

# Fansites as Sources for User Research: Case Habbo Hotel

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**Abstract.** The online chat and game environment Habbo Hotel has become a hit among Finnish high school teenagers, as about 25% of them visit Habbo at least once a month. Like in the case of other popular computer games such as The Sims, fandom websites have emerged around Habbo since its launch in August 2000. The fansites are important because they shape the community by providing the arena for public Habbo discussions, which mediates user opinions to a large audience. In this paper we investigate the fansite content to find out what one can learn about the social world of Finnish Habbo users. We identified 173 Finnish fansites, of which we selected 23 fansites aimed at a large audience. These fansites publish news, hints, reviews, lists, graphics, and other articles about essential Habbo topics. Based on this fansite content, it was possible to distinguish 8 different user groups and 11 popular activities. Therefore we draw the conclusion that fansites are useful sources for user research as they complement other sources informing information systems design.

## Introduction

The growth of networked computers in home and entertainment contexts has increased the importance of virtual communities. These emerging contexts of use challenge existing information systems research with their large numbers of users in non-work contexts, where fun and enjoyment (Blythe et al. 2003) is more important than usefulness. For instance 430 000+ people around the world play Everquest, a medieval fantasy game (Taylor 2003), and four million Koreans play

the game Lineage (Woodcock 2005). The popularity of the games is also demonstrated by the emerging web-based fan culture around the games.

Fansites have emerged in the U.S. around the single-player game The Sims, where one can create virtual characters and manage their careers and lives. A website called The Sims Resource has a fansite index, where the top four fansites have more than 5 million hits. The fansites offer the latest about the Sims, including news, articles, reviews and lots of extensions and modifications to the game for downloading (The Sims Resource 2005).

In this paper we investigate the fansites around the online chat and game environment Habbo Hotel. We distinguish fansites from personal homepages, since the fansite authors use their nickname from Habbo, thereby not revealing their real names. Although some fansites are created by individuals, most of them are made by small groups, therefore resembling what Döring (2002) calls collective personal home pages. Habbo is designed for teens and has become a very popular and fast growing teen website in sixteen countries<sup>1</sup>. About three million unique users visit Habbo each month, and roughly 22 million Habbo characters have been created (Sulake 2005). It is not a game as such, but a very flexible collaborative game environment that provides the resources for play. The users themselves can generate their goals (collecting furniture, making friends, competing, etc.) or choose to focus on the chat and hang around with friends.

Since fansites studies are only beginning to emerge, the research question is fairly general at this stage: Are they useful as sources for user research? We do not focus on technical issues behind the websites, but rather on two subquestions: 1) What kind of content can be found on the fansites? 2) What can we learn about user groups and popular activities? Our empirical data originates from the Finnish community around Habbo. We concentrate on the official and active fansites, while also noting fansites on a break, inactive, and inaccessible ones.

In our Habbo survey from Summer 2004, about 50% of the respondents visit some fansite at least once a week. The survey showed that the fansites are broadly known among Habbo users and many visit them as often as the hotel. The fansites play an integral part in the community and are therefore an important object of research. Fansite analysis might also prove to be a cost-effective user research method in situations like Habbo where there are a large number of geographically distributed users, of which many gather around popular fansites.

## Previous Work

*Computer games* have been researched for more than a decade from technical, aesthetic and socio-cultural perspectives by a growing number of researchers with different backgrounds (Aarseth 2003, Brown & Bell 2004, Dourish 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> Mainly in Western Europe and North America, but also Australia, Japan, and Singapore are included.

Fansites have not been a research topic yet, since most research has focused on the gameplay itself and the question of what constitutes a good game (Konzack 2002). Some attention has been paid to the 'playground' where the gameplay takes place, and concepts like off-game communication and social playability have emerged (Järvinen et al. 2002, Ermi et al. 2004).

While the origins of Habbo can be traced back to research on textual online chats and games like MUDs and MOOs (Cherny 1999, Curtis 1994, Dibbel 1993, Mnookin 1996), this paper leans on research in computer-mediated communication and user research. *User research* (Hackos & Redish 1998, Beyer & Holtzblatt 1998, Kujala 2002, Kuniavsky 2003) can be seen as a subtopic of the larger theme *participation* in information systems development – a core topic of information systems research since the 1960's (Markus & Mao 2004). Usually user research 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, as Henriksen (2002) reported, the notion of one bounded field site is problematic when investigating distributed information systems. As a consequence she turned to a multi-sited research design, where the research sites are regarded as an open-ended space of possibilities. We follow this line of thinking in our investigation of the Habbo fansites and regard them as important first-hand sources for user research, complementing other sources and methods (mainly different kinds of interviews and observations).

Research on *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) has also been published in the field of information systems: for instance anxiety and CMC (Brown et al. 2004) and web home page complexity (Geissler et al. 2001). Nicola Döring (2002) has made a systematic review of about thirty home page studies. She summarises how theories of identity, self-presentation and CMC have been applied to personal home pages. To integrate the diverse empirical findings, she structures the findings by looking at homepages as media products with production processes, product characteristics, and reception processes. Focusing here on the product characteristics, the homepages can be classified based on whether they are available, under construction, or completed. The realized homepages can be divided into expressive (the topic is one's own person) and instrumental (another topic without explicit reference to one's own person). The core elements of personal homepages are e-mail links, external links, a welcome message, 1-4 graphics, and a brief biography. This classification and the core elements inspire our fansite analysis, especially the list of fansite elements.

One specific type of personal homepages that has recently attracted research attention is the *weblogs*. Weblogs, or just blogs, are frequently updated websites where the authors post their opinions and links to other sites, commenting on topics close to their heart. The news section on the fansites are very similar to

blogs, which makes blogs relevant here. The scholarly research on blogs is emerging mostly at scientific conferences such as Computers and Writing. Some blogs have a large audience and interact with other media. Drezner & Farrel (2004) report on the influence of blogs on the American political debate. According to Gurak et al. (2004), what characterises the blogs as a genre is their form and function: “all posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty”. Kuniavsky (2004) noted that blogs are one source to others’ hard work and they can contain important, but unedited, insights.

Our research is also informed by *fandom research* that originates in the studies of scifi magazines beginning in the 1920’s and 1930’s in the U.S. (Jenkins 1992). These magazines that fans corresponded through were precursors to current fan magazines, or fanzines, which in turn can be seen as precursors to the fansites were discussing in this article.

## Case Habbo Hotel

Based on experiences from two Internet chat rooms (Mobiles Disco and Lumisota), the game development company Sulake Labs launched the first Habbo Hotel in Finland in August 2000. People familiar with Internet technologies describe Habbo as an audiovisual chat environment on the web that can be accessed with a web browser with the Shockwave plug-in. Others talk about a virtual hotel where one can hang out and make new friends. When checking in to the virtual hotel one creates one’s own cartoon like Habbo avatar (Figure 1) that can walk, dance, eat, drink and chat in the cafés (Figure 2), 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.



Figure 1. A Habbo avatar.

Compared to popular massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), Habbo’s 3 million users seems to be fairly large number, only the Korean Lineage with 4 million subscriptions is in the same magnitude. Everquest has about 0.4 million users and Ultima Online and a few others have about 0.2 million users

(Woodcock 2005). Habbo is also huge compared to other non-competitive virtual worlds that are marketed as 'virtual getaways'. The number of active users in Active Worlds, There, and Second Life is measured in tens of thousands (Activeworlds Corp. 2005, Forterra 2004, Woodcock 2005).



Figure 2. A café in Habbo.

It is difficult to exactly measure the number of Finnish Habbo users, since the popular measuring techniques are counting the number of browsers from which users log on to Habbo. The organization that publishes Finnish web use statistics, TNS Gallup, reports about 90 000 users per week (09/2005) or about 278 000 users per month (03/2004). Their statistics show that the Habbo website has been among the top 20 most visited sites in Finland since 08/2003. According to our research in Summer 2004 95% of the users are between 10 and 19 years old. Assuming about 160 000 users would imply that about 25% of the Finnish 10-19 years old population visit Habbo.

Unique selling points of Habbo, compared with the above mentioned MMOGs, could be that it is intended for teenagers, since one's avatar is a boy or a girl – not a grown-up. Habbo is fairly easy to start, since it is not a separate program, but works within the web browser. Also, one does not have to choose lots of character

capabilities or attributes for one's avatar, just gender and clothes. Habbo has no subscription fee, which is usually difficult for teenagers to pay, it is free to chat, but some extra hotel services cost money. The site is a hotel, which is different from the outdoor setting of most MMOGs. From a parent perspective Habbo is a non-violent and moderated environment, which makes it a reasonably safe place for kids. However, these are also the reasons for why one might not want to visit Habbo. There are a lot of kids there who prefer talking to their friends and not to adults. If more options in changing avatars and the virtual world is wanted, other virtual worlds provide more alternatives. Also, one has to follow the Habbo Way, which basically means being nice and polite, and not swear nor cheat, which is far from the 'anything goes' attitude of some games.

## Research Method & Data

We follow the strategies for ethnographic research on virtual communities outlined by Paccagnella (1997) and Jones (1997). Fansites exhibit a fair amount of interpretative flexibility – “they can mean different things to different individuals or different groups, and their use continues to be interpreted and reinterpreted with the passing of time” (Paccagnella 1997). It also means that fansites can be studied from many different perspectives, we could discuss their role in the social worlds of Habbo, their potential for user feedback, their technical implementation, or the copyright issues related to them. Here we choose to focus on what we can learn about the users and their social worlds around Habbo from a user research perspective. We are interested in what kind of user groups emerge and what kinds of activities in Habbo are popular.

Even though this is not an identical study, we present a similar kind of argument as Bøving & Simonsen did a year ago in SJIS (2004). They presented an approach to studying the use of web-based information systems, focusing on web usage statistics from http log files on web servers as data. Their argument was that results from http log analysis might support other data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, and observation. They showed that http log analysis could be valuable in both quantitative and qualitative research. Here in our paper, we will argue that fansite analysis can fill a similar role, complementing the mentioned sources for user research.

The term *virtual community* has become fashionable, unfortunately creating more confusion than order in the academic literature. Paccagnella considers it a problematic scientific concept, because there is not a commonly accepted definition of what a community really is. He ends up using the term virtual community as a “metaphor to indicate the articulated pattern of relationships, roles, norms, institutions, and languages developed on-line” (1997). The important thing here is to note that a fansite is not a virtual community, it is a just

a 'window' through which we look at the virtual community. We can elaborate on this by discussing Jones approach to cyber-archaeology.

Jones (1997) notes that one must distinguish between the virtual community and its place on the Internet. He defines a set of minimum conditions for the place, which he calls a virtual settlement:

- 1) a *minimum level of interactivity*, referring to a dialogue in messages, where later messages refer to earlier ones
- 2) a *variety of communicators*, more than two individuals communicating on
- 3) a *virtual common-public-space where a significant portion of interactive group-computer-mediated communications occur*
- 4) a *minimum level of sustained membership*, thereby excluding temporary and fleeting aggregations of people, e.g. Smart Mobs (Rheingold 2002)

Jones considers finding a virtual settlement proof for the existence of a virtual community. Looking at the fansites alone, we find that they do not qualify as virtual settlements, since the level of interactivity is fairly low and only a few fansites feature a discussion forum, which could be an interactive virtual public space. However, together with the interaction in the virtual public spaces of Habbo we find that there is evidence of virtual settlements.

Fansites differ from traditional sources for user research, because they are accessible without researcher intervention. This can be a benefit compared to the problems arising from the presence of the researcher in the field doing participatory observation, for instance. This obviously causes new ethical issues, but it reduces the danger of distorted data by the presence of the researcher. The ethical issues concern how to treat electronic discussions, for instance would the researcher need permission to analyse the fansites? Here we adopt Paccagnella's advice, the public discussions on the fansites are considered public acts deliberately intended for public consumption – therefore no more precautions than common in other studies of everyday life in public spaces or mass media communications are necessary. It is ok to quote fansites providing that the source is mentioned, and names need not be held confidential as in private interviews.

Some preliminary qualitative background data was drawn from semi-structured contextual theme interviews with a couple of moderators (15 and 22-years old), and an active player (11-years old), the community director of Sulake Labs, and from the conversations and correspondence with a handful of the producers. The second background data stems from a web-based questionnaire with 27 questions, of which 21 were multiple-choice and 6 were open. A link to the web form was put on the Finnish Habbo frontpage. 10 613 visitors answered during the two weeks the link was there (June 22 - July 6, 2004). This data is, however, used in this article only as descriptive background figures, because here we focus on the fansites. The more analytic usage of it will be published elsewhere.

**Data collection.** For this particular fansite study we have identified 173 Finnish fansites in total, of which 5 became official fansites in June 2004. As of

December 2004 we found that 32 of the rest were active, 12 on a break, 59 had no updates during the last three months, and 65 were inaccessible or the content was removed. Many of the fansites have a name with 'kala' in it, which means fish in English. The reason is that the Finnish Habbo started out as Hotelli Kultakala (Hotel Goldfish) and anything annexed with 'kala' seems to be cool.

We first analysed the official fansites (Kala-Stamo, Monitori, Nefekala, Nerokala, Pixeli), one of the biggest closed fansites (Paratiisikala), and 4 random fansites (Aalto, Palmu, Rausku, Wannabe-kala) in detail. This body of articles on the web forms the basis for our qualitative content analysis, resulting in the list of fansite elements. After this, we validated and improved the list based on the contents of 13 additional fansites. Finally, we clicked through the remaining 85 accessible fansites to check for new elements that our list did not include. We found none, which confirmed our results.

## Habbo Fansites

The most popular fansites are usually made by a small team of Habbo fans with different expertise and roles. One designs the layout and look & feel, another one writes the stories and a third one has the technical skill to publish them on the web. We have not systematically studied the age and gender of the fansite authors, because many fansite authors remain anonymous and only reveal their nickname in Habbo. However, some do, and among them we note that some of the youngest fansite authors are 10 and 11 years old (e.g. Sekofisu). Many are between 13 and 15 years old. The most active fansites have smaller updates (like news and rumours 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 webmagazine. The webmagazines seem to follow a rhythm of one issue per one or two months.

The form and content of the fansite is created with a wide variety of software tools. The simplest way is maybe using the html editing facilities on a free web hosting service like Freewebs.com. Another way is to write in Word and save the article in the html format, after which it is uploaded to the Internet service provider that hosts the website. Html-savvy use Notepad or an html-editor. A few fansite teams have skilled webgurus and set up sites using scripting techniques (e.g. php) and databases (e.g. MySQL). Most fansite functionality is based on text and images on static webpages, but some allow the fansite audience to participate through guest books, gallup polls, and forums. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of two fansites.



Figure 3. Kala-Stamo, one of the official fansites.

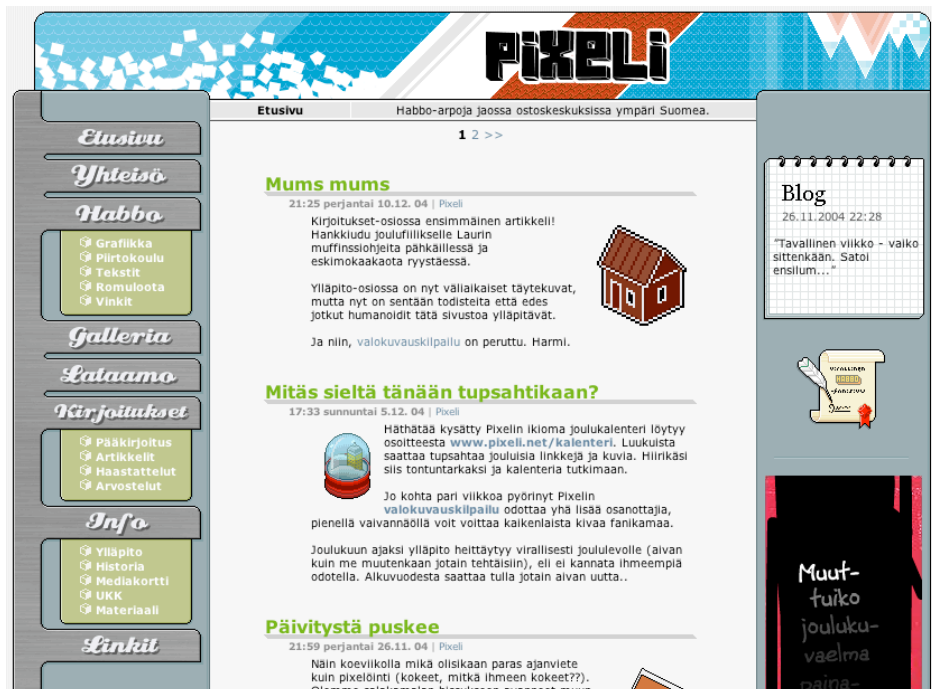


Figure 4. Pixeli, another official fansite.

## Results

In this section we present the results to the first research subquestion: what kind of content can be found on the fansites? The following Habbo-related topics seem to be the common elements on the fansites. They are based on a bottom-up classification and examples are given for each category. After the summarizing table, in the following subsections, we answer the other subquestion regarding what we can learn about user groups and popular activities.

### Fansite Elements

**News and rumours.** The fansites are very active news and rumour distributors. News items are often placed in a corner of the frontpage. A hot topic in April 2004 was the changed way of ordering Habbo coins through SMS and with which mobile phone operators it worked. The news also included the Habbo happenings during Easter: searching for a bunny, drawing competitions, background images and e-postcards. A software bug in the swimming pool caused some buzz. (Pixeli)

**Guest books and gallup polls** provide the fansite audience a way to participate comment on the fansite. Fansite visitors post greetings and polite comments on the good work as well as rude ones. Some try to market their own homepages or fansites, and others ask questions about the fansite development. (Nerokala, Pixeli). For instance Paratiisi-Kala asks if the readers have cheated furniture, and 28% of 1931 respondents say yes.

**Other fansites.** Some of the studied fansites comment on each other. Reviewing 'official' Habbo stuff made by Sulake is one thing, but reviewing other fansites is a delicate matter. For instance, in an article at Nefekala it is evident that the article & fansite author is offended by a harsh review of Nefekala at Pixeli. Clearly Nefekala 'gives back' in their review of Pixeli. The official fansites have large link collections to other fansites, between 40 and 50 Finnish fansites were linked. Nerokala and Pixeli also included ratings of the other fansites, and Nerokala even provide click through statistics.

**Hints.** Once one has learned the basics in the hotel, one starts to notice certain things that are not mentioned in the official tutorials. How do they make those special characters in the room names, and how does one change the look on the face of the Habbo character? The hints provide answers to these questions and more. For instance what the curious shorthand writing common in chats mean – LOL means laughing out loud, and so on.

**Reviews and lists.** Paratiisi-Kala provides excellent reviews of all public spaces in the hotel, e.g. what one can do in each room, how the room is designed, how many Habbo characters will fit simultaneously, the name of the bots, etc. All the fansites give information on what virtual pets there are, what they can do and everything about furniture. What furniture one gets when joining the Habbo Club, rare collection items, seasons-related furniture, etc.

**Secrets.** These are things that one can impress one's Habbo friends with. How to move furniture faster with the Alt-key. Walking through chairs. Making furniture float in the air. Talking to the bartender bots, ordering special drinks with secret phrases, etc. (Pixeli).

**Guidelines.** Some articles on the fansites show serious effort to set boundaries for acceptable behaviour in Habbo. They go much further than the official rules of the Habbo way. Nerokala presents 20+1 rules in an article on how to become 'fish'-credible. It starts with a rule to read the character description before starting a conversation, to avoid asking unnecessary questions. The second rule advises not to ask for age nor location right away, because it's 'childish and stupid.' It continues by stating how 'silly, embarrassing, and forbidden' all sorts of bad manners and cheating are. Pixeli has an article in the same way of writing, how to be 'idle' in the hotel without disturbing others, not shouting in public spaces, making friends that matters (not just 'collecting'), as well as basing discussions on arguments, instead of yes-no debates.

**Histories.** Two major histories are told on the fansites, the history of Habbo and the history of that particular fansite. The *Habbo history* presented by Nerokala runs along two intertwined threads. The first explains how the hotel structures were developed by Sulake, which rooms and furniture items were created when. The other thread describes the development of the Habbo community and how the hotel structure changes were received. The fansite authors usually present their *fansite history* and themselves on a 'staff'-page. It includes stories of what personal reasons lay behind the decision to make the fansite and who were invited to the editorial staff. Advice on making a fansite is given, where to publish them, being original compared to previous fansites, and even how to make money with the aid of the fansite.

**Fashion and celebrities.** Pixeli has an article 'Fashion for the early Winter', where Muotiminna gives hints on what's fashionable for boys and girls. Boys are recommended a long-sleeve shirt, and girls are recommended to show their belly below their t-shirt. Paratiisikala (no. 8) has done a Habbo interview with snowgirl90 and .:Eminemi.:, who recommend the hottest thing: the recently introduced public room 'Kahvila Kaneli' and the drink 'kuplamehu' (bubblejuice). Unfashionable furniture are digi-tv sets and Dew-sofas. Nerokala has published extensive lists and screenshots of celebrities like 23 Habbo staff members and 97 of the about two hundred moderators.

**International Habbo.** All four studied fansites maintain links to Habbo Hotels in other countries. Especially the British Habbo is important, since the Habbo Club was introduced there a few weeks before Finland. This means that one can go there and peek on what the next Habbo Club furniture will be. Similarly the Finnish Habbo was exceptionally popular abroad in February 2004, when it was the first hotel where the virtual pets were announced. Nerokala also tells the story about Veijo's great Habbo-adventure to the British Habbo.

**Meetings IRL.** Since Habbo is intended to be a safe place for everyone, 1-on-1 meetings outside Habbo are discouraged. Instead, following the Habbo Way, open meetings for groups of Habbo players are encouraged. Fansites provide the information for when and where to meet.

**Competitions.** The fansites present competitions both in Habbo and on the fansite. Inside Habbo it can be an official competition, such as the ‘find a bunny’ contest during Easter arranged by the Hotel Manager, or an unofficial competition invented by a hotel visitor. Some fansites organise competitions and lotteries regarding the fansite, to engage fansite readers in their fansite.

**Pictures.** Edited screenshot pictures are an integral part of many fansites. Pixeli even provides a drawing school on how to make good pixel graphics.

Table 1 presents the above outlined fansite elements in more detail. The fansite ID columns refer to a particular fansite listed in Appendix 1. Lots of pluses imply that a fansite element is very typical. Very few pluses imply a fansite element that is unique to only a few fansites, which is either a big strength in profiling or an element that all others consider unnecessary. The fansite elements in between can also be important, signifying emerging elements that only some have implemented. This list reflects the selection of official and active fansites aimed at a large audience in the community.

Fansite type Fansite ID	Official					Active					Break			Inactive					Σ					
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R		S	T	U	V	W
News & rumours	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	+	-	18
Participation																								
guest book	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	17
gallup polls	+	+	-	+	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	11
e-mail address	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	21
feedback form	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	12
disc. forum	-	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
competitions	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	14
stories by others	-	-	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	9
irc	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
link toplist vote	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
file upload	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Links																								
other fansites	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	+	20
int. Habbo	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	16
int. fansites	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	3
other category	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	12
forums	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Hints, secr., guidel.	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	20
Reviews and lists																								
public spaces	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	7
priv. guest rooms	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	5
HabboClub furni	+	-	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	8
rare furniture	+	-	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	9
virtual pets	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	2
other fansites	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	15
hobbas/staff/eoph	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Histories																								
Habbo history	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Fansite history	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	8
Fashion & celebs	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	+	16
Interviews	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	16
Magazine	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	8



Summing these with previous fansite knowledge we identify the following eight user groups: 1) Furniture traders and collectors, 2) Chatters (in public rooms), 3) Gang-members and VIPs, 4) Hobba-supervisors, 5) Cheaters, 6) Quizz-makers and players, 7) The Hotel manager, and 8) Celebrities.

This is a crude generalisation, since we continuously learn about more and less peculiar ways of using Habbo. For instance, one group of friends use Habbo a few times a year to gather there and catch up. Also not unheard of is parents leaving messages to and communicating with their children through Habbo.

## Popular Activities

Many are enticed of the fact that one can design the guest room to imitate anything. They enjoy designing to rooms to imitate for instance popular tv-shows like 'Who wants to be a Millionaire', or just arranging a quizz, or a bingo. Another popular event has been miss Habbo beauty contests. Some just do it for fun, others participate in or create games to get more furniture. Usually it costs some cheap piece of furniture to enter the competition, and the winner gets the lot, except for what the organiser keeps.

Another popular competition is the furniture trap. People are invited into a room, where the organiser moves the furniture around so that less and less space is available. The game ends when the characters are trapped and cannot move anywhere in the room. The winner is the last one to be trapped.

Paratisikala reports in the magazine (no. 7) from early 2004 about one of the newest competitions, Habbo sumo-wrestling. The idea being to get the other character 'mixed up'. Both players try to step into the same square at the same time. The one who stays in the square gets a point. The wrestling-ring is 4x4 squares big. A common game seems to be 1-on-1 and first to reach 10 points.

Monitori.org reports about many different games in Habbo. For instance, they report that there are more than ten formula tracks in Habbo. The idea of a formula track is to run through a set of rooms connected by teleports, and the winner is the first to get the last room, from which the competition also started. Another game is called Habbo-Hockey, where people play in teams. Moving is restricted to two squares per turn, and shooting or passing is simulated by complicated sets of rules of how to roll the dice. Still another game is called CheatersGate (Peeloporti), which is similar to the formula tracks, but full of furniture obstacles on the way. The largest track owned by -Holy- is reported to be 25 rooms big.

Rutzki from Aalto writes about different room types. Some types not yet mentioned include:

- *Casinos*: where people gamble with their furniture. Everybody gets a dice and the winner is the one with the highest score on the dice. In many cases there is a VIP room, for those who give the owner a small piece of furniture.

- *Dating*: First the boys and girls line up into distinct queues, then a few boys and girls at a time ask each other questions in the date area of the room. They vote some participants out, ending up with a couple, who then can go into a quiet room to start dating
- *Talk shows*: A host discusses with invited guests, often Habbo celebrities.
- *Clubs and hotels*: by buying a ticket from the owner you get to the 'better side of the fence'.
- *Orphanages*: Some pretend to be orphans, others pretend to be parents. The room owner 'connects' the orphan with a suitable pair of parents, after which they can pretend to be a family.

As we can see here, the diversity and creativity of the activities in Habbo is huge. Providing a comprehensive list of popular activities is challenging, but Rutzki's summary is a good start: Trading furniture, Casinos, Dating, Beauty contests, Competitions, Dice games, Team sports, Formula tracks, Talk shows, Clubs & Hotels, Orphanages.

## Conclusion & Discussion

In this paper we have answered the research subquestion of what kind of content can be found on the fansites. We have provided detailed examples of different fansite elements and summary table based on 23 fansites. From a user research perspective we posed the second subquestion, what can we learn about the user groups and popular activities? Based on the fansite articles we were actually able to distinguish 8 different user groups and 11 major types of popular activities in the social world of Finnish Habbo users. These user groups and activities are only preliminary, because they have not yet been triangulated with other research data. The point here though, is that it is possible to get a grasp of the user groups and activities by analysing fansite articles. Therefore we can answer the main research question with a strong yes – fansites are useful sources for user research.

The fansites around Habbo are important because they complement other sources for user research. Usually user research involves fieldwork methods like interviews, observation, focus groups, questionnaires, diary methods, etc. However, in the case of Habbo, we face a significant sampling problem with the large number of users: how do we know that the opinions of the interviewed users are representative? One way to find out that is of course to do a survey to get a large enough number of observations. However, in our exploratory user research, we realised that the fansites are very valuable. We first found the fansites as one of our interviewed Habbo users pointed them out to us as an important source for his Habbo knowledge. Soon enough we found ourselves reading the fansites and learning Habbo tips & tricks that would have taken months of play to find out. The fansites are not just any source of information, in many cases the content is written for a wide audience, representing a consensus. Also, they are public

discussions, which means that people put more thought and effort into them compared to private discussions.

However, reading published information on fansites also brings on new challenges. Finding trustworthy information and interpreting it requires use of source critique. The texts are obviously not written for the same purpose as the researcher is reading them. The author and the fansite that published the article give important hints to how trustworthy it is. For instance, if an article is published on an official fansite, the author cannot be too critical towards the Habbo producer. On the other hand, if it is published on a more independent site, it can be critical, but the opinions might not be widely supported. In this way the fansites resemble ordinary mass media, some are more critical and some are more mainstream. Although the fansites are accessible without researcher intervention, the amount of articles is so large that they cannot all be included. The role of the user researcher becomes visible in finding and selecting the articles to report.

Our study has concentrated deliberately on one country only, because the setting of one main site and the fansites around it enables us to concentrate on meaningful details compared to multinational and multilingual settings. It is difficult to assess whether our fansite sample is representative of the whole Finnish Habbo fansite landscape, because there is no comprehensive list of all fansites. However, our sample includes all official fansites and about one third of the active fansites, which makes it representative of the relatively small number of big and active fansites aimed at a large audience and being fairly close to the producer. And, correspondingly, our sample is not representative of the smaller and more underground fansites.

Another question is how much the Habbo fansites represent fansites around other online games. Obviously, unlike in Habbo, if persistent texts can be found inside the games, the fansites probably look different. Then there is one need less for fansites. Also, in many online games, modifications (mods) play an important role, and sharing these mods are an important and potential activity for fandom. Habbo does not have mods, even if sharing Habbo pictures is an important communication theme. However, as around many online games, also Habbo furniture, especially rare ones, are traded on eBay. Discussing the economical aspects of the fansites would be an interesting theme.

The most obvious future work is of course the international comparisons between the fansites around the national Habbo Hotels. Also important would be to analyse the different profiles of the fansites, focusing on how the fansites position themselves in relation to the other fansites. We also intend to reflect on the larger role of the fansites in the Habbo social world, since some of them seem to have strong possibilities to influence. From a user research viewpoint, comparing the results from the fansite analysis to questionnaire and interview results will reveal more details about when and where to use fansite analysis in information system design.

## Acknowledgments

This study is carried out in the context of the Mobile Content Communities project, funded by the National Technology Agency of Finland (TEKES). This research would not have been possible without the important people at Sulake Labs, thanks to Sampo Karjalainen and Rebecca Norman.

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## Appendix 1: List of Fansites Mentioned, December 2004.

First in the list are the official fansites, after that the fansites are grouped based on how often they are updated. The "page count" column indicates the cumulative number of frontpage hits. It is only indicative, since the counters count from the day the counter was started or restarted, which might be different from when the fansite was launched. However, the order of magnitude is important, e.g. whether the fansite has one hundred, one thousand, ten thousands, or a hundred thousand hits. Also, the list is not exhaustive, it show only 23 selected fansites of 173. The inactive fansites were found based on fansite lists on older and inactive fansites. Many inactive fansites have been archived, e.g. check [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).

Official fansites		Total: 5	Page count	ID
Kala-stamo	<a href="http://www.kala-stamo.net">www.kala-stamo.net</a>		485862	A
Monitori	<a href="http://www.monitori.org">www.monitori.org</a>		N/A	B
Nefekala	<a href="http://www.kotinet.com/nefekala">www.kotinet.com/nefekala</a>		315849	C
Nerokala	<a href="http://www.nerokala.com">www.nerokala.com</a>		781308	D
Pixeli	<a href="http://www.pixeli.net">www.pixeli.net</a>		~300000	E
Active fansites		Total: 32		
E-kala	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/juhoppi/e">koti.mbnet.fi/juhoppi/e</a>		N/A	F
Habbostaff	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/habbosta">koti.mbnet.fi/habbosta</a>		N/A	G
Kriisipalvelu	<a href="http://www.kriisipalvelu.net">www.kriisipalvelu.net</a>		2561	H
Lampi	<a href="http://lampi.urli.net">lampi.urli.net</a>		3421	I
Lieskakala	<a href="http://www.freewebs.com/lieskakala/frame.htm">www.freewebs.com/lieskakala/frame.htm</a>		N/A	J
Munkki	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/munkkitk">koti.mbnet.fi/munkkitk</a>		27502	K
Navigaattori	<a href="http://www.navigaattori.com">www.navigaattori.com</a>		3403	L
Palmu	<a href="http://www.palmu.biz">www.palmu.biz</a>		21807	M
Sekofisu	<a href="http://kotisivu.dnainternet.net/paavokor/sekofisu">kotisivu.dnainternet.net/paavokor/sekofisu</a>		1448	N
On a break		Total: 12		
Aalto	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/rutzki/aalto">koti.mbnet.fi/rutzki/aalto</a>		N/A	O
H-Hotel	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/h-hotel/index">koti.mbnet.fi/h-hotel/index</a>		9264	P
Hyvitysturva	<a href="http://www.hyvitysturva.fi">www.hyvitysturva.fi</a>		N/A	Q
Inactive fansites (no updates for 3 months)		Total: 59		
Boxi	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/b0xi">koti.mbnet.fi/b0xi</a>		1781	R
KultakalanKuvalehti	<a href="http://kultakalankuvalehti.com">kultakalankuvalehti.com</a>		N/A	S
Loisto	<a href="http://nwps.ws/~kultakala/html">nwps.ws/~kultakala/html</a>		5595	T
ParatiisiKala	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/toiwo">koti.mbnet.fi/toiwo</a>		135905	U
Rausku	<a href="http://www.kuukso.com/~maztere/rausku/">www.kuukso.com/~maztere/rausku/</a>		N/A	V
Wannabe-kala	<a href="http://koti.mbnet.fi/ggstudio/wanabikala">koti.mbnet.fi/ggstudio/wanabikala</a>		N/A	W

Table II. List of Fansites Mentioned, December 2004.