advertisements, or feature roadmapping. This is not to say that they should be, it is just a fact that needs to be stated when outlining the Habbo user-developer relationship. E-democracy in Habbo has not yet reached the extent of the governance experiments in virtual worlds such as *EVE Online* or *A Tale in the Desert*.

6. Conclusions

In addition to the themes discussed in research literature on user involvement, user involvement regarding social media appears to be an issue of timing, trans-nationality, and governance. It is a timing issue, because user feedback influences most the features under development at a particular point in time. It is a question of trans-nationality, because user feedback from different countries is influenced by both language and market size. It is a question of governance, because user feedback might also address issues that are not considered open for discussion by the developers.

Sulake's user involvement practices reveal a bias in common classifications of user involvement methods. Traditional formal methods and usability evaluations are only one small part of the big picture regarding learning about social media users. The 23 [!] different modes of user involvement reported in this study suggest that the usability practitioner's 'toolbox' needs tuning regarding social media.

This case also reveals how the nature of user involvement has changed with social media. Before social media, 'involving users' has been a much more explicit effort, as developers and researchers have had to go where the users are and ask permission to observe and get feedback. While some ways of involving social media users remain as indirect as before, feedback from social media users is at the same time genuinely direct. The very thing people do in and return to the service for, can be interpreted as user feedback. The users might not think that they are being 'involved' or formally 'invited' – they will just not return if the service does not meet their needs. However, previously it took longer before a decision by a user to stop using a product or service reached the producers.

This 'direct feedback' from social media users, in terms of frequent data points of user actions, has a major consequence to user studies. The techniques commonly denoted as evaluation 'with' and 'without' users need to be supplemented with 'evaluation with database access to users'. As both use and non-use is logged in the server database, alarms can be set to trigger if use practices change. These alarms can then be used as starting points for succeeding user studies to explain the changes in use practices. How strange, or perhaps disciplinary inconvenient, it may sound, the experience from this case study suggests that acquisition and analysis of database logs should take place before embarking on either quantitative or qualitative studies on social media use.

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