

# Children's Participation in the Development of Online Games<sup>1</sup>

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This chapter is concerned with recent computer game industry design methods that seek to enrol children's participation in the co-development of online games<sup>2</sup>. This includes instances where young gamers are invited to act as beta testers of new game features or to provide suggestions and feedback to game designers via social media. *Co-production* and *co-creation* have become an area of growing research interest in computer game studies over the last decade – particularly the way that these design models seek to redraw boundaries between 'media producers' and 'users', and the significant value they place on user contributions (see Williamson, 2003; Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Banks & Deuze, 2009). There has, however, been little critical consideration of this model of design in relation to younger gamers and the forms of participation it seeks to cultivate with them.

In this present volume on computer game concerns, this chapter questions how children's participation has become a concern for the developers of online computer games. A key design affordance of online games is their ability to evolve and develop over time, in line with the changing preferences and tastes of their users. It has therefore become necessary for online games developers to find ways

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  - 2 In this chapter, the term *children* is used to refer to any person aged sixteen years or younger. Though the users of children's online games can exceed this age bracket, this chapter is primarily concerned with children aged thirteen to sixteen years who were considered as one of the primary age markets of virtual worlds by the companies consulted in the study.

of keeping in touch with their young user base and to anticipate their priorities for the game's future development. This has led to the adoption of user-centred game development practices that seek to bring young users into different phases of the design process and provide opportunities for their feedback and input. The present chapter focuses on how young users' participation is negotiated in these feedback processes and on what terms. To this end, the chapter draws on research into the online game virtual world *Habbo* (Sulake, 2000), created by the Finnish media firm Sulake<sup>3</sup>. *Habbo* has frequently been noted as a pioneer of innovative user centred design practices during the 2000s and as prescient of an industry shift towards closer monitoring of user practices and preferences (see Ruckenstein, 2011; Berriman, 2012; Hyysalo, Elgaard & Oudshoorn, 2016). As an online game with a substantial child user base<sup>4</sup>, *Habbo* provides an opportunity for unique insights into how growing industry interest in user participation has also presented new challenges for addressing and enrolling children as contributors in the development of online games.

A central concern of this chapter is to draw attention to the language and to what is meant by the rhetoric of children's *participation* within the online games industry<sup>5</sup>. Rhetoric in this instance is understood as a discursive technique aimed at generating a shared understanding or viewpoint on a given subject (Potter, 1996). In the present chapter, this notion of rhetoric is used to help frame an analysis of how those involved in the online games industry describe and seek to define children's participation. In recent decades, the language of children's participation has become highly politicised in the West (Jans, 2004) – increasingly tied to moral and legal discourses that emphasise children and young people's *right to participate* in decisions affecting their lives (Nolas, 2015). Recent studies on children's consumer culture have suggested that these so-called 'rights-based' discourses of participation have increasingly found their way into the rhetoric of commercial

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3 Note that the research project that this chapter is based on took place between 2011 and 2013. As such all descriptions of *Habbo* and references to its demography are derived from research during that period. Websites have been referenced with their last date visited during the project and it is possible that many of the links are now 'broken' and no longer work. By providing the original dates visited I hope to provide a means for the reader to research for themselves the original links by tracking their closest approximate date in the Internet Archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)).

4 According to Sulake, 90 per cent of its users were aged thirteen to eighteen years in 2012 (Sulake, 2012a).

5 This chapter specifically refers to the online game industry located in Northern Europe.

markets, where enlisting children's active participation in product design and marketing has been framed as empowering the agency of children as consumers (Cook, 2004; Buckingham, 2011). By assimilating the language of children's rights, commercial firms have sought to position themselves as recognising children as market participants beyond mere consumption (Buckingham, 2011, p. 171).

Discussions about consumer participation in the online games industry have, however, not been solely limited to moral concern for children's involvement. Since the early 2000s, the online games industry – particularly in Northern Europe – has experimented with new ways of inviting gaming audiences to be intimately involved in the different phases of a game's creation. Inspired by 1970s Scandinavian Participatory Design traditions, many companies in the online games industry (including Sulake) have made the representation and involvement of game players a key concern in product development (Banks & Potts, 2010; Banks, 2013). From becoming early investors through crowdfunding platforms (Smith, 2015) to acting as testers, reviewers and brand ambassadors (Taylor, 2006; Berriman, 2012) – the industry has experimented with a range of approaches that re-imagine and re-draw the boundaries between developers and gaming audiences. In this context, industry concerns about participation have primarily focused on how best to cultivate and manage relationships with gaming communities as a way of further developing gaming products. This version of participation has not been driven by a moral or political concern of making (young) consumer voices heard, but rather by design and economic imperatives to shape and fine-tune a gaming product around the evolving preferences of its community base.

Against this backdrop, the present chapter seeks to explore how designers and developers of online games engage with the idea of children's participation as a site of concern. Drawing on interviews with members of the development team behind the online game *Habbo*, this chapter will explore how designers conceptualise and talk about children's participation in design processes. To this end, the chapter poses the following questions: First, how is children's participation defined in design practice? Drawing on interviews with creators of the online game *Habbo*, the chapter will explore examples of Sulake designers describing where they have sought input and feedback from children during different phases of game development. Through these examples the chapter will look at how children's participation is discursively characterised by designers, and the methods through which the designers describe seeking to enrol and mobilise that participation. Secondly, building on this close analysis of discourse and practice, the second question will more broadly ask: to what extent do models of online game co-development provide a participatory space in which children's voices can be

heard? This question will provide an overarching point of reflection throughout the chapter and will be returned to in the conclusions.

The next section of this chapter will give a brief background introduction to the *Habbo* virtual world. The following section will then examine how members of the *Habbo* design team generally described and framed children's participation in the virtual world. The chapter will then examine two examples of children's participation in the design and development of *Habbo*: the first of these will consider how different phases in the design of an online game are described as providing opportunities to mobilise user participation, and the second will explore the more recent deployment of social media as a means of mobilising participation. The chapter will then conclude with some critical reflections on children's participation in online game design.

### **Case Study: *Habbo***

According to its creators – the Finnish firm Sulake – the *Habbo* virtual world is “the world's largest social game and online community for teenagers” (Sulake, 2012a). In 2012 (when the present study took place), the game boasted about having 250 million registered users and received approximately 10 million unique visitors per month (ibid.). The company's own figures estimated that 90 per cent of the *Habbo* user base were aged between thirteen and eighteen years, with a gender split of approximately 56 per cent male versus 44 per cent female players (Sulake, 2012b). According to KZero Worldwide (2012), an industry analytics firm, *Habbo*'s user figures ranked it the largest virtual world globally, outpacing contemporary rivals such as *Stardoll* (Stardoll AB, 2004) and *Club Penguin* (Disney Interactive Studios, 2005) (with 200 million and 170 million registered users, respectively).

*Habbo*, like many other virtual worlds, primarily generates income through micro-transactions, user membership schemes and in-game advertising. *Habbo* has always remained free at the point of use, however users have the option to purchase the in-game currency, which can be used to pay for customisations of their avatars and virtual rooms.

The present chapter draws on qualitative interviews with six Sulake employees at the company's Finnish headquarters. These interviews took place as part of a larger ethnographic study of two children's media firms (Sulake and the BBC's children's department). The employees represent a cross section of staff directly involved in the development of *Habbo*, including concept designers, a graphic artist and a software architect. As Sulake's headquarters are based in Helsinki, the majority of staff were native Finnish speakers with one exception. All interviews

were carried out in English and, although every person interviewed was a confident English speaker, it is important to note the interviews were not carried out in their native tongue. For ethical purposes, the names of all staff have been kept anonymous and research participants are referred to by their general job role at the time of the interview.

In addition to interviews with staff, a variety of textual data was also gathered from a range of Sulake owned websites and social media accounts. All textual data collected was publicly available online, however names and details of the authors of those materials have again been kept anonymous.

## YOUNG GAMERS' CREATIVE PARTICIPATION

Before exploring how children's participation was framed in the design and development of *Habbo*, it is useful first to consider how Sulake's designers more broadly framed the *Habbo* virtual world as a participatory gaming space for children. At the beginning of each of the interviews, staff were asked to describe the *Habbo* virtual world in their own words. One of the most common themes across responses was an emphasis on the centrality of creative participation in children's gaming experience. For many of the designers interviewed, the primary purpose of *Habbo* was to provide a creative gaming space for children to explore self-expression and to invent their own forms of imaginative social play. The ability to design an avatar and to host and decorate virtual rooms were commonly given as examples of how the game invited creative participation through customization and personalization. The following three extracts provide similar but contrasting accounts of how this participation was typically described in interviews by members of the creative team. In this first example, a designer describes how *Habbo* seeks to give users control over their gaming experience:

Habbo is a creative social space [...] the main feature for me is the freedom and the creativity. Users can create their own space, their own room. In a way it's a bit like a mini-god simulator [...] because you have your own space you can decide to make it an airline check-in desk, some users do that, or a mafia room, a role play, a maze or just a chat room. Users, they go to Habbo, they have their space and they choose what direction to take their experience.

In this extract, *Habbo* is described as a gaming environment whose design *enables* and *facilitates* user creativity. Of particular interest here is how the rhetoric of creativity is mobilized to position younger gamers as actively contributing to the

shaping of their own, and others', gaming experiences. There is also a repeated reference to the *Habbo* environment as designed to give gamers a sense of ownership and control. The description of *Habbo* as "like a mini-god simulator" implies that children are regarded as having high degree of creative control over the way the virtual environment is shaped. In this instance, the rhetoric of participation draws very heavily on idealised notions of creativity (Banaji, Burn & Buckingham, 2010) that frames children as freely able to draw on the resources of the world around them to enact imaginative forms of play.

Another *Sulake* designer framed the creative participation of young gamers in a slightly different way:

[Creativity] becomes more important for more active users, I would say that new users don't see it so clearly that aspect of creativity. It's more a visual chat room for them, but after a while, when you use the service more, the creative part becomes really important.

In this instance, *Habbo*'s gamers are described as varying in their level of creative participation, with notable differences between new and more established users. In this instance, some gamers are defined and distinguished as *more* actively or *more* creatively involved in shaping the game environment than others. One reading of this might be that references by design staff to gamers' creative participation do not necessarily refer to the whole gaming community, but rather a subsection of gamers who designers identify as having a longstanding commitment to the virtual world. In both quotations, we see how creative forms of participation are particularly valued by the designers. However, in the second quotation it becomes clearer that this creative participation is not seen as a quality of all young gamers, but rather a sub-section who are invested in the game. This raises an important question about which gamers are included and excluded within particular rhetorics of participation.

In this final extract a designer responds to the question of how important creativity is to the user experience:

It may depend on whether you're a buying user or not, because if you're not a buying user and so you don't have furni, then you can't design your room, you can't make a Habbo home, you can't make a Habbo group. I mean what you can do obviously, is you can choose your outfit or clothing, you can and you can just chat with people. So in that way, you're just mainly a social person in Habbo, whereas if you're paying user for example you have a lot more stuff and you can show your creativity in a lot more ways.

A distinction is made here between gamers based on whether they make purchases in the game. *Habbo*'s services are free at the point of use and gamers can explore the virtual world using a basic avatar. Purchasing *Habbo Credits* provides the ability to further customize avatars with a range of outfits, as well as providing the ability to purchase furniture (or *furni*) which can be used to decorate a user's room. The latter quote suggests that those users who do make purchases have the option of more creative forms of participation in the virtual world, whilst those that do not are largely limited to the social experience. Making in-game purchases provides a further means for distinguishing levels of gamer participation – with those users who have access to in-game credits, and thus furniture, able to be more creatively involved in the *Habbo* experience. This again has implications for who is included and excluded in designers' accounts of participation, with sub-groups of gamers rhetorically positioned as more active and creative in their participation than others.

So far we have seen how the creative participation of young gamers is celebrated by *Habbo* designers and how the virtual world is regarded as facilitating gamers' creativity through its design. We have also seen how designers' discussion of participation often make implicit assumption about who can be more creatively involved in virtual world based on their length of time in the game and whether they have access to purchased features. In the following two sections we explore in more detail how perceptions of young gamers' creative participation are mobilized in the design practices of Sulake staff and how gamers come to be enrolled as participants in the design process.

## **MOBILISING PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE GAME INTERFACE**

For *Habbo*'s designers, the game's interface provides a key means of mediating their relationship with young gamers. The virtual world is not only the product that they design but also a primary means of gaining closer access to their gaming community. During the interviews for this study, Sulake staff were asked to describe the design process of a single feature that they had recently been involved in. They were asked to describe what their role in that process had been and how that design process involved engagement with users. During these discussions, designers would frequently report going in-game at specific points in the design process – whether to look for inspiration for new design ideas or to get a sense of how gamers were responding to recent product releases. This section looks at a few examples of how Sulake designers described their engagement with users in

the design process – focusing especially on moments where user participation was regarded as making an important contribution.

In the following extract, a designer describes their experience of engaging with *Habbo* gamers during the beta testing phase of a new product release. In this instance a closed beta of the virtual world was created and a select group of experienced *Habbo* users were invited to give feedback:

When the beta was out, we used Habbo a lot with [the lead designer] and we sort of just spent time in beta and started to interview users about the beta as well, about how they feel about it. I guess that's a skill as well. We try to get in there and talk face-to-face to the users as well, how they feel about something. And then again, I guess, the feedback we gathered is to get the insight from that and turn that into a concept. It's a skill that you can do that as well, so that first you have to realize the problem and then you have to sort of evaluate what you can do based on that, and then turning that into a functioning concept on the site.

This quote provides some indications as to how Sulake's designers enter the virtual world to enrol the participation of young gamers in the design process. By being present in the beta, the designers can position and establish themselves as a mediator for young gamers to contribute their thoughts and feedback on the beta release. It is interesting to note that the designer describes this as a "face-to-face" encounter – thus although it is a mediated encounter, it is framed as one that creates a closer sense of proximity between gamers and designers. The designer then describes how a user's feedback can be evaluated and transformed "into a concept" which can then be incorporated into the development of a new virtual world feature. Designers thus become the intermediaries through which gamers can participate in the design process. This role of intermediary is also partly one of authority; the designer is not only a facilitator of user suggestions but also a filter, able to judge and evaluate the usefulness and viability of user ideas.

The designer describes this means of engaging with users in-game as a social skill. Earlier in the interview the designer had been asked what kinds of skills were required for their role and these were generally listed as a set of technical and organizational skills. In this instance, however, the designer suggests that being able to engage user participation in the design process and to act as an intermediary for their feedback were additional and necessary social skills. As Kline, Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2006) describe, the intermediary role of the designer has become an increasingly significant means of developing a productive relationship with consumers. How then is this relationship developed with young gamers and on whose terms?

For the Sulake staff interviewed, developing the ability to engage with young users raised a number of issues – ranging from the kind of avatar used, to the type of language they employed when talking with users. In the following extract a concept producer describes some of the difficulties of engaging with young users in-game:

We don't want to come across as the user's best friend, we don't want to come across as cool, uncool or anything like that, you know, we want to be as straight forward and blunt with our users as possible. So yeah, we can be funny, we can be friendly but, you know, we don't want to be down with the kids per se. You know, because that is the kind of thing that if it works, it can work brilliantly, but in my experience, more than not, it back fires and makes you sound like a boring uncle [laughs].

In this extract, contrasts are made between how staff should and should not interact with users in-game. Although great importance is placed on developing a closer relationship with users, this extract suggests that staff must also maintain a degree of distance. As such, appearing to be “down with the kids” or acting as a “user's best friend” are flagged as interactional boundary points. These boundary points also hint at the generational distance between *Habbo's* designers and users. There is a sense that by avoiding certain forms of behaviour, Sulake's designers are better able to suppress these generational differences in their engagement with users and thus avoid sounding “like a boring uncle”.

Many of the designers interviewed chose to use avatars that did not explicitly identify them as staff members<sup>6</sup>. As one interviewee described:

I just go in [...] as a random account and just start talking to users [...] they don't know that I'm a staff member because that wouldn't be beneficial for my aims, which is, well one of them is seeing what users are talking about, seeing what users are doing.

Being recognised as a game designer is regarded in this instance as a potential impediment to observing how young gamers are engaging with the game. The ability to observe children's in-game activities is seen as potentially obstructed as a result of the designer's presence. Though the younger gamer is positioned as participating in the design process in this instance – by acting as a key source of information for the designer – they are not aware of their potential contribution. For the most part, the mobilization and engagement of younger users through the

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6 Staff involved in *Habbo's* community management often use avatars with a badge that clearly identifies them as Sulake staff members.

game occurs predominantly on the terms of the designers. The game designers are able to select at what points they enter the game's interface for user feedback or invite users to give their feedback on a beta feature. The terms of engagement remain limited for the user, who may or may not have the opportunity to share their opinions with Sulake staff. Negus (2002) has suggested that, although the role of the intermediary provides a point of connection between consumers and the production process, it can also serve to re-produce a degree of distance between these two points.

## MOBILISING PARTICIPATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

In this final section we turn our attention to the enrolment of young gamers' participation outside of the online game's interface. Over recent years Sulake has begun to implement a brand presence spanning a number of social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. The present section is restricted to looking at Sulake's presence on Twitter and examining how this platform has provided staff with an alternate means of mobilising the participation and feedback of young gamers.

Sulake's Twitter presence can be broadly categorised into two main account types. First, there are the official *Habbo* and Sulake Twitter accounts, which provide regular corporate and product announcements to Twitter followers. For example, if the *Habbo* service experiences technical downtime, the *Habbo* Twitter account is used as a channel to provide users with estimates as to when the service will be re-opened. The second group of accounts are the Sulake Tweeters: individual Sulake staff members who manage their own Twitter accounts. These range from the company's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to members of the design and creative teams. To promote the Sulake Tweeters, Sulake's corporate website contains a gallery of self-written profiles promoting each staff member, accompanied by a single photograph. Each of the profiles follows a similar template, with staff members describing their role at Sulake, sometimes hinting at some of their interests and finally encouraging users to follow their Twitter account.

The following are just a few extracts from the profiles of Sulake Tweeters encouraging *Habbo* users to follow them on Twitter:

So Habbos, I'm here for you... to answer your questions, to listen to your crazy ideas and to help as much as I can.

I am curious to hear your thoughts about the future. About great new ideas or things you saw at different games that you think would work in Habbo as well. Let me know and see you in Habbo!

I am interested in your thoughts and ideas on how to make the Habbo experience more fun, meaningful, creative and social. Let me know how to bring more value to the Habbo experience. (Sulake, 2012c)

In each case the *Habbo* user is addressed as being in possession of opinions and ideas that are significant and of value to Sulake. The staff members invite *Habbo* gamers to connect with them on Twitter in order to share their “crazy” or “great new” ideas. They can then gauge how users would like to see *Habbo* changed or improved and therefore “bring more value” to the users’ “Habbo experience”. In this way, the staff members again establish themselves as intermediaries through which a users’ opinions can be heard and potentially implemented into the online game’s design. As opposed to being a faceless or anonymous channel, the Sulake Tweeters present themselves as individuals who wish to interact with users and to hear their opinions and ideas. As such, there is a sense of immediacy in the interaction offered between *Habbo* users and the Sulake Tweeters, with users apparently able to contact the staff members on their own terms.

The profiles of the Sulake Tweeters provide an important initial means of appealing staff to users – furnishing *Habbo* users with insights into each staff member’s interests, areas of expertise and personality quirks. The accompanying profile photos add a further means by which staff can express their individuality to users and also allow users to put a ‘name to a face’. In the majority of cases, staff members opt for a regular portrait photograph, but in some instances their faces are obscured either by a mask or are edited until the face is only partially discernible. Though staff members are referred to by their first names, it is interesting to note that a number of staff choose to disguise their faces in the photographs. Thus to some degree the Sulake staff may choose to assert a degree of privacy in sharing only limited details about their identity. Nonetheless, these profiles could be seen as an attempt to encourage users to engage with staff through the promise of a closer and more personalised connection via Twitter.

Marwick and boyd (2011) have described how using Twitter and other social media involves a particular form of identity performance to an imagined audience. In the case of the Sulake Tweeters their audience is to some extent pre-formed, as the accounts appear to have been established with the intention of interacting with and mobilising *Habbo*’s young gamers. Indeed, the majority of Tweets through the Sulake Tweeters’ accounts are directed at a *Habbo* audience, either sharing

*Habbo* related news or responding to Tweets from users. The notion of identity performance is, however, significant to the way that Sulake staff seek to mobilise user engagement and participation. As we saw in the previous section, the type of language and avatar used in the virtual world is important to how designers attempt to engage with young gamers. However, the framing of these accounts as Sulake Tweeters suggests these Twitter accounts form part of the company's public identity and may follow a similar set of guidelines to those employed in the *Habbo* environment. The interaction between the Sulake Tweeters and *Habbo* users might therefore be seen as mediated to some degree by corporate values.

It is also important to consider the potential unevenness of Twitter as a mediatory channel between *Habbo* users and Sulake. Although *Habbo* users have the ability to Tweet to Sulake staff members, it remains the purview of the Sulake Tweeters to decide which Tweets to acknowledge and respond to. As such, a *Habbo* gamer's ability to tweet to staff members does not necessarily equate with having the ability to be included or recognised as a contributor to the development of the *Habbo* service.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at how children's participation is a concern for designers in the online games industry. Harnessing children's participation in ongoing design processes has become an important means of securing the future sustainability of online games and virtual worlds. Increasingly, young gamers have become vital sources for gauging reactions and obtaining feedback – providing critical responses during the development of new design ideas. The primary means of mobilising and eliciting this user participation has been to establish designers as accessible intermediaries through which young gamers' voices can be heard and distilled as feedback data. Whilst the intermediary role is familiar across the cultural industries (Negus, 2002), in the case of young gamers it takes on a particular generational character that requires designers to carefully weigh up how they present themselves and initiate interactions with gamers. In this respect, the mobilisation of young gamers' participation is far from straightforward, involving careful consideration of when and how that participation is elicited and on what terms.

This latter point is particularly prevalent in addressing the second question that I raised at the beginning of this chapter: to what extent do co-production models create a participatory space that is equally accessible to all young gamers? The present chapter's case study has shown that young gamers' participation in the

design process is principally at the discretion of the game's designers. By establishing themselves as intermediaries in the game's design and development, game designers have been able to define when and on what terms children are able to make design contributions and which individuals are able to participate in that process. Whilst the active and creative participation of children is an important rhetoric for the designers, the practice of enrolling and mobilising young gamers' participation can be limited in scale and scope. Those young gamers who do have the opportunity to voice feedback and to contribute to the design process are, for the most part, an exclusive minority.

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