Habbo Hotel – Academic Studies in Mixed Feelings

Raija Halonen[1], and Eeva Leinonen[2]

[1] University of Oulu, Department of Information Processing Science, Finland,
Raija.Halonen@oulu.fi
[2] University of Oulu, Department of Information Processing Science, Finland,
Eeva.Leinonen@oulu.fi

Abstract: "The first time was not so painful they claim!" This is an example of comments expressed by university students who were compelled to use Habbo Hotel in their studies. In this article we analyse the usefulness of an internet game called Habbo Hotel as a collaborative platform when the students carry out their studies on digital media. Today, digital media has evolved to concern several dimensions of everyday life. We want to understand how digital media bends to act as social media in teaching and learning. Social media is characterised by participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness. These concepts built the core also in our lessons where human-computer interaction was emphasised.

Keywords: education, teaching with games, collaborative, virtual interaction

1. Introduction

"Only by putting my shoulder to the wheel I succeeded to make a Habbo personality." (A male student in his blog November 20, 2007). This quotation shows the difficulties the adult students perceived in the beginning when they participated in a new way of carrying out an academic course. This paper discusses the impressions and challenges we met in our course in the Department of Information Processing Science. We wanted to study how human-computer interaction with virtual communities persuades students' learning or is it only a burden. The first attitude was skeptic and the students took the chosen media with a grain.

According to Mayfield (2007) social media can be defined as a group of new kinds of online media which share the following characteristics: participation,

openness, conversation, community and connectedness. Due to convenience, we chose Habbo Hotel (Habbo, 2007) as our platform in the course where we taught digital media. "Habbo is a virtual world where you can meet and make friends." Habbo Hotel is a virtual community owned and operated by Sulake Corporation (Wikipedia, 2007a). According to Wellman & Gulia (1999) virtual communities are studied as communities but we want to add to this with our research on virtual community as a persuasive technology of human-computer interaction to support teaching and learning.

We used the means of qualitative case study in our research despite research that grounds on rich qualitative data predict challenges (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The challenges were increased in our study due to the chosen platform. This article is organised as follows: The next section brings forward literature review on virtual communities, problem-based-learning and www-based games. After that, the research methods are presented and the case is briefly described. That is followed by empirical illustrations of the case. After that, discussion and results are presented ending with suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Communality as a concept can be defined by communal limits, perceived safety, togetherness and a joint language (MacMillan & Chavis, 1986). Social media is something more: Participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness are the keywords that define modern social media Mayfield (2007) continued. Participation refers to contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. Openness lets people to give feedback, to participate and to share information. Furthermore, conversation is realised by two-way interaction between those involved. Community refers to the possibility to form communities quickly and easily around common interests. Finally, connectedness means that social media is dependent on the possibility to combine different kinds of media in one place. (Mayfield, 2007)

On the other hand, the term "community" is sometimes used to refer to intensive social groups whereas on the other occasions it refers to a group of people who hardly know each other. Every now and then the term "community" is used as a concept that means a geographic place. (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999)

Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) compared face-to-face communities and virtual communities with the help of six factors: access to the communication, verification in communities, interactive broadcasting, reassembling, meeting mechanisms and memories. They claim that it is an illusion to assume that real-world communications are much more effective than communications in virtual environments. Etzioni and Etzioni continue that combining real-world and virtual communications could allow the special strengths of each system to make up for weaknesses of the other.

The characteristics and processes related to utilitised virtual community were studied by Blanchard and Markus (2004). Their study expresses that the perceived sense of community is characterised by social processes of exchanging support, creating identities and making identifications and by the production of trust. These processes seem to be similar to those processes that contribute to the formation of sense of community without virtual reality. Blanchard and Markus continue that a sense of virtual community does not even take form without the recited processes.

However, according to Li (2004) it is significant to notice the differences between virtual communities and virtual teams or groups. Li defines that virtual teams are formed to solve specific problems or tasks. Contrary to that, virtual communities focus on relationships in real life especially when people have no intended reasons to remain in the communities. Furthermore, virtual communities may exist for a long time while virtual groups or teams tend to disappear after the specific task or function is completed. Preece (2000) adds that virtual communities necessitate people who interact when they strive for their goals; common meaning, strategies and information systems that support social interaction and enable a feeling of togetherness.

Li (2004) argues that a plausible definition of virtual communities is still missing and that studies on virtual studies are still in their initial stage. Therefore, more research should be carried out especially by the means of case studies and empirical studies, Li concludes.

In all, one can conclude that human-computer-aided communities are not yet studied in full. Our article adds to the research with an empirical study that consists of a case study on using virtual communities as enablers and platform when teaching graduate students.

3. Research Methods and the Case

In this chapter the research methods are expressed. Furthermore, due to the role of the learning technique in the context, also it is essentially described. Finally, the case is briefly explained.

This study is qualitative case study (Stake, 2000) in nature. Eisenhardt (1989) delineates case study as a research strategy that focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings. Eisenhardt also supposes that case study research has important strengths like novelty, testability and empirical validity which arise from the close linkage with empirical evidence. Theory building from case studies is an increasingly popular and relevant research strategy that forms the basis of an excessive large number of significant studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

In our study, we observed the meetings and collected written material written by the participants. Furthermore, we documented virtual sessions that were held

during the observations. We also collected emails and other notes that were written related to the course. To analyse the empirical material, we used discourse analysis (Potter, 1999) that supports naturally occurring talk and discussions in their venue. The discussions are emphasised in the research material due to the nature of the case even if it was demanding to get the talk recorded.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an instructional strategy of "active learning" that is often used in higher education and students are encouraged to take responsibility for their group and organize and direct the learning process with support from a tutor or instructor (Wikipedia, 2007b). As a learning technique, PBL can be characterised by three essential assertions: 1) understanding is in our interactions with the environment; 2) cognitive conflict or puzzlement is the stimulus for learning and determines the organisation and nature of what is learned; 3) knowledge evolves through social negotiation and through the evaluation of the viability of individual understanding (Savery & Duffy, 2001). PBL aims to help students gain content knowledge, strengthen problem-solving skills, engage in learning and develop a professional identity (Shumow, 2001).

The case consisted of carrying out an undergraduate course that was a part of digital media studies in the Department of Information Processing Science. The course was compulsory or optional depending on the orientation of the student. The course was to be performed by active participation or by a literature exam. Already beforehand, the active way was advertised in the course web site:

"The course is performed by active participation both in contact lessons and in www-based working in a way that will be announced in the course. In addition to group and individual tasks, there will be an exam that will be explained in detail later in the course. On top of this description, the course can be performed by a literature exam."

Habbo Hotel is a virtual hotel, where "teenagers can hang out and chat" (Habbo, 2007). As of July 2007, over 82 million avatars have been created worldwide and there are 6 million unique visitors to the virtual hotels around the world every month, and 75,000 avatars being created every day (Wikipedia, 2007).

The educational background with its problem-based learning (PBL) was introduced in the first lesson and the chosen platform (Habbo Hotel) was described to the students. Every student was told to make an own Habbo personality (avatar) i.e. register him or her self (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Entrance of Habbo Hotel.

Despite the richness of colour in the welcoming window (Figure 1) the user finds it easy to proceed. In our case, the notice of "hangout for teans" was experienced foolish.

4. Empirical Illustrations and Analysis

In this chapter the empirical findings are described in detail. The informative description enables the reader to get a full understanding on the case and challenges that were met there. The empirical research material is collected during an undergraduate course that was carried out by "active performance".

In our case, the activity necessitated blog-writing, PBL technique in learning and using Habbo Hotel (Habbo, 2007) in group meetings. This procedure was introduced to the students in the first so-called compulsory lecture. After having heard the procedure, several students left the lecture hall. A pronounced resistance to the procedure was almost touchable.

The participation necessitated signing in the course but the signing was enabled also after the first lecture. Because the core topic was digital media and digital communities with their diversified culture the teachers had chosen Habbo Hotel as a learning platform in the course. The feature of Habbo Hotel being recommended for children above ten years old gave the teachers challenges to introduce the media to the students who were well over 20 years of age. The students commented: *"Making a Habbo personality sounds chiefly surrealistic …"*. In our case there were almost 100 students who participated in the course. That amount led to 13 groups with five to six students. The groups were formed at the end of the first lecture and only some groups consisted of students who were familiar to each other from the very beginning.

Figure 2 A Habbo avatar that can wave or dance.

The first homework was to make a blog for the group and to make an avatar (Habbo personality) for each student. Figure 2 shows an avatar that can be made to wave her hand or dance. When preparing the course, the teachers already had created their own Habbo personalities and named them with a prefix Ed to distinguish from students' names. The students were directed to name their avatars so that they could be identified. Despite the wish, that desire did not come true in the course. Creating Habbo personalities was more difficult to some students because it appeared that operating systems acted differently in relation to the needed Shockwave. The students wrote their blogs: *"On top of all this, Habbo is difficult to reach by almost everyone except Windows users ..."* Fortunately this problem was solved with the help of Habbo: "So how do you get into Habbo if you have an Intel based Mac? Simple! Follow these steps: […] " (Habbo, 2007). This difficulty in human-computer interaction connected with technology increased the perceived resistance to adopt Habbo as the learning platform.

Besides the students, also the teachers perceived problems when building the learning platform. A course blog was created in the very beginning and it was announced to act as the primary information source in relation to all course notices and communication. To relieve the burden of the teachers in following the group blogs the group blogs were to be included as RSS entries in the course blog. However, only nine RSS entries were enabled and another way to manage the group blogs was to be found due to the great amount of the groups. Finally, the group blogs were added in a blogroll of the course blog. The group blogs were listed in the course blog but it was not possible to get the updated information automatically fed i.e. as RSS feed. Therefore, the teachers had to visit every group blog to see if there were any new annotations in the blogs and that increased their work a lot.

The first homework was checked in the next lecture. Additional students joined the course and they were ordered to form a group. The teachers recorded: *"The change is remarkable. This lecture hall was dark with students; there were not enough chairs, even. Some questions were expressed but we were prepared to more of them. I am surprised at this reception. We also had to admit that the teachers cannot visit every session because there are so many groups. Therefore we must flexibly apply PBL here."*

The students were encouraged to write their group-based blogs about their experiences with Habbo Hotel. The notes were diversified. Some students were open-minded and they wrote positive annotations: *"... the course implementation appears interesting and at least different ..."*. *"The first ambiance is a little mixed but for once there is something new in the studies, this blogging and habboing."* Others students were attacking with their comments: *"To my mind, the start was chaotic due to the new implementation." "My weekend is spoilt. Thank you Wordpress, thank you Internet!"* Some students seemed to be satisfied and thanked the change*: "Extraordinary implementation is always a plus, whatever course it concerns."*

The actual learning topic was introduced next week after the students had found a group for themselves and registered in Habbo Hotel. The topic "The special characteristics of virtual communities" was announced in the course blog and it included an article "Net Surfers Don't ride alone: Virtual Communities as Communities" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). The students were to study the topic by the means of PBL. Three questions were given to them to be answered during their learning:

How is community realised in the internet?

Which kind of communities are there in the internet?

What is combining these communities to "virtual communities"?

Following the procedure of PBL, the students were to have a brainstorm in the Habbo room. The yellow spots in the figure 3 represent the tags that were used in the brainstorm.
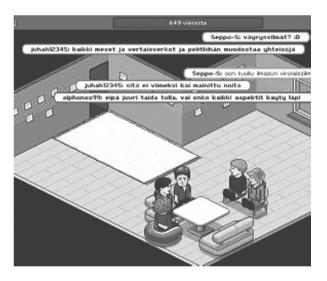

Figure 3 Group in a session.

The discussion in the group was carried out by balloons that drifted up as new balloons were written (Figure 3). In case of active discussion the speed was greater and it appeared difficult to follow the discussion. According to the chosen learning methodology PBL, the discussion should have been recorded by a secretary and a chairman should have taken care of the order in the group. A third role was called an observer. Observers should have observed the social dynamics in the session. Instead of being permanent, the roles had to be circulated among the students. One role lasted only one session. This requirement was set to give an equal work load for the students and also to enable an active participation in discussions. Writing the discussions down appeared such a burden that the secretaries were not able to discuss actively in the same session.

The students were very censorious with the discussion platform. They complained the limited space in the balloons that prevented long sentences in addresses: *"For some reason the maximum length of the messages is limited in Habbo so that it is impossible to write sensible sentences in one message."* Another topic for complains was the lacking possibility to log message history: *"By the way, the hotel expressed its best character because the message history is still missing in the discussions in Habbo."*

It also happened that the software broke down every now and then: *"The occasional falls of Habbo troubled working. Furthermore, it was irritating that the comments went to the heaven of bits."* In order to relieve the interaction, some groups used additional tools in their group meetings: *"The meeting starts at 6 pm. We'll gather both in IRC and Habbo Hotel."*

Besides the students, also the teachers used additional tool during the group meetings. The teachers decided to use Skype's [18] chat that enabled them to interact so that the students were not able to see the comments. Skype also enabled the private discussions to be saved for later use.

An interesting feature of the chosen media was the possibility to make the Habbo avatar "speak" in loud, whispering or normal voice. That feature was necessary when the avatars were located in public rooms (e.g. bar or lounge in the hotel) but it was not needed when the students gathered in their classrooms. In case the students did not realise to "shout", the addresses were not properly visible in the balloons. This situation was realized when the avatars were situated too far from each other (Figure 4).

Figure 4 An avatar (Tonyyh) is speaking too quietly.

Some of the virtual sessions looked so comical out that the teachers felt it difficult to participate without laughing. The funny outlooks also tempted to use

informal words and phrases when talking with the students in Habbo Hotel. The environment simply forced to act friendly and cosy. The teachers wrote to each other: *"It will be difficult to meet face-to-face these students after this session!"*

Unfortunately it was not possible to observe what happened in the Habbo room without being virtually present. Therefore, the teachers had to "step in" the same Habbo room with the students when they wanted to supervise the students.. In this sense, it was also impossible to know how the teachers' intervention influenced the interaction. On top of being present in the room, the teachers had to be located near enough in order to "hear" the discussion. The teachers regretted: *"It is a pity that we cannot see what they do there when we are not present."* It also happened that the free discussion did not proceed e.g. when the students agreed on roles in the meeting. The teachers wrote to each other in Skype: *"Half an hour is passed and they are still discussing roles!"* When it looked like the students were not able to proceed in their assignment the teachers occasionally left the room. The teachers continued: *"They are not listening to what we tell them." "This isn't progressing at all."*

The students took the platform with mixed feelings. The teachers participated in a session where one student tried to push others to change to IRC (Internet Relay Chat). He was very persistent in his arguments. The teachers chatted: *"Javelin is pushing them to IRC but the others do not want to."*

Nonetheless, the teachers would have liked to see how the groups worked and how they managed to use Habbo in their interaction and learning. They needed to know who was active and how the given problem was solved. Occasionally the teachers observed: *"They are pretty quiet."* From the viewpoint of the course on digital media studies, the chosen platform acted both as a target and a tool.

Figure 5 Avatars with differing outlooks.

It appeared that the outlook of the avatars was perceived very important because the window was relatively small and the creatures too small to be properly identified. Figure 5 displays a session where there were two groups at the same time in the hotel room. Without the exceptional outlooks it could have been impossible to identify the students or distinguish them from each other.

The groups got their assignments done and they reported their findings in their blogs. Some of them wanted to compare different platforms: *"The only issue that Habbo Hotel offers compared to IRC is the graphic user interface. That may help the younger generation to make a better feeling of community but it is not so essential to the older people. Especially if more important features are left out because of that."*

One group had deliberated dating in internet: "The most important feature in the profile of dating in internet is the image they give of the person's personality."

The groups also found some benefits in virtual communities: "Giving feedback is easier in virtual communities because the tool acts as a buffer between the giver and the receiver. In some virtual community it is problematic that the giver may hide behind anonymity and she or he may give feedback that would not be given as real self." An interesting notice was about participation: "In virtual community it is much easier not to participate in the community activities than in real-worlds communities".

All these quotations from the students' blogs illustrates that the students were able to use Habbo Hotel when they discussed the given problems. They also were able to conclude their occasionally fragmental sentences that they wrote in Habbo Hotel. On the other hand this new way to realize the course was led to participation and collaboration of the students. Also Barker (1999) and Xing and Spencer (2008) reported advantages for students' active approaches in virtual learning context.

5. Discussion

In this article we have intimately explored digital media in the form of Habbo Hotel (Habbo, 2007) as a platform of human-computer interaction in teaching graduate students. In addition to contribute teaching, also learning is an important issue to be concerned. We used qualitative research methods in our research and the main analysis was carried out by the help of discourse analysis. The research material consisted mainly of notes made of private discussions between two teachers, blogs written by the students and sessions in Habbo Hotel. The research material offered a rich empirical material that enabled research based on empirical study, thus responding to the appeal of Li (2004). Next we summarise the baseline:

First, the ground for the study was fruitful and sensible. The research material was collected in a course that was a part of digital media studies in the Department

of Information Processing Science. This starting point would support the progress and motivation and also prefigure the output of the research.

Second, the digital media was a game that was designed for children above ten years of age. This feature was a challenge but it was recognised in the very beginning, before the course had its start. The feature also predicted easy human-computer interaction.

Third, the participating students had a choice to perform the course in another way. Thus participating in the "active way" was voluntary.

Fourth, the chosen media (Habbo Hotel) was not designed for meetings, but that was known beforehand. In addition, the platform was not designed for teaching purposes either. Despite that, the interaction in the social community could consist of learning by PBL.

At the beginning of the course, the reaction of the students was astounded and staggering. There were more students present than was planned beforehand. Also the perceived problems with technology at the beginning caused irritation. After the first reaction, the atmosphere changed more towards expectant. The blogs contained notes that exposed both negative and positive opinions.

Due to the unexpected amount of students, the organising of the course appeared to be difficult and laborious. In the course there were several small virtual communities: each group was told to form a virtual community and they should have met in Habbo Hotel one group at a time. The teachers were called to participate every virtual meeting. However, it happened that occasionally two groups gathered simultaneously to the Habbo room. The students also contemplated in their sessions if the whole course formed one community. Thus, the environment (Habbo Hotel) really supported their thinking and learning.

Because of the limited usability of Habbo Hotel, both the students and the teachers felt it important to use additional media during the sessions. The main additional tool used by the students was IRC and the teachers used Skype, respectively. The number of carried discussions varied between the groups but at the end every group had been able to ponder the given problems and they had written constructive comments on the topic.

From the viewpoint of the teachers, the interaction between the teachers and the students seemed to be easier in the Habbo room. The sentences had to be kept short and also the words seemed to contain more information than in real-life. A bare question mark was needed if somebody wanted to spell "I beg your pardon". It also seemed that the tone in the sentences was friendlier than when interacting face-to-face.

Despite the experienced friendly and constructive performance in the Habbo room, there were students who insisted to change the whole forum (e.g. Javelin, see above). However, these students were minority and the group work was mainly carried out in the settled environment, even if supported with other media.

Furthermore, we would like to emphasise the informal nature of the forum. The environment with the funny-looking creatures supported open-minded interaction. On top of the outlook of the avatars, the avatars could also be made dancing. They

could "dance" all the session through because the "dance" was an on-off-feature of the avatar.

In all, one can conclude that the experiment teaching in Habbo Hotel was a positive one and both the students and the teachers learnt a lot. Grounding on the thorough reports on the meetings in Habbo Hotel and the written blogs on the given topic we figure that Habbo Hotel may contribute teaching and learning with its limited human-computer interface. Despite Habbo Hotel was designed for teenagers, it proved to be useful also in adulthood.

In our case we had too many students in the course and the teachers were not able to participate as they had planned. However, they could monitor the progress by reading the blogs. In this sense, the blogs were complementing the interaction between the students and the teachers. The blogs also completed the interface that was experienced insufficient in certain moments.

To conclude, we recommend future research on using such platforms in teaching. We suggest that other platforms will be used and experiments collected. It would be worth studying such environments that also offer easy possibilities to record discussions. We also emphasise that avatars should be kept in the forth-coming research palette because that gives possibilities to make comparisons between these studies. Furthermore, we also claim that avatars as such contribute free-floating and unprejudiced discussion.

References

Baker, P.: Using Intranets to Support Teaching and Learning. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, vol 36 iss 1, pp. 3-10 (1999).

Blanchard, A.L., Markus, L.M.: The Experienced "Sense" of a Virtual Community: Characteristics and Processes. Database for Advances in Information Systems 35;1, 65-79 (2004).

Eisenhardt, K.M.: Building Theories from Case Study Research. The Academy of Management Review 14;4, 532-550 (1989).

Eisenhardt, K.M., Graebner, M.E.: Theory building from cases: opportunities and challenges. Academy of Management Journal 50;1, 25-32 (2007).

Etzioni, A., Etzioni, O.: Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communities, A Comparative Analysis. The Information Society, 15, 241-248 (1999).

Habbo:, Habbo Hotel. (2007) Available: http://www.habbo.com/. Accessed 14 April 2008.

Li, H.: Virtual Community Studies: A Literature Review, Synthesis and Research Agenda. Proceedings of the Americas Conference on Information Systems, New York, New York, August (2004).

MacMillan, D.W., Chavis, D.M.: Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory. Journal of Community Psychology 14;1, 6-23 (1986).

Mayfield, A.: What is social media, an ebook from spannerworks. USA: Spannerworks. (2007). Available: http://www.spannerworks.com/fileadmin/uploads/eBooks/What_is_Social _Media.pdf. Accessed 14 April 2008.

Potter, J.; Discourse Analysis as a Way of Analysing Naturally Occurring Talk. In: Silverman, D. (ed.) Qualitative Research. Theory, Method and Practice, pp. 144-160. SAGE Publication, London (1999).

Preece, J. Online Communities – Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester (2000).

Savery, J.R., Duffy, T.M.: Problem Based Learning: An instructional model and its constructivist framework. CRTL Technical Report No. 16-01 (2001).

Shumow, L.: Problem-Based Learning in an Undergraduate Educational Psychology Course. In: Levin, B. (ed.): Energizing Teacher Education and Professional Development with Problem-Based Learning. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development Alexandria, VA, USA, 24-44 (2001).

Skype. Available: http://www.skype.com. Accessed 14 April 2008.

Stake, R.E.: Case studies. In: Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) Handbook of Qualitative Research, pp. 435-454, Sage Publications Inc. Thousand Oaks (2000).

Wikipedia, (2007a). Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habbo_Hotel. Accessed 14 April 2008.

Wikipedia, (2007b). Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem-based_learning. Accessed 14 April 2008.

Wellman, B., Gulia, M.: Net surfers don't ride alone: Virtual communities as communities. In: Kollock, P., Smith, M. (eds.). Communities and Cyperspace Routledge New York (1999).

Xing, M., Spencer, K.: Reducing Cultural Barriers via Internet Courses. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, vol 45 iss 2, pp. 169-181 (2008).