

Negotiating proximity: The co-existence of Habbo and its fansites

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Abstract:

Over the past decade, a significant amount of attention has been paid to the potential for fans and amateur media producers to publish and distribute their own content online (Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b). The production and distribution of this content has frequently been perceived as in tension with the commercial media industry, particularly in cases where fan content re-produces or re-appropriates commercial media content. This paper explores the relationship between Habbo, a commercial virtual world for teenagers created by Finnish firm Sulake, and fansites, created by groups of Habbo users. Rather than focus on the creation of fan content, this paper examines the co-existence of these two online spaces – examining the ways in which each defines and negotiates its proximity to the other. In so doing, this paper will explore the terms under which Habbo and its fansites co-exist, and how these terms come to be negotiated.

Keywords: Digital media, Fans, Fansites, Online spaces, Proximity, Virtual Worlds, Young People.

Introduction

The development of digital media has presented a number of trials for media corporations over the past couple of decades. One of the most persistent challenges has been the on-going need to re-evaluate and re-negotiate relations with fans and fan communities. Attempts to address these challenges have occurred to varying degrees of success, and academics have frequently commented on the tensions and unease that often underlies the relationships between fans and media corporations (Fiske, 1992; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b). Fans have frequently been regarded as in tension with commercial media interests, particularly over issues of ownership and copyright of media content (Jenkins, 2006b; Grimes, 2006; Sarvas et al., 2005). Fan community sites, in particular, have come under intense pressure for hosting and distributing content, such as fan-produced art and fiction, particularly if that content is perceived to have contravened the intellectual property rights or values of a media corporation (Consalvo, 2003).

At the same time, the advent of digital media has also heralded opportunities for media corporations to develop new forms of association with fans. In particular, new channels of communication have emerged that enable media producers to obtain fan feedback on their products and services with greater immediacy. This has, in turn, led to a growing recognition of the potential 'value' of consulting online fan communities in the design and development of new media (Johnson & Toiskallio, 2005). Thus a growing number of academic studies have begun to note the development of dialogues between fans and media producers (Banks, 2002; Baym & Burnett, 2009; Brooker, 2001; 2003) and, in some cases, of fans being enlisted as 'brand ambassadors' (Baym, 2007). These developments have also coincided with a number of recently established discourses in new media studies that celebrate the growing agency of audiences and fans. In particular, the concept of a 'participatory' media culture, coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006b), has gained significant traction in recent times. According to Jenkins, "rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (2006b: 3). Yet it should also be noted that Jenkins is quick to caution that the fan-producer relationship continues to be markedly uneven, with media corporations "still exert[ing] greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers" (2006b: 3).

The present paper focuses on this shifting digital media landscape, but with the specific aim of exploring how changing *proximities* are re-defining the fan-producer relationship. In other words, this paper will seek to examine the ways in which notions of proximity, such as perceptions of 'distance' and 'closeness', are employed in the negotiation of relations between fans and media corporations. Though not always explicitly the case, notions of proximity have often been an underlying theme of academic discussions relating to fan sites and media corporations. Indeed, the challenges described above might be more aptly re-framed as ones of proximal balance, in which media corporations seek to establish, what they perceive to be, a 'productive' level of distance or closeness between themselves and fan communities. Thus, on the one hand, we find examples of media corporations attempting to establish closer relationships with fans and audiences through new media. This can include engaging with fans through forums and online community spaces or, more recently, through social networks such as Facebook and micro blogging websites such as Twitter (Deller, 2011: 228-230). On the other hand, we can also observe examples of corporations attempting to create and maintain a measured distance between themselves and particular types of fan activities, such as when a piece of fan fiction is seen to contravene the values of a specific media franchise¹. This can, in turn, lead to top-down heavy regulation of fan-produced content that, in some cases, may result in fans receiving threats of copyright lawsuits from a media corporation². It is rarely the case, however, that corporations opt for an either-or approach and over the course of this paper it should become increasingly apparent that proximity is often assessed and measured in a variety of different ways by both media corporations and fan communities.

Proximity has also been used within academic studies as a way of defining different forms of fan engagement with media. On the one hand, fans have been defined by their intensive engagement with media texts, such as through 'close' readings (Jenkins, 1992) and affective attachments to media franchises (Hills, 2002). In this sense, fans are defined by their closeness to a media text or franchise, as held in contrast to that of more 'casual' media users (Gray, 2003). On the other hand, fans are also defined by their 'distance' from mainstream forms of media consumption – through transgressive readings and alternate forms of media engagement. In some cases this has led to characterisations of fandom as anti-capitalist and as operating in resistance to media corporations (Hills, 2002). Thus this study will also address how fans, involved in the creation and organisation of fan sites and online communities, perceive their own proximity in relation to media corporations and online media.

Case Study: Virtual World 'Habbo' and its Fansites

By way of example, this paper will employ an empirical case study of research carried out on virtual world franchise 'Habbo Hotel' and its associated fansites. Launched in the UK in 2000, Habbo Hotel (or, simply, 'Habbo') is described by Sulake³, its parent company, as, "the world's largest social game and online community for teenagers"⁴. According to the Sulake homepage, 90% of current Habbo users are aged between thirteen and eighteen⁵. In 2009, Sulake reported that 56% of users were male and 44% were female⁶. Figures published on Sulake's homepage claim that Habbo currently receives over 10,000,000 unique visitors per month and has approximately 250,000,000 registered users⁷. According to Kzero, an independent virtual worlds analytics firm, Habbo's user figures rank it the largest virtual world globally⁸. Habbo has a well-established fan community and, at the time of writing, the Habbo.com homepage lists twelve, recognised, English-language fansites⁹. This paper will focus on the relationship between Habbo and just one of these fansites – 'Habbox'.

Created three years after Habbo's launch, Habbox has emerged as one of Habbo's longest running fansites. The Habbox homepage describes the fansite as a space for users who enjoy "chatting about Habbo, Habbox, real life and everything in between". The Habbox website is comprised of two main parts: The Habbox homepage, which includes a range of articles and content relating to Habbo, and the 'Habbox Forum', which houses an extensive discussion board for registered Habbox members. Habbox is maintained by a dedicated team of volunteers, each of whom carries out a distinct role such as forum moderation or graphics design. On average, Habbox volunteers are aged from their early teens to early twenties, and the majority juggle either work or education alongside their Habbox roles.

For the most part, this article will draw on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews undertaken with members of the Habbox website team during Summer 2011. Due to constraints on time and resources, the decision was made to focus on just one 'official' fansite and to restrict interviews to those involved in the fansite's everyday running and organisation. As one of most active and enduring Habbo fansites, Habbox quickly

emerged as the front-runner. Contact with the Habbox team was initially made via email and, after verifying my identity, they invited me to advertise the study on their staff forum. In total, seven members of the Habbox team were interviewed. Only one participant was under the age of sixteen and the remaining interviews were conducted with members in their late teens and early twenties. Over the course of the research it became apparent that many of Habbox's younger staff members were deterred from participating due to the requirement of parental consent for those below the age of sixteen. Many members had chosen to keep their use of Habbo and Habbox private and were thus unwilling to approach their parents for consent. It is, therefore, worth bearing in mind that the extracts quoted in this paper primarily represent those of an older generation of Habbox members.

All of the interviews were carried out via the internet, primarily via instant messenger services and the Habbox forum private messenger system. All quotations used in this paper have been anonymised. In addition to the interviews, data was also collected from the Habbox homepage, including news articles and other miscellaneous information. Further data was also collected from the Habbo homepages, where it related to the Habbo fansites.

Using Habbo and Habbox as a case study, this paper will attempt to address the following questions:

1. On what terms are fan online spaces able to co-exist alongside online corporate-owned media? Fan sites and forums, such as Habbox, have emerged as focal points of fan activities and discussions online, frequently offering additional or alternate content to that provided by corporate media providers. Much of the previous research to focus on online fansites has primarily been carried out through ethnographies of the 'internal' dynamics of fan communities (e.g. Baym, 1993; Bury, 2005). As such, fansites have often been researched as *enclosed* and *bounded* spaces of fan discussion and activity. This paper will attempt to explore as shaped not only by inter-fan community relations but also by their relations to corporate media spaces.

2. What forms of proximity are enacted between online fan communities and media corporations? Media corporations have adopted a variety of approaches in their approach to fan groups online. This should not, however, be seen as a one-way process. This paper explores how proximity is mobilised both in the way that corporations connect with online fan spaces *and* in the way that fans, in turn, connect with corporate media spaces.

3. To what extent are fan and commercial online spaces shaped and defined by their proximity to one another? In this paper, proximity is seen not just as a product of the interactions of the social actors engaged with these different online spaces, instead it also contributes to the definition and constitution of these online spaces. Thus this paper will attempt to explore how proximity is mobilised as a means of *positioning* online spaces and to what ends.

In order to address these questions, the following discussion and analysis has been split into two parts. The first section begins by addressing how Sulake has responded to the growth of Habbo fansites, focusing in particular on the schemes and initiatives the company has employed in order to manage the fansite community. The second section moves on to explore how fansites have attempted to define their own proximity in relation to Habbo. For the most part, this second section focuses on *temporal* forms of proximity. In so doing, this section explores the value for fansites of remaining 'up-to-date'. However, before continuing, we will briefly review some of the previous ways in which children and young people's virtual worlds, such as Habbo, have been approached in academic research.

Children, Young People and Virtual Worlds

The past few years have seen a rapid growth in the number of online spaces and virtual worlds marketed toward children and young people. According to Kzero, the total number of registered accounts in virtual worlds for young people, aged ten to fifteen, rose from 246 million at the beginning of 2009, to 652 million in mid-2011¹⁰. Such figures should, however, be treated with some caution. According to recent research as part of the European-wide project 'EU Kids Online II', only 16% of children in Europe report having ever used a virtual world (Livingstone et al., 2011). Thus although the virtual world market may indeed be expanding, the number of children and young people using virtual worlds remains quite limited.

Despite the growth of the virtual world market, academic interest in young people's virtual worlds has been slow to take off. Initial academic enquiries have primarily sought to examine virtual worlds as sites of play and learning (Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010; Marsh, 2010; Marsh, 2011; Willet & Sefton-Green, 2003). Such studies can be situated in a broader research agenda that seeks to understand the contribution of media to children and young people's learning and development (see for example Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003; Livingstone, 2004). In studies such as these, the child user or audience is often at the centre of both the empirical investigation and subsequent analysis. As such, virtual worlds are primarily understood in terms of the experiences, and forms of interaction and participation, that they afford their users.

In contrast to this 'child-centred' approach, a number of more recent studies have begun to emerge from theoretical perspectives such as political economy and technology studies. These studies tend to focus on the broader mechanisms of the virtual world industry, covering topics such as: marketing and advertising (Grimes & Shade, 2005; Chung & Grimes, 2005; Wasko, 2010), virtual consumption (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009), and user analysis (Johnson, 2007). Perhaps the most striking difference between these studies and the child-centred approach is the empirical shift of attention away from the perspectives and experiences of children and young people. Though some exceptions exist (see for example Ruckenstein, 2011), contributions from children and young people who use virtual worlds are far less common in this second strand of empirical investigations. Instead we find

greater attention is paid towards the virtual world as a media environment and commercial product, with studies focusing on in-game advertisements, terms of service, purchasing trends, game mechanics etc.

The present paper shares some common background with both approaches. Whilst children and young people are not the primary focus of this paper, their voices nonetheless form a crucial aspect of the empirical investigation. The present paper also attempts to acknowledge the importance of viewing young people's engagement with media within a broader set of commercial and social processes. As such, the present paper attempts to address children and young people not as isolated categories but instead engaged in a range of relations and associations with virtual worlds, media corporations and other fansite users.

The 'Good' Fansite

Defining the Fansite Space: Corporate vs. Fan Territories

Though fansites and online fan communities have received growing attention in academic literature, discussion of how fansites co-exist alongside corporate media spaces remains limited. One of the primary ways in which fan spaces and communities have been addressed is as sites of 'alterity', existing in a space far removed from the capitalist values and practices of the corporations behind their chosen media franchises¹¹. The autonomy and separate-ness of fan and corporate spaces has thus largely been taken as presumed and self-evident.

It is this truism that this first section seeks to problematize. Rather than presume the separate-ness of the online spaces of fans and corporations, this section seeks to examine how this separation comes to be defined, negotiated and, on occasions, re-drawn.

As a starting point, let's consider how Sulake discursively defines Habbo's fansites. The following extract is taken from the FAQs section of the Habbo website:

Fansites are sites created by Habbos¹². Sulake do not own these sites and have nothing to do with their content, however if we think a fansite has content that we do not approve of we can have the site removed from its official status and on more serious cases the whole site closed.¹³

Of interest here is the manner in which Sulake defines its relationship to the Habbo fansites and how this positions the two online spaces as relative but separate from one another. To begin with, Sulake acknowledges that Habbo fansites are created by Habbo's users and in this respect they originate from Habbo itself, thus permitting a tenuous association between the two online spaces. Following this, however, Sulake begin to erect a series of boundaries that delineate Habbo and the fansites as distinct online spaces. In the first instance this is achieved by distinguishing the fansites as non-Sulake property. Secondly, the fansites are identified as *autonomous* creators of their own content, thus deflecting responsibility and accountability for the content of Habbo's fansites away from Sulake. In doing so, Sulake sets

up the fansites as *independent* of Habbo, whilst also acknowledging their connection through a shared community base.

A further level of complexity is added when Sulake claims that, though it neither owns nor contributes to the fansites, it asserts the right to have a website temporarily or permanently removed if it does not content not approve of its content. Though the fansites are initially described as spaces distinct and autonomous from Habbo, their existence is framed as partially contingent on Sulake's approval. Sulake thus establishes a significant degree of jurisdiction over the content of the fansites and, ultimately, over their continued existence. Though Sulake eschews responsibility for the creation of content on the fansites, it reserves the right to monitor and regulate that content.

Sulake's sphere of jurisdiction becomes clearer when we consider 'The Fansite Way', a set of guidelines created by Sulake for all would-be Habbo fansites. These guidelines are split into what fansites *can* do and what they *must not* do. Rather than attempt to discuss each individual point from The Fansite Way, we will instead briefly examine just a few specific examples and their impact on the relationship between Sulake and the fansites.

Following on from the discussion of the FAQs, it is worth noting that the final point listed under what Habbo fansites 'must not do' is as follows, "Habbo fansites must not [...] Represent that your site is approved by or affiliated with Sulake Corporation Oy or that any other content on your site approved by or affiliated with Sulake Corporation Oy"¹⁴. Sulake thus maintains a strong emphasis on clearly distinguishing the fansites as separate and distinct spaces from Habbo. Despite this rule, one of Habbox's most striking features is its visual similarity to aspects of the Habbo website. From its colour scheme to its font, Habbox emulates many of Habbo's visual characteristics, maintaining a similar visual consistency with the 'official' Habbo brand. Images of Habbo avatars and objects can be found across the website, decorating page banners and backgrounds. A number of these images have been edited using programmes such as Photoshop, for example adding outfits or facial expressions to avatars that wouldn't usually be possible in Habbo. Obtaining permission to replicate and edit Habbo's images forms a significant part of fansite members' interpretation of The Fansite Way and their perception of its enforcement by Sulake. As one interviewee involved in Habbox's graphic design explained:

because we're a Habbo fan site and we're based around Habbo we are allowed to use Habbo images. In the "fans site way" [sic] [...] there is nothing stating we cannot use images Sulake have made. (Male, 18)

In this instance the interviewee asserts that simply *being* a Habbo fansite legitimates the appropriation of Sulake's images. Any lack of explicit discussion on Sulake's part is taken as silent approval. Another interviewee, however, felt that a more detailed examination of Sulake's legal information leads to rather different conclusions:

In the terms and conditions it says something about Sulake Group owns all Habbo images but will allow other sites to use them aslong [sic] as they abide by the rules. Meaning if you were to not abide by the fansites rules, Sulake has every right to shut you down as you are using their images. (Male, 18)

According to this interviewee, Sulake has the ability to assert its intellectual property rights over its images should the need arise to discipline a fansite. Habbo's images are thus perceived as 'on loan' to Habbox, so long as it follows The Fansite Way.

One of the few visual cues on the Habbox website to indicate that the website is distinct from the Habbo franchise is a short disclaimer at the bottom of the main webpage that reads, "Copyright Habbox 2012. This website is neither owned nor operated by Sulake Group"¹⁵. In this way, Habbox and Habbo are distinguished by a disclaimer that 'legally' demarcates who owns and operates a given online space. However, it remains debatable as to how many visitors to the Habbox homepage would discern or pay attention to this discreet legal marker.

Two further guidelines listed under The Fansite Way relate to how fansites fund the hosting and maintenance costs of their homepages. One guideline stipulates that fansites must not "charge users for premium services such as VIP access"¹⁶, whilst another guideline suggests that fansites can "offset [...] hosting costs with advertising banners or ad words"¹⁷. According to a number of research participants from Habbox, this set of guidelines proved particularly controversial for some fansites. Habbox had initially recouped its running costs through a paid VIP scheme whereby fansite users could gain access to a set of exclusive features for a small fee. However, as one participant recalls, "Sulake stopped this claiming it was against their T&C's to sell premium membership" (Male, 18). Therefore Habbox, along with the other fansites, were required by Sulake to remove their premium service schemes and instead had to rely on advertising revenue and donations. It is again interesting to note the way in which Sulake's jurisdiction is exercised over the Habbo fan sites, but *from a distance*. Though Sulake maintains a clear distinction between Habbo and the fansites, it nevertheless assumes a degree of 'remote' authority over certain aspects of the organisation of the fansites.

This may, in part, be attributed to one of the key points of crossover between their online spaces: their users. The language of The Fansite Way is particularly interesting in this respect. Many of the listed guidelines refer to the responsibility of the fansites towards 'Habbos' who visit or make use of their website. For example, fan sites must: "allow all Habbos to join in" and "offer help for new and old Habbos"¹⁸. The choice of the term 'Habbos' holds particular significance here, in that it designates visitors to fansites as, first and foremost, 'Habbo users'. As a result, users of fansites are not identified by their association with the online space of a fansite but instead with that of Habbo; they are Habbos first and fansite users second.

With the above examples in mind we can begin to address what role The Fansite Way may serve. In the context of the present discussion, this can be broadly separated into two parts.

In the first instance, The Fansite Way acts a means of establishing the proximity between Sulake, Habbo and the fansites. The first example demonstrated the clear distinctions and boundaries that Sulake attempts to establish between Habbo and its fansites. However, as we have seen in other examples, proximity is also used as a means of supervising fansites at-a-distance.

Secondly, The Fansite Way acts as a means of designating a range and scope for Sulake's jurisdiction over the activities of fansites. Thus on the one hand, the guidelines delineate what fansites are both able and unable to do, such as preventing fansites from charging users for premium services but allowing them to raise funds through advertising. On the other hand, the guidelines begin to outline an 'ideal' model of what a fansite should be and what it should do. Some of the suggestions as to what Habbo fansites 'can' do include, "post[ing] fun, friendly Habbo news" and "hold[ing] competitions and parties in Habbo"¹⁹. In this way, Sulake subtly proposes what makes a 'good' fansite and it is towards this ideal model that we now turn our attention.

The Good, the Bad and the Scam Site: The Differentiation of Fansite Spaces

For a number of years Sulake has overtly celebrated 'good' fansites through the award of 'official fansite' status. The scheme was initially designed to allow Habbo users the opportunity to vote for their favourite fansites, with those polling highest being awarded 'official fansite' status. Successful fansites were then granted a number of privileges, for example being included on a list of 'official fansites' on the Habbo homepage and receiving advanced previews of future in-game releases. Though the system has undergone a number of changes and adjustments, it remains one of Sulake's primary means of granting recognition to Habbo's most popular fansite.

The notion of the 'good' fansite has more recently been addressed in a podcast interview with the (then) newly appointed CEO of Sulake, Paul LaFontaine. The podcast was primarily aimed at Habbo's fansites and attempted to clarify a number of issues relating to a review of the present Habbo fansite system. One of the questions posed in the interview asked, 'what constitutes a good fansite?' LaFontaine's response to this question was as follows,

I think any fansite that is interesting, it doesn't have broken links, it keeps people coming back, it *provides trusted content about Habbo*, it actually *enriches the experience of being a Habbo*, is a good site and *should actually be recognised by us as being a helpful partner*. (LaFontaine, 2012 [emphasis added])

Within his response, LaFontaine creates a number of connections between Habbo and the fansites that are worthwhile briefly exploring. First, LaFontaine describes how a 'good' fansite 'provides trusted content about Habbo'. The issue of 'trust' and the reliability of fansite content are discussed further below, however it is interesting to note at this point that providing content *about* Habbo is regarded as a key quality of a 'good' fansite. Secondly, LaFontaine claims that fansites should enrich 'the experience of being a Habbo'. In this sense, fansites are regarded as companions to the Habbo 'experience', further attributing a close association between Habbo and its fansites. Finally, LaFontaine states that any 'good' fansite should be 'recognised' by Sulake as a 'helpful partner'. Closeness to the Habbo brand is thus offered as a reward to 'good' fansites.

Following on from this, LaFontaine goes on to contrast the 'good' fansite with those that are not awarded 'official' fansite status:

Sites that I would say are not official are ones that just haven't been kept up, that nobody goes to visit them or they actually have some other purpose, like they use Habbo to get users to go there so they can sell them something different or scam them or things like that. That, obviously, is not going to be acceptable to us because we don't want Habbos going there under our name and having things sold to them that aren't Habbo [...] So what we'd want is a relationship with those sites that are just really well maintained and make sense, that actually represent Habbo well. So any site that does that we would consider official. (LaFontaine, 2012)

Here LaFontaine groups together a number of different qualities and activities in an attempt to differentiate 'good' fansites from, what we will refer to here as, 'not-so-good' fansites. In the first instance, LaFontaine begins to consider what qualities constitute a 'not-so-good' fansites, such as lack of regular updates and too few visitors. He then moves on to consider those websites posing as Habbo affiliates or fansites, such as 'scam' sites that attempt to extort money from users of the Habbo service. Of particular interest here is the way in which the criterion not only establishes 'good' fansites from 'not-so-good' fansites, but also a third category of the 'bogus' fansite. In either case, Sulake seeks to distance both the 'not-so-good' fansites and 'bogus' fansites from Habbo, with only minor descriptive differentiation between the two. LaFontaine's contrast between the 'good' and 'not-so-good' fansites might also be read as the creation of a criterion by which non-official fansites can appraise their current position and begin to work towards *becoming* LaFontaine's model of the 'good' fansite. As such, the 'good' fansite as 'potentiality' also provides fansites with a well-marked trajectory by which they can work towards a closer 'partnership' with Sulake. With this in mind, the final part of this section moves on to consider how creators of Habbo fansites perceive Sulake's criteria and how they negotiate the organisation of their fansite in relation to it.

The ‘Good’ Fansite – Some Alternate Definitions

The predominant focus so far has been on the guidelines and definitions that Sulake has established in its determining the relationship between Habbo and its fansites. Here we consider a number of ways in which the Habbox staff perceive the boundary between Habbo and their fansite and how this has shaped the ways that the Habbox website is organised and run.

a) Professionalism

One of Habbox’s most distinctive features is the organisational structure of its voluntary team of staff. All of the voluntary jobs or roles within Habbox are arranged within a series of departments e.g. the news team, forum moderators etc. Within these teams, staff members are ranked from ‘trialist’ to ‘department manager’. Though the complexities of Habbox’s occupational system won’t be discussed in any significant detail here, it is worth briefly considering the role of the hierarchical system in establishing Habbox’s position relative to Habbo. One research participant, who had volunteered on Habbox for a number of years and in a variety of roles, contrasted the activities of Habbo users with those of Habbox staff members as follows:

The role play on Habbo is very childish, like people playing mom and dad [...] they build their own 'home' and stuff like that and often it only lasts a couple of hours [...] they will probably never see that person again. Whereas on Habbox, I hate to use this word, but it's more professional. Everyone comes back every day, it's structured and we actually have a goal that we aspire to meet. (Male, 18)

In this extract age and maturity are deployed as a means of distinguishing between the ‘very childish’ role-play of some Habbo users and the ‘professional’ (and presumably ‘adult-like’) role-play of Habbox staff. In a study of young people’s views on horror films and ‘video nasties’, Buckingham (1996) found that respondents would often deploy maturity as a discursive means of justifying what was appropriate for their own age group, by drawing comparisons with younger age groups. Whilst maturity is deployed in a similarly discursive manner here, it is mobilised instead as a means of distinguishing Habbox as a reliable and professional space, distanced from the ‘child-like’ activities of regular Habbo users. It’s also interesting to note that many of the roles assigned to Habbox share similar titles to those of Sulake employees, including moderators and graphic designers. Thus in contrast to the ‘domestic’ role-play of younger Habbo users, Habbox has sought to cultivate an organisational structure that closely emulates that of a ‘professional’ media corporation, such as Sulake.

Another research participant summarised the purpose of Habbox’s ‘professionalism’ as follows:

Habbox likes to be the professional fansite out of the others, as we wish to set a standard where users aren't allowed to full on swear in posts or post certain images or videos due to young people. (Male, 18)

Particularly important in this extract is the contrast made between Habbox and 'the others' – referring to other fansites. In doing so, the interviewee attempts to differentiate Habbox by contrasting its 'professional' behaviour with that of other fansites. He then goes on to describe how Habbox "wish[es] to set a standard" for certain types of behaviour. In this respect, Habbox's 'professionalism' is comparatively defined in proximity to its competitor fansites. We find again in this instance a notion of professionalism and maturity that is comparative, this time in contrast to 'other' fansites who do not meet the same 'standard' as Habbox. Thus, in considering the proximity of fansites to Habbo, we must simultaneously address a fansite's shared proximity with other fansites.

b) Trustworthiness

One question posed to every participant interviewed for the present study was 'How important is it for Habbox to be officially recognised by Sulake?' The most common response given was that 'official fansite' status is an important indicator of Sulake's *trust* in Habbox and other fansites. As one participant explained:

We are [...] able to gain [...] trust from the community because we are on the list of sites and they can trust in terms of hosting events, giveaways and so on.
(Male, 18)

In his podcast interview, LaFontaine also made reference to the trustworthiness of fansite content, observing that 'trusted' content was the mark of a 'good' fansite. For the above participant 'official fansite' status also acts as an indicator of a fansite's 'trustworthiness'. Held in contrast to LaFontaine, the logic is slightly reversed. For the Habbox member, the 'official fansite' status is what enables Habbox to be trusted. Although both the Habbox member and LaFontaine relate trustworthiness to official recognition by Habbo, for LaFontaine trust must be *gained prior* to earning official fansite status, whereas for the Habbox member trust is *gained through* holding official fansite status. Many of the interviews claimed that one the primary motivations for obtaining official fansite status was to be allowed to promote the Habbox URL within the Habbo chat rooms and to demonstrate to users that they had Sulake's seal of approval. Without official fansite status, the number of visitors to Habbox would fall and it would become harder to assure users of the website's legitimacy and trustworthiness.

Of significance in both the discussions of 'professionalism' and 'trustworthiness' are the ways in which Habbox staff attempt to establish their own criteria of how their fansite should 'ideally' be perceived. These perceptions of what makes a 'good' fansite are, in part,

based on Habbox's proximity to Habbo and other fansite spaces. As such, Habbox's professionalism is held in direct contrast with that of other fansites, whilst its trustworthiness is established through its being awarded 'official fansite' status by Sulake. One research participant summarises this quite well:

I use [sic] to think Habbox was an extention [sic] of Habbo [...] A reliable place to source good information. [...] It's not an extension anymore, Habbox is close to being on a level par, Habbox leads where other [fan]sites try to follow.
(Female, early 20s)

Thus within this extract alone we find both proximal references to Habbox's relationship with Habbo and also contrasts being made with both Habbo and other fansites in terms of Habbox's provision of 'reliable' information and content.

Fansites and 'Timeliness'

This final section considers how fansites, such as Habbox, attempt to position themselves as *contemporary* to Habbo, but also their attempts to *anticipate* and align themselves within the future direction and development of Habbo. In considering the temporal organisation of fan activities, Hills offers some initial insights in his discussion of "just-in-time-Fandom" (2002: 140). For Hills, 'just-in-time-Fandom' characterises the, primarily, fan practice of entering into online discussions *immediately* after a television programme has ended in order to debate and analyse the episode with other enthusiasts.²⁰ More broadly, Hills links this to a temporality of fandom, "enmeshed within the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting" (ibid.), in which fans seek to continually maintain and demonstrate both their *timeliness* and *responsiveness* (ibid.).²¹ Though the "rhythms and temporalities" of virtual worlds significantly differ from that of television broadcasting, Hills notion of 'timeliness' nonetheless provides a significant tool for exploring how fansites position and demarcate themselves as contemporary.

In addition to considering the contemporality of Habbo fansites, this section also considers the role of *speculation* and *anticipation* in shaping the future-orientation of fansites. Speculation and anticipation have been shown to play a significant role in many fansite communities where the future direction or development of a franchise exists in a state of flux and uncertainty (Baym, 1993; Clerc, 2002; Jenkins, 2008b). This section will thus conclude by looking at fan speculation on the potential futures of Habbox and Habbo, and how they perceive Habbo's fansites as contributing to the *making* of those futures (see Brown et al., 2000: 13).

Keeping up with Habbo: Fansite 'Timeliness'

Discussion and reporting of Habbo-related news is one of the most widespread activities across the vast majority of Habbo fansites. In some cases, fansite homepages contain dedicated 'news feeds' with articles written by fansite members on a range of Habbo-

related topics. In almost all cases, fansite forums house designated topic threads where registered members are able to share and discuss the latest Habbo or Sulake news. The present discussion focuses primarily on the production of new articles by Habbox staff as opposed to private member forum posts. This decision was made, in part, due to the ease of access to the news articles, which are publically available on the Habbox homepage. Forum threads, on the other hand, are located in Habbox's members-only forum and citing private members' posts poses considerable ethical issues in terms of an individual poster's consent and privacy. This decision does, however, raise significant issues in terms of the form of temporality that this paper is able to address. Forums provide the most *immediate* means by which members are able to report news and updates, whereas news articles often have a more notable *time-lapse* and delay between a release or event and their subsequent coverage. The potential implications of focusing exclusively on news articles will need to be borne in mind throughout this discussion.

According to the Habbox News Department homepage, Habbox reporters write articles, "both about the Habbo world and the outside world"²². Though there are occasional articles on 'non-Habbo' topics, news relating to Habbo and its parent company, Sulake, are by far the most frequent. Some of the most common topics covered by the news article include: in-game events and campaigns, changes and alterations to the Habbo service and new furniture releases. Another claim on the Habbox homepage is that the News Department was initially created, "due to the fact that Habbo itself didn't post many [...] updates"²³. In order to fill this void, "[Habbox] news reporters had to go around the hotel researching all the latest features as well as testing them"²⁴. Though Sulake has long since begun to provide its own news updates, Habbox and other fansites have continued to maintain their own news feeds, positioning themselves as mediators of Habbo news and announcements to their communities.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, Habbo is subject to constant re-design and development and though Sulake makes frequent announcements, these do not occur at fixed intervals²⁵. Consequently, fansites must remain alert to changes in order to provide their own timely response. One former Habbox staff member described the speed of response to news on the fansite's forum;

Members are very quick to create threads with news of changes, they get a buzz from being the first to post, and if the information is incorrect, it's not long before someone either questions the information or others start to confirm it's correct. (Female, early 20s)

Of particular interest in this extract is the dual emphasis on both the *speed* and *reliability* of new information shared through the fansite. Similar emphasis is given on the News Department's homepage, which claims that Habbox has, "often been dubbed as one of the most reliable news source around for Habbo news, with people checking [the website] daily"²⁶. Over the course of this paper, notions of 'reliability' and 'trustworthiness' have

emerged as important themes in relation to how fansites are defined, however in this section we will primarily focus on notions of ‘speed’ and ‘up-to-dateness’ as measures of a fansite’s timeliness.

One of the primary ways in which Habbox members measure the timeliness of their fansite is in contrast to rival Habbo fansites. When asked whether Habbox differs from other fansites, one interviewee responded:

Habbox does differ from other fan sites. The reason for this is because [...] it’s the oldest. The “father” of all fan sites you look around and see today. Habbox updates often and has a staff team for everything. (Male, 18)

This sentiment was shared by a number of interviewees, who frequently cited the size of Habbox’s staff team, and the length of Habbox’s experience, as enabling it to be updated more frequently than other fansites. In this respect, ‘just-in-time-fandom’ needs to be treated as a relative concept, in which the responsiveness of one fansite community is measured against those it identifies as its competitors.

Competitiveness between fansites was also one of the topics addressed by LaFontaine during his podcast interview for fansites (see above). At present, ‘official’ status entitles Habbo fansites to receive advanced previews on changes and updates to the Habbo service, thus allowing ‘official’ fansites the opportunity to report news ahead of non-official fansites. During his interview, LaFontaine sought to address a request by some official fansite creators for a more hierarchical system of fansites, in which the more popular fansites would receive preferential treatment and receive updates and information ahead of less popular sites. LaFontaine responded to this request by stating:

to say it dilutes [...] the value of fansites by giving them all the same information, is just another way of saying ‘give me the information and not the other fansites’, that’s an unbalanced playing field [...] We’re going to start with a fair system and we’re going to see which fansites actually respond well to the fair system. Because I think, actually, a lot of our fansites are done by true fans of Habbo, they’re not commercial enterprises. (LaFontaine, 2012).

In this instance, LaFontaine rejects the notion of Sulake contributing to a ‘temporal hierarchy’ between Habbo’s fansites. Instead he insists on a ‘fair system’ in the dissemination of news and updates in which all ‘official’ fansites are treated equally. In this respect, LaFontaine establishes a temporal framework in which Sulake imposes and maintains a schedule by which fansites are informed of updates, limiting the ability of fansites to measure their timeliness against one another.

In order to gain a competitive edge, a number of fansites have begun to adopt more ‘inventive’ methods in order to demonstrate their timeliness and responsiveness. In one interview a research participant explained how some fansites had taken to examining the

Habbo client's PHP script by regularly downloading and running it through SQL database software. The downloaded PHP script would then be contrasted with the previous database in order to identify if any new lines of script had been added. These new lines of script are then examined to see what kinds of new updates or furniture may soon be released on the Habbo service. In some cases, new lines of script have gone on to form the basis of news articles on Habbox, often with the script being posted into the article in order that readers are able to examine and interpret it for themselves. Thus in one article a reporter claims that, "Deep, Deep down in the 'basement' of Sulake – 3 new catalogue pages have been discovered!"²⁷ The reporter then goes on to list the different lines of code and offers some potential interpretations of what they might mean.

The examination of the Habbo clients PHP script by fansites also marks an interesting shift in the 'rhythm and temporality' of fansite news reporting. Rather than waiting for an announcement or preview, Habbox and other fansites have shifted the measure of timeliness from the preview or release of a product, to its upload into the client's PHP script. Thus instead of competing to 'keep up' with Sulake's announcements, fansites are competing to 'keep ahead' of them. This concern with monitoring future developments is not confined to client updates, and in the final part of this section we consider how fansites frame and speculate on their own futures.

Fansite Futures

We've already observed that a significant proportion of news articles on Habbox provide speculation about new or imminent changes to Habbo. In addition to these, there are also a number of articles that attempt to anticipate the future state of relations between Habbo and its fansites. These articles range from overtly negative outlooks (e.g. 'The Dark Fate of Habbo Fansites'²⁸) to more positive projections (e.g. 'Sulake Show More Interest in Fansites!'²⁹). The primary focus of these articles is a persistent sense of uncertainty over the future role and proximity of fansites in relation to Habbo.

In the following extract from a Habbox article, a Habbox news reporter attempts to articulate their concerns for the future of fansites:

For years people within the fansite community have been discussing, debating and trying to deliberate into what the future has in store for fansites. Habbo has at the same time been extremely vague over what has been happening over the previous couple of years. Ever since the merge³⁰, the fansite community has crashed. Habbo no longer cared or integrated fansites into the game, something which in the past was viewed essential with fansites having prestige. This leads to the question of what's next for fansites?³¹

For this Habbox reporter, the future of Habbo's fansites is contingent, in part, upon the interest and attention given by Habbo's creator, Sulake. In this case, interest and attention are assessed by the extent to which Sulake appears to 'care' for the fansites and also the

degree to which Sulake 'integrates' the fansites within Habbo's online space. Such forms of attention and interest are seen here as integral to a fansite's 'prestige'. It's also interesting to note that the terms used to describe the desired forms of attention are themselves signifiers of particular forms of proximity between Sulake and the fansites. Thus, to 'care' suggests a particular close-attention from Sulake, whilst the 'integration' of fansites 'into the game' would require Sulake to incorporate fansite content into Habbo. In this way, an informal means of measurement is developed whereby judgments of Sulake's 'closeness-of-attention', or lack thereof, acts as a yardstick for assessing the future prospects of fansites.

In this next extract, a Habbox news reporter announces the appearance of a new survey in the Habbo client and speculates what this might mean:

good news just keeps on coming! We popped into the Habbo Research Lab today and spotted a brand new poll in there – with a question about fansites [...] The question is; 'Do you follow Habbo Fansites? If so, which ones?' This has added to many rumours over the past months that Sulake could potentially be considering a re-vote on the list of official Fansites [...] However, some people are feeling that this poll may not be to do with a re-vote at all! This may just be another way of showing that Sulake are interested in the Fansites that people use and how many users visit them.³²

The quoted extract offers two competing explanations as to why Sulake may be carrying out the poll. The first suggestion is that the poll may indicate an attempt by Sulake to gauge whether to hold a new vote on the list of 'official fansites', which the reporter suggests is supported by other 'rumours over the past months'. The second suggestion is that the poll may simply be a way of testing to see the extent of fansite usage amongst users. In either case, this single question from an in-game survey is offered as an indication that Sulake may be displaying greater interest in Habbo's fansites.

In addition to speculating on Sulake's motivation for carrying out the poll, the article also encourages fansite users to respond to the poll, providing them with instructions as to how it can be accessed. As such, the article not only speculates on the 'underlying' purpose of the poll, but also attempts to position the poll to its readers as of potential significance to the futures of Habbox and other fansites. By providing instructions on how Habbox users might take part in the poll, the article also acts as a petition encouraging users to vote, and thus to raise the profile of fansites. To this end, the article is both speculative *and* shaping of the future. The reporter's reading of the poll serves to outline two potential futures and in both of these Sulake is represented as taking greater interest in fansites. As such, the article treats the poll as both an indicator of these potential futures *and* as a means by which fansites and their users can begin to realise that future.

Through speculation and anticipation of futures, Habbox attempts to observe and monitor its own position in relation to Habbo. In doing so, Habbox is able to stage *timely* interventions in an attempt to adjust its future relationship with Habbo. In this respect,

'Just-in-time-fandom' might be seen not only as a fansite's attempt to demonstrate its responsiveness to developments in a given media, but also its ability to mobilise timely interventions.

Findings

The role of Habbo's fansites remains a point of on-going questioning and scrutiny both by Sulake and the creators of those fansites. Over the last few years Sulake has initiated a number of schemes aimed at defining and managing the role of fansites in relation to the Habbo product and brand. In doing so, the company has attempted to establish a stance that positions the fansites as independent entities from Habbo, whilst simultaneously providing Sulake with the authority to judge and determine the suitability of their content.

Some fansite activities are clearly welcomed by Sulake, particularly those that, in LaFontaine's words, "[enrich] the experience of being a Habbo". Indeed, fansites that adhere to Sulake's criteria, particularly The Fansite Way, are celebrated as 'good fansites' and are rewarded with advanced content previews and promotion on the Habbo homepage. The closer the values of the fansites align with those of Sulake, the closer the relationship fansites can expect with the Habbo franchise. This, in a sense, creates an 'economy of values' in which the performance and demonstration of certain brand values are key to a fansite achieving a closer relationship with a given franchise. Thus in Habbox's case we are able to observe that the practice of certain values, such as 'professionalism', is regarded as a means of establishing the fansite as a trusted resource for Habbo users.

Though Habbo's fansites often have to work within the proximal boundaries defined by Sulake, there are also examples of Habbox defining its own criterias of proximity. Whilst only the Habbox 'news' section has been addressed here, it is worth noting that Habbox's staff have developed a number of schemes that position their fansite as a significant intermediary in the circulation of information and news to Habbo users. From 'how to' guides to Habbo furniture valuations, Habbox has sought to establish itself as an important external resource for Habbo users. By constantly updating and maintaining these resources, Habbox has been able to maintain its contemporariness with Habbo.

When asked how important they felt Habbo's fansites were to Sulake, many Habbox interviewees voiced uncertainty. As one replied:

Yes and no. Sometimes it feels as though Sulake feel that fansites are important, but I think they just want to use these fansites as an advertisement technique, but I can't tell. I also say no, because they seem to neglect fansites and they don't seem to talk much about fansites. (Male, 18)

For Habbox members, the proximity between the fansites and Habbo remains a largely grey and ambiguous area that requires careful navigation. Interviewees frequently cited The Fansite Way as their most significant guide, but often they expressed confusion or frustration with the lack of clarity in their relationship with Sulake and Habbo. It is perhaps

due to this uncertainty that many fansite members continually sought to define and measure Habbox's relationship to Sulake, particularly in attempting to gauge the role of fansites in Habbo's future.

Conclusions

In a speculative essay on the 'Future of Fandom', Jenkins (2007) suggests that, "we should no longer be talking about fans as if they are somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate" (362). Instead he argues that media companies "have been shaped by the increased visibility of participatory culture" (Ibid.) and are "forming new kinds of relationships with their consumers" (Ibid.). It is the formation of these 'new kinds of relationships' that the present paper has sought to explore by examining the co-existence of media fans and corporations online.

Whilst previous research in fan studies has occasionally touched on the shifting proximities between fans and corporations, many researchers have been content to treat the activities of fans and fan communities as isolated from corporate associations. However, as Jenkins suggests above, fans have become a point of increased interest and focus within the media industry, and as such it is no longer possible to view the spaces of fan activity as isolated or wholly autonomous from corporate media spaces. Instead the two must be seen as, at least in part, defined and shaped by their co-existence. Thus, as media corporations deploy digital and social media to create new kinds of relationships and associations with fans, consideration must be given to the forms of emerging proximity that this enables and also how this might re-shape the way we approach the study of online fan communities.

As a theoretical tool, proximity provides us with a means of considering how fans and corporations become entangled in the design and organisation of each other's online spaces. Seen in this way, online fan spaces become a point of relational configuration, created by the coming together of fans around a shared interest (in the form of a participatory culture) but also affected by their proximity to corporate spheres of influence.

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Notes:

¹ See for example the *Harry Potter* franchise (Walters, 2004)

² See for example Warner Bros. and the *Harry Potter* franchise in Jenkins (2008).

³ Sulake is a Finnish firm, founded in 2000, which currently describes itself as a "social entertainment company". In 2010, the company reported sales of €56.2 million (\$78.7 million) with a net profit of €1.6 million (\$2.3 million) (see <http://sulake.com/press/releases/2011-03-31->

Habbo_Hotels_Parent_Company_Reports_Record_Year.html). Though the company has produced a number of websites and mobile games, Habbo remains Sulake's most popular and successful product to date.

⁴ <http://www.sulake.com/habbo/> [visited 15/03/2012]

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://www.sulake.com/press/releases/habbo-hotel-and-mtv-international-partner-to-bring-the-mtv-europe-music-awards-to-the-worlds-largest-teen-virtual-world/> [visited 15/03/2012]

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://www.slideshare.net/nicmitham/kzero-universe-q4-2011> [visited 15/03/2012]

⁹ This is by no means a definitive figure of existing fansites. As will be seen below, there also exist a number of 'unrecognised' Habbo fansites.

¹⁰ Similar growth can also be observed for both younger and older age groups. See <http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/q2-2011-vw-cumulative-registered-accounts-reaches-1-4-billion/> [visited 10/07/12]

¹¹ See Hills (2002) for an extended discussion on attitudes towards fans and capitalist values.

¹² 'Habbos' is a term commonly used to describe Habbo Hotel users

¹³ <https://help.habbo.com/entries/282111-what-are-habbo-fansites> [visited 10/10/2011]

¹⁴ <http://www.habbo.com/groups/fansites> [visited 12/03/2012].

¹⁵ <http://habbox.com/#!/Home> [visited 12/03/2012]

¹⁶ <http://www.habbo.com/groups/fansites> [visited 12/03/2012].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ At present we are perhaps seeing a trend towards an 'in-the-moment-Fandom', with the rise of micro blogging site Twitter where viewers provide instant commentary and reactions to their favorite shows

²¹ See Jenkins's (2006b) chapter on US reality show *Survivor* for an example of the fan temporality in relation to a television series

²² <http://habbox.com/#!/dpt-news> [visited 01/02/2012]

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ An exception to this is the release of new furniture or events to coincide with a regional holiday or seasonal event, such as Halloween (or 'Habboween'.)

²⁶ <http://habbox.com/#!/dpt-news> [visited 01/02/2012]

²⁷ <http://habbox.com/#!/News/article/738> [visited 27/02/2012]

²⁸ <http://habbox.com/#!/News/article/1088> [visited 27/02/2012]

²⁹ <http://habbox.com/#!/News/article/994> [visited 27/02/2012]

³⁰ "The merge" refers to the consolidation of all individual English-speaking Habbo Hotel branches (e.g. American, British, Australian etc.) into a single English-speaking Habbo Hotel. This took place over a number of months in mid-2010.

³¹ <http://habbox.com/#!/News/article/1088> [visited 27/02/2012]

³² <http://habbox.com/#!/News/article/994> [visited 27/02/2012]