

‘This One’s for VIP Users!’: Participation and Commercial Strategies in Children’s Virtual Worlds

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Abstract

Through the integrated framework of participation theory and political economy, this article analyzes participatory opportunities in the virtual world Habbo Hotel, and how participation is constrained and framed by the producer’s commercial strategies, which are based on advertising and sales of virtual goods. The study also looks into the ways in which the producer Sulake Corporation discursively represents the virtual world, and how the users with various forms of tactics try to bypass the commercial constraints. The methods used include observations of the English and Swedish language versions of Habbo Hotel, document analysis, and an interview with one designer employed by Sulake. The results show how participation in this virtual world takes minimalist forms, and that it is foremost an arena for interaction and consumption. Users’ participation in the virtual world is constrained by the commercial strategies in numerous ways, and the producer strategically takes advantage of children’s need to gain status in their peer group, in order to get them to purchase on the site. Habbo Hotel is represented by the producer as a safe and creative environment with learning opportunities for the children. Observations of the virtual world instead reveal Habbo as a panopticon-like shopping mall where users, through the practice of begging and other tactics, try to resist the commercial strategies. Virtual worlds could be potential spaces for children’s participation and contribute to a democratization of the social; however, this study shows how participation in this virtual world is clearly structured and limited for commercial purposes.

Keywords: Participation, political economy, virtual worlds, children, Habbo Hotel, advertising, virtual goods, tactics

Introduction

Children's internet usage has steadily increased during the last years (Findahl 2013: 40; Statens medieråd 2013: 19-20), and one popular activity on the internet is to engage in virtual worlds where children can adopt their own avatar, play games, and interact with other users (Statens medieråd 2013: 42). Virtual worlds function both as spaces for children's socialization and entertainment, and as arenas where corporations try to make profits from children's engagement online through advertising and sales of virtual goods. Virtual worlds aimed at children have been described as "the latest commercialization of children's culture" (Wasko 2010), and are also seen as constituting one important part of "the new digital marketing ecosystem" (Montgomery 2012). Research on these online spaces is still under-developed (Buckingham 2013), and the focus has mainly been on literacy practices and learning (e.g. Marsh 2011; Marsh 2014; Black 2010; Merchant 2010). Little attention has been paid to political economy perspectives and commercial strategies employed in virtual worlds. Wasko (2010) states that: "the political economic factors involved in this area are often underplayed or ignored by academic researchers," and continues: "it is necessary to incorporate forms of critical political economic analysis, especially for new products and media forms that have incorporated marketing and advertising strategies targeted at children" (ibid.: 113). In a study of the virtual worlds Neopets and Webkinz, Wasko (2010) concludes that these platforms are attractive due to their interactive and participatory characteristics, and that they, at the same time, reinforce consumer ideology and "naturalize the commercial process that is at the core of advanced capitalism" (ibid.: 127). Like Wasko (2010), Livingstone and Drotner (2011) maintain that children's media needs to be analyzed from the perspective of political economy in order "to judge how far children's culture is being transformed into promotional culture" (Livingstone & Drotner 2011: 409).

The present article argues, in line with Wasko (2010) and Livingstone and Drotner (2011), that research must pay more attention to the commercial dimensions of children's media in general and virtual worlds in particular. In addition to this, the article also argues that it is important to analyze what participatory opportunities are provided in these online worlds, and how the producer's commercial strategies frame and constrain participation. Consequently, this article combines a political economy perspective with participation theory in a case study of the virtual world Habbo Hotel, in order to better understand children's virtual worlds both as (potential) sites for participatory opportunities, and as sites for marketing strategies which aim at steering participation towards purchases of virtual goods.

The main question posed is: What participatory opportunities are provided to users in Habbo Hotel, and how is participation constrained and framed by the producer's commercial strategies? This is combined with a study of how the producer discursively represents Habbo Hotel, as a means to show the gap between the pro-

ducer's discourse and actual practices. In relation to this producer-oriented focus, the analysis also directs its attention to the users and their tactics in relation to the commercial strategies.

In the following, research relevant for the present article is discussed in more detail. Subsequently, the article proceeds to the theoretical framework, which primarily builds on Carpentier (2011) and de Certeau (1984), and after this follows method, results and, discussion.

Mapping the Research Field

Focusing on participatory opportunities and constraints, this article also connects with larger debates within media and communication studies concerning the internet and how to understand the nature of users' participation online. Some voices in this debate argue that the internet has increased opportunities for social, cultural, and civic participation (e.g. Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b). A substantial amount of criticism has been launched towards this discourse on participation and the internet (e.g. van Dijck & Nieborg 2009; Olsson 2010; Fuchs 2013), and researchers have started to direct their attention towards the producers and how they actively steer participation (Olsson & Svensson 2012). In research on children's virtual worlds there are studies that write themselves into the more optimistic discourses on participatory affordances of online spaces. In a study of Habbo Hotel, Ruckenstein (2011) analyzes children as prosumers within creationist capitalism, and argues that children's interactions "should be explored within a framework that identifies the intimate links between social aspirations and economic production" (Ruckenstein 2011: 1060). Although emphasizing that the business model is based on children's user-generated content, Ruckenstein depicts Habbo Hotel as a site for empowering creative participation:

[v]irtual worlds, in particular, open up innovative possibilities for prosumption by emphasizing playfulness, participation, and creative capacities of people. One of the key findings of this research is that Sulake has created a child-friendly environment [...] Such recognition raises further questions about children's participation: if child-friendly environments are created by companies, are corporate agents, in fact, more readily claiming recognition and empathy with children than the rest of society? (Ruckenstein 2011: 1074)

Ruckenstein (2011) understands the producer's commercial motives and children's participation as a mutually enriching symbiosis. Buckingham and Rodriguez (2013) criticize Ruckenstein (2011) for uncritically accepting the rhetoric of the producers and challenge this optimistic view by analyzing how Habbo Hotel moderators exert their power over the users, and what users learn about citizenship in this context. Buckingham and Rodriguez conclude: "our analysis suggests that Habbo Hotel is very far from being the free, democratic, creative space proclaimed by the company [...] it certainly bears comparison with real-life authori-

tarian regimes and ‘total institutions’ such as prisons” (Buckingham & Rodriguez 2013: 56). They conclude that children, with regard to political lessons, “learn to function in a situation where the powerful enjoy absolute authority” (Buckingham & Rodriguez 2013: 57). While the main focus in this article concerns what users learn about power and citizenship in Habbo Hotel, the authors also reflect on the virtual world as primarily an arena for social interaction where the creative possibilities are restricted to the purchase of virtual goods (Buckingham & Rodriguez 2013: 55).

Also connecting to the more optimistic approaches to participation in online worlds, Lund (2013) argues that the virtual world Stallet.se offers young girls a space for civic participation. Similarly, Tuukkanen, Iqbal & Kankaanranta (2010) analyze children’s participatory practices in virtual worlds, but they come to a rather different conclusion. Based on a survey conducted in two Finnish schools, they conclude that virtual worlds are foremost arenas for social participation; socializing with friends through chat and engaging with the avatar were the most popular activities, while forms of civic participation were not very common.

As this overview shows, previous research has not systematically examined children’s virtual worlds from the integrated framework of political economy and participation theory. This paper, thus, aims at contributing to research on children’s virtual worlds in general, and a better understanding of participatory opportunities, constraints, and commercial strategies within these online spaces in particular. On a more general level, the article also leaves a contribution to research which deals with questions of participation in social media and Web 2.0.

The Case of Habbo Hotel

Produced by the Finnish company Sulake Corporation Oy, Habbo Hotel is available in 11 different language versions and has, according to the corporation, 273 million registered users in 150 countries and five million unique visitors every month (“Habbo Hotel – Where else?”). The main income comprises 85-90 percent from micropayments of virtual items, and the rest from advertising (Johnson, Hyysalo & Tamminen 2010: 625). Sulake estimates that 90 percent of the users are between 13-18 years old (“Habbo Hotel – Where else?”) with an average age of 13 years (“Habbo Adsales”). These numbers are, though, highly uncertain and research has shown that many users are younger than the required age of 13 years (Johnson, Hyysalo & Tamminen 2010: 626; Ruckenstein 2011: 1064). Sulake uses both the terms “children” and “teenagers” to describe the users (“Habbo Hotel – Where else?”; “Habbo.com Customer Support”). In the present article the term “children” is used throughout in order to include both younger children and teenagers.

Theoretical Framework

In *Media and Participation – A site of ideological-democratic struggle* (2011), Nico Carpentier carries out an exhaustive examination of the concept of participation in relation to the media sphere, and also in relation to other spheres where participation has been widely discussed: democracy, spatial planning, development, and arts and museums. Acknowledging the notion of participation as a “floating signifier” due to its ideological role within democratic-ideological struggles, he also states that “some form of discursive fixity is required in order to allow for this concept to be analysed” (Carpentier 2011: 128), and develops a framework for assessing participation and its enabling and limiting elements within the field of media. This framework serves as an important source of inspiration in the analysis of the empirical data and will therefore be introduced in more detail below and connected to the political economy perspective. Finally, de Certeau’s theory on practices in everyday life (1984) and particularly the concepts of strategies and tactics are introduced.

Participation Theory and Political Economy

In the “AIP (Access, Interaction, and Participation) model,” Carpentier (2011) distinguishes between the concepts of *access*, *interaction*, and *participation*, which are played out in relation to the four areas *technology*, *content*, *people*, and *organization*. Most important here is the distinction between interaction and participation (a distinction also made by Jenkins 2006b). Interaction is defined as socio-communicative relationships between humans, or between humans and technology, within the media. Carpentier argues that participation needs to be distinguished from interaction as it “helps to clarify the meaning(s) of participation and to prevent the link with the main defining component of participation, namely power, being obscured” (Carpentier 2011: 129). Participation is, thus, defined as co-deciding on/with technology, content, people, and organizational policy and, consequently, denotes more equal power relations (ibid.: 130-131).

Central in Carpentier’s theoretical framework is also the differentiation between minimalist and maximalist forms of participation. Using a broad definition of the political as inherent in all societal fields, Carpentier writes that: “the political nature of participation manifests itself in the struggles to minimize or to maximize the equal power positions of the actors involved in the decision-making processes that are omnipresent in all societal spheres” (ibid.: 11). Specifically related to the media, in minimalist forms of participation “media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, restricting participation to access and interaction [...] In the maximalist forms, (professional) control and (popular) participation become more balanced, and attempts are made to maximize participation” (ibid.: 69).

Carpentier identifies four structuring elements – *technology*, *organization*, *identity*, and *quality* – which “structurally can impede and facilitate participatory processes, and shift them towards more minimalist or maximalist versions” (ibid.: 358). For the specific purpose of the present study, a fifth structuring element can be added here, namely the producer’s *commercial strategies*. As shown in the results section, the micro-payment revenue model in different ways both structures and constrains participation. This element can be related to the element *organization* in Carpentier’s model:

The second structuring element relates to the nature of the organizational structures and to the existence of participatory organizations. We should not forget that many (mainstream) media organizations still function in capitalist logics, which impacts strongly on their objectives, and often works against a definition of media participation as a primary organizational objective. (ibid.: 356)

The element *commercial strategies* could be seen as a sub-category of the organizational element, and serves to connect participation theory with the political economy perspective.

Researchers in the field of political economy of communication have traditionally focused on the distribution of power on the macro-level, and the contexts surrounding media (Mosco 2009; Wasko, Murdock & Sousa 2011), but there are also examples of political economy research with a micro-level approach. Wasko (2010), for instance, positions herself within the field of political economy when analyzing commercial virtual worlds. Her study focuses on “the appeals of these sites to children, and how they define children as consumers” (Wasko 2010: 113). In McChesney’s (2000) definition of political economy of communication, content analysis is presented as a part of the field: “political economy of communication looks specifically at how ownership, support mechanisms (e.g. advertising) and government policies influence media behavior and content” (McChesney 2000: 110). This article looks specifically into what McChesney here refers to as support mechanisms, that is, sales of virtual goods and advertising, and how these constrain and frame participation in the online world.

Strategies and Tactics

One dimension of the analysis of Habbo Hotel is to also look for traces of how users respond to the commercial strategies. The theory of practices of everyday life of active audience theorist Michel de Certeau (1984), and particularly the concepts of *strategies* and *tactics*, is used here as a framework for understanding this user – producer relationship (see Jenkins 2006a and O’Brien 2009 for other studies inspired by de Certeau). In *The practice of everyday life* (1984), de Certeau focuses on how users/consumers in their everyday life relate to and appropriate cultural products, such as mass media representations, consumer products or the urban space: “These ‘ways of operating’ constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of soci-

ocultural production” (ibid.: xiv). De Certeau introduces the concept of *tactics* to capture the nature of these everyday practices of cultural consumers. Tactics are put in relation to *strategies*, which denote the calculative operations of the producers. Strategies are “actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power (the property of a proper), elaborate theoretical places [...] capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed” (ibid.: 38). The core, defining element of a strategy is, thus, the possession of a “proper place.” In contrast to this, users lack these proper places and can with their tactics “only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (ibid.: 30).

Applying these concepts to the specific case of this article, it can be said that Habbo Hotel is the proper place of the producer Sulake. In this proper place the producer establishes a calculative relationship with the users, and one dimension of this relationship is the commercial strategies. The users of Habbo Hotel act within this place and relate to the commercial strategies with different forms of tactics. It could be argued that Habbo Hotel also constitutes a proper place for the users as they in various ways can contribute to the shaping of the virtual world; however, as will be discussed in the results section, the design of the virtual world and the rules of the game are to a large extent established by the producer and, not least, Habbo Hotel is the property of Sulake Corporation. De Certeau’s description of the relationship between tactics and strategies is, therefore, still useful: “The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (ibid.: 37).

Despite being written before Web 2.0 and social media, de Certeau’s theoretical framework is still relevant when studying user practices, as there are important features of the sites that are controlled and determined by the producer and to which the users must relate. However, there are dimensions which need to be problematized in a changed media landscape. Most relevant to comment upon here are de Certeau’s descriptions of everyday tactics as “hidden” (ibid.: xii, xiii), “silent” (ibid.: xii) and “unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized” (ibid.: xvii). This may be the case regarding users’ tactics in relation to, for instance, television, but in relation to social media users’ tactics can be manifested in the virtual space, as shown in the present study.

Method

Multiple methods were used in the study, including observations, qualitative content analysis, document analysis, and an interview. These methods are connected to the three areas of research outlined in the introduction and for the sake of clarity the method section is organized in relation to these three areas. Initially, though, some general details concerning the whole study are described.

Habbo Hotel is available in 11 different language versions and in the present study the English and Swedish versions (habbo.com and habbo.se) were included

in the analysis. The selection of these two versions of the virtual world was made for practical reasons, but also to broaden the empirical material. Initial observations made it clear that there were differences between these two versions regarding the presence of advertising and, therefore, it was considered relevant not to restrict the analysis to, for example, only the Swedish version. Habbo.com and habbo.se were observed by the author of this paper during the months of February and March 2012 for approximately two hours a day. The observations were restricted to the actual virtual world and did not include observations of other arenas where users in different ways can engage in the Habbo universe, such as the Habbo Facebook page, fansites, or the Habbo homepages and forums which are related to Habbo Hotel. Documentation of the observations was made in a research journal and in screenshots. Permission to reproduce screenshots was given by Sulake Corporation.

In order to approach the main question posed in this paper on participatory opportunities and constraints, a form of “participatory” qualitative content analysis was undertaken of habbo.com and habbo.se (participatory in relation to technology). Two avatars were created and the initial phase of the research was rather unstructured and explorative. The different functions and features of the sites were explored, and the most popular rooms (as indicated in the “Navigator”) were visited. Special attention was paid to which functions were free of charge and which functions required payment, together with a study of the different strategies employed by the producer to make the user purchase on the site. Attention was paid to the information presented directly to the user by the producer. Such information as, for instance, a “Valentines Quest Calendar”, often appeared right after the login phase. Another category of information which was of particular interest was advertising. After the explorative phase, the analysis took a more structured form where the most popular rooms were visited and notice was taken of the producer’s direct communication in the form of messages shown on the screen. Screenshots were taken of these messages and other aspects that related to the focus of the research.

In order to approach the question on user tactics in relation to the commercial strategies, the chat, where the avatars communicate with each other, was observed. As there were no prior expectations of what would constitute these tactics, the observations were also exploratory and broad in character. In order to have some focus in these observations special notice was given to chat content which in some way connected to the micropayment model. Obviously, other interesting dimensions of the virtual world not relating to the subject of the present article, such as issues of gender and ethnicity, were not paid attention to in the observations (for research on these dimensions see Boellstorff et al. 2012: 26).

The observations were non-participatory as no interaction took place between the researcher and the users. Therefore, the method is not “ethnographic” in its fullest sense as participatory observation and interaction between the researcher

and the users are central here (e.g. Boellstorff et al. 2012: 65; Hine 2000: 63-64). The choice not to interact with other users was made for practical reasons, as interactions would have required informed consent (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 157; Kozinets 2010: 151), which can be a time-consuming process especially when involving children (e.g. Kozinets 2010: 152), and was beyond the scope of this research. Ethical questions are much debated in virtual ethnography (Hine 2000: 23). Some scholars consider it important to disclose the researcher's identity even if the observations are non-participatory (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 142), and no interaction takes place between the researcher and the users, while other researchers chose to keep their identity hidden as disclosure could have an effect on the users' behavior (e.g. Sanders 2005: 71). In line with this latter viewpoint, the researcher's identity was not explicitly communicated during the observations in this study. Other actions were undertaken as a means to protect the integrity of the users. Generally, only the popular rooms with a more "public" character were observed, and if the conversations acquired a clearly private nature the room was abandoned (on virtual worlds as private or public spaces, see: Boellstorff et al. 2012: 134-135; Kozinets 2010: 140ff.). Avatar names have also been anonymized with the use of pseudonyms in order to protect users' identities (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 136-137, Kozinets 2010: 144).

Data eliciting information on the producer's representations of Habbo Hotel was found mainly in documents on the habbo.com and habbo.se websites, and the homepage of Sulake. The documents on habbo.se and habbo.com were identical, with the difference that there were additional documents on habbo.com. Because of this, and for language purposes, the analysis has been made based on the documents written in English. A commercial in the form of a YouTube video where Habbo Hotel is presented is also included in the analysis. During the research process, an interview was also made with a Habbo Hotel designer, employed by Sulake. This interview was made on Twitter between March 6-8, 2012 and revolved around questions relating to user-generated content versus content produced by the corporation.

Finally, some concluding remarks about data analysis. In this study, data collection and analysis was, at large, intertwined (e.g. Silverman 2010: 221; Boellstorff et al. 2012: 160-161). The observations of Habbo Hotel were analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework that, consequently, guided the analysis, but did not determine it (e.g. Olsson 2008: 97-98). Carpentier's and de Certeau's ideas served as starting points, but needed to be developed and understood in relation to the specific case and the specific media in focus.

The data used to discern the producer's discursive representations of Habbo Hotel was, in contrast to this, analyzed after collecting the data. The analysis of the documents and the interview was inspired by the discourse analytical approach developed by Potter & Wetherell (1987). The basic assumption in this ap-

proach, as generally in discourse theory, is a view on language as action and constitutive of the social world:

social texts do not merely *reflect* or *mirror* objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world. Rather, they actively *construct* a version of those things. They do not just describe things; they *do* things. And being active, they have social and political implications. (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 6, emphasis in original)

Language is used for various purposes and has different functions depending on context and audience. There will, thus, be substantial *variation* in discourse. This has implications for analysis, which needs to focus on “the constructive and flexible ways in which language is used” (ibid.: 35). More specifically, in the first phase of the analysis there is a search for patterns of both variability and consistency regarding the content and form of language. In the second phase, the researcher tries to understand the different functions of language (ibid.: 168-169).

Results

The results section initially presents the analysis of the producer’s discourse, and then proceeds to discussing participatory opportunities and constraints in the virtual world. This is followed by a presentation of the observed advertising strategies, and finally, attention is directed towards the users and their tactics.

Habbo Hotel Represented in the Producer Discourse

The ways in which Habbo Hotel is represented is contingent upon the type of document and the intended audience. One group of data has the wider public as the main audience, where specifically parents constitute an important part. In these texts (also including the commercial and the interview) there are some common patterns in the way Habbo Hotel is described. Three main themes have been identified: Habbo as a *social space*, a *creative space*, and a space for *economic transactions*. Regarding Habbo Hotel as a social space, Habbo is represented as a space where users can meet friends: “Habbo Hotel is all about having fun with friends in an inspiring and safe environment” (“Official Parents Guide”). In the quote we can see how the social dimension is also connected to safety, which can be viewed as an essential argument to gain the trust of parents.

Concerning Habbo as a creative space, Habbo is represented as a virtual world where users can “have fun through creativity and self-expression” (“Habbo Hotel – Where else?”), and “explore their creative side by building games to challenge their friends [...] and by dressing up their avatars to reflect their personal style and values” (“Official Parents Guide”). Habbo Hotel is represented as a virtual world entirely built by user-generated content: “Currently there are over 120 million user-generated rooms in the different Habbo communities. User-generated content is king in Habbo Hotel! It is the Habbo users who make the virtual world

what it is” (“Habbo Hotel – Where else?”). In the commercial, which is built up as an interaction between a journalist and a visitor to Habbo, the users are put forward as the very producers of the virtual world:

Journalist: Tonight we bring you an exclusive interview with the man who went undercover to seek out the mastermind behind the craziness and creativity of the world’s largest hotel [...]

Visitor: The answer was right there all along; there is no mastermind. Everything in Habbo is created by other Habbos just like you and me. We are what make Habbo Hotel so cool. (“Habbo YouTube - Special Report”)

In the research interview the same line of argument came up, where the producer actively downplayed their own role while emphasizing the role of the users. In the interview, when asked if any of the popular rooms are created by Sulake, the designer responded: “Some are, some not. I’d love to see the user-generated rooms being more popular than ours. It’s all about you – not us. :)” (Interview March 2012). From the quote we can understand that there are rooms made by the producer, and the quote also indicates that the rooms created by the producer are the more popular rooms in the hotel.

In the representation of Habbo as a creative space there are also uses of language which contrast to the very notion of creativity, particularly in the use of the word “decorate” in formulations such as: “it is the only hotel where everyone gets to *decorate* [author’s emphasis] their own room any way they want. There are millions of items to choose from and purchase in the Habbo catalogue” (“Habbo YouTube – Special Report”). Thus, in the theme Habbo as a creative space, users’ activities are understood in a wide variety of ways: as acts of creativity, the production of user-generated content, and as decoration and acts of consumption. In the last quote we can also see how the decoration of rooms is directly linked to the purchase of virtual items, which leads us to the last theme of Habbo as a space for economic transactions.

The commercial dimension of Habbo Hotel is represented as learning opportunities for the young users. Under the headline “Free to play – improve your trading skills” it reads:

In addition to improving social skills and creativity, players learn the basics of economics such as marketplace functionality and trading of Habbo Hotel items, which is a very popular pass time amongst players. Habbo Hotel is free to play, but to get the most out of their experience, players can buy Habbo Credits, Habbo Hotel’s official currency. Credits are used to pay for virtual items that enable the creation of events and fancier rooms. (“Official Parents Guide”)

Learning and safety are core values connected to Habbo Hotel. The purchase of virtual items is also linked to the loaded word “self-expression”: “[v]irtual furniture /.../ are important factors in most Habbos’ lives within the community, allowing them to express themselves through the creation of theme-styled rooms” (“Habbo Hotel – Where else?”). The main function of this way of representing

Habbo Hotel is to portray Habbo as a good environment for children where they can socialize, be creative, and learn.

When the main audience is potential advertisers, Habbo Hotel is represented as a platform which makes available a potential site for interaction with young people: “Habbo Hotel provides for both international and local advertisers convincing audience numbers: 273 million registered Habbo avatars with 5 million teens visiting the site every month” (“Advertising in Habbo”). Here, Habbo is not represented as a space where users can socialize, be creative, and learn about economy; instead, the users themselves become a part of the economic transaction. Users are not portrayed as the content creators of Habbo; in their place, the corporations are put forward as potential content producers: “Habbo Hotel pushes traditional online marketing campaigns into a virtual, activity and identity driven world *where brands have the opportunity to become content providers* [author’s emphasis]” (“Advertising in Habbo”). To parents, self-expression was presented as a value in itself, but in relation to advertisers, users’ identity exploration becomes a valuable product that can be sold:

Habbo Hotel is a community where teens can explore their identities through self-expression. Brands can help to spark this creativity /.../ Brands can even create environments as a part of the virtual world, a form of advertising far more valuable than simply displaying an advertisement. (“Advertising in Habbo”)

These two ways of representing self-expression observed in the data, one aimed at parents and the other aimed at advertisers, reveal two conflicting views on children: children as social beings with rights and values of their own, and children as objects which can be sold on the market.

In documents establishing the legal conditions for engaging with the virtual world, there are representations which contrast to the way Habbo is described to the public in general and parents in particular. In the “Terms of Service” it is established that the content of Habbo Hotel – above described as created by the users – is Sulake’s property: “Accordingly, you have no other interest, including no property, proprietary, intellectual property, ownership, or monetary interest, in your Virtual Currency and Virtual Goods, *which remain our content and property*” [author’s emphasis] (“Terms of Service”). The corporation also states that they have the “absolute” right to modify or eliminate virtual goods (“Terms of Service”). When described to parents, Habbo was portrayed as built entirely out of user-generated content. In the Terms of Service, user-generated content is given a considerably narrower meaning, and refers here only to content which users bring with them into the virtual world and not what they build in the virtual world based on the virtual items. User-generated content refers to “content submitted by users” and includes “wall posts, messages, and actions with other end users” (“Terms of Service”). The infrastructure of the hotel, the rooms, and the virtual objects are not here included in the category of user-generated content.

The variation in discourse can be explained by the different contexts and intended audience (Potter & Wetherell 1987). The various purposes of the discourse – to gain credibility amongst the public and particularly parents, to attract advertisers, and to protect their intellectual property – affects the way Habbo is represented. The discourse, especially the part on Habbo as a creative space, can also be understood in its broader cultural context as it connects with a wider discourse on Web 2.0 found amongst business gurus and also amongst academics. Analyzing Web 2.0 business manifestos, van Dijck and Nieborg (2009) identify three buzzwords used in this discourse: “collaborative culture”, “mass creativity” and “co-creation”. The basic idea promoted in this discourse is that social platforms are:

created by crowds of (mostly) anonymous users who define their own informational, expressive and communicational needs, a process touted as ‘mass creativity or ‘peer production’ [...] Mass creativity, peer-production and co-creation apparently warrant the erasure of the distinction between collective (non-market, public) and commercial (market, private) modes of production, as well as between producers and consumers [...]. (van Dijck & Nieborg 2009: 856)

There are clear parallels here between Sulake’s discourse on Habbo where the focus is on users’ creativity. However, what van Dijck and Nieborg, in the quote above, call the erasure of the distinction between producers and consumers is in Sulake’s discourse not so much an eradication but rather a conversion where the users are put forward as the very producers of the virtual world.

Participatory Opportunities and Constraints in the Virtual World

According to Carpentier (2010: 130-131), the notion of participation should be understood as co-deciding on/with technology, content, people, and organizational policy. The Habbo Hotel users have some, however limited, possibilities to participate in decision making regarding media content, while the power to decide on technology, people, and organizational policy remains within the sphere of the producer Sulake. The fact that the producer utilizes user feedback in the development of the virtual world (Johnson et al. 2010; Ruckenstein 2011) does not entail participation, but should rather be understood as consumer marketing research. On a general level, thus, participation in Habbo can be said to take on a more minimalist form. While there are some participatory opportunities in relation to media content production, there are also constraints put on participation. In the following, the article looks further into the participatory opportunities and constraints, and is organized in relation to two main categories which relate to media content production: 1) The chat and the avatar, and 2) Rooms, games, and virtual goods.

The Chat and the Avatar

The main locus for participating in Habbo Hotel is in the chat where users communicate with each other in speech bubbles, and in this way engage in social ac-

tivities such as role-play and contests. The content is provided by the users and there are no commercial constraints on the chat, as it is free of charge (although the chat content is supervised by moderators, see Buckingham 2013). In Carpentier's model, socio-communicative relationships between humans are considered a form of interaction. In the context of the virtual world, however, the content production in the chat can be seen as a form of social participation, as it is a space where the users can decide on the content and in this way contribute to the shaping of the symbolic environment.

In addition to this, the avatar also plays an important role in the social relations of the virtual world. However, there are more constraints on the use of the avatar than the chat. The avatars' possibilities to communicate with body language are limited; the avatar can dance, sit, wave, and idle for free, but in order to blow kisses or laugh the user must purchase a VIP.¹ There are also spatial constraints on the avatars' possibilities to move around in the virtual world connected to the VIP. The avatar can mostly move freely, but in some rooms there are restricted areas where only VIP members can enter (habbo.com, February 21, 2012). When observing other avatars that could not enter the VIP area, it seemed as if they were confused about their possibilities to participate in the activities going on. One avatar asked in the chat: "Do you have to be a VIP to join the game?" (habbo.com, February 21, 2012). Users are constantly reminded of the different limitations put on the avatar; limitations that serve as constant reminders of the fact that enhanced opportunities to participate in the virtual world must be bought in the shop.

In the producer's discourse (see above), it is said that avatars can be dressed up in order to reflect a personal style and personal values, something which is linked to self-expression and identity. Yet, to dress up the avatar with a personal style the users have to purchase a VIP, since it is the VIP clothing which expresses a personal style; the VIP clothing has strong colors in contrast to the muted colors of the free clothing, and they have a trendier and more original style. The VIP Club is presented as follows: "Stand out from the crowd. Show off your style with exclusive clothing and hairstyles" (habbo.com, March 2, 2012). It is apparent that Sulake in this respect uses children's need to gain status in their peer group through expressing a personal and "cooler" style (Buckingham 2011: 87), as a means to get them to purchase on the site. Communicative signals, such as color and style are, thus, used to clearly identify who has purchased a VIP. Research on the function of virtual items in virtual worlds has shown that virtual items function the same way as material items; they are used for self-expression and mark distinctions between low and high status (Lehdonvirta, Wilska & Johnson 2009: 1073; Animesh et al. 2011: 790).

During the period studied a "Valentines Quest Calendar" was presented to the user when logging in to both habbo.com and habbo.se. This calendar, and the different tasks presented each day, often had a social function where the user was

encouraged to contact other “Habbos” in order to find love. This calendar had, however, with its focus on the social, obvious economic motives: to raise awareness of VIP (see Figure 1) and to get traffic to the shop. These types of messages pop up on the screen and have the same function as advertising messages – to get users interested in certain products so as to prompt them to purchase on the site.



Figure 1. Possibilities to reflect a personal style are linked to the possession of a VIP, something that is highlighted in the “Valentines Quest Calendar” (habbo.com, February 16, 2012). The message serves to raise awareness of the benefits of the VIP-product, and can thus be seen as an advertisement that takes advantage of children’s need to gain status in their peer group.

Several quests in the “Valentines Quest Calendar” had sections restricted to VIPs, in order to get users interested in purchasing VIP membership. The messages shown in the calendar constantly reflected the constraints put on users not having a VIP, and highlighted the fact that VIP members have more possibilities to personalize their appearance. One “bonus” VIP users could get was to be able to dress all in black (see Figure 1). In another message appearing it said: “Love in the hair. Your hair looks a little ragged; time for a change. Hair extensions for VIP or short hair for everyone” (habbo.se, February 15, 2012).

Other quests served to raise awareness of VIP and augment the status of VIP members by encouraging non-VIP members to interact with VIPs. One quest stated: “Get a VIP to laugh next to you! Stand beside a VIP Habbo and tell a joke or a funny story. You can also just ask them to laugh – as simple as that” (habbo.se, February 18, 2012). The “Valentines Quest Calendar” often contained a section where featured “love furni” was shown with a button next to it that said *Go to Shop*. In the Valentines section of the shop, the user could trade hearts obtained

from completing the quests for a selection of furni. However, some furniture also required additional coins (virtual currency paid for with real money). The “Valentines Quest Calendar” can, consequently, be considered a strategy where Sulake with subtle methods uses social participation as a means to get the users engaged in economic activities.

Rooms, Games, and Virtual Goods

Another important dimension regarding co-deciding on content is engaging in the construction of rooms and games. In the producer’s discourse, room construction was described both as an act of creativity, and an act of decoration linked to purchasing virtual items. The observations of the virtual world make clear that the latter representation is closer to facts than the former. The user cannot create new objects but can select from a predefined set of goods found in the shop, or trade objects with other users. Engaging in room decoration is, consequently, limited if the user does not purchase virtual goods, even if there are other possibilities to obtain objects, for instance through gifts, winning competitions or through the pixel shop.² There are, however, a few opportunities to engage more creatively, for instance, with a VIP the user can use a “black hole” in the floor, which can be used to build a more unique floor. The users can thus in a limited way co-decide on what content to fill the personal room with, but cannot in a more creative way decide on the content from the start. With respect to this, engagement in the virtual world can be seen either as interaction with media content or a minimalist form of participation.

The idea that Habbo Hotel is constructed solely by user-generated content, as put forward by the producer, is also misleading. The structure of the hotel, i.e. the different rooms, is produced by Sulake, and there are also rooms which are decorated by Sulake, such as rooms made especially for Valentine’s Day, the Habbo Research Lab, rooms made for ChildLine and Sims Showtime 3 (see below), and rooms for special events. These are obvious examples of rooms not generated by users. However, regarding the most popular rooms in the hotel, it is not possible to tell whether they are constructed by Sulake or ordinary users. In the interview with the designer employed by Sulake, one question revolved around how to tell the difference between rooms primarily decorated by the producers and rooms decorated by users. The designer did not seem to want to answer the question, but responded: “...made by us. Would you like that to be surfaced in the hotel?” (Interview March 2012). To keep this information hidden can be seen as a way to sustain the idea that Habbo is built solely by user-generated content.

In the producer’s discourse, building games is depicted as a creative activity that the user can engage in. In this case though, making games in Habbo Hotel is not about creativity in the sense of connecting objects together in order to create something new (Gauntlett 2011: 2). Creating games in Habbo Hotel is mainly about purchasing items from the shop, and putting together pre-defined games, as

can be read on the site: “These games are built by Habbos just like you. Are you ready to start up your very own game? Click on the Shop button to open the shop and find all sorts of gaming furni – from Puzzle Boxes to ice skating” (“Where are the games?”). Game construction, thus, can better be described as an act of consumption and following pre-defined instructions, than a creative act. It seems like few people actually create their own games; according to a text on habbo.com, which encourages users to create their own games, game creators are described as geniuses:

Show us how YOU make a game in Habbo! That’s right Habbos...we’re looking for those few genius developers who choose to make games in Habbo. Using Wired and other furniture in perfect tune, creating a masterful, easy to play and addictive game experience. (*Get Your Game On*, 2004-2012)

Additionally, to be able to play already-existing games on higher levels, users need to purchase VIP membership (habbo.se, February 11, 2012).

There is, finally, one important thing to comment upon in relation to co-deciding on media content. Co-deciding on content also concerns the possibility to decide on what to do with your creations. However, as described in the analysis of the producer’s discourse, the content of the rooms, i.e. the virtual items, is the property of Sulake. In this respect, engagement in the virtual world lends itself closer to interaction than participation.

Advertising Framing Participation in the Virtual World

The revenue model based on micropayments in different ways structures and constrains participation in Habbo Hotel. Advertising, which is also a part of the revenue model, does not limit participation but adds to the visualization of the virtual world as a commercial space. Regarding paid advertising there are major differences between the Swedish and English language versions; in habbo.se there is no paid advertising, while in habbo.com there is advertising for consumer products, non-commercial advertising for non-profit organizations, and events used to promote artists such as Cher Lloyd and Mindless Behaviour (on March 17 and 21). In habbo.se, as well as in habbo.com, Sulake’s own products, such as the games Niko and Lost Monkey are advertised. In addition to this, the virtual goods are also advertised in Habbo in messages appearing on the screen. This is done in the “Valentines Quest Calendar,” but also in squares appearing in the right-hand corner of the screen. In these squares there is a headline, a picture of the object, a selling argument, and at the bottom: “Buy from the shop.” The headline can be, for instance, “Executive carpet” and the selling argument: “Walk around like you own the place” (habbo.com, February 9, 2012).

In habbo.com, youth and charity organizations are prominent actors who promote their services. ChildLine (a free helpline dedicated to children and young people) had a featured room where an advertisement was shown, containing a telephone number and a text urging the user to watch a video. The video was

about self-harm and aimed at highlighting this question in connection to the Self-harm Awareness Day on March 1. During Valentines, habbo.com also collaborated with ReachOut.com, an Australian website dedicated to helping young people. ReachOut.Com had a room with an advertisement, which linked to the organization's web page. The purpose of the room was described as follows: "So there can be a lot less lonely hearts this Valentine's Day, Habbo Hotel has teamed up with ReachOut.com to create a community space for Habbos to share and support others who may be going through a tough time" (habbo.com, February 10, 2012). These examples show how Sulake in habbo.com promotes safety and support to children in different ways. However, in contrast to this stands the promotion of commercial products. Thus, Sulake both aims at helping children in their everyday lives, and at the same time tries to persuade children to buy specific products in order to profit from their participation in the media. This is another conflicting aspect of Habbo Hotel, which basically reflects the same contrast found in Sulake's representation of children as important social actors versus objects that can be sold on the market. One screenshot from the habbo.com login page visualizes this two-faced side of the virtual world (see Figure 2); just below the Child-Line advertisement there was an advertisement for the game Sims 3 Showtime, which was going to be released on March 9.

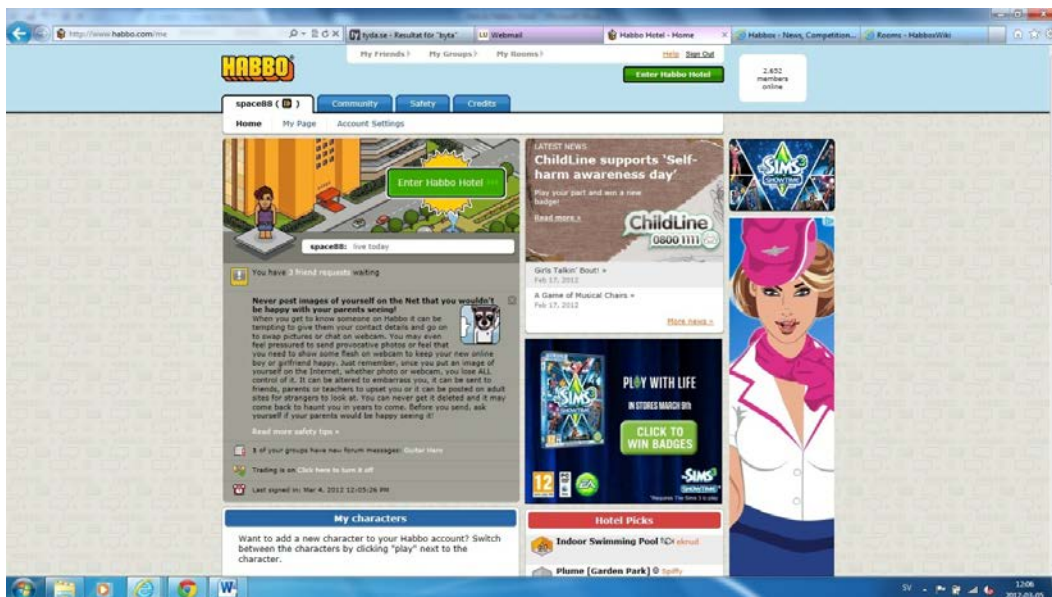


Figure 2. Advertisements for ChildLine and Sims 3 on the habbo.com login page (March 5, 2012).

The Sims 3 Showtime campaign was made in collaboration with Habbo Hotel and was fully integrated in the virtual world, blurring the boundaries between advertising and entertainment. Sims 3 had its own featured room called "The Sims Showtime super-star lounge." In this room an advertisement with the text "Make your

rise to fame” was shown. When clicking the ad the user was directed to a Habbo page with more information on the game, a video from the game, the release date, and a link to amazon.co.uk where the game could be pre-ordered. In “The Sims Showtime super-star lounge,” Sulake had created a game with the same theme as Sims. Next to a door was a note that said, “Welcome to the Sims 3 Showtime super-star lounge. Head through the tele to begin your rise to fame and discover the different roles you can play on the way” (habbo.com, March 3, 2012). Entering the teleport, different options were presented to the user, and in order to make it through questions related to Sims 3 had to be answered. The doors were colored light blue with a white star – the same colors used in Sims. When the user made it to the final room, featured as a stage, a note appeared saying, “Poll. Congrats! You have made your rise to fame; now all that’s left to do is chill in VIP as your adoring fans wait outside. Time for your first quick interview before you get your badge” (habbo.com, March 3, 2012). The poll asked exclusively for the user’s country, but that was presumably information which both Sulake and the advertiser were interested in.

Commercial surveillance (e.g. Fuchs 2013) was also observed in other contexts of the virtual world. For instance, in the room “Habbo Research Lab” the producer looked for users who were willing to give feedback on the hotel in small group chats. A poll was presented to the user where most questions revolved around purchase of virtual objects and VIP membership. Sulake also creates large surveys in the virtual world which, in the words of Sulake: “reveals teens’ current media usage, consumption behavior and brand preferences in order to better understand what compels youth around the world” (“Habbo’s second Global Youth Survey...”).

Users’ Tactics in Relation to the Commercial Strategies

The producer set the conditions for how the virtual world can be used, but the users in different ways try to resist these structures, and in the words of de Certeau (1984) they make “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (de Certeau 1984: xiv). During the data collection period actions were observed in the chat that can be interpreted as tactics and forms of resistance towards the micro-payment model, and also towards promotional events organized by Sulake in Habbo.

As described above, the avatars’ possibilities for self-expression are constrained in order to get users to purchase VIP membership. However, users have invented new ways of self-expression with the use of the free chat function, and can in this way bypass the commercial strategies. In the chat, the users find an arena for self-expression beyond the avatar; users post links in their chat-comments that connect to personal blogs and YouTube videos. On these other media platforms young people show themselves playing the piano, playing the

guitar and singing. One example is a link to a blog owned by a Swedish girl. In the chat below the link, she wrote: “for some hot pictures and videos of me” (habbo.se, February 15, 2012). The blog contained personal photos and comments from everyday life. This shows that there are no clear boundaries between the virtual and the “real” life, and that users mix social interactions through the avatar with real life images.

Other tactics which challenge the commercial strategies concern attempts to obtain virtual objects without paying for them. While there are users engaged in purchasing and trading virtual objects, there are also users who try to go beyond the established channels for obtaining virtual objects; an often-observed activity is “a practice of begging” where users beg to receive objects from other users. An example of this can be found in the chat dialogue between the avatars Black and Rabbit (pseudonyms). Black says: “plz get me it” and Rabbit answers: “why dont you buy credits and not take other peoples money.” Black continues: “hey” and then whispers: “can u plz buy vip for me?” (habbo.com, February 16, 2012). In this dialogue we can, thus, see how a user asks another user to buy him/her VIP membership, and how the other user seems to get irritated by the question.

Similarly, inside habbo.se, in a room where trading activities took place, there were comments such as: “can I get free furniture from someone please,” and “selling an invisible pillow” (habbo.se, February 28, 2012). These begging practices can be seen as forms of resistance to the micropayment model of the virtual world, but they can also be viewed as less desirable social consequences of the revenue model. How the users experience these kinds of tactics, as either play or frustration, and if these tactics have their desired outcome, cannot be revealed from these observations. Interviews with children on their relationship with online advertising has shown that children feel frustrated when performing avoidance tactics (Martínez, Jarlbro & Sandberg 2013), something which contrasts to de Certeau’s depiction of tactics as exclusively enjoyable acts of resistance (de Certeau 1984: xxii, xxiv, 18). Future research should look further into how children experience their tactics in online virtual worlds.

There is clearly an interest in obtaining virtual objects and VIP membership without paying for them, and there are also many actors who promise to deliver free coins, VIP membership, and furniture. In the chat there often appear links to websites, such as “blunthotel”, “habzo”, “bobbahotel,” which have copied the design of Habbo, and Sulake has taken legal actions against these kinds of websites (“Sulake shuts down a pirate Habbo software distributor” 2012). There are also actors appearing in the chat claiming that they can deliver free furniture and VIP membership to other users. On habbofreecoins.net it reads: “Are you wondering how to get credits on Habbo? Do you want to be a Habbo VIP? Just follow the simple steps below” (habbofreecoinsnet.weebly.com). This phenomenon can be seen as ways to resist the micropayment model and the copyright of Sulake, but it could equally be actors trying to lure Habbo users. When these kinds of links ap-

peared in the chat there was often a mix of expectation and suspicion, and the users discussed the intentions behind these propositions. In one room where an avatar promised free furniture if they entered the website talkhabbo.com there were chat comments like: “do u for real give free furniture,” “scam,” “he doesnt give anything,” “THIS IS A SCAM,” “no it’s not,” “he-s a bot,” “EVERYONE THAT GETS THERE SAYS HE DIDNT GIVE THEM ANYTHING” (habbo.com, February 14, 2012). When the avatar left the room the other users had been waiting for about an hour, and there were negative reactions when it was revealed to be a deception: “nooooooooooooo,” “he is gone,” “hes offline,” “fck,” “no giveaway,” “aww dam it,” “why r we still in this line,” “LMAO TOLD YOU IT WAS A SCAM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (habbo.com, February 14, 2012). Like the “practice of begging,” these kinds of events can be seen as forms of resistance towards the micro-payment model, but also as negative social consequences of the model where users spending their time in the hotel are lured and disappointed.

Promotional events are organized in habbo.com, which serve both to promote various artists and their new albums, and to promote Habbo Hotel by creating entertaining experiences for the users. The ideal outcome for Sulake is, thus, satisfied users. However, based on the observations these events are not always successful for the producer, as users use the virtual space to launch their critique towards Habbo Hotel. The “live chat” with the artist Cher Lloyd is a clear example of how promotional events in Habbo can fail. The live chat took place in the “Cher Lloyd star lounge” at 4.30 pm UK time on February 17, 2012. When Cher Lloyd’s avatar entered the room she was bombarded with all sorts of questions, and many users asked her to follow them on Twitter. This was a scene that basically resembled a shouting, but in this case silent, fan-crowd. The chat progressed so fast that the artist’s answers drowned in all the questions. One question asked by Cher Lloyd was “Has anybody bought my last single?” – a question which clearly shows the live chat’s commercial intent. When receiving an affirmative answer she said: “good!! Who bought it????? Wave ur hands if you have it!!!” (habbo.com, February 17, 2012). It was impossible for the users to maintain a dialogue with the artist, and many users afterwards blamed Habbo for the failure of the event. Some of the negative comments which could be spotted in the chat were: “Just cause HABBO is poo! Don’t mean we shouldn’t be grateful for Cher trying to do something for fans!” “Cer don’t go on Habbo again, go on twitter its so much easier,” “WASTE OF TIME,” “I cant see where shes responding this is pointless for me :(.” (habbo.com, February 17, 2012). These comments show how users utilize the participatory space given to them in the chat bubbles in order to symbolically shape the event as a failure, and in this way resist the strategies of the producers.

Discussion

Using the integrated framework of participation theory and political economy, the present study has shown how users' possibilities to participate in Habbo Hotel are confined to minimalist forms of participation which foremost concerns social participation through content production in the chat, while other forms of engagement in the virtual world are better understood as interaction and acts of consumption. By offering opportunities for social participation for free, the corporation tries with various strategies to get users to purchase virtual goods. One recurring strategy used in, for instance, advertising messages is to actively play on children's need to gain status in their peer group. These forms of advertising messages, together with other advertising formats in the virtual world, contribute to the shaping of Habbo as a commercial space. The user is constantly reminded of the commercial dimension of Habbo Hotel, and users with various tactics relate to the producer's strategies and seem to experience both success and deception in their attempts to resist the power of the producers.

The results of the study are in line with Wasko's (2010) conclusion that children's virtual worlds reinforce consumer ideology, and the observation made by Buckingham and Rodriguez (2013) that Habbo primarily offers a space for social interaction while creative opportunities are limited to the purchase of virtual goods. The present study, though, advances the understanding of *how* the producer both enables and constrains participation in intricate ways so as to make children purchase on the site. While Buckingham and Rodriguez (2013) compare Habbo Hotel with authoritarian regimes and prisons, the present study identifies Habbo foremost as a panopticon-like shopping mall, where the producers observe and calculate how to steer participation towards purchases.

Ruckenstein's (2011) view on Habbo Hotel can, in the light of the present study, be questioned in various aspects. First, the view of Habbo as a site for children's creativity is problematic. Descriptions such as "user-generated theme rooms" (ibid.: 1065) are misleading, as children's possibilities to create content in this respect involves solely the purchase of virtual goods from the shop. Second, to understand Habbo as a child-friendly environment where the ambitions and goals of the producers and users are without conflict, is also problematic. The present study has highlighted the gap between the discourse Sulake promotes to the public and the actual practices of the producer in Habbo Hotel. The study of the users' tactics also indicates that users are not satisfied with the actions of the producers and the commercial constraints put on the various functions of the virtual world.

Individuals have a need to participate and gain control of their everyday lives, and struggle with the ways their participation is organized and limited (Carpentier 2011: 15). More maximalist forms of participation in the media can contribute to the democratization of the social (ibid.: 131). Children spend much of their leisure

time using the internet and virtual worlds could be one arena for participatory experiences. The present study is limited to one case and cannot, consequently, be generalized to other virtual worlds. However, this study shows how in Habbo Hotel participation is clearly organized and limited for commercial purposes and, therefore, restricted to minimalist forms of participation and interaction.

Participation can be structured in several ways, and Carpentier (2011) has identified some of these structuring elements. The present study has added the structuring element “commercial strategies” to Carpentier’s theoretical framework. Future research needs to look further into how commercial strategies in virtual worlds, as well as in other online spaces, shape, structure, and constrain participation. Research should also explore how children engaged in virtual worlds experience the strategies of the producers, and whether they experience their tactics as either forms of play or acts of frustration.

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Notes

- ¹ In 2012, VIP membership could be bought for 4.99 US dollars per month.
- ² “Pixels” is a kind of currency that can be traded for a limited set of furniture or special effects. The user obtains pixels after a certain login-time and for other activities such as confirming their e-mail account.

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