Design and Participation Across Young People's Online Spaces

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in Sociology

September 2013

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the growth of online spaces for children and young people, and examines the shifting position of young people as participants and economic agents in new media markets. Through a series of ethnographic case studies, this thesis investigates how online spaces for young people are designed and developed, and provides a close examination of how, and on what terms, young people are enrolled and mobilised within production processes. As this thesis will demonstrate, media corporations are increasingly framing young people as key participants within the product development process – attempting to mobilise and harness user activities to productive ends. Rather than focus on user activities as confined to the 'moment' of consumption, this thesis seeks to explore user participation as distributed throughout the course of an online space's development. Each of the case studies of this thesis are located at key points in the development of an online space, taking place at specific spatial and temporal junctures in the product's unfolding biography. At each of these junctures, this thesis looks at the specific configurations of young people's agency and examines how their ability to participate in the development of an online space is defined and shaped. More broadly, this thesis critically engages with existing perceptions of children and young people as on the periphery of economic markets. Drawing on media and consumer studies, the sociology of childhood, actor-network theory, and new economic sociology, this thesis develops a theoretical approach that views young people as deeply embedded within the design and economic processes of new media markets.

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Acknowledgments

Completing this thesis would not have been possible without the help, support and advice of many people.

Special thanks to my supervisor, David Oswell, for his ceaseless support and encouragement throughout my thesis, and for always challenging me to go one better. Thanks also to my MA/PhD pals Vik Loveday, Marcus Morgan and Clair Morrow for the cathartic chats over many cups of coffee and pints of beer. Also, thanks to the many other members of the Goldsmiths Sociology Department who, whether directly or indirectly, helped to support my thesis over the course of its development. Special thanks go to my students over the last four years at Goldsmiths, who have always helped to keep me grounded.

Many thanks go to the ESRC, who provided the three-year award that funded this thesis.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the many people who participated in the research and helped to make the study possible. Thanks to the staff at Sulake and the BBC for warmly welcoming me into their places of work. A big thank you also to the children and teenagers who volunteered their time to talk to me.

Finally, innumerable thanks go to my girlfriend/fiancé/wife/proof-reader extraordinaire Louise for her unwavering support. Many thanks also to my parents, Louise and Gavin, and to my family, who have rallied behind me in whatever decisions I've made.

Articles based on chapters of this thesis have been published elsewhere. These include:

Chapter 4:

Berriman, L. (2013). ''Activating' Young People in the Production of Virtual Worlds' in Bennett, A. & Robards, b. (eds.) *Mediated Youth Cultures: The Internet, Belonging and New Cultural Configurations*. Palgrave.

Chapter 7:

Berriman, L. (2012). 'Negotiating Proximity: The Co-existence of Habbo and its Fansites'. *Participations*, 9(2), pp. 575-596.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: The Development of Young People's Online Spaces

This study is a multi-sited research investigation into the configuration of children and young people's[1] participation in the design and development of online spaces. Drawing on a theoretical framework that combines the study of children, youth and media with economic and cultural sociology, this thesis seeks to trace the co-development and emergence of young people's online spaces, their markets, and their users. Through the use of ethnographic research methods, this thesis attempts to trace the unfolding biographies of young people's online media spaces by closely examining the practices and processes that contribute to their on-going development. In particular, this study is concerned with the configuration and positioning of children and young people as significant participants in the design and development of online spaces. This thesis draws specific attention to the shifting economic role of children and young people within media design and production processes, focusing on the means by which they are enrolled and mobilised as 'active' participants. In this way, the present thesis attempts to observe how the unfolding development of an online space is intimately linked with the framing and configuration of young people's media participation.

The past decade has seen a rapid expansion of the children and youth online media market. In particular, virtual worlds, one of the most popular commercial online spaces for young people, have seen a significant spike in user registrations over the last few years. At the beginning of 2009, industry figures estimated that, globally, there were approximately 246 million registered virtual world accounts for young people aged 10-15 and 73 million registered accounts for those aged 15-25. By early

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[1] The terms children, youth and young people are all frequently employed over the course of this thesis. The term 'young people' is used predominantly as an umbrella term for all those under the age of twenty-one. The term children is most commonly used in reference to any young people who are pre-teens (under the age of thirteen.) The term youth is generally used to refer to young people from the early teens to their early twenties. This is by no means a perfect system of classification, and it is predominantly employed here as a shorthand for age groups, rather than as a means of defining a particular generational group. Very occasionally reference is made to 'infants', and this generally refers to all children aged two and under.

2012 this estimate had risen to approximately 852 million and 712 million respectively (Kzero Worldwide, 2012a). Such rapid growth has, in no small part, been made possible by the increasing access to the internet-enabled technologies in children and young people's homes. Ofcom estimates that nine in ten UK children aged 5-15 years now have access to the internet at home via a PC or laptop (Ofcom, 2012: 18). Though television remains the most common media activity for most children in the UK, the internet has emerged as an increasingly fierce contender for children's time and attention (Ofcom, 2012: 53). In response to this significant reconfiguration of young people's everyday media environments, entertainment firms have produced a variety of new forms of online activities, experiences and environments in an attempt to capture the burgeoning online children's market.

This study has been developed in response to the growth of these new online media products and their markets. It takes place at a time when online spaces and virtual worlds for young people have rapidly increased in numbers in a very short space of time, and certain online brands are achieving the status of 'household names' amongst children and their parents. This study also takes place at an extremely challenging time for children, parents and media corporations. Anxieties around cyberbullying, online grooming, and sexual and violent content frequently appear in the news, and regular concerns are raised about children and young people's safety in online environments[2]. The study also occurs at a time where fresh questions are being raised about children's status as consumers, particularly in relation to new forms of marketing and data collection developed to track the tastes and preferences of consumers through their engagement with online spaces (Buckingham, 2011; Chung & Grimes, 2005). Though a growing field of research has begun to emerge around children and young people's online media use, particularly around online safety and learning (see the literature review in chapter 2), there are still a number of key topics that remain understudied.

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[2] See for example the Channel 4 investigation into explicit sexual discussion in virtual world *Habbo Hotel* (O'Brien, 2012) and a recent case of cyberbullying leading to a teenager's suicide on social network Ask.fm (Henley, 2013).

The past decade has seen a significant amount of academic interest in young people's online media, with a strong underlying focus on issues of agency and participation. As the literature review chapter will show, a large section of this research has focused on young people's engagement with online media at *the moment of use*. Whether discussing online safety, mediated relationships, creative play, or online learning, the majority of studies in this field have principally focused on the moment of young people's use or consumption of online media. In contrast, this thesis is an attempt to expand our understanding of young people's online media consumption beyond their immediate everyday lives, such as at home or school. It is about those extended relational ties that, though not always visible, are crucial in enabling young people's everyday use of online spaces. In particular, the present study will address the how young people's media consumption intersects with broader economic practices of designing, developing and marketing young people's online spaces. To this end, this thesis attempts to examine young people's online spaces as a point of convergence and intermediation between different events, spaces, practices, networks and relationships. In so doing, this study pays close attention to those mediated connections that relationally bridge the child's bedroom or classroom with the workstations of graphic designers or software architects. One of the key questions the present study attempts to address is: what are the different activities and events that contribute to the shaping and configuration of young people's media participation? Such a question cannot be answered by empirically examining young people's engagement with an online space alone. It requires an investigation that traces the different mediated connections that emerge around an online space, particularly between the designers and users of online spaces.

The following sections of this chapter begin to outline in greater detail some of the key elements of this study. In the next section I begin by outlining why young people's participation forms the central focus of this thesis. I then outline what kinds of online media spaces the present study is particularly concerned with and why they are such a significant case study. This is then followed by a discussion of how the children and youth online media markets have developed over the past decade,

briefly summarising some key trends. In the final parts of this chapter I outline the central research questions that the present study has attempted to address and conclude by providing an overview of the each of the chapters of this thesis.

Frameworks of Young People's New Media Participation

One of the primary concerns of this thesis lies in the theoretical and empirical framing of young people's agency and participation in relation to the development of new media products. The rapid growth and proliferation of young people's online media products has stimulated increased academic attention around how, and on what terms, young people are defined as consumers in the digital media market (Buckingham, 2011; Montgomery, 2001). Within broader media and cultural theory the notion of a 'participatory' media culture (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins, 2008) has gained significant traction, defining new media consumers as increasingly able to, "appropriate [...] and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins et al., 2006). Young people's media use, in particular, is regularly characterised in terms of increased opportunities for social (boyd, 2008; Marwick, 2011), educational (Ito et al., 2009; Loveless, 2002; Marsh, 2004), creative (Ito et al., 2009; Lange & Ito, 2010; Sefton-Green, 2002), and civic (Loader, 2007; Lotan et al., 2011; Tuukkanen et al., 2010) modes of media participation. Within such studies, media participation is framed as increasingly important means by which young people are able to connect to their friends and peers, to access learning opportunities, and to make their voice heard in the public sphere.

Such frameworks of young people's media participation have not been restricted to academic researchers alone. The perception of children and young people as 'active' and 'empowered' media consumers has emerged as a significant rhetorical device amongst designers and marketers within the digital media industry (Buckingham, 2011; Cook, 2005). The Finnish corporation Sulake, for example, describes its virtual world, Habbo Hotel, as a space for young people to, "have fun through creativity and self expression" (Sulake, 2012a). New media products, such as Habbo Hotel, are increasingly marketed based on the opportunities for participation and creativity

that they afford young consumers. It's within this context that we find academic and industry conceptions of young people's media consumption increasingly converging along parallel conceptual trajectories, with designers and marketers regularly employing a discourse of young people as 'active' and 'creative' media consumers. Across these parallel frameworks, young people are increasingly framed by academics and marketers as a group of digital media consumers who deserve to be recognised as agentic in their interaction with media, and as capable of exploiting the affordances of new media technologies in creative and unanticipated ways.

The present study seeks to examine how and on what terms young people come to be framed and configured as 'active' participants in their consumption of online media. Whilst both academics and the media industry have embraced digital and online media as generating new opportunities for young people to take part in an increasingly participatory media culture, there has been a lack of explicit discussion as to how the ability participation comes to be assembled and configured. Instead, active participation has often been conflated with agency – leading to the problematic assumption that the ability to participate is equally open to all young people. However, as Buckingham suggests, "the fact that children are now increasingly addressed and engaged as 'active' consumers does not necessarily mean that they have greater agency" (Buckingham, 2011: 102). Rather than seeing participation as an inevitable product of engagement with digital media, this study seeks to understand how participation comes to be configured and negotiated within the design, development and consumption of online media. To this end, the thesis will explore what models of participation emerge in the development of online spaces, and also how young people come to be enrolled and configured as active participants within these models. Rather than assume young people to always, already be active participants in their engagement with digital media (Morley, 1993), this study treats participation as a discursive and material configuration that requires explanation.

Virtual worlds and online games provide a particularly useful research case study in this regard, existing in a market that gives considerable value to the notion of young

people as creative and active consumers. The following parts of this chapter outline the significance of online spaces as research sites for exploring the definition and delineation of young people's 'participation' in their media consumers.

Young People's Online Spaces: Some Issues of Classification

The description and classification of online media has posed a number of important epistemological challenges for the present thesis. In a discussion on social network websites, Beer (2008) suggests that it is all too easy to employ definitions that are either too broad or too narrow, or that too easily conflate different online media together. As an example, Beer's paper demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between social *network* websites (where users identify themselves in network relations to other people that they know) and social *networking* websites (where users actively attempt to create new network connections) (2008: 518). Though he classifies both under a broader Web 2.0 umbrella, Beer argues that it is important to distinguish how each of the different types of website enable users to partake in distinct forms of activity. Issues of classification are also important for the present study at both an empirical and methodological level. In the present section I will briefly outline the types of online spaces that this thesis is concerned with and offer some initial thoughts on how children and young people's online spaces might be variously classified and defined. This will provide a useful introduction for readers who are less familiar with the types of online media available to children and young people, but it will also offer an initial outline of some of the key issues that this thesis raises in terms of the design and production of online spaces.

Over the past decade the number of online spaces targeted at children and young people has rapidly increased. Such a significant market shift has not gone unnoticed within the UK media, and news outlets have frequently reported on some of the most successful online spaces. Reporting on the rise of the British-based website *Moshi Monsters* in 2011, a number of articles drew contrasts with adult social network websites by describing it as a 'Facebook for Kids' (Garston, 2011; Halliday, 2011). Such a phrase can be seen in fairly banal terms as a shorthand means of

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categorising an online space that many adult readers may be unfamiliar with. However, the phrase also carries significant connotations as to the type of function such an online space may serve – not least as a means of readying children to become the social media users of 'the future'. For the most part, such contrasts with adult social network websites are misleading and serve to disguise many of the nuances that define and distinguish children and young people's online spaces.

By no means providing a definitive typology, Figure 1 attempts to separate and categorise some of the main online spaces available for children and young people and provides an overview of their principal features. Not all types of online space are given the same attention in this thesis. For the most part, this study focuses on those online spaces that are owned and managed by a single corporation. As a result, those websites that curate third party content do not feature prominently in this study. Instead, this thesis primarily focuses on virtual worlds, virtual pets websites, and multi-content websites that are run by single corporations. Rather than summarise Figure 1, I will briefly describe some of the primary features and qualities that broadly apply to most online spaces for children and young people, whilst also acknowledging how different types of online space might also be distinguished.

a) Mediated Social Connectivity

Though the phrase 'Facebook for kids' is largely a misnomer, many online spaces for children and young people do contain some form of 'social' participation. This can include textual conversations that are either synchronous or asynchronous, and public or private, but also a range of non-verbal communication such as 'waving' an avatars arm or emoticons. The types of social participation available vary between online spaces and, in most instances, are determined by the target age group of the website. For example, *Club Penguin*, a virtual world for younger children, offers a limited vocabulary of words and phrases in order to protect users from giving away personal details or participating in potentially 'harmful' conversations. In contrast, the virtual world *Habbo Hotel*, which is primarily aimed at teenagers, allows users (or their parents) to select either filtered or unfiltered chat. Like social network

Figure 1 – Typification of Online Spaces for Children and Young People

	User Account Types	Content & Gameplay	Social	Monetization	Examples
Multi-Content Curated – Self Produced or Commissioned	Frequently a username account for login and occasionally an accompanying profile page	Mini Games, leader boards, video content, forums	Predominantly user message boards	Other media & merchandise linked to television franchises, banner advertising	CBBC, Nickelodeon, Disney XD (typically created by established television corporations)
Multi-Content Curated – Third Party Produced	Frequently a username account for login and occasionally an accompanying profile page	Mini Games, leader boards	Multi-player gaming occasionally accompanied by live chat features	Banner advertising, virtual currency	Miniclip, Andkon Arcade
Virtual Worlds	Avatar(s) and occasionally an accompanying profile page	Live chat spaces and forums, mini games, virtual content marketplace, customisation	'Friending'[3], live chat, private messaging	In-game advertising, virtual currency, premium membership, spin-off media and merchandise	Habbo, Club Penguin, Star Dollz, Movie Star Planet
Virtual Pets	'Adopted' creature(s) and occasionally an accompanying profile page	Mini games, virtual content marketplace, forums, customisation	'Friending', message boards, private messaging	Virtual currency, premium membership, spin-off media and merchandise, in-game advertising	Neopets, Moshi Monsters, Fight My Monster, Bin Weevils

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3 'Friending' is a term commonly used to describe the practice of connecting with friends in social online spaces.

websites, many young people's online spaces also provide users with the ability to 'friend' others. In some instances this can enable friends to communicate privately or find one another's avatars in the virtual world, but it can also be used to instigate multiplayer games or to share and trade virtual items. In this sense, friending is more closely linked to creating connections specifically for activities related to the online environment.

The present study primarily focuses on online spaces that contain some elements of social participation. In particular, this study will focus on online spaces that act as mediatory or intermediary connections between different social actors. Over the course of this study a variety of different types of mediated connections are considered: between designers and users, fans and corporations, and children and their peers. Young people's online spaces often act as a nexus for these connections, though they are by no means the only channels of communication through which mediated connections are created and enacted. As such, the social and mediatory qualities of young people's online spaces will be a key feature of the present study.

b) Gaming and Play

In addition to affording forms of social participation, many of the online spaces investigated in this thesis offer users opportunities for gaming and play. Though many of these online spaces contain gaming elements, this is neither their sole or primary purpose. In this respect, the online spaces considered in this study can generally be seen as distinct from massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), such as *The World of Warcraft* or *EverQuest*. This distinction is by no means clear-cut and there are certainly many common elements between the two (most notably, the use of avatars). However, for most of the online spaces considered in this study, there are no established sets of gaming objectives that require completion in order for users to 'advance' to new areas of the virtual environment. In this respect, the online spaces considered in this study offer a predominantly self-directed environment in which users are able to select which activities they choose to participate in. Thus whilst some of the online spaces may have some self-contained

'mini' games, the online environment is generally designed for users to direct their own forms of play (whether alone or with others). As with the social functions described above, the types of gaming and play available vary between online spaces. Virtual pet websites offer a slightly more structured environment in comparison to virtual worlds, however users still have the ability to choose between different kinds of activities.

c) Design and Development

The final features of online spaces considered here are the processes of their design and production. The design of online spaces varies considerably to that of other types of young people's media. In the first instance, they are almost always subject to on-going design and development. Rather than being treated as finished products upon their release, the majority of young people's online spaces remain in a constant, recursive, state of re-design and development. In this way, online spaces can shift to meet the changing demands of their user base. For example, if a particular theme becomes increasingly popular in youth culture (e.g. vampires and werewolves), an online space can be quickly adapted to incorporate elements of this theme into its design (e.g. vampire/werewolf costumes for avatars). Such recursive and on-going design also requires new tools and methods for gauging users' needs and wishes. As such, many firms now attempt to create more 'intimate' relationships between their designers and users. This has included a range of mediated forms of connectivity, incorporating: newsletters, in-game interactions and social media campaigns. One of the most interesting examples in this respect has come from the CEO of the Moshi Monsters franchise, Michael Acton-Smith, who has self-styled himself as 'Mr Moshi'. As 'Mr Moshi', Acton-Smith regularly attends events for the launch of Moshi Monster products, at bookshops and toy stores, in order to meet with users and their parents. Though a rather unique example, this thesis will explore a range of different ways that media corporations have attempted to connect with their users.

Finally, the design of online spaces has increasingly been framed in terms of greater user participation. Though this does not amount to a positioning of users as 'co-creators' (cf. Banks, 2013; Taylor, 2009), many corporations regularly attempt to consult and engage with users at different points in the design of new product features. This movement towards 'inviting' user participation is a central theme of the thesis, particularly in relation to the enrolment of users and the framing of their participation within design and production processes. All of the above points have significant implications for how young people's media are designed and created, but also for the framing and construction of children and young people as participatory media users.

The Children and Youth Online Media Market

The children and youth online media market is broadly made up of two main types of media corporations: large-scale media corporations and small-scale start-up firms. The former group is predominantly made up of well-established corporations with a strong international presence in the children and youth media markets, including: the BBC, Viacom (owners of Nickelodeon), Mattel, Ganz, and the Walt Disney Company. The majority of these corporations are either broadcasters or toy manufacturers who have only gradually attempted to branch out into the online and digital media markets. These firms often already have an established brand presence within the media market and significantly benefit from existing franchises and content which are already familiar to many consumers. Their legacy as broadcasters or manufacturers has also meant that these firms have often been cautious in their attempts to capitalize on the online and digital media markets. Much of the BBC's initial online output for children was comprised of homepages to accompany existing televisual content. However, in the last few years many of these firms have begun to experiment more with new kinds of online spaces that have no specific connection to existing franchises. This includes, for example, the CBBC game *Adventure Rock* and Nickelodeon's virtual world *Monkey Quest*.

The second category of media corporations is predominantly made up of newcomers to the children and youth media market. Rather than starting with existing media properties, many of these firms rely on a single media product, which they seek to develop into a profitable franchise. Many of these firms might be regarded (initially at least) as 'start-ups', relying heavily on investor support and on-going market testing to get their franchise off the ground. Two of the earliest online spaces created by firms in this category include *Neopets*, in 1999, and *Habbo Hotel*, in 2000. In more recent years this market has rapidly expanded to include online spaces such as: *Moshi Monsters*, *Stardoll*, *Bin Weevils*, and *Maplestory*. Whilst the corporations in the first group are primarily centred in the United States (with just one exception), the start-ups in this second category are based in a range of countries, including both Asia and Europe. The UK has been particularly successful at generating start-ups in the youth digital media market, including Mind Candy (*Moshi Monsters*), Bin Weevils, Ltd. (*Bin Weevils*), and Fight My Monster, Ltd. (*Fight My Monster!*).

In some instances the success of a start-up has led to their acquisition by one of the larger media corporations. The most notable instances of this have been the purchase of *Club Penguin* by The Walt Disney Company in 2005 for $160 million and the purchase of *Neopets* by Viacom (the owners of Nickelodeon) for $350 million in 2007 (Halliday, 2010). Such purchases are significant in highlighting the extremely competitive nature of the online media industry, with start-up firms producing many of the most successful online media franchises. The response by some larger corporations has been to buy out and adopt existing successful properties and to incorporate them into their existing brands rather than produce new products from the ground up. There have, however, been a number of larger corporations that have created their own successful online spaces, including Mattel's *Barbie Girls World*, Ganz's *Webkinz*, and Nickelodeon's *Monkey Quest*.

The creation of virtual worlds and online spaces has proven to be an extremely profitable venture for both large and small corporations. However, the means by which such profit is generated has significantly changed over the past few years, with firms shifting their focus from advertising and purchases based within an online

environment, to wider licensing and merchandising deals. Earlier virtual worlds, such as *Habbo Hotel*, largely relied on users making purchases 'in-game' (for example, buying virtual objects and outfits or investing in premium membership schemes.) Many commercial online spaces have also profited through advertising deals with third parties. This can range from placing advertising banners 'in-game' – for example on loading screens, pop-up windows, or at the edges of a user's screen – to incorporating 'immersive' advertising into regular game play – for example creating branded objects or experiences that users can engage and interact with.

More recently, a number of firms have begun to expand the franchise of their online space through the creation of licensing and merchandising deals. Perhaps the most successful firm in this respect has been Mind Candy, the owner of *Moshi Monsters*, who have set up partnerships with a range of firms to produce licenced merchandising. This has included: trading cards, a magazine, toys, Nintendo DS games, various books and, most recently, *Happy Meal* toys in partnership with the fast food chain McDonalds. According to Kzero, the expansion of an online space's franchise via licensing and merchandising deals has greatly increased the 'monetization conversion' for in-game purchases (Kzero Worldwide, 2013). In other words, by selling other tie-in products or media, many firms have also greatly increased the chances of users spending money on in-game purchases. A further innovation in this respect has been to tie the purchase of 'physical' products to 'virtual' items. Purchasing a *Moshi Monsters* play set, for example, provides a code that enables a child to unlock further virtual items in-game. The game series *Skylanders* – a virtual world console game by Activision – takes this a step further by directly linking the purchase of action figures to available in-game avatars.

Measuring the success of a particular virtual world or online space has been subject to significant debate by market analysts and academics. Kzero, the virtual world analytics firm mentioned above, holds a considerable monopoly on measuring competition between products within the virtual world through its quarterly 'Universe Charts' of virtual worlds and MMOs (massively multiplayer online games). These charts arrange the most popular, and up and coming, virtual worlds according

to a number of variables including: target age group, launch date, and number of registered user accounts. It is the latter variable that is of particular interest as this is the most frequently employed measurement of a virtual world's relative size and success. The number of registered users refers to the total number of accounts that have been created by users since the website's launch. Its reliability as a measure of either size or success has, however, been questioned. Boellstorff et al. have argued that the measure doesn't account for users with multiple accounts or the differences between regular and infrequent users (2012: 60). Such figures may also include dormant accounts, where users have ceased using the service but have not deleted their account. Whilst I occasionally make reference to some of these user figures over the course of the thesis, they are not treated as concrete or definitive numbers of an online space's day-to-day users. Nonetheless, the figures remain important within the industry and the number of registered users is one of the primary ways that corporations publically define the success of their online space against their competitors.

Research Questions

1. What role do young people play in the shaping and development of online spaces?

One of the main concerns of this study is the extent to which children and young people are contributors and participants in the development of online spaces. As discussed above, media corporations have increasingly sought to 'invite' young people to volunteer their time to help in the development of new product features. Such contributions can range from completing surveys and questionnaires, to participating in beta tests and focus groups. One important aspect of this study will be to consider the role of young people within design practices and product development processes. However, this thesis will not solely be confined to those forms of participation elicited and regarded as 'valuable' by media corporations. Instead, the study will also look at a wide range of different ways that users engage with online spaces and make contributions to its on-going development. As such,

children and young people's media participation will form a central theme throughout the course of this thesis.

2. At what spatial and temporal points are young people able to participate in the unfolding development of online spaces?

As mentioned earlier, one of the most significant characteristics of young people's online spaces is their on-going design and production. This development process positions online spaces as particularly unique products in the children and youth media markets, able to be adjusted and tweaked in order to meet shifting consumer demands. To this end, the current thesis shifts attention away from a 'linear' view of product development, looking instead at the dispersal of activity at interlinked but separate moments. One of the central concerns of this thesis is to explore at what temporal and spatial junctures young people are able to participate in the development of online. Rather than focusing on young people's media participation as framed only at the 'moment of use', this thesis explores how and on what terms young people are invited to participate at different points in the development of online spaces. As such, close attention is paid to the processes of mediation that link moments of the development process together, enabling overlaps between the offices of designers and the bedrooms of users.

3. How is young people's participation configured in the development of online spaces and their broader media markets?

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore how and on what terms young people are framed as participants in the development of online media spaces. As we'll see in the next chapter, much of the existing research on young people's media participation is isolated from corporate practices and market processes. Instead, the young media user has predominantly been conceived in academic research as a figure independent of markets, treated instead as a 'creative' or 'learning' subject confined to 'local' moments of use. The aim of this thesis is not to pursue an approach that emphasises the power of the market over young people as

consumers, but rather to understand the terms of young people's participation within these market processes. If media corporations are 'inviting' more significant contributions from young people in the development of their products, then we must consider on what terms this occurs and how 'even' this relationship is. Rather than seeing the young consumer as an autonomous figure, we need to begin thinking about how the contributions of users are made possible, but also delimited, within economic and production processes.

Mapping Out the Thesis

Chapter 2 – Shifting Markets, Agencies and Relationalities: A Literature Review

This chapter starts to develop the theoretical framework of this thesis. It initially begins by considering the scope of research into young people's online media participation and, more specifically, their participation in the development online spaces. The chapter then goes on to focus on how agency and participation have emerged as key focal point in the study of young people's online media – primarily in terms of the different ways in which young people engage with online media. Two main criticisms are developed in relation to existing approaches to children's agency in their use of online media: first, that the predominant focus of research has been on children as 'active' and 'creative' media users. And secondly, that little consideration has been given to the broader media assemblages in which young people's media activities are situated. By way of re-dressing this imbalance, the chapter looks at recent discussions of agency in the sociology of childhood and new economic sociology. Through these approaches, an initial framework is developed that examines young people's media agency as embedded within broader market processes and socio-material media assemblages.

Chapter 3 – Tracing Young People's Participation Across Online Spaces: A Methodological Account

Following on from the literature review, this chapter attempts to outline a methodological approach that enables us to trace to the configuration of young people's participation across the development of online spaces. This chapter initially considers the development of the virtual ethnographic approach and its attempts to adapt traditional ethnographic tools to digital environment. Two main criticisms are made of this approach. First, that it presumes a separation of the 'online' and 'offline' from the outset. And secondly, that when this approach has been adopted in relation to online spaces, such as virtual worlds, the focus has primarily been on the perspective of users and has thus been limited to participation as framed at the 'point of use'. In order to address these issues, this chapter looks toward the multi-sited ethnography as a way of examining the mediated activities and process that shape participation across an online space's development. In this way, the chapter explores how we might examine the unfolding development of online spaces across different temporalities and spatialities, whilst avoiding privileging certain 'determining instances' (Lash & Lury, 2007: 19). The remainder of the chapter focuses on the biographical development of the project and provides a reflexive account of my role as the researcher.

Chapter 4 – Design, 'Activation' and Mediation: Young People's Participation in the Development of a Virtual World

This is the first empirical chapter of the thesis, drawing on a case study of virtual world *Habbo Hotel* and its parent company Sulake. The focus of this chapter is on the processes and practices by which young people come to be framed and configured as participants within the design of online spaces. This chapter introduces the concept of user 'activation'. Here, activation is taken to mean the process of enrolling and mobilising young people's participation in the development of an online space – of positioning them as 'active' participants. Though we find a substantial amount of celebratory rhetoric of 'active' users in the rhetoric of Sulake's designers, there are nonetheless significant limitations on this participation in practice. In the Sulake staffs' descriptions of design practice we find that user contributions to an online space's development are generally confined to specific

temporal and spatial moments, and to restricted forms of activity. This chapter also considers how the activation of young people's participation occurs through various mediatory processes across a range of intermediary devices. In the first instance, we see how the virtual world is, itself, positioned as an intermediary device, enabling users to be observed and recruited by designers. This chapter then goes on to consider other intermediary devices, including social media platforms such as Twitter. In this way, this chapter attempts to map the spatial and temporal arrangement of user participation in the development of online spaces, and how this is specifically configured through attempts to mobilise young people as 'active' participants.

Chapter 5 – Aligning Media, Platforms, and Audiences

The next chapter of the thesis is based on a case study of the CBBC multi-platform programme *Bamzooki*. In contrast to chapter four, the online space is part of a cross-platform assemblage in which young people's participation and engagement is spread across different screens and devices. The first part of this chapter is concerned with how the online space is designed in relation to other platforms, specifically: television programmes and computer software. Particular attention is paid to the BBC's 'broadcaster heritage', and how the development of the *Bamzooki* online space is defined in terms of a broader shift from young people as users of single to multiple platforms. The second part of this chapter turns our attention towards how users are framed as participants in multi-platform assemblages. Returning to the notion of 'activation', this section of the chapter considers how *Bamzooki's* production team attempted to 'smooth' the user transition between platforms by cultivating an affective experience that elicits a sense of scale and movement across the show's media. This relies on a specific configuration of young people as 'active sense-making' participants whose experience is shaped by their navigation between platforms.

Chapter 6 – Digital Disruptions: Trust, Stability and Responsibility

In contrast to the previous two chapters, chapter six shifts the focus away from the 'successful' configuration of young people's participation, looking instead towards its disruption and breakdown. Returning to case studies of both Sulake and the BBC's children's department, this chapter examines instances where an unexpected disruption young people's everyday participation and engagement with a media provokes a 'negative' emotional response from users. This chapter begins by considering how such events are framed as particularly disruptive to children and young people's participation. In particular, we consider framings of younger users as 'sensitive' to sudden or widespread change in the design of an online space, and also of users as sharing 'intimate' attachments to particular online spaces or brands. The chapter then goes on to consider how media corporations attempt to monitor and mediate disruptions to user participation, devising methods of measurement to judge the emotional responses of users. The latter part of the chapter examines how corporations attempt to mend and repair young people's participation and their relationship to an online space. In the first instance, this involves consideration of how firms adjust their practices to fix present disruptions or prevent future disruptions from occurring. In the second instance, this concerns how corporations are positioned as responsible not only for the safety of young people but also the affective configuration of their media participation.

Chapter 7 – Proximal Relations Between Corporations and Fans

This chapter looks at a case study of user-created *Habbo* 'fansites' and their relationship to Sulake. Fansites offer a particularly interesting case study as they are online spaces that are not owned by media corporations, but nonetheless share a close proximity with corporately owned online spaces. This chapter considers how the proximity between Sulake and Habbo's fansites acts as a site of constant negotiation around young people's participation in the Habbo brand. The first part of the chapter examines how Sulake attempts to manage and administrate *Habbo's* fansite community via rules and guidelines, rewards schemes, copyright law, and

classificatory systems. In particular, this chapter looks at how Sulake labels 'good' and 'bad' fansites and how this enacts a hierarchy of proximity that shapes which shapes fansites' participation in the Habbo brand. The chapter then goes on to consider the practices of the fansite members and to examine the ways in which they attempt to navigate the participatory frameworks set out by Sulake. Particular attention is paid to the temporal proximity of the fansites to *Habbo* and how fansite members attempt to remain ahead of the virtual world's development by publishing news about upcoming design features ahead of other fansites. As such, this chapter considers how fansites attempt to establish themselves as key intermediaries between users and *Habbo* by bringing the proximity between the fan and corporate online spaces.

Chapter 8 – Young People's Mediated Participation Across Online Spaces

The final empirical chapter of this thesis considers the configuration of young people's participation in online spaces as part of their everyday lives. The first part of this chapter considers how young people access and participation in online spaces is mediated by a variety of factors, including: parental rules and routines, home architecture, safety software, and material resources. By focusing on the mediation of access to online spaces, this chapter considers the 'domestic' assemblages that enable or constrain the ability of young people's ability to participate in online spaces. The second part of the chapter moves on to consider the intermediary role of online spaces in young people's everyday relationships and friendships. Rather than viewing children's lives as split between the 'online' and 'offline', the chapter considers mediations across devices, people and spaces. In this way, children's peer relationships do not occur in either 'offline' or 'online' spaces, but rather are *always* subject to overlapping and mediation between different times and spaces.

Chapter 9 – Conclusions

The final chapter draws together many of the key themes and concepts developed over the course of the thesis. In particular, the chapter considers the shifting status

of children and young people as 'active' participants in new media markets, and the implications of this shift for theorisations of young people's economic agency.

This chapter has sought to provide an overview of the development of young people's online spaces and the markets in which they're embedded. It has established the central research questions of this thesis and has provided an overview for how the thesis will unfold. The next chapter shifts focus towards some of the main theoretical and analytical questions of the thesis. Engaging with key literature in media studies, the sociology of childhood, science and technology studies (STS) and economic sociology, this chapter will focus on young people's media participation and economic agency have been framed and understood.

Chapter 2 – Shifting Markets, Agencies and Relationalities: A Literature Review

Introduction

The aim of the following chapter is to begin to establish a theoretical framework for researching how children and young people's agency and participation are defined in the development of online media. The previous chapter set out a number of ways in which the growth of children and young people's online media has significantly re-shaped how media are designed and produced, and the role that young people play in product development processes. This chapter picks up on these themes by beginning to assess how suitable existing theoretical frameworks are as a means of accounting for these changes, particularly in relation to the re-configuration young people's participation within design and production processes. To this end, the present chapter considers the following questions:

- How has children and young people's agency and participation been framed in relation to their use of online media?
- How might we understand the configuration of young people's participation as occurring within extensive media ecosystems and market assemblages?

The first part of this chapter begins by providing an overview of existing research into children and young people's online media participation. Over the course of this section I will consider how the study of children and young people's media has been carried out to date, and consider which issues have received the most and least attention. Having situated the present study in relation to existing empirical research, the remainder of the chapter will focus on beginning to develop the overarching theoretical framework of the thesis. In the first instance this will involve considering how children's agency and media use have been framed by theorists and researchers in the field of children and young people's media. I will then reflect on how the present study might adapt and adjust existing approaches by considering

contributions from recent work in the sociology of childhood, research into children's consumer cultures, and economic sociology. Across these approaches, I will focus in particular on notions of 'agencement' and 'assemblage' as potential means of re-framing the relationship between young people and online media. The final part of this chapter will examine approaches that examine product consumption and use as part of wider market and economic processes, focusing in particular on theories of 'domestication' and 'qualification'. Both theories offer different ways of thinking about the design products, but also of how user agency is configured within a product's development. As such, the final part of the chapter will consider how we might frame user participation in the design of product as embedded within broader production assemblages.

Children, Young People and the Internet: The Story So Far

Current Trends in Young People's Internet Use

The online media landscape of children and young people is transforming at a rapid pace and a significant amount of quantitative research has attempted to map these changes across the UK and Europe. Most notably, the 'EU Kids Online' project, in both its first (2006-9) and second (2009-11) iterations, has provided a significant window into the trends and patterns of children's internet use across Europe (Livingstone & Haddon 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011). Drawing on research studies conducted across the continent, the EU Kids Online projects have provided data on individual nation states as well as collaboratively pooling data for cross-national comparisons and figures. Within the UK, a number of national studies have been conducted over the past decade. At the LSE, the UK Children Go Online (2005) project provided one of the first substantial overviews of growing internet use amongst 9-19 year olds. The UK media regulator Ofcom has also published regular statistical figures on the changing media patterns of children and young people in the UK. One of the most notable developments in Ofcom's reports over the past decade has been the gradual shift in research focus from the television to a broader range of media, most notably the internet and mobile devices.

The present section will briefly explore some of the key trends highlighted by the most recent research studies mentioned above, namely the EU Kids Online II study (2011) and Ofcom's *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report* (2012). A more detailed overview of the research into young people's internet use can be found in any of these reports. Instead the present section will focus on highlighting a select number of trends that are of substantial interest to the present study.

According to the most recent EU Kids Online surveys, 87% of European children aged 9-16 years currently use the internet at home. In the UK, this figure noticeably rises to 95% (EU Kids Online II, 2011). Providing a more detailed break down by age, Ofcom suggests that this figure differs markedly by age, with older children being significantly more likely to access the internet at home than younger children (Ofcom, 2012: 17). For 5-7 year olds the figure is 58%, for 8-11 year olds the figure jumps to 87% and for 12-15 year olds the figure is 95% (ibid.). In their most recent study, Ofcom made the decision to survey the parents of 3-4 year olds for the first time and found that 37% currently used the internet at home (2012: 5). Thus whilst the EU Kids Online study found that the average age that UK children access the internet for the first time is currently eight years old (EU Kids Online II, 2011), the number of younger children using the internet suggests this may change in the coming years. Since 2007 the number of children using the internet has significantly risen across all age groups (particularly in the 8-11 bracket, rising from 65% to 87%) (Ofcom, 2012: 31). Between 2011 and 2012, Ofcom has noted that there has been the least substantial change in the percentage of children aged 5-15 accessing the internet, effectively plateauing at approximately 82% for the present moment[4] (Ofcom, 2012: 28).

In addition to growing numbers of internet users across all age groups, there have also been substantial changes in the way that children and young people access the internet. With the growth and proliferation of smart phones, tablets and other

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[4] Note that this figure is substantially lower than the percentage given by the EU Kids II study as it also incorporates 5-8 year olds.

mobile devices, the means by which young people access the internet has become less tethered to home or school computers. The use of mobile phones and tablets to access the internet at home has notably increased between 2011 and 2012 (Ofcom, 2012: 17). For 12-14 year olds this has risen from 29% to 44% for mobile phones and 3% to 11% for tablets (Ofcom, 2012: 39). Though not nearly as high a percentage as the 12-14 year olds, both the 5-7 and 8-11 age groups have also seen extremely substantial increases in internet access via mobile phones (2% to 5% and 9% to 12%, respectively) and tablets (1% to 6% and 3% to 9%, respectively) (Ibid.). Interestingly, the use of laptops and PCs to access the internet has not dropped as a result of this uptake in internet-capable devices. Instead the Ofcom report suggests that mobile devices are being used "very much *in addition*" to laptops and PCs (2012: 38)

The final substantial trends to consider are the types of activities taken up by children and young people whilst using the internet. According the EU Kids Online II reports, the most common online activities for 9-16 year olds in Europe are (in descending order): school work (85%), games (83%), watching videos (76%) and using instant messenger service (62%) (Livingstone et al., 2011: 33). Of particular interest to the present study, the use of virtual worlds in the UK lies at 19% (EU Kids Online II, 2011). One of the most significant findings of the EU Kids study was that most young people are 'receivers' rather than 'creators' of content online (Ibid.). In the UK 71% of 9-16 year olds reported watching a video online, whilst only 46% reported having ever posted any photos, videos or music online (Ibid.).

According to Ofcom's (2012) report, the ranking of online activities substantially differs across age groups. For 5-7 year olds games were the most popular activity at 47%, whilst schoolwork and homework accounted for only 38% (Ofcom, 2012: 77). The use of avatar websites (predominantly virtual worlds) was the third most popular activity for this age group at 33% – substantially higher than the 19% reported by the EU Kids Online study (Ibid.). For 8-11 and 12-15 year olds, schoolwork and homework were the most popular reported activities, though more so for the older age group (82% versus 67%) (Ibid.). Games remained a popular activity for 8-11 year olds (51%), as did avatar websites (36%) (Ibid.). In contrast to

the younger age groups, social networking websites were reported as the third most popular activity for 12-15 year olds at 76% (Ibid.). Only 15% of 12-15 year olds reported using avatar websites (Ibid.).

Before concluding this part of the present section, it is also worth noting some substantial gender differences. According to Ofcom, girls are significantly more like to use avatar websites that boys, particularly amongst 5-7 year olds (39% of girls versus 27% of boys) and 8-11 year olds (42% of girls versus 30% of boys) (Ofcom, 2012: 77). By contrast, boys are much more likely to report using games. Though games did not feature as one of the most common online activities for 12-15 year olds, 60% of boys in this bracket (compared to 34% of girls) reported playing games online as a regular activity (Ibid.).

The research by the EU Kids Online project and Ofcom provide a number of important insights into the demographics and shifting habits of young people's online media use in the UK. In particular, the Ofcom report highlights the importance of exploring differences amongst children and young people across age and gender. Similarly, the EU Kids Online report indicates that differences also exist at an international level, with higher than average internet access by young people in the UK compared to the European average. In the following part of this section I begin to explore how academic researchers from the UK, Europe and North America have approached the relationship between young people and the internet through more qualitative approaches, focusing in particular on research into young people's virtual worlds and online spaces.

Existing Research on Young People's Online Spaces

Academic research into children and young people's online media use has developed into a distinctly interdisciplinary field over the past decade. Though primarily dominated by media researchers, the field has also attracted researchers from disciplines such as sociology (Chung & Grimes, 2005), education (Merchant et al., 2013), anthropology (Ito et al., 2010) geography (Holloway & Valentine, 2002), and

economics (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). As a result, the field has diversified into a wide range of research interests, covering topics such as: online risks and safety (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2012; Oswell, 1999), literacy and learning (Carrington, 2013; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010; Marsh, 2011; Marsh, 2013), play and creativity (Buckingham & Willett, 2006; Ito et al., 2009; Sefton-Green, 1998); identity and social relationships (boyd, 2008; Buckingham, 2008; Henderson et al., 2002; Kafai et al., 2010), and consumption and commercialisation (Grimes & Shade, 2005; Seiter, 2007). In the present section I focus on the development of one particular sub-section of this emerging research field: the study of young people's virtual worlds and online spaces. In many respects, the study of children's online spaces has mirrored this broader research agenda, with researchers paying particularly close attention to the areas of learning (primarily in terms of literacy), participation, play and commercialism.
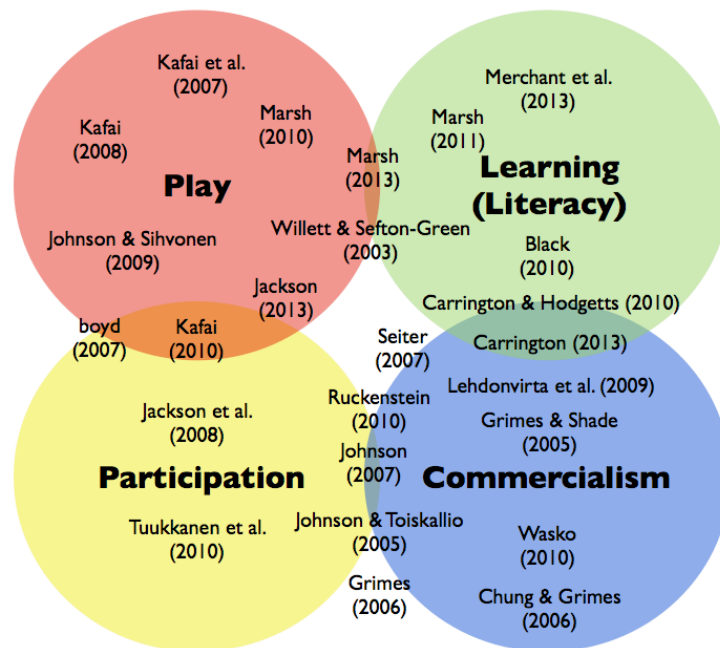
Figure 2 - Existing Research on Young People's Online Spaces

Figure 2 provides a general visual summary of current research into children and young people's social online spaces, with the circles representing the four main research themes. Of course not all studies fall neatly into a single bracket, and so

figure 2 is an attempt to plot studies in terms of their proximity to different research themes. One other point to note is the date of individual publications. Despite the rapid growth of virtual worlds and online spaces in the past decade, academic interest in this area has been relatively slow to take off. Though some studies were beginning to emerge in the early 2000s (for example Willet & Sefton-Green, 2003), the majority of existing research was not carried until 2005 onwards. In this sense, the study of children and young people's online spaces remains a research area still in its infancy. What follows is a discussion that attempts to position the present study in relation to existing research in this field, whilst also indicating how it might contribute to its continued development.

Research into young people's online spaces has received different emphasis across different geographical regions. In the UK, research studies have largely centred on children's online spaces as sites of both play and learning. Willett and Sefton-Green's (2003) early study of children using the virtual world *Habbo Hotel* looked at the way informal learning took place via peer play and talk. Since then, numerous other studies have considered the various ways in which virtual worlds and online spaces act as important sites for the development of children's literacies. A number of these studies have looked at the way that language learning occurs through peer play in online spaces (Marsh, 2011; 2013), whilst others have considered the forms of textual discourse and rhetoric embedded within particular commercial online spaces (Black, 2010; Black et al., 2013; Carrington, 2013). As an example of the latter, Carrington and Hodgetts (2010) provided a critical discussion of the available language tools in the virtual world *BarbieGirl*, describing how "the site appears to be built around a […] model of girlhood that unproblematically encourages a particular gendered consumption" (2010: 681). Researchers in this strand have thus largely expressed cautious optimism about the potential of virtual worlds as tools for learning, whilst remaining wary of their commercial origins and the potential limitations this imposes.

Elsewhere in Europe, particularly in Finland, a steady stream of research has emerged around virtual worlds. *Habbo Hotel*, one of the first virtual worlds for young

people, was initially produced in Finland and therefore it is no surprise that it has featured as a prominent case study within Finnish studies. Initial research in Finland focused on the forms of play and subcultures that emerged through the interactions between users in virtual worlds (Johnson & Sihvonen, 2009). However, over the past few years, there has been a significantly greater focus on the economic and commercial aspects of online spaces. The close proximity of Finnish researchers to the main production site of *Habbo* (in Helsinki) has, perhaps, enabled a particularly unique angle of examining the institutional design practices of the virtual world's parent company. Focusing on *Habbo*, Finnish researchers have covered a range of issues including the development of user-centred design practices (Johnson, 2010) and forms of user research (Johnson & Toiskallio, 2005). Finnish researchers have also considered the commercial and economic components of virtual worlds, particularly around 'virtual economies' and 'virtual commodities' (Lehdonvirta et al. 2009).

Research studies from Finland have, therefore, largely been concerned with the commercial and industry practices that shape young people's online spaces. In most instances the children and young people who use virtual worlds feature as a secondary figure in research, and are primarily defined as a consumer or economic actor. This stands in contrast with the UK research strand, which has primarily adopted a 'child-centred' approach, focusing on the individual experiences of children engaging with online spaces. As a result, Finnish studies have given only limited consideration to the specific experiences of young people as virtual world users (as opposed, to say, adults). There are, however, some notable exceptions. Ruckenstein (2010), for example, provides a critical reading of the commercial practices of the virtual world industry, examining the economic value acquired through young people's creative participation (or 'labour'). Moving away from commercial and industry practices entirely, Tuukkanen et al. (2010) have focused on notions of participation that emerge around online spaces, examining how virtual worlds have contributed to young people's notion of 'citizenship'.

Similar to Finnish researchers, academics in the United States have demonstrated an interest in the commercial aspects of young people's online spaces. In contrast to studies from Finland, however, these have primarily related to concerns around the commodification of children's online play and considerable focus has been given to the marketing and commercial practices of media corporations (Chung and Grimes, 2006; Grimes and Shade, 2005; Wasko, 2010). US researchers have also placed greater emphasis on understanding the specific issues of producing online spaces for children and young people, (Jenkins 1998; Seiter, 2005). Though based on video games, Cassell and Jenkins' (2000) collection of essays considers how different forms of design can invite greater media participation from girls. Play has also emerged as a significant component of US studies, particularly in relation to creative user engagement with online spaces (boyd, 2008; Kafai, 2010) and the potential educational value that might be derived from virtual worlds (Kafai et al., 2007). In this respect, US studies share many similarities with UK studies, particularly in terms of placing the child as a central figure in research.

Despite the geographical diversity of research into young people's online spaces, a number of key themes have frequently re-emerged. First, there has been a recurrent acknowledgement that online spaces are, predominantly, commercial spaces. There has, however, been significant variation in the degree of emphasis researchers have given to the commercial features of online spaces. Though UK researchers have frequently focused on issues relating to learning and literacy, they have remained conscious of the commercial roots of the majority of young people's online spaces (Carrington, 2013; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010). In contrast, researchers in Finland and the US have placed much greater emphasis on studying the commercial aspects of online spaces, though with significantly different emphasis on the role of young people within these processes. The second continuity across research has been the emphasis placed on online spaces as an important feature of young people's everyday lives. This has, again, been subject to notable variation as researchers have placed greater or lesser emphasis on topics of play, learning, social interaction, participation, consumption etc.

The present study shares concerns with studies from each of these different, geographically distributed, research strands. Similar to many of the UK and US studies mentioned, this thesis is concerned with the experience of online spaces that is specific to children and young people. As the methodology and data chapters will show, children and young people's voices provide a significant contribution to this thesis. However, the present study is not *exclusively* child-centred. Like many of the Finnish researchers, I also believe it is important to consider the broader market processes and practices that shape the creation, development and management of young people's online spaces. Children and young people's media engagement is not a sphere of action separate from these broader commercial and market processes – it is deeply embedded within them. As such, the present study attempts to contribute to this existing literature by accounting for the specificities of young people and children as users of online spaces, whilst also positioning their experiences within the broader market and commercial processes. The aim of the remaining sections of this chapter is to outline the theoretical framework that will enable such an investigation to take place.

Children and New Media: Theorising Agency and Participation

Signalling a key turning point in the development of information and communication technologies, the arrival of the internet also heralded a significant discursive shift in popular understandings of children and young people's media use. The gradual movement of the internet from the unfamiliar to the everyday was accompanied by a growth in rhetoric and discourses that either welcomed or feared its potential 'impacts' on society. Whilst John Perry Barlow (1996) was prophesising the new freedoms that would emerge as a by-product of a networked technology that was "naturally independent" of governance, others were extolling its potential benefits for future generations. In his book *Growing Up Digital* (1998), Don Tapscott proclaimed that the arrival of the internet in family homes had initiated a fundamental shift in young people's media use. He described how the 'N-Generation' were swiftly adapting to the internet and had quickly overtaken their parents in technological competence. Thus he argued:

If parents think that their kids are catching on to the new technologies much faster than adults, they're right. It's easier for kids. Because N-Gen children are born with technology, they assimilate it (1998: 40).

Tapscott's rhetoric can largely be seen as at the more optimistic end of a spectrum that celebrated the arrival of new technologies and viewed young people as having their agency rapidly extended by the internet.

Though some, including Tapscott (2008), have continued to extoll the virtues of the internet for younger generations, others have taken a more critical stance. Some of these criticisms have focused on Tapscott's predominantly deterministic account of technology's impact and effect on a particular generation (Buckingham, 2007). As Buckingham suggests, "generational differences are seen to be *produced* by technology, rather than as a result of other social, historical or cultural forces" (emphasis in original, 2007: 47). Researchers such as Livingstone (2003) have also questioned the empirical basis of Tapscott's argument, arguing that young people's technological expertise and competence have been overstated. She found that whilst children claimed to have higher technological competence than their parents, there were still many areas where they lacked confidence. Thus whilst some writers, such as Tapscott, have heralded the internet as an unequivocally positive force for change for young people's agency, others have taken a more cautious position.

Though recent studies have tended to offer more cautious accounts of young people's relationships to the internet, the question of children and young people's agency in relation to new media has remained an important topic of debate. One particular area of debate has been the extent to which children might be regarded as 'active' and creative in their media use. Over the past decade a growing number of studies have examined an increasingly diverse set of ways through which young people are able to exercise different forms of agency in their use of new media. This has ranged from topics such as identity performance through profile pages and avatars (boyd, 2008; Kafai et al., 2010)) to the development of technical skills

through the creation of webpages and video 'mash-ups' (Lange & Ito, 2010; Stern, 2007). Within studies such as these, the theme of creativity has become particularly significant, as researchers have sought to explore the extent to which young people can become 'producers' of media content in their own right[5]. Here there has been a significant amount of overlap with the notion of a 'participatory media culture' as advanced by academics such as Jenkins. Some scholars have, however, offered a more cautious note to these discussions. Livingstone, for example, warns that the types of 'creativity' that the majority of young people are engaged with online is "highly formatted" and "often commercialized" (2010: 60). This is not to say that young people are not engaged in the creative forms of media production, but rather that we also need to account for young people's agency in engaging with all forms of media, including those that are 'highly formatted' and 'commercial'.

One way of framing such discussions might be as a theoretical tussle in which the 'creative' agencies of young people are pitted against the structural and institutional frameworks of adult media corporations. Indeed, many of the key studies into children's online media have implicitly or explicitly drawn on theories that have attempted to 'resolve' the structure-agency divide (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003; Livingstone, 2010; Ito et al., 2010), particularly Giddens' theory of structuration (1986) and Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus (1977). In this way, children and young people's agencies are defined within the perimeters established by a media product's design and the institutional frameworks that govern the creation and distribution of that media. According to Livingstone:

> [when] children exert agency online […] they do so in the context of
> structures set by others – usually powerful adults […] Children creatively
> resist some adult pressures but […] succumb to others – commercial
> pressures that entice and entertain (2010: 32)

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[5] In the case of virtual worlds and online games, the issue of users as producers of content has emerged as a particularly complex issue. For example, the issue of whether the avatar and virtual property created in a game are the property of users or the corporation who own the servers which host the game environment and its content. See Grimes (2006) and Taylor (2009) for comprehensive discussions on these issues.

By adopting theories such as structuration, children's media scholars have attempted to frame children and young people's agency as shaped by adult-created institutions and frameworks. In this respect, children's agency is seen as the ability to be creative *within* the context of adult structures.

In a study of Nintendo's *Pokémon* franchise, Buckingham and Sefton-Green provide an in-depth consideration of how theories of structure and agency might provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of the consumption and production of children's media. They begin by suggesting that media franchises, such as *Pokémon*, often provide a range of activities that require users to exercise different skills and abilities; from remembering the names and stats of different *Pokémon*, to trading and collecting cards. Though they accept that such activities "positively *require* 'activity'" (2003: 380) from young people as consumers, they are nonetheless sceptical as to the extent to which young people are able to re-negotiate *the terms* of such activities. Therefore they suggest that young people's engagement with such media franchises:

> are predominantly dictated by forces or structures beyond their control. The practice of collecting cards, or playing the computer game, is to a large extent determined by the work of their designers – and indeed by the operations of the market [...] The rules that govern these cultural practices are therefore not, by and large, open to negotiation or change (2003: 379-80)

For Buckingham and Sefton-Green this becomes an issue of "'balancing out' structure and agency" (2003: 385) and, in the context of children's media, "allocating some of the power to the industry and the text, and reserving the rest of it for the audience" (Ibid.). Their proposed solution to this quandary is to focus on the concept of *activity*. In this instance, activity is not a form of, "independence or autonomy of power" (2003: 396), but rather a delineation of the forms of agency *invited* and *required* to engage with a particular media. In other words, media activities may

require users to be 'active', but the range of these activities is limited by the design of the media.

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003) make some important distinctions between 'agency' and 'activity'[6]. This raises particularly important questions in terms of the types of activities *desired* by media corporations and the forms of agency that users are able to exercise in their use of a particular media. There are, however, a number of issues that need to be to raised with regards to the adoption of an agency/structure model of children and young people's media. Though this model is certainly convenient as a means of understanding young people's agency as both enabled and constrained by the conditions of their engagement with media, it also has a number of limitations. Of most significance to the present discussion is the separation of not only agency and structure, but also of child and adult, consumer and producer, and consumption and production. This results in a rather awkward merging of dichotomies in which agency is explicitly aligned with the child and consumption, whilst structure is aligned with media institutions and the design and production of media 'texts'. The point of the present argument is not to suggest that categories of production/consumption or child/adult are becoming increasingly blurred, but rather that it presents an oversimplified and potentially limiting model for understanding children and young people's media.

Possibly the most problematic element of this model lies in the suggestion that questions of agency primarily reside with children and consumption practices. It implies that the agency of media producers is either a given or of little consequence to understanding children and young people's media. Furthermore, it leaves us with limited sense of where young people derive their agency from, only accounting for the instances where it is either enabled or restrained. As such, we need to consider how we account for young people's ability to participate in media activities in the first place. Furthermore, we also need to consider whether all young people are able to access the same kinds of agency and, if this is not the case, why? Whilst I agree

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[6] Similar distinctions between agency and activity have also been made by Silverstone (1994) and Morley (1993).

that greater emphasis needs to be given to how young people's agency is shaped, transformed and potentially constrained through the use of media, I am less convinced that theories derived from a structure-agency model provide the most appropriate framework. Consequently, the remainder of the present section attempts to consider how we might develop an alternate theorisation of children and young people's agency as media users. In the first instance this will involve looking at recent developments in the sociology of childhood and, secondly, looking at theories of agency and agencement developed in economic sociology.

Developments in the Sociology of Childhood

Though initially developed within separate disciplines, the study of children's media and the sociology of childhood have come to share a number of close theoretical ties. In the first instance, both treat children and young people as social actors worthy of attention in their own right. As such, they have both primarily adopted qualitative and child-centred research techniques as a way of investigating children and young people's lives. Secondly – and of primary relevance here – both have adopted very similar theoretical positions with regards to children's agency. The following extract summarises the sociology of childhood's approach to agency from one of its key initial texts:

> Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes (Prout & James, 2004: 8)

During its development in the mid 1990s, the sociology of childhood sought to a develop a theoretical approach that recognised children as social actors in their own right, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the structuring of children's lives via routines and institutions administered by adults. To this end, Giddens' theory of structuration initially proved to be a good fit for the emerging field, enabling

researchers to, "account for children as both constrained by structure and [as] agents acting in and upon structure" (Prout & James, 2004: 28).

In more recent years, however, the structuration approach has come under increasing scrutiny from within the sociology of childhood's ranks. The work of Nick Lee (2001), James Prout (2006) (who was one of the original advocates of a structuration approach), and Berry Mayall (2002) has been particularly important in this respect. Addressing the adoption of structuration theory in the early days of the sociology of childhood, Lee has identified a number of problematic assumptions carried over from Giddens' model. In the first instance, he suggests that the recognition of children as social actors has been treated as synonymous with the notion that they *possess* agency (2001: 130). Lee partly frames the decision to adopt Giddens' structuration theory as an attempt by the sociology of childhood to legitimate their field of study within mainstream 'adult' sociology. As such, he describes this as an effort to align the 'immature' sociology of childhood with the 'mature' mainstream sociology, by adopting its language and theoretical frameworks (2001: 126-7). As he describes, "To use mature sociology as a supplementary source of confidence, one must be able to speak its language, but speaking its language can commit one to ways of thinking that are indebted to standard adulthood" (2001: 125).

The second assumption identified by Lee is that the social agent of 'adult' social theory is one who is 'independent' and therefore, "able to act against convention to bring change" (2001: 129). Mayall has also been particularly critical of this view of agency, suggesting that, "Giddens' theory does seem to overstate the power of people to make a difference, and to understate social constraint or limitation" (2002: 32). Both sets of criticisms relate to a model of agency that emphasises the ability of social actors to shape and affect their everyday surroundings. For Lee, this issue is summarised in one key question, "where does the self-possession of agent come from?" (2001: 120). He suggests that rather than focusing on social actors as possessing agency independent of their surroundings, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the *dependent* origins of social action. Though the sociology of childhood

seeks to recognise children as actors in their own right, this does not necessitate their agentic independency. However, rather than creating a dichotomy in which children are dependent and adults are independent, Lee suggests that a framework of agency needs to account for dependencies of both.

To this end, Lee turns to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a possible avenue for re-thinking children's agency. In particular, he draws attention to ANT's relational framing of agency, which views social action as contingent on associations formed within socio-material assemblages. In this sense, any social actor (child or adult) is reliant and dependent upon a broader assemblage in the performance of any given action. Such assemblages are compromised of a range of relational ties, formed not only of human actors, but also non-human and material 'actants'. As such, Lee describes how:

> ANT gives an account of agency that does not rely on the independence and self-possession of the standard adult. Instead it emphasises incompleteness and dependency (2001: 130)

Lee is not alone in considering ANT as a possible theoretical framework for re-thinking children and young people's agency. Prout suggests that ANT offers the means of describing the "heterogeneous complexity" (2006: 81) of childhood, enabling researchers to see how both children and adults emerge "from the complex interplay, networking and orchestration of different natural, discursive, collective and hybrid materials" (Ibid.).

Such an approach also shifts away from traditional structure-agency model outlined by Giddens. Instead, ANT operates through a notion of actor and assemblage, rejecting the notion of separate scales between 'macro' structures and 'micro' interactions. Bruno Latour, one of the founding figures of ANT, outlines his criticisms of the 'actor/system quandary' as follows:

> The question is to decide whether the actor is 'in' a system or if the system is made up 'of' interacting actors. If only the vertiginous swing could come to a gentle stop […] But if you discover some happy medium between the two non-existing positions, what makes you so sure that this third position has not even less claim to existence? Should we try to compromise between actors and system, or should we go somewhere else? (2007: 169)

In this sense, ANT attempts to develop an approach that is always 'local'. For example, instead of viewing 'the family' as an abstract social institution or structure, ANT scholars would instead study the minute localised arrangements that *form* and *make up* what a family is on a day-to-day basis. In this way, what a family *is* can adapt and change according to shifts in localised assemblages. The introduction of mobile phones, for example, might initiate a shift in the way that families communicate or the types of rules that a parent might implement. Such an approach also has a significant impact on the framing of agency. Rather than seeing agency as *possessed* by an individual actor, ANT treats agency as the *achievement* of a whole assemblage. As Lee suggests, the ability to act is dependent on a specific socio-material arrangement being in place.

Though Prout and Lee have welcomed ANT's approach to agency as a means of theorising the broader assemblages on which children's everyday lives are dependent, other childhood theorists have offered more cautious notes. Like Prout and Lee, David Oswell has welcomed an approach that views children's agency as, "always relational and never a property" (2013: 270). However, he suggests that ANT's flattening of scale risks reducing our view of children's lives to "highly localised relations" (2013: 267). Oswell instead proposes that any study must account for the 'multiscalarity' and 'multidimensionality' of the circulation of children's agency (2013: 269). In contrast, Priscilla Alderson's (2013) critiques have focused on the anti-humanist elements of ANT's approach, particularly the suggestion that human actors and material actants are 'equal' in a network. Describing an ANT-inspired study of children attached to ventilators in an intensive care unit (see Place, 2000), Alderson highlights the "bionic conflation of metal and plastic machines with

vulnerable, sapient, sentient, beloved and irreplaceable children" (2013: 84). She suggests that ANT overlooks the value and affective relationalities that separate and differentiate children from material objects. Though critical of ANT, Alderson does not see structuration as a viable framework either. Sharing the views of Lee and Mayall, she suggests that Giddens' approach, "risks […] overestimating individuals' freedoms and responsibilities […] [and] denies great inequalities in people's skill, knowledge, status and resources" (2013: 103).

The shift within the sociology of childhood away from a structure-agency model, towards approaches that actively question the autonomy and self-possession of social agents, has significant implications for children and young people's media research. If key figures in the sociology of childhood have found it necessary to re-evaluate the adoption of a Giddensian model of agency, why haven't similar questions also been raised in children's media research? Surely a field that regularly deals with material and digital technologies would have the most to gain by considering the potential value of more materialist approaches.

However, questions also need to be raised of the sociology of childhood. Despite its shift in attention towards the materiality of children's everyday lives, only limited concern continues to be paid to the role of media and technology. As Buckingham suggests, the sociology of childhood has, "paid very little attention to culture, to the media, or even to children's use of commercially produced artefacts more generally, such as toys" (2007: 118). Despite emphasising the dependency of children's agency on material objects and assemblages, there remains only limited consideration of the role of media technologies and other commercial products within the sociology of childhood. The final part of this section begins to address both sets of criticisms by bridging recent developments in the sociology of childhood, with the concern for technologies and consumer products found in the study of children's media.

Theorising Children and Young People's Economic Agency and Agencement

So far we have considered two different approaches to children's agency. The first, inspired by structuration theory, views children's agency as defined against adult imposed structures and institutions. This approach leads to something of a theoretical seesaw in which children's agency is either seen as overstated or understated. As such, academics have sought to develop middle ground approaches, such as Buckingham & Sefton-Green's notion of 'activity'. The second approach, proposed by recent work in the sociology of childhood, looks towards actor-network theory and other materialist approaches as a way of framing young people as dependent on material networks and assemblages. This approach sidesteps the structure-agency quandary, theorising agency as distributed across socio-material arrangements.

Though this approach is not without its criticisms, the final part of this section will further consider how an ANT-inspired notion of agency might potentially benefit our understanding of children and young people's engagement with new media technologies and their broader market processes. I also wish to suggest that this requires a re-evaluation of how we frame children and young people's media consumption. In the first part of this section I criticised both the conflation of agency and consumption and the sidelining of production as merely a structuring element of children's media engagement. As such, I propose that any understanding of children's agency as media users cannot be confined merely to the act of consumption, and must instead consider broader social and material arrangements of both consumption *and* production.

To this end I wish to focus on two research fields that have a shared interest in understanding agency as embedded within economic and commercial assemblages: the study of children as economic actors (Chin, 2001; Cook, 2004; Zelizer, 1994; 2011; Seiter, 1995; Buckingham, 2011; Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010) and contemporary economic sociology – which has been greatly influenced by ANT over the past decade (Callon, 1998; Callon et al., 2007; MacKenzie et al., 2007; Pinch &

Swedberg, 2008). Despite common concerns around issues of consumption, production and market processes, both fields of research have remained relatively separate, focusing on either 'child' or 'adult' markets respectively. In the remainder of this section I attempt to explore the potential synthesis between these two fields of study, highlighting how each might contribute to development of a conceptual framework capable of addressing children and young people's agency in contemporary media markets.

To start with, we'll begin by considering some of the recent developments in the study of children as economic actors. One of the main features separating this field from the study of children and young people's media has been its commitment to studying young people as economic actors in the broadest possible sense. Rather than focusing on the act of consumption alone, studies in this field have addressed the role of children in markets across a wide range of economic practices, including: marketing and data mining (Chung & Grimes, 2005; Buckingham, 2011), 'informal' labour (Aitken et al., 2006; Zelizer, 2011), and retail store design (Cook, 2003). Discussing her work on children's economic value, Zelizer describes how issues of play and learning have dominated childhood studies, whilst, "children's economic practices have remained closeted, camouflaged" (2011: 214). As such, Zelizer and others have sought to understand children not only as the 'receiver' of goods, but also as important contributors to, "processes of production, consumption and distribution" (ibid.). Cook has similarly sought to take a wider view of children's economic market in his historical study of the children's clothing industry in North America. He argues that, "the child consumer is always, already embedded in market relations. Both historically over the twentieth century and ontogenetically, before birth" (2004: 5). In this respect, economic markets pervade children's lives beyond the act of consumption. As such, Cook argues that it is necessary to understand both the role of markets in children's lives and the role of children in economic markets.

Though the study of children as economic actors has set itself apart from more conventional research in childhood studies by its focus on wide-ranging economic processes, it has nonetheless remained distinct from broader economic sociology. In

part this might be due to a perpetuation of the idea that children's commercial and economic worlds are fundamentally separate from those of adults. Zelizer, for example, characterises children's economic activities as capable of detachment from the economic sphere of adults. She describes how, "Despite efforts to contain them, they [children] also establish segregated, partly autonomous spheres of production, consumption, and distribution of their own" (2011: 217). To support this claim, she describes activities such as children setting up lemonade stands, or trading food or toys in playgrounds. It's in this respect that I feel we risk drifting into the fallacy of seeing children and young people's economic activities as somehow entirely independent and divorced from adults. Though children and young people can play key roles in such activities (as sellers or traders), they do not occur in child-only bubbles. Indeed, activities such as these are only possible because children have been given access to the resources (whether lemons or toys) and the spaces (the 'sidewalk' or playground) that enable them to occur. In this respect, the ability of children to partake in such activities is partially dependent on the provision of resources and spaces by adults.

Childhood theorists have not been alone in maintaining the separation of children and adults' economic spaces and activities. As Cook suggests, "a good deal of mainstream socio-cultural "consumption theory" and studies of consumer society either ignore children and childhood completely or see children as appendages or adjuncts" (2004: 63). This has been no less the case in recent economic sociology. In a paper by Callon et al. (2002) (discussed in the next section), a brief reference is made to an example of the contribution of children to their parents' supermarket purchases. Callon et al. describe how the offer of a free toy with a bottle of orange juice, re-positions the grocery product as more attractive to consumers accompanied by children. Whilst the inclusion of the child is an important part of the purchase, the child is nonetheless treated as little more than an intermediary to the parent's economic agency. In this sense, Callon et al.'s paper frames the child not as an economic agent in their own right per se, but rather as a component in a broader assemblage that is predominantly adult-orientated. This example is endemic of economic sociology's general neglect of children and young people as economic

actors. Despite this segregation of economic and consumer studies, I believe there are a number of potential areas of synthesis between these two fields, particularly around the topic of agency.

To this end I will focus in particular on one notion of agency that has risen in prominence within economic sociology over the past few years – 'agencement' – and consider how it might be further developed in relation to children as economic actors. Though originally derived from the work of Deleuze & Guattari (1980), agencement has recently been taken up by Michel Callon as a conceptual tool for thinking about the agency of social actors within economic markets and processes. Callon's background as a founding theorist of ANT is particularly significant here as much of his work in economic sociology has conceptual roots in ANT and STS (science and technology studies). As discussed in the previous section, ANT has developed around the notion that agency is distributed in socio-material assemblages and arrangements and does not 'reside' in any single social actor. In one essay, Callon criticises approaches that focus on agency in terms of individual social actors by describing how, "They generally grant more importance to the role of humans and thus impose a very narrow definition of action" (2008: 33). Instead, Callon highlights the need to see action and agency as always 'distributed' among multiple actors. In the case of economic sociology he describes how this can enable researchers to see how "humans as well as procedures, calculation tools, instruments, and technical devices collaborate and participate in a coordinated manner" (2008: 37).

To describe this relationship between actors, agencies and arrangements, Callon uses the term 'agencement'. He justifies the terms usage over agency or assemblage as follows:

> I use the French word *agencement*, instead of arrangement, to stress the fact that agencies and arrangements are not separate. *Agencements* designate socio-technical arrangements when they are considered from the point view [sic] of their capacity to act and to give meaning to action (2005: 4)

This notion of agencement closely aligns with Lee's description of children's agency as always *dependent* on broader assemblages. It encourages us to look for the *conditions* of agency within broader socio-material assemblages and arrangements. In the case of children and young people's media, this requires us to always look beyond the immediate act of consumption if we wish to understand how a child's ability to engage with a media is made possible. To this end, the present thesis explores how children and young people's agency is negotiated within the design and development of online spaces, but also during the processes of user research and testing, and product promotion and marketing. However, rather than examining the user's agency as defined against either the structure of the media 'text' or the media institution, this thesis will attempt to trace how the arrangement of specific assemblages gives rise to particular forms of user agency.

To this end we must also consider the broader configuration of children and young people's agencies in relation to shifting media arrangements. Cook aptly summarises this point when he describes how the status of the child as an economic actor has increasingly shifted towards, "privileging its identity as a *subject* in and of market relations – a subject with desire" (2004: 12). Such a shift has not arisen from any innate technical competence in young people or as a result of new 'empowering' technologies, but rather it has emerged through complex changes in broader social and economic assemblages. Buckingham suggests this is a discursive shift, in which academic notions of the child as 'active' consumer have filtered through, and been increasingly adopted into, the rhetoric of marketers (2011: 100-101). Whilst it is certainly interesting to note how the 'active' child consumer has entered into the rhetoric of marketers and designers of children's products, such a shift cannot be seen as purely discursive. As Callon describes, "(Re)configuring a agency means (re)configuring the socio-technical *agencements* constituting it, which requires material, textual and over investments" (2005: 4). In this sense, the child as 'active' or 'agentic' consumer is assembled (at least in part) by the modification of design practices and socio-technical arrangements.

Callon's theorisation of agency requires us to think of young people's media use not just in terms of the immediate act of consumption, but also the distribution of action across broader market assemblages and socio-technical arrangements. Consequently, the final part of this chapter shifts our attention towards the theorisation of socio-technical systems and media assemblages and considers how we can illuminate the highly mediated and processual qualities of the development of online media spaces.

Theorising Media Systems and Assemblages

The aim of the final part of this chapter is to consider the potential forms of dialogue that might be generated between media theories of socio-technical systems, particularly the work of Roger Silverstone, and the notions of assemblages and agencements described in the last section. As previously mentioned in this chapter, a significant amount of media research – particularly in relation to children and young people – has primarily centred on activity and engagement at the point of use. Furthermore, research within this trend has also tended to treat consumption as somehow isolated from broader commercial and market processes. The present section begins to consider how we might locate engagement with young people's online spaces within broader media assemblages. This is important in two respects: (1) as Callon suggested in the previous section, any understanding of agency must view action as embedded and distributed within broader assemblages and (2) media assemblages are inherently *mediated*, bridging together multiple temporal and spatial locations. To this end I will initially consider Silverstone's accounts of innovative practices and socio-technical systems, and then move on to contrast this with Callon's notion of product qualification within economic assemblages.

Innovation and Socio-Technical Systems

The notion of media as embedded within broader systems or assemblages is far from new and to this end we might begin by considering work within the tradition of cultural studies that developed out of the Birmingham school from the 1960s

onwards. In his essay on *Encoding/Decoding* (1980), Stuart Hall developed a relational model of media constitution that attempted to move beyond a linear sequence of "sender/message/receiver" (1980: 128). His approach sought to view encoding (meaning generated by media institutions) and decoding (meaning generated by audiences) as interlinked, yet distinct, processes. A television programme, for example, could be produced with one intended set of meanings, however this did not guarantee that audiences would not generate their own sets of meanings from the same media text. As Hall described, "while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated" (1980: 128-9). This approach has had a significant influence on much subsequent media studies research, particularly in the field of audience studies.

Approaching the topic of introduction of ICT technologies into homes in the early 1990s, Silverstone and Haddon (1996) outlined a similar approach that relationally linked together the processes of production and consumption. Similar to Hall, they sought avoid characterising production and consumption, "in a singular or linear fashion" (1996: 44), instead looking at them as twin processes of innovation. They describe how, "Innovation is a process which involves both producers and consumers in a dynamic interweaving of activities" (ibid.) To this end they focus on two 'innovation' processes in particularly: design and domestication. For Silverstone and Haddon, both processes key to the shaping and constitution of a product. In the process of design, Silverstone and Haddon describe how conceptualisations of the user, and of future anticipated use, are fed into the construction of the product. The process of innovation doesn't, however, end with the product's manufacture and distribution. Silverstone and Haddon describe domestication, the process of placing and embedding a product into everyday the home and daily routines, as a further innovation process. As such, domestication treats the consumer as a key agent in the development of a product. The consumer's agency is not defined as an act of consumption alone, but also as a productive and creative contribution in the shaping of the product.

Reflecting on the process of domestication some years after his paper with Haddon, Silverstone summarise domestication as:

> a process of bringing things home – machines and ideas, values and information – which always involves the crossing of boundaries: above of those between public and private, and between proximity and distance, in a process which involves constant renegotiation […] domestication can only be understood as relational (2006: 233)

Silverstone and Haddon's theory is therefore one of *movement*, in which products changes hands and fresh innovations are initiated by new parties. These innovative processes are not separate or distinct changes; instead, each process of innovation becomes enmeshed with those that have come before. There is a great deal to be gained from Silverstone and Haddon's approach for thinking about the development products in broader socio-technical systems. For them, use and consumption are not distinct or separate activities, but are instead 'interwoven' with processes of design and production (1996: 44). The agency of the user emerges in relation to the product, and the preceding innovation processes embedded within its design.

There are three points I wish to draw attention to in their model. First, unlike Hall's model of communication and content, Silverstone and Haddon's (1996) account draws attention to the process of a product's *design*. In this way, they focus our attention on how a product comes to be shaped as a particular object or commodity. Secondly, and following on from the first point, Silverstone and Haddon's approach is limited to two distinct phases of product innovation. In the past few years increasing attention has been paid to the 'intermediary' processes that occur *between* production and consumption, such as marketing, user research, retail and distribution (Maguire & Matthews, 2010; Negus, 2002; Nixon & Du Gay, 2002). In this sense, Silverstone and Haddon's view of innovation is distributed into only two parts, rather than across a range of intervals in the 'biography' of a product (Lash & Lury, 2007). Finally, though they attempt to present the product as not part of a purely linear sequence of events, there is nonetheless a distinct temporal division

and ordering between design and use. Though Silverstone and Haddon's discussion of anticipated future users begins to develop the idea that the temporality of product innovations might involves complex interweavings of the past, present and future, this nonetheless remains relatively limited. As mentioned in the first chapter, children and young people's online media spaces are often in a continuous state of design and development, with users frequently being approached for feedback. As such, it is necessary that the theoretical model of the present study is capable of accounting for the complex temporal arrangements of new media's design and use.

Qualification and Product Assemblages

By way of contrast with Silverstone and Haddon, the final part of this section returns to the work of Callon and focuses on his theory of product qualification (Callon et al., 2002). Similar to Silverstone and Haddon, Callon et al. attempt to trace the various processes that contribute to a product's development. However, rather than seeing these processes as limited to a binary set of events (design and domestication), Callon et al. explore a broader socio-technical arrangement composed of design, testing, marketing, distribution, consumption etc. As such, they pay closer attention to a wider variety of activities and practices that contribute to a product's development – including many of the intermediary roles overlooked by Silverstone and Haddon. For Callon et al., the product is an unfolding process that relationally links different actors, times and spaces together over the course of its development. As a result, the product is not only shaped by the various components of the assemblage (of actors and objects), but also acts to bring those different components of the assemblage into proximity with one another. Callon et al. describe this dual process as follows:

> The product singles out the agents and binds them together and, reciprocally, it is the agents that, by adjustment, iteration and transformation, define its characteristics (2002: 194)

Qualification, then, is the process of defining the qualities and features of a product by a multitude of actors. These qualities do not exist *a priori*, but rather emerge through a product's adjustment and testing as it moves across the socio-technical assemblage. Similar to Silverstone and Haddon, Callon et al.'s process of qualification is one of movement in which, "the definition of […] characteristics is modified as the product develops and changes" (2002: 199). However, the product also mobilizes new parts of the assemblage as it moves, enrolling news actors as it changes hands.

Though perhaps not discussed in as greater detail as Silverstone and Haddon's concept of domestication, Callon et al. also emphasise the role of the consumer in the constitution of the product. They describe how,

> consumers are just as active as the other parties involved. They participate in the process of qualifying available product. It is their ability to judge and evaluate that is mobilized to establish and classify differences (2002: 201)

In this sense, the role of the consumer is to position and judge the product against other products that share similar qualities. Indeed, one of the main forms of consumer activity and agency described by Callon et al. (and by Callon elsewhere (Callon, 1998; Callon & Law, 2005; Callon & Muniesa, 2005)) is that of 'calculation'. Here, calculation is taken to mean practice of, "perceiving differences and grading them" (2002: 212). The consumer judges and evaluates the product by assessing and testing its qualities. However, the consumer is not alone in this process, they are "accompanied an supported in this evaluation and judgement by supplies and their intermediaries" (2002: 213). From advertising and marketing, to package design and store placement, the product invites evaluation from the consumer, but does so with the assistance of its broader assemblage.

Whilst Callon et al.'s notions of qualification and product assemblages offer a more complex and nuanced means of tracing the development of young people's online spaces, there are a couple of issues I wish to raise with respect to the role of the consumer. The first of these relates to the framing of consumers as 'calculative'

subjects. Though calculation is depicted as a distributed and relational activity within the product's broader assemblage, little or no attention is given to how consumers *become* calculative subjects. Instead the primary focus lies on how the consumer is positioned as a calculative subject within the assemblage. Children and young people undoubtedly assess different products and services, but Callon et al.'s theorisation offers no suggestion as to how calculative competencies emerge. How and where does an actor learn to become a consumer and calculative actor? In this respect, research around learning and pedagogy may offer a useful point of intersection. The second issue relates to the diversity of consumer activities. Though Callon et al. describe the consumer as 'active', their discussion remains limited to calculative activities of grading, assessing and judging a product at the point of (potential) purchase. The processes of qualification following the product's purchase remain under explored. Silverstone and Haddon's notion of domestication offers one potential means of thinking about the qualification processes continuation post-purchase. In the case of young people's online spaces, the qualification of the product by users continues to be of interest to the designers and producers as they attempt to judge how to further develop and adjust the product. In this sense, further consideration needs to be given to the specific forms of qualification and product development linked to individual products.

Conclusions: Rethinking Young People's Participation in Media Assemblages

This chapter has attempted to re-evaluate how we frame and understand children and young people's agency in relation to online media participation. In particular, this chapter has sought to interrogate more conventional theoretical frameworks of children and young people's agency that rely on a structuration model, positioning the 'media industry' and 'user agency' in dichotomous opposition to one another. The approach developed in this chapter has been two-fold. Firstly, this chapter has sought to recognise children and young people's participation in terms of broader economic processes. Rather than focus on young people's participation and engagement with media at the point-of-use, this chapter has detailed an approach that looks at the young people's participation as interlinked with, and dependent

upon, broader production and market processes. As discussed in first chapter of this thesis, the growth of the online media and virtual worlds markets has led to a significant shift in the way that media corporations attempt to frame young people's media participation. As such, it has been increasingly necessary for researchers to look beyond the point-of-use, and to consider how young people's participation is configured within wider design and market processes.

The second point developed in this chapter has been to view young people's participation and contributions as configured within design and production assemblages. As such, this chapter has attempted to outline an approach that views young people, online spaces and media institutions as part of relational market assemblages or *agencements*. Callon's (2008) notion of agencement has been particularly useful as a way of thinking about how young people's agency is configured and dependent upon a wide array of connections that extend across different points in time and space. In contrast to more conventional research into children and young people's media engagement, this chapter has sought to situate and embed young people within broader economic arrangements of media production. Thus rather than separate children and young people from economic markets and processes, this chapter has proposed that any investigation into their agency as media participants must involve an examination of the wider agencements in which they are positioned. To this end, the present thesis focuses the processes of design and qualification of online spaces as key moments in the definition and delineation of young people's agency and participation. This is not, however, to treat children and young people as equivalent to 'adult' economic actors in terms of their agency or participation. Rather we need to understand the specific configurations of young people's participation within the development of online spaces.

The issues raised in this chapter have had significant consequences for how the present research investigation was carried out. In the next chapter I outline the methodological framework of this thesis and address the key research issues that emerged over the course of the study. A central component of this discussion will be to consider how we empirically trace the configuration of young people's

participation across broader media assemblages. In contrast to more traditional approaches that have conducted in-depth media ethnographies of media participation at the point-of-use, the next chapter will consider how we might develop a more transient and multi-sited research approach across media assemblages.

Chapter 3 – Tracing Young People's Participation Across Online Spaces: A Methodological Account

Introduction

The following chapter considers the methodological and practical challenges encountered over the course of the present investigation into young people's online spaces. In the previous chapter I described how young people's online media participation must be seen as embedded within product development processes and broader media assemblages. To this end, the present chapter considers how we might trace young people's media participation within distributed and processual media assemblages. The first half of the chapter begins by addressing some of the fundamental methodological questions that have been key concerns throughout the research investigation. These include:

- How might we define young people's online spaces, such as virtual worlds, as **objects** for investigation? In other words, how might we frame online spaces as not only 'virtual environments' but as also connected to extensive media assemblages?

- How can we delineate the **scope** of an investigation into online spaces? Thus, building on the previous question, what might be the potential limits of an investigation into online spaces and their broader media assemblages?

- By what means can we **trace** online spaces as **mediated** objects? As suggested in the previous chapters, young people's online spaces are fundamentally mediatory objects that link together users, but also users and designers. As such, how might we trace activities and relationships that stretch across online spaces?

Having considered these questions, the second half of the chapter will provide a detailed account of the development of the research investigation. Considering each

empirical case study in turn, I will reflect on the practical, methodological and ethical issues that arose at key junctures in the research process.

Evaluating the Virtual Ethnography

For researchers of online media, the process of defining the object and field of an investigation has often proven to be a challenging methodological issue. Over the past decade the range of online platforms, media, and content has rapidly proliferated and researchers have had to continuously adapt and reconfigure their conceptual and methodological toolkits. This has, in turn, led to the emergence of a rapidly diversifying range of research methods and techniques in what can broadly be referred to as the field of 'internet research'. One has only to look at the recent *SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* (2008), or postings to the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) listserv[7], to see the diversity of research techniques being developed across a range of disciplines, from the digital humanities to computational science. For the purposes of the present discussion I will focus on a particular strand of internet research – virtual ethnography – and examine how researchers in this area have approached the methodological challenges of defining the object or field of research. In doing so, I will draw contrasts between the virtual ethnographic approach and the present study, highlighting some of the ways in which I have both adopted and adapted some of its frameworks and techniques.

Over the past three decades virtual ethnography has emerged as one of the most widely adopted methodological approaches for research into online cultures and practices. Christine Hine (2003), a key proponent of virtual ethnography, summarises the aims of its emergent methodological approach as follows:

> An ethnography of the Internet can look in detail at the ways in which technology is experienced in use. In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting,

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[7] See http://aoir.org/ [accessed 26.04.13]

taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes (2003: 4-5)

For the most part, the virtual ethnographic approach has developed through the adaption and mapping of existing ethnographic methods into the 'online' environment. This process has not, however, been entirely straightforward. Research investigations of online environments have presented their own methodological challenges and the virtual ethnography has emerged amidst intense discussion and debate as to how these challenges should be met. The present discussion will only scratch the surface of these debates, focusing on those issues most relevant to the present study. In particular, I will consider how the virtual ethnographic tradition has conceptualised and framed its field or object of study, particularly around a dichotomy of the 'online' and 'offline'. I will then consider the means by which we can begin to map relations and associations across online spaces, focusing on the productive synthesis of the virtual ethnography and the 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus, 1998).

Online Spaces: Defining the Field or Object of Study

In the second chapter of her book *Virtual Ethnography* (2003), Hine describes how internet research can be arranged into two broad empirical camps, each concerned with a very different field or object of study. The first of these is the 'internet as culture'. According to Hine, this strand of research has predominantly been concerned with the internet as generating new forms of 'online' culture that are distinctly different from those in 'offline' settings. This research agenda has formed the main impetus for the development of virtual ethnographic techniques that are able to capture the distinctive cultural activities that occur in 'online' settings (e.g. Poster, 1995; Rheingold, 2000). The second strand of research, identified by Hine, conceives the internet as a 'cultural artefact'. The 'cultural artefact' approach emphasises the material and technical qualities of the internet. This strand of research has predominantly developed out of theory and research in both science and technology studies (STS) (e.g. Bijker & Law, 1992; Grint & Woolgar, 1997) and

audience and reception studies (e.g. Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1994). By studying the internet and other media technologies as material artefacts, researchers in this strand have predominantly located their research in spaces of production and use, where social actors are engaged with media technologies.

For Hine, these different strands of research have resulted in two significant, yet distinct, means of defining the internet as an object or field of study. In an attempt to explain this divergence of concerns and interests, Hine identifies each camp as being more or less concerned with 'online' or 'offline' contexts. The internet as cultural artefact strand has predominantly been concerned with, "the circumstances in which the internet is used (offline)" (2003: 39), whilst the internet as cultural strand has concerned itself with, "the social spaces that emerge through its use (online)" (Ibid.). For Hine, virtual ethnography can potentially be a way of bringing these divergent strands together. However, achieving such a holistic approach is far from straightforward and the main methodological obstacle, according to Hine, is that, "the settings where we might observe the Internet culture are different from the ones in which we would observe the Internet in use" (2003: 40).

Hine's depiction of internet research as separated by different objects and fields of study is a highly resonant one and there is certainly a great deal that can be gained by considering their different approaches. Nevertheless, the division of research into concerns with 'online' and 'offline' contexts is quite problematic. Though Hine acknowledges the online/offline divide as, for the most part, 'discursively performed' (2003: 39), she establishes a division from the outset that estranges the 'online' from 'physical' contexts. Even when Hine attempts to understand the 'interplay' between the online and offline, a division is established from the outset that presents each as *inherently* different. In this way a bifurcation of the objects and fields of study emerges, in which the 'internet' and 'online spaces' are *linked to* but *separate from* the 'offline' and 'physical' social realities.

Miller and Slater share similar concerns to Hine, but offer some different conceptions of the internet as an object for research. In their book *The Internet: An*

Ethnographic Approach (2001), Miller and Slater are particularly critical of research that involves "extreme 'disembedding' from an offline reality" (2001: 4). Instead, they argue for an ethnographic approach within "the tradition of material culture analysis […] concerned with how subjects are constituted within material worlds […] and how they understand and employ objects" (2001: 3). Such an approach might, at the outset, appear to fall within Hine's 'cultural artefact' strand. However, Miller and Slater go on to describe their concern not only with the material qualities of the internet, but also its 'virtual' dimensions. Here they offer a very specific definition of what constitutes the virtual, which attempts to avoid separating it from existing material realities. They argue that the internet, as a 'virtual' field and object, should be seen as "continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (2001: 5). In this sense, they argue for a more seamless methodological approach that is capable of shifting between 'physical' and 'virtual' spaces without giving undue prominence to either.

Miller and Slater's study (2001) presents an ethnographic investigation into the specific cultural contexts of Trinidadian internet use. Over the course of their study they attempt to investigate some of the specific material cultures that have arisen through the uptake of the internet as a technology within Trinidad and how this has simultaneously shaped a specific 'Trinidadian' internet culture. Their concern is not with specific online spaces, but rather how the internet, in its multiple virtual and material forms, has been adopted by individuals and groups within Trinidadian society. As with Hine, there is much that can be gained from Miller and Slater's work. Their concern with a range of spaces, and the embeddedness of the internet within these spaces, offers one potential means of exploring the assimilation of the internet as interwoven into broader cultural contexts. Though Miller and Slater present an approach that attempts to avoid giving undue prominence to the 'online' settings of internet use, they nonetheless maintain a division that differentiates the 'virtual' from the 'material'. Thus, while their approach attempts to make the movement between 'online' and 'offline' settings more seamless, the 'virtual' is still maintained as distinct and different from our everyday 'material' reality.

As the present study is concerned with virtual worlds and other social online spaces it is worth briefly reviewing how existing virtual ethnographic research within this subfield fit alongside Hine, Miller and Slater's approaches. Since their early conception, virtual worlds have proven particularly favourable objects and fields of study for virtual ethnographers. Studies in the mid-1990s focused on text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and researchers such as Curtis (1999) and Dibbell (1993) provided much of the initial impetus for studying 'virtual worlds' as self-contained social spaces. Contemporary research has primarily focused on virtual worlds for adults, such as *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008), and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), such as *EverQuest* (Taylor, 2009) and *World of Warcraft* (Nardi, 2010). Such studies typically involve the ethnographer 'entering' the virtual world and primarily conducting research by means of participant observation over a sustained period of time (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In contrast to other forms of online space, the virtual world has proven particularly amenable to more 'traditional' ethnographic techniques. Researchers can create and embody 'virtual' identities (e.g. avatars), enabling them to interact with other virtual world users and participate in social activities.

The virtual world also provides a 'self-contained' field of study within which research can be carried out. Boellstorff et al., in their multi-authored book on *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* (2012), place significant emphasis on the virtual world's spatial qualities, describing how, "they are *places* and have a sense of *worldness*. They are not just spatial representations but offer an object-rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact" (emphasis in original, 2012: 7). Boellstorff et al. describe how each of the volume's authors had primarily focused their research studies 'inside' virtual worlds, with some occasionally attending to offline contexts when the opportunity presented itself. For the most part, Boellstorff et al.'s approach appears to largely fall into Hine's 'internet as culture' strand. At the beginning of their book they describe how virtual worlds "draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices" (2012: 1). There are

only occasional references to either the broader technical or spatial positioning of virtual worlds.

It is perhaps as a result of the virtual world's 'worldness' that ethnographers have been content to remain within the coded boundaries of the online environment. Virtual worlds are, without a doubt, rich sites for data collection and it is not difficult to see how whole studies can emerge from 'within' them. However, the 'interior' focus of virtual worlds is also extremely problematic. First, it leads us back to the problem that Hine, Miller and Slater each attempted to grapple with: how we overcome the online/offline boundary. By concerning themselves only with the activities 'inside' virtual worlds, Boellstorff et al. reify the bifurcation of 'physical' and 'virtual' realities. Secondly, it presumes that a virtual world, or other online space, is intrinsically contained and bounded, with a clear demarcation between what lies 'inside' and 'outside'. This refers not only to 'online' versus 'offline' spaces, but other online spaces that may be significant to the shaping of virtual worlds[8]. Finally, studies such as these focus on 'determining instances' (Lash & Lury, 2007: 19) within the life of a virtual world as a product or cultural artefact: principally its reception and use. Whilst the first two critiques are primarily spatial in nature, this final critique refers to the temporal trajectory of the virtual world as it emerges within cycles of 'production' and 'consumption'. By locating research 'within' the online space, such ethnographies offer only a partial account of the virtual world's unfolding 'biography' (Lash & Lury, 2007). This is not to say that such studies are devoid of concern for temporality, and indeed some provide detailed accounts of the temporal rhythms and cycles of online spaces and their users[9].

How, then, should an online space, such as a virtual world, be positioned as an object of investigation? In some respects I'm advocating a *de-centring* of online spaces. For Miller and Slater the internet is part of the fabric of everyday life, engaged with in a variety of spaces and locations. This is no less the case with more specific online spaces, including virtual worlds. In this study I wish to de-centre single

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[8] See for example social media platforms in chapter four, and fansites in chapter five.
[9] See for example Yee's (2007) work on 'player life-cycles'.

online spaces in order examine the broader media assemblages or 'ecologies' (Fuller, 2005) in which they are positioned. As Green has shown with virtual reality technologies[10], although they can be "worlds of fantasy and imagination", they are always also, "materially and immediately, technical systems […] simultaneously objects, media, tools, signs, cognitive activities, and narratives" (1999: 409). It is all too easy to become focused on a single quality and aspect of a media technology as a research object. To detach an online space from its broader media assemblage is to lose sight of the social and material processes in which it is embedded. It is not enough to consider an online space as its own 'contained' field of study, it must always simultaneously be considered as part of a wider assemblage on which its very existence is contingent.

In this sense I wish to describe young people's virtual worlds and websites as *intermediate spaces*: as significant points of *intersection* and *mediation*. As a point of intersection, the intermediate space acts as a point of connection between multiple spaces within an assemblage. In this sense we need to expand the notion of the spatiality of media assemblages to incorporate a wide array of spaces, including: the offices and workstations of media firms, bedrooms and school playgrounds, social media platforms etc. The intermediate space thus acts as a significant point of intersection, always bridging and mediating between a heterogeneous array of spaces[11]. This does not, however, necessitate that the website is the *only* point of intersection within a media assemblage and indeed there may be multiple intermediating spaces acting as significant mediatory points. The mediatory quality of these spaces is also significant: *young people's virtual worlds and websites are always mediated*. No matter where a social actor is positioned within a media assemblage, their engagement with a website is always mediated. This concept of mediation and intermediation is an important one and is considered in more detail below.

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[10] Virtual reality technologies offer a particularly apt point of comparison with virtual worlds and online spaces as they have similarly been treated as generating their own sense of *other* 'worldness'.
[11] The work of Michel Serres is particularly useful in helping to theorise the online space as an intersectional point. He describes objects as "polychromic, multitemporal […] a time that is gathered together with multiple pleats" (Serres & Latour, 1995: 60). In this respect we can think of an online space as the 'folding together' or overlapping of multiple times and spaces.

Finally, the present study also investigates young people's websites as cultural and economic *products*. By focusing on single 'determining instances' we greatly limit our understanding of a media product's spatial and temporal biography. Drawing on work from cultural economy in particular (Callon et al., 2002; Lash & Lury, 2007), this study proposes to avoid privileging the perspective of any single group of social actors, positioned at specific moments, and instead seeks to examine some of the different junctures along a media product's unfolding biography. At each of these junctures the study will seek to examine some of the different processes of qualification (Callon et al., 2002) that shape and transform the media product, and re-configure its broader assemblage. Rather than consider each juncture as taking place either 'online' or 'offline', 'inside' or 'outside' of a virtual world or website, they will instead be examined in terms of the convergence of multiple times and spaces at specific junctures in the biography of the media as products.

Mapping Connections Across Trans-mediating Spaces

Having considered how young people's websites might be defined as objects or fields of research, it is now necessary to consider the means by which they can be investigated. The end of the last section outlined three significant qualities of the young people's virtual worlds and websites as intermediate spaces. First, virtual worlds and other media spaces need to be de-centred in order to position them within broader media assemblages. Secondly, they should be examined as a point of intersection, mediating between multiple times and spaces. Finally, they need to be examined as a product that is shaped and constituted across its temporal and spatial biography. These three qualities are highly significant in shaping how we begin to think about the process of developing an ethnography that is capable of mapping and tracing intermediate spaces and broader media assemblages. Over the course of this section I consider two important components to such an investigation. First, that the research approach will need to be able to account for the multiple spaces and temporalities that intersect across young people's websites. Secondly, that any research approach must always account for the *intermediate qualities* of these

websites. Discussion of both these points will again bring us back to the virtual ethnography.

The Multi-sited Ethnography

Discussing the methodological issues arising from researching products and commodities on a global scale, Lash and Lury pose the question, "how do you follow objects?" (2007: 20). Their response is, "you find out as much about them in as many places in time and space from as many points of view as possible" (Ibid.). The ethnographic approach of 'following the object' has gained significant traction in a number of disciplines over the past few decades. Since the 1980s a number of anthropologists have begun to place greater emphasis on following the temporal and spatial movements of people and objects (Appadurai, 1986), proposing a multi-sited ethnographic approach that is better able to trace and follow their movements (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Marcus, 1998). Similarly, within Actor-Network Theory in the 1980s, emphasis began to be placed on 'following' actors or objects across social and material assemblages (Latour, 2007). More recently, the multi-sited ethnographic approach has gradually begun to be adopted by media scholars seeking to understand the multiple spaces involved in the shaping of media (Couldry, 2003; Green, 1999; Hine, 2008; Wittel, 2000)[12].

George Marcus (1998), one of the leading proponents of the multi-sited ethnography, describes the approach as moving, "out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (1998: 79). In order to achieve such a multi-sited approach, Marcus suggests that we must follow different objects across time and space. He lists the potential range of objects that can be followed as including people, things, metaphors, signs, symbols, plots, stories, allegories, lives, biographies and conflicts (1998: 90-94). A multi-sited approach thus

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[12] A further strand of 'following the object' is emerging in the methodologies of digital sociology where the emphasis has been on tracking or tracing digital forms of data across time and space. See for example Allen-Robertson & Beer (2010) and Marres & Rogers (2005).

has a great deal to offer research into online spaces, particularly in an industry that is increasingly global in scale. Yet at present multi-sited studies are still relatively limited in media research and media scholars have, according to Couldry (2003), tended to remain in, "the stereotypical site of media consumption (the home)" (2003: 48). In this respect a great deal of media research may be contrasted with the virtual world ethnographies described above, focusing on only specific 'determining instances' in the biography of media products.

There are, however, a number of promising instances of research demonstrating the potential of a more multi-sited approach to media and internet research. Nina Wakeford (2003), in her discussion of a bus route through London, offers one alternative way of thinking about spaces of online media consumption. By travelling along the bus route, Wakeford's team sought to explore how access to, and engagement with, the internet was variously shaped across a range of different neighbourhoods. People and places were brought together both by their use of the internet and the spaces in which they lived and worked. Nicola Green's (1999) study of virtual reality technologies also offers an example of the successful employment of a multi-sited media study. Following 'virtual reality technologies', Green was able to, "focus on technologies in the making across various locations in time and space produc[ing] a flexible conceptualization of VR as having multiple locations and trajectories" (1999: 414). Couldry (2003) provides a third and final example for consideration. Couldry sought to examine 'unconventional' sites of media engagement, where audiences could "travel to see the process of production close up" (2003: 48). Of particular interest in Couldry's case is the emphasis he places on the processes of mediation that shape our understanding of different media spaces. He argues that an ethnographic approach needs to consider the variety of media spaces but also "the complexity of how media flows together produce *the mediation* of social life" (2003: 45). This, I believe, is something that media research can uniquely offer the multi-sited research approach – an understanding of how different places are not only connected through the movement of people and objects, but also how they are intermediated across time and space.

Intermediations Across and Between Multiple Times and Spaces

The multi-sited ethnography presents a useful way of tracing and mapping the different places that connect across and around young people's websites. It enables us to think about the way in which websites as intermediate spaces connect to a variety of different spaces, including media corporation offices and young people's homes and bedrooms. However, it falls short of helping us to understand how websites intermediate across different times and spaces. For example, how can we observe an online space acting as an intermediary for designers who wish to observe users in the development of a new product feature? Or how would we go about studying the protests of fans disgruntled by a recent policy change on their favourite online space? At present these are still very difficult questions for the multi-sited ethnography to answer. Following the object only takes us so far, helping us to see where connections and associations are being formed around an object.

Couldry (2003) suggests that we look at the way in which mediation crosses traditional boundaries and shapes spaces that are geographically distant. He argues that, "Mediation, as communication which crosses contexts and borders in pervasive and regular ways, changes the boundaries of the ethnographic situation, just as it changes the boundaries of the political situation, the family situation, and the educational situation" (2003: 45). In this respect we need to not only follow the 'object', but also trace the mediations that traverse *between* people, objects and spaces. Latour's (1996) notion of mediation is particularly useful in this respect. Rather than being limited to media objects, Latour suggests that *all* actors and objects act as mediators. According to Latour, "we need to consider any point as being a mediation, that is to say, as an *event*, which cannot be defined in terms of inputs and outputs or causes or consequences" (1996: 237). In this respect a school friend can act as a mediator, providing advice or tips on how to play a game, shaping and modifying another child's engagement with a particular online space. In this way we can begin to trace the flow of mediations that occur around and across media objects. As Latour suggests, we cannot trace these movements back to their source, or even onward to their conclusion. However, we can begin to trace and observe the

way in which websites, along with people and objects, form mediatory associations that shape broader media assemblages.

Attempting to observe these mediations has therefore been one of the primary aims of the present study's methodology. Unlike the ethnographers of virtual worlds, who have sought to understand online spaces by experiencing them 'first-hand', I have attempted to embrace the mediated quality of websites by eliciting *accounts of mediation*. In so doing, I have attempted to avoid focusing on a specific 'determining instance' in the biography of a website and have instead sought to explore as many of the multiple temporal and spatial positions that emerge across and around online spaces. Returning again to the critique of virtual world ethnography, we can also begin to see how such an approach might nullify our need to think in terms of dichotomies such as 'online' and 'offline' and 'inside' and 'outside'. By tracing and mapping the mediations across and around intermediate spaces, we can begin to think in terms of the degrees of porosity between spaces. Not all mediations between spaces will be equally successful. As Couldry points out, mediation is a fundamentally 'asymmetrical' (2008: 380) and uneven process. As such a multi-sited approach needs to be attuned to the dynamics of mediation at each juncture of the biography of young people's websites.

The Researcher as Intermediary

Up to this point I have considered how websites as objects of research might be conceived and investigated, however little consideration has been given to the role of the researcher in this process. The researcher is far from a neutral observer, drawing together connections as they appear. Indeed the process of 'following' objects and mediations is far from straight forward and the researcher plays a key role in assigning priority and relevance as to what to follow. In the case of multi-sited ethnography, Marcus describes how, "just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites" (1998: 80). The researcher not only identifies

connections but also *creates* them. John Law and John Urry's (2004) discussion of the performativity of methods is particularly useful in this respect. Their argument is that research methods are "not innocent [...] they are also political. They help to *make* realities" (2004: 404). From the choice of spaces and actors that we focus on, to their presentation within our research accounts, the research process is engaged in an 'ontological politics' (Ibid.) that helps to shape and perform particular social realities to the exclusion of others. In this respect the researcher is also a significant intermediary as they enter into relations with actors, spaces and objects.

The present research study has, of course, been significantly shaped by the decisions that I have made and the questions that I have sought to answer. As Marcus suggests, the "goal [of a multi-sited ethnography] is not holistic representation [...] of the world system as a totality" (1998: 83). It must therefore be borne in mind that the present investigation is a study of opportune junctures in the biography of online spaces that enable just a few brief empirical snapshots. The following discussion on the research process attempts to provide a reflexive account of how the present study unfolded. Though it is not possible to produce an entirely neutral and transparent account, the following discussion will hopefully provide some insight as how and why the present study unfolded in the way that it did.

The Research Process

The remainder of this chapter is a discussion of the fieldwork process. In writing the second half of this chapter I have attempted to mirror the multi-sited organisation of the study by considering the different intermediary spaces that acted as entry points for the research, in this case: the media corporations, the fan site, the school, and the corporate media websites. I have also attempted to recall the research process in a biographical style, charting my (not always successful) attempts to trace the media assemblages that emerge around young people's websites. Consequently, the second half of this chapter will continue to evaluate the issues raised so far, particularly around the practical issues of conducting research in a thoroughly mediated research environment. Figure 3 summarises the different kinds of data

collected over the course of thesis research, providing an index of how much data was collected and by what means.

Figure 3: Table of Different Kinds of Data Collected Across the Case Studies

Data	How/When Collected	Quantity	Case Study
Interviews with Sulake HQ employees	Semi-structured interviews carried out with Sulake staff at the Helsinki headquarter offices during October 2009.	Single interviews with: 1. A Lead Concept Designer. 2. A Concept Designer. 3. A Graphic Designer. 4. A Software Architect. 5. A Content Designer. 6. A User Activation Specialist.	Chapter 4
Interviews with local Sulake employees	Semi-structured interviews carried out with Sulake staff at either the regional London office or via Skype, during Summer 2009.	Single interviews with: 1. The UK Site Manager 2. The UK Community Manager. 3. The Senior Manager for Moderation and Safety (via Skype). 4. A Player Support Assistant (via Skype)	Chapter 4
Ethnographic observations at Sulake HQ and London offices	Informal, non-participant, observation of one meeting at HQ office and at various staff workstations during Summer 2009 (UK office) and October 2009 (Helsinki office).	One day spent at London office and five days spent at the Helsinki office.	Chapter 4
Interviews with CBBC employees (predominantly those working on '*Bamzooki*')	Semi-structured interviews carried out between Spring 2009 and Spring 2010.	Single interviews with: 1. The *Bamzooki* Television Producer (in 2009). 2. The first *Bamzooki* Interactive producer (in both 2009 and 2010). 3. The second *Bamzooki* Interactive producer (in 2010). 4. The CBBC Head of Interactive and On-demand (in	Chapter 5

		2009). 5. The *Bamzooki* website's Lead Designer (in 2010).	
Online and social media content produced by the CBBC	Textual and visual analysis	Numerous pieces of data collected over the course of the research project, including: two blog posts by the Portfolio and Products manager of BBC Children's from 2011, the Bamzooki homepages, PDFs of the CBBC Programme Policy Review reports for 2009/10 and 2010/11.	Chapters 5 and 6
Online and social media content produced by Sulake	Textual and visual analysis	Numerous pieces of data collected over the course of the research project, including: an podcast by the Sulake CEO, Tweets by Sulake staff and the official Sulake Twitter account, blog posts on the Sulake company homepage and 'Behind the Pixels' blog, and user information pages from the Habbo homepage.	Chapters 4, 6 and 7
Interviews with creators of the Habbo Fansite 'Habbox'	Synchronous and asynchronous semi-structured interviews carried out via instant messenger services and webmail services during Summer 2011.	Seven interviews with young people aged thirteen to twenty-one.	Chapter 7
Online and social media content produced by 'Habbox' fansite members	Textual and visual analysis.	Four blog posts were specifically selected for analysis and discussion in the case study. Other data was also collected from the fansite's homepages.	Chapter 7
Focus group interviews	Semi-structured focus group discussions with children aged nine to eleven from Autumn 2011 to Spring 2012.	Three focus group discussions with children in year 6 and one focus group discussion with children in year 5.	Chapter 8

a. The Media Corporations

The following section offers a comparative account of my experiences of carrying out research with two different media corporations: the BBC and Sulake. Rather than present separate accounts, I have chosen to explore some of the similarities and differences that arose in the course of my research with each organisation. This is largely due to brevity – there were a number of similarities that would result in significant repetition if considered over separate sections. Juxtaposing my experiences with both corporations also enables a comparison of the different organisational settings in which the research was conducted and the different issues that arose as a result.

My initial access to the BBC was established via academic contacts who had previously conducted research with the BBC's children's department. Following these initial introductions I was referred to the 'Interactive and On-Demand' department of the CBBC, which was responsible for the majority of interactive and online children's content, in particular The Red Button and the CBeebies and CBBC websites. For the most part I was left to my own devices and welcome to interview whomever I felt was appropriate. On the one hand this enabled a significant amount of latitude for the research and I was able to follow research interests without significant obstruction. However, this also meant that my presence was treated as a relatively casual arrangement and often required a significant amount of legwork on my part, particularly in tracking down and chasing up contacts for interviews. From an early stage I became interested in a CBBC programme called *Bamzooki* which had begun airing in 2004. In my initial discussions with CBBC staff I learnt that *Bamzooki's* online content was in the process of undergoing a complete re-design. The primary appeal of *Bamzooki* was its categorisation as a multi-platform show, and it was generally regarded by staff as a test case in which online content was treated as an 'equal' counterpart to broadcast content. My research with the BBC's children's department thus largely focused on the re-design of *Bamzooki's* online content and the re-development of the programme as a whole. My initial contact with the show's team was in late 2009 and involved some preliminary interviews with the producer

and the recently assigned online content producer, who was tasked with organising the website's re-design. I returned in mid-2010 and carried out further research post re-launch with a range of members of the online team. A number of other interviews were also carried out in this period with senior members of the CBBC and Cbeebies website teams.

The process of establishing access with Sulake was markedly different to that of the BBC. Initial contact was established via an email to one of the corporation's founders. He showed some initial interest in the research and subsequently referred me to the company's user insight team, responsible for internal and external 'user research'. Over the following months I entered into an intensive period of negotiation, over the course of which I was required to provide an outline of the research and the potential benefits and insights it would bring to Sulake. This concluded with the signing of a legal agreement between the corporation and myself. In comparison with the BBC my research with Sulake was subject to significant prior organisation. My research with Sulake largely took place in three phases. First, in June 2009, I visited the Sulake London offices where I carried out research with the team responsible for the UK Habbo's localised content. Secondly, over the summer I conducted a number of interviews with 'remote' Sulake staff who primarily worked from home. These interviewees were principally responsible for player support and moderation. Finally, in autumn 2009, I travelled to Sulake's Helsinki headquarters where I spent a week carrying out research with members of Habbo's main design team. This included interviews with a range of staff responsible for Habbo's design including content and graphic designers, and software architects.

The interview topic guides used in both the Sulake and BBC interviews were largely very similar (see appendixes one and two). A set of initial questions sought to explore an individual's roles and responsibilities within their respective teams, as well as their everyday working practices. More specific questions were then framed around particular projects that they had worked on and their role within those projects. The final parts of the interviews generally focused on their knowledge of, and engagement with, the users of their respective websites. In each case the

interviews were tailored to the interviewee's specific products, media and roles. At both Sulake and the BBC I requested that, wherever possible, interviews be conducted in the presence of a computer. This provided the opportunity for both interviewee and interviewer to visually indicate to certain aspects of the online space over the course of discussion. It also allowed the interviewee to share certain tools and software that were specific to their role, such as Photoshop or moderation tools. In this way, the computer acted both as an elicitation device (Harper, 2002), providing a shared object for discussion, but also provided a mediatory point by which the online space could have a (liminal) presence within the interview.

Following my research, a number of significant changes occurred in both corporations. First, the BBC began its relocation from Television Centre in White City to MediaCity in Salford Quays (BBC News, 2007). During the course of the relocation a number of the research contacts I had developed left the BBC. Sulake also underwent a substantial number of changes over the course of the study. In early 2011 a number of Sulake's local 'Hotels' were merged together, resulting in the UK Hotel's amalgamation with the United States, Canada, Australia and Singapore branches (Habbo, 2011). This resulted not only in the merging of virtual worlds, but also the gradual closure of many local branch offices, including the one in London. Furthermore, Sulake underwent significant media strain in June 2012 when a Channel 4 undercover investigation reported cases of explicitly 'sexual' and 'violent' conversations within Habbo. As a result 3i, a major investor of Sulake, decided to withdraw its financial backing from the company (Channel 4 News, 2012a). Sulake weathered the media storm, however by late October 2012 it was announced that the company would be reducing its head office staff by up to two thirds (Anderson, 2012). This in turn resulted in the enforced redundancy of a significant proportion of the remaining staff I had worked with at Sulake.

Such changes are testimony to the rapidly changing market environment that these media corporations inhabit. The present study has been significantly shaped by these changes, and as a researcher I have felt personally invested in the changing circumstances that my research contacts and participants have found themselves in.

This thesis thus provides only a snapshot of the rapidly changing, and precarious, market environment of young people's media production. For the most part my account does not directly reflect on the changes and upheavals experienced by the participants, however I certainly believe these would be worthy of attention in their own right.

b. The Fansite Community

It was through my interviews with Sulake staff that I first became aware of the *Habbo* fansite community. Sulake staff had frequently mentioned visiting *Habbo* fansites as a source for gauging user reactions to developments and changes in the *Habbo* service. I was initially curious to find out more about the role of fansites as sources of user feedback for designers, however I soon discovered that the relationship between fansites and Sulake was one of ceaseless negotiation, as fansite communities sought to position themselves as a key intermediary point between *Habbo* users and the virtual world service. I had initially been wary of focusing on a specific user group due to concerns that they would not be representative of the more typical user experience. On reflection I realised that such aspirations were too idealistic and, ultimately, beyond the scope of the present study. Furthermore, the relationship of fansites to Sulake was invested with significance by both the young people involved and the corporation. As such I chose to explore the Habbo fansites' relationship to Sulake as one instance of the negotiation and administration of relations between a corporation and a group of users.

In preparation for contacting fansite creators, I initially consulted a list of fansites published on the *Habbo* homepage (see Habbo, 2012). I would later learn that this was a list of fansites officially recognised, and approved, by Sulake[13]. Indeed, these fansites represent the tip of the iceberg and there are a great many more fansites than those listed by Sulake. Nonetheless, the fansites listed on the *Habbo* website tend, as I also later discovered, to be the most established and popular with users

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[13] Chapter seven discusses the categorisation of fansites by Sulake in more detail.

and their relationship with Sulake tends to be more extensive than smaller fansites[14]. In establishing a criterion for fansites to contact I chose to exclude those that were forums only. Instead I chose to contact fansites that had a homepage that hosted publically available content that could be incorporated into my research. *Habbox* was the first fansite to respond and, due to limitations of time, this was the only fansite I conducted research with. As I was specifically interested in the production of the fansites, I chose to limit the sample of my study to those involved in its everyday running and administration. In the case of Habbox, the fansite staff team included over sixty volunteers, providing a sufficiently large sample pool for participants.

Two primary methods were employed in the *Habbox* research. First, the semi-structured interview was adopted as a means of learning about the everyday running of the fansite and its relationship to Habbo and Sulake. Secondly, I conducted a significant amount of textual analysis of *Habbox's* publicly available content, including 'information' pages and its regularly updated news articles.

One of the first hurdles in preparing to carry out research with *Habbox* was to provide proof of my authenticity as a researcher to the fansite's management team. It was agreed that a scan of my university ID card and the contact details of my research supervisor and postgraduate secretary would suffice as assurance of my legitimacy. I was then invited to join the forum and given access to the staff-only forum where I was told that I could post an advertisement for research participants. The forum's general manager appended a confirmatory post to my own, assuring the other members that they had given me permission and that the study had been authenticated.

The next significant hurdle was to secure a broad sample of participants. *Habbox* has volunteers from a wide range of age groups and I chose not to limit the age of those

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[14] As discussed in chapter five, the popularity of a fansite is in part linked to Sulake's recommendation that offers the website a degree of legitimacy and re-assures other Habbo users that they are 'safe' to visit.

participating. In the case of those under 16 years, I had to ensure that parental permission was given in advance of the study. In the advertisement for participants I explained that a consent form would need to be sent to their home address, addressed to a nominated parent or carer, and would require the co-signature of that parent or carer. The consent form invited the parent or carer to contact me via telephone or email if they wished to discuss the study in more detail before giving consent. In total, only two volunteers aged under sixteen requested a consent form be sent to their home address and only one of these secured permission from their parent. In a conversation with one of the *Habbox* managers I was told that the requirement of parental permission had been a significant deterrent for younger members of the community. He described how many staff members avoided informing their parents about their Habbox role and, as a result, felt that obtaining parental consent would be too troublesome and invasive.

The total number of participants was seven. As mentioned above, only one participant was younger than sixteen and the remainder were aged eighteen to twenty-one. Though the age range of the sample was generally older than I had originally hoped to recruit, all of the interviewees had been users of *Habbo* since their early teens and were able to share reflections on both their past and current relationship to the fansite and *Habbo*. Furthermore, the majority of the older participants had senior roles in the fansite's management and were able to provide detailed overviews of both its history and present day-to-day running. Only one participant was female and, although the majority of *Habbox* staff are male, it should be noted that this does represent a significant gender imbalance in the sample.

Interviews with participants were carried out via online forms of communication. Initially I had invited the participants to be interviewed via *Skype* or a textual instant messaging service. The participants were, however, generally reluctant to be interviewed 'live'[15] and the majority were subsequently interviewed through the exchange of messages via the forum's internal mail system. This generally seemed to

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[15] Only one participant was interviewed via a live instant messenger service.

be more convenient for the participants as it enabled them to respond to a set of questions each time they visited the forum. Though this format constrained the dialogic nature of the interview, I was still able to query points made in previous answers by inserting clarificatory questions at the beginning of each new message. Furthermore, in my subsequent analysis of interview transcripts I found that those interviews performed asynchronously were generally more detailed than those conducted in 'real-time'. Thus when the interview was broken up into smaller segments, participants appeared to be more willing to spend greater lengths of time responding to individual questions. An additional advantage of performing the interviews online was the added possibility for participants to insert links, images and data as examples and illustrations of points they made. This included screenshots and, in one instance, lines of code that I would not otherwise have had access to.

As mentioned above, I also conducted lengthy textual analysis of the fansite's publicly posted content. Of particular interest were the 'information' sections of the fansite, such as those describing *Habbox's* history and its staff roles, and also its news articles. These homepages are the 'public' face of *Habbox* and are primarily intended for general website visitors seeking information on *Habbo* or *Habbox*. In my interviews, the majority of participants described their experience of the fan site primarily in terms of *Habbox's* forum. Though I had been invited onto the forum, I chose not to use private members posts as a source of data. The use of forum content as data within research has proven a contentious issue, particularly around issues of privacy and consent (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002; Hine, 2008). For the purposes of this study I chose to avoid analysis of privately posted content and instead examined the 'public' representation of *Habbox* via its main webpages.

c. The School

The Bamzooki School Competition

During my research with the *Bamzooki* creative team I was informed of an LEA that had begun hosting a cross-schools *Bamzooki* competition on an annual basis. This presented an ideal opportunity to explore an instance of user engagement with an online space that I was already in the process of studying the production of. I was put in touch with the ICT curriculum advisor for the LEA, who was the primary organiser of the *Bamzooki* competition, and, after an initial meeting, I was invited to carry out research with the schools and pupils participating in that year's competition (Summer 2010). The competition was arranged such that each school within the LEA nominated a team of year six pupils who had been most successful at creating Zooks in their own classroom competitions. The LEA then hosted a 'grand final' day (mimicking the format of the television programme) in which the teams nominated from each school would have the opportunity to compete against one another.

For the purposes of the competition I devised a mixed method approach that combined a social network survey with focus groups in order to examine how the pupil's individually and co-operatively created their Zooks. The aim of the survey was to collect both relational and attribute data on teams of children based on their collaborative creation of Zooks. Such relational data would include information such as: team and friendship connections (who built Zooks with whom), connections to Zooks (who built which Zook models) etc. Whilst attribute data would include information such as: a Zook-builder's gender and age, past Zook-building experience, and Zook characteristics. In addition to the network survey, the focus groups would provide a more qualitative insight into the process of negotiating the building of Zooks and the affective dimensions of this experience (such as feelings of pleasure and frustration).

A couple of months before the competition was due to take place I was contacted by the competition's coordinator who explained that they were experiencing technical problems with an updated version of the *Bamzooki* software that had replaced the

version used in previous competitions [16]. Due to these technical issues, the competition was subsequently cancelled that year and I was invited to contact them again the following year. Unfortunately, the issue remained unresolved the following year and the competition was cancelled indefinitely. Following this, I contacted a number of individual schools that had previously run *Bamzooki* competitions, however they had also ceased to hold competitions. As time was now running out, I was forced to abandon the research into the *Bamzooki* school competitions.

School Focus Groups

Following the lack of success in this first line of investigation, I was forced to adapt the study to an alternate line of enquiry. I still intended to focus on the relationships between young people in relation to online spaces, however I decided to explore these in the context of children's peer relationships and online spaces more broadly. I chose to retain the focus group element of the study as I felt this still offered one of the most appropriate means of gaining access to the dynamics of peer relationships. Recent methodological discussions have emphasised the specifically performative dimension of focus groups in terms of both individual and collective identities (Kitzinger, 1994; Munday, 2006; Skeggs et al., 2008). By using focus groups I hoped to explore how a participant's account of their use of social online spaces was performed and articulated in a peer group setting. I also wished to explore how online spaces were, themselves, articulated within discussions, and to what extent they acted as a point of shared experience amongst participants. In this way, I hoped to gain a sense not only of the way in which individual children engage with online spaces, but also the way in which online spaces act as a significant intermediary point in both the shaping and articulation of peer relationships.

I chose to recruit children to the study by contacting schools. Due to the now reduced available time for research, I adopted a largely opportunistic approach to

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[16] As mentioned above, the competition was due to take place during the CBBC team's re-design of the *Bamzooki* website and software. In this instance it's possible to see the changing design of the online space and software as having a direct impact on the users and, in turn, the research investigation.

sampling. I had initially hoped to find two schools with contrasting mixes of social backgrounds, however only one school (referred to here as 'High Bridge') was immediately forthcoming and after a month I abandoned my search for a second school. By way of background, High Bridge is a one-form entry primary located in an inner city area with an ethnically diverse population and a higher than national average level of deprivation. The school is generally representative of local demographics[17], with High Bridge placed in the highest 20% of primary schools for deprivation indicators in the UK. Of the school's approximately 240 pupils, 86.4% are from ethnic minority backgrounds – significantly above the national average – and 60% of children are reported not to have English as a first language. The largest ethnic group within High Bridge is Black or Black British (34.8%) and this was generally mirrored in the participants who took part in the research.

I chose to limit the sample from High Bridge to years five and six pupils (aged between 9-11 years) due to relatively high reported use of social online spaces amongst this age group. According to the 'EU Kids II' UK survey report, *Risks and Safety on the Internet* (2011), 15% of boys in the 9-12 age group have reported visiting a virtual world and 44% have played an online game with other people (2011: 19). In the case of girls of the same age group, 25% have visited a virtual world and 29% have played an online game with others (Ibid.). Market figures offer a similar picture, and Kzero's survey of virtual worlds for Q4 2012 indicates a marked increase in the number of virtual worlds, and their estimated number of user accounts, as the market audience increases in age (Kzero, 2013). Due to the format of the focus group as a period of relatively structured verbal exchange I also decided that this method would most likely be unsuitable for younger age groups who might find it difficult to participate in extended discussion (approximately 40-50 minutes)[18]. Indeed, this was an issue even for the sample group (see below.)

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[17] The following information is taken from a self-evaluation form by the school in 2011 for Ofsted.
[18] This decision plays to certain assumptions of this age group and criticisms have been made elsewhere of the now common practice by researchers to carry out studies with the 10-12 years age group to the exclusion of younger children (see McNamee & Seymour, 2012). In this present discussion I can only acknowledge the limitation this places on the sample selected for the study.

To recruit children to the study, the school office issued a letter to the parents of students in the years five and six classes, providing a brief outline of the research (see appendix 7). A form was attached to the letter for parents to indicate whether they were happy for their children to participate in the study. Though the school had consented for the focus groups to go ahead, it was mutually agreed that only those pupils who had permission from parents would be able to take part. The initial response was extremely low and the deputy head teacher approached parents individually to encourage participation in the study. This led to a moderately higher response rate of fourteen pupils, of which only two were from year five and the remaining twelve from year six. Of the sample, nine were girls and five were boys. It should therefore be noted that the sample was moderately skewed in gender towards girls. In preparation for the focus groups the children were randomly divided into three groups. The year five pupils were interviewed as a pair and the year six pupils were interviewed in three groups of four. I chose to separate the year groups due to concerns that the younger participants may have felt intimidated by the presence of older children, which may in turn have affected their participation[19]. The recommended size of a focus group varies widely (Gibbs, 1997), and in this instance I chose to limit the number to four in order that each participant had a reasonable opportunity to speak in the short amount of time available.

The focus groups took place wherever space was available in the school on a given day. Two focus groups were carried out in a library corridor space outside of the junior years' classrooms, and the other two were carried out in the school medical room. Both spaces were subject to occasional interruptions by staff and other pupils, however these did not significantly disrupt the interviews. The timing of the focus groups proved to be particularly tricky and it was agreed in advance that all interviews would take place during the school day and would not interrupt the students' breaks. It was generally left to the respective class teachers to decide which time slots would be least disruptive to their pupils' learning. In each case I

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[19] As the year five group was formed of only two participants it might be regarded more as a shared interview as opposed to a focus group. Certainly the dynamics were considerably different in this group compared with the other three.

began the focus group by asking the students to write their names on a set of white labels. Whilst they made these name labels, I gave a brief description of what the interview would be about (many did not know or had forgotten) and how I was going to record the discussion. I also talked to the students about quoting and confidentiality, and invited them to ask any questions. They were also told that they could go back to the classroom at any point if they no longer wished to take part in the discussion[20].

Research with children raises a number of ethical and methodological issues, particularly around the negotiation of access and consent. Whilst there have been growing calls for children to participate in and contribute to research about their lives (Alderson, 2008; Mayall, 2002), the terms of their participation have been increasingly subject to stricter forms of ethical approval. Such strictures have received growing criticism from inside childhood research, particularly in terms of limiting children's research participation. For example, Morrow and Richards argue that, "an overly protective stance towards children may have the effect of reducing children's potential to participate in research" (1996: 97). Furthermore, ethical guidelines can also result in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, often treating children as a homogenous group of social actors. Instead, what is required is a reflexive approach that evaluates the necessary ethical requirements for each group or individual participating in a research study. For example, I was particularly mindful in this study of ensuring that consent was negotiated with the participants throughout the course of the interviews. At both the beginning and end of each interview I ensured that enough time was made available to discuss issues of consent and anonymity with the group. On each occasion these discussions were subject to shifting emphasis, with different questions being raised or different issues receiving greater or lesser focus.

Moving away from issues of ethics, there were also a number of practical considerations over the course of the focus groups. Most notably, managing the

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[20] See appendix 8 for the template I used for the pre-focus group discussion along with the topic guide.

focus groups discussion required constant attention on my part. As the only adult present at the focus groups I had to balance directing the discussion with supervising the groups' behaviour. The participants were generally eager to take part and to share their responses. In order to allow each child an opportunity to speak they were informed that after each question we would work our way around the circle (reversing the order each time) and if they wished to speak again, after everyone else had had a chance to respond, they would need to raise their hand. I decided after the first session to introduce a soft toy as a means of indicating who was permitted to speak at any given time. This worked reasonably well, though on a couple of occasions participants were reluctant to surrender their opportunity to speak and commandeered the soft toy. In one instance a pupil was frequently disruptive and I informed them that if they continued to misbehave they would have to return to class. An authoritative role was thus occasionally required for the focus group discussions. This in turn led to issues in relation to the power balance between researcher and researched and may potentially have impacted on the pupil's responses. For the most part the pupils treated me with curiosity and would frequently ask questions at the end of the interviews about why I was asking them questions about their use of the internet.

The topic guide was divided into three principal parts: background information on the participants' access to, and use of, the internet and media technologies; a discussion of the participants' use of online games and virtual worlds; and, finally, the types of social play and interaction they use the internet for. When preparing the topic guide I attempted to ensure that the questions did not pre-suppose access to, or use of, any specific media or technology, including the internet. Whilst it is now highly likely for a child of this age group to have access to the internet – the EU Kids II survey reports that 95% of young people aged 9-16 have access to the internet – the individual's *conditions* of access are likely to vary across homes[21].

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[21] A child's access might be limited, for example, by material conditions within the home (e.g. the number of available computers) or parental governance (e.g. rules and regulations).

Unfortunately it was not possible to use computers during the focus groups, due to the school computer room being used for regular classes. Incorporating the focus groups with separate computer sessions might have provided some insights and contrasts in terms of both talk and practice, and this would certainly be an interesting line of enquiry for further research. As part of the interview I introduced visual images of brand names and characters from popular virtual worlds. The pupils generally treated the introduction of these images as a competition to see who could guess the website being depicted. I was wary of introducing the images out of concern that they would limit the range of online spaces discussed and so these were left till roughly the halfway point in the discussion. Despite the lack of computers in the focus groups, the online spaces used by the children were highly significant in the shaping of the discussions.

d. Virtual Worlds and Digital Content

Though much of the research was carried out via interviews, a significant amount of 'ethnographic' research was also carried out across a number of websites. This portion of the research was initially limited to those online spaces of primary relevance to the investigation, in particular: the CBBC website, *Habbo*, and the Habbo fansites. Over the course of the investigation this expanded to incorporate a significantly broader range of other online spaces, including: Sulake and the BBC's corporate websites, industry blogs and news websites, and social media platforms.

A significant amount of my initial research involved examining the layout of the different online spaces in order to familiarise myself with their design. By taking screenshots I was able to keep a visual record of key design features and these acted as a useful resource for reference in interviews and also for later analysis. In addition to exploring the visual layout of the websites, I also gathered a significant amount of textual data. These predominantly consisted of general information and instructions for users, including: terms and conditions, service updates, 'house rules', tutorials, and help information.

Later in the investigation I began to explore a number of other online spaces that I had become aware of either via hyperlinks from the online spaces I was researching, or from conversations with research participants. The corporate homepages of the BBC and Sulake both emerged as significant to the research but for very different reasons. The BBC Trust's website proved to be a particularly important resource for corporate reports and strategy briefings. Just as the present research investigation was starting out, the BBC published *A Review of Children's Services* (2009). This report, along with a number of other documents and briefings, provided important resources on the discourse and rhetoric of the development of the BBC's online media strategy for children. The BBC 'Internet Blog' also emerged as an important source of data; hosting blog posts from staff working in the BBC's online and technology teams. In contrast to the BBC Trust's reports, the blogs provided a more 'informal' communication channel for staff to share projects and issues with the general public.

As a commercial firm, Sulake provided only limited corporate strategy information on its homepage. Nonetheless, the homepage acted as an important tool in the development of Sulake's brand image, publishing frequent press releases and announcements on forthcoming developments to the *Habbo* service. Over the course of the study, Sulake's branding strategy also spread onto a number of social media platforms, including blogs, a Facebook page and numerous staff *Twitter* accounts. As demonstrated in the next chapter, the growth of Sulake's social media became highly significant to the way the corporation communicated with users. This in turn meant that social media took an increasingly prominent role in both the *Habbo* and fansite case studies, emerging as important online spaces in their own right.

In bringing the different data sources together I sought to adopt an ethnomethodologically inspired approach by treating speech and textual sources as forms of social practice (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Latour, 1987). In this sense, the accounts of the interviewees, and the textual sources from blogs and social media, have been regarded in this study as not only 'accounts' of the social

world, but as also contributing to its constitution. As such, the chapters in this thesis examine how and in what ways different textual accounts position, frame and constitute actors and practices.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have described some of the main methodological and practical challenges that have emerged over the course of the present study. Following on from the literature review in chapter two, the present chapter has sought to outline a methodological framework that: (1) takes account of the broader media assemblages and ecosystems in which young people's online media participation is configured, and (2) is capable of tracing the unfolding biography of an online space's design and development. Such an approach allows our attention to shift away from the point of use as a 'determining instance' in the biography of the online, and enables us to instead consider how different moments and junctures in the biography of an online space are relationally linked and dependent in the configuration of participation. To this end, the multi-sited research approach has offered a particularly appealing means of 'following' the configuration of participation across different mediated points in an online spaces unfolding development. Such an approach has partly been necessitated by the shifting practices of media product design, where different groups of actors are enrolled and mobilised at different points in the design process. The following five chapters of this thesis each compromise a different empirical case study, with each positioned at different junctures and intersections in the design and development of young people's online spaces. Following on from the present discussion, the next chapter looks at the trajectory of a virtual world's development, examining how users are enrolled as 'active' participants and at which different points in the product's development.

Chapter 4 – Design, 'Activation' and Mediation: Young People's Participation in the Development of a Virtual World

Introduction

Of the many different types of online spaces available to children and young people, virtual worlds form a particularly distinct category. On the one hand, they share many common characteristics with computer games, enabling users to control and navigate an avatar across a virtual environment. They also share many common features with online 'chat room' services, such as live public or private conversations between multiple users. In recent years, many computer games have begun to adopt similar characteristics to virtual worlds, most notably increased online social contact between players[22]. Nonetheless, the virtual worlds considered in this study belong to a particularly distinct branch of browser-based online spaces that require no software installation and offer no formal gaming 'objectives'. Virtual worlds belonging to this category include websites such as Disney's *Club Penguin*, *Movie Star Planet* and, the case study of the present chapter, Sulake's *Habbo Hotel*.

In addition to their hybrid functionality, virtual worlds also share a distinctive production process. Rather than remaining 'completed' products after their launch, virtual worlds continue to undergo re-design and re-development. Modifications to virtual worlds can range from small content additions, such as the introduction of new avatar outfits, to large-scale adjustments, such as the complete overhauls of the online interface. As browser-based media, virtual worlds require no specific software installation beyond an up-to-date internet browser and the necessary browser plug-ins to load *Flash* or *Shockwave* based webpages. As a result, the designers of virtual worlds are able to constantly develop and evolve the service without requiring any alteration to the user's existing software. In this sense, the virtual world offers a constantly evolving service that is delivered anew each time a user logs in via their browser.

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[22] See for example Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* series.

The present chapter focuses on this constant process of re-designing and developing virtual worlds. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, one of the primary aims of this study is to explore the different spatial and temporal points that are linked and connected in the biography of online spaces. In this chapter, the predominant focus will be on those temporal and spatial sites linked to the design and production of virtual worlds. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the trajectory of a virtual world's development is far from linear. Practices of production and consumption unfold alongside one another and, on occasions, overlap. To remain competitive within their markets, virtual world firms employ a range of methods to gain insights into their users and attempt to *align* the evolving qualities of the product with the perceived interests and demands of their user base. In this sense, the virtual world's biography is one of constant evolution, attempting to keep apace in a market where user retention is essential to commercial success

Another aim of this chapter is to consider the framing, enrolment and mobilisation of users in the evolving and unfolding development of the virtual world service. In particular, I will consider how the virtual world's design and development has become intimately linked with the process of assembling and constructing young people as 'active' participants. To this end, the present chapter will focus on the various methods that designers employ in an attempt to enrol and 'activate' young people as participants over the course of a virtual world's design and development. Such an approach particularly draws on Miller and Rose's (2011) account of the *assembly* and *mobilisation* of the consumer subject by advertising agencies in the mid-twentieth century. Miller and Rose examined how, through 'techniques' of "calculation, classification and inscription" (2011: 140), advertising firms rendered the psychological subject of consumption into being. This chapter similarly examines how the young person as 'active' participant is constituted through the methods of user elicitation and 'activation' in the process of the virtual world's design. Over the course of the chapter, further questions will be raised in terms of how such categories of the 'active' user can act to exclude particular groups of young people and potentially limit their ability to participate in the development of virtual worlds.

In the first part of this chapter, the case study of *Habbo Hotel* will be introduced in more detail. This will then be followed by some further clarification of some of the key terms employed in this chapter, particularly 'qualification' and 'activation'. The remainder of the chapter is broadly split into two parts. In the first half I consider the temporal and spatial organisation of the virtual world's design process. In the first instance this will involve considering in more detail the nature of the unfolding biography of the virtual world as a product, drawing in particular on the concepts of 'qualification' and the 'economy of qualities' as developed by Callon et al. (2002). This section will also consider how the virtual world's design process unfolds through particular spatial and temporal distributions, focusing in particular on how user participation is distributed at particular points in the design process. The second half of the chapter will focus in more detail on the mediated relationship between *Habbo's* designers and users. In this section we will move from examining the virtual world as simply a 'product' of the development process, and instead consider how it has been utilized as a tool for enabling mediated proximal relations between *Habbo's* design team and *Habbo* users. This will involve a more detailed exploration of the methods for eliciting user participation and an examination of the dynamics and contours of the mediated relationships between designers and users.

Case Study: *Habbo Hotel*

Habbo Hotel (or simply *Habbo*) was launched in the UK in 2000 by a Finnish firm called Sulake. The firm has since opened a range of *Habbo* websites across a number of territories, with the most recent 'Hotel' opening in Turkey in August 2012. According to Sulake's corporate website, *Habbo* is "the world's largest social game online community for teenagers" (Sulake, 2012a), providing an online space "to meet new and existing friends, play games and simply have fun" (Ibid.). Over the past decade *Habbo* has amassed a large and loyal following of users and Sulake estimates that the website currently receives 10 million unique visitors per month, with approximately 250 million registered user accounts globally (Sulake, 2012a). *Habbo* is largely aimed at the 'teen' market and, according to Sulake's most recent

figures, 90 per cent of its current user base is aged between thirteen and eighteen years (Ibid.). Figures from 2009 suggest a marginal gender split in the user base of approximately 56 per cent male versus 44 per cent female (Sulake, 2009). According to Kzero (2012), *Habbo's* user figures rank it the largest virtual world globally, currently outpacing rivals such as 'Stardoll' and 'Club Penguin' (with 200 million and 170 million registered users, respectively). In 2010, the company reported sales of €56.2 million ($78.7 million) with a net profit of €1.6 million ($2.3 million) (Sulake, 2011).

Like most other virtual worlds, *Habbo* requires users to create an avatar to act as their proxy within the virtual environment. When customising their *Habbo* avatar, users have a range of options, including: adjustments to hair, clothing, skin tone, facial features etc. Once logged into *Habbo*, users have the choice of navigating to two different types of virtual environment: 'public' or 'private' rooms. Public rooms are environments pre-created by Sulake staff and are available for all users. Private rooms, on the other hand, are environments created and 'owned' by users. Users can choose from a number of different room layouts, and can personalise their chosen room using furniture or decorations that they purchase from the *Habbo* catalogue. How *Habbo* users choose to design and arrange their rooms is left largely open-ended. As a result, private rooms have been used to create a range of different spaces including: hospitals, schools, beauty contests, mazes, mafias, replicas of 'Hogwarts' etc. Within both public and private rooms, users have the ability to communicate with one another by entering text that is displayed in the room as speech bubbles. Similar to a more traditional chat room interface, speech bubbles gradually scroll to the top of the screen, whilst the most recent entries appear at the bottom. Users also have the ability to invite others to join their personal 'friend list', which then enables them to privately communicate with one another using an in-built instant messenger service. A twenty-four hour moderation team monitors the *Habbo* service and users can request assistance if they experience problems with another *Habbo* user.

Habbo is described as a 'free-to-play' service – meaning that users are able to create an avatar and use the virtual environment without requirement to pay. Nonetheless, *Habbo* is a commercial virtual world and Sulake generates income from the service in three main ways: micro-transactions, user memberships schemes, and in-game 'immersive advertising'. As mentioned above, user's can customise rooms through the purchase of furniture and decorations. In order to buy these virtual items, users must first purchase some of the in-game currency: 'Habbo Credits'. These credits can themselves be purchased using a number of payment methods, including: text messages, credit cards, *PayPal* etc. Since *Habbo's* initial launch, the number of furniture items has rapidly exploded, with new items being added on a regular basis. Though *Habbo's* 'catalogue' of virtual items includes many permanent furniture ranges and collections, Sulake has also introduced a number of 'rare' virtual items, which are available in only limited quantities. *Habbo's* virtual furniture can also be traded between players and, thanks predominantly to the scarcity of some items, this has given rise to a complex in-game virtual economy (see Lehdonvirta, et al., 2009). In addition to purchasing furniture, *Habbo's* users can also use credits to pay for monthly 'Habbo Club' membership. By being a club member, users gain access to an exclusive range of outfits and appearance for their avatars, as well as a wider range of choice in private room layouts. Continued membership in the *Habbo* Club is rewarded with new 'rare' furniture items that are delivered to the user on a monthly basis.

Sulake's final source of income is through its advertising partnerships. The firm claims to offer a particularly unique advertising scheme by hosting 'immersive' brand experiences within the virtual environment. In the following extract from its corporate homepage, Sulake pitches the immersive advertising concept to potential partners:

> From an advertising perspective, *Habbo* concept offers one of the most innovative and cost-effective ways to communicate and interact with the teen demographic, build brand loyalty and modify consumer behaviour. *Habbo* Hotel turns traditional online marketing campaigns into live virtual

marketing experiences. The viral marketing effect of these campaigns is multiplied by the fact that these take on a life of their own, outside the *Habbo* environment, as they flow into myriad fan sites and discussion forums (Sulake, 2005)

Such 'immersive' advertising experiences can include the creation of public rooms, 'rare' items and user 'quests' themed by a particular brand or product. As such, the marketing of the product or brand is merged into the virtual environment so as to blur the advertisement and broader virtual world experience.

As one of the first virtual worlds for young people, *Habbo* has been something of a trailblazer in the rapidly emerging youth online media market. Though *Habbo* still boasts the largest number of registered users of any virtual world, it is increasingly facing competition from other market competitors in the UK, particularly *Moshi Monsters* and *Bin Weevils* (Langsworthy, 2013). Though its market prominence may no longer be as secure as it once was, the present chapter demonstrates that *Habbo* remains a valuable case study for examining the emerging practices of designing and developing online media products in a market that continues to expand at a rapid rate.

The Qualification of Virtual Worlds

Callon et al.'s (2002) concept of qualification – originally introduced in chapter two – offers some important theoretical tools for thinking about the design and development of online spaces, such as *Habbo*. One of their central arguments is that products remain in "a (continuous) process of qualification and requalification" (2002: 199). Throughout the course of its biography, a product's qualities continue to be modified and transformed as it constantly changes hands (2002: 197). Callon et al. use the term 'goods' to signify a product that has had its qualities temporarily stabilised at a specific temporal and spatial 'moment'. The term 'product', on the other hand, is used more broadly to refer to the object that remains in process. The process of qualification captures well the processual nature of the virtual world's

continual development. For Callon et al., both producers and consumers are involved in this process of qualification. They argue that, "consumers are just as active as the other parties involved. They participate in the process of qualifying available products" (2002: 201). This is particularly emphasized in relation to the 'perception' of differences between products and the ability to 'grade' them (for example 'does this website load well on my computer?'), which in turn can lead to the further requalification of a product by a producer (2002: 212).

Callon et al. apply the process of qualification not only to 'physical' products but also the 'service' economy. They suggest that the provision of services is a 'socio-technical capacity' provided or leased to the consumer. Virtual worlds are particularly difficult forms of product to assign either to the category of 'physical' or 'service' product. In a sense, firms such as Sulake provide their users with a 'social' service, moderated and maintained by teams of staff. Nonetheless, the ability to access a virtual world remains heavily dependent on the existence of other products, such as computer hardware, an active internet connection and browser software. In this sense the virtual world remains a hybrid of both 'physical' and 'service' products. Commenting on Callon et al.'s article, Slater (2002) offers a particularly useful way for thinking about the virtual world as product that can be made 'discrete'. He uses the term *decoupage* to describe the process by which a product or service can be 'cut out' and made into a "discrete and transactable event/object" (2002: 110). In this sense, the virtual world emerges through an alignment of a particular socio-technical assemblage (e.g. hardware, software etc.) that allows it to be made "stable enough to allow transactions, at least for a limited period" (2002: 111).

Though Callon et al.'s account of qualification offers a significant amount of potential for examining the product of virtual worlds, there remains one issue that requires further consideration. In Callon et al.'s account the participation of the user is presumed as part of the process of qualification – consumers are 'just as active' as those involved in the design and production processes. The question for the present chapter, and the thesis as a whole, is 'on what terms'? This chapter, in particular,

considers how the user is positioned as 'active' not only at the point of use, but also during the production process. Rather than presume 'active' participation, this chapter will probe precisely how and on what terms users are positioned as *able* to contribute to a virtual world's qualification at the point of design and development.

Framing and 'Activating' the User

One of the central aims of this chapter, and of the thesis as a whole, is to examine how children and young people are constituted as 'active' participants in their engagement with online spaces. In the present chapter, this theme is initially addressed by exploring how *Habbo's* users are framed as potential contributors in the on-going design and development of the virtual world. In particular, the next section will explore how the process of designing a virtual world is itself inextricably linked with the process of assembling and mobilizing the 'active' user. At the present point in the discussion it is important to distinguish between notions of children and young people's agency and their construction as 'active' media users. As outlined in chapter 2, agency is taken to mean the ability and capacity of young people to act within particular socio-material assemblages. The notion of the 'active' user, on the other hand, is defined in this thesis as the (predominantly adult) construction of a particular model of *consumer subject*, which is used to demarcate and delineate certain notions of valued 'activity' (e.g. 'creativity' or 'self-expression'). Seen in this way, the 'active' user is embedded and materially inscribed within the media assemblage and emerges as part of the virtual world's design. This is not, however, to say that young people's agency and their construction as 'active' users are mutually exclusive events or processes. As we will see over the course of this thesis, the notion of the 'active' user often plays a significant part in shaping young people's ability to participate in online spaces.

Part of the aim of this chapter will be to examine the processes by which the 'active' user is defined and mobilised in design practices. In his study of the children's clothing industry in the early 20th century, Cook (2004) has attempted to illuminate the processes by which the child consumer was made distinct from adult consumers

in retail. In particular, he notes how "the historical trajectory of the child consumer moves away from emphasizing the child's status as an *object* of economic activity and towards privileging its identity as a subject in and of market relation" (2004: 12). In a sense, the present study offers a glimpse of the continuation of these processes as the child or young person as consumer is further transformed into an 'active' consumer who 'creatively' and 'proficiently' engages with media products. Buckingham (2007; 2011) has also engaged with such constructions of the child consumer in his work, drawing attention in particular to the ways in which wider public debates have been polarized into either extreme celebratory or condemnatory positions (2011: 44). More recently, Buckingham has noted how the notion of the child as 'active' consumer has increasingly been adopted in the discourse of marketing professionals. He draws attention to the way in which new forms of marketing techniques, such as the 'immersive advertising' utilized by Sulake, are reliant on "the positive involvement of the consumer" (2011: 100). As we will see in this chapter, the development of virtual worlds has similarly come to be organized around a notion of 'active' user involvement.

Before exploring some of the ways in which the 'active' user is mobilised in *Habbo's* design, it's important to get a sense of how Sulake staff frame users as more generally 'active' in their engagement with *Habbo*. One of the overriding themes of my interviews with Sulake staff was the significance placed on 'creativity' as part of the *Habbo* user experience. The ability to personalise an avatar and to host and decorate rooms were commonly given as examples of the creative activities that *Habbo* users could engage in. When asked to summarise *Habbo*, one Sulake staff member described it as follows:

> *Habbo* is a creative social space [...] the main feature for me is the freedom
> and the creativity. Users can create their own space, their own room. In a
> way it's a bit like a mini-god simulator [...] because you have your own
> space you can decide to make it an airline check-in desk, some users do
> that, or a mafia room, a role play, a maze or just a chat room. Users, they

go to *Habbo*, they have their space and they choose what direction to take their experience.

In this account, the virtual world is positioned as an environment that *enables* and *facilitates* user creativity. Of particular interest here is the way in which the rhetoric of 'creativity' is mobilized to position the user as 'actively' contributing to development of their own, and other's, *Habbo* experience. The description of *Habbo* as 'like a mini-god simulator' implies that the user has a degree of creative control over the way the virtual environment is shaped. There is also a repeated reference to the *Habbo* environment as the user's 'own space'. Though Sulake hosts and owns *Habbo*, the interviewee suggests that the virtual world is designed to give users a sense of ownership and control.

Another Sulake staff member framed user creativity in a slightly different way:

[Creativity] becomes more important for more active users, I would say that new users doesn't see it so clearly that aspect of creativity. It's more a visual chat room for them, but after awhile, when you use the service more, the creative part becomes really important.

This interviewee identifies varying levels of 'activity' and 'creativity' between users, particularly between new and more established users. In this instance some *Habbo* users are defined and distinguished as *more actively* or *more creatively* involved in the qualification of the *Habbo* environment than others. In this sense, the label of the 'active' or 'creative' user is one attributed only to a perceived subsection of users, particularly those who invest more time in the virtual world service. This raises an important point in terms of not only how users are described (e.g. as active, creative etc.) but also the process by which such labels can be used to both include and exclude. In addition to considering differences between newer versus older users, we might also look at paid versus free accounts. For example, are users who

pay and financially contribute to virtual worlds more likely to be considered 'active' and 'creative' contributors than those who only use 'freemium'[23] services?

In the following sections I consider in closer detail how the designers and developers of *Habbo* attempt to mobilise or 'activate' their users in the development of virtual world service. The verb 'activation' is used here to emphasise the processual character of the techniques and practices employed in *making* the 'active' user subject. It also moves us away from the presumption that *all* users are *always* active in the sense defined by media industry professionals[24]. As we have already seen, some users are considered to be 'more' active than others. The next part of this chapter will focus, in particular, on the way in which user 'activation' is distributed in the process of the virtual world's design.

Distributions of User 'Activation' in Virtual World Design

> our process of how we change the product has evolved just as much as the product has also […] there's been the constant interaction between the users, and the product, and us

The above quotation, taken from an interview with one of Sulake's lead concept designers, describes how the process of designing new features for *Habbo* has 'evolved' to incorporate a 'constant' relationship between the designers and users. Writing about the video games industry, Kleine et al. (2006) describe how the development and cultivation of such relationships are a way to:

> "close the loop" between corporation and customers, reinscribing the consumer into the production process by feeding information about his or her preferences and predilections back into the design and marketing of new game commodities (2006: 57)

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[23] The term 'freemium' refers to virtual world accounts that are free at the point of use. However, there is often the potential for users to subsequently pay for a 'premium' membership account that offers a range of additional features unavailable to freemium users.

[24] See also Evans (1990) and Morley (1993) for discussions of whether media users are 'always' active.

To 'close the loop' is to create a closer relationship between corporations and users in order to shape the product more closely to the expectations and preferences of the users. Furthermore, such a relationship has been characterised as enabling greater participation on the part of users, enrolling them as "active partners" (Arvidsson, 2005: 70) in the process of designing the product prior to release. In the case of the online games and virtual world industry, such a relationship has been characterised by some as heralding a shift towards more co-productive models of product design and as blurring the boundaries between producers and consumer (Banks, 2013; Taylor, 2009).

This section, and the thesis as a whole, offers a slightly more cautious reading of claims that media users, and particularly young people, have a greater opportunity for participation in the design of commercial products. As mentioned in the previous section, the notion of the 'active' media consumer has increasingly been adopted in both media marketing and design, with the consumer being characterised as playing a significant role in the development of media products and brands. In the present section, I examine accounts by Sulake staff of user 'activation' in the design process, paying particular attention to how they describe the 'closing of the loop' between users and themselves. I will also consider how user participation is distributed within the design process and attempt to locate at which specific *temporal-spatial junctures* user activation is said to occur.

Distributions of 'Active' User Participation

The notion of unfurling temporalities plays a significant role in Callon et al.'s (2002) understanding of products as embedded in continuous processes of qualification and requalification. They describe how each product, "consists of a sequence of actions, a series of operations that transform it, move it and cause it to change hands" (2002: 197). Adding to the discussion of temporality raised in Callon et al.'s paper, Adkins (2009) describes how a product's temporality should not be viewed as external to its development, but rather as unfolding with the product. She describes how this is a

form of 'event time', in which each product is defined by its own unique temporal and spatial movement. The present section examines the forms of temporal framing that emerge in the development and qualification of virtual worlds. Over the course of my interviews with Sulake staff, participants gave various accounts of the temporal sequencing and pacing of designing new features for the *Habbo* service. Of particular interest in these accounts was the positioning and distribution of users as participants at particular 'events' or junctures within the design process. How and when users were described as being able to participate in the design process was strongly linked to specific temporal and spatial points within the product's unfolding development.

In the following extract, one of the Sulake concept designers describes a series of unfolding events in the design, development and release of a new feature:

> as a result of our observations of the users then, we gave them the new kind of tool, they started using in ways we didn't anticipate

In this extract we can identify five distinct events: the *observation* of *Habbo* users, reflection on the *results* of the observations, the *giving* (or distribution) of the new tool, the *use* of this new tool by users, and finally, the design team's *reactions* to that reception. According to the designer, user participation enters at the points of distribution and reception. The users are also 'present' in the designer's observation and monitoring of user activities[25]. This sequence of temporal events sets out a distinction of participatory roles and activities that unfold with the product's design, production and qualification. Whilst such temporal sequences are generally planned and informed by industry models of practice, it is their localized articulation that produces this specific set of relations between the actors concerned and the product. That the users adopted the new tool in ways unanticipated is particularly interesting in terms of different events feeding into one another across the product's temporal unfolding.

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[25] User observation and monitoring are further considered below.

In this next extract, from another Sulake concept designer, user participation is distributed in a slightly different way,

> in that project we had to sort of split it into phases, because we can't do everything at once, so we just have to decide what the first package was that could go out to a small group of people and then we started adding users into the beta, who had access to the product, and after we thought that 'okay now we're in the stage that we think everyone can access it', then we opened up to everyone. And then we still did the sort of, tweaking. Adding bits and pieces.

In this instance, a new design feature undergoes pilot testing at various points in the design process. Access to the first pilot phase is initially limited to a small group of users, gradually increasing in size until the design teams are satisfied that the new feature is ready to be made available for wider release. During the pilot phases, a form of temporal and spatial *partitioning* is employed, limiting participation to a select group of users. This partitioning also enacts distinctions between users, who are separated into pilot testers and 'everyone' else. Earlier in this chapter I described how the label of 'active' users was often informed by other distinctions such as the amount of time a user had spent in the service. In the above extract, we can observe how these distinctions are further enacted through the inclusion or exclusion of users at different phases or junctures in the design process. Though the pilot testers may have a greater stake in the development process, their ability to participate is reliant on the design team providing them with access to the beta test.

The designers also frequently described the 'speed' of a project and the necessity of getting user feedback on a feature as soon as possible. This was attributed to the need to gauge the extent to which a new feature met with user approval and whether it would require further adjustments. As the following concept designer describes:

I thinking it was a compromise between what the users like and what we like […] it's just balancing, and testing it out there. We try to get it out there as soon as possible. Then if we get the feedback, then we know if it's okay, because our users will tell us if it sucks [laughs] […] we can sort it quite fast now if something is, in their opinion, going sort of, in the wrong way

The users are described here as assertive in their feedback, giving an unambiguous response as to how they feel about a new feature. The response by users is monitored as a means of determining whether that new feature requires further development. In this sense, *Habbo*'s users are positioned as 'active' in their judgement and evaluation of a feature upon its release, and the strength of their reaction can prompt its re-qualification.

For the most part, the extracts considered so far in this section have referred to *Habbo's* design in terms of monitoring and retrospection. The following part of this section will consider more closely how these temporal positions also intersect with anticipations and expectations of the 'active' user.

Future Orientations: Anticipation and Shifting Expectations

In their discussion of the twin processes of design and domestication, Silverstone and Haddon (1996) suggest that a key aspect of a product's development lies in the construction of the future user. That is, an imagined prospective user whom designers intend their product for. They argue that, "design images of eventual users are incorporated into the fabric of the object" (1996: 1). Unfortunately, little further consideration is given in their article as to how this process of constructing 'future user' is mobilised in design processes. Such ideas have, however, been taken up further within STS. In particular, Wilkie and Michael (2009) have examined the role of 'expectation' in design, in which 'future users' are performed in the process of design. They describe how:

By imagining future scenarios of use, a projected move into the future and folding the implications and consequences of the future back onto their present activities, innovation actors […] can stimulate future potentialities, which in turn serve in the potential making of the present with a view to affecting the future (2009: 505).

In this way, the future, past and present are interweaved and intermingled. The design process provides a point of intersection in which these different temporal strands converge and, as Silverstone and Haddon describe, become part of "the fabric of the object" (1996: 1).

During my research with Sulake, designers would often refer to the variety of different ways in which their practices were informed by imagined or anticipated future user activities. Just prior to my visit to the Helsinki offices, the user insight team had begun to introduce *Habbo*'s design teams to a set of new 'user personas'. These user personas were a set of profiles representing different user 'types' within the virtual world service, based on the amalgamation and sorting of various data collected by the user insight team. Each profile was given a name and identifying features, such as gender and age, as well as a range of likes and dislikes. The purpose of the personas was to enable designers to consider how different types of user might greet and react to the introduction of a new design feature. This is demonstrated by the following extract from the lead concept designer:

we've evaluated like which parts of that particular features, like each one of the personas would like. And there's been some new ideas springing about based on the fact that we've figured 'okay this persona specifically needs this kind of functionality and we hadn't originally planned for it', and we actually added some of that stuff in.

Though the designers were still adjusting to the introduction of the personas in their design practices, many of them described the positive opportunities they felt the profiles created, particularly in terms of ensuring that different user perspectives

were considered. Of particular interest here, is the way in which the personas represent an intersection of past and present observations with future expectations. In the above quote, the designer describes how the personas enabled consideration about the users needs that hadn't been "originally planned for" or anticipated. In this sense, the persona acted as a way of preventing future user issues with a design feature, through the mobilisation of an imagined 'future user' in the present.

In addition to planning for 'future users', the designers also described how their own expectations and anticipations of future use were often tied into their design practices. The majority of the interviewees described how they had largely come to expect that users would find ways of adopting and using new design features that were unanticipated by the original designers. As the following interviewees attest:

> all the cool stuff that people have started to do in *Habbo* is definitely emergent and wasn't planned for […] we just didn't anticipate most of the uses.

> if we invent something, they invent something out of that, then it sort of start a loop, so it's really hard to control that, where it ends.

Many of the interviewees described how they took a substantial amount of pleasure from seeing how users would find innovative means of adapting new design features to their own ends:

> I just love seeing somebody use something in a way that we didn't anticipate before.

In this way, anticipation of the 'unexpected' has emerged as a significant part of the *Habbo* design process. Rather than closing down how a design feature *ought* to be used, many of the Sulake staff welcomed the potential user innovations of their ideas. In this sense, the anticipation accompanying the introduction of new features is closely intertwined with the construction of the 'active' user. Each new feature is

built with the anticipation that it will 'activate' users (or, at least, certain users) into new and innovative means of engagement with the *Habbo* service. As such, the designers describe the process of 'innovation' as continuing beyond the point that they have finished working on it. Instead, at the point of its introduction into the virtual world service, a new feature becomes an 'activating device', mobilising users into new forms of engagement.

For the remainder of this section I will focus on an example of the introduction of a new design feature called the 'respect' button. The designer who led the project described how their original intention had been to design a feature that enabled users to "give […] attention" to others, without requiring verbal contact. Her idea had been to create, "just a button that you could hit and you just get the respect point". However, the adoption of the feature by users had some unexpected outcomes, "what happened was users started to sell respect points [laughs] so that they said 'okay, three respects for a furni', and we didn't like that happen, but it did [both laugh]". In this instance, the original anticipated use of friends or strangers 'giving respect' as an act of friendliness and generosity, was transformed into a commoditised gesture that could be bought at the right price. The designer went on to describe how this initial adoption, though 'a huge shock', consequently died down after a couple of weeks. She also described how

> after the respect I'm sort of thinking what will be the, sort of the way that, that they will use it. I'm trying to think about how could they use this in a wrong way, trying to turn it around also, just to check what's on the other side.

In this account the interviewee offers a slightly more cautious and wary note of how user innovations might unfold in unanticipated ways. In this case, she describes how after this incident she attempts to reflect more on ways in which users might adapt a feature in the 'wrong way'. This also offers a slightly different perspective on user activation, suggesting that not all outcomes of activation are considered to be positive.

Mediation and New Proximal Relations

One key point to emerge from the present chapter has been the attempts by designers to 'close the loop' between the processes of production and consumption by mobilising users as 'active' participants at specific junctures in the design process. The final part of this chapter focuses in more detail on the establishment of connections between designers and users and will examine how such relationships generate new forms of *mediated proximity* across the virtual world's development process. Up to this point, the virtual world has primarily been viewed as the emergent *product* of the relations between designers and user. The present section expands this definition, examining how the virtual world acts as a point of an *intermediary device* that enables Sulake staff to establish new forms of proximal relations with their users. As such, the virtual world is viewed here as significant mediatory device within its own unfolding development. However, it is not the only significant mediatory device between designers and users. This section will also examine how other online spaces, particularly social media websites, are enrolled and mobilised as intermediaries in the formation of user-producer relationships. In the methodology chapter of this thesis I emphasised the importance of de-centring virtual worlds and examining them as just one of potentially multiple intermediating spaces within a media assemblage. This point is further pursued here by examining the broader assemblage of intermediary devices in which the virtual world is located.

By examining the mediated proximity between Sulake staff and users, the present section will also consider how mediation shapes and produces notions of closeness and distance. Though some academics have emphasised the growing closeness of relations between media users and producers, many others have remained sceptical. Negus (2002), for example, has suggested that although intermediaries provide a point of connection between consumption and production, they also serve to "re-produce rather than bridge the distance" (2002: 509) between these two processes. For the present chapter, notions of closeness and distance are not only an issue in terms of the gap between production and consumption, but also a generational gap between 'young-users' and 'adult-designers'. Mayall's work is particularly useful

here in terms of thinking about 'generation' as "social positions [that] are constituted, reproduced and transformed through relational activity" (2002: 40). In this sense, generational difference is not a fixed concept (e.g. Tapscott's 'Generation Y'), but rather a concept that relationally fluctuates between individuals and groups. Consequently, our reading of the mediated relationship between designers and users must also account for forms of generational proximity.

The Virtual World as Intermediary

During interviews in the Sulake offices, staff would frequently report going 'in-game' at specific points in the design process. The purpose of such visits ranged from finding inspiration for new design concepts, to getting a sense of how users were responding to recent product releases. Like *Habbo's* users, the Sulake staff would create and use avatars as a way of navigating around the virtual world environment. How staff used their avatars and to what ends varied significantly depending on each individual's work role and their motivation for going in-game. Staff who self-identified as working in more 'back-end' roles were significantly less likely to go in-game to communicate with users. Instead, they would either often limit their visits to technical check-ups of the service or would use a non-live copy of the service:

> I visit the services quite often but it's more like taking screen shots or testing how some things work.

> I'm running like a copy of the server locally and connecting to that all the time, of course, when I'm doing the feature, like. But going in to the live site where the users are, certainly I've been less.

In contrast, concept designers and content producers were much more likely to use the *Habbo* service on a frequent basis. For the most part the remainder of this section will focus on those staff whose roles most frequently required engagement with users in the virtual worlds.

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For most members of Sulake's design team, the primary aim of going 'in-game' was to spend time either observing or interacting with users. As the following staff member describes,

> I just go in, you know, as a random account and just start talking to users. And they don't know that I'm a staff member because that wouldn't be beneficial for my aims, which is, well one of them is seeing what users are talking about, seeing what users are doing.

This staff member describes how using an avatar within the client allows him to 'start talking to users' and 'seeing what users are doing'. He also describes how being identified by users as a Sulake staff member can be a potential impediment to these tasks. As such he uses a 'random' account in order to avoid being recognised. The use of anonymous accounts was a frequent practice by Sulake staff in order to prevent their presence from affecting the 'natural' flow of user activities. In a sense, the Sulake staff treated their entry into the virtual world as a form of ethnographic observation, attempting to immerse themselves in the activities of the users. As one designer described,

> I try to go in every day if I have, sort of, time. Because, it requires fifteen minutes to get into something really nice, if you want to sort of hang around a bit. But if you really want to play it takes a couple of hours in my opinion […] [I] observe what the users are doing and what they, sort of, do in different situations and then also trying to get into the games.

The framing of users is particularly interesting in both of these accounts. Though positioned as 'actively' engaged in their use of the virtual world, there is a sense in which this activity would be disrupted by knowledge of a staff member's presence. Instead, both staff members limit their mediated interaction with users to a predominantly one-sided exchange, dipping in and out of user activities without identifying their intentions. As such, the terms of engagement remain limited for the user, who is able to participate in the designer's research only unwittingly.

For the Sulake staff interviewed, developing the ability to engage with users raised a number of issues ranging from the kind of avatar used, to the type of language they employed when talking with users. In the following extract a concept producer describes some of the difficulties of engaging with users in-game:

> We don't want to come across as the user's best friend, we don't want to come across as cool, uncool or anything like that, you know, we want to be as straight forward and blunt with our users as possible. So yeah we can be funny, we can be friendly but, you know, we don't want to be down with the kids per se. You know, because that is the kind of thing that if it works, it can work brilliantly, but in my experience, more than not, it back fires and makes you sound like a boring uncle [laughs].

In this extract a set of contrasts are made between how staff should and shouldn't interact with users in-game. Though great importance is placed in developing a closer relationship with users, this extract suggests that staff must also maintain a degree of distance. As such, appearing to be 'down with the kids' or acting as a 'user's best friend' are flagged as interactional boundary points. These boundary points also hint at the potential generational distance between *Habbo's* designers and users. There is a sense that by avoiding certain forms of behavior, Sulake's designers are better able to suppress these generational differences in their engagement with users and thus avoid sounding 'like a boring uncle'.

In the following extract, a concept designer describes their experience of engaging with users during the beta testing phase of a new product release:

> When the beta was out, we used *Habbo* a lot with [the lead designer] and we sort of just spent time in beta and started to interview users about the beta as well, about how they feel about it. I guess that's like a skill as well. So, trying to get in there and talk face-to-face to the users as well, how they feel about something. And then again, I guess, the feedback, what we gather, is

sort of to get the insight from that and turn that into a concept. It's a skill that you can do that as well, so that first you have to realize the problem and then you have to sort of evaluate what you can do based on that, and then turning that into a functioning concept on the site.

In this instance, the designers chose not to disguise their presence from the users. By entering into direct contact with the users, the staff members are positioned as a means by which users can contribute their thoughts and feedback on the beta release. Interestingly, the designer describes this as a 'face-to-face' encounter – though their interactions are mediated by the virtual world, they are framed here as bringing the user and designer into *closer* proximity. The designer goes on to describe how feedback from users can be evaluated and transformed 'into a concept' which can then be incorporated into the development of the product or feature. The designer thus positions themselves as the intermediary between the user's ideas and their implementation. This also establishes the intermediary role as partly one of authority, able to filter, judge and evaluate user ideas.

The intermediary role of the virtual world is perhaps unanticipated in the types of products considered in Callon et al.'s (2002) discussion of qualification. In the case of the virtual world, the product is not only an on-going process but also a key mediatory point within that process. It should be noted that virtual worlds are not unique in this respect, and many other forms of social media products are being designed as technologies that either gather and report information on their users, or provide a mediatory link between producers and consumers[26]. The present chapter is only able to touch the surface of these issues.

Social Media as Intermediary

In this final section we turn our attention to user-designer interactions that take place 'outside' of *Habbo's* virtual world interface. Over the last few years Sulake has

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[26] *Facebook* is perhaps the most obvious example, gathering data on users in order to provide more targeted advertising from 3rd parties.

begun to implement a brand presence spanning a number of social media platforms, including *YouTube*, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. The present section will be restricted to looking at Sulake's presence on *Twitter* and examine how this platform has provided staff with an alternate means of user engagement and 'activation'. At the end of this section I will briefly draw some comparisons between *Twitter* and the virtual world as intermediaries, before offering some general reflections on the discussions in this chapter.

Sulake's presence on *Twitter*[27] can be broadly categorised into two main account types. First, there are the 'official' *Habbo* and Sulake *Twitter* accounts, which provide regular corporate and product announcements to *Twitter* followers. For example, if the *Habbo* service experiences technical 'downtime', the Habbo *Twitter account* is used as a channel to provide users with estimates as to when the service will be re-opened. The second group of accounts are the 'Sulake Tweeters'; individual Sulake staff members who manage their own *Twitter* accounts. These range from the company's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to members of the design and creative teams and community orientated staff. In order to promote the 'Sulake Tweeters', the company's website contains a section of self-written profiles promoting each staff member, accompanied by their *Twitter* account name and a profile photograph. Each of these profiles follows a similar template, with staff members describing their role at Sulake, sometimes hinting at some of their interests, and encouraging users to follow their *Twitter* account.

The following are just a few extracts from the profiles of 'Sulake Tweeters' encouraging *Habbo* users to follow them on *Twitter*:

So Habbos, I'm here for you... to answer your questions, to listen to your crazy ideas and to help as much as I can.

[27] For those unfamiliar with *Twitter*, it is generally described as a 'micro-blogging' service. Users are able to publish ('Tweet') messages of up to 140 characters in length, which are shared with any other users who have chosen to 'follow' that user's tweets. In turn, the user is able to follow others and can view other people's Tweets in a timeline that updates live. The *Twitter* service employs algorithms to monitor the live stream of Tweets and is able to display 'trending' topics by recognizing recurring key words.

I am curious to hear your thoughts about the future. About great new ideas or things you saw at different games that you think would work in Habbo as well. Let me know and see you in Habbo!

I am interested in your thoughts and ideas on how to make the Habbo experience more fun, meaningful, creative and social. Let me know how to bring more value to the Habbo experience (Sulake, 2012b).

In each case the *Habbo* users are being addressed as in possession of opinions and ideas that are significant and of value to Sulake. The staff members invite the *Habbo* users to connect with them on *Twitter* in order to share their 'crazy' or 'great new' ideas. They can then gauge how users would like to see *Habbo* changed or improved and therefore 'bring more value' to the '*Habbo* experience'. In this way, the staff members overtly establish themselves as *intermediaries* through which a user's opinions can be heard and, potentially, implemented into the virtual world's design. As opposed to being a faceless or anonymous channel, the 'Sulake Tweeters' present themselves as individuals who can be interacted with and wish to hear the opinions and ideas of *Habbo* users. As such, there is a sense of 'immediacy' in the interaction offered between *Habbo* users and the Sulake Tweeters, with users apparently able to contact the staff members on their own terms.

The 'Sulake Tweeters' profiles, on the company's website, provide an important initial means of mobilizing users to follow the staff *Twitter* accounts, and form a closer and more 'personalised' connection via *Twitter*. Each of the profiles provides the *Habbo* users with insights into each staff member's interests, areas of expertise and personality quirks. The accompanying profile photos add a further means by which staff can be individually identified to users, allowing users to put a 'name to a face'. In the majority of cases, staff members opt for a regular portrait photograph, but in some instances their faces are obscured either by a mask or are edited until the face is only partially discernible. Though the staff members are prepared to be addressed by their first names, it's interesting to note that some of the staff have

chosen to disguise their faces and conceal part of their identity. Thus, to some degree, the Sulake staff may choose to assert a degree of privacy in sharing only limited details about their identity with the users.

According to Marwick and boyd (2010), using *Twitter* and other social media involves a particular form of identity performance to an imagined audience. In the case of the Sulake Tweeters, their audience is to some extent 'pre-formed', as the accounts appear to have been established with the intention of interacting with and 'activating' *Habbo* users. Indeed, the majority of Tweets through the Sulake Tweeters' accounts are directed at a '*Habbo* audience', either sharing *Habbo* related news or responding to tweets from *Habbo* users. The notion of identity performance is, however, significant to the way that Sulake staff seek to activate users. As we saw in the previous section, the type of language and avatar used in the virtual world is important to how designers attempt to engage with users. However, the framing of these accounts as 'Sulake' Tweeters suggests these *Twitter* accounts form part of the company's public identity and may follow a similar set of guidelines to those employed in the *Habbo* environment. The interaction between the Sulake Tweeters and *Habbo* users might therefore be seen as mediated to some degree by corporate values.

It's also necessary to consider the potential unevenness of *Twitter* as an intermediary device between *Habbo* users and Sulake. Couldry (2008) has noted that mediation can generate, "asymmetric relations between actors in the media process" (2008: 380). He goes on to highlight, "the impossibility of some actors or outputs influencing other actors or outputs" (ibid.). In this regard, a further factor to consider is whether a user is in possession of a *Twitter* account. From the outset, this factor has a significant impact in separating users and non-users of *Twitter*. This is not, however, to suggest that all *Twitter* users share the same advantage. Although *Habbo* users have the ability to Tweet to Sulake staff members, it remains the decision of the Sulake's Tweeters to choose which messages they acknowledge and respond to. As such, a *Habbo* user's *ability to Tweet to staff members* does not necessarily equate with having *the ability to be included or recognised* as offering

valuable contributions. Unfortunately, the present study is limited in its ability to examine which *Habbo* users are more or less likely to receive a response from a Sulake employee. Such an analysis would undoubtedly provide further insights into the contours of the mediated communication of users and Sulake staff via social media platforms.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have argued that 'activation' offers an important conceptual tool for tracing how young people are enrolled and mobilised as 'active' participants in the development of an online space. In the first part of the chapter I demonstrated how Sulake's designers attempt to encourage 'active' user participation at specific temporal and spatial points in the virtual world's design process. In these instances 'active' participation is defined in terms of particular *valued* activities that help to contribute to the development of the *Habbo* service. Therefore, rather than demarcating the agency of a user, 'activation' defines a model of participation that attempts to mobilise user activity in ways that contribute to the qualification of the online space. The second part of this chapter demonstrated how the process of activation involves the formation of closer proximal connections between users and designers. One of the key methods for activating users in the design of online spaces is through the creation of relatively 'informal' connections using mediatory channels. In this way, designers can engage 'directly' with users and encourage their participation by reassuring them of the value of their contributions. In this way, designers attempt to generate 'closer' relationships with users as means of mobilising young people's participation within the design process. Nonetheless, this chapter has also raised issues as to the extent to the 'evenness' of this relationship. Though mediatory tools enable a 'closer' relationship between designers and users, they also provide designers with the ability to determine whether and on what terms a user is 'invited' to participate.

The next chapter of this thesis provides moves on to a case study that significantly contrasts with that of the present chapter. Looking at the example of the CBBC's

multi-platform series *Bamzooki*, the next chapter will examine how user participation is framed and configured by a corporation that is publically funded and whose expertise has primarily been in television broadcasting. In this chapter we will see how young people's participation has undergone a significant re-framing, requiring new 'activation' techniques to manage user engagement across multiple platforms. Such contrasts will enable us to see how participation is not a fixed concept, but rather one that is shaped around different market imperatives and platform assemblages.

Chapter 5 – Aligning Media, Platforms and Audiences

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the configuration of young people's participation in the development of online space as part of a multiple platform assemblage. In the final section of the last chapter, I described some of the ways that Sulake staff used social media platforms to engage with users 'outside' of the virtual world environment. As a result, their elicitation of *Habbo* users' participation has become dependent on a media ecosystem that stretches *beyond* the online space they are creating. The enrolment of additional intermediary platforms has great significance for the way that we think about the broader media ecosystems and assemblages in which young people's online spaces are situated. In the present chapter this discussion is developed further by examining how young people's participation is framed in media assemblages that are composed not only of online spaces, but also *multiple media platforms*, including: televisions and software programs. This chapter will focus on the case study of CBBC's *Bamzooki*, a multi-platform children's programme, whilst simultaneously considering the broader implications for the configuration of young people's participation in cross-platform media production.

The past decade has witnessed a significant shift in practices of production and consumption across media platforms. This shift has been characterised, on the one hand, as a process of platform fragmentation in which, "cable and broadcast networks struggle to compete for audiences (which are now divided among hundreds of channels and distribution platforms) […] [and] new program forms emerge and multiply" (Spigel, 2004: 2). Academic discussions in this area have primarily focused on multiplication of platforms for accessing televisual content and the impact this has had on the television as a platform and medium (Spigel & Olsson, 2004; Bennett & Strange, 2011). The shift has also been characterised as instigating an increased distribution of media content across platforms, which has been

described by Jenkins (2008) as a process of media 'convergence'. In a discussion dedicated to the topic, Jenkins defines media convergence as,

> the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want (2008: 2).

Whilst acknowledging the multiplication and fragmentation of platforms, Jenkins focuses on how media producers and audiences continue to maintain cohesive media experiences *across* different platforms. Furthermore, Jenkins highlights that this is not a process that displaces 'old media', but rather one in which "their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (Jenkins, 2008: 14).

In many cases, such multi-platform production strategies are coordinated around a specific media franchise. The *Pokémon* franchise has become a classic example of a cross-platform franchise comprising computer games, cartoons, trading cards, and other toys and media. More recently, the children's virtual pet website *Moshi Monsters* has similarly branched onto other platforms and products, including *Nintendo DS* games, soft toys and sticker albums. However, not all multi-platform media are necessarily directed by a single franchise. There are numerous examples in academic research of television audiences connecting via the internet to discuss their favourite programmes in fan-forums (Baym, 1993; Jenkins, 2008) or, more recently, using social media to conduct live discussions about a show during its broadcast (Deller, 2011). In instances such as these, the connection between platforms is established and maintained by media users as opposed to corporations.

The decision to look at CBBC's *Bamzooki* is twofold. First, it provides an opportunity to look at how user participation is configured in the development of an online space as part of a multi-platform media assemblage. Secondly, in contrast with the previous chapter's case study of a commercial virtual world, this chapter will

examine how young people's participation is framed and mobilised within a principally broadcast media corporation that is publically funded. As we will see, both the corporations history as a broadcasting – attempting to keep up with 'new' media and forms of participation – and its public funding, have significantly shaped how and on what terms media participation are framed and understood.

To this end, the first part of this chapter will examine how the design of multiple platforms occur in proximity to one another, often with competing assumptions and frameworks of young people's media participation. We will see how this presents particular challenges for the design of online spaces and part of the discussion will consider how the CBBC online team sought to develop a coherent sense of user participation across platforms. The second half of this chapter will then consider how CBBC staff attempt to facilitate a 'smooth' transition for young people's participation between *Bamzooki's* different platforms. The framing of participation across platforms remains a key challenge for media producers and this has been no less the case for *Bamzooki's* production team. This section will focus on the attempt by CBBC staff to generate different forms of *affective* participatory experience in the *Bamzooki* users' transitions between platforms. In particular, this section will explore how the web designers of *Bamzooki* attempted to create a sense of scale and locality unique to each platform. Of interest in this discussion will be how the *Bamzooki* audience are framed as "active sense-making" media participants (Ito, 1998: 305). A number of academic studies have emphasised the embodied sensations and affective dimensions of user engagement with virtual worlds, computer games and other media environments (Ferreday, 2009; Green, 1997; Hansen, 2004; Ito, 1998; Walkerdine, 2007). In my discussions with CBBC designers, similar framings of users as 'affective subjects' and 'active sense-making' media participants were frequently deployed. This offers a markedly different dimension to the previous chapter's discussion of the 'active' participation and the processes of user 'activation'. In their attempts to create a cross-media experience that users could smoothly transition across, the designers paid particular attention to the affective and sensorial experience of engaging with *Bamzooki* across platforms. As such, this chapter will attempt to further develop an understanding of how the 'active sense-making'

media participant emerges in the process of designing an online space in co-ordination with other media platforms.

Before considering these points in further detail, the next section of this chapter will examine the case study of *Bamzooki* and the CBBC's multi-platform agenda.

Background: *Bamzooki* and the CBBC Multi-platform Agenda

The background to this chapter is divided into two main parts. The first half of this section will introduce the CBBC show *Bamzooki* and provide a brief history of the programme's origins and development over the last decade. I will then go on to situate *Bamzooki's* development in the broader CBBC multi-platform agenda, examining the department's shift from children's 'broadcaster' to 'multi-platform' producer.

Bamzooki

Bamzooki, which first aired in March 2004, is a multi-platform children's programme created by the BBC's children's department. The basic concept of the show is to create and battle virtual 'insect-like' creatures known as 'Zooks'[28]. The programme is spread across three main platforms, which include: a television series, a 3D modelling software kit, and an online community website. Each of these platforms is now considered in turn, as well as some of the ways that they interconnect with one another.

The television programme is a team-based *Bamzooki* tournament in which groups of contestants showcase their Zook designs and compete against the Zooks of rival teams. Each programme is split into a series of contests, including: races, obstacle courses and 'sumo wrestling' style battles. Users do not control their Zooks during the contests and instead the virtual insects move autonomously in a simulation

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[28] For those familiar with the 1990s BBC programme *Robot Wars,* contrasts are often made between the formats of the two shows.

software program. The most successful Zooks are those that have the most appropriate design for a specific challenge[29]. Each series of *Bamzooki* is structured as a league, with a 'grand final' in the concluding episode of the series between the most successful teams. One of the defining features of the television programme is its use of augmented reality technology. Regarded as particularly innovative at its launch, the programme overlays 3D visuals of the competing Zooks onto live camera feeds of the presenter and contestants. This has the effect of making the Zooks appear to be competing in 'real time' in front of their creators.

The 3D modelling software, known as the 'Zook Kit', is the computer program in which all Zooks are created. Writing from experience, the creation of a Zook is a particularly sharp learning curve! The initial assembly of a Zook is a relatively straightforward process. Users begin with a basic torso and can then add limbs and other body parts as they choose. The main difficulty lies in creating a Zook that can move and, at some stage, compete in the different *Bamzooki* challenges. In addition to the modelling kit, the software also comes with a simulation program in which Zooks can be tested in the television programme's main challenges. This enables users to test their creations in the simulation software and then return to the modelling kit to make adjustments and fine tune their Zook design. In its earliest form, the simulation software was primarily for local testing, with users receiving a time score only for their Zook's performance in a given challenge. In the most recent iteration of the software, the simulation programme is able to record and transmit the 'high scores' of a user's Zooks onto league tables housed on the *Bamzooki* homepage. Links between the software and the *Bamzooki* homepage have gradually developed over the course of the different series, such as providing users with the ability to download other users' Zooks to test and modify. Unlike the television programme and the website, the software was not built in-house and was instead designed by a third party company called Gameware.

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[29] For example, a long-legged Zook is better able to walk over high obstacles than a short-legged Zook.

The *Bamzooki* website acts as an important hub between the television programme, the Zook Kit software and the show's audience. Over the course of the present research investigation, the website was in the process of undergoing a significant overhaul to introduce a range of new features. The following description of the homepage primarily refers to the completed re-design. In visual appearance, the *Bamzooki* homepage resembles a garage or workshop, including a workbench with various tools and Zook parts lying about. The homepage is relatively interactive and different aspects of the workshop relate to different functions and activities, such as a television for viewing past *Bamzooki* episodes. The website primarily serves four main roles: first, the homepage houses important information about the show and the creation of Zooks. Users can access interactive tutorials, teaching them how to build Zooks, or use the moderated community forums to post questions to other users. Secondly, the website hosts a league table, separated by different competitions from the show, in which users can compare their Zook's scores against those of others. Thirdly, the website is the only place that users can download the Zook Kit's modelling and simulation software. Finally, the most recent episodes of the *Bamzooki* television programme are embedded into the website[30], allowing the audience to catch up on missed shows. One final point to bear in mind is that the *Bamzooki* homepage is housed within the main CBBC website and, as such, is part of a broader platform of online CBBC content. By way of shorthand, I will primarily refer to either '*Bamzooki* website' or 'homepage' for the majority of this chapter.

The research for the present case study was conducted during the course of the programme's overhaul between series three and four. *Bamzooki* had been on the air for a number of years and the production team had decided to re-launch the show with a new theme and re-designed interfaces for the homepage and software program. The show was re-titled *Bamzooki: Street Wars* and the programme's theme took on a more 'urban' and 'gritty' tone. Later in this chapter I will explore the re-design process in more detail, examining how the website designers attempted to re-build the website in close alignment with the other *Bamzooki* platforms. Due to

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[30] Using the BBC iPlayer interface.

the BBC's strict guidelines on user data, particularly that of children, the production team had no concrete user figures for *Bamzooki*. The lack of specific user data stands in stark contrast to the more precise user data of commercial firms such as Sulake. Nonetheless, CBBC staff did attempt to form a sense of the make-up of their audience through more informal means. Over the course of interviews with CBBC staff I was told that the team largely relied on user names and forum posts to speculate on the general make-up of their user base[31]. As one web team member described:

> the only way you can sort of guess is by the way they talk on the message boards [...] they'll often sign off with their real names. We allow children just a bit of background to share on the message boards, their real first name, their and their country, town or city or area, provided there's more than one hundred and fifty thousand people living in that area [...] generally they don't talk about their area but they'll talk about their age and their name

Using information from the forums and other sources, such as school studio visits, it was generally estimated that the show and website's main audience were boys aged eight to eleven. It was also generally acknowledged that the audience differed across platforms, with a more 'general' audience for the television programme and a more 'dedicated' user base for the website leagues and community forums.

From Broadcasting to Online and Multi-platform Media

The commissioning of *Bamzooki* as a multi-platform programme marked a significant shift for the BBC as a producer of media for children and young people. In the first chapter of this thesis I discussed how the growth of online media over the past decade has seen the rise of new start-up firms emerging as fresh competitors in the children and youth media markets. In contrast, broadcasters (such as the BBC, Disney and Nickelodeon) have entered the market as well-established media

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[31] BBC ID user accounts record gender and age, however these details are not made available to CBBC website designers.

corporations with a broad range of existing recognisable brands from their broadcast content. However, despite possessing well-established and familiar branded content, the transitional process into the online media market has not been without its difficulties for broadcasters. In part these difficulties have arisen from the need to re-configure the corporation's production and brand assemblages to align with the new and emergent online media markets. In terms of media production, this has involved a shift of tools and apparatus, whereby the firm embraces new models of production and distribution and integrates these alongside existing production processes. It also involves a brand re-alignment, in which the corporation re-casts itself as not only a television broadcaster but also a producer of content across a range of media platforms. Such a transition is far from instantaneous and for the BBC it has been a very gradual shift that remains on going[32].

During the present research investigation, CBBC staff described *Bamzooki* as part of a significant shift for the BBC, de-centring the televisual platform and introducing a more cross-platform experience. However, as one interviewee went on to describe, the BBC remains largely defined by its 'TV Heritage' which continues to be heavily ingrained in current production processes. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of the BBC has undergone a significant shift over the past decade, adopting a new discursive repertoire that has sought to re-position and re-imagine the corporation and its brand in a new media market. The *CBBC Programme Policy Review* for 2010/11 offers an example of this emergent discourse:

> Enjoying CBBC should not be a passive experience. We want kids to be able to interact with our brand on any platform, and the CBBC website is key to this. We also want to proactively create opportunities for children to get hands-on with CBBC and come face to face with our content (BBC, 2010).

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[32] In an article in the trade journal *Broadcast*, just prior to the completion of this thesis, Joe Goodwin, the director of the BBC's children's department, was quoted as saying that the department was "still lagging behind its audience" and their use of multiple platforms. See Parker (2013).

This leads us to another significant re-alignment: the shift towards an audience spanning multiple platforms and activities. According to the extract above, the CBBC audience should not be 'passive' in their media engagement, but rather 'interactive'. To this end, an attempt is made to position the BBC as playing a significant role in transforming the media experiences of the audience. Its responsibility is to 'proactively create opportunities' for more 'interactive' engagement across 'any platform'. This returns us to the theme of activation introduced in the last chapter, which will be re-visited over the course of this chapter.

Reference to *Bamzooki's* role in the corporation's multi-platform strategy can be found in the following extract from the CBBC programme policy review for 2009/10:

> CBBC is a multiplatform brand that aims to enhance its online presence and reputation for innovation by giving audiences opportunities to consume and interact with content directly on the web. Key multiplatform content will include [...] Bamzooki Street Wars, in which children can create their own 'zook' online, to test their creative skills and win the opportunity to compete on the TV show (BBC, 2009).

Bamzooki was one of the first 360-degree productions for the BBC's children's department. The phrase '360-degrees' refers to the production of media content as planned across multi-platforms from the show's inception. This is in contrast to the more traditional broadcasting model of television production, where an accompanying website is often planned and created towards the end of the production process. In 360-degree productions, each platform is seen as playing a significant function, adding additional modes of engagement to a media franchise. In the case of *Bamzooki*, the use of multiple platforms creates a self-contained transmedia ecosystem in which children have the opportunity to watch, learn, build, chat, compete etc. Employing *Bamzooki* as a case study, the remainder of this chapter attempts to chart one strand of the BBC's attempts to enact a series of significant re-alignments: from television to multiple media platforms, from

television audience to 'active sense-making' media users, and from broadcaster to multi-platform media producer.

Aligning Online Spaces in Multi-Platform Media Productions

Though the first iteration of the CBBC website was launched in 1998 (Producer, 2013), the transition to multi-platform production has largely been a gradual and cautious process for the BBC's children's department. As mentioned in the last section, *Bamzooki* represents one of the first attempts by the BBC to produce a wholly 360-degree children's show and programme. As a result, the production of *Bamzooki* not only brought different platforms into closer proximity, but also generated increased proximity between the different production teams. As one interactive producer[33] remarked:

> this project was a bit of an anomaly, it's kind of a learning process because we never worked so closely with a TV team before and because it was kind of an interactive project and a TV project. So full three-sixty. There's a lot of stakeholders.

This increase in proximity meant that both the television and interactive production teams had to find new ways of accommodating the different demands of each other's respective platform. For the most part, the present section focuses on the accounts and perspectives of the CBBC interactive and web team and the show's overarching producer. Though it would be interesting to provide a more detailed contrast between the different teams in the production process, this chapter is primarily concerned with how the development of *Bamzooki's* online space occurred relative to the televisual and software platforms. As such, this section will focus on how the web team attempted to align and synchronise the development of *Bamzooki's* websites with the show's other platform productions.

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[33] The 'interactive producer' is an individual who leads the development of the website and other online and interactive content.

Proximity and Synchronicity

As we saw in the previous chapter, the production schedule of online spaces operates within a temporality that enables designers to continually re-adjust their product at multiple intervals. Though multiple staff – such as concept designers, graphic designers and software architects – may be working on the same feature, they each have the opportunity to adjust and fine-tune that feature prior to its 'final' release. Even after that 'final' release, should a problem emerge, the designers are able to re-visit and re-tweak the feature. This temporality of production and development is significantly different to that of television and broadcasting. Though a great deal of planning and preparation may go into a television production, there is often a tight schedule for filming and the programme's final release is, in most cases, final. As a result, both online and televisual media exist across different unfolding temporalities, comprised of distinctly different rhythms. The challenge for a multi-platform production is to marry these temporalities together in order to produce an integrated media product across each of the platforms.

At the beginning of the production of *Bamzooki's* re-launch, the programme's overarching producer described the difficulties faced in bringing the show's different production temporalities together:

> What's critical about cross-platform projects is to make sure that there is complete, you know, the two work together. And time lines are very different […] TV tends to be kind of like, you know, an enormous great push towards the end, and then you have ten weeks, twelve weeks, sixteen weeks to put it into production and everything happens in a speed […] put it out as quickly as you can, as cheaply as possible […] Whereas the web is much longer, it's a slower burner, ideas have to be developed much earlier in the process […] And so it's critical that ideas, from the conceptualisation of both, happen at the same sort of time. As early as possible you have to involve the web in the process.

In this extract, the producer highlights how development speeds act as a significant point of separation between different platform productions. The temporality of television production is characterised by a hurried final 'push towards the end'. In contrast, website production is described as 'slower' and 'longer'. The challenge, according to the producer, is to ensure that the generation of ideas and concepts related to the show "happen at the same sort of time". In other words, a key issue for *Bamzooki's* production lay in the establishment and maintenance of synchronicity between each of its platforms' respective temporalities. In addition to marrying both the television and website's temporalities, the production team also had a third platform to consider:

> With *Bamzooki*, the third area is the software coding […] which is more profound than in your average web project because it's not just coding the website, you know See Plus Plus [C++] and then you've got Flash, it's much more, it's about writing the software itself for the game engine.

In this instance, the producer attaches the design of the software onto the website's production, but acknowledges that it is no longer an 'average web project'. Synchronicity in the case of *Bamzooki* lay not only between ensuring the alignment of television and website productions, but also that the software was sufficiently accounted for.

For *Bamzooki's* web team, the synchronisation of the website and television production processes required significant re-adjustments to their usual working practices. Almost all CBBC and CBeebies television productions are now accompanied by an online space in some form, often to provide the show with some additional interactive content such as games. In the following extract, one member of the web team contrasts their experience of working on *Bamzooki* to other CBBC productions:

> Nine times out of ten, in terms of web design and website building, the show will be at quite an advanced stage by the time that the website even gets

thought about […] Whereas this time we've been offered, because there's so much background stuff which has to go on between the Zook kit and our servers, we've been about to kick off far earlier. Which means we've been able to get involved in the design stage of everything really, before they've even set the show design. At the moment we're in a position where we're designing the website without knowing what the show will actually look like.

In *Bamzooki's* case, the website's production was transported from it's usual position at an 'advanced stage' in the show's production and was temporally lifted to 'kick off far earlier'. In this sense, the synchronicity of the two productions is initially established by moving the initial starting point for the website's production. It's particularly interesting to note how it is the television production's temporality that is used as the benchmark for determining how the two platforms can be made synchronous. Consequently, it is the website's development that has to be *made* synchronous with temporality of the television programme's production. The web team member describes how one of the most significant adjustments is "designing the website without knowing what the show will actually look like". In a more typical CBBC production, the appearance of the website is designed to align with that of the nearly completed television series. With the temporal lifting of the website's design to an earlier stage in the production process, *Bamzooki's* web team faced an additional challenge of aligning the website's appearance with a programme that had yet to be produced.

The following extract, from another member of the web team, offers some further insights into the alignment and synchronicity between the television and website productions:

It was more the TV influenced the website, I would say, in appearance. Which is quite normal actually. And so with their graphics and what they had from the TV show they were, actually quite irritatingly they came after the site design had been signed off [laughs]. So they weren't quite the same. Ideally they'd have been more in unison […] that kind of feel would have been better

to replicate on the site but with two times lines that wasn't possible. So I think the TV, I don't think it was influenced by how the site was going to look, I think the site had to follow a bit more how the TV was going to look.

In this instance the interviewee laments the lack of visual alignment and consistency between the two platforms. Furthermore, the mismatch in visual alignment is linked with a lack of synchronicity in the development of each of the platforms. Rather than being described as a single production process, the web team member describes how the show was created across 'two time lines'. She then describes how, 'irritatingly', the television programme's final graphics were selected *after* the website's design had been finalised. As a result she suggests that the two platforms don't share the same 'kind of feel'. It's also interesting to note that, as with the previous quotation, the television series production is placed in a dominant position to the website. Whereas before this was in terms of the website synchronising with the television production, in this instance the dominance is asserted in terms of visual alignment. The interviewee describes how the website "had to follow […] how the TV was going to look". As the television production had only initially began when the website development took place, this required a significant amount of anticipation on the part of the web designers. Another interviewee described the lack of visual alignment as a benefit for the website, allowing it to be future-proof for other television series where the visual appearance may radically change. In this way, he suggested that being a "little bit separate" meant that the website could avoid "looking dated very quickly". In either case, the visual alignment is judged in terms of the degree to which the website suitably *matches* the television series. As a result, the television series remains the dominant platform and acts as the benchmark for the website's design.

Despite the dominance of the televisual platform, the *Bamzooki* website did occasionally make significant contributions to the programme's overarching design. In the following extract, one of the website's interactive producers describes how the website team were centrally involved in the finalisation of *Bamzooki's* re-designed logo:

When we started the project there was no new *Bamzooki* logo, so we had the old logo. It's not changed massively, but we got to a certain point in the design and we were like 'we need a logo for the website are you [the television production team] going to give us the logo?' And the TV team said, 'well we don't have one, you build one and we'll agree it'. So we had a freelance designer come in and work with us for a week, churned out loads of different variations of the logo. And about half way through the week we spoke with [the television producer] and saw how it was going and decided if it was looking really good and if we could use it, and we gave some more design direction. And then by the end of the week we had a finalized logo which was then used across the website, across the branding for the t-shirts that the kids wore through the show. So that was quite unique. I don't think there's ever been a show before that's used the logo assets that were designed by the website, because normally the website is just following. Normally we're just given a bunch of assets from the show.

In this instance, the website's advanced production, ahead of the television programme, resulted in the web team commissioning and influencing the design of the *Bamzooki* logo. In part, this was necessitated by the need for a logo that could consistently appear across platforms. Though the website and television had some visual differences, the logo was treated as a significant boundary object (Bowker and Starr, 2000) between the different points of production. As the producer goes on to describe, the logo appears across not only the website and programme, but also across objects such as contestant's t-shirts. It's particularly interesting to note how the interviewee frames this as an out-of-the-ordinary event, in which the web team assumes a position of directing the show's visual development as opposed to 'just following' the television production.

We've already considered instances where the synchronicity between *Bamzooki's* platforms was not as successful as initially anticipated. Before concluding the present section we will briefly consider one specific instance that resulted in a

misalignment between the show's platforms. This example, from one of the website's key designers, describes the creation of an animation for the *Bamzooki* website:

> So we had a window where we could have the flash animator to do all those Zook designs. So they produced all the Zooks, like walking into the garage, and at the time there were no designs through for the House Zooks[34], for the actual ones in the show. And then when those House Zooks came through, right at the end point of where the flash animator had finished, TV then decided that they wanted those animated Zooks to be House Zooks and couldn't really understand why they couldn't be House Zooks. But then we didn't have the time, that window had been taken up, they'd been created.

In this instance, the creation of the animation and the finalisation of the House Zooks are described as temporally misaligned. Once again, the television and web teams are presented as operating along separate schedules, and the decision to include House Zooks on the website's animation occurs after the flash animator has completed their job. In this sense, the 'flow' of content, as described by Jenkins (2008) at the beginning of this chapter, is not so easily achieved. The House Zooks are limited in their movement across platforms as a result of the uneven overlaps between the different production temporalities.

This section has considered how the production of *Bamzooki* across different platforms occurs through on-going attempts to maintain synchronicity between different production time lines. Such synchronicity is not easily achieved and the present section has examined numerous examples of the friction between different modes of temporal unfolding. In contrast to *Habbo*, *Bamzooki's* online space is highly dependent on the production of other platforms, particularly the television series. Though the interviewees position the website as a key component of *Bamzooki's*

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[34] 'House Zooks' are Zooks designed especially for the television programme by members of the production team. In some of the trials, the contestants Zooks are pitted against the House Zooks. The House Zooks are also, partly, mascots for the series and are attributed different personalities by the show.

multi-platform experience, they continued to largely regard the television series as the benchmark platform for setting the tone and visual appearance of the series. This may, in part, result from what the CBBC's Head of Interactive and On-demand described as the television 'heritage' of the BBC. The re-alignment and re-configuration of the BBC's institutional assemblage, in its adaption to multi-platform media, remains an on-going process. Having considered the processes of production across platforms, the following section will turn to consider how the CBBC web team attempted to create a 'seamless' multi-platform experience for their users.

Proximity and Movement Between Media Platforms

The 'Complex Beast'

> I think one of the difficulties of *Bamzooki* is the fact that, because it's such a complex beast, it's quite difficult for them [the audience] to watch the show and then move seamlessly to the website. Because, in effect, what they love about the show they can't do on the site. They have to do the download, and the download isn't the site.

The above quote, from one of the web team's interactive producers, summarises the main issues faced in co-ordinating a multiple-platform show like *Bamzooki*. The producer lists two overlapping concerns: firstly, that the users will not be able to move 'seamlessly' from one platform to another, and secondly, that each platform will not adequately deliver the user's anticipated experience. He gives examples of the website's inability to replicate what is most 'loved' about the show, and the necessity of using the software separately from the website. As such, his main anxieties lie in concerns that the relationality between platforms will not be sufficiently seamless and integrated for the users. The following section considers these issues in further detail, exploring how the producers of *Bamzooki* attempted to create a continuous media experience by creating and encouraging movement across platforms. In the first part of this section, the online space is examined as a key intermediary platform for movements across *Bamzooki's* media ecosystem. Such

movements include not only users, as they make their way from television to software, but also of data and information as they transfer between different platforms. In the second part of this section I begin to consider how the web team framed *Bamzooki's* users as 'active sense-making' subjects and the ways in which this shaped the development of new forms of relationality between the show's platforms.

Mediations and Movements Across Platforms

One of the main activities that encourage users to move from one platform to another is the creation of the 3D virtual-insects known as Zooks. Fundamentally, Zooks are bundles of code, specifying each qualitative and quantitative detail about an individual Zook's design. From the width, length and volume of a single appendage, to the colour or texture of its 'skin', each individual Zook is comprised of code and data that define its individual form and appearance. Importantly, such code is mobile and transportable. It can be sent and received as a data file across internet connections, able to be shared by friends or with the wider *Bamzooki* community. In this sense, Zook data files are one of the primary means of linking together different platforms and computers into a single *Bamzooki* ecosystem. The following part of this section considers how the movement and mediation of Zooks across platforms attempts to create a more integrated *Bamzooki* experience.

Figure four provides a general summary of the different ways in which *Bamzooki's* platforms are connected by the movement and mediation of Zook data. In the first instance, the *Bamzooki* website provides the initial means of accessing the necessary software for building and testing Zooks[35]. Once downloaded, users are able to build their Zooks in the modelling kit and can test their creations in the simulation software. As mentioned in the background to this chapter, the modelling kit and simulation software are separate pieces of software. In this sense, we might consider them to be separate platforms as each can be opened independently of the other.

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[35] One limitation of Bamzooki's software was its sole compatibility with Microsoft's Windows operating system.

Where they are linked is in the transfer of Zook data files. *Bamzooki's* users can shift between these two software programmes as frequently as they wish: building, saving, testing, re-building, saving, re-testing etc.

Television Programme

The simulation software is run 'live' on the television programme. Augmented reality technology gives the appearance that the Zooks are competing in front of the teams

When users submit their Zook's high scores from the simulation software, their Zook's data file is also automatically uploaded for other users to download

Zooks can be submitted via the website to participate in the television series

Simulation Software

Website

Both the Zook modelling and simulation software can be downloaded from the Bamzooki website. Users can also download other users' Zooks

Zooks created in the modelling kit can be opened in simulation software for testing. After testing they can be further adjusted and fine-tuned in the modelling kit

Modelling Software

Figure 4 - The movement of data and information across Bamzooki's different platforms

One of the key elements of *Bamzooki's* re-build was to create a closer connection between the software kits and the website. This resulted in the creation of the 'Zook Passport'. Each time a user chooses to submit their Zook's highest scores to the website's leader boards, they are also made to submit their Zooks data file. This enables other users to view which Zooks have the highest score in a particular leader board category and it also provides them with the ability to download and re-design that Zook for themselves. The Zook Passport acts as a means of identifying who the original creator of a Zook was and which other users have subsequently added or adjusted its design. In this sense, the Zook Passport adds 'biographical' data to the Zook, providing a partial history of its movement between users and platforms.

As one interactive producer described, the introduction of the Zook Passport was designed to position the website as a space, "where children worked together to produce something, rather than it [the media experience] being about you and the thing you made in isolation". In this sense, the Zook's mediation and movement across platforms was designed not only to connect a single user's multi-platform experience, but also a broader network of platforms across multiple users' computers. The introduction of the Zook Passport scheme was not, however, the successful intermediary scheme that the designers anticipated. Rather than willingly giving up their Zook designs, many users voiced their discontent at being made to give up their Zooks. As members of the web team described:

> what we found is that they're quite protective, a lot of them are quite protective of their Zooks.

> I expected children to be more happy with the collaboration. I expected there to be more willingness to see your Zook taken by someone else and tweaked […] when you see someone's Zook passport it's very clear to see who was the original Zook creator, and you can still see their, the history of that Zook. I always felt that was really important. But yeah, I think children didn't take to it as much as I thought they would.

In this instance, a scheme that attempted to create greater connectivity between platforms instead became a significant reason for some of *Bamzooki's* users choosing not to fully integrate their website and software experiences. Protectiveness of individual Zook creations acted as a limitation of the flow of data between platforms. *Bamzooki's* platform connectivity relies not on free-flowing immaterial code, but on code and data as material objects (Fuller, 2005) that can be parted with and shared. Consequently, if users choose not to share their Zooks creations, the movement and connectivity between platforms becomes partially disrupted. As we saw in the last section, the connectivity between platforms is never an assured process. Even with the technical apparatus in place to enable to smooth movement of Zooks from platform to platform, users must still be enrolled and

mobilised in securing that movement. A user can simply choose not to share their Zook online by playing within their own self-contained media ecosystem. As such, the CBBC team must persuade and motivate the user to participate in the sharing of Zooks. The final part of this section moves on to consider how CBBC website designers framed *Bamzooki's* users, focusing in particular on the affective dimension of their relationship to the online space.

Affective Platform Relationalities

In the introduction to this chapter I mentioned that there has recently been a significant amount of interest in the affective dimensions of audience and user engagement with new media. Discussing this increased attention, Blackman and Venn have drawn attention to the range of different ways in which media can 'modulate', 'augment' and 'amplify' the affective experiences of media users (2010: 14). During the course of my research on *Bamzooki*, I became increasingly aware of the way in which the designers of the show's website sought to position children as affective and sense-making subjects in their engagement with media. The example of the users who expressed discontent at the imposed upload of their Zook designs offers one instance of how user emotions were framed as significant in the development of *Bamzooki's* multi-platform ecology. However, the framing of users as affective and sense-making subjects extends beyond discussions of their emotions. In the final part of this section I consider how *Bamzooki's* web team sought to generate a specific form of affective relationality in the users' movements between different platforms. In particular, I focus on how the designers attempted to create a shifting sense of scale and locale as users moved between *Bamzooki's* platforms.

One of the traditional ways of framing sense-making in relation to digital media has been in terms of 'immersion' (Heim, 1995) – the extent to which one feels part of 'another' reality in a simulated environment. Such an approach has largely been predicated on a separation of the 'virtual' and the 'real', with immersion implying the extent to which one becomes absorbed in the alternate reality of the virtual

technology. The present study avoids such dualisms and instead seeks to consider how particular sensory and affective experiences emerge through particular design and platform arrangements. Of particular interest in this respect is Albena Yaneva's (2009) work on architects and scalar models of buildings. Yaneva's work has explored how architects experience different affective sensations of scale through rhythmic and recursive movements between architectural models. In particular, her work has focused on how architects move back and fourth between abstract and detailed architectural models. For Yaneva, scale is not a fixed concept, measurable by external means. Instead it emerges through the movement of bodies, shifting and being moved through different sensations of scale. As such, scale can be affectively experienced through feelings of immensity and vastness or locality and immanency.

As we'll see in a moment, the designers of *Bamzooki's* website also sought to generate a sense of scale that would elicit different affective responses as users moved between platforms. This offers some interesting crossovers with, and divergences from, Callon et al.'s (2002) concept of qualification. Callon et al. suggest that the qualities of a product are said to emerge through processes of measurement, testing and calculation. In turn, consumers employ tactics of judgement, valuation, and classification to distinguish between different market products. Within these processes, Callon et al. give little consideration to the potential affective dimensions of defining or qualifying a product. Yet the emergence of these affective qualities relies on many of the same processes as Callon et al. describe. For Yaneva, a sense of scale still arises from particular socio-technical arrangements of models, graphics and blueprints. Though the present section focuses only on how the designers attempt to generate a shifting sense of scale between platforms, this still provides some initial insights into the potential affective dimensions of the qualification process.

At the beginning of *Bamzooki's* re-design one of the interactive producers on the project described his plans for how the website would be overhauled:

Children are far more used to [...] sites that feel like they've got movement and texture, and sites that feel far more immersive, you know. It feels like you're actually inside something, it's like you're part of something rather than it just feeling like it's a display of information. I know the original *Bamzooki* website was really good and loved in its day [...] but I think now we've got an opportunity to really expand who the site's open to [...] visually it's going to be far more appealing.

In this extract the producer draws contrasts between the original website and the plans for the new *Bamzooki* website. The old website is characterised as "feeling like it's a display of information". Earlier in the interview he drew contrasts between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, implying that the old website belonged to the latter and the new would belong to Web 2.0. In this sense, the transformation of the *Bamzooki* website is characterised as a part of a broader technical advancement and a shift in children's expectations of media. Terms such as 'movement', 'texture' and 'immersion' are used to describe the qualities of the type of online space *Bamzooki* ought to be. Perhaps most significantly here, he describes how the website should make a child feel "like you're actually inside something [...] part of something". In this sense, the *Bamzooki* website should generate and elicit a particular affective experience in its user.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the final re-designed *Bamzooki* website was modelled as a workshop or garage. Before entering the main interface, users are played an animation that begins outside a garage door. At first, Zooks are seen scurrying into the workshop under the half lifted metal garage door, carrying various tools and furnishings in preparation for the users' arrival. A one-eyed Zook then appears from under a drain cover and approaches the front of the screen and briefly stares at the user before scuttling under the garage door. At this point the door lifts to full height and the animation transitions into the workshop. The main interface is set up as a horizontally scrollable interface, with the appearance of a workshop containing various tools and workstations. Each of the objects in the workshop represents a specific activity, such as a television for catching up on past episodes via BBC iPlayer

or a drawing board for tutorials on how to design Zooks. Using their mouse, users can scroll from left to right on the screen, moving from one end of the workshop to the other. Clicking on different objects enables the user to 'zoom in' on different parts of the workshop, focusing their attention on a specific task or activity.

Following the *Bamzooki* website re-design I returned to interview members of the web team to gauge how successful they felt the re-design had been:

> I think it kind of, it gives more of a feel, like, because the whole idea was that you go into the *Bamzooki* garage […] like you're going somewhere, it's a place. Whereas before it was a very static page.

> it was just a webpage, whereas now it feels like a destination. Whereas before it felt like a HTML page […] now it feels far more like you're going into a zone, which is what *Bamzooki's* all about.

These extracts focus on the sensation of 'being somewhere'. Similar to the first extract, contrasts are made between the website's iterations 'before' and 'after'. In this instance, the previous website is described as 'very static' and feeling 'like a HTML page'. The specific reference to HTML is particularly interesting as it makes reference to the technical coding of the website. The new *Bamzooki* website was produced using Flash and so the comments establish a contrast between the different types of tools and software available during the different website builds. In this sense, the ability to make the website 'feel' like you're going to a 'zone' or 'place' is partly dependent on available technical apparatus at a given point in time. The evolving biography of the *Bamzooki* website is therefore explicitly linked by the designers to shifts from Web 1.0 to 2.0, and from HTML to Flash, enabling qualitative contrasts between its 'old' and 'new' forms.

Descriptions of the sense of scale that the designers attempted to generate through the website were most explicitly addressed in contrast with the show's other platforms. As mentioned earlier, the television series is set at the *Bamzooki* HQ, a

place where the creators of Zooks meet to compete their different creations against one another. In the following extracts, members of the web team draw contrasts between the different platforms:

> the concept was trying to keep the look and feel of the TV show but not mimic the TV show. Hence we've gone for this actual place, this garage, so that kids can feel part of something.

> We wouldn't necessarily have wanted to be *Bamzooki* HQ because that's where only the best people get, that's only where the show happens [...] I think it's good that we still say that we're within your personal area, your HQ.

In these extracts the 'personal area' of the homepage is contrasted to the 'public' arena of the Zook-competition, the '*Bamzooki* HQ'. The opening sequence to the television series presents an interesting contrast to the website's opening animation. The sequence begins with an aerial shot of the UK, with the camera hurtling through the sky as it gradually reaches a bird's eye view of the *Bamzooki* HQ. Both of the extracts above emphasis how the design of the website sought to keep the 'feel' of the television programme, whilst also creating a space distinct from the *Bamzooki* HQ. The second extract, in particular, emphasises the notion of the online space as "your personal area, your HQ". As such, the workshop is the space where users learn how to create Zooks and prepare to participate in the *Bamzooki* leagues.

In each of the above extracts, the web team describe particular forms of affective or sensory experience and the types of 'feelings' that different platforms should generate. In particular, they describe the website's intimate sense of scale, which attempts to create a 'personal' space where users can feel they belong and are a 'part of something'. Embedded within these descriptions is the presumption of children as 'active sense-making' media users. The web team frame the affective and sensory experience of users as 'activated' by contrasts in the sense of scale and locality on each different platforms. This also presumes that the users are moving between platforms in order to develop affective distinctions between each of

Bamzooki's media spaces. The qualification of the sense of scale primarily emerges through the contrasts and movements between platforms.

We also need to be aware of the types of values that are embedded in the mobilisation of user as 'active sense-making' subjects. In particular, it presumes a user who will move between platforms and seek to 'immerse' their selves in *Bamzooki's* multi-platform ecosystem. During one interview, the CBBC Head of Interactive and On-demand described how the child audience is "platform agnostic" and that "they don't really see the difference between screens". It is this 'platform agnostic' and 'active sense-making' audience that the BBC's children's department has sought to re-align itself towards. However, this is not a process in which the BBC is a neutral institution, seeking out its audience. Through *Bamzooki*, and the broader multi-platform strategy, the BBC also contributes to the framing and constitution of that audience. *Bamzooki* doesn't just meet a market demand; it contributes to the creation of new means of engaging with media.

Conclusions

Examining Bamzooki has provided a number of significant contrasts with the previous chapter in terms of the framing and configuration of young people's participation. For the BBC, children and young people are considered to be *already* multi-platform orientated. As such, the corporation frames its role as 'keeping up' with the shifting expectations of what constitutes young people's participation in a multiple platform media environment. In the case of the BBC's children's department, this involves a significant re-alignment of the existing modes of production, as the corporation seeks to develop new expertise and tools for building *more* participatory online spaces. However, despite the rhetoric of increased emphasis on online media production, we also saw how television remains the dominant platform, with online spaces having to 'fit' into existing production assemblages. As such, developing a coherent sense of young people as media participants remains a challenging process, as production teams seek to impose different values of what constitutes 'active' participation.

In the case of Bamzooki, the team attempt to create an online space that provides a bridging point between platforms, enabling users to explore different modes of participation and sensorial media experiences. They present a framing of young people as increasingly sensorial media users, who can be 'activated' and enrolled into a particular media ecosystem by engaging them as 'active sense-making' users. Here the role of the designers is to guide the users attention and interest between platforms. In contrast with Sulake, there is less emphasis on 'activating' young people's participation as 'consultants' and also less economic imperative to mobilise young people's participation in the development of the online space. Instead, the design team attempt to 'activate' the young person's desire to explore and inhabit different aspects of Bamzooki's media ecosystem. This is not, however, to say that the BBC does not frame young people's participation in non-economic or market terms. One of the primary aims of the BBC in developing digital and online media is to position itself competitively within the new media market and to configure its products as offering 'active' media participation.

The past two chapters have examined how two different media organisations have sought to enrol and configure young people's 'active' participation. To a large extent, these chapters have demonstrated how media corporations attempt to 'successfully' invite and manage young people's participation. The next chapter moves on to consider the disruption of young people's participation and examines how users and designers respond to situations where incidents disrupt the flow of normal user activities.

Chapter 6 – Digital Disruptions: Trust, Stability and Responsibility

Introduction

Over the past two chapters I have considered the processes by which young people's participation is configured in the design and development of online spaces, and how this occurs within particular socio-material arrangements. I have also described how, on occasions, young people's engagement with new features of an online space have unfolded in ways unanticipated by the original designers and developers. In such instances, the product has continued to undergo fresh forms of qualification as the users 'domesticate' the feature into their existing routines and practices. On some occasions, the designers perceive these unexpected unfoldings in a negative light, as a form of abuse or misuse of feature. For the most, however, designers view these as part of the 'creative' participation of the users as they take ownership of a new feature. Indeed, some of Sulake's designers described how news features were intentionally built as 'open-ended' devices, with the expectation that young people would find new and innovative ways of using them.

The present chapter builds on a number of these points, offering a slightly different angle to what has been discussed so far. In the first instance, this chapter continues to consider the management of user 'activation' within design practices, as corporations attempt to develop their online spaces around particular forms of *preferred* participation and activity. However, rather than focus on the 'successful' activation of user participation, this chapter will consider instances of user unanticipated 'activation'. Here, 'mis-activations' are understood as the inadvertent or accidental activation of users participation in a way that provoke a negative affective response – often resulting in either anger, upset or frustration on the part of the users. In this chapter I will specifically focus on negative user responses to actions or events that have caused a *disruption* of their everyday participation. As such, this chapter will look at interruptions and disruptions of young people's participation and the subsequent attempts by designers and corporation to 'repair'

user participation and engagement with the online space. To this end, the present chapter draws on two case studies of disruptions to user participation. The first relates to the negative reception by parents and children to the re-design of the CBeebies homepage in 2007, whilst the second refers to the repercussions of a Channel 4 news investigation that focused on sexual content in the *Habbo* virtual world in summer 2012.

By focusing on disruptions and 'negative' activations, the present chapter provides the opportunity to consider how young people's online spaces exist in a state of tentative stability. It also allows us to think about notions of responsibility on the part of media corporations, and how that responsibility is framed and enacted in instances where their online services are disrupted or are generating negative responses from users.

Two Case Studies of 'Digital Disruptions'

1. 'No More Tears': Re-launching the CBBC Homepages

In 2011, the BBC children's department embarked on a re-design of both the CBBC and CBeebies homepages. According to Phil Buckley, the then product manager for CBBC and CBeebies, the primary aim of the re-build was to, "showcase [the website's] tremendous content in the best possible way", and to allow, "the CBBC audience to find exactly what they want" (2011b). Over the course of the re-design, Buckley used his 'BBC Internet Blog' to report on the progress of the build at various stages in its re-development. Within the blog posts, Buckley focused on one particular issue that had overshadowed previous re-designs of the CBBC's homepages: how to achieve a 'no more tears' re-launch. A previous re-development of the CBeebies homepage in 2007 had resulted in a number of complaints from parents and carers on the *Grown Ups* message board on the CBeebies website. To show the emotional intensity of reactions, Buckley listed some examples of these in his blog post:

I know that as human beings we don't like change and I do try to accept new things and that things have to change but NO!

I'm so gald [sic] u all agree my 5 year old hates it she even cried

What has happened to the old website page? My 5 year old was in a flood of tears this morning

I have a distraught four year old, managing to say, through the tears 'I want the old website.' (Cited in Buckley, 2011a)

The strength of the emotional response to the re-launch came as a surprise to the design team. The concerns expressed by parents primarily focused on how *suddenly* the changes had been implemented and that the website had lost its architectural and visual *familiarity* with which their children had become *accustomed*. Prompted by the outpouring of concern from parents and reports of distraught children, the CBBC team decided that future re-launches would need to be carried out in a more cautious manner.

The 'no more tears' strategy was developed to assuage the fears of parents and to ensure the transition to the new website build was as smooth as possible for children. In his blog posts, Buckley frames the 2007 re-launch as primarily one of *disruption* to the user experience. In one post he describes how:

Website re-launches, however well-intentioned and sensible, sure can annoy people. […] For children's websites this is *especially true*: children are just learning how to use computers, and when the sands shift they can no longer find what they want. (Emphasis added, Buckley, 2011b)

The solution arrived at by Buckley and his team was to offer a slower transition from the old website to the new build. As such, there would be no big re-launch, but rather a gradual re-build involving a steady flow of small changes. The aim of this

approach was to make the changes to website as imperceptible as possible and to allow users time to gradually adjust to an alteration before moving onto the next stage in the re-design. On his blog, Buckley tentatively described the 'no more tears' approach as a success:

> The main reaction to the releases has been an ocean – an ocean! – of indifferences, a pacific lack of comments. We had message board threads open and stuck at the top of the page for days before someone took pity on us and commented […] we are optimistic that the lack of comments is because children have had no problems using the site and are simply delighted; but our optimism is cautious (Buckley, 2011a)

This first case study offers an example of how the design process of a children's website can bring disruption to the user experience. The next example presents a different kind of disruption caused by an 'external' intervention.

2. Habbo and 'The Great Mute'

On 12th June 2012, Channel 4 News broadcast the findings of an undercover investigation into the virtual world *Habbo Hotel*. The report claimed that the undercover investigator, posing as the avatar of an 11 year old girl for two months, had encountered sexually explicit content 'within minutes' of entering the website, including instances of users participating in cybersex and requests to undress on webcam (see Seifert, 2012). The report went on to condemn Sulake's lack of moderation of content on the website and suggested that users of the website were at high risk of exploitation by paedophiles (see O'Brien, 2012). These claims sparked significant debate around the safety of children in virtual world environments and resulted in 3i, one of Sulake's main investors, withdrawing its financial support from the company (Channel 4 News, 2012a). In response to the report, Sulake made the decision to implement a blanket mute on communication between users within *Habbo* – subsequently known as 'The Great Mute' (Ibid.). Sulake claimed the

measure was necessary in order to provide the company with time to review its safety measures and to prevent any further sexual incidents from occurring[36].

Reactions to the report by some *Habbo* users were instantaneous. Channel 4 reported a 'social media backlash' following the initial broadcast, with teenagers taking to social media channels to express negative opinions on the report (Channel 4 News, 2012a). According to Channel 4, a significant proportion of the social media response expressed upset at the investigation and its negative depiction of *Habbo*. As one *Habbo* user reported on *Twitter*, Channel 4 News had, "ruined a day for more than two million people" (Channel 4 News, 2012a). In some cases the social media 'backlash' was targeted at the *Twitter* accounts of specific Channel 4 News staff. This included the Channel 4 News programme editor, Oliver King, who described, "Being trolled by idiots for retweeting about a brilliant C4 News investigation I didn't write/report about how Habbo site is unsafe for kids" (Channel 4 News, 2012a). A further response by some *Habbo* users was to stage a 'silent protest' within one of *Habbo's* main 'public' rooms. This entailed the user's having their avatar hold a candle, and standing still in the room alongside fellow silent users. User motivations for holding the protest remain unclear and reports differed as to whether users were demonstrating against the news investigation or the muting of chat services. A news article from the *Habbo* fansite *Habbox* (discussed in chapter 7), suggested that users were joining, "together to support Sulake in disproving Channel 4's allegation" (Habbox, 2012a). This cannot, of course, be taken as the motivation for all *Habbo* users and Channel 4 cited a number of instances of *Habbo* users welcoming the report as "a kick up the butt" for Sulake (Channel 4 News, 2012b).

Habbo's 'Great Mute' incident substantially differs from the CBBC case study. Sulake and *Habbo* remained in the media spot light for nearly two weeks after the report and repercussions persisted for months afterwards. On the 20th June 2012, Sulake launched 'The Great Unmute', a website designed to allow users to express their

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[36] It should be noted that the report had created a significant amount of media attention around *Habbo* and that by muting service Sulake also prevented news reporters from witnessing further instances of sexual content. It also had the affect of preventing reporters from speaking to users in-game.

"thoughts and feeling" on *Habbo* and recent events (LaFontaine, 2012a). The website was opened for a six hour period and Sulake reported the website as receiving over 10, 000 responses globally (LaFontaine, 2012b). Towards the end of June, Sulake also held a 'Parents Advisory Summit', in which concerned parents were invited to discuss safety on the website over a three day period (LaFontaine, 2012c). Following these consultations with users and parents, Sulake gradually re-instated chat features into the different *Habbo* national territories. This coincided with the introduction of number of new safety features, including a 'responsible use test', to assess the ability of users to safely use the *Habbo* service, and increased 'human' moderation. The allegations in Channel 4's report, and the withdrawal of investment from Sulake, also had significant financial implications for *Habbo* (LaFontaine, 2012d). In August 2012 Sulake reported a reduction in revenue, down to 75% of its pre-mute revenue (Handrahan, 2012a). Over the course of the following year, Sulake's CEO, Paul LaFontaine, stood down from his post (Sulake, 2012) and up to two thirds of the company's workforce were made redundant (Handrahan, 2012b). The 'disruption' to the virtual world service thus had far reaching consequences for both *Habbo* users and staff.

The remainder of this chapter begins to consider how 'disruptive' events have impacted on users of the websites and how, in turn, the media firms have sought to minimise, repair or prevent disruption to users. The next section begins by considering how we might theorise 'disruptions' to users and their online spaces. In particular, I explore how users are framed as unintentionally or accidentally activated, and how media firms attempt to monitor and measure these 'accidental activations'. This chapter will conclude by considering the processes of reparation following a disruptive event, and how the responsibility of a media corporation is framed in relation to disruptions that provoke emotional user responses.

Tears, Protests and 'Accidental' Activations

Both of the case studies outlined above describe an event, or series of events, in which users have negatively reacted to a sudden and unexpected disruption in their

engagement with an online space. The Cbeebies users woke up one morning to find their 'old' website had, without warning, been updated to a 'new' design layout and are subsequently reported as being reduced to tears. Likewise, *Habbo* users abruptly found their website at the centre of a highly critical news investigation and that their ability to communicate with other users had been 'switched off'. Some *Habbo* users responded through 'silent' protests or took to social media to vocalise their upset. In both instances, the reaction by a segment of users was one of intense emotion: of upset, anger or frustration. In previous chapters I have discussed the 'activation' of users, in which designers and developers of online spaces have attempted to harness or channel user participation at particular moments and to specific ends. The focus of these discussions has largely been on the productive and constructive ends of activation, with some form of 'positive' outcome being anticipated by the designers. In this chapter I wish to examine how disruptions can also lead to the activation of users, but not always in ways predicted, anticipated or desired by media corporations. In this respect I intend to explore how disruptions to the stability of an online space or media assemblage can spark and generate 'inadvertent' activations.

This first section considers the disruptive*ness* of the case study incidents in more detail. In the first instance, this involves a dual consideration of how these events came to be framed as 'disruptive' and how, in turn, children and young people have been framed as *particularly* 'sensitive' to certain kinds of change and disruption in their engagement with online spaces. The second part of the section then goes on to consider how the assemblage of the online spaces provided the means for users to communicate their frustrations. Here, specific attention will be paid to the mediation of the users' upset, anger or frustration.

'Sensitive' Users

Writing in a blog post about the disruption caused by the Cbeebies re-launch, Buckley describes how, "re-launches, however well-intentioned and sensible, sure can annoy people. […] For children's websites this is *especially true*" (emphasis added, Buckley, 2011b). For Buckley, the disruption caused by the re-launch of the

Cbeebies website was *especially felt* by the child users. He goes on to outline two reasons for why he believes this to be the case. First, he defines children as in the process of "learning how to use computers" (Buckley, 2011b); a process that he defines as interrupted when changes are made to stable and familiar interfaces. Secondly, Buckley defines children as reliant on familiar configurations in order to carry out routines and practised actions. In one post he describes how, "children [...] become used to moving their mouse into a particular space to do a particular thing" (Buckley, 2011a). As such, locating a specific game by following certain links may become a habitual practice that can be interrupted by subsequent changes to a platform's interface. In this sense, Buckley frames the re-launch of the Cbeebies website in 2007 as a disruption to users' learned and embodied experiences of navigating the website. The re-design of features such as menu bars, and the re-arrangement of web pages, are framed as disruptive to a child's habitual and learned patterns of navigating a previously familiar platform interface. Consequently, the *learning* child is faced with the prospect of having to acclimatise themselves to new layouts and interfaces.

This conceptualisation of the CBBC and CBeebies audiences is addressed most explicitly by 'System Concepts', a consultancy firm hired by the BBC to carry out user research in the lead up to the 2011 re-launches. In a case study discussion of the 'no more tears' project on their company website, System Concepts describe how, "Young children often find *security* in *familiarity* and can be *resistant to change*" (emphasis added, System Concepts, 2011). Once again, children are identified as a group that are particularly affected by disruption to the familiar and everyday. Buckley also pays attention to the actions of the designers and of how the 2009 re-launch was carried out. The re-design of the Cbeebies website involved a major overhaul of the website architecture in a single release and Buckley suggests that the *speed* with which the re-design was rolled out was both too fast and too sudden for younger users. In one post he describes how such a sudden re-arrangement can be, "like when your supermarket moves all their aisles around" (Buckley, 2011b). As such, both the suddenness and scale of the changes are framed as disorientating to younger users.

Both Buckley and System's Concept's suggestions for why children responded negatively to the Cbeebies overhaul share some similarities with Anthony Giddens' (1990; 1991) notion of 'ontological security'. The concept of ontological security appears a number of times in Giddens' work – principally as a way of understanding how social actors attempt to maintain a sense of stability over the course of their everyday lives. According to Giddens, "Ontological security […] refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (1990: 92). Ontological security also serves a practical purpose. Assurance in the stability of the social environment allows social actors to 'get on' with their daily lives without constant concern. As Giddens describes, it enables social actors to 'bracket' and put, "aside thought of things we don't necessarily need to focus our attention on" (1991: 36). This might include, for example, logging on to a computer and expecting to be able to find, and navigate to, the same webpages on a daily basis. Ontological security therefore relies, to a large extent, on routines and habits and on the repetition of activities. In this sense, ontological security is a constant daily accomplishment that relies as much on the maintenance of routines and recurring practices as it does on the stability of social environments. For Giddens, stability and trust are not pre-given, but rather practiced and achieved.

Giddens' (1990; 1991) notion of ontological security draws heavily on psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and, in particular, his work on infant development. Through Winnicott's work, Giddens proposes that ontological security emerges in infancy and initially develops through the early interactions between child and parent (or, more specifically, the child and mother.) For Giddens (1991), the significance of Winnicott's work lies in his emphasis on habits and routines in the development of the child's sense of trust and security. In particular, the repetition of a parent's absence (when they leave the child's field of vision) and their eventual re-appearance. Through this recurring practice of presence-absence, Winnicott suggested that the child came to develop a sense of assurance that the parent would always, eventually, 're-appear'.

For Giddens, ontological security and its development play a significant role in the ability of social actors to carry out everyday activities. Similarly, Buckley sees the stability of the online space as important to a young child's ability to confidently navigate the website. By drawing comparisons with Giddens' work, I am not suggesting ontological provides a good theoretical 'fit' with Buckley and System Concepts. Rather, I am interested in the general overarching perception of children as *particularly* ontologically insecure. As such, the aim here is to consider how the perception and construction of young children as *ontological insecure* provides the basis for how corporations frame, and attempt to fix and mend, disruptions to their online space. As we'll see later in the chapter, the sensitive and ontologically insecure user emerges as a significant figure both in the responses of the CBBC production team and Sulake's management.

The present chapter is not the first time ontological security has been considered in the context of media technologies. Silverstone (1994) and Moores (2000) have also both considered how ontological security might be conceptualised in relation to media use. Silverstone's work, in particular, shares a great deal in common with Giddens' theorisations, only seriously questioning his apparent lack of concern for media as a source of routine and security. Like Giddens, Silverstone sought to find a way to understand how social actors developed a sense of security in the their everyday lives, offering a specific focus on the role of media technologies – and in particular television. In his own words, Silverstone describes how his work sought to address, "the central role of routine in everyday life: habit, seriality, framing and, of course, the media's role in defining and sustaining these routines" (1994: 580). For Silverstone, the media (and particularly television) act as points of 'constancy' and 'permanence' in everyday life (1994: 587-8). Like Giddens, Silverstone also draws heavily on the work of Winncott, paying particular attention to the role of the material in Winnicott's theorisation of 'transitional objects'. For Winnicott, transitional objects are items, such as soft toys or blankets, which infants treat as a substitution for the security of their parents' presence as the 'potential space' between them widens over time.

Drawing on both Winnicott's and Giddens' theories, Silverstone suggests that television and other media also act as significant transitional objects. He goes on to describe how:

> television will become a transitional object in those circumstances where it is already constantly available or where it is consciously (or semi-consciously) used by the mother-figure as a baby-sitter: as her or his own replacement while she or he cooks the dinner or attends, for whatever length of time, to something else, somewhere else. The continuities of sound and image, of voices or music, can be easily appropriated as a comfort and a security, simply because they are there. (Silverstone, 1994: 587).

Like Giddens, Silverstone's focus on infants and children is, for the most part, a means to an end. He is not specifically interested in the relationship of children to televisions as transitional objects, but rather seeks to understand how television comes to occupy a significant role in the routines that form the ontological security of the everyday lives of adults. Winnicott provides the bridging point for both Giddens' and Silverstone's theories, enabling them to understand how adults *become ontologically secure*. However, this has the consequence of framing children as 'incomplete' in their development as ontologically *insecure* social actors and, consequently, as vulnerable and sensitive to change. By focusing on developmental accounts, there is an underlying presumption that older children and adults are *less* sensitive change and, consequently, *more* ontologically secure. The consequence of Giddens and Silverstone's reliance on Winnicott is that it hinges on a discursive figure of the child as a developmental subject[37]. Similarly, Buckley and System Concepts also draw on a particular psychological figure as developmental, but also as *vulnerable* to certain kinds of disruption. The focus of Buckley's blog posts, as we will see, lies in the emotional protection of the child, of avoiding unnecessary disruption to their sense of security. By framing the Cbeebies users in this way, Buckley and the

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[37] Rose (1999) provides a particularly interesting discussion on the formation of the child as a psychological subject.

BBC frame themselves as responsible for the emotional well-being of the child in their use of the online space.

We might also question the particular psychological framing of the developmental child by considering instances where older children and adults have similarly experienced disruption to their use of an online. In particular, our other case study of *Habbo's* disruption as a result of the Channel 4 News investigation involved children and teenagers who were significantly older than the Cbeebies website's typical demographic. Though their reaction was not reported as one of tearful upset, the *Habbo* users nonetheless responded through expressions of frustration, upset and anger. We might also look towards the disruptions of adult websites. In 2009 Facebook underwent significant changes to its user interface, prompting the organisation of user protest groups such as 'Change Facebook Back to Normal' (The Telegraph, 2009). In this case, adults, rather than children or infants, were the ones upset by changes to their existing service and interface. To suggest, therefore, that children are particularly sensitive to change or disruption is to limit our understanding of how media might play a role in the everyday routines of both adults and children. In his discussion of ontological security and media technologies, Moores avoids the developmental work of Winnicott, and instead looks at the significance of media in the shaping of the spatial and temporal dimensions of everyday routines (2000: 13). Moores gives the example of the morning newspaper delivered to a person's door. If that newspaper fails to appear then our daily routine can be disrupted. Moores goes on to suggest that it is in moments of the breakdown of routine that we come to realise the extent to which our lives are built around the expectation of media's stability and continuity.

Ontological security can play an important part in helping to conceptualise the relationship between users, routines and stable media assemblages, but it is a big leap to suggest that children or infants are particularly sensitive to change. Nonetheless, disruptions generate intense affective responses. One possible way of thinking about why disruptions to a user's relationship with an online space generates such intense responses might be to consider existing affective bonds to

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those spaces. In an essay on virtual pets and robotic toys, Turkle (2007) looked at how children can form affective attachments with particular machines or objects. She coins the term 'evocative objects' to describe how an item might 'evoke' certain feelings or emotions. In her study of school children in the US, Seiter similarly found that children formed "intense personal connections" (2007: 98) with certain kinds of games and online spaces. As we will see in next chapter (chapter 7), the young people who run *Habbo* fansites maintain very close relationships with the *Habbo* franchise, investing great amounts of time and effort both in the virtual world and on their own websites. Hills' (2002) work on fan cultures has been particularly significant in highlighting the affective bond formed between consumers and a particular brand, product or franchise. For Hills, a key part of fandom is the emotional attachments and investments formed between fans and particular forms of media. Here I would suggest that we might wish to extrapolate this idea further to consider how not only 'fans' might form affective attachments to media, but also media users more generally. An affective attachment in this sense might be a sense of comfort in a particular website layout or a sense of concern for the future of a website. As such, disruptions might also be events where users are mobilised by their concern and sense of attachment to an online space.

Mediation, Monitoring and Measuring of Emotional Responses

At this point we turn to the question of how the emotional responses and reactions of users were monitored and measured both during and after the homepage re-design. As we saw at the beginning of this section, feedback on the CBeebies re-launch in 2007 was primarily gathered from parents and carers on the CBBC's 'Grown Ups' message board[38]. Consequently, Buckley and his team's primary sources of feedback were the mediated responses of child users through their adult carers. Indeed, this feedback predominantly comprised of parents' descriptive accounts of their child's emotional reactions (for example, "My 5 year old was in a flood of

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[38] The 'Grown Ups' message board is specifically designed for parents to talk about, and give feedback on, the Cbeebies and CBBC media outputs. Buckley also noted (in correspondence) that the team received many emails from parents as well.

tears") as opposed to specific verbal responses. The elicitation of feedback for the 2011 re-launch of the CBBC website differed quite significantly. Rather than relying on parents and carers feeding back their children's reactions, the CBBC team posted direct requests for feedback on the website's various user message boards (e.g. 'Games', 'Things To Do'). These requests often came in the form of a set of questions relating to the website's changes, such as asking whether features are easier to find. This shift in elicitation techniques is suggestive both of how the CBBC and CBeebies audiences are differentiated in terms of their perceived communicative abilities and also through what mediatory channels a user's feedback can most successfully *reach* the production team.

In contrast, the immediate frustrations and upsets of the *Habbo* users were predominantly communicated via social media channels 'external' to the virtual world. Social media provided a space to 'publically' voice upset over the report, but also offered a means by which users could target their upset at specific figures who they perceived as responsible for how events had unfolded. As such, the *Twitter* account of the Channel 4 News programme editor, Oliver King, became a prime target for angry *Habbo* users. Similarly, *Habbo* users focused on the social media pages of both Channel 4 News and *Habbo*, expressing their grievances with the report and their frustrations at Sulake's decision to issue a blanket mute. Not all of the protests by *Habbo* users took a verbally mediated form. As mentioned in the case study's introduction, a significant number of *Habbo* users chose to protest within the virtual world by staging 'silent' demonstrations in some of the Hotel's public rooms. It's interesting in this respect to note the very 'public' response of the Cbeebies parents and the *Habbo* users to each of the disruptions. Though some parents communicated their upset to the BBC via email, many chose to use a public forum to share their upset. One parent commented how 'glad' she was that other parents were similarly voicing their anger at the changes. In this respect the response via the Grown Ups message board is not only one of voicing upset to the BBC, but also of taking reassurance that the disruptive experience is one shared with others. Similarly the *Habbo* users chose very public channels to share their response to the Channel 4 News report. The intensity of the response became a news story in

itself, with Channel 4 News reporting the following day on the social media 'backlash' following the show's broadcast.

The mediation of user responses also forms part of the means by which corporations monitor user satisfaction with an online space. The public responses of the users or their parents therefore provide one means by which corporations can gauge whether the development of an online space is moving in a 'positive' direction. To this end, specific tools for measuring and tracking user responses have formed a key part of the development of online spaces. The CBBC Grown Ups forum is one example of an online space specifically designed to encourage parents to share their thoughts and opinions. Similarly, one of Sulake's responses to the Channel 4 News report was to build an online space to encourage feedback from users. The Great Unmute forum was designed to allow users to, "post your thoughts and feelings in a way never seen before in social media" (LaFontaine, 2012a), and to provide them with the opportunity to share their thoughts on how "to improve the community" (Ibid.).

Buckley also discusses the use of website metrics as key tools for monitoring the reactions of users to website changes. One such metric was website traffic data. According to Buckley, this metric experienced a dip at the time of the 2009 Cbeebies re-launch (2011b), with website usage dropping momentarily. Buckley also described, in email correspondence, how the team looked at the 'Appreciation Index' for the CBBC websites[39]. Unlike the dips and spikes in the website traffic data, the Appreciation Index did not register any significant change. Buckley suggested that one possible reason for this might be that the Appreciation Index is only tested on a quarterly basis. As such, it would only pick up long-term dissatisfaction with the CBBC websites, rather than more short-term frustrations. Based on this metric, and the temporary dip of website traffic data, Buckley suggests disruptions are only 'transient' events, with no significant lasting effects. Forms of monitoring via metrics such as these have interesting implications for the framing of the sensitive child user

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[39] The appreciation index is regular measure employed by broadcasters to test audience or user satisfaction, out of a score of one hundred.

and of the disruption. Though the forums suggest an intense emotional reaction, the website metrics and the appreciation metrics temporally frame the disruption and its reactions as 'short term' dips. In this respect the team were able to justify not taking an immediate response to the upset caused by the 2009 re-launch, instead planning a more long-term strategy to prevent further dips in subsequent re-launches.

As mentioned earlier, the CBBC team also employed the consultancy firm System Concepts to carry out user research prior to, and following, the 2011 CBBC website re-launch. System Concepts' role was to "ensure that children found the new site both usable and desirable" (System Concepts, 2011). To this end, System Concepts employed a range of techniques including survey interviews and focus groups. Their website describes their approach as follows:

> Our researchers collected both qualitative and quantitative data, adapting to the needs of the children by using child-friendly pictorial rating scales and emotive response scales. A lot of insights with children are gained from non-verbal communication and we have innovative methods for recording and interpreting our observations (System Concepts, 2011).

The emotive response scales provide a chart of faces displaying a scale of emotions, ranging from happy faces with large grins to distressed faces with tearful expressions. From the scale, children are asked to select which face best represents how they feel about a given topic, object or scenario. In this way, the chart acts as a non-verbal mediator of the child's feelings towards a particular object. Again, we see a movement towards tools that seek to both elicit and measure the user as a feeling, emotive and sensitive subject. In this way the tools are not neutral instruments of user monitoring, but also work to position and situate the child as an emotionally sensitive and developmentally insecure subject. The metrics and scales in particular label and classify the users in emotional categories, but also accentuate particular framings of young media users as requiring monitoring of their emotional state. As we'll see in the next part of this chapter, the monitoring and measurement of users

through mediatory tools and devices also significantly informs the design practices of corporations and the framing of their firm as a 'responsible' children's media producer.

Repairing Disruptions

The second part of this chapter considers the attempts by Sulake and the BBC to repair the disruptions to their online spaces. In the first instance this will involve consideration of how the firms attempted to mend the relationship between the users and their online spaces. This part of the discussion will specifically focus on the invention of new initiatives and changes to practice that attempt to mend existing disruptions or prevent future disruptions from taking place. However, we will also consider how media corporations attempt to restore trust in their roles as *responsible* producers of online spaces for young people. In this respect, we will think about the repair of disruptions beyond mending the relationship between users and their online spaces, and also consider how trust and responsibility are framed in a broader public and market context.

Mending Online Spaces

As mentioned in an earlier section, Buckley and his team partly attributed the disruption caused by the 2009 Cbeebies re-launch to the speed and scale of the website's changes. Consequently, the 'No More Tears' project attempted to develop a method of re-launching the CBBC and Cbeebies websites that would seek to provide a less abrupt experience to existing users. As the previous two chapters have shown, the process of an online space's design and development is a 'time-sensitive' process. Online spaces for young people remain in a state of constant competition to remain up-to-date in a bid to differentiate themselves against other market competitors. In the case of the 2011 re-launch, Buckley describes in one blog post how the necessity of a fresh re-design of the CBBC website had originated from feedback that whilst children, "loved our content, they couldn't find a lot of it" (2011b). For the CBBC team, the main difficulty lay in finding a way of introducing

urgent changes to the website's navigation, whilst simultaneously avoiding a disruption to the user experience.

The solution arrived at by Buckley and his team was to de-accelerate the process of the website's re-launch. Rather than implementing all of the changes in a single package, they would be broken up and released at a more gradual and staggered pace. As Buckley describes:

> Instead of a big bang, we started by keeping the design as it was and releasing major functionality improvements piece by piece; when children were used to moving their mouse in certain ways to get certain things, we unrolled a new design on top (Buckley, 2011b).

The aim of this more gradual approach was to slow down the rate of change to the extent that it would be relatively *imperceptible* to users returning to the website on a frequent basis. To this end, the team also focused on making changes to the website's functionality, whilst maintaining the familiar 'look' and 'feel' of the interface. In this way, they sought to maintain a sense of familiarity and constancy, whilst subtly introducing changes to different areas of the website over an extended timescale. For Buckley and his team, this was an attempt to introduce a more 'sensitive' design approach to a website re-launch – adjusting the pace of the change such that it avoided disrupting the daily experience of regular website users.

Buckley's conclusion in his blog posts was that the 'no more tears' approach was a success. He describes how the reaction by users had been:

> an ocean – an ocean! – of indifferences, a pacific lack of comments. We had message board threads open and stuck at the top of the page for days before someone took pity on us and commented […] we are optimistic that the lack of comments is because children have had no problems using the site and are simply delighted; but our optimism is cautious (Buckley, 2011a).

In this respect the success of the project was measured by the *lack* of comments and responses from users. Though the aim of the re-build had been to improve the user experience of navigating the website, for Buckley the primary success of the project lay in how the re-launch had been released with the least disruptive effect on users. As he states on his blog, "amazingly, we haven't had a single complaint or even comment on the topic: children have just got on with it" (Buckley, 2011a). The framing of users as 'sensitive' and developmentally insecure remains a key component of this design approach. To avoid the accidental activation of users, Buckley and his team attempted to develop an approach that 'tip-toed' around users existing and familiarised patterns of usage, whilst gradually introducing changes to improve their experience of navigating the website.

For Sulake, the necessity of repairing the relationship between users and the online space presented a far more urgent task. As a virtual world, *Habbo's* chat services are one of its key functionalities. The decision to mute chat services whilst the company reviewed and re-designed its chat moderation systems posed a significant threat to both the website's user numbers and the company's revenue. One of the primary means by which the company sought to re-assure and assuage its users during the mute was to provide regular updates via the *Habbo* homepage and the company's social media accounts. Sulake's CEO, Paul LaFontaine, played a particularly significant role in this process, issuing numerous updates and tweets in an attempt re-assure users that the company was urgently seeking to restore the virtual world's chat services with updated safety protocols. Through daily updates, LaFontaine and Sulake staff attempted to keep users in the loop with on-going development, whilst simultaneously seeking to reassure users that the company was attempting to restore the chat functionality as soon as possible.

Another aspect of Sulake's response was to evoke the 'loyalty' of *Habbo* users to the virtual world and to the brand more generally. As mentioned earlier, a number of *Habbo* users began to hold silent protests in public rooms on the website following the muting of the chat functionality. In the following extract from one of his

messages, LaFontaine directly addresses those users participating in the silent protests,

"on behalf of myself and all my staff in Sulake – I would like to thank the many thousands of users who have remained loyal to the site over the last few days. The many rooms filled with silent *Habbo*s holding candles has been a source of inspiration at a challenging time" (LaFontaine, 2012e)

In his message, LaFontaine attempts to frame those participating in the protests as expressing their loyalty and commitment to the *Habbo* service. By way of acknowledgment of this brand loyalty, Sulake issued 'rewards' to users who had participated in the protests or had logged into the *Habbo* service during the mute. These included a virtual trophy, depicting a *Habbo* user holding a torch above their head, and an avatar badge with a torch at its centre. By distributing 'free' virtual objects with limited availability, Sulake sought to not only 'reward' the loyalty of those who had continued to log into the service during mute, but also attempted to encourage others to return who had not logged in since the mute began.

The evocation of loyalty is also interesting from the perspective of Hills' (2002) work on fan's affective commitments to particular media (discussed above). As we will see in the next chapter, *Habbo* has a large online 'fan' community, with many popular fan-created websites. LaFontaine's comments can, in this context, be seen as an attempt to rally the existing affective connection that young people have developed with *Habbo's* virtual world and brand. Though the disruption caused by the Channel 4 News report might be seen as damaging to the affective connection between *Habbo* and its users, it is also this affective connection that is being mobilised as the means by which Sulake attempts conserve its unsettled user base.

Restoring Trust

For Sulake, Channel 4's highly critical news report was a significant blow for the firm's public brand image. In the days following the news report, one of Sulake's key

investors, '3i', withdrew its 16% share in the firm. This was shortly followed by the news that a number of British high street retailers, including WH Smiths, had made the decision to pull their stock of *Habbo* e-card vouchers from their stores (Channel 4 News, 2012a). Consequently, the impact of the Channel 4's news report was not only a disruption to the *Habbo* user experience, but also caused a significant amount of damage to the firm's brand reputation and its financial stability. Over the following twelve months, Sulake was forced to significantly downsize the workforce at its head office and the company's CEO, Paul LaFontaine, resigned from his position (Sulake, 2013). Though these may not have been as a direct result of the Channel 4 News investigation, the report nonetheless marked the beginning of a particularly difficult period for Sulake. In large part, the repercussions of Channel 4's report were as a result of the perception that Sulake had neglected its responsibilities to ensure the safety of its users. As such, one of the key priorities for the firm following the news investigation was to regain the trust not only of its users, but also its stakeholders, the parents of its users, and the public more generally.

In this respect, issues of trust and reliability become more complex than simply the question of whether an online space provides a consistent and stable experience. Instead, the focus shifts towards the providers and creators of online spaces, and issues of corporate responsibility and trust. Part of Sulake's initial response to the Channel 4 News investigation was to attempt to re-assure the parents of *Habbo* users that their children were safe using the service. This resulted in the introduction of a 'parent advisory summit' in which parents were invited to attend an online forum in order to help Sulake, "understand better how we can collaborate with parents to deliver the best possible levels of safety to our users" (LaFontaine, 2012c). Sulake also set up a specific email address for parents to get in touch with the company and to share their concerns or comments relating to the events surrounding the news report and the re-development of the chat safety system.

We might also read some of Sulake's assurances to its users as part of a more public performance to shore up its brand image. Many of Sulake's messages to users via its

public company pages made reference to the solidarity and loyalty demonstrated by its users. As LaFontaine stated in one of his messages:

> Since conversations on the site were muted, we have experienced an unprecedented online response with thousands of loyal users remaining active on the site, holding a silent candle-lit vigil to express their support for *Habbo* (LaFontaine, 2012f).

Public messages such as these offer a thanks or acknowledgement to 'loyal' users, and also act as a demonstration to a wider public of the continued commitment of the virtual world's user base. After the initial report, Sulake refused to provide any press statements and, as such, the public messages to users were one of the few means by which the media were able to monitor the company's response to the news report. The company's 'Great Unmute' was also a significant means of rallying users as a way of demonstrating continued support for the virtual world service. On the one hand, the website was positioned as a way to allow *Habbo* users to 'speak' again and to share their thoughts on the virtual world service. On the other hand, however, the Great Unmute was also framed as a means for users to communicate their thoughts not only to Sulake but also to the wider world. As LaFontaine described:

> As the world media stops talking ABOUT us and takes a brief moment to listen TO us, I want us to demonstrate why we are proud of our community […] This is what we're going to show with a single voice (LaFontaine, 2012a).

As such, the Great Unmute was explicitly framed as a means for users to have a 'voice' that would be listened to by Sulake and the global media. Once again, Sulake attempted to mobilise the user brand loyalty as a way to encourage users back to the service and as a means of communicating a more positive image of the brand to the international media.

The success of the Great Unmute is harder to judge than the BBC's 'no more tears' approach. LaFontaine claimed it to be a success in a subsequent blog post, describing how the website was, at one point, overwhelmed and required additional servers to support the incoming traffic. Later in the blog post he went on to describe how:

> The teens and young people who inhabit our site have spoken in a mature, united and compelling voice. They have articulated the practical and personal benefits of a virtual community for a demographic full of young people still discovering themselves and their place in the real world (LaFontaine, 2012b).

For LaFontaine the scale and quality of the response from users was a success in itself. Nonetheless, the company's reputation and financial situation remain in recovery, and the repercussions of the disruption have irreversibly changed the fortunes of one of the virtual world market's early leaders.

In contrast to Sulake, the BBC has always been held to a particularly high standard of trust as a publicly financed children's broadcaster. Focusing on the public perception of children's television broadcasting in the UK, Messenger Davies describes how:

> The provider of children's television appear to have a quasi-parental role and is this seen as a provider for other kinds of needs as well, including intimacy and mutual trust (2001: 98).

In some ways this 'quasi-parental' role links back to Silverstone's discussion of Winnicott's 'transitional objects' and how, in some instances, the television acts as a substitute for 'the mother' in her absence. Regardless of whether we prescribe to Silverstone's adoption of Winnicott, there is nonetheless a consistent address of children's broadcasters as 'quasi-parents', viewed as responsible for ensuring that their outputs are suitable and appropriate for their young audiences. Oswell similarly describes how:

Perhaps unlike other forms of broadcasting, children's broadcasting has required that those who make the programmes have a *responsibility* to their audience over and above the money that might be made from transmission or the entertainment of children watching (emphasis added, 2002: 21).

Such framings of corporate responsibility have similarly been carried over to the production of online media. The issues raised in the Channel 4 News report into *Habbo* addressed some of the main sources of concern in relation to children's online media: safety from the harm of 'others'. Nonetheless, for Sulake the news report was also a disaster for the brand, and the firm had to spend a similar amount of effort re-building its reputation as it did on overhauling its online safety system.

In contrast, the BBC's primary concerns have lain in demonstrating its commitment to the general 'happiness' and well-being of its users. In this respect, Buckley and the CBBC team used their blog as a channel to demonstrate to parents their shared concerns around website re-launches, and also as a means to re-assure them of how they would minimise future disruptions. The BBC is perhaps a unique example in this respect, expressing concerns for children's well-being that lies beyond the standards expected of its commercial competition. As such, responsibility is a particularly relative term, with different expectations for public and commercial media providers.

Parts of Buckley's blog posts emphasised the anxiety and uncertainty that the team felt in preparing to carry out the re-launch. For example, Buckley describes the 'trepidation' he felt in initially announcing the re-launch and how the team had 'worried' about the consistency of the user journey as the individual packets were introduced. Employing a language of shared, empathetic, concern with parents, Buckley's blog posts attempted to align his and the teams anxieties with those of the parents of CBBC and Cbeebies users. The 'No More Tears' project title is in a similar vein – borrowing from the *Johnson's* brand of 'Baby Shampoo' and implying a parental care to avoid a child from becoming tearful during bath time.

Conclusions

This chapter has raised a number of important issues for the present thesis, offering fresh perspectives on some of the key themes considered so far. First, this chapter has looked at the break down and disruption young people's participation in a ways unanticipated by designers and corporations. Disruptions offer particularly interesting events in the biography of an online space, potentially changing the way that an online space is developed and, in some cases, transforming the terms of young people's participation. This is turn can have a broader market impact on the fortunes of media corporations, and disruptions can cause a number of normally 'invisible' stakeholders to come to the fore. As seen in this chapter, parents, retailers and investors – who would normally only have an indirect impact on the day-to-day running of an online space – can play significant roles when disruptions occurs. In this way, disruptions can help us to trace the broader and more extensive assemblages in which young people's participation is embedded and configured. Secondly, this chapter has explored how media corporations react to 'negative' and 'accidental' activations of user participation. In the previous two chapters we have seen how designers have attempted to frame 'activation' as a means of mobilising users to 'positive' forms of participation. In contrast, this chapter has demonstrated how the actions of corporations and designers can lead to inadvertent activations of young people's participation in unexpected ways. This chapter has also raised new issues in terms of the responsibility of corporations for the emotional welfare of their users as a consequence of such negative activations. Of particular interest has been the way that such responsibilities can lead to significant shifts in the design and development of an online space in order to mend the disruptions to young people's participation. As such, we have seen how corporations attempt to remain responsive to perceived shifts in user satisfaction and 'mood' as a way of stabilising participation.

The next chapter of this thesis moves on to explore how user fansites provide an important site where young people's media participation is explicitly negotiated between corporations and users. Fansites offer a particularly important case study of

online spaces that exist in close proximity to corporate media spaces, but which are owned and run by young people. The next chapter will examine how corporations have attempted to extent the configuration of user participation 'outside' of the virtual world environment, and into a broader brand assemblage that incorporates fansites.

Chapter 7 – Proximal Relations Between Corporations and User-created Online Spaces

Introduction

In chapter four I considered how the designers of *Habbo Hotel* attempted to establish new forms of mediated proximity with their users via the virtual world environment and other social media platforms. This discussion introduced the idea that young people's participation is increasingly framed as not isolated to one form of media, but instead as embedded within broader media assemblages shared with other online spaces. In this sense, they are part of broader media ecologies where proximal links are formed between online spaces in order to enable the configuration of young people's participation across media platforms. The present chapter pursues this notion of the configuration of participation across *proximal media ecologies* further by exploring relations between users and corporations across 'fan'-created websites, or 'fansites'. This will provide an opportunity to not only consider how corporate online spaces form part of young people's media ecologies, but also online spaces that have been created by young people for other young people. It will allow us to consider how corporate and 'fan'-created online spaces co-exist and how fansites provide important sites for the negotiation of young people's participation in the development of online spaces. As *Habbo* has a large and well-established fan community the present chapter will return to the *Habbo* case study for one final time.

It should be noted from the beginning that the activity of fansite creation is undertaken by only a limited segment of virtual world users. As such, fansite users are not necessarily representative of 'typical' virtual world participants, tending to be significantly more loyal to a single virtual world platform and spending a large amount of time engaged with their particular fansite. Nonetheless, fansites can play a significant role in negotiation and configuration of young people's media participation. As we will see later in this chapter, *Habbo*'s corporate owner, Sulake,

has taken a significant interest in user-created fansites. During my interviews with Sulake, one staff member described how fansites are:

> kind of opinion leaders within the community […] a big portion of our users visit fansites as well. So it's sometimes an even more important medium for getting important information, what's going on in the community

In this instance popularity and influence are cited as key motivators for either monitoring or engaging with fansites. As such, fansites are not only a significant space for users, but also assigned a degree of value by corporations. This dual significance is of central importance for the present chapter, and a large part of the current discussion will be dedicated to exploring how *Habbo*'s fansites have emerged as significant sites for the negotiation of young people's media participation.

Over the course of this chapter I will consider three questions in particular:

First, on what terms are young people's fansites able to co-exist alongside online corporate-owned media? Fan sites and user-run forums have emerged as focal points for fan activities and discussions online, frequently offering additional or alternate content to that provided by corporate media providers. Much of the previous research 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 chapter will attempt to explore these online spaces as shaped not only by inter-fan community relations but also by their 'external' relations to corporate media spaces.

Secondly, how has the proximal space between fansites and corporate media spaces emerged an important site for the negotiation and configuration of young people's media participation? This chapter attempts to explore how fansites have emerged as alternative spaces of user activity where new configurations of participation can

emerge. However, this chapter also explores how media corporations, such as Sulake, have increasingly sought to incorporate fansites into their brand's media ecosystem. As such, this chapter explores how user-created online spaces have emerged as a key site where models of young people's media participation are debated and negotiated.

Thirdly, to what extent are fan and commercial online spaces shaped and defined by their proximity to one another? In this chapter, 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 chapter will attempt to explore how proximity is mobilised as a means of delineating where and on what terms young people's participation can be legitimately configured.

The first section of this chapter will briefly examine existing academic discussions on the relationship between media corporations and fan communities online so as to provide some further empirical and theoretical background. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the present chapter's case study, providing some context to the *Habbo* fansite community. The chapter will then address 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 participation and activities of the fansite community. The following section will then explore how fansites have attempted to define their own proximal forms of participation in relation to *Habbo*. For the most part, this second section will focus on *temporal* forms of proximity and explore the value for fansites of remaining 'up-to-date'.

Media Corporations and Online Fan Communities

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, 2006; 2008). Fans have frequently been regarded as in tension with commercial media interests, particularly over issues of ownership and copyright of media content (Jenkins, 2008; 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 proximal 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). As a result, 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 (2008) in relation to media fans, 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" (2008: 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" (2008: 3).

The present chapter 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 chapter 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 franchise[40]. 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 corporation[41]. It is rarely the case, however, that corporations opt for an either-or approach and over the course of this chapter 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

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[40] See for example the *Harry Potter* franchise (Walter, 2004)
[41] See for example Warner Bros. and the Harry Potter franchise in Jenkins (2008).

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). 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: *Habbo* Fansites

As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter will return to the case study of *Habbo Hotel*, with a specific focus on *Habbo* fansites. *Habbo* has a well-established fan community and, at the time of writing, the Habbo.com homepage lists twelve, recognised, English-language fansites[42]. These fansites offer a range of different services to *Habbo*'s users, including: information about *Habbo*, news articles, competitions, discussion forums, live radio broadcasts etc. Not all fansites offer the same full range of services, and a number are exclusively discussion forums. All fansites are owned by either current or former users of *Habbo*. In some cases, a fansite will change hands to new owners after a former owner has chosen to retire from the *Habbo* service. The majority of fansites pay fees for server space and domain names and often rely on the use of third party advertising to recoup their running costs. Furthermore, fansites are run by groups of volunteers rather than single individuals, with different members taking responsibility for different areas of the website.

Since *Habbo's* launch in the early 2000s, Sulake has attempted a variety of means of engaging with the growing number of *Habbo* fansites. One of the primary schemes developed by Sulake has been the 'Official Habbo Fansite' award, which is presented to those fansites who are seen to be the most positive servers of the wider *Habbo* community. Sulake has also developed a set of rules known as the 'Fansite Way',

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[42] 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.

that establish a set of guidelines for best practice within the fansite community. The next part of this chapter will focus on these schemes in greater depth. For now it is important to note the degree of attention paid by Sulake to the *Habbo* fansites.

The present chapter will focus on the relationship between Sulake and just one particular *Habbo* fansite – *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" (Habbox, 2011a). As such, it positions itself as not purely dedicated to the discussion of *Habbo*, but also as a space for users to more generally socialise. The *Habbox* fansite is comprised of two main platforms: the main *Habbox* website and the *Habbox* forum. The *Habbox* website is the main hub for news and information, predominately relating to *Habbo*. The homepage is split into a variety of sections including: a news feed, events listing, job openings on the website, and various pages providing detailed information on the *Habbo* service. The homepage also has an embedded radio player at the top, which is variously manned by *Habbox* staff who play music and announce current events taking place in *Habbo*. *Habbox* users can message the radio DJ and send requests for songs to be played. The *Habbox* forum houses an extensive discussion board for registered members. During my interviews with *Habbox* staff members I was told that the forum received the most internet traffic of the different sections of the *Habbox* website. As such, it has become its own distinct platform and is continually moderated by *Habbox* staff.

The *Habbox* website is maintained by a dedicated team of volunteers, each of whom carries out a distinct role, such as forum moderation, graphics design, radio DJ etc. 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. The *Habbox* staff system has its own internal management structure, with more experienced users directing different parts of the website. All of the fansite staff are represented on the website by their in-game avatar and it is common practice for staff to use the same username as one of their main *Habbo* avatars. As such, *Habbox*

staff attempt to maintain a degree of continuity in their 'online' presence on both *Habbo* and on the fansite.

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 franchises[43]. 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 Habbos[44]. 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 (Habbo, 2010).

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, therefore

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[43] See Hills (2002) for an extended discussion on attitudes towards fans and capitalist values.
[44] 'Habbos' is a term commonly used to describe *Habbo Hotel* users

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 and, as such, 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 approve of its content. Whilst the fansites are initially described as spaces distinct and autonomous from Habbo, their existence is framed as partially contingent on Sulake's approval. In this way, Sulake 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', whose 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" (Habbo, 2012). In this extract, Sulake 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" (Habbox, 2012b). 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" (Habbox, 2012), whilst another guideline suggests that fansites can "offset […] hosting costs with advertising banners or ad words" (Ibid.). 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" (Habbo, 2012). 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 demonstrates 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. 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" (Habbo, 2012). 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* (emphasis added: LaFontaine, 2012g).

Within his response, LaFontaine creates a number of connections between *Habbo* and the fansites, which are worthwhile briefly exploring. First, LaFonatine 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, 2012g).

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 LaFontaine's criteria not only distinguishes 'good' fansites from 'not-so-good' fansites, but also produces 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.

Here we might draw a number of similarities between the concept of 'activation' introduced in previous chapters, and the criteria for being a 'good' fansite. Firstly, the concept of the 'good' fansites proposes a similar model of *valued* user contributions. For example, in chapter four we saw how individual users were classified according to the extent to which they were 'active' and 'creative' members of the *Habbo* user community. Sulake's designers praised and encouraged those users who were seen to be making valued contributions to the development of the *Habbo* service through their 'innovation' and 'ingenuity'. Similarly, we have seen in this section how 'good' fansites are publicly praised and promoted on the *Habbo* homepages, whilst 'not-so-good' fansites are ignored and left unmentioned. The 'active' user and the 'good' fansite positively contribute to the development of the

Habbo service through their activities. Consequently, both the subject positions of the 'active' user and the 'good' fansite have come to act as classificatory devices against which all user, or fansite, activity is measured and appraised in terms of its productivity.

Secondly, the model of the 'good' fansite also acts as a means of mobilising *Habbo*'s fansites. In chapter four I described how 'activation' was the means by which designers and Sulake staff attempted to mobilise users to participate in particular forms of productive activity in the development of the *Habbo* service. Similarly, the model of the 'good' fansite attempts to enrol and mobilise fansites into particular forms of participation that positively contribute to *Habbo*'s services, such as "enriching the experience" (LaFontaine, 2012) of other users. However, to be a 'good' fansite is a precarious achievement. By holding regular contests for 'official' fansite status, Sulake is able to motivate not only those fansites that wish to become 'official' fansites, but also those who wish to maintain their position. The final part of this section considers some of the ways in which *Habbox* has attempted to model itself as a 'good' *Habbo* fansite.

The 'Good' Fansite: Some Alternative Definitions

The predominant focus so far has been on the guidelines and definitions that Sulake has established in demarcating 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 everyday, 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* staff share similar titles to those of Sulake employees, including moderators and graphic designers. Therefore, 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*. When 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 within the present case 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).

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*, seek to position themselves as *contemporary* to *Habbo*, but also how they attempt to *anticipate* and align themselves within the future unfolding 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' primarily characterises the 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[45]. 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.)[46]. 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, 2008). 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

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[45] 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

[46] See Jenkins's (2008) chapter on US reality show *Survivor* for an example of the fan temporality in relation to a television series

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 chapter 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" (Habbox, 2012c) . Though there are occasional articles on 'non-Habbo' topics, news relating to *Habbo* and Sulake are substantially more frequent. Some of the most common topics covered by the news articles 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" (Ibid.). 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" (Ibid.). 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 intervals[47]. Consequently, fansites must remain alert to changes

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[47] 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'.)

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" (Habbox, 2012c). Over the course of this chapter, 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, such as 'exclusive' 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, 2012g).

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!"[48] 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' (Habbox, 2011b)) to more positive projections (e.g. 'Sulake Show More Interest in Fansites!' (Habbox, 2012d)). Within these articles we find a persistent sense of uncertainty about 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 merge[49], 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? (Habbo, 2012e).

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

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[49] "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.

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 (Habbox, 2012d).

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 potentially significant 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.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined how negotiations of young people's participation extend to user-created fansites. In so doing, this chapter has demonstrated how the ability of young people to participate in the creation and maintenance their own online spaces continues to be shaped through proximal relationships with media corporations. Whilst previous chapter have considered the framing and configuration of young people's participation within the media ecosystem created by corporations, this chapter has sought to explore how such negotiations have been extended to include user activities 'outside' of the corporation's official brand assemblage. This chapter has explored how Sulake, through frameworks such as the Fansite Way, has sought to foist a model of the 'good fansite' as a way of delineating the parameters of fansite participation. Though Sulake openly acknowledges that fansites are autonomous user-owned properties, it nonetheless attempts to guide and administer their activities by either promising 'exclusive' privileges or (in extreme cases) potentially seeking their closure. This is not to suggest that young people involved in fansites necessarily see this relationship in entirely negative terms. In the case of *Habbox* there are certainly young people who seek a closer relationship with Sulake and *Habbo* in order to open new opportunities for exclusive news and content. Nonetheless, questions need to be raised in terms of who benefits from this closer proximity and the extent to which young people have sufficient agency and resources to negotiate the terms of their participation with corporations.

The next and final empirical chapter of this thesis looks in closer detail at how young people's participation in online spaces is shaped and configured in their everyday lives. To this end, the chapter will look at how commercial and corporate media assemblages intersect with young people's own personal media ecosystem. This

chapter will also consider the importance of young people's peers and families in shaping and configuration of their media participation.

Chapter 8 – Young People's Mediated Participation Across Online Spaces

Introduction

In this final substantive empirical chapter of the thesis, we turn our attention to the shaping and delineation of young people's online media participation as part of their everyday lives. In this way, we continue to trace configuration of young people's participation in the biographical unfolding of online spaces as they become embedded – or 'domesticated' (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996) – within young people's home environments, their peer relationships, and their personal media ecosystems. Two key points are developed over the course of this chapter. Firstly, that in order to understand the terms of young people's participation in the development of online spaces, we need to explore how broader media assemblages intersect with home and domestic media environment. As such, we need to see the conditions of young people's participation as always defined across multiple overlapping points in time and space. In this way, a young person's ability to participate must be seen as simultaneously dependent on relational connections that stretch across online spaces, from homes and playgrounds, to the offices of international media corporations. The second point developed within this chapter is that a key moment in the development of online spaces is the process of their intersection with young people's individual media ecosystems and everyday relationships. Over the past four chapters we have considered the relational assemblages that attempt to define participation around specific online spaces. In this chapter we consider the plurality of online spaces that populate young people's media ecosystems, each seeking to enlist young people's participation. As we'll see in this chapter, young people do not restrict their use to individual online spaces, but rather participate across a range of competing online spaces. As such, this chapter considers the configuration of young people's participation in the arrangement and assembly of their own media personal ecosystem.

The first part of this chapter provides an introduction to the sample of young people who participated in this aspect of the research study. This chapter situates their engagement with online spaces in their existing domestic assemblies of media technologies. As such, this first part of the chapter foregrounds the media ecologies in which the young people's online media participation take place. The second part of the chapter moves on to consider the local and domestic configurations of access and participation. Here we consider how participation is shaped at the point of access. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which parents act as intermediaries of young people's online media participation through rules, routines and the arrangement of domestic architectures. The final part of the chapter examines some of the ways in which online spaces become embedded within the fabric of young people's everyday play and peer relationships. Here we consider how young people's online media participation is shaped by peer relationships, but also how online spaces play a significant role in shaping of their peer relationships and friendships. As such, this chapter look consider how participation in online spaces is positioned, fashioned and arranged to *fit* into young people's existing media ecosystems and the fabric of their everyday lives.

Background

The present chapter is based on a series of group discussions conducted with children from an inner city primary school in the UK. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the school is located in an area with an ethnically diverse population with a level of deprivation higher than the national average. Since chapter three already provides a detailed account of how the study was conducted, I will limit the present discussion to providing some further details about the background of those children who participated in the study. In total, fourteen pupils from the school participated in the study: one aged nine, ten aged ten, and three aged eleven[50]. The majority of those interviewed were from ethnic minority backgrounds and there were significantly more girls (*n* = 9) than boys (*n* = 5).

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[50] See appendix 9 for a full breakdown of the participants

Although the children resided in an area with higher than average levels of deprivation, they generally described their homes as containing a wide range of media and technology. These technologies included: wide-screen televisions, games consoles, hand-held games consoles (e.g. the *Nintendo DS*), PCs and laptops, mobile phones and, occasionally, tablet computers. All of the participants claimed to have an internet connection in their homes.

When describing the media and technologies in their homes the participants would often include some form of qualitative description. In some cases this was to identify the location of objects in the home, as demonstrated in the following extract:

> **Dimitri:** I have (erm) a TV, I've got, I've got two in my bedroom (erm) one at the side of my wall and one (erm) one in front of my bedroom and (er) I use, I use, basically one of them

This form of description was particularly detailed in the case of the children's bedrooms, where participants would provide additional details of non-media items such as lamps and toys to their list of 'technologies'. In this way, specific technologies were located within the home's media architecture. One of the most frequent forms of description was to identify specific brands and models of media objects:

> **Kimberly:** I have, is one Dell laptop and (er) one Windows 7 computer

In this instance Kimberly identifies the brand of a laptop's creator and also the brand and iteration of the operating system of a computer. The close association of brands with specific objects and technologies is interesting in terms of Callon et al.'s (2002) discussion of qualification and of the way that consumers contribute to the differentiation of products within the broader market space. In this instance the children employ descriptors to distinguish *their* specific branded object from those owned by *others*. The descriptions also suggest that, to some degree, the children have an awareness of competing market brands and that they are able to deploy

these as both a form of categorization and ordering of objects, for example, what constitutes a 'good' or 'poor' quality brand. This is illustrated in the following extract:

Christian: I have a Nokia brick, [**Lauren:** laughs] (erm) a Wii, (er) I got PS1, I got PS2

Lauren: And a brick (laughs), sorry

Christian: And (er)

Lauren: a Nokia brick (laughs)

In this extract Christian describes having a 'Nokia brick' – referring to an older and bulkier Nokia phone model – and Lauren then repeats the phrase 'brick' several times whilst laughing. Christian's use of the term 'brick' might be read as a self-effacing description of his mobile phone, acknowledging that it is neither a recent nor 'compact' Nokia model. Lauren finds amusement in the description of the phone as a 'brick' and persists in repeating the descriptor, possibly in an attempt to further shame Christian's ownership of an older Nokia model. In this instance the description of the phone as a 'brick' is jointly recognised as negative and disparaging by both Christian and Lauren.

Descriptions of technology and media in the home would also occasionally take on a competitive edge, with each participant claiming to have 'one more' item than the previous speaker. The following extract is an example of such an occasion:

Dimitri: At my house I have, I have, I have (erm) a PS3, I have a computer and (erm) I have a TV and yeah

Carl: I have two computers, two laptops, three TVs and I was thinking of getting a Wii

Simone: My name's Simone and I have a Wii, one computer, I have four TVs and I have one computer and one laptop

In the above extract, Dimitri begins by describing singular objects in his home including a games console, a computer and a television. Carl and Simone then each increase the number of televisions, with Carl claiming to have three and Simone claiming to have four. In highlighting this pattern I am not proposing to question the validity of either Carl or Simone's claims, but am instead drawing attention to a recurring 'one-upmanship' in the reporting of home possessions. Such one-upmanship generally appeared in the interviews to have a playful competitiveness to it, and most of the participants seemed generally keen to prove to the interviewer, and the other participants, that they had media-rich homes. This also highlights the peer group nature of the interviews. In the groups, participants were always with pupils in the same year group as themselves, and as such were well known to each other prior to the interviews. It should therefore be taken into account that the pupils often brought a shared history with them into the interviews – a point that will be returned to frequently over the course of this chapter.

Many of the pupils described having access to a range of media in their bedrooms, predominantly televisions and games consoles. This, in part, matches the description of the 'bedroom culture' described by Bovill and Livingstone (2001), with children's bedrooms acting as personalised media environments. Some of the participants described having computers or laptops in their bedrooms, however a significant number of participants suggested that they only had access to a computer when in a shared family living space. As we will see in the next section, this can partly be accounted for in terms of parental supervision of the internet. The homes of other relatives and friends were also occasionally mentioned, and the participants sometimes drew contrasts in terms of what they could access online in these locations that they couldn't at home.

As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter does not focus on any specific online spaces and instead examines the participants' media engagement across a range of online spaces. As such, it is worthwhile briefly reviewing some of the online spaces that were most commonly mentioned in the interviews. By far the most frequently referenced online space was Disney's *Club Penguin*. *Moshi Monsters* and *Movie Star*

Planet then followed this in a close joint second. The popularity of *Club Penguin* and *Moshi Monsters* is not surprising as, at the time of the interviews, both were quickly emerging as leading products in the UK virtual world market. *Movie Star Planet*, however, is something of an oddity. The website does not feature in Kzero's virtual world user population rankings and as such can be presumed not to have a significant market share. Though some of the boys mentioned *Movie Star Planet*, it was the female participants who predominantly described using the website. The popularity of the website in the group discussions might therefore be partly accounted for by the higher proportion of girls in the focus groups. The website features female avatars more prominently on its homepage than male avatars and some of the main activities are highlighted as creating and dressing your own movie star. Other websites mentioned in the interviews commonly included: the CBBC website, *Bin Weevils*, *Star Dolls* and *Vizwoz*. Another website commonly referred to was *Facebook*. Whenever it was mentioned, the children generally treated it as a somewhat 'taboo' subject and would either immediately claim not to currently use it:

Darren: I had *Facebook* aswell but I deleted it cos I'm under 13

Or only hint at the possibility that they currently did:

Lauren: I talk to my friends […] I go on MSN, not Facebook, cos I'm not going to say it on the recorder
Kelly: You're just saying-
Christian: She's trying to say it

In the first extract Darren claims that he 'had' used *Facebook* but that this was no longer the case due to his age. The characterisation of some online spaces or content as 'inappropriate' occurs frequently over the course of the interviews, often with reference to age. In Lauren's case, she claims not to talk to friends on *Facebook* but only because of the presence of the tape recorder. Kelly and Christian then immediately protest that, although Lauren claimed not to use *Facebook*, she was

heavily hinting that she did. Again, the validity of whether Darren or Lauren currently use *Facebook* is not in question here. Rather, it is interesting to note that the participants feel they have to be careful what they say in the discussions and that *Facebook*, in particular, is an online space that they should distance themselves from. In Lauren's case she went on to cover the recorder with her hand and admitted to using *Facebook* but with the reassurance that "I get their names first, don't worry". The act of physically covering the voice recorder prevents some form of imagined critical or concerned (adult) audience from hearing that which she is prepared to conspiratorially admit to those physically present. As though to allay my worries as a potentially concerned adult, Lauren further reassures that I shouldn't 'worry' as she only speaks to people with whom she is already acquainted. Again the group situation of the interview should be borne in mind and, as is probably already evident, Lauren frequently found amusement in teasing the other members of the focus group.

This section has sought to provide a brief overview and background of the children interviewed for the present chapter. The following section investigates in more detail how their access to online spaces and virtual worlds is shaped and mediated in their day-to-day lives.

Mediations of Access to Online Spaces

The issue of 'access' to online spaces has remained relatively unexplored up to this point in the thesis. For the most part this thesis has focused on the varying levels of participation for those who *have access* to online spaces and only limited consideration has been given to children and young people's *ability to access* online spaces. All of the children in the present case study had access to online spaces in some form, but how and on what terms they were able to access online spaces generally varied. By exploring issues of access, this section will return to the concept of mediation. Mediation has had significant implications for this thesis and I have repeatedly attempted to highlight the different modes and means by which mediation can occur. Though online spaces are themselves important points of

mediation and intermediation, I have attempted in this thesis to demonstrate how a range of actors and objects come to be positioned as significant mediatory points within media assemblages. The focus in this section shifts towards how access to online spaces is mediated in the everyday lives of children and young people and I will begin to explore questions such as: under what circumstances are young people able to access online spaces? And how do they learn about, and make connections with, particular online spaces? Children do not have a direct, unobstructed, relationship to online spaces. Rather, their access is dependent on navigation though specific mediatory points. It is these processes of mediation and navigation that are the focus of the present section.

The Home

For most of the child participants, their homes provided the main location for accessing the internet and online spaces. Though school computers were also frequently mentioned, this was almost exclusively in a learning context as opposed to more leisure-orientated activities. Within the home, participants described a range of online activities, including: communicating with friends and family, watching online video content, playing games and accessing educational resources. Virtual worlds and social online games featured prominently in the discussions and the participants often referred to these as either one of their regular or occasional online activities.

Since the arrival of the radio, the home has emerged as a significant site for the negotiation and regulation of children's media activities (Livingstone & Bober, 2006; Oswell, 2002). The gradual domestication of the internet into the home environment has – as with all 'new' media technologies before it – brought a range of concerns about children's safety and appropriate levels of media use. It is not possible in this thesis to review these debates in any significant detail[51], however it is necessary to consider how children's access to online spaces has been significantly shaped by the

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[51] See Buckingham (2007) for a good overview of debates around concerns relating to children's media use.

growth and development of domestic methods of media regulation[52]. The interview participants described various ways in which their access to the internet and online spaces was significantly shaped by parental rules, and parents were often defined as the most significant mediatory figure in determining a child's access to the internet. Across the interviews, three main parental rules and regulatory methods featured prominently: time sanctions and routines, parental monitoring, and content controls. Some of these methods related to accessing the internet more generally, but for the most part they will be considered here in terms of how they mitigated access to children's online spaces.

a. Time sanctions and routines

Most of the participants described having only limited access to the internet and online spaces on a daily or weekly basis. On weekday evenings in particular, participants frequently had limited time slots for online activities, and this time was often split between homework and leisure activities. In the following extract Tia describes how her time is normally split on weekday evenings:

> **Tia:** Okay (erm) most of the time the rules are, when (erm) my mum said I should go and do some like maths websites for like (erm) ten minutes and then should complete some more things, and learn what I don't know already, and what I have troubles with, but until that happens then I can't go on anything that I want to go on.

For Tia, access to the websites that she 'wants to go on' are dependent on her having satisfactorily completed the homework and learning tasks set by her mother. In this instance the time sanction establishes set periods of time for different tasks, creating a priority of learning activities over more leisure-based activities. Such time sanctions are not, however, fixed and the participants often described how weekends differed from weekdays:

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[52] Measures to protect and safeguard children by both government and industry will also be considered, but for the moment the focus will remain on parents.

Interviewer: Is it different on weekends or the same [going on the internet]?

Joseph: No, I can go on it anytime I want on the weekend

Michaela: Me too

Interviewer: Is it different what you do during the week on the computer, compared to the weekend? [**Joseph:** (nods)] Okay, Joseph you nodded?

Joseph: I play games on the weekend and on the weekdays I learn

Interviewer: Okay [pause], Michaela?

Michaela: I just play games on the weekend

In this instance the division between educational and leisure media activities is framed in terms of a split between weekdays and weekends. First, Joseph and Michaela suggest that there are no limits to their time online on a weekend. Secondly, the forms of permitted activities change and the weekend is strongly associated, for both Joseph and Michaela, with playing games.

The division of online activities into daily and weekly routines features prominently in the interviews, providing insights into the everyday organisation of media activities in the participant's everyday lives, a point further illustrated in the following extracts:

Naomi: When I go home, first I turn on the TV, then I turn it off and I go on the computer for about (erm) one hour, or sometimes two

Dimitri: (erm) when I get home I watch TV, when there's nothing to watch, when it's all boring, I go on my computer, usually that takes about (er) I usually spend on my computer about three to four hours playing on my computer

Simone: When there's nothing to watch [on tv] I just leave it on and then I just go on the computer and I sometimes go on *Club Penguin* or *Vizwoz* and I go on it for about [pause] one and a half hour

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The description of routines, in the form of sequences of activity, was common across the interviews. These sequential accounts are interesting for a number of reasons. First, as described above, they are sometimes used to demonstrate how access to the internet is often dependent on the completion of particular tasks, such as homework. Secondly, they offer an insight into how access to online spaces becomes embedded within children's everyday routines. Not just in those dictated by their parents necessarily, but also in the media routines that the children create for themselves. In the above three extracts, each of the participants describes how their access to the internet and online spaces 'fits' in around other media activities, particularly watching television. It's also interesting to note how each of the routines are told in a semi-narrative format, with two of the participants (Naomi and Dimitri) beginning the description of their routine with their arrival home from school. Access to online spaces is not an activity partitioned from everyday routines, but instead is embedded very much within the mundane fabric of the children's lives.

b. Parental monitoring

Descriptions of parental monitoring tended to vary across the interviews, with participants describing different degrees to which their parents actively checked their online activities. This seemed to partially depend on where a computer was located in the home, with computers located in a family space more likely to be monitored than those in a child's bedroom. During the following extract, Joseph used objects on a table to show how his living room was laid out:

> **Joseph:** [arranges objects on the table] Look, this is the computer and this is the chair, my mum is sitting there and that's the TV. When she watching it and then she turns around and sees I'm on *Mathlectics* and then she turns back around.
>
> **Interviewer:** I see, so she checks what you're doing every now and then
>
> **Joseph:** But on Fridays I'm allowed to stay up late, because on Saturdays I don't need to be up

Joseph relates how his mother is able to check what he is doing online by sitting in a position from which she can turn to look at the computer screen. A particular spatial architectural arrangement of the living room, demonstrated by the physical objects on the table, allows Joseph's mother to maintain an intermittent gaze on the computer screen. This enables her to check that he is using the website *Mathletics*, an educational games website, rather than browsing other content. Joseph goes on to describe how this arrangement changes on Fridays when he is allowed to stay on the internet until later in the evening. In this way, temporality intersects with the degree of parental monitoring and Friday nights see a relaxation in Joseph's usual weekday routine. Kimberly's experience, on the other hand, is notably different to Joseph's:

> **Kimberly:** My family doesn't really go on the computer, so naturally (erm) I just go on it (erm) any time, I don't have to ask, cos it's in my room

Unlike some of the other participants who have been quoted so far, Kimberley describes being able to access the internet 'any time' she chooses. She gives two main reasons for this: firstly, she doesn't have to share the computer with others, as her family 'doesn't really go on the computer'. Secondly, the computer is located in her room, and as such she doesn't need to ask permission to go on it. Elsewhere in the discussion she describes how the location of the computer in her room means she can access content such as "scary movies on *YouTube* and also *Movie Star Planet*". Kimberley presents herself as having some degree of freedom in her online activities, partly attributed to the placement of the computer in her room and away from her family. In both instances, the domestic architecture plays a significant role in terms of the extent to which Joseph and Kimberley's online activities are monitored by their parents. Whilst Kimberley presents her access to the internet as very much on her own terms, Joseph describes his online activities as under greater scrutiny.

In some cases, participants also described attempts to subvert the monitoring of their parents. In this extract, Kelly describes one such tactic of avoiding parental monitoring:

> **Kelly:** I sometimes stick to the rules but when my mum's not there sometimes I go onto this, like, website, yeah, that's set on private right, so that your mum and dad can't see it [**Christian:** Aw!] And then I go on anything I want

Kelly's use of an online privacy tool prevents her parents from 'seeing' which websites she visits and allows her to 'go on anything' she chooses. Again, the physical presence of parents is important, and Kelly describes using the privacy tool only when her mother isn't there. When she describes her parents as not being able to 'see' what she has been doing online, this is not just a description of monitoring in the present, but also of future monitoring, possibly by reviewing her internet history. The use of the term 'private' is particularly indicative, suggesting that she lacks privacy when her parents are present. In this way she claims to be able to subvert parental monitoring, and allows herself the freedom to 'go on anything'. Immediately following this extract, the other three members of the focus group began to talk at once, contesting whether Kelly did in fact subvert her parents' rules in this way. Unfortunately as they all spoke at once it is difficult to distinguish individual arguments, but it is nonetheless interesting to note that Kelly's account was contested by her peers. Regardless of the validity of Kelly's claims, there is an expressed desire in her account to have some degree of freedom from parental monitoring, which is treated as limiting her ability to access all of the online spaces that she wishes.

c. Content controls

In the introduction to this chapter I described how *Facebook* was often differentiated from other online spaces and treated as a space that the participants (generally) sought to distance themselves from. Over the course of the interviews

the participants drew numerous other comparisons between those online spaces they were and weren't allowed access to. Sometimes they used quite broad descriptive labels of prohibited online spaces, such as 'nasty', 'rude' and 'bad' – though when I queried what kinds of websites these were, the participant's would often decline to respond. They also frequently used age labels describing websites as 'plus eighteen stuff' or 'over eighteen stuff', which suggests that the types of online spaces they were describing were not limited to social networking websites but also other 'adult' content. In chapter 7's discussion of fansites I referred to Buckingham's (1996) work on 'video nasties' in which children drew on a discursive repertoire of 'maturity' to justify whether content was appropriate for them or not. Similarities can also be drawn here in terms of the labelling of particular online spaces as appropriate or inappropriate based on age and maturity. In the following extracts, Naomi and Simone draw some contrasts between different online spaces:

> **Naomi:** When I'm on my computer I already know my rules, like I'm not allowed to go on *Facebook* and *Bebo* and all of those stuff, but I am allowed to go on like virtual websites, like (erm) *Vizwoz*, *OurWorld* and (erm) *Stardoll*

> **Simone:** The rules is, I'm not allowed to go onto *Facebook* but I'm allowed to go onto virtual games, yeah

In the first extract, Naomi separates two different types of online space: '*Facebook* and *Bebo* and all of those stuff' and 'virtual websites' such as *Stardoll*. What's of particular interest here is the separation and labelling of two groups of websites. On the one hand Naomi identifies those websites she is not allowed to access, identifying the social networking websites *Facebook* and *Bebo* as examples. On the other hand, she describes 'virtual websites', predominantly virtual world websites. Simone's distinction of permitted and non-permitted websites follows a similar categorisation with 'virtual games' placed on one side and Facebook placed on the other. Though implicit, these categorisations are based on a division of age appropriateness, with 'children's websites' placed on one side and 'adult' social

networking websites placed on the other. This division appears more explicitly in the following extract:

Dimitri: (erm) At home my dad tells me that I'm not allowed to go on like (erm) inappropriate stuff (erm) older than my age, so I usually go on like, first I go on Google and I go on like music like, then I go *OurWorld*.

In this extract Dimitri explains how his father decides what is appropriate for Dimitri based on his age. Though he doesn't describe those websites considered 'inappropriate', Dimitri does go on to list websites he is allowed to visit. Like Naomi and Simone, Dimitri identifies a virtual world ('*OurWorld*') as one of the online spaces considered appropriate for him to use. This presents an interesting pattern of virtual worlds being identified as 'appropriate' online spaces and of being utilized as a benchmark against which other websites are judged. In both Naomi and Simone's case, the 'virtual games' act as a point of contrast with prohibited content, helping to differentiate which online spaces they are and aren't allowed to visit. In this sense, the participants deploy the virtual worlds as a benchmark of appropriate-ness. This is not to suggest that parents would share the same categorisation of online spaces, but that in the case of the children interviewed there appears to be an implicit acceptability of virtual worlds that enables the participants to contrast them against 'unsuitable' online spaces such as *Facebook*.

Heard it on the Grapevine?

Over the course of the research I was curious to find out how young people become acquainted with, and 'enrolled' into using, particular online spaces. In regards to the first question, the responses from the focus group participants can broadly be placed into three categories: peer recommendations, advertisements, and 'random' searches. That friends and peers have an influential role is, perhaps, not unexpected. The following extracts illustrate the role of peers in directing participants to particular online spaces:

Carl: (erm) How I found out is, a few friends told me (erm) people told me what to do (erm) people told me to go on it (er)

Joseph: (erm) I knew this because when I was seven I used to watch CBBC and then I found out there was games and my sister that's 13 told me, and my friends told me about *Club Penguin* and *Moshi Monsters*.

Interviewer: Okay, and how about *Movie Star Planet*?

Joseph: Yeah my friends told me about *Movie Star Planet*

Interviewer: Okay, Michaela?

Michaela: (erm) I found CBBC because I want to play CBBC games and I type out and found out that they're there. And *Moshi Monsters* (erm) I was told by my friends and *Club Penguin* by my friends as well

Simone: What I do is when I go to my friend's house on the weekend, probably on the weekend, they'll be like 'have you seen this, have you seen that' and I'll be like 'no' and then when I go in the evening I'll search it up on the internet and I'll find it

Curiously, the CBBC website does not appear to have required any recommendation. The participants appear to justify this in terms of their existing familiarity with the brand through television. In contrast, the participants describe how they learnt about the commercial virtual world websites through either friends or siblings. In Carl's case it is interesting to note that his friends not only tell him about the website, but also explain to him 'what to do' to get on to it. In this sense, he describes his ability to access the website as reliant not only on the recommendation of friends but also on their teaching him how to access and use it. An interesting comparison might be drawn here with Buckingham and Sefton-Green's (2003) discussions of the *Pokémon* franchise and Ito's (2007) discussion of the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* franchise. In both instances, the media franchises provides a point where children can develop a local-expertise that they can then share with others. In this sense, Carl's friends play a significant intermediary role, introducing him to the website and guiding his initial access of it.

In addition to peer recommendations, many of the participants described how advertisements played a significant role in their discovery of new online spaces. The following extracts provide some examples of this:

> **Naomi:** Sometimes like, say you're on a website that, a website like dressing up games, and it'll give you advert while it's loading and it'll show you like, that's how I got to know *Moshi Monsters*, I saw an advert whilst I was playing a game, yeah and *Movie Star Planet* as well. And that's how sometimes it is, and sometimes adverts will show you a short advert about the website and it says 'go on it now'

> **Darren:** Yeah, well I just get some from friends, some are advertised on TV like, like there's a new one called *MiniMonos*, but then, yeah like *MiniMonos*, *Club Penguin*, all of these stuff (erm) all of these stuff were advertised on the TV and also they're coming out as games, like *Club Penguin*, they're on DS as well, they have it on DS and stuff. There's more games coming

There are a number of interesting similarities and differences in Naomi and Darren's accounts. Naomi describes how she came to learn about *Moshi Monsters* and *Movie Star Planet* through advertising on other online games websites. She goes on to describe how the advertising appears on the website's loading screens and will attempt to encourage the user to 'go on it now'. Such forms of 'in-game' advertising have grown increasingly common and, as I originally described in the introduction to the thesis, many young people's online spaces rely on advertising as a source of revenue. As these online spaces are largely competing within the same user market, targeting advertising through competitor websites generates increased pressure to retain the attention and loyalty of the existing user base. In Naomi's case, adverts by both *Moshi Monsters* and *Movie Star Planet* were 'successful' in luring her from other online spaces. Through targeted 'in-game' advertising, online spaces can become competitively embedded within one another's interfaces. Darren's extract presents a more cross-platform approach to discovering online spaces. He describes

how, in addition to receiving recommendations from friends, he learnt about *MiniMonos* and *Club Penguin* through television adverts. Darren also demonstrates his broader brand knowledge of the *Club Penguin* franchise, describing how his experience is not limited to online spaces but also the *Nintendo DS* spin-off games. In Darren's case, discovery of an online space and its franchise transcends the internet and is spread across a range of platforms and media. This provides a useful illustration of the development of the virtual world industry as it expands into transmedia franchises, including television programmes, trading cards, console games etc. In both instances, online spaces rely on 'other' media to provide a conduit between themselves and users such as Naomi and Darren.

Finally, some of the participants described how their discovery of online spaces occurred through 'random' encounters. Rather than being *directed* either by peers or other media to a website, participants described the 'random' encounter as occurring through happenstance. The following extracts provide some examples of such encounters:

Dimitri: It all started when (pause) It all started when I was researching and I had nothing to do, when I was just researching on my computer, and I had nothing to do, I just typed in a few websites and then came *Moshi Monsters*

Darren: I'm just searching the internet really for games and (erm) I just see them when I'm on websites

Dimitri describes how having 'nothing to do' led him to begin searching the internet, resulting in his discovery of *Moshi Monsters*. Indeed, boredom was often cited in the interviews as a motivation for accessing or looking for online spaces. Both participants characterise their searches as in some way *direction-less*, with Darren describing how he was 'just' searching and Dimitri explaining how he was 'just' researching or typing. The term 'just' is particularly interesting as it characterises the activity of searching or typing as occurring in and of itself without any other underlying purpose. Nonetheless, the online search engine is the tool that enables

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them to pursue a 'random' search. Though they might have no single end point in mind for their search, the search engine algorithmically processes their keywords and sorts their results (often, it should be noted, with 'recommendations' and advertisements). Though Dimitri and Darren characterise this as a random process, it is important to bear in mind that it is still a heavily mediated process enabled and co-ordinated by search engine algorithms[53].

It has not been possible in this section to provide a complete overview of the extremely complex means by which access and participation in online spaces is filtered and mediated. Instead I have focused on some of the main features relating to access that arose over the course of the focus groups. As one might expect, parents and peers play significant mediatory roles in both providing and limiting access to online spaces. However, access is not predicated on human actors alone and in this section I have also attempted to highlight how factors such as home architecture, categorisations of websites, routines, and algorithms, also play a significant role in shaping the conditions of children's access. In the next section, our attention will shift away from issues of access and will instead begin to examine how online spaces act as important intermediaries in shaping the proximal relationships between children and their peers.

The Topology of Young People's Trans-mediated Relationships and Play

Children and young people's relationships with their peers, and the forms of play that they participate in, remain two of the most researched topics for childhood and youth researchers across academic disciplines. Until relatively recently, this research had primarily focused on face-to-face peer relationships and play, particularly within school and playground environments (Cosaro, 1988; Danby & Baker, 1998; Epstein et al., 2001). With the arrival and adoption of new successive generations of media and communication technologies, the way that children and young people maintain and negotiate their peer relationships and interactions has gradually changed. In

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[53] See for example Goodwin (2011)

response to these changes, academics have also had to re-consider the way that they conceptualise and research young people's friendships and interactions with peers. Kearney (2005), for example, has demonstrated how the arrival of the landline telephone played a significant role in the shaping of girls' relationships and peer groups over the course of the twentieth century. From a more contemporary perspective, mobile phones and social networking websites have become an increasingly dominant means by which young people, of both genders, maintain mediated connections with friends and peers (boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Robards & Bennett, 2011). Nonetheless, there have been a number of significant differences in the way that different age groups have been able to adopt new technologies. Though some of the participants in the focus groups mentioned using *Facebook* and owning mobile phones, these were not generally described as the most common means by which they communicated with their peers. This is not, however, to say that the research participants have *less* mediated relationships than older children and teenagers. During the focus groups participants described using a range of different online media to communicate and interact with friends, including virtual worlds, instant messaging services and online spaces. As such, the aim of this current section is to explore in greater detail the role online spaces have in shaping and mediating children's relationships with their friends and peers.

Though the present study is not concerned with social networking websites, research in this area offers some possible avenues for examining mediated relationships amongst children and young people. In a paper examining the rise of social networking websites, boyd and Ellison (2007) raise a number of significant questions about the changing nature of 'friendship'. Over the course of the paper they put forward the claim that a distinction can be made between 'friends', in the 'everyday' sense, and 'Friends', who are online connections. For boyd and Ellison there is a fundamental distinction between these two categories of friends (2007: 220). They describe how impression management can often inform the decision as to whether or not a person is accepted as a 'Friend' on a social network. In a paper responding to boyd and Ellison, Beer (2008) offers a critique of their separation between 'friends' and 'Friends'. Beer disagrees with the notion that the two are

entirely distinct, and suggests that the everyday 'friend' can also be an online 'Friend'. He goes on to argue that boyd and Ellison have overlooked the way in which friendship as a concept is being changed and 'remediated' by the gradual pervasiveness of social media as a component of everyday life. He thus argues that,

> "we cannot think of friendship on SNS as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on SNS" (2008: 520).

Beer does not deny that changes to friendship have occurred, but he instead seeks to find a more holistic approach that examines the shifting nature of friendship, rather than its division into the 'online' and 'offline'. Beer's critiques are particularly useful in thinking about the relationships between children across online spaces. Rather than separating children's friendships conducted 'online' from those conducted 'offline', we can instead begin to think about how online spaces provide a mediatory point that has a significant impact on the way children's friendships are performed and negotiated. This can enable us to question, for example, how 'playground' friendships have been transformed and remediated by online spaces.

One further dimension to consider in this discussion is the topology of children's space. Throughout the course of this thesis I have considered how mediation across online spaces has been central to forming closer proximal relationship between media producers and users. In this section I also consider how online spaces are significant in the shaping of proximity between children and their peers. In other words, how does communication and interaction with friends via virtual worlds or other online spaces shape the *temporal and spatial properties* of friendships? At the turn of the millennium, Valentine and Holloway (2002; 2003) examined how ICTs (information and communication technologies) were beginning to re-shape the everyday spaces of UK children's lives, such as their schools, homes and public spaces. Over the course of their study, Valentine and Holloway explored both the 'online' and 'offline' worlds of their child respondents and arrived at the conclusion

that, "children's "real" worlds are incorporated into their "virtual" worlds" (2002: 302) and that "their "virtual" worlds are incorporated into their "real" worlds" (Ibid.). Valentine and Holloway thus approached the 'online' and 'offline' as separate but interconnected[54]. Though they avoided treating online spaces as a form of cyberian apartness from everyday life, they maintained an a priori distinction between the 'online' and 'offline' in children's geographies. Nevertheless, Valentine and Holloway remained consistent in their aim of not only exploring the 'online' spaces of children's lives, but also the 'offline' spaces in which children's ICT use takes place, such as the school and the home. The present section also attempts to situate the use of online media in relation to the everyday spaces of children's lives. However, rather than examining these as separate-but-connected spaces, I instead explore how virtual worlds and other online spaces intermediate across different times and spaces; how instead of generating their own distinct spatiality or temporality, they fold together and remediate children's existing spatialities and temporalities.

One example of such folding and remediation can be found in Ito's (2005) study of mobile phone use by Japanese youth. She examined how the adoption of the mobile phone had radically changed the way that young people communicated with peers, with many of her respondents intensively maintaining contact with friends throughout the day. She also noted how the mobile phone was not used as "a tool for producing indiscriminate social contact" (Ito, 2005: 9) but rather "to reinforce existing social relations fostered in the traditional institutions of school and home" (Ibid.). For Ito, the adoption of mobile phones had generated a greater intensity of contact between friends, radically shifting the temporal and spatial boundaries of contact. Though the children in the present study do not maintain as intensive a connection with their friends as Japanese youths, Ito's study provides a useful framework for thinking about how existing geographies of friendship are transformed and remediated by mobile devices. To this end, the present section attempts to explore the remediation of children's friendships and their spatial and

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[54] This theorisation shares many similarities with the virtual ethnographic approaches of Hine (2003), and Miller and Slater (2001) (see Chapter 3)

temporal landscape by online media. Over the course of the present section, I consider a number of different ways in which online spaces shape and mediate the relationships of the participants with their friends.

Forming Mediated Friendships

Like social networking websites, many of the virtual worlds and online spaces for children offer users the ability to connect with friends and peers. In 2011, *Club Penguin* added a 'friend request' functionality that allowed users to invite other users onto their 'friend list' (Club Penguin, 2011). In most virtual worlds, 'friending' enables a user to see which of their friends are online and, in some cases, to send private messages or invitations to take part in a game. In this respect, 'friending' can be seen as a way of establishing a connection that grants a degree of privileged access to another user. There are, however, a number of ways in which 'friending' on children's virtual worlds differs to social networking websites. Perhaps the most notable difference is the reduced amount of 'information' sharing; particularly any data that would help to discern a user's identity or location. This is not to say that users do no share personal information via virtual worlds, but rather that most children's online spaces are designed to discourage the sharing of intimate data, such as through the creation of anonymised usernames. As such, children's virtual worlds have emerged as a particular form of mediated connectivity that is distinctly different to that of social networking websites, relying more heavily on sharing social activities as opposed to information sharing.

In order to connect with their friends in virtual worlds, the focus group participants frequently described the necessity of knowing a friend's usernames. In the following extracts, some of the participants describe how they obtain their friend's usernames:

Lauren: I make sure I know their names first

Darren: well basically, yeah, I ask for their names

Interviewer: how do you find out what their names are on there?

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Joseph: When it's playtime we talk about the names

Sharing usernames emerges as an important practice for how the children establish friendship connections across virtual worlds. In Joseph's case, the playtime at school provides the opportunity for exchanging usernames. As such, 'finding' a friend on a virtual world is possible only through the process of username sharing in the playground. For some of the participants, the username was essential to the process of confirming a friend's identity. In the next extract, Naomi describes the process of how she decides whether to accept a friend request:

Naomi: And if I see people that I don't know, some people that requested me that I don't know, I will see their status and all like that before I add them and mostly I don't add them

If a username is not immediately recognisable, Naomi attempts to ascertain whether she knows whose avatar it is by looking for other potential identifying information. If she does not successfully recognise them, she will generally avoid adding them. For the participants, the username acts as an intermediary object[55] that makes a friend identifiable whilst using a virtual world. The process of connecting to friends is not, however, limited to the virtual world and instead the school playground acts as an intermediary space for the sharing and exchange of usernames. In this way, usernames act as an overlapping point across spaces, providing a means of establishing mediated connections.

The range of people that the participants described friending on virtual worlds included school friends, extended relations, and friends from clubs and organisations. Though some participants described making new friends in the virtual worlds, the majority described talking and playing with friends whom they already had an existing connection with. As Kimberly describes:

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[55] Another possible term could be 'boundary object' as outlined by Bowker and Star (2000).

Kimberly: Even though you're dressed up as a penguin (erm) you still communicate with your friends. Most people have their real life friends on there too

In this extract Kimberly appears to suggest that having an avatar 'dressed' as a penguin does not alter who her friendship connections are in the virtual world. For the most part they remain her 'real life friends'. The following extracts further illustrate some of the virtual world connections that participants described having:

Darren: I'm just hanging around really and just checking for people that's in my school so, yeah I just chat to them

Joseph: Sometimes it's friends from our class and sometimes its friends on *Club Penguin*
Interviewer: How about you Michaela?
Michaela: (Erm) sometimes my friends that don't come to this school and sometimes friends that come from this school

Elise: Yeah, I got some scout friends that I talk to

There are some similarities in these extracts to Ito's description of Japanese youth not creating 'indiscriminate' connections, but rather using mobile devices to 'reinforce' existing friendships. Darren, Joseph and Michaela describe meeting friends from their school in virtual worlds, and Elise and Michaela describe meeting friends from outside of school. There are two interesting points to note here: first, their friends are still identified by some form of organisation or spatial location. Joseph also has a separate category for friends met on *Club Penguin*, so as to distinguish where and how he met them. Secondly, the virtual world acts as an intermediary point for connecting with friends from multiple parts of their everyday lives. As such, it acts as a point of spatial and temporal overlap, allowing them to connect with friends who would 'normally' be proximally dispersed, such as school friends and scout group friends. However, we also need to recall that accessing

online spaces is itself a temporally and spatially located practice. It does not override everyday space and time, but it does remediate some of the ways that friendship are formed and sustained.

Playing Together

For many of the participants, one of the primary reasons for accessing online spaces was to play games. One of the most frequently mentioned multiplayer games in the focus groups was *Fireboy and Watergirl* (*FB & WG*), a flash based game embedded in a multi-content curated website called *Miniclip*. The aim of *FB & WG* is to navigate two characters through a series of mazes littered with obstacles, which can only be completed if both characters work co-operatively to overcome the various challenges. Though the game is available online, both *Fireboy* and *Watergirl* must be controlled from the same keyboard, with one player navigating using the arrow keys, and the other using the W, A, S and D keys. It is possible for one person to control both of the characters and some of the participants did describe doing so. However, as the following extract demonstrates, this was not the preferred mode of play for many participants:

> **Tia:** (er) sometimes I play it with my cousin and (erm) my friends most of the time, like Kimberly I like going on *Fireboy* and *Watergirl* because (erm) sometimes I don't like going, cos that game, if one person dies and the other person dies at the same time and, but most of the time I like playing it together because I think it's a bit boring when you're doing it by yourself, cos you don't get to have like much of an adventure and things

Despite the necessity of sharing a keyboard, many of the participants shared Tia's enthusiasm for playing *FB* & *WG* with others. One participant even described playing the game with two other people, with each person taking it in turns to control the characters. *FB* & *WG* is not a typical multi-player game and yet it's 'atypical' feature, of encouraging users to share a keyboard, appeared to be what was most attractive to the children.

Though *FB* & *WG* cannot be played from separate locations, it nonetheless emerges as an important intermediary point between peers. Gee (2004) describes this form of proximal play in terms of 'affinity spaces', whereby children are brought together not in terms of 'group memberships' but instead through participation in a shared social practice. Such an affinity space does not arrive 'pre-formed' around an online game, but instead emerges through negotiation, such as deciding who controls which side of the keyboard or debating how best to complete a maze. We should, however, be cautious in seeing such 'affinity spaces' as democratising play around online spaces. Returning to Buckingham's (2008) example of the Pokémon series, he states that "the 'affinity spaces' of phenomena such as Pokémon do not provide a level playing field: on the contrary, they are spaces in which relations of power and inequality are inevitably rehearsed and reproduced" (2008: 110). How and on what terms children participate in online spaces is therefore partly subject to existing dynamics in peer relationships.

Mediated Fallings-out

This final section considers how online spaces are not only able to create closer proximal relations between friends and peers, but may also be mobilised as a means of generating distance and rifts. During the group interviews there were a number of instances where participants described fraught relations with peers that were partially intermediated by online spaces. For the present section I have chosen to examine an instance not of the description of a rift between friends, but rather of a disagreement that appeared to unfold over the course of one particular discussion involving three girls. All of the focus groups conducted for the study had a mixed gender composition except for this group, which contained all girls. Over the course of the discussion, one of the girls raised the topic of boyfriends and dating in virtual worlds – a topic that had not been directly addressed in any of the other focus groups. In this first extract, Elise, a year six pupil, describes her online contact with boys from her school:

Elise: Well on (erm) on *MyWorld*, yeah, *MyCity*, I like, dress up as (erm) I'm a movie star and I (erm) have like two boyfriends on the game, but it's like someone from our school, so I know. One of them's called [*username #1*] and one of them's called [*username #2*] well (erm) most of the time I talk to [*username #1*] because he's the funniest, most of the time [pause] [*username #2*]'s always talking to other girls. So I dumped him and anyway so (erm) I have really good (erm) fun, I really like [*username #1*] the most

Elise's description jumps between the past and present tense as she describes her relationships with two 'boyfriends' in the virtual world *MyCity*. Viewed from the perspective of the online and offline as distinct-yet-connected spaces, Elise's account might be read as one in which she plays as a 'movie star' with multiple 'boyfriends' in the virtual world, but that this play-acting does not significantly impact on the 'offline' world. Indeed, Elise contributes to this distinction by emphasising that, although she knows the boys from school, they are only her boyfriends 'on the game'. Elise also attempts to maintain a separation by referring to both of the boys by their virtual worlds usernames, rather than by their 'real' names, further emphasising how their dating is restricted to *MyCity*.

Following Elise's account, the subject of online dating emerged as the dominant topic of discussion within the group. Having just discussed what they liked most about virtual worlds and online games, the group had moved on to describe what they least liked. Tia and Kimberly were the first to respond to this new topic:

Interviewer: Are there any things that you don't like about online games and virtual worlds, Tia do you want to start?

Tia: Well sometimes I don't like it when, like, so in some of them, like, I don't like it how, like, in *Movie Star Planet*, I don't like it when they just make it all like adult, it's like on *Movie Star Planet* you can get boyfriends and things, that's what I don't like about it

Kimberly: What I dislike is, when on the website, (erm) people can get boyfriends (erm) when they get boyfriends and they go around the place, and

when people click on their profile and they have this weird message saying 'I'm married', I might read something like that

Interviewer: And why don't you like that?

Kimberly: Because it's just-

Tia: (whispering) It's too grown up

Interviewer: Too grown up did you say Tia?

Tia: Yeah, that's right

Kimberly: But you're only like ten and eleven and you're saying you're married and you don't even know the person you're married to, that's just really dumb, you know

Tia: That's what I was thinking

Tia and Kimberly's remarks stand in stark contrast to Elise's account, with both girls offering negative views on online dating. In the process of outlining their views, both girls draw on a discourse of age and maturity to suggest that online dating is 'too grown up' for girls of their age. Kimberly is particuarly critical of the of the public-ness of these relationships, berating the way that 'people' put 'weird messages' announcing, "I'm married" on their profile pages. The most striking omission from their remarks is, however, any direct reference to Elise. Throughout the course of their comments, they neither name Elise nor make direct reference to her description of her virtual world boyfriends. They maintain this indirect approach by referring to a set of imaginary third persons, remarking on internet dating as a general phenomenon rather than specifically mentioning Elise. Nonetheless, their comments do not appear to be incidental, particularly as they arose only moments after Elise had spoken. Indeed, Elise appears to recognise that the comments are directed at her, and following these remarks she adds some further detail to her earlier accounts:

> **Elise:** Well, what happens is, yeah, in *MyCity*, yeah I've (erm) dumped both of my boyfriends but anyway, I go out with this boy from scouts and I'm not going to say his real name but someone in this room knows him and is going to spread it around. And she already knows who I'm talking about

In this extract, Elise alters her account and suggests that she has 'dumped both' of her virtual world boyfriends. Instead, she now claims to have a boyfriend in her scout group, who is known to another of the girls in the focus group. Elise then states that this other boy will remain anonymous, as she believes one of the other focus group participants would be liable to 'spread' the information of their dating. Elise's comments are more directed than Tia or Kimberly's, but she nonetheless avoids reference to any specific names.

Of particular interest in this exchange between Elise, Kimberly and Tia is the rapid transformation of a set of peer relationships, in which one girl is isolated by the other two. Though it isn't possible to know how the three girls got along prior to the interview, their exchange nonetheless provides a snapshot of the way that mediated relations intermingle and overlap with broader peer networks. Kimberly and Tia distance themselves from Elise by not only stating their disapproval of online dating, but also by directing their comments at a generalised and distant 'other'. In some respects, the online space remains partially present as a mediatory point within the discussion. Kimberly and Tia refer to their experiences from *Movie Star Planet*, avoiding direct reference to Elise by referring instead to general observations mediated via the virtual world. In her final comments, Elise attempts to re-frame the discussion by distancing herself from the virtual world boyfriends by situating them in the past. Whether enabling greater closeness or distance between peers, the virtual worlds and online spaces act as significant intermediary points in the participant's everyday lives. This intermediation is not limited to the time spent using these online spaces. Instead, as we have since in this last example, they filter through into the everyday relationships and interactions with peers. In this sense the online space remains a liminal mediatory point that continues to frame and shape peer relationships and friendships beyond the computer interface.

Conclusions

This chapter has looked at the configuration of young people's online media participation within their personal media ecosystems and their everyday lives. Rather than focus on a single online space, this chapter has examined how young people's participation in online spaces is shaped through their play and social relationships. Though this chapter has focused on more local relational arrangements of children's relationships with their parents and peers, these associations nonetheless have significant implications for young people's participation as consumers and economic actors. In the first instance, we have seen how parental mediation of online spaces significantly shapes when, and on what terms, the children in the study are able to access and participate in online spaces. For the majority of children in this chapter, parents and guardians remain significant gatekeepers in demarcating the schedule of their day and the points that media activities are permitted within that schedule. Zelizer also describes the importance of parents in the shaping of young people's economic participation, describing how young people's consumption activities, "repeatedly mingle economic transactions with intimate personal relations" (2011: 85).

Secondly, this chapter has also looked at the shaping of young people's participation in the selection and arrangement of online spaces within their personal media ecosystems. Peer relationships play a particularly significant role in this regard, with judgements of online spaces being made on the basis of peer recommendations and the popularity of games and virtual worlds within friend groups. In their article, Callon et al. describe how consumers participate in the qualification of a product by assessing and judging its qualities. This process can be assisted by adverts or 'professional' advice (such as specialist consumer websites), or through "collective evaluations" (Callon et al., 2002: 203) within a consumer's family or peer networks. This is certainly evident in this chapter, particularly in the way that young people share and recommend online spaces with one another. However, this process does not conclude at the point of purchase. Similar to Silverstone and Haddon's (1996) notion of domestication, the young people in this study continue to collectively

negotiate and arrange their participation in online spaces through their peer interactions. Within their peer groups, the young people in this case study encouraged particular forms of participation, such as collective play and the sharing of new online spaces, but they also rejected other forms of participation such as forming romantic relationships. These configurations of participation also intersect with the market assemblages. Through recommendations and valuations amongst peers and friends, young people participate in the qualification of online media spaces by demarcating their desirability and positioning them as *the* place to be.

The final chapter of this thesis concludes by examining how we might reconceptualise the configuration of young people's online media participation in digital media markets.

Chapter 9 – Conclusions

Introduction

This thesis has set out to critically examine the framing and configuration of young people as participants within the unfolding development of online media. In this final chapter I return to the key research questions that have guided the overarching trajectory taken by this thesis. In summary, these questions related to development of young people online spaces in terms of: (1) what role young people play in the shaping and development of online spaces, (2) at which spatial and temporal points their participation is enabled and permitted, and (3) how their participation is configured in the development of online spaces and media markets more broadly. Over the course of five empirical case studies, this study has sought to investigate the specific relational arrangements in which young people are positioned and configured as key participants in the development of online spaces. As demonstrated in the first chapter of this thesis, the growth of virtual worlds and online spaces has initiated a new model of media production in which children and young people are invited to participate as 'active' contributors in the development of media products. Such a shift has significant implications for our understanding of the youth digital media market, but also for how we think about children and young people's economic participation. One of the key theoretical strands of this thesis has been to re-evaluate how academic researchers might frame children and young people as serious economic agents. In this concluding chapter I bring together the key themes that have emerged across the investigation, whilst also considering the broader implications of this research for our understanding of how children and young people's participation is configured in the development of new media products and their markets.

In the first section of this chapter I outline three key points raised in this thesis in relation to how we think theorise young people's media participation. First, that young people's media participation is multi-scalar and requires theoretical and

methodological tools that examine its configuration beyond the 'point of use'. Secondly, that young people's ability to participation needs to be understood as dependent on, and embedded within, relational media assemblages. And thirdly, that young people's media participation needs to be understood as constituted within economic and market processes. The second section of this chapter will then go on to outline the main theoretical tools that have assisted the development of this thesis: first, the notion of 'activation' as a key process in the configuration of young people's media participation and, secondly, the tracing of mediated proximities across online spaces. The final section of this chapter considers what new questions this thesis opens up around young people's participation as media consumers and suggests some potential trajectories for future research.

Re-theorising Young People's Participation in New Media Markets

Over the course of this thesis I have attempted to outline how and on what terms young people's participation is configured in new media and digital markets. In this section I bring together three of the most significant issues that have emerged throughout this thesis and outline how each of these issues presents important challenges to the way that young people's media participation is currently theorised and thought about. Whilst each of these points are considered separately, I was also show how each of these issues intersect and influence one another in a number of crucial ways.

a) Multiscalarity

One of the key issues confronted by this thesis has been the enduring perception of children and young people's media participation as principally located and configured at a 'local' level of media use – primarily the home environment. Whilst youth studies has increasingly sought to shift away from a purely local notion of youth culture and towards a more globalised definition (Gidley, 2004; Griffin, 2001; Huq, 2006; Lipsitz, 2005; Maira & Soep, 2005; Skelton & Valentine, 1998), this has often juxtaposed the local and global within a largely binary relationship. The rapid

globalisation of the youth media industry has prompted a greater need to shift our understanding of young people's cultural worlds away from the local level of media consumption (Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham et al., 2014; Ito, 2005; Tobin, 2004; von Feilitzen & Carlsson, 2002), and towards an empirical and theoretical position that is better able to account for how young people's media consumption fits into wider global markets.

Despite this increasing recognition of young people's media and culture as enmeshed in global processes, empirical research has still continued to couch young people's media engagement in predominantly local terms. This has primarily occurred through the persistent use of empirically 'localised' case studies that have tended to remain focused at the point of media use, at the expense of broader cultural and economic processes. Throughout the course of this thesis I have sought to develop a theoretical and methodological approach to tracing the configuration of young people's media participation that neither reifies the local as the primary site of media participation nor bifurcates the global from the local into a binary opposition. Over the course of this thesis I have sought to develop a multi-sited and multi-scalar approach that shifts between different scales, spaces and moments in the framing and delineation of young people's media participation. Whilst still acknowledging the home, bedroom, school and playground as significant sites in the shaping of young people's participation (see chapter 8), I have sought to set out an approach that recognises that participation is always, already being configured on multiple scales, in multiple locations and at multiple points in time.

In contrast with existing studies on children and young people's engagement with new media, this study has sought to conceptualise the definition and configuration of young people's media participation as a distributed and fragmented set of processes. Rather than seeing participation as the product of a young person's individual engagement with a media device, this study has shown that the delineation and negotiation of young people's participation is perpetually occurring across different sites in the development of an online media space. Consequently, any approach that prioritises either the local or global will fail to capture the

complex processes that shape and define young people's participation across online media spaces.

b) Participation and Agency

A second important issue raised in this thesis has been the relationship between young people's participation as media consumers and users and their agency as social actors. Both Buckingham (2011) and Cook (2004) have claimed that the notion of young people as 'active' consumers and media participants has often been conflated with their having greater agency. Whilst acknowledging the importance of conceptually distinguishing young people's agency and 'active' media participation, this thesis has also sought to investigate the productive tensions that exist between the two concepts. In this way, agency and participation are treated as conceptually distinctive, but also as intrinsically linked.

One of the most significant differences between the theoretical framework of this study, and Buckingham and Cook's work, has been to adopt a relational theorisation of agency. Rather than treating agency as an individual's capacity to act, this thesis has drawn on post-structuralist approaches that theorise agency as distributed within socio-material assemblages – or *agencements*. Within this theoretical framework agency is understood not as an individual's ability for *independent* action, but instead the ability to act is viewed as *dependent* upon broader socio-material assemblages. Such a theorisation of agency stands in contrast with much of the existing research into children and young people's media use, which has largely drawn on a structuration model that frames agency as an individual's ability to act in relation to the structural and institutional frameworks of adult media corporations (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003).

In contrast with agency, young people's 'active' participation has been understood in this thesis as a important site in the negotiation for what constitutes *valued* and *preferred* models of media activity. As such, what constitutes the desired or preferred form of participation exists in a state of perpetual discursive and material

(re)configuration as different social actors attempt to define and frame the terms of young people's media participation. Over the course of this thesis, processes of enrolment and 'activation' have been identified as the means by which designers attempt to either persuade or coerce young people into a particular preferred model of media participation or activity. This is not, however, to suggest that processes of activation are always successful, or that the term' of young people's participation are wholly defined by designers or marketers. As chapter six demonstrated, the activation of user into particular models of 'active' participation does not always occur on the terms of designers or media corporations. Similarly, in chapter seven, we saw how fan site users have been able to develop a space where the definition and configuration of participation can be contested and re-negotiated in subtle ways.

To this end, models of media participation are viewed in this thesis as attempts to define and configure a socio-material arrangement in such a way as to open up certain forms of participation and activity whilst closing down others. However, this is never a fixed model of participation. Rather it is a model that undergoes constant re-configuration as users and corporations seek to re-frame and re-adjust the terms of participation. In this way, participation acts as a site of agentic contestation, with different individuals and groups each attempting to mobilise and shape existing socio-material arrangements in order to achieve a model and configuration of participation within the broader media assemblage. By framing participation in this way we are able see it not as a manifestation of agency, or as the promise of new media, but rather as an important site for the configuration of young people's media engagement.

c) Economic Participation

The third issue considered over the course of this thesis has been how and on what terms we might understand young people's media participation to be a form of economic participation. Existing research has largely tended to marginalise or ignore the economic as a significant component of young people's media and cultural

activities (Cook, 2005; 2008; Martens et al., 2004). In instances where consumption has been addressed as a form of economic activity, it has often been confined to a local scale of action that limits children and young people's economic participation to relationships with friends, parents and, occasionally, retail assistants or market researchers (Zelizer, 1994). Within children's media research in particular, the focus has almost exclusively been on play, learning and peer interaction as forms of participation distinct from economic and market processes. Consequently, children and young people's media activities have largely been isolated from economic processes, with young people's media participation being treated as peripheral to the global media market.

One of central arguments of this thesis has been that the empirical and conceptual separation of young people's media participation from broader economic processes is an increasingly untenable position for researchers. Instead, this thesis has attempted to outline how the configuration and delineation of young people's participation needs to be seen as a fundamentally economic process in and of itself, defining how and on what terms young people are able to contribute to the qualification of an online media space and to the production of its value. By examining practices of enrolment and 'activation', this thesis has sought to illustrate how designers and marketers increasingly seek to position and configure young people as significant economic participants in the development of online spaces. By inviting young people's 'active' participation and creativity, designers frame young people's contributions as important to the product's on-going development.

Although this thesis has proposed a re-framing of young people media participation as embedded within economic processes, it has also highlighted the unevenness of their economic participation. In this first instance, not all young people are able to contribute equally to the development of online spaces. As chapter four's case study of Sulake designers demonstrated, social media has increasingly been used as a way of giving users 'a voice', but it has also been used as a tool for selectively listening to certain contributions whilst neglected others. As such, we need to acknowledge not only how young people can be invited to participate in economic processes, but also

how they can be excluded and marginalised. Only by paying attention to the configuration of participation as an economic can we begin to explore the asymmetries of young people's media engagement.

The Configuration Young People's New Media Participation: Mediation and 'Activation'

a) Activation and Design

Notions of design and qualification have been central to the present study's understanding of the production and unfolding development of young people's online spaces. As emphasised throughout this thesis, these online spaces exist in a state of on-going design and development – undergoing constant re-configuration to meet the demands of their evolving user bases. Consequently, theoretical models that frame media production in terms of a linear sequence of events – beginning with production and ending in consumption – fail to capture the way that online spaces emerge through the constant interweaving of designer and user activities. In the case of young people's online spaces, design and use are not part of a sequential chain of development, but rather are co-temporous events and processes. To this end, Callon et al.'s (2002) notion of qualification has proven to be a particularly effective theoretical tool for framing the development of online spaces. For Callon et al., products are, "a sequence of transformation[s]" (2002: 194), passing between multiple sets of actors whose actions each contribute to the development process. As such, the process of qualification is the constant shaping and transformation of the product, whose qualities emerge through various processes of testing and assessment. Importantly for this study, Callon et al. describe how the development of a product occurs at no single location in time and space, but rather emerges across an extended assemblage composed of designers, users, markets, testers etc.

While Callon et al.'s (2002) model has proven useful as a framework for exploring the processual and distributed nature of an online space's design, it falls short as a means of understanding how consumers are enrolled as 'active' participants in

processes of design and qualification. Firstly, for Callon et al. the consumer's role is principally framed in terms of the assessment and valuation of competing products within a given market (2002: 201). In this way, they fall back onto a model of product development that positions consumer participation as located at the end-point of the production process. For a theory that emphasises the distributed nature of a product's development, this seems at variance with the models overarching framework. Secondly, Callon et al. describe how the product 'binds' (2002: 194) actors to it, but there is little sense of how actors become enrolled within the process of qualification. Elsewhere, Callon has described the processes of 'attachment' (Callon, 1998), by which products and consumers become 'entangled', but again this does not account for how consumers might be enrolled within the design and development of a product.

To this end, the present study has developed the notion of 'activation' as a conceptual tool for describing the processes by which consumers and users are enrolled and mobilised as 'active' participants in the process of a product's development. The initial impetus for developing a notion of 'activation' was the observation that media designers and marketers were increasingly adopting a discursive rhetoric of the 'active' consumer. In chapters four and five of this thesis I demonstrated how staff at both Sulake and the BBC framed their young users as 'active' in their engagement with media. However, what became increasingly apparent over the course of the study was that the designers and developers also sought to invite and encourage this 'active' user within the processes of design. In this sense, the 'active' user was not only a rhetorical or discursive construct, but also a particular user model or subject position that the designers attempted to enrol and mobilise at specific points in an online space's development. Using a variety of different methods and techniques, designers attempted to 'activate' users by framing their contributions as valuable and significant to the development of the online spaces.

Through the notion of 'activation', I have sought to offer a way of understanding how consumers and users become enrolled as 'active' participants within processes

of qualification. Online spaces offer just one example of a range of emerging media and products that increasingly 'invite' participation within the design and development process. As such, it has grown more and more important to understand how and on what terms users are enlisted and configured as participants in the development of new media products. In linking activation to qualification, I also wish to emphasise their co-dependency as economic processes. Just as qualification is the process by which a product evolves and is brought into being, so too is activation the process by which participatory subject positions emerge and are configured. In this respect, the specific configuration of what constitutes 'desirable' consumer participation for any given product will vary across different production assemblages. As such, further thought might be given in future research to the different methods and techniques by which adults and young people are enrolled and mobilised as 'active' participants within the development of media products.

b) Mediated Proximities: Tracing Relationalities

Another key theoretical tool of this thesis has been the tracing of mediated relationalities that emerge across online spaces, particularly in the interweaving of processes of production and consumption. Rather than examine online spaces as self-contained media environments, this study has sought to research how online spaces act as intermediary points between different spatial and temporal points in their own development. The mediatory quality of online spaces has significantly shaped the methodological approach of the present thesis. In order to trace processes of design and qualification, this study has attempted to examine the unfolding biography of online spaces across multiple sites in the development process. As such, this study attempted to develop an approach that was able to trace online spaces as mediated objects, distributed across multiple points in time and space.

Through this methodological framework, the present thesis sought to examine how the development of an online space relies on particular mediated relationalities between designers and users. In particular, this thesis paid close attention to how

online spaces, and other mediatory devices, enabled designers to achieve 'closer' forms of proximity with users. In chapter five, for example, I demonstrated how disruptions to an online space led to a range of different mediatory tools being deployed by media teams in order to closely monitor and measure user responses. Similarly, social media platforms such as Twitter and blogs were employed as a means of directly reassuring and both users and parents. I've also shown how these new forms of mediated proximity have been utilized by designers in the process of activating users. A significant proportion of the activation techniques described in this study have relied on the creation of 'close' proximities between designers and users. This is not to suggest that activation is *always* a mediated process, but rather that the activation of young people in the development of online spaces was chiefly reliant on the establishment of a range of mediatory channels.

The increasing mediated proximity between corporations and users raises a number of important questions. In the first instance, it requires that we consider the 'evenness' of such mediated communication. Mediatory devices, such as social media platforms, provide 'apparent' closer contact with designers, but the ability to decide *who* is heard and listened to primarily resides with the corporation. Secondly, we also need to consider the extent to which young people have the agency and the resources to be able to define their relationship with media corporations and their staff. One of the key points developed in chapter seven was that young people often have very limited means of defining those terms, particularly when corporations are able to draw on resources and legal competencies beyond the means of most young people. As such, this thesis has begun to draw attention to some of the ways that the mediated contact between corporations and young people may be based on a fundamentally uneven relationship. Again, future research into the design and development of new media products for children and young people needs to be alert to potential inequities within design processes.

Looking Forward

A recurrent underlying theme of this thesis has been the rapid pace of change within the children and youth media markets. When I initially decided to undertake this investigation, the market was still in its infancy. Virtual worlds and other online spaces were restricted to a very narrow and niche market, dominated by only a few spearheading products such as *Habbo Hotel* and *Neopets*. The past four years have witnessed a 'mini'-revolution, as both large-scale media corporations and smaller start-ups have attempted to break into the market. At various points I have drawn attention to the shifting fortunes of different media firms and products, such as the steady decline in the market dominance of *Habbo Hotel*, and the rapid growth of other online spaces such as *Moshi Monsters* and *Bin Weevils*. As a consequence of this dynamic pace of change, the present thesis provides only a brief temporal 'snapshot' into the development of the children and youth online markets.

Though the market and technologies studied in this thesis are rapidly changing, this study has primarily been concerned with tracing the more gradual transformation of children and young people's agency and participation within economic markets. The theoretical and methodological framework developed in this study offers one possible means by which future research may continue to trace the on-going transformations in children and young people's media markets. In particular, I wish to draw attention to two possible avenues for future research that emerged over the course of the present study: (1) online spaces for young children and (2) the collection of data via children and young people's digital products.

Firstly, the present study has focused predominantly on children and young people aged eight to eighteen. When this study began, online spaces and virtual worlds were largely targeted at this age group, with only a few exceptions targeted at younger media users (for example, the *Cbeebies* website.) In the past few years the number of younger children accessing the internet regularly has seen a rapid increase (see chapter two). The children's media market has, in turn, swiftly responded by offering a growing range of online spaces for younger age groups.

Websites such as *BoomBang* and *JumpStart* still represent a niche market, yet their growing numbers (Kzero, 2013) suggest that this market could expand further over the next few years. Both current and future growth of this market raises a number of important questions, particularly in terms of how younger children's participation will be framed and configured relative to that of older users, and in what ways this will re-shape the practice of designing online spaces for this new market.

Secondly, one of the most recent trends within sociology has been to examine the proliferation of digital data that is generated in our everyday engagement with social media and other commercial technologies (Beer & Burrows, 2013; Ruppert et al, 2013; Savage & Burrows, 2007). Many of these discussions have primarily been framed in terms of adults, and yet studies have also begun to show that the children's media industry has started to adopt increasingly sophisticated tools for gathering data on its young media users (Chung & Grimes, 2005; Steeves & Kerr, 2005). Many of these tools are built into the design of products, such as virtual worlds, enabling corporations to, "create detailed demographics and behavioural profiles of children and young people online" (Chung & Grimes, 2005: 528). Though some research has already begun to emerge within this area, it nonetheless remains heavily under-researched in relation to children and young people's media engagement. By way of building on the present study, further research might begin to consider on what terms young people are enrolled within processes of digital data production, and how the collection of digital data is re-shaping children and young people's economic agencies and their participation within product design processes.

The rapid growth and evolution of new media technologies and their markets give us little time to reflect on how and on what terms we engage with them. In the case of children and young people, such discussions are important if we're to understand their shifting status in contemporary media markets and the terms of their participation within design and economic processes. This thesis has sought to reflect on these issues in relation to the growth of online spaces for children and young people. The study has shown that young people are increasingly enrolled as key

participants within the development of online spaces, but that they are not always able to define the terms of their own participation.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule – Sulake Designers

i. Introductory Questions

1.Could you briefly describe Habbo?

2. Could you briefly describe your role in relation to Habbo, detailing which aspects of its production you're involved in?

ii. Design Process

a) Production of Ideas

3. Could you start by describing the process of producing a piece of content or a feature you have recently designed for Habbo, from its initial conception?

4. a) How were the ideas for this content/feature initially formed? What is the process of planning a new piece of content/feature?
b) Which staff would be consulted in this process?

5. How was it devised and then designed in relation to the existing Habbo community?

6. a) How does the design process take account of the multiple demands (different interests) and types of users?
b) How do 'Habbo Personas' aid this process?

7. How is intended use configured into the design process?

8. How frequently are new content/features, such as this, produced?

9. Do you feel that design can be used to encourage or discourage certain forms of behaviour?
If so,
a) Can you think of any examples that encourage certain forms of behaviour?
b) Can you think of any examples that discourage certain forms of behaviour?

10. The following questions ask about different types of *values* and the role of these values in the process of design and production. In other words, these question ask what you feel should be regarded as important and as having a positive value when designing for Habbo users.
a) What *values* do you feel need to be maintained in the process of designing content for Habbo?
b) How do these *values* shape the product?
c) Are there certain values that would restrict, or has restricted, certain content from being created?
d) Are there certain values that encourage certain content to be created?

b) Production of Content

11. What types of software do you use in the process of producing Habbo?

12. What does this software enable you to do in comparison to similar types of software for virtual content?

13. What are the limitations of this software in comparison to similar types of software for virtual content?

14. How are hardware requirements (such as potentially 'handed down' older models of PC/laptops) and software requirements (variety and versions of browsers) taken into account when designing for user access to the website?

15. What sorts of skills or abilities are specifically required in the production of content for a site such as [website]?
    a) Of a technical nature (examples?)
    b) Of a non-technical nature (examples?)
    c) Do these crossover, if so how? (examples?)

iii. User Experience

16. a) What sort of experience does Habbo aim to produce for its users?
b) How does the design of Habbo achieve this experience?

17. The English language version of the Sulake website describes how one part of the Habbo experience is to 'have fun through creativity';
a) How would you describe creativity in this context?
b) How important is 'creativity' to the user's experience of Habbo?
c) How does the design of Habbo achieve this experience? (Examples?)

18. How do different aspects of Habbo cater to the broad range of needs and requirements of users?

19. The English language version of the Sulake website describes how Habbo is a space 'for self expression';
    a) What does 'self expression' mean in design terms?
    b) How important is 'self expression' to the user's experience of Habbo?
    c) How does the design of Habbo achieve this experience? (examples?)

20. What forms of self-produced activity do users engage in?

21. Have these forms of self-produced activity been used as inspiration for new design ideas?

22. How is play/activity and communication between users designed into Habbo?

23. a) In what ways have users employed objects or parts of the virtual environment in ways originally unintended by the design?
b) How has this changed the process of design?

24. a) How frequently do you go in-game/visit the website and for what purpose?
b) How much contact do you have with users?
c) How well do you think users know your role?

iv. Community Management

25. a) What are the ramifications of having a community that greatly outnumbers those managing it?
b) What systems/structures are in place to support the management of a large community?
c) What is the role of design in assisting community management?

26. a) What sorts of considerations need to be made when designing new features and functions for staff in-game?
b) How similar/different is this process to producing content for users?

v. Relationship with Other Websites

27. a) How has the relationship between the Habbo homepage and in-game been developed?
b) What separate functions do each perform?

28. a) What websites (social networking, video) or web applications (chat, IM etc) do users often use in conjunction with Habbo?
b) How does this affect their use of Habbo?
c) How has this affected the design of new features for Habbo

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule – Bamzooki Interactive Producers

1. How would you describe the concept of Bamzooki?

2. How would you describe your roles in relation to the design of the Bamzooki website?

3. How do (or did) your role relate to the production of the Bamzooki as a whole?

4. Drawing on both of your experiences, as past and present site producers, I want to talk through your involvement in the re-development of the site from its initial beginning through to the present day.

4.1. How did the re-design of the site begin?
4.1.1. Who was involved at this stage?
4.1.1.1. What were their roles?

4.2. What were the objectives of the re-design of Bamzooki?
4.2.1. How were these objectives set?

4.3. What sort of experience was initially intended for the users of the site?

4.4. What types of information about the users were available during the production?
4.4.1. How was this information used?
4.4.2. Who were the intended users for the website?

4.5. How important was your own experience of designing children's website in the design decision processes?

4.6. What were the stages of the design and production of the site?
4.6.1 What was your involvement during these stages?

4.7. At what point did [2nd producer] take over from [1st producer]?
4.7.1. How did this take place?

4.8. What hardware and software tools were used in the design and production process?
4.8.1. How did these specifically assist in different tasks?

5. What was the user's reception to the new site?
5.1. How was that user reception monitored?
5.2. Did the user reception lead to any further adjustments to the site?

6. How successful do you think the site re-design has been?

7. How important was the notion of allowing for user 'creativity' to the design of the Bamzooki site?

8. What do you think brings users back to the site?

9. How do you expect the Bamzooki site to evolve further?

Appendix 3: Research Consent Form – Media Professionals

This form is to confirm the participant's willingness to participate in the research and to provide consent for the use of the interview data as outlined below. The form also outlines the researcher's commitments with regard to the intended use and distribution of the interview data provided by the participant.

As part of the research, a voice recording will be made of you during the interview. The following bullet points will outline the intended use of this recording. By signing this form you consent to the following;

- The researcher [Liam Berriman] and departmental supervisor [Dr. David Oswell] are granted permission to study the interview transcript and recording as part of the researcher's PhD research and thesis.
- Extracts of the interview transcript can be quoted in scientific publications and conference papers in reporting the results of the study. Quotations will be anonymised

The researcher, by signing this form, commits to using the data in above manner only and also commits to the following safeguards;

- The records will not contain the participant's name but may refer to their company and role within that company.
- The digitalized recordings and text transcriptions will not contain the participant's name and will be securely stored for the duration of the study.

_____   _____

Participant's signature   Date

_____

Interviewer's signature

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule – Fansite Members

1. Ensure they're still happy to go ahead
2. Remind them that they're free to drop out at any time
3. If there's any questions you don't feel are relevant, are unable to answer or don't wish to answer, that's fine.
4. Inform them that they'll receive a transcript of the conversation

I'm going to start of by asking you, very briefly, some questions about your use of Habbo, and the internet more generally, and then we'll move on to discuss Habbox and about your experience of being involved with it.

Relationship with Habbo

Q1. To begin with, how would you describe Habbo in your own words?

Q2. How long have you been using of Habbo?
[Have you been a constant user of Habbo during that time?]

Q3. How often do you use Habbo?

Q4. How did you first learn about Habbo?

Q5. When you go onto Habbo, what sort of things to you typically do?
[OR What do you normally do (when you go) on (to) Habbo?]

Q6. What would you say are your main [motivations OR reasons] for using Habbo?

Q7. As a user, what do you think are Habbo's best features?

Q8. And what do you think are it's worst features?

Background information

Q9. So more broadly, how frequently do you use the internet in a normal [day/week]?

Q10. In what places do you most frequently use the internet? [e.g. home, bedroom, office, internet café, library, work, school etc.]

Q11. What devices kinds of devices do you most frequently use the internet on? [e.g. mobiles, laptop, tablet computer, games console etc.] [WHY?]

Q12. What activities do you most frequently use the internet for?

Q13. Other than Habbo and [*named fan site*], what other websites or web applications do you regularly use?

a) Relationship with the fan site

Q14. In your own words, how would you describe Habbox?
What are its main features?

Q15. How would you say Habbox connects with Habbo? [In what ways?]

Q16. How would you describe the design/appearance of Habbox?

Q17. How do you think Habbox differs from other fan sites?

Q18. How would you describe your role in relation to the running of Habbox?
[What do you do?]
Q19. How much time do you typically spend on Habbox in a typical [day OR week]?

Q20. How long have you been involved in the running of Habbox?
Q21. How did you become involved with the running of Habbox?

Q22. Why did you decide to get involved with Habbox?

Q23. How do you stay in touch with other fan site staff? [e.g. live chat, social networking sites? Etc.]

Q24. Who are you in touch with the most? [Why?]

Q25. How does working on Habbox fit into your everyday life?

Q26. What skills do you need to be able to your Habbox role?

b) Relationship with users of the fan site

Q27. What kind of experience do you think Habbox aims for its users?

Q28. What do you think are the main reasons people typically use Habbox?

Q29. What do you think using a fan site adds to a user's experience of Habbo?
[Do you think their experience of Habbo is different to that of non-fan site users?]

Q30. Do you think there is a 'typical' or 'average' fan site user?
[If YES] how would you describe them?

Q31. How much contact do you have with the Habbox users?

Q32. Is your contact with fan site users predominantly through the fan site or through Habbo?

Q33. In your opinion, how well known are you to Habbox users?
[How do you think Habbox users perceive your role in relation to the fan site?]

Q34. Do you prefer to keep your avatar/s within Habbo separate from or linked to your fan site role?
[*If YES or NO*] **Why?**

Q35. What are the main rules of using the fan site for users?
How do you think these rules compare with the Habbo website's rules?

Relationship with Sulake

Q36. Do you [or other fan site staff] have any contact with staff from Sulake?
[*If YES individual*]
      a. How frequently?
      b. Who do you have the most contact with from Sulake?
      c. What kind of contact do you have with Sulake staff?
      d. How often does this relate to the fan site?
e. Do you think contact with Sulake staff is important to [*named fan site*]? [Why?]

 [*If YES others*]
      a. How frequently are [*named fan site staff*] in touch with Sulake?
      b. Who do they have the most contact with from Sulake?
      c. What kind of contact do they have with Sulake staff?
      d. How often does this relate to the fan site?
e. Do you think contact with Sulake staff is important to [*named fan site*]? [Why?]

[*If NO*]
      a. Have you ever attempted to contact Sulake staff?
      b. Would you prefer to have more contact with Sulake staff? [Why?]
c. Do you think contact with Sulake staff is important to [*named fan site*]? [Why?]

Q37. How do you think Sulake staff perceive [*named fan site*]?
Q38. Do you think Sulake staff visit or use Habbo fan sites?

Q39. Do you think fan sites are important to Habbo? [Why?]

Q40. How important is it that [*named fan site*] is officially recognised by Sulake?
How did [*named fan site*] become an official fan site?

Q41. What do you think are the benefits of being an 'official' fan site?
Are there any down sides to being an 'official' fan site?

Q42. What do you see as being the future of Habbo fan sites and, in particular, Habbox? [Positive/negative]

Appendix 5a: Research Consent Form – Fansite Members Over 18 Years

This form is to confirm the participant's willingness to participate in the research and to provide consent for the use of the interview data as outlined below. The form also outlines the researcher's commitments with regard to the intended use and distribution of the interview data provided by the participant.

As part of the research, a written or audio recording will be made the interview. The following bullet points will outline the intended use of this recording. By signing this form you consent to the following;

- The researcher [Liam Berriman] and departmental supervisor [Dr. David Oswell] are granted permission to study the interview transcript and recording as part of the researcher's PhD research and thesis.
- Extracts of the interview transcript can be quoted in social science publications and conference papers in reporting the results of the study. Quotations will be anonymised and identifying features (e.g. references to geographical location, family and friends etc.) will be removed or replaced.
- At any point in the study the interviewee may withdraw from the research and their participation is, at all points, wholly voluntary.
- At any point in the study the interviewee may request copies of all data files (e.g. audio recordings and transcriptions) pertaining to their participation in the study.

The researcher, by signing this form, commits to using the data in the above manner only and also commits to the following safeguards;

- The transcribed recording will not contain the interviewee's name but may refer to specific websites that the interviewee is a participant of. The research will also remove or replace any identifying features from the recording during transcription.
- The digitalized recordings and text transcriptions will be securely stored for the duration of the study in password-encrypted computer files and folders.
- At the request of the interviewee, the researcher will immediately destroy all data records pertaining to their participation if so requested.

Interviewee's name: _____
Interviewee's signature: _____

Date: _____/_____/_____

Researcher's name: _____
Researcher's signature: _____
Date: _____/_____/_____

Appendix 5b: Research Consent Form – Fansite Members Under 18 Years

This form is to confirm the participant's willingness to participate in the research and to provide consent for the use of the interview data as outlined below. The form also outlines the researcher's commitments with regard to the intended use and distribution of the interview data provided by the participant.

As part of the research, a written or audio recording will be made the interview. The following bullet points will outline the intended use of this recording. By signing this form you consent to the following;

- The researcher [Liam Berriman] and departmental supervisor [Dr. David Oswell] are granted permission to study the interview transcript and recording as part of the researcher's PhD research and thesis.
- Extracts of the interview transcript can be quoted in social science publications and conference papers in reporting the results of the study. Quotations will be anonymised and identifying features (e.g. references to geographical location, family and friends etc.) will be removed or replaced.
- At any point in the study the interviewee may withdraw from the research and their participation is, at all points, wholly voluntary.
- At any point in the study the interviewee may request copies of all data files (e.g. audio recordings and transcriptions) pertaining to their participation in the study.

The researcher, by signing this form, commits to using the data in the above manner only and also commits to the following safeguards;

- The transcribed recording will not contain the interviewee's name but may refer to specific websites that the interviewee is a participant of. The research will also remove or replace any identifying features from the recording during transcription.
- The digitalized recordings and text transcriptions will be securely stored for the duration of the study in password-encrypted computer files and folders.
- At the request of the interviewee, the researcher will immediately destroy all data records pertaining to their participation if so requested.

Interviewee's name: _____
Interviewee's signature: _____

Date: _____/_____/_____

Parent/guardian's name: **_____**

Parent/guardian's signature: _____

Date: **_____/_____/_____**

Researcher's name: **_____**

Researcher's signature: **_____**

Date: _____/_____/_____

Appendix 6: Letter of Introduction to Schools

To the Head Teacher,

My name is Liam Berriman, a PhD research student from the department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. I'm currently conducting research for my thesis, as part of an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded research project, on the growth and use of online games and virtual worlds for children aged 8-14 years. As part of this research I am carrying out a series of group discussions with children across a number of London primary schools. I'm writing today to ask if you would be willing for your school to participate in this study, by allowing me to conduct a series of these group interviews with students from your year's 5 and 6 classes.

These group discussions will be used to explore how different children's access to and use of online spaces is mediated at home and in other environments. In particular, this study examines the extent to which the growth of children's online games and virtual worlds, such as *Disney's Club Penguin*, *CBBC's Bamzooki*, and *Moshi Monsters*, have impacted on children's experience of using the internet. Each group discussion would be held with approximately four to five children and would last for up to an hour. The interviews would be recorded using a digital voice recorder and children's name and other identifying details would be changed or removed during the transcription process. In subsequent reports and publications the name of the school would also be changed. The discussions would need to be held in a room or space with minimal noise or distraction. In advance of the interview, parents would need to give permission for their child to take part, and I've attached a draft letter and consent form explaining the nature and purpose of the study. I've also attached a draft copy of the group interviews to give you a sense of the types of questions that will be asked.

If you require any further information please don't hesitate to contact myself, or my department research supervisor, Dr. David Oswell (d.oswell@gold.ac.uk). Thank you in advance for your time and for any assistance you can provide.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Liam Berriman BA. MA.

Appendix 7: Letter to Parents with Consent Form

Dear Parent/Carer,

My name is Liam Berriman and I'm a Sociology PhD student based at Goldsmiths, University of London. Your child's school has kindly given me permission to visit the school, as part of my research, to talk with groups of children about their experience of using the internet and, in particular, online spaces and games designed for children. I am writing today to ask permission for your child to take part in this study and to briefly explain what taking part will involve.

As part of this study, your child will be asked to take part in a one-hour group discussion, with four to five other children from their year group. The children will be asked in advance if they wish to participate and the discussions will take place at times that are least disruptive to the school day or to your child's education. These discussions will be recorded using a digital voice recorder, and the voice recordings will be securely stored in password-encrypted folders for the duration of the research, after which they will be deleted. In written reports of the research the school's name will be changed and the children will also have their names changed, as well as any other identifying features (e.g. family member's names etc.)

These group discussions will form part of a larger piece of research into the growth of online spaces and games for children, such as the *CBBC* website, *Disney's Club Penguin* and *Moshi Monsters*. Whilst the group discussions will primarily focus on experiences of the internet, it is not necessary for your child to have internet access at home to participate in these group discussions.

If you are happy for your child to take part in the study, please return the permission slip below, by Friday 11th November. If you would like any further information about the study, please do not hesitate to get in touch either via email (l.berriman@gold.ac.uk) or telephone (xxxxxxxxxxx).

Yours sincerely,

Liam Berriman BA. MA.

I give permission / do not give permission* for my child to participate.
(* Please delete as appropriate)

Name of pupil: _____

Class: _____

Name of parent/ guardian:
_____

Parent/ guardian signature: _____

Date: _____

Please complete this form and give it to your child to return to his/her teacher by Friday 11th November.

Appendix 8: Focus Group Discussion Topics – Years 5 and 6 Groups.

Good afternoon. My name's Liam Berriman and I'm from Goldsmiths, University of London.

Introduction to research project [5 mins]
Today I want you to tell me about how you use computers and the internet and about some of the websites that you use at home or other places outside of school. Even if you don't use them, or you only use them a little bit, I'm still really interested to hear what you have to say. This will be a group discussion and I'm really interested to hear from all of you and, although I'm going to be asking you lots of questions, I want you to remember that there are no right or wrong answers! If you don't understand a question that I've asked or you aren't sure about a word that I've used, please stop and ask me. All of the questions today are to help me with my study, which is all about how people make websites and games for you and about how you use those websites and games.

Discuss confidentiality
To help me remember everything that you're going to tell me today, I'm going to be recording our discussion using this digital voice recorder [point to the recorder] which is going to be put in the middle so it can hear all of your voices. The recording will only be used by me for my work and I may use it to quote some of the interesting things that you've said when I later write about our discussion [Do you know what I mean by the word 'quote'? It's where you repeat exactly what someone has said about something. So if you hear on Newsround that the queen has said 'I like sausages for breakfast' that would be a quote from the queen.] However, if I do quote you I will change your name and this way you won't have to worry about people knowing what you tell me today, as they won't know that it was you who said it. If any of you aren't happy or comfortable with the idea of having your voice recorded or being quoted, please come and speak to me before we begin. As I said before, I'm really excited to hear what you have to say and I'm very grateful for you all coming to take part. Do any of you have any questions so far?

Name labels and introductions

Before we begin, could you all write your names on these sticky labels and put them somewhere so that I can see them. When the recording starts we're going to go round in a circle and I'm going to ask you to say your name out loud and how old you are. This way when I listen to the recording later I should hopefully be able to recognize all of your voices!

[Draw seating plan]

Is everyone happy for us to begin?

1. Background information [10 – 15 mins]

Q1. To start with, what kinds of technology do you have at home?
Verify: Do you all know what I mean by 'technology'?
[Prompts: E.g. Games consoles? Televisions? Mobile phones? etc.]

Q2. What kinds of technology do you have in your bedroom at home?

Q3a. How many of you have got access to the internet at home?
Q3b. How many of you have got access to the internet somewhere else that's not home? [Where?]
[Prompts: E.g. Friends house? Relatives house? Out-of-school clubs? Etc.]

[*The following questions relate to usage at whichever location child most commonly has access to a computer/the internet…*]

Q4. When you're at [home *or* friend/relative's house], what (devices) do you use to go on the internet?
[Prompt: Home computer? Consoles? Phones?]

Q5. When you're at [home *or* friend/relative's house], what rooms do you use the computer/internet in?

Q6a. How much time do you think you spend on computers on a normal weekday? And do you spend more or less time on it on a Saturday/Sunday?
Q6b. How much time do you think you spend on the internet on a normal weekday? And do you spend more or less time on it on a Saturday/Sunday?

Q7a. At [home *or* friend/relative's house], who sets the rules about what you're allowed to do on the computer/internet?
Q7b. What are the main rules for going on the computer/internet at [home *or* friend/relative's house]?

Q8. What are the things that you use a computer for?

Q9. And what sort of things do you do on the internet at [home *or* friend/relative's house]? [Prompts: Chat, games, schoolwork, browse, shop etc.]

Q10. Are there any things you're not allowed to do on the computer/internet? [What are they? Why do you think you aren't allowed to do that?]

2. Online games/virtual worlds [15 mins]

Q11a. How many of you have heard of online games or virtual worlds like CBBC website, Club Penguin, Moshi Monsters? [*Prompt: Show images of websites*]
Q11b. Can you think of any more like these that I don't have a picture of?

Q12. How many of you regularly play on online games or virtual worlds?
[Which ones?]

IF YES
a. How often do you use [*website/s*]?
b. What sorts of things do you normally do on [*website/s*]? [Encourage description]
c. Why do you like to use [*website/s*]?
d. Do you remember how you found out about [*website/s*]?

IF NO
a. Have you ever played on one before? [Which? When?]
b. Have you ever seen anyone play on one before? [Which? When?]
c. Are there any particular reasons why you don't use them? (E.g. parents)

Q13. What can you do on [*website/s*] that you can't do on other websites?

Q14. What do you like about [*website/s*]?

Q15. Are there any things about [*website/s*] that you don't like?

[At this point explore the responses to the previous two questions to find out more about what make's the website/s 'fun' and 'different' e.g. customisation, social etc.]

3. Social play [10-15 mins]

Q16b. How many of you regularly use [the internet/a computer] with members of your family? [E.g. brothers, sisters, grandparents etc.]
[Who? How often? Why? What do you do?]
Q16c. How many of you have used [the internet/a computer] with friends?
[Who? How often? Why? What do you do?]

Q17. How many of you have used the internet to stay in touch with friends or family?
a. [*If yes-*] How often do you use the internet to stay in touch with [friends/family]?
b. [*If yes-*] What do you use to stay in touch with [friends/family]? E.g. E-mail, MSN, SNS etc.
c. [*If yes or no-*] Aside from the internet, how else do you stay in touch with [friends/family]?

Q18. How many of you have played online games or in virtual worlds with friends?
[*If yes-*] How often do you play [online games/in virtual worlds] with friends?
[*If yes-*] What sort of games do you play with your friends?

Q19. Do you think it's more fun to play on [*website/s*] by yourself or with friends?
[*If yes-*] Why?

[*If no-*] Why?

Q20. Before we finish is there anything any of you would like to say that you didn't get a chance to say earlier on?

Thank them for taking part

Appendix 9: Table of Focus Group Research Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Carl	Male	Ten	Black British
Cassie	Female	Ten	White British
Christian	Male	Eleven	Black British
Darren	Male	Eleven	Black British
Dimitri	Male	Ten	Black British
Elise	Female	Ten	Black British
Joseph	Male	Nine	Black British
Kelly	Female	Ten	Black British
Kimberly	Female	Ten	Black British
Lauren	Female	Ten	White British
Michaela	Female	Ten	Black British
Naomi	Female	Ten	Black British
Simone	Female	Eleven	Black British
Tia	Female	Ten	Black British