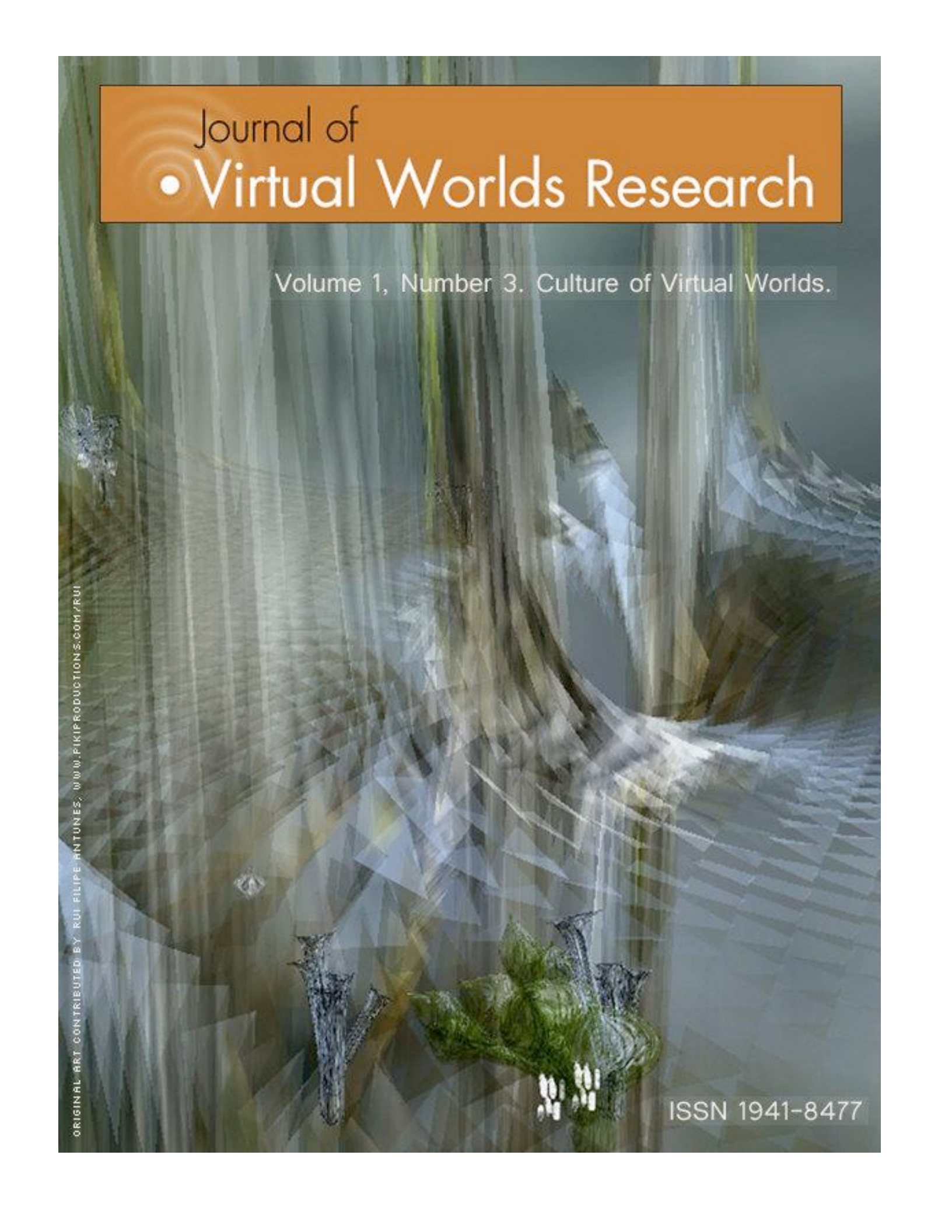




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On the Dark Side: *Gothic Play and Performance in a Virtual World*

By

Mikael Johnson, National Consumer Research Centre, Finland;
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Abstract

This article investigates gothic play and performance in Habbo, a virtual world for children and teenagers. In addition to analyzing the aesthetics of the environment and its player characters, the authors seek to discover how gothic players figure in its appropriation and redevelopment. Countercultural player activities, such as playing goth in Habbo, are often treated as disruption, but we argue that gothic players are in fact rather resourceful and productive members of the community. Observations of player-generated content, events, rituals, appearance, and group discussions indicate that goth is more than a style – it is also play and performance. Gothic players are not only consumers, but also content providers who inspire the developers at Sulake, the company behind Habbo. The influence of Habbo goths is evident, as emergent gothic player-created content has repeatedly been incorporated in newer releases of the game platform.

Keywords: goth; gothic; virtual world; subculture; counterculture; play; performance.

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On the Dark Side: *Gothic Play and Performance in a Virtual World*

By

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The foundations of virtual worlds, especially massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), may be based on their developers' intentions, but it is clear that the social dynamics present in them are mainly the result of player interactions. To understand what constitutes a virtual world in this cultural or social sense, it is mandatory to investigate what kinds of practices and ideas characterize the social interaction between players. What is also important to consider is how players reproduce their player identity on the internet and how they negotiate and talk about their gameplay habits outside of the game in related discussion boards and wiki pages.

In this study, we concentrate on analyzing the countercultural player activity we conceptualize as "gothic" and the ways the particularly gothic behavior is manifested in online immersive 3D environments. As a specific point of reference we look at the player behavior in *Habbo* (Sulake, n.d.), which is an open and welcoming game environment and platform for social interaction for all kinds of players – as long as they play by the rather strict rules. Since *Habbo* is a virtual world for children and teenagers – 90 percent of the players are between 13 and 18 years of age – it is subject to notable monitoring and moderation from the part of the players' parents as well as of the developer company, Sulake. All activities referring to violence or sex, even implicitly, are prohibited.

Despite the parental concerns and far-reaching monitoring mechanisms, "goth" is played out in various ways also in *Habbo*. Gothic themes, such as the utilization of morbid aesthetics in the creation of game character habitats, seem to be fairly widespread in this online environment. It can be suggested that presenting one's avatar or room as gothic in *Habbo* is a countercultural activity as it is not always in accord with developer intentions; with that said, it has to be pointed out that gothic play can be done in diverse or inconsistent ways. Gothic themes in the context of *Habbo* range from experimental and ironic performance to the player contemplation of deep identity issues.

What are the ways gothic is manifested, then, and how do gothic players figure in the development and appropriation of virtual worlds such as *Habbo*? Our starting point is to illuminate the diversity of gameplay practices and their importance by concentrating on the gothic subcultural style of play and performance. Before delving into the analysis of gothic behavior and performance in virtual worlds, however, we will provide an overview of the research context of virtual worlds to which this text seeks to contribute.

Contextualizing Player Behavior

Habbo is a virtual environment where children and teenagers meet, socialize, and play many types of games. It was first launched in August 2000 in Finland as Hotelli Kultakala ("Hotel Goldfish") and it was based on the developers' two earlier online services. At the time of writing, there are *Habbo* hotels in thirty-three countries, and 11.5 million players visit *Habbo* each month (Sulake, n.d.). Instead of an entrance or a monthly fee, the profit model is based on

micro-payments in the hotel. Virtual furniture, mini-games, and membership in the *Habbo* club are bought with *Habbo* credits. These credits can be purchased (depending on the country) with pre-paid cards, bank transactions, credit cards, or special text messages that add a specified amount of money to the customer's mobile phone bill.

The social interaction in *Habbo* is multifarious. In the design of *Habbo*, clear winning conditions and gameplay rules have been avoided, and instead, players are encouraged to create their own objectives beyond chatting, room decoration, and meeting friends. The provided environment for these activities is a hotel consisting of public and private rooms, where the virtual hotel visitors, called *Habbos*, chat, buy virtual furniture, decorate rooms, play mini-games, and arrange social events. Most of the teenage players log on after school, and according to Sulake, the developer company, on average they spend around forty-five minutes per day in the hotel or on its related discussion forums.

Even though *Habbo* is an open virtual world with built-in social networking tools (Messinger, Stroulia, & Lyons, 2008), it has very active player forums outside of the gameworld. *Habbos*, the game characters, can be thought of as avatars mainly because they can be used also in role-play. What is notable in the player behavior in and around *Habbo* is the players' own creation: the players design their characters and their individual rooms, but they also use the available means to organize social and game events often on a specific theme. Sulake has even incorporated specific "*Habbo* homepages" for each avatar to support player creativity and self-expression. The player-generated content that we consider in this article includes avatars, virtual objects, and shared virtual spaces.

Concepts like participatory culture, social media, online community, user innovation, player-generated content, and crowdsourcing have recently been applied to describe the changing relations between producers and consumers of online products and services like virtual worlds (Fischer, 2002; Jenkins, 2008; Sotamaa, 2007). Generally, in contrast to non-digital mass-production where consumption decreases the value of a product, "consumption" of virtual worlds increases their value. Gameplay is an activity that often results in something tangible, which can then in turn be transformed into something of value. A max-level avatar or an extremely rare weapon are examples of in-game items that may have monetary value both in the gameworld as well as outside of it on game-related auction sites.

Players are naturally productive members of the gaming community, and they have active roles in all stages of the innovation process. By playing the game the players incorporate game development ideas and practices into the game culture they create and maintain. In the long run, nobody wants to be in an empty virtual world; just by being there, players play a key role in the maintenance of those virtual worlds.¹ Players help each other, forming teams and guilds to achieve shared objectives. In addition to these visible roles, some players also carry out other, more subtle experiments and try out different positions in and out of character. Some create auxiliary game-related websites, some act as beta-testers, others develop technical or content

¹ On the other hand, it is recognized that solitary play is common among some player groups (Ducheneaut, Nicholas Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). In all game-like virtual worlds, practices like leveling up and "grinding" are often done alone; similarly, preparing for big, public fights or events are usually done outside of the social context of play. Even in *Habbo*, it is customary that players tune up their game characters and organize their virtual assets in solitude for the public show-off.

modifications, and almost all are providers of feedback to the developer company in one way or another.

Virtual worlds emerge as the result of complex processes of negotiation between developers and players from the start of the design process. Developers work with a vision of a good game and fun gameplay, which implicitly shapes future players. Developers consider what the players might do and how they might play. The vision is then realized during game development into particular features. As actual players put the features into use, they *appropriate* them for their own purposes, and also make up their own, novel ways of using the game (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992/1994). These creative gameplay processes feed back to the developers, who learn, develop their vision, and adapt the features to suit the emergent use of the game environment. As new features are developed and appropriated, this slowly paced dialog continues between developers and players through the (co-realized) material foundations of the virtual world.

Graphical player-generated content has changed the web user experience and given players new possibilities for online self-expression. The internet itself has changed from having been mostly textual (e.g., multi-user dungeons and newsgroups) towards a more graphical basis that builds either on computer-generated 3D graphics (MMOGs) or photos and other visual material (e.g., social networking sites) (King, 2008). Games-related communication in particular is not only based on chats, social forums, or messaging services, but it also relies on the making and distribution of skins and clothes for game characters, as well as virtual objects and decorations for in-game locations that are usually presented to other players via screenshots.

In addition to the game platform itself we also consider *Habbo* fansites as relevant research material. Fansites, or player-authored websites and forums, are essential in considering the characteristics of player behavior in the context of virtual worlds. Unlike traditional single-player games without any network connection, stand-alone games with internet connectivity make it part and parcel of the game itself for players to show their avatars, skills, and possessions to other players. Besides designer-provided game objectives, the online sharing and trading of these virtual assets has become an activity itself in the context of *Habbo*. If not possible within the gaming platform, fansites and other third party platforms often provide complementary services to the realms of virtual worlds (Johnson & Toiskallio, 2005).

Many game-themed supporting websites and fansites created by active players have assumed an important role in the maintenance of game cultures. These fansites help players and support gameplay by sharing hints, cheat codes, secret paths, guidelines, stories, and perspectives about what players regard essential. By doing so, the fansites render the player culture around a virtual world visible and material, and they also contribute to the general understanding of the game in an important way. The fansites may also reproduce and reinforce player “career paths” and the legitimization of player groups in specific ways (Sihvonen, 2009).

With their online activities and player-generated content, MMOG fansites often expand and comment on the media content produced by the game developers. The processes of giving feedback and negotiating with the available game contents may present themselves as harmonious and constructive, a win-win situation for both the developers and the players, as they both aim for the common goal of enriching the gameplay experience. However, there are situations where the conflicting interests of these parties unexpectedly surface. Practices like hacking, scamming, and grief play – a playing style where a player intentionally aggravates and

harasses other players (Foo & Koivisto, 2004) –, as well as specific MMOG phenomena such as mass protests and virtual item trade may seriously undermine the developer-player relations, and thus, the virtual dynamic constantly needs to be addressed by the developer company. Conflict management and governance are much needed also in virtual worlds. One of the important underlying questions in MMOGs is how governance can be organized so that it best supports the expression of different opinions while not suppressing the identity building processes game players engage in (Taylor, 2006).

Gothic play can be interpreted in the context of identity politics, or as adoption of a certain counter- or subcultural position. This usually manifests itself in the stylistic choices the players employ as part of their gameplay. However, playing goth can not simply be considered as grief play, or a countercultural activity in the sense that it would self-evidently disrupt the logic of play originally intended by the game developers. Instead, we see goth more as a subcultural activity, as something that is not necessarily anticipated by the developers or the mainstream player community. Gothic play is rather like toying with the hidden subtext in the layers that make up the cultural product as a whole. At the same time, gothic themes can also be rather effortlessly incorporated as part of general game (re)development taking place through the developer-player dialogue described above. An example of such incorporation is the prevalence of gothic characters, such as the vampire and the werewolf, in the expansion packs of *The Sims 2* as the result of players wanting to focus on such themes.

Gothic Themes in Teenagers' Virtual Playground

In the context of studying gothic behavior and aesthetics it is important to define the convoluted terminology. Words like “goth” or “gothic” have different connotations depending on the context of their use and origin. Furthermore, gothic themes have not been present in academic research to the degree that they have in general popular culture, and therefore, the significance of these words is largely associated with themes present in more popular discourse.

In the context of popular culture, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines gothic as “a genre of fiction characterized by suspenseful, sensational plots involving supernatural or macabre elements and often (esp. in early use) having a medieval theme or setting” (2008). However, at least regarding virtual worlds, this definition lacks the sense of irony and black humor which are often considered important in the appropriation of gothic themes. We argue that a more fruitful approach to gothic would be interpreting it rather in the vein of “harnessing the dark forces in an ironic spirit,” and hereby we follow writers like Gavin Baddeley (2006) and Paul Hodgkinson (2002, 2006).

Fantasy and horror are easily applicable, everyday themes in many virtual worlds and game environments; they are present also where one would not expect it. *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* (Gothic Second Life, n.d.) may be obvious candidates for exploring provoking and macabre topics associated with gothic aesthetics, but even *Facebook* users are regularly bitten by virtual vampires (Vampires, n.d.). Monster-like characters as well as horrifying extra-terrestrial life-forms play an important role in current virtual worlds, but they are especially manifest in environments that are based on a confrontation between good and evil. The introduction of such fearful forces has been a welcomed point of departure and feature in the creation of suspenseful and sensational plots for digital games. Culturally meaningful and multidimensional monsters have the power to fascinate, where as hastily sketched and easily defeated opponents do not.

However, not all virtual worlds are violent or about monsters. *Habbo*, for instance, is a cartoon-like virtual world popular among millions of teens, 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*. The only non-player characters are pets – such as cats, dogs, and crocodiles – that live forever and are designed to have a friendly appearance (Habbo UK, n.d.). Even though *Habbo* is the perfect opposite to violence and horror, goths are encountered in *Habbo*, which begs two questions. First, how is gothic represented in style – that is, how do players make a cheerful cartoon-like avatar or a room that looks gothic? Second, in addition to this representational dimension, the question of how goth is played out and performed needs to be answered; what does it mean to engage in gothic activities and social performances in this kind of a benevolent virtual world?

As we set out to understand how gothic is manifested in *Habbo*, a few notes on our methodology are necessary. The material discussed here was gathered online through observations of player-generated content, online behavior, appearance, and discussions. This research is based on fansites and discussion forums, online player and group profiles, online images of avatars, and shared virtual spaces in *Habbo* (Johnson & Toiskallio, 2007). In addition, our understanding of *Habbo* draws on developer (N = 10) and player interviews (N = 12), as well as ongoing developer collaboration in a research project (Johnson, 2007). The *Habbo* player communities are based on localized *Habbo* sites that exist independently in each of the thirty-two *Habbo* hotel countries. Each country has a thriving community with bigger and smaller fansites. Johnson and Toiskallio (2005) found footprints of 173 player-created Finnish *Habbo* fansites in 2004. The 6,850 threads regarding *Habbo* fansites in the UK is also a clear sign of an active player community (Habbox Forum, n.d.).

In 2007, the *Habbo* developer company Sulake extended the virtual game world to include social networking features such as player and group profile web pages, and gradually the fan community landscape started to change. At present, player discussions are prevalent on the sites provided by Sulake. Furthermore, the new *Habbo* website structure with social networking features, and particularly *tags* enable searching for players and groups with particular interests, such as “goth.” *Habbo* players use tags to describe their avatars and groups, but these tags are also interactive. When players click on a tag, the system shows an index of all avatars and groups that use that tag.

Compared to previous research on goths online, such as those conducted by Hodkinson, (2002, 2006), this study focuses more on visual culture than on the structure (central vs. dispersed) of textual discussions. Especially interesting is how the visual culture associated with gothic themes is influenced by the operating logic of the technical platform in question. Not all online games or media are similar, which makes it important to shed light on how the gothic subcultures are manifested in different ways in their specific contexts. The selection and presentation of gothic examples in this article fall into two categories: the players themselves explicitly identify their creations as gothic – in names and descriptions of player characters and hotel rooms – or we discuss specific themes (e.g. death, suffering, monsters) commonly considered as gothic in the context of *Habbo*.

It is difficult to give an exact estimate of the popularity of a subculture such as “gothic players.” However, thanks to recent developments in the *Habbo* platform, it is possible to give some quantitative figures. Table 1 contrasts *Habbo* tags that relate to the gothic subculture (goth, gothic, goths, dark, vampire, death) with tags that relate to mainstream music styles (rock, rap)

and phenomena (love, football, emo, cats) as well as a three other subcultural music styles (hiphop, punk, metal). The tags are counted in the US and UK *Habbo* hotels.

Table 1. Selected Totals of Habbo Tags in US and UK as of September 2008.

<i>tag</i>	<i>habbo.com</i>	<i>habbo.uk</i>
love	25149	1849
rock	20483	1509
football	13302	2201
rap	10016	236
emo	7027	735
metal	3768	394
punk	3336	249
cats	3243	737
hiphop	2710	60
goth	1559	226
death	1124	166
vampire	1080	113
dark	622	74
gothic	543	63
goths	50	33

This table indicates that the gothic subcultures, defined through the gothic-themed tags in *Habbo* US and UK, are ten times smaller than the most popular tags. However, the gothic tags outnumber other tags shared by only a handful of avatars. This implies that goths in *Habbo* are few enough not to be mainstream, but large enough to represent more than a scarce, individual interest. Because the numbers are fairly similar in *Habbo* US and UK, gothic play does not seem to be a sign of anything particularly national; gothic in this sense is rather a reference to transnational (or translocal) subculture that is possibly global in scope (cf. Global Gothic, n.d.). To sum up, even though gothic themes may be somewhat underground, they are widely dispersed in the undercurrents of popular culture throughout the Western world.

Understanding the Dark Gothic Core of Popular Culture

Traces of gothic themes prevail in popular culture. Gothic has manifested itself in the history of digital games, and especially the role-playing game (RPG) subculture, in numerous ways. The RPG culture has been occupied with gothic thematics, figures, and sceneries to the point of being accused of obsessing over the “dark forces.” David Waldron (2005) traces the gothic roots of RPGs to the early 1980s and the Christian moral panic in the US, the objective of which was to ban RPGs through various media campaigns and legal actions. Schools, parents, and Christian associations joined forces in the campaign against games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.

One of the long-lasting effects of this RPG moral panic was the emergence of a stronger need for identity-building among game developers and player groups. Role-players in the 1980s were young enthusiasts, and no ideologies or political agendas *per se* were associated with the leisure activity. As role-players were attacked in public debate, they had to rise to the challenge by organizing themselves into groups and more clearly defining the nature of their hobby and gameplay activity. These practices gradually aided also the consolidation of the subcultural identities linked with RPGs.

Furthermore, according to Waldron, the subcultures that were formed around role-playing were associated with the strengthening of gothic influences in the more general popular culture at the time. Role-players started to connect more tightly with fans of other media products, such as horror, science fiction, and fantasy literature, movies, TV shows, as well as computers and computer networking. Fan cultures around RPGs expanded by incorporating player created fanzines (fan magazines), cons (meetings), and discussion forums. A certain jargon became established, and members could be identified through a certain way of dressing – general characteristics to many other subcultural manifestations, as well.

Nevertheless, the connections among goth, subculturality, and role-playing are not simple and straightforward. Goth is about a certain flexible sensibility, the origins of which can be traced to artistic movements in the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century. This so-called neo-gothic style took inspiration from Europe's pagan past and created imageries of monsters – the vampire, Frankenstein's monster, the living dead (zombie), and the werewolf – of which many lived on for centuries (Davenport-Hines, 1998). What is typical to the gothic sensibility is its simultaneous sympathy and antipathy for these monster figures, resulting in complex settings and scenarios. In gothic culture, non-human characters tend to have human characteristics that make us want to identify with them, despite their evil and inhuman origins. These human traits can simultaneously be both hidden and exaggerated.

According to Gavin Baddeley (2006), gothic is a cultural aesthetic that lives on oppositional, anti-mainstream, and subcultural mentalities. "Performing goth," however, remains open for interpretation and individual appropriation. Gothic more likely signifies a viewpoint, subversion, and counter-action, or even a lifestyle, than it does a mere aesthetic choice. In the contemporary cultural context, goth signifies a subcultural phenomena that can be first located in the early 1980s Britain. Gothic style incorporated elements from the Romantic and Victorian traditions as well as fantasy, the glorification of the mystical and the supernatural, and marginal ideas and ideologies outside of the mainstream. Gothic music emerged in the aftermaths of punk inspired especially by horror literature and movies (Davenport-Hines, 1998). Many cultural elements were mixed and matched with an attitude that had a hint of irony or camp aesthetics.

Since the early 1980s, a great deal of gothic horror and monster thematic has been applied to games played on different platforms. For instance, the narratives of the two *Dracula* games that were made for early hand-held gaming devices, were loosely based on Bram Stoker's classic novel of the vampire count (*Imagic* from 1983 and *Epoch* from 1982). The idea of the games is to combat werewolves and vampire bats, enter Dracula's castle and steal his gold. Expanding this kind of a simple, widely-known, and easily malleable back story to different game platforms has proven an extraordinarily profitable starting point for game design and development.

Today, there seems to be an abundance of dark fantasy and horror games: *Call of Cthulhu*, *Gothic3*, *The Vampire*, and *Werewolf* games from the *World of Darkness* series are examples of rather mainstream utilization of gothic themes. The aesthetic influences in these games often hark back to movies and other audiovisual culture products. A great deal of the work done by directors such as Tim Burton circle around gothic themes, as films like *Edward Scissorhands*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Corpse Bride*, and *Sleepy Hollow* illustrate. These types of cultural products act as important models and testing grounds for the stylistic choices associated with gothic sensibility, therefore providing a basis for the maintenance of a subculture also visible in the context of a non-violent online game.

How Habbos Are Tweaked Gothic

It is typical for subcultures that their "subculturality," or means of distinction from mainstream culture, is a process of continuous negotiation. To place oneself in the margin is an active act that constantly needs to be reproduced through various actions and visible symbols. Gradually these markers may form a style that can be associated with a specific subculture and behavior. Based on these stylistic distinctions, different degrees of membership emerge: "real" members of the subculture may want to be distinguished from "wannabe" members or the ones who only "flirt" with the margin of the group (Hebdige, 1979/1988).



Figure 1. Gothic Style Avatar (Calliope, n.d.).

Figure 1 show a gothic style avatar from a Finnish fansite discussion (Calliope, n.d.). In the accompanying description of the gothic style, the difference between "real goths" and "wannabe goths" is actively reproduced and negotiated. According to these self-proclaimed *Habbo* specialists, for instance, wannabe goths temporarily try out a white avatar skin shade for fun, where as real goths keep their avatar skin white consistently and continuously. Calliope writes:

"Gothic. In addition to punk, this style is really popular in Habbo, and in real life. White skin and dark clothes guarantee the beauty of the gothic style. But there are also wannabe-goths, who just use gothic clothes in Habbo for fun, if something is really bothering. You recognize a wannabe when you see that they don't wear the previously mentioned clothes on the day after. Gothic colors are for example black, red, and violet".

An example of a REAL goth: **Wrox**

(translated by the authors from Finnish to English from Calliope, n.d.).

Especially in those virtual worlds, where human-like avatars are common, it is typical that avatar subclasses emerge, as do players who distinctively want to play a certain kind of avatar (based, for instance, on their real-life self-identification). References to gothic style in this sense can be found already in the forums of *Nerokala* – a Finnish community that formed around Habbo in 2002, but later on branded itself as an online youth forum – in discussions about different avatar styles and potential clashes between the player's normal everyday style and the appearance of her avatar.

Even though gothic player cultures are not extraordinarily vast in *Habbo*, gothic elements found on the player forums support the subcultural character of playing goth in particular ways. It can be suggested that gothic in the context of these games is one way of standing out in the crowd and opposing the mainstream player communities, as well as the developers of the game with their rules and monitoring – that is, power – they impose on players.

While many avatars designed for virtual worlds such as *Habbo* incorporate hegemonic beauty ideals – they are often young and “white” characters with colorful and trendy outfits – there are implicit as well as explicit gothic, horror, and dark fantasy elements present in *Habbo* character creation. In the design of gothic avatars, existential agony, *Weltschmerz*, pain, and suffering related to death and love emerge as central topics, often in overtly exaggerated ways and through the use of melodramatic expressions (possibly typical to the teen years). Even though all themes relating to violence are prohibited in *Habbo*, there are ways to offset this rule. These subversive practices are visible in the look and feel of many player profiles in the community.



Figure 2. Two Different Gothic Avatars
(XXXDominatrix, n.d.; GothicaTheLost, n.d.).

The avatar on the right in Figure 2 displays perhaps the only way of explicit avatar violence possible in *Habbo*. By positioning a pin on the same spot as the avatar (on the avatar homepage, *Habbo Home*), it gives the impression that the avatar – or more specifically, this avatar's heart – is pierced or stuck by a giant pin. This way, even these innocent and non-violent *Habbo* features can be tweaked to portray suffering.

However, not all *Habbo* avatars that tag themselves as “goth” follow the dark gothic style. Figure 2 shows also another kind of gothic avatar on the left that is also tagged with “emo” and “punk,” which is an example of using multiple style or group identity markers

simultaneously. The tags can be interpreted as a sign of overlap between these styles, an individual selection of styles, or a low degree of commitment to any styles in particular. It has been suggested that portraying a style such as goth can be more like a flimsy experiment or a phase rather than an expression of identity, as is detectable in the attached chat posting:

“Unlike normal text chats, in Habbo one can be a sexy blond or a blackish goth, even if reality would be far from that. And it is always so sweet, if 94’ers find a habboadventurefriend or something. Oh that youth bliss”.
(translated by the authors from Finnish to English from Ferithem, 2005).

Another aspect that undermines the significance of gothic performance in *Habbo* is the fact that the player can only choose the name, appearance, and gender of his or her avatar, and the aesthetics of the virtual world resemble those of highly abstracted and stylised Lego or Duplo rather than the more generic fantasy-themed MMOGs. This naturally restricts the means of visual expression. In *Habbo*, being a goth is more likely to be signalled by writing something intriguing and provoking in the one-line avatar description than mere looks.

In the more general gothic subculture, a certain erotic appeal, particularly the kind concentrating on an active woman, or the “femme fatale,” is clearly visible. Men and masculine characters such as vampires are also often eroticized. In the world of *Habbo* this kind of simple aesthetics-based erotic charging of characters is not possible because the looks of *Habbo* avatars are more based on the appearances of children or young teens instead of grown-ups. This directs the mind more towards the innocence of youth, from which follows the fact that potential sexual and violent themes are much (and understandably) less prevalent.

Gothic Ambience in Game Space

Habbo players can create a room of which the style can be categorized as gothic, and this can be done rather effortlessly by using furniture from the lines such as the “Gothic” or “Halloween.” Along with “Valentine’s Day,” “Easter,” and “Christmas,” *Habbo* also launched furniture for Halloween in 2002–2003 (Habborator, n.d.). In response to gothic player activities, a Gothic line of furniture was launched in 2007. Figure 3 shows three examples of Halloween furniture (left), and three pieces from the more recent Gothic series (right).



Figure 3. Examples from two lines of gothic furniture in Habbo.
(Habborator, n.d.)

The creation of gothic-themed rooms has been rather popular in *Habbo*, as there are more rooms with words like “gothic” and “goth” in the title than the fifty rooms that can be displayed in the room search function. Most of the rooms found using general search terms in the room search function, including most rooms named gothic-something, appear as empty or abandoned,

which indicates that they are more like archaeological relics than actual avatar habitats. Players have been creating gothic items and furnishings in *Habbo*, and the traces of this activity can be found in the room names and descriptions. Some of these rooms have preserved decorations, even though no avatars are visible. Figure 4 portrays a room made by Cosmo85 called "Gothic Mansion":

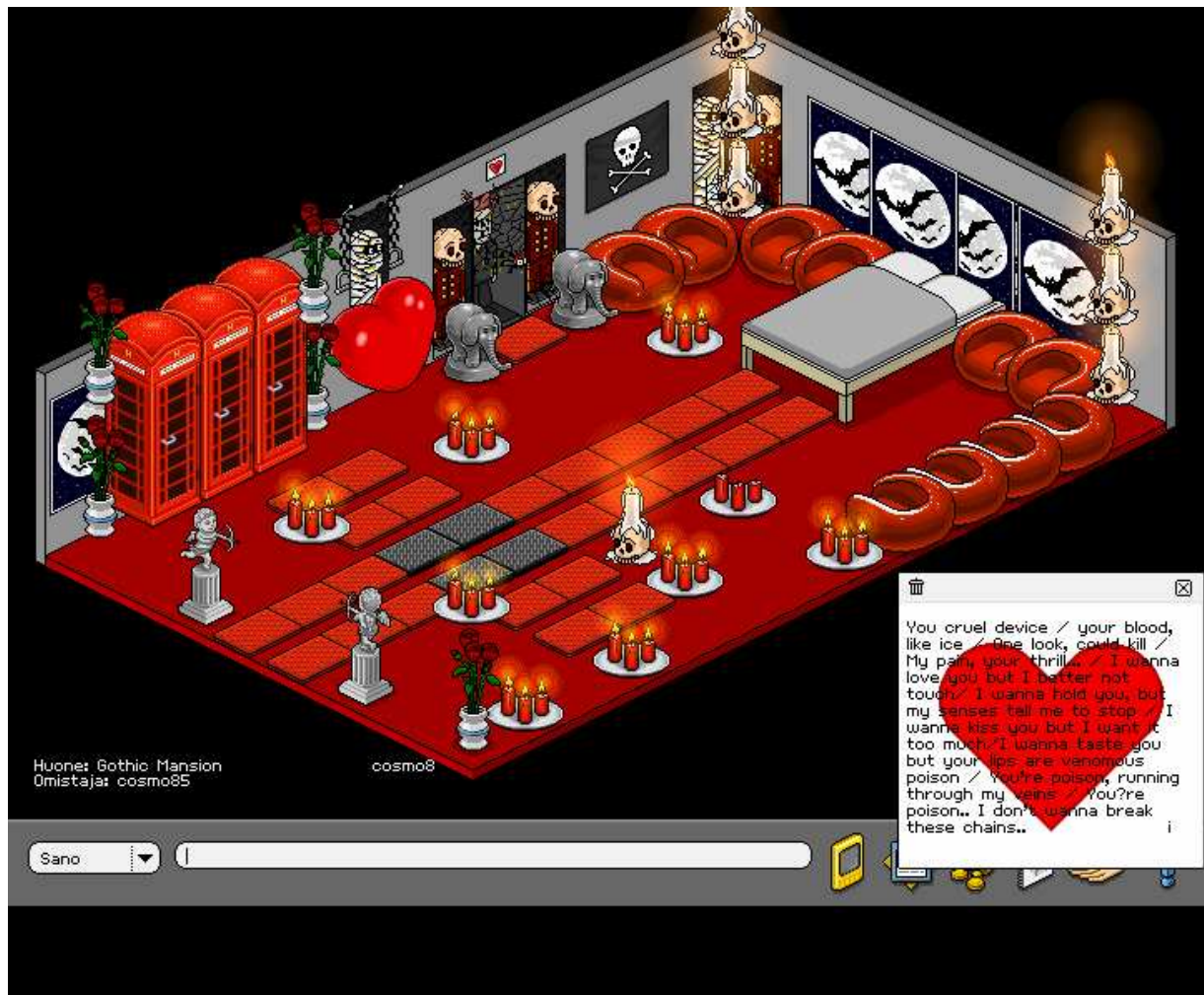


Figure 4. A Gothic Room in Habbo Finland (cosmo85, n.d.).

This room's decoration is gothic in many visible ways. The candles, the skulls, the bats, and the red-black-gray background colors with white as contrast give the room a mystical atmosphere. The bed and the red chairs reserved for "the audience" along the walls, as well as the use of the symbols of love – roses, the heart, and Amor – suggests transcendent rituals. Tension is in the air as the visitor clicks the post-it note above the door with the heart shape, and a poem pops up. This poem at first sight appears to be about rather straight-forwardly gothic thematics of blood, poison, love, and death; the lyrics of Alice Cooper's mega-hit *Poison* (1989) emerge from the words. But the question surfaces: how can this hard rocker be considered gothic in *Habbo* and not too "old," mainstream, or too big a star to be approved by real *Habbo* goths?

The most important influences to contemporary gothic rock music come from the late 1970s post-punk music, where a particular musical style began to play a big role. The pale

representatives of gothic rock and "death rock" dressed darkly and created their shows on stage with impressive horror film elements and references. Smoke machines, spider webs, rubber bats and other animal replicas, as well as various edged weapons began to form the cornerstones of the style (Baddeley 2006). For instance, the nightclub show by rock group Bauhaus on the piece "Bela Lugosi's Dead" in the vampire movie *The Hunger* (1983) is a poignant example of this early gothic style.

An important characteristic of the early gothic rock was however the ironic play with horror themes. Bloody stage performances by Black Sabbath, where some "night creatures" had their heads bitten off, cannot be considered as anything else except a joyfully horrific provocation. Alice Cooper and *Poison* belong to this second gothic wave from the early 1980s. In the music video, Alice appears from smoke in the middle of young, half-naked girls with a wicked expression in his eyelined eyes. The *Habbo* player's connection between gothic romanticism and Alice Cooper repeats the same ironic vibe that has been very typical to gothic culture, especially in its early stages.

Nevertheless, the question of what constitutes "real" gothic music is still a serious issue (Goodlad & Bibby, 2007), as there have been fierce debates over what counts as credible music styles also in *Habbo*. For instance, in Finnish advice for goths (Goth 101, n.d.), it is mentioned that one should despise metal rock because it is not authentically goth, so it is debatable whether the "Gothic Mansion" room represents any approved gothic *Habbo* style or not. Actually, the fact that we recognize the lyrics of Alice Cooper's song is an indication of its slippage into mainstream culture. It also hints that this room might be created with a twinkle in the eye. It is very possible that the room decorator wanted to try out a mystical theme to attract visitors just for chit-chat. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the room creator was one of the Finnish *Habbo*'s most famous celebrities for several years.

Gothic Behavior and Play in Habbo

As we are interested in finding out how goth is being acted out and performed, we can not limit our observation of the gothic style to the surface; we also need to look beyond. Even though gothic aesthetics are distinguishable in virtual worlds, they cannot be reduced to visual style alone. *Habbo* allows for player-created gothic environments and avatars, but it is still within the limits of the game environment and the imposed rules. What could then be termed as gothic player behavior and performance in virtual worlds such as *Habbo*? Are there characteristics that prevail in other virtual worlds including built-in "gothic" features, such as causing problems for other avatars (griefing), torture and even the possibility of death?

Dealing with gothic themes and twisting something to represent the gothic sensibility is a way of handling difficult topics, such as violence, disease, and death. By re-enacting gothic rituals, players seem to explore and contemplate their own emotional responses to these issues. There are rooms and groups dealing with both heaven and hell and even death-themed spaces. Figure 5, from player THEBLOWFISH, shows a *Habbo* version of a funeral parlour, where one player lies on a bed pretending to be dead and another player enacts the role of a bereaved visitor.



Figure 5. Funeral Parlour in Habbo UK (THEBLOWFISH, 2008).

When comparing the use of gothic aesthetics in *Habbo* to other online forums, the rather unique characteristic of virtual worlds like *Habbo* is made visible: since it is a game environment, players can create gothic items, objects, and sceneries for playful interaction. Even though the hotel is situated indoors, the popular Halloween furniture series includes a grave item, from which – when clicked upon – a skeleton emerges. As an example, Figure 6 shows a creative use of the grave furniture item: by putting several items besides each other, an interesting mass-effect can be created.



Figure 6. Massive Use of the Grave Furniture Item Showing its Skeleton Animation (UNDROZE4VAL080, 2008).

In general, gothic player behavior in *Habbo* seems to be of the more benevolent kind. Like other online forums, *Habbo* provides opportunities for goths and wannabe-goths to discuss topics such as gothic books, films, music, and style. Even though what is considered gothic is debatable, this debate also takes place in *Habbo*. *Habbo* players can create discussion groups to discuss topics close to their hearts. In *Habbo* UK, there are close to thirty discussion groups that are tagged gothic. Figure 7 shows the tags that are related to the tag “gothic” in *Habbo*, which gives an idea of what counts as gothic in *Habbo*. Active Habbos have also created fan groups for gothic musicians and bands like Marilyn Manson, Gothminister, Turmion Kättilöt, Dragonforce, and others.



Figure 7. Gothic Related Tags in Habbo UK (Habbo UK, 2008).

Gothic Habbos also regularly make gothic versions of the established player activities in *Habbo*. Typical *Habbo* activities include sports, contests, TV-show imitations, and so on, as well as boarding schools and mafias. A boarding school imitates a school environment, where the players play teachers and pupils, where as a mafia is a hierarchically strict group with player-invented ranks and missions. Figure 8 shows an example of a vampire boarding school that, in contrast to most, does not require special school uniforms.



Figure 8. Vampire Boarding School in Habbo UK (megask8tr, 2008).

It can be argued that the core of performing goth consists of role-play. A gothic room interior and avatars representing the gothic style is all that is needed for gothic role play in *Habbo*. Perhaps the biggest and oldest role-playing subcommunity in *Habbo* Finland is Enelya (Enelya, 2008). It has been active since 2002, has 1,055 members, and essentially consists of hundreds of player-created rooms. The theme of Enelya is medieval fantasy, and all participating *Habbos* play a specific race, the specificities of which are made up by the game master and role-players. Figure 9 shows digitally edited screenshots of some of the available races: humans, demons, undeads, mutants, giants, dwarves, and fairies.



Figure 9. Digitally Edited Screenshots from Habbo Showing Player-created Races in a Player-created Roleplaying Game (Enelya, 2008).

Role-playing a goth also seems to be one way of avoiding annoying pickup lines in chat environments in *Habbo*. One writer explained how the gothic style communicates “don’t come near me” to other visitors. This strategy might work well; however, for many, *Habbo* is first and foremost a chat, which renders this “don’t come near me” attitude as strange and unusual.

This topic is discussed on a British fansite² by *Habbo*-reporter *.:Luna-Lovegood:.* As she entered a gothic room, sat down beside another avatar, and asked “Hi, how are you?,” the response was “Go away.” This was repeated as she moved to talk to another group:

— Hi how are you?
 No reply.
 — hello?
 Still no reply.
 — How are you?
 Then one of them said:
 — Cant you guess, we’re off people
 (.:Luna-Lovegood:., 2006).

After the experience, *.:Luna-Lovegood:.* was left wondering why these players were in the chat in the first place. It can be suggested that this is an example of the ways the very basic gothic principles of “anti-behavior” are performed and reproduced: the point of resorting to only talking within a small group of players was to be noticed, to be alone together with like-minded people, and to provoke mainstream players. In this excerpt, Luna seems to represent the mainstream to the gothic players, wondering about “these goths”, who were successful in their subtle provocations.

Conclusions

In this article we have analyzed various forms of online gothic style in avatars, virtual objects, and places. Players of MMOGs usually use the available means to achieve the typical goth appearance of pale skin and dark clothes for their avatars. The reproduction and transformation of the gothic style is also rather common in *Habbo*, although this MMOG is initially designed to support benevolent and playful online behavior.

² Habbo Paper used to live at <http://www.habbopaper.co.uk>, but has transformed into a Habbo group on the Habbo website. The article is not online anymore, but traces of *.:Luna-Lovegood:.*’s “Habbo, a chat site?” of it can be found in the Internet Archive.

Furthermore, what we discovered is that performing goth online is not just based on a visual style, as it is also a way of playing in *Habbo*. Being a goth in *Habbo* can mean different ways of being noticed and being alone together with like-minded players, as well as provoking the more mainstream players. Actively discouraging contact is one such norm-breaker, and another example is the gathering of “off people” players in a room, where everyone sits silently in the chat.

As we established, goths in *Habbo* play an interesting role in the development of the virtual world, as well as in the maintenance of it as a platform for social interaction. From the player’s point of view, *Habbo* is a place where gothic players can find the company of other gothic players. The player-created gothic scenery – avatars and rooms in gothic style – provide a fun environment for the interaction. Gothic events, rituals, and groups structure the interaction and enable participation in something bigger than just a conversation. Talking about gothic topics can be fun or ironic for some gothic players, but it is also a way of dealing with personally touching and emotionally charged topics.

What *Habbo* goths have from the developers’ point of view is a specific role in the innovation process. Goth players provide the kind of content for the virtual world that interests many teenagers and which can be further utilized by the developer company. Some gothic players are consumers – they pay real money for virtual furniture – but there is more to it. For example, gothic players started out by using the “Halloween” furniture line of candles, skulls, and bats for their own purposes. The developers noted the popularity of the “Halloween” line, and in 2007, they incorporated parts of the gothic subculture into the core of *Habbo*. A gothic line of furniture emerged as a set of its own, which shows the innovative impact of gothic players. Without the content and feedback provided by gothic Habbos, the gothic line of furniture would probably not have been launched by the developers.

These two perspectives on goth subculture in *Habbo* make an interesting duality. On the one hand, *Habbo* goths have created a provocative anti-mainstream playing style; on the other hand, the developers have managed to turn it into a business benefit. This incorporation of subcultural activities has not meant the end of playing goth, as early subculture theory by Hebdige (1979/1988) suggests. On the contrary, the gothic subculture is still vibrant. The gothic subculture in *Habbo* has survived commercialization, which is in line with recent research on the new relationships between gothic subculture and the mainstream (Goodlad & Bibby, 2007).

However, in contrast to previous research where gothic discussion groups and blogs are described, the boundary processes are different in virtual worlds. Hodkinson (2002, 2006) describes these as online places where few outsiders intentionally or accidentally appear. In contrast, *Habbo* is a virtual dwelling place with meeting points for everyone, which puts the intermingling of goths and non-goths more in the foreground. The chance that gothic players meet non-gothic players is much greater than it is in general discussion groups or blogs.

Gothic play is an interesting challenge for player models of virtual worlds. Research on player motivations typically mentions motivational factors such as achievement, socializing, and exploring/immersion behind player participation online (Yee, 2006). Most goth players would probably score low on these mainstream motivational factors because of their anti-social, but still at many times pacifist, behaviour. Because of goths provoking, but not actively disturbing style, they cannot be described as typical grief players either. Further work is needed to develop player motivation models that incorporate also the anti-mainstream, such as gothic, behaviour.

It is also worth noting that gothic players in *Habbo* are neither disruptors nor a kind of grief players. Grief players intentionally disturb other players and disrupt their play patterns. Sure, some goths in *Habbo* aim to provoke, but it is not their goal to actively disturb others, as the “off-people” example above illustrated. Neither is gothic just an aesthetic style in *Habbo*. Gothic is performance and play, as all the above-discussed gothic examples of the *Habbo* activities illustrate.

For some players, exploring gothic themes and topics may be a way of experimenting with the “dark side” in a safe environment. For others, it is a way of tackling difficult and emotionally-loaded issues. And for some, the gothic sensibility can provide important mechanisms for self-expression and exploration of the facets of identity. All of these forms of player behavior contribute to the social dynamics and the re(development) processes of the online virtual world itself. Understanding them is key in deciphering how and why virtual worlds such as *Habbo* function so well in the way they do.

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