VIRTUAL TOURISM OF HABBO UK USERS

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Abstract

Habbo, an open social virtual world, attracting millions of teenaged users monthly, consists of 31 local internet communities around the world. Every Habbo site operates in a different country in the local language, and despite similarity of activities and appearance, all communities form their own culture by making its own additions and translations to the globally coordinated elements. Having been grown to have its own customs and codes of conduct, every local Habbo has its own traits, making them worthy targets of virtual tourism within the Habbo realm.

With United Kingdom -based teenagers as examples, we investigated the phenomenon of virtual tourism in Habbo virtual world. We perceive British teenagers as defining themselves as global citizens: they form a proud national core identity, are familiar with multi-national or international identities, and are interested in travelling and exploration. In real-life, this 'glocal' youth is held back by age, money and opportunity; virtual travelling offers them a way to new experiences.

A local campaign in Habbo UK was designed during late 2008 for the predominantly British Habbo UK user to create virtual spaces for their peers to travel virtually within. The result was a thoughtfully executed representation of a local virtual community's idea of separate real life scenes in different countries; the success of the campaign showed the users' wish for travel and the desire to express national identity.

Another form of virtual tourism happening in Habbo was recognized with a survey executed among UK-based users in Habbo United States during summer 2008. While British teens have many reasons to visit a foreign Habbo, a few differing types of virtual tourism were recognized: one group of users wanted to meet their peers from around the world, especially American teens, in Habbo US, to learn and exchange thoughts with them. Another group of users visited Habbo US because of it having a unique character among other Habbos, i.e. because Habbo US has a different culture from that in the Habbo UK.

1. Introductions

Welcome to Habbo

In the virtual Habbo world, consisting of 31 internet hang-out communities owned by Sulake, over 10 million monthly users, around the world, with 90 % having the age between 13 to 18 years lead virtual avatar lives in an open social environment. Johnson and Sihvonen (2009) have compared Habbo to virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft, and noted that whereas the former incorporate "[m]onster-like characters as well as horrifying extra-terrestrial life-forms", Habbo is "set in a contemporary indoor setting. *Habbo* players are encouraged to interact in a non-violent fashion and it is not possible to inflict harm on avatars or break things in *Habbo*." True enough, Habbo players engage in role-playing games (e.g. Johnson & Sihvonen, ibid.) and some elements in the world can be translated as fantasy-themed, but we state that at its bottom, Habbo is a close representation of the users' (aspirational) real life, with some added glamour.

In Habbo, the socializing and self-expression happens in virtual *rooms*. It is in these rooms, decorated with virtual furniture, *Furni*, where the core of the Habbo activity takes place, with user-generated content filling Habbo in the form of events, competitions, quests, games, and other happenings. In the user-generated rooms, often decorated according to a certain theme such as airplanes, restaurants, cafés, cruise ships, gang headquarters, marketplaces, offices, hospitals or police stations, the users can interact with one another and meet either their real-life friends after school; find totally new friends; explore the Habbo world; or concentrate on mastering the game aspects of the world, to name a few.

Building up on the user-generated content base, Habbo also provides its users with many kinds of activities organized by Habbo staff. These can range from themed entertaining storylines, shorter stunts, official competitions and events. One of the most popular forms of event and entertainment are live visits of real-life celebrities, such as Rihanna, Jonas Brothers, or Bullet for My Valentine.
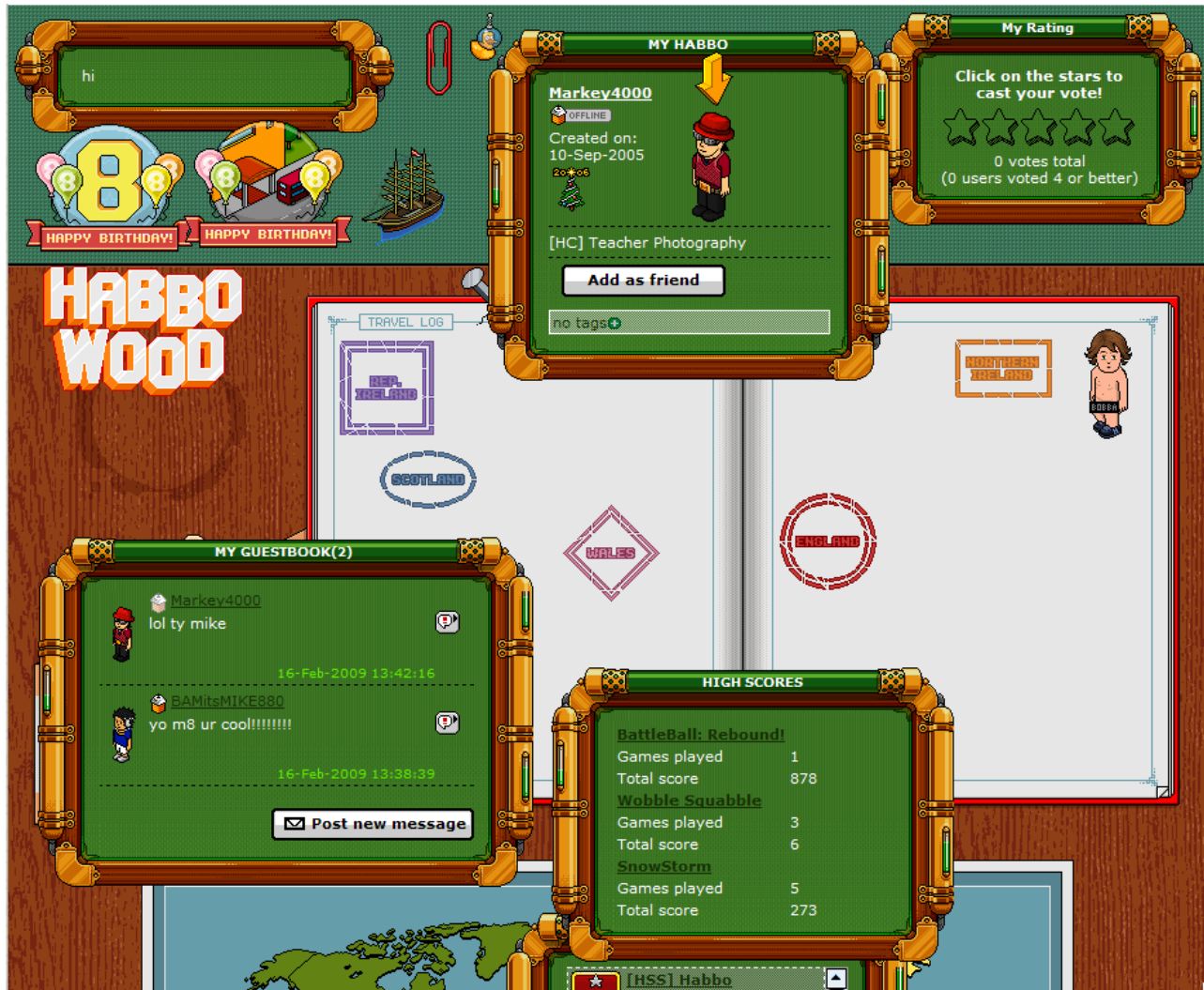
Image 1. Example of a Habbo user WWW-home page.

Basic usage such as participating in staff-organized games and events of Habbo is free, but by buying Habbo currency, *credits/coins*, users can get access to a VIP membership package, buy virtual Furni with which to decorate rooms, or decorative elements to their Habbo WWW-homepages (Image 1) that enhances the Habbo experience by offering a social networking environment with its interlinking profile pages, groups and discussion boards.

Introduction to Habbo UK

Every Habbo site operates in a different country in the local language, and the avatars are tied to their native sites. Despite the similarity of technology, happenings, and design, all local Habbos (originally referred to as hotels) are actually separate entities. Activities are lead by local Hotel Managers, who as front-faces take care of the everyday work load together with other staff often much less visible to the Habbo users.

It is relatively easy for an English-speaking Habbo visitor to familiarize themselves with five different local Habbos, namely Habbo.co.uk (UK), Habbo.com.au (Australia), Habbo.ca (Canada), Habbo.sg (Singapore) and Habbo.com (US). Of these, Habbo UK is the oldest of English-speaking Habbo sites, originating from the year 2001. Habbo UK is also a place where new Habbo product changes get piloted, and it attracts people from around the world such as Brazil, Italy, Australia, Spain and India to Belgium, China, Canada, France and Mali.

Introduction to entwined elements of Habbo encouraging virtual tourism

A recent study probing the player readings of avatar appearance as marks about the player's social status and advancement in World of Warcraft has been executed by Tosca and Klastrup (2009); for instance Habbo fansite discussions (Image 3) hint further that the avatar appearance differs also in Habbo in different stages of the player career, when the user has learned to present themselves better with the gear available.

Image 3. Example of a fansite forum entry discussing the possibility to dress one's avatar to look less like a beginner (http://www.habbohut.com/board/showthread.php?t=26793)

In addition to Johnson and Sihvonen (2009), also Lehdonvirta (2009) has recently discussed the fact that the visual appearance of avatars is culturally important in Habbo, these studies thus bringing the facets of avatar appearance already understood within Habbo communities as expressed in the fan forums, to the scholarly forums; it therefore doesn't seem implausible for us to suggest despite missing body of academic research, that an eye trained a little in Habbo avatar aesthetics and way of expression, can also find differences between visual appearances of user avatars between Habbo countries. For instance, the word "bikini" is among the most popular tags in Habbo Brazil (www.habbo.co.br, Image 4), whereas in Habbo UK it is nowhere near the top; this preference is also reflected in the clothing Habbo avatars wear in their respective countries.

Image 4. Habbo Brazil front page showing the most popular tags as in 8th of April 2009, including bikini.

We note, then, that the Habbo avatar appearance evolves during the player career. Based on internal Sulake studies, we also suspect it is at the relatively advanced player career stage, somewhere between the phase of "messing around" in the service, as in users extending their understanding of the technology and media, and the phase of focused interest-driven participation (cf. Ito et al. 2008), where we normally find users taking interest in the existence of other than their local Habbo sites and potentially going there to explore the differences and similarities, and see and try any features that may not (yet) be available in their local Habbo. Concrete examples of the differing Habbo features the users explore outside their local Habbo, include ranges of Habbo furniture not available in their local Habbo, or any new functionalities presented in Sulake's Pilot Habbo, Habbo UK.

However any globally coordinated activities, such as the yearly "Habboween" during Halloween time (in 2008, a "Hospital", or "Zombie" theme, as presented in Habbo Australia:

www.habbo.com.au/groups/habboween_08), and different kinds of dating and relationships related activities during Valentines time (in 2009, "Shalimar", or "Bollywood" theme, as presented in Habbo Singapore: www.habbo.com.sg/groups/shalimar), despite a common theme, often in practice gain a strong local colour and form from the local user community and staff's translation and emphasis on the different aspects of the theme. Also many globally interesting local campaigns such as the American Idol campaign in Habbo US (www.habbo.com/groups/habboamericanidol) or the "HABprentice" campaign in Habbo UK (www.habbo.co.uk/groups/thehabprentice) attract visitors from around the world. In addition, many local Habbos have developed their own traditions such as the "Shaolin" event in Habbo France (www.habbo.fr), or the weekly WWW-newsletter in Habbo Netherlands (www.habbo.nl) that is built up on user-generated content and published regularly since 2006 (www.habbo.nl/groups/89480/id, a sample newsletter from the 8th of April 2009).

As the examples of clothing, campaigns and other activities suggest, every local Habbo obviously makes its own additions and translations to the available globally coordinated elements, and grows to have its own habits, codes of conduct, traditions and customs. We therefore state that every local Habbo exudes some kind of Habbo-local and even national traits, making them worthwhile and often-visited targets of virtual tourism, probably at least for the more experienced and/or older Habbo users.

Introduction to Britain's youth and its aspiration to travel

Most Western teenagers have born and live in a globalised world. They take for granted the technological developments that the previous generation did not have. Moreover, the brands and goods they consume no longer have a local definition. Foreign brands have been so easily available to them online, in entertainment and on the high street for so long, that they no longer carry a foreign tag. For instance, according to the Global Habbo Youth Survey of 2008 (Sulake 2008), based on the responses of around sixty thousand Habbo users worldwide, four of the Global top five favourite celebrities were American. In the UK, the top rated TV channel was US-based Disney and only three out of the top ten television programs were British. The top drink and fast food brands were also American.

Based on discussion over the identity forming of youth (examples considered in this article being Bloom 1985, Csikszentmihailyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Williamson 1970; Strachey 1957), we conclude that teenagers can define themselves by their background, up-bringing and also what products they use for entertainment, clothes they wear and news they read. Especially, many British citizens of today descend from across the world like India, Pakistan, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Africa and Hong Kong. The result on the immigrants' future generation is a natural multi-national identity, and as a whole, the current generation of UK teenagers is familiar with and occupy a third space beyond just being British or Indian (cf. the discussions by and about the British Stuart Hall, e.g. Morley and Chen 1996).

Based on Williamson's (1970) argument on identity formation through consumption, we believe UK teenagers define themselves as global citizens (consumers): they are mobile, accept global brands as their own and use them to define their identity. We also believe British teenagers form a proud national core identity (for instance created through sports and the media) and use it within an international landscape. At their core, they form an international identity of all backgrounds to form something completely new. Habbo UK would then match this third space in the make-up of its users, and create an instantly accessible and safe environment to express and share this identity. It even can be argued that

with their real identities hidden behind user names, the users express their nationalized individuality within the whole global Habbo community.

Not only the identities, but also the physical bodies of the identity-bearers have grown to be mobile and global. In other words, teenagers are also spatially and physically growing with ever increasing literal mobility. In the same Global Habbo Youth Survey (Sulake 2008), globally, only 15 % of the respondent youth expressed no interest towards travelling. Also a more recent internal user study, executed in Habbo UK in March 2009, found out a common theme among the UK users, that of a fear of being trapped. They want to be free, move where they like and to explore, and also strive to express their lifestyle and choices via the brands they consume. These "glocal" (global-local), mobile consumers are only held back in real life by age and in most circumstances, money and opportunity for actual physical movement. Virtual travelling offers them a way to new experiences and adventure.

2. Virtual Tourism in Habbo: Case Globetrekkers

Introduction

A local Habbo campaign was executed in Habbo UK, designed on the British teenager being an aspiring traveller, already with knowledge of and closeness to foreign worlds, cultures and information, and as a global consumer of e.g. entertainment, branded goods, and media. The six-week campaign, arranged in November-December 2008, was called Globetrekkers. We expected the campaign to harness the UK users' glocal identity locally, in a responsible manner, and to promote cultural understanding. Inspired by both typical late teenagers' coming-of-age gap years and a successful Habbo UK campaign called Road Trip USA executed earlier in the year, Globetrekkers encouraged users to create in-world Habbo rooms describing different countries, enhanced with facts and stories that could be used in a permanent virtual tour guide.

Travelling with Globetrekkers

The driving storyline of Globetrekkers was "Backpacking around the world". The UK community was anticipated to be interested in the subject with the premonition that the UK users already feel a part of international cultures whilst simultaneously wanting to proudly represent their local national culture and identity, as discussed in the previous chapter. UK community members could choose by continent where they would like to backpack to. With them all starting in the United Kingdom and Ireland, they had the choice of Europe, the Americas, Eastern Asia and Oceania, the Middle East and Africa. The users needed to indicate their chosen continent, and follow the available routes. Each week, a new set of countries were made available to travel to. Users then had to choose which single country they would visit next, creating their own bespoke trip. For example, they could start in England, then choose France and travel around the Mediterranean whereas another user could choose to go to Denmark and travel through Scandinavia.

The weekly decision of travel destinations was made more appealing with an organized weekly live event. A member of staff from another local Habbo was invited to meet with the UK community and

educate the users on their particular country. Seven countries over six weeks were represented, with staff from Poland, Russia, Italy, Holland, USA, Spain and Sweden. The events with foreign Habbo staff lasted on average an hour and were open to all wanting to ask questions and hear foreign Habbo staff responses to them.

In addition to presenting a full-blooded foreigner to the Habbo UK community, the visiting staff also gave a weekly task to the community. By following the outline of the tasks, the users could participate in a competition, where they had to create a Habbo room that represented the country they were visiting, as a "postcard", and place it within Habbo UK for other users to see. These postcards rooms actually made it possible for all other users to follow their chosen route and visit countries of the world virtually in Habbo UK. This process was designed to reflect progression of travelling. Put together in the context of the Globetrekkers campaign competition, these postcards rooms created environments where users could share facts, landscapes and experiences, the campaign thus encouraging peer-based learning (cf. Ito et al. 2008). Whatever real-life nationality the user had, the postcard rooms could satisfy the dual-identity desires (cf. Williamson 1970): users could be nationalistic and create a postcard room for national pride, or they could learn something new by creating a postcard room to act out their aspirations and desire for travel.

Image 5. Postcard room "Loch Ness" with room stickies.

Postcard rooms included useful facts on room *sticky notes* (Image 5, to the right of the image; these have been clicked to increase their size, at the right corner of the Loch Ness postcard room), containing information that a real-life/offline tourist tour guide would include. The sticky notes in postcard rooms carried a wide range of information from statistics such as population and languages to historical snapshots about the landmark or country. Judged based on the apparent effort put into the fact-collecting, the users had activated to research and find facts on the countries, no matter how difficult and foreign.

9

Conclusion on Globetrekkers campaign

Globetrekkers' postcard competition received quality entries for over 90 countries and established the tour guide with postcard rooms of The Atonium, Liberty Island (Image 6), Taj Mahal, Loch Ness (Image 5), The Millennium Stadium, the Madrid Bull Ring and the Japanese Bullet train to name just a few. The most popular foreign countries created outside of the British Isles and Ireland were Kenya, Brazil, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Botswana, Malaysia, Japan, Canada, France and Netherlands.

Image 6. Liberty Island postcard room.

With the results from the postcard room competition, Habbo UK could incorporate a permanent virtual tour guide within the Habbo UK world. The Hotel Managers conclude the campaign was a success in terms of engagement and the amount of users taking part. The way Habbos integrated with the campaign showed both their wish for travel and their desire to express national identity, thus confirming the expectations mentioned earlier. Future campaigns around the travel theme could focus for instance on growing Habbo UK tour guide options, focusing on single countries or bespoke trips. For instance a Spanish Summer could look in detail at several tours/cities in Spain or an Amazonian Autumn could have users travelling along the river in detail.

3. Virtual Tourism in Habbo: Case UK visitors in Habbo US

Introduction

Habbo UK attracts visitors from many countries from Europe, from Asia to Africa to Americas. However, if one enters the US-based site www.habbo.com, it can be seen that of the Habbo US's over 2,000,000 monthly unique visitors, many more in proportion originate from countries other than US. Based on Sulake internal sources, the clear majority of these are obviously from English-speaking countries, but also countries like Philippines are well-represented. This means that the US Habbo is very active even during the hours when US-originating users are sleeping or at school.

Sulake executed a survey during the summer of 2008 in order to find out, what makes the US Habbo so attractive to users from elsewhere. After all, many organized activities take place at a time suitable for those living in US time zones, and US Habbo currency, coins, can be rarely acquired in other countries than in the US. The survey revealed, that there are several reasons for non-US teens to visit Habbo US; in this paper, we are focusing on the responses gained from the 1024 United Kingdom –based users.

Habbo US: A place to visit

Often, one's local Habbo seems to be quite enough to keep a user content for a long while until they decide to leave the virtual world – after all, there is new activities and events like the Globetrekkers published all the time, and if the user has found good friends in Habbo, they might be happy to hang out with them long after they have learned to know the local Habbo like the back of their hand.

Like mentioned previously, Sulake's internal research shows signs that especially the more experienced users often become aware of other sites' existence during the course of their Habbo life. For instance in the reported survey, the respondent profile is slightly older when compared to the usual survey respondent profile in UK. Quite naturally, users with an older physical age are often also more experienced Habbo users, i.e., they have a higher Habbo age. The familiarity with Habbo UK is also often reflected in the responses, when we find the users telling they have already visited the UK and know it, and want to explore a new Habbo.

As put forth in the considerations of the previous chapters, it comes as no surprise that in the survey, there is a significant amount of UK respondents who want to meet new people around the world. Habbo US has a reputation of being an international hotel within the Habbo realm; respondent opinion, as deduced from the open-ended responses of the survey, states that the atmosphere in Habbo US is in its part enhanced by the fact there are people around the world present. Further, some respondents who have not found a suitable interest group for them in the Habbo UK, have found one in Habbo US.

Based on the open-ended responses, it seems that the current UK-based users in Habbo US are both sightseers wanting to investigate the Habbo life in other sites, and regular visitors who come to Habbo US to enjoy things they can't do in their local Habbo. In Habbo context, many respondents of the survey

are cosmopolitan teens who, instead of hanging out in their local culture and/or Habbo, for one reason or another like and want to familiarize with other nationalities. They even revel in other communities and feel special within them. The respondents are also exiles disliking their fellow Brits (expatriate users who feel more comfortable with Habbo US hotel both for real-life and virtual life reasons); experienced users who are used to leading a Habbo US life; or those who have first found Habbo US and might like to check Habbo UK site, but found it difficult because their Habbo life would be different in another local Habbo.

Habbo US tourism types

Of the survey respondents, 13 % indicated they visit their local Habbo UK site as least as often as the Habbo US site. These users lead Habbo lives mainly elsewhere, but also come to Habbo US site because of their Habbo US friends, their curiosity to see what is happening in other Habbo hotels, and because of their Habbo US specific activities. This kind of users can be called "Tourists experiencing differing virtual life cultures in a virtual world". This group has a virtual life in one local Habbo (in this case, UK), but they visit another local Habbo (in this case, US) because it is a different, though very similar, virtual world.

The rest, i.e. 87 % of the respondents told they visit mainly or only Habbo US. These users come to Habbo US because of their Habbo US friends, because they are leading a successful avatar life in Habbo US, and because they prefer the atmosphere in Habbo US. These users lead their real lives in their own country. Yet instead of hanging out with their native community in their free time, they would rather make trips in a Habbo located elsewhere. Many respondents recognize there is a different "groove" in different Habbo hotels and are curious to explore it. These users seem more like "Expatriates/tourists experiencing differing virtual life cultures in a virtual world", most likely depending on their dedication to their local Habbo UK.

A third aspect for the UK-based users to visit Habbo US is that the international character of this one local Habbo actually enables them to meet teenagers all over the world. Specifically, many respondents do believe they can encounter and learn something about different cultures and especially American one, by visiting the Habbo US. This kind of users can be called "Tourists searching for differing real life cultures in a virtual world", as they seem to some extent at least to perceive the Habbo US and culture and activities in there, to be able to mediate the real-life US culture virtually.

Conclusion on UK-based tourism towards Habbo US

The UK-based users in Habbo US show an interest to travel and experience foreign cultures, but their chosen activity differs from the previous case of Globetrekkers-kind-of-tourism in the sense that Globetrekkers, being an arranged activity within one local Habbo, is a well-executed and skilful representation of the community's idea of separate real life scenes in other countries, whereas the users' private visits to different Habbos such as Habbo US is tourism to what they perceive to be truly different entities located in different countries, incorporating communities with different national cultures and customs.

In addition to travelling virtually in the hope of meeting different national cultures virtually, UK-based Habbo users also visit Habbo US and other local Habbos to experience different Habbo cultures. The

survey didn't address more specifically the elements that make the cultures different as experienced by the users, but we anticipate that the way of avatar dressing, the type of events and their relative popularity within communities, as well as the social customs and ways of socializing within the communities including the local staff and their habits, all have a role in this.

4. Further thoughts on virtual tourism in Habbo

Habbo UK has recently launched a Mall within the Habbo UK virtual world. The Habbo UK Mall is a network of shops linked together through foyers and levels that users can interact in. In the Mall, a travel agency (Image 7) has been opened and staffed voluntarily by users who offer travel tips and suggestions to other users. Here, the users can act out the concept of tourism from both sides and discuss a holiday, or send "customers" to the remaining Globetrekkers postcard rooms. Users can either then use the user-created Globetrekkers postcard rooms' content for their information or actually do their own tour in the postcard rooms, allowing them to "go away" with their friends and learn about a country at the same time if they so wish. The act of virtual tourism is therefore continuously contained within Habbo UK and allows users to act out their tourist aspirations without leaving the familiar service.

Image 7. Habbo UK Mall Tourist Agency.

If we take the stance that it is the players advanced both in the game and their age that prefer to visit foreign Habbos, we might ponder over the thought that the activities in local Habbos, such as Globetrekkers, make it easier for users to start travelling on their own in the virtual Habbo realm. Also the before-mentioned similarity of different local Habbos can be anticipated to encourage virtual tourism between local Habbos by providing the users with some familiar landmark elements everywhere.

When considering the experience of the UK-based Habbo US users taking the plunge and leaving their local grounds, either their offline UK life or Habbo UK community, to follow their tourist aspirations in a separate virtual world of Habbo US, an additional twist and a logical thought is, to what extent does the Habbo US life actually reflect real life in the US, or the Habbo UK life reflect real life in the UK? Despite locality and the transference of the local real-life culture into the virtual communities, the Habbo realm is steered by a Finnish company employing people from a dozen of different cultures in its Helsinki headquarters only. Also due to the ability and nature of Habbo avatars to be anonymous and not betray the user's origin in the cases when the user visits a local Habbo from another country, it can be anticipated these visitors unknowingly give their own spice to the complex concept of "the local Habbo as an extension of the culture of its originating country". Interestingly, we are left with the question - where does the real-life culture end and the (locally) unique virtual culture begin?

"Its Just Habbo, doesnt matter where people are from its all the same."

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