

Children and Culture in Society

Children as Competent Users in the Consumer Culture?

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Children in the Virtual World: Children's Social Action and Adults' Responsibilities

Introduction

A child in the virtual world is a rather new subject in the field of child studies. It is not a common topic in technology research either, especially if we think about children's social action in these virtual worlds. Furthermore, discussion about adult responsibilities is the newest emphasis in the debate about children's social acting in the virtual world. This article is comprised of three different themes. The first theme is about the victim point of view on children in the virtual world. After this, another view regarding a child as a social actor in the virtual world will be presented. The data has been collected from the game world Habbo Hotel. Finally, attention will be paid to the major shift in the attitudes towards children's virtual worlds, in other words, thoughts about adults' responsibilities will be presented.

Threats in the Virtual World

Adults' interpretations about children's virtual world are often embellished with threats. Playing games, network life and children's media habits, at large, cause anxieties. There is nothing new in this sense, because in the media, and often also in studies, children are mostly seen as victims and objects, not as actors or subjects. In the Finnish press, in the 1980s children and teenagers were mostly seen either as future hopes or as victims (Hoikkala 1991). Some researchers have come to the conclusion that the victim viewpoint has gained more and more space in the publicity, especially in the 1990s (Alanen 2001; Wyn & White 1997). These kinds of starting points have been seen characteristic of the "new" child studies takeoff (Strandell 1992).

In the turn of the century the Finnish press became enormously interested in the ill-health (opposite of welfare) of children and youth as well (Sihvonen 2005). In this large press debate (in 1999–2001) children were seen almost purely as victims of the society and especially victims of parents' neglect. Topics around the ill-health dilemma were various, but also the internet, games and time spent in the virtual world were on the list of affairs,

which were seen to reduce children's wellbeing. However, this so-called *moral panic* in the turn of the century, told more about problems in the adult world than about children on the threshold of the new century.

Moral panic – as defined by Stanley Cohen (1972) – arises in a situation which gives rise to moral disorder in the society. Moral panic means that some people or phenomena are described as against the prevailing values of the society. Very often moral panic is caused by groups who want to protect the predominant value system. The moral panic is linked to groups in a society which are potential for disturbing the dominating value system; this means usually the lower social classes, youth, and children. Usually the phenomena that have caused moral panic, eventually become socially acceptable.

Threats in the children's internet use are various of which internet *addiction* is one of the major ones. Children are spending more and more time on a computer. Threats like physical hazards and social isolation and marginalization are associated with too great use of the web. However, 90% of the Finnish youth aged 15–24 years use the internet 10 hours or more in a week (Salasuo 2006, 64). Marginalization and isolation are also threats if the youth are not able to use the web at all. Other threats with the internet are for example its *contents* which are not always suitable for children. Also, *security and anonymity* are seen as major problems in the web. Security refers to computer viruses as well as problems which arise when people are appearing anonymously in the virtual world. Threats associated with anonymity are, for example, abuse as well as children's identity fragmentation (Näre, 2005). There are – of course – also different kinds of studies: in the very comprehensive European Virtual Society? -research project children's internet use is seen in the positive light. Still, until now, the victim point of view on children in the virtual world has strongly dominated especially press and public discussion.

But, this is not the whole story yet. This article will not only raise discussion about the threats and victims in the virtual world, but also introduce other interpretations about children's virtual action, namely community and social action in the virtual world. With the quantitative material that have recently been collected in the Virtahepo Project of the VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland (May 2006, n=1572 under 18 years old), this article will answer, for example, a question what children and teenagers do in the virtual sites or game worlds.

Case Habbo Hotel

The research material was collected by a structured questionnaire from the game world Habbo Hotel. The SPSS software was used to analyse the study material. The main purpose of this research was to examine youth work in the virtual world. However, in this article more attention will be paid to the adult presence in the virtual world on a general level.

Sex distribution in the inquiry was 570 boys (38%) and 949 girls (62%). Age distribution was 34% under 12-year olds, 40% 12–13-year olds, 20% 14–15-year olds, and 6% 16–17-year olds. There were no major differences between sexes in the age variable ($p=0.183$). (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Age distribution between sexes

Age	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Total (%)
Under 12 years	31	36	34
12-13 years	42	40	40
14-15 years	21	19	20
16-17 years	6	5	6
Total	100	100	100
p=0.184			

Habbo Hotel is owned by the Finnish commercial company Sulake Corporation Ltd. It is an online community with 41 million users in 17 different countries including the Nordic countries Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland. In Habbo Hotel children and teenagers, usually over 12 years old, can meet friends, play games, have fun, and create their own room. Using Habbo Hotel is free but all extra services are chargeable, including for example decorating rooms and playing games. With Habbo coins children can buy virtual furniture, pay voluntary Habbo Club membership fee or participate in the games. Even though the age limit is 12 years, the average user age in our inquiry was 12.4 years. Registration as a user in Habbo Hotel is allowed only for children over 11 years old, but registration is not supervised, so it is possible to be dishonest about one's age. Obviously many children lie their age, because in our inquiry 34% were under 12 years old.

Habbo Hotel is based on communication which means meeting other children in the online community. Every user has their own Habbo console through which they are able to contact friends online. Children are not only meeting old friends but making new ones too. Decorating their own room is also very important for children. One of the Habbo Hotel attractions is that users can create lots of content by themselves. Users can, for example, create their own games and competitions, theme rooms, and own communities with their friends.

Social Action in Habbo Hotel

According to our inquiry the most important purposes for the children in the game world Habbo Hotel were *meeting new friends, having lots of friends and that other players find you as a nice girl or guy*. In all, more than 83% thought that these purposes were considered very important or rather important (Table 2). Other alternatives such as spending money (or Habbo coins), collecting furniture, having many rooms to decorate, playing different games, or arranging competitions were not nearly as important.

Table 2. Acting in the Habbo Hotel

How important for you in the Habbo Hotel is....	Very important (%)	Rather important (%)	Very important or rather important (%)
...that other players find you as a nice fellow?	62	24	86
...meeting new friends?	63	22	85
...having lots of friends?	59	24	83
...taking part competitions?	35	31	66
...being a member in some community?	38	25	63
...using Habbo coins?	16	24	40
...playing games?	14	22	38
...arranging competitions?	16	22	38
...meeting new friends which you could meet IRL?	20	18	38
...exchanging furniture and other goods?	14	21	35
...owning many rooms?	8	13	21
...finding errors in the Habbo Hotel?	9	5	14

However, there were some differences between sexes: boys value more having many rooms and collecting furniture ($p=0,000$). But, differences disappear in social questions: both girls and boys consider social purposes more important. The most important for the girls is to find a new friend (very or rather important by 86%) and that other players find them as a nice girl or guy (very or rather important by 88%).

There were no major differences between ages and attractive activities. Using Habbo coins and changing furniture and other things were a little bit more important for young children. But on the other hand, the reason behind this can also be time spent in Habbo Hotel: a rough estimate is that the less time a child has been a member in Habbo Hotel, the more important it is to build your own room and use coins; and vice versa, the more time a child has been a member in Habbo Hotel, the more important are the social activities.

But it is very important that we also take a critical point of view to these quantitative results. What do children truly mean with “being a nice girl or guy”? In some game worlds, for example in the Swedish Lunarstorm, users get points according to how active their “social” life in the virtual world is (viite). Thus, being a nice pal or having lots of

friends does not actually measure the social activity, but is part of the game playing in purpose to get more points. Situation in Habbo Hotel is not the same as in the Lunarstorm, but there might be some invisible game playing structures, which remain hidden in this kind of questionnaire. With this quantitative material it is quite impossible to solve this type of question, but it is important to pay critical attention to matters like this.

It would be very interesting to find an answer to the question how children sort out virtual and real life. It seems that some children keep them very separate, but then again many children meet their real life friends mostly in the web, also in Habbo Hotel. These kinds of questions demand qualitative material, so that children could explain in their own words, what they mean with “being a nice pal” and how they define virtual and real.

Major Shift: From Moral Panic to Adult Presence in the Virtual World

There has been a major shift in the attitudes towards children and the internet: the previous moral panic has softened by a degree and turned to discussion about the adults’ responsibilities and adult presence in the children’s and teenagers virtual sites. One example of this turn is that many organizations that have earlier taken a stance against the internet use, have now entered the children’s virtual worlds.

In the City of Helsinki, youth affairs have slowly tried to enter the teenagers’ virtual communities (*Netari.fi* project in Habbo Hotel). Youth workers have their own room in Habbo Hotel, and when it is open young people can come to talk to them. According to youth workers, the purpose of this move to the virtual world, is to be where the teenagers are and offer them services there. Through the internet it is also possible to make the young people more aware of the services available, and attract more participants to various activities (Sihvola 2005). Youth workers confront many new challenges in this pioneer attempt: interaction is different and it demands – maybe surprisingly – a more intensive presence than in traditional physical youth centres.



Figure 1. Netari youth work room in Habbo Hotel

Also, *Life Tastes Better without Drugs* (the Finnish EOPH) organization has their own place, the Hubu bus, in Habbo Hotel. Children are queuing to get in the bus and hear about drug affliction, etc.



Figure 2. Hubu bus in Habbo Hotel

Save the Children organization is also on duty in Habbo Hotel. They have a special Manteli chat which is meant for children who have to be alone for some reason at Christmas time. Also, *The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare* (Finnish MLL) has created their own bully chat in Habbo Hotel to help children with difficulties.

Children spend a lot of time in the web. So threats about the time spent on the computer, its hazards for the mental and especially for the physical health, are also real, but only a small number of children are included in this risk minority. However, according to a recent study, children who spend the longest times in the internet, the so-called heavy users, are those that also need social strengthening the most. (Sihvola 2005, 44–49). The most alarming thing is that nobody keeps an eye on these heavy users' use of the internet. The adults' presence and responsibility as well as the technology designer's responsibility in these children's "secret playgrounds" is maybe the most challenging task nowadays. Parents, teachers, and youth workers should not only restrict the use of the internet or game playing, but discuss it with the children, just as when discussing other hobbies or leisure activities.

Finally, how to define when adults, namely parents, teachers, and youth workers are needed, or are they needed in the children's virtual spaces? When we asked the children this question, adult presence and protection was indeed needed.

Table 3. Age distribution in asking help in the internet's problem situations

If you confront some problems in the Internet, who do you ask help for?	Under 12 years (%)	12-13 years old (%)	14-15 years old (%)	16-17 years old (%)
Friends	30	41	42	35
Parents	34	25	22	15
Siblings	15	16	18	15
Netari-youth worker in the Habbo Hotel	12	7	8	15
Moderator in the Habbo Hotel	3	3	4	4
Someone else (youth worker, teacher etc.)	6	8	8	16
Total	100	100	100	100
p=0.042				

Most of the children have confronted confusing situations in the web, and 38% have asked help from their friends, but children also lean on parents very often (27%) (Table 3). Many previous studies have shown that children do not rely on their parents if they have problems in the internet. Evidently, there has been some progress. Also, as much as 70% accept youth workers, that is Netaris, in Habbo Hotel.

Final Conclusions

The goal of the Virtahepo Research Project was to understand children's social acting in the internet. This article shows that social activities are important for children in the virtual community. Children use the internet as a social continuation of their everyday life: chats and plays in school yards continue in the virtual world. According to our study, the more time a child has been a member in community, the more important are the social activities.

This article also shows how importance of children's social activities in the internet has aroused discussion about the adults' responsibilities and presence in the virtual sites: protection and help in the children's virtual worlds is needed. However, protection and help are *not* the kind that we, adults, usually think about with regard to internet locks and filtering, et cetera. Children are demanding guidance and media education on how to work with these new media. According to our inquiry, one of the important issues on what

children want to talk with *Netari* youth workers was the correct behaviour codes in the virtual sites.

The internet is a common social environment for teenagers and children. It is as common as those in real life. But, social environments in the web also contain the same threats as real life situations: bullying and how to trust new people. There are also some new threats, for example with anonymities and reliability. This is where adults' responsibility should arise. Adults should openly get to know the virtual environment where the children are spending time and they should be interested in children's virtual hobbies. The researcher's responsibility means finding suitable means for supporting children's safe use of the web and the participation, for example, of youth workers and other professionals working with kids in this virtual world.

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