

USER-PRODUCER INTERACTION IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY; THE CASE OF HABBO HOTEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore user-producer interaction in the online community Habbo Hotel. Based on desk research, interviews and an online survey among more than 3000 Habbo Hotel users in the Netherlands, three specific issues are highlighted that illustrate the interactions between users and producers. First, different levels of user generated content in Habbo Hotel will be discussed. Secondly the communication between users and producers will be analysed and finally the matter of online safety will pass in review.

KEYWORDS

Users, online communities, business, internet, media, entertainment

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Active Users

Occasion for this paper is the growing importance of users in the online media and entertainment domain. The concept of the audience as passive, mindless couch potatoes is long gone. Traditionally, users were characterised mainly as consumers of content. But the past twenty-five years, they are increasingly assigned more active roles by many scholars from different theoretical fields. Theorists in the domestication approach for example dissociate themselves from the view that users are passive and only subject to a technology or media message (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Silverstone 1995; Punie 2000; Frissen 2004; Berker et al. 2006). They advocate that users tame 'wild' technologies and give them a place and meaning in their lives. Users sometimes even change the use of technologies, unexpectedly, to match their own purposes and values.

This idea of domestication can be extended to the online domain. Many users have integrated internet into their daily lives. Not only are they actively consuming content online, they have also taken on more active roles in many parts of the value creation process. Users take on distribution roles in peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing, and content creation roles in the case of user generated content. But they also actively rate and tag content (a phenomenon known as folksonomy), download content, comment on it, communicate about it with their peers, remix it, and upload it again for millions of other users to find it. Users furthermore share agendas, locations, bookmarks, documents, photos, videos and even friends, all online and on a large scale. Many activities take place within more or less tightly-knit online communities.

1.2 Changing Businesses

It can be argued that users have taken the lead in online developments and producers (firms) are following, hoping that they can capitalize on user behavior. Internet characteristics, combined with multiple forms of user activities enable (or force) firms to reorganize their business. Internet for example enables firms to reduce their transaction costs, develop new products and services, and try out new pricing and revenue models (Osterwalder 2004). Firms have also started to incorporate user roles and community aspects into their services. Sometimes, they even give users a monetary reward for sharing their content.

The interaction between users and producers in the online domain is supported and accelerated by technology. Internet is a tool (Bakardjieva 2006). The internet makes two-way communication much more direct and faster than other media were able to. It changes for example the scope, speed and impact of the interaction within communities, between various user groups and between users and firms. But besides the enabling characteristics of the internet, technology can also be deployed to constrain possible user roles and interactions. Think for example about Digital Rights Management tools or services that require specific bandwidth. It must be underlined that in online media and entertainment services, users, producers and technology can not be analyzed separately.

Notwithstanding there are more and more initiatives that place users in the center of their service, many firms are still uncertain about the way their users behave online or how they can generate an online income based on user activities (users for example are often accustomed to getting things for free). Therefore, more research is necessary to analyze user roles and the way they influence online businesses (and also the way firms are trying to influence the behavior of their users). This paper is a first exploration of the interaction between users and producers in one particular case: Habbo Hotel.

1.3 Case Study: Habbo Hotel

Habbo Hotel is developed by the Finnish interactive entertainment corporation Sulake in 2000. Sulake provides a digital, online hotel environment in eighteen countries where users can walk around, chat and play games. Habbo Hotel allows users to create and develop their own identity online. And this has been taken up by users on a large scale. At the beginning of 2006, 41 million Habbo avatars were created world-wide.

Habbo Hotel is operating localised. Every website is adapted to the language and looks of the country it is based in. This case is directed at Habbo Hotel in the Netherlands. The Dutch log-in page shows windmills and tulip fields. Habbo Hotel has 'aired' in the Netherlands in February 2004 and became very popular in a short time. In two-and-a-half years, more than 4.4 million Habbo avatars are created and Habbo Hotel Netherlands is second compared to world-wide revenues.

Habbo Hotel is a successful initiative with a viable business model. Most income is derived from the sale of Habbo credits, online currency. This paper is based on desk research, management interviews and an online user survey carried out in May 2006 among more than 3000 Habbo users in the Netherlands. The main question that will be explored in this case study is; how do users and producers interact in Habbo Hotel? Also the enabling or constraining role of technology will be taken into account.

Exploring the interactions between users and producers in Habbo Hotel might give some insights in the possibilities and constraints of online business initiatives in the media domain from a user perspective.

1.4 Paper Outline

In the next section, the methodology of the case study will be explained. In the remainder of this paper, first the role of the user in the Habbo Hotel business model will be discussed. This will answer the question how Habbo Hotel integrates the user into their business model and the way they generate an income. Secondly, the user survey will be treated. General respondent characteristics will pass in review. Who are the Habbos? How do they create their identity online? And what do they find important? Furthermore, to limit the scope of this paper, three specific issues are highlighted that illustrate user roles and the interactions between users and producers; (1) different levels of user generated content in Habbo Hotel, (2) communication between users and producers and (3) the matter of online safety. In the conclusions the issues that are exemplary for user-producer relations in this case, and can serve as point of interest for other online communities, will be summarized.

2. METHODOLOGY

There are several reasons to choose Habbo Hotel as a case study. Firstly, Habbo Hotel is an online service where users take on all sorts of different roles. They are consumers, but also creators of content. Habbo Hotel only started out as an amateur project (Mobiles Disco), but was further developed because of its success by users. Secondly, Habbo Hotel has an interesting business model. The users are the backbone of the service. But instead of generating money by selling their target audience to advertisers, Habbo Hotel receives the largest portion of income from the sales of online, virtual furniture. Thirdly, Habbo Hotel has become very popular in a short time span and is initiated by a new player in the media and entertainment domain – Sulake.

As a first exploration of the interactions between users and producers in Habbo Hotel, desk research, management interviews and an online user survey were combined. First, by means of desk research and interviews with the Habbo Hotel management, the business behind Habbo Hotel was analyzed. Besides general information about technical and organizational issues, the role of the users in the business model was clarified. To gain more understanding about the users of Habbo Hotel, a questionnaire was placed on the Habbo Hotel website.

2.1 Online User Survey

Every month, Habbo Hotel NL is visited by approximately 600.000 users. In May 2006, a link to the online survey was placed on their website. All users were enabled to fill in the survey. Sampling occurred through self-selection. In five days, more than 3000 people filled in the questionnaire. The 45 questions were formulated in four different themes, (1) general characteristics and media use, (2) financial affairs, (3) perceived value and (4) user roles and communication.

Primarily, single variables were analysed. Furthermore, there has been a check for significant differences between various user groups (measured by Cramer's V); boys and girls, different age groups, and (paying) Habbo Club members and non-members. It is striking that between boys and girls, there are no or very weak statistical differences. Between different age groups, there are more differences, but still the differences are very small. The reader needs to be taking in account that in no case the mentioned differences are strongly statistically related.

The risk of online questionnaires is that respondents can fill in the questionnaire multiple times, or that they are answering the questions not seriously. To counter the first problem (respondents filling in the questionnaire multiple times) it is no option to check IP addresses. Sometimes, one computer is used by many persons, for instance a school computer. Furthermore it is not possible to examine this by asking users their Habbo names; most people have more than one Habbo avatar. To prevent users from filling in the questionnaire more than once, the Habbo management deliberately did not offer users a reward (for example furni). By doing so, users did not have a real incentive to fill in multiple questionnaires. Furthermore, the questionnaire was rather long (45 questions), so it would have taken users a lot of time to respond multiple times. And a last indication that most users filled in the questionnaire only once and also rather seriously, was given by the last question. The users were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up of the research. This question yielded almost 2800 unique e-mail addresses.

3. USER ROLES IN THE HABBO HOTEL BUSINESS MODEL

In the Netherlands Habbo Hotel is a joined venture between Sulake and the Telegraaf Media Groep, owner of (amongst others) a number of Dutch magazines. The scope of this paper is rather limited, therefore I will not discuss the full business model of Habbo Hotel. I will only explain how Habbo Hotel integrates their users in their business model.

Part of the business behind Habbo Hotel is that users are allowed to enter the hotel for free; a room doesn't cost any money. Participation has a very low threshold. They are enabled to create their own Habbo avatar, walk through the hotel, visit different rooms and interact with other Habbos. This large group doesn't provide Habbo Hotel with direct monetary income (for the time being), but nonetheless is of high value. Firstly, the large user base provides a lot of value for other Habbos. The pool of possible contacts is very large. Secondly, the users help creating the online hotel by shaping the environment and organizing activities

themselves. Thirdly, the user group is a source for marketing purposes, and lastly, can function as a source of inspiration. Their online behavior is very visible and very easily accessible for the Habbo Hotel management.

Users are charged for furniture to decorate their hotel rooms and other extras like playing games. Users also can become Habbo Club members. They pay a monthly fee of approximately four Euros. In return Habbo Hotel offers members more choice in haircuts and clothing, two extra guestrooms in the hotel, choice of furniture that is not for sale in the regular catalogue, special commandos that can be used and a Habbo club badge next to the avatar. The outcomes of the online survey indicate that HC members are more likely to spend a higher amount of money on Habbo Hotel than non-members; 28 percent of HC members indicate that they spend more than €8 per month on Habbo, against only 4 percent of non-members. Despite that only a small percentage of users actually pays for these services, Habbo Hotel makes a substantial profit, because the absolute user base is very large. The sale of Habbo Credits accounts for ninety percent of total Habbo income.

Besides income from the sale of Habbo credits, Habbo Hotel also generates income by selling in-game sponsoring opportunities. The possibilities are: product placement, sponsoring of public spaces and sponsoring events in Habbo Hotel. It is also possible to place advertisements on the Habbo Hotel website. Furthermore Habbo Hotel offers market parties the opportunity to conduct research. Lastly, Habbo generates income through the sale of related products (ringtones, games for mobile phones, wallpapers and agendas).

4. HABBO HOTEL USERS

4.1 General Characteristics

Who are the Habbos? Almost as many boys (46 percent) as girls (54 percent) have filled in the online questionnaire on the Habbo Hotel website. Most Habbos were 12 or 13 years old. Habbo Hotel does not need a lot of advertising; the majority (76 percent) of users is getting acquainted with Habbo Hotel through word-of-mouth. It is eye-catching that more than 70 percent of all respondents indicate that they have already been on Habbo Hotel for over a year, and furthermore, more than half of all respondents are (paying) HC member. Considering these outcomes, it is probable that the more serious and long-term users of Habbo Hotel were in the majority filling in the survey. This statement is supported by the fact that more than fifty percent of the Habbos is spending money on Habbo Hotel. This is much higher than the percentage of spenders that Habbo Hotel reports itself (only 7,5 percent).

In the survey, the respondents were asked what else they were using internet for, other than playing Habbo Hotel. They could choose multiple answers. The Habbos chose on average almost five items from the list. The results show that the respondents use the internet for a lot of things and are very active online. Chatting (78 percent), playing online games (77 percent), e-mail (72 percent) and downloading music (65 percent) are the most popular activities among the respondents. Habbos furthermore use the internet to watch movies or video clips, gather news, read weblogs, download movies and share self-made movies with others.

Habbos are very active in creating their own content online. A large percentage (40 percent) of all respondents has their own website or Habbo fansite. And 22 percent is keeping a weblog. These activities are often combined; 71 percent of Habbos that have their own weblog is also keeping their own website. It is of course a possibility that the weblog is on their website. Taken together, almost half of all respondents (47 percent) have a weblog, a website or both. This is a large percentage compared to Dutch youth in general. In 2005, the research 'Jongeren 2005' (Qrius, 2005) showed that 29 percent of all young people (age 6 – 29 years) has their own site.

Habbo Hotel fits very well in the media use pattern of these young people. Communicating, gaming and creating content online are things they do regularly. And Habbo Hotel integrates these activities into one Hotel platform. As has already been underlined, Habbo Hotel has become popular in a short time span. That some users are very dedicated to Habbo Hotel, shows from the fact that 4,3 percent wrote down they used the internet for Habbo Hotel, or Habbo related things. This is remarkable, for the question was 'What else do you use internet for?'

4.2 Identity/ Friendship

Habbo Hotel enables users to create their own identity online. The first time users enter the hotel, they need to create a Habbo avatar. Users have to choose a name and a password to enter the site. This name needs to be unique and some names are not allowed. Considered that since the website in the Netherlands has launched, 4.4 million avatars have been created, this sometimes is a difficult task.

After picking a name, the Habbo avatar can be compiled of different heads, skin colour, clothing and hair colour/style. The choices are only limited to what Habbo Hotel offers. Users for example do not have the freedom to create their own characters outside the Habbo surroundings, for example by adding their own head to the avatar or creating their own clothes. The country manager of the Dutch Habbo Hotel indicates that this was a deliberate choice. The number of possible variations has been kept limited for technical reasons, the game should be as simple possible. According to Habbo, the possibilities provide the Habbos with enough possibilities to express themselves. In the course of time, Habbo Hotel has already expanded the possibilities because their users have asked it. But still, 77 percent of all respondents say they do not have enough choice to change their Habbo character.

What do the Habbos deem important in Habbo Hotel? For most respondents of the survey, the community aspect of Habbo is the most important thing. Almost 80 percent finds chatting with other Habbos very important. Having a lot of friends (78 percent) is considered more important by a lot of respondents than having a lot of furni (54 percent). Playing games is considered not important by a larger group (35 percent) than the respondents who find it important (30 percent).

The opinion that having friends is important shows from the friends lists that are created by the Habbos. More than 70 percent of all Habbos say they have more than 50 friends online. Habbos are very positive about the possibilities of Habbo Hotel to make and maintain friendships. More than three-quarters of the respondents agree with the fact that Habbo Hotel is a good way to meet new friends, they get to know more people in Habbo Hotel than anywhere else on the internet. Only 7 percent of the Habbos say they don't meet new friends in Habbo. Furthermore, 85 percent knows the real name of most Habbos in their friends list and 60 percent thinks that they really get to know the other Habbos. But still, the image arises that Habbos are a little bit careful about their friendships. A smaller percentage (however still large with 42 percent) considers the Habbos in their friends list as their true friends. And 38 percent speaks to their Habbo friends on other places like MSN, via e-mail or in real life. But still, the Habbo majority seems to be very aware of the risks involved when meeting people online. Only 8 percent of the respondents give their personal phone number to people they meet on Habbo Hotel.

5. USER GENERATED CONTENT

According to Sampo Karjalainen, chief creative officer of Sulake, users create 95 percent of the content on Habbo Hotel themselves (Borst, 2006). In the online survey, one of the questions was if the respondents thought Habbos are creative people. And they do. It is striking that 71 percent of the respondents indicate that Habbos are creative people. More than 75 percent considers themselves to be creative. Furthermore, 59 percent thinks that in Habbo Hotel, the Habbos organise a lot of activities themselves. But creativity is a rather broad concept. Looking more closely, in Habbo Hotel, there are different levels for users to take part in the content creation process.

The first way, as has already passed in review is the customisation of the Habbo character and their private rooms. This customisation is bound to a limited set of choices. Only Habbo Club members who pay a fee every month have more choice. Technologically it should be possible for users to upload their own character or self-made furniture. But the Habbo Hotel organisation has deliberately chosen to rule out this opportunity.

A second way to participate in creating content (broadly speaking) is users organising all sorts of activities and events for themselves. An indication that Habbos are really contributing to the online surroundings, is that 20 percent of all Habbos indicate that they organise activities and 32 percent of all respondents say that they are mainly participating in activities organised by other Habbos. This means they are more often participating in activities organised by other Habbos than in activities organised by the Habbo Hotel organisation.

Thirdly, a lot of Habbos are creating content as an activity, for example to participate in competitions. An example is the Habbowood competition, in which Habbos were invited to make their own short Habbo movie. But Habbos also send in creative contributions because they like doing it. More than 25 percent of the Habbos has written a story or poem, and 17 percent is making Habbo alterations¹. Other options for users to generate content is reporting a blooper or Habbo wisdom, and making screenshots. Technology is really an enabler and facilitator of these activities. The threshold for creating and distributing content online is very low.

In fourth place, users also display more detached forms of user generated content. Users like Habbo so much they want to express this in other places, online or offline. In the online domain, users for example create Habbo fansites. On these websites they gather images, information or other things connected to Habbo. Furthermore users actively make Habbo part of their real life by organising parties in Habbo theme, or making school assignments with Habbo Hotel as subject.

A last interesting phenomenon on Habbo Hotel is the way Habbos create their own jobs. Almost 60 percent of all Habbos say they have or once had one or multiple jobs in Habbo Hotel. This phenomenon has developed without the Habbo Hotel organisation having anything to do with it. The jobs Habbos have, are often offered by other Habbos and reflect jobs people have in real life. Popular jobs in Habbo Hotel are; advertising, modelling, offering jobs to other Habbos, police, barkeeper, helpdesk, Mafia, hospital, working in a restaurant (McDonalds) or in a helpdesk.

6. COMMUNICATION

In the online domain, the threshold to communicate is very low. To get an idea about the direct interaction between Habbos and the Habbo Hotel management, one of the questions to the Habbos was if they communicated with the Habbo Hotel organisation. 45 percent of all respondents indicate that they never have contact with the Habbo management. This implicates that 55 percent of all respondents *do* communicate with the organisation. Habbos could choose multiple answers; users send the management e-mails (41 percent), react to a newsletter (23 percent) or call the Habbo Hotel organisation on the phone (6 percent) This indicates that the Habbo Hotel management receives a lot of messages from their users.

Some Habbos remark that they have tried to contact the organisation but that they didn't receive an answer in return. This is the same complaint as many Habbos have in the domain of creativity. Often Habbos have send in something creative, but they never won something. Some Habbos therefore have even given up doing creative things.

The online survey gives an indication that, besides some complaints about the organisation not reacting, Habbo Hotel actually does a reasonable job. Almost 60 percent of all respondents think that the Habbo Hotel management listens very well to what the Habbos want.

7. SAFETY

In an online environment, users determine the success or failure of a service. Habbo Hotel tries to set boundaries and create the right environment for participation, but can't predetermine how users will behave. And as also is the case in real life; not everybody wants to stick to the rules. Habbo Hotel in the Netherlands has received significant media attention because of safety issues. Stories about Habbo users who lost their valuable possessions to people who stole their username and password reached the national media.

Especially because children are involved, Habbo needs to take safety issues very seriously. The organisation has taken strong measures to make the environment more secure. Firstly, the Habbo Hotel website pays a lot of attention to safety instructions. Users as well as parents can find guidelines on the website. There are strict rules for Habbos. It is for example not allowed to use aggressive, rude, sexist or racist language.

Secondly, in the hotel, (real life) moderators (Hobbos) are present that monitor the users between 8 A.M. and 12 P.M. Like digital police agents they supervise the hotel. Hobbos can be summoned by Habbo Hotel

¹ Habbo alterations are alterations of people from real life in Habbo pixel style.

users when things occur that are not allowed. They can immediately go to the place of the misconduct and take appropriate measures. When Habbos misbehave, they can for example be banned from the hotel.

Because Habbo Hotel is very large and the moderators are not able to monitor everything that is said and done, technology is also deployed to help the organisation to keep safety. Habbo Hotel applies a technological tool (George tool) that searches for conversations that match certain defined 'wrong' criteria. For example when two Habbos are in a room and have a private conversation, away from moderators, everything that is said will be registered automatically. If anything happens, or a Habbo sends a complaint afterwards, the conversations can be retraced.

Fourthly, Habbo Hotel employs an automatic word filter that reacts to abusive language. When certain words are typed in by Habbos, they will be automatically replaced by the word 'BOBBA'.

How do these safety measures get across to the Habbo users? From the responses, it became clear that the majority of users are well aware of the rules inside Habbo Hotel. They know that they should not give personal information to other Habbos. Some actively take part in keeping the safety by reporting scammers (cheating users). But how do the users see the role of Habbo Hotel in this? In the online survey it was asked whether the users thought the Habbo Hotel management was strict or not; 46 percent thinks that the Hotel management is very strict. Only 30 percent indicated that Habbo Hotel gives a lot of freedom to the Habbos to do whatever they want.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a first exploration of user-producer interactions in the online community Habbo Hotel in the Netherlands. Habbo Hotel is a fairly new service, based on user behavior in the online domain, and similar to other online communities like Second Life (but directed at a much younger target audience). Based on desk research, interviews with the Habbo Hotel management and an online user survey, several specific situations of user-producer interaction were studied. Below I will discuss some of the possibilities and constraints of online interaction between users and producers.

Habbo Hotel fits well into the young, dynamic online environment of users, mixing real life, their own creations and interactions, institutions and commerce. Communication, playing games and creating content are important aspects of their online behavior. These activities are integrated into one platform by Habbo Hotel. Users are enabled to express and develop their own identity in interaction with others. Until now, only a small percentage of users is willing to pay for online content (like furni). But when the user base is large enough, this percentage will provide businesses with enough income to become profitable. This underlines that advertising is not the only revenue model that is viable for businesses.

It is striking that, contrary to more traditional media services, in Habbo Hotel, users and producers do not stand very far from each other. Firstly, communication has a very low threshold. Technology enables users to communicate very directly with online organisations (which is not surprising, it takes less effort to send an e-mail than writing a letter, putting it in an envelope, stick a stamp on it and walk to the post-box). More than half of the users use this opportunity to provide the Habbo Hotel management with a lot of unsolicited advice. Organisations receive a lot of user input this way. Secondly, businesses can observe their users much better. All online activities can be logged. These two characteristics of online user producer interaction, gives the organization the opportunity to really take into account what their users want, all the time. A downside is that it takes a lot of time and effort to deal with all this communication in an appropriate way. When users do not get a response from the producers, the motivation to interact will be reduced. Business initiatives have to take this into account while developing their service.

It needs to be underlined that Habbo Hotel is a controlled and ordered surrounding. Technology is not only an enabler of interaction, but can also be used as a constraint. The Habbo Hotel management for example uses technology to set boundaries. As facilitators of the service, they have the responsibility to make Habbo Hotel as safe an environment as possible. This limits the possible actions of users – as has been discussed in the safety section. Users are not allowed to use certain terms of abuse and are monitored when they are with only two Habbos in a room. Especially when user communities grow bigger and bigger, business initiatives can employ technology to play an important part in securing safety. This will save the firms a lot of effort, but also will present ethical problems concerning user privacy.

According to McGuire (2005), Habbo Hotel users think that they are free, but soon find themselves deceived: "The liberating potential of the Internet that was recognized by Rheingold and others has been diminished as the forces of globalized commerce impose their order on the electronic frontier". This is a rather bold statement that is not taking into account the independent capabilities of the users. Furthermore it indicates that McGuire did not really take a good look at user practices. It is true that users sometimes are restricted in their choice, but they have the freedom to complain about it - which they often do. Technology furthermore enables users to move beyond the boundaries of online communities and really make a link with their own interests and their real life. By creating content inside as well as outside the borders of Habbo Hotel, users are active in more ways than was envisioned or pre-structured by the Habbo Hotel organisation. By communicating, organising and participating in activities and inventing things like jobs and contests, Habbos actively shape Habbo Hotel. And the right question to ask, also for further research, is not; how do online communities facilitated by business parties influence or constrain the lives of users? It should be: how do users incorporate services like Habbo Hotel into their lives? How do they shape these initiatives? And how do businesses take these user practices into account while further developing their services?

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