

# **Social Networking and Digital Gaming Media Convergence: Classification and its Consequences for Appropriation**

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## **Biographies**

Marie Griffiths moved from the IT industry into academia and is now based at the University of Salford as an EPSRC Academic Fellow. She has, and continues to research gender and ICTs. Recently she has embarked upon the study "Cybercitizens and their Virtual Pursuits" to understand the consequence of growing up and living in a technologically saturated environment. Her work has been published in journals such as Gender, Work and Organization, the European Journal of Information Systems and Information Communication and Society.

Ben Light is Professor of Technology and Society at the University of Salford. His research concerns the appropriation of configurable technologies within work, organisations and society. This has led him to explore the use of large-scale enterprise resource planning packages, call centre technologies, social networking sites and digital games. He has published in journals such as Communications of the ACM, Information Systems Journal, New Technology, Work and Employment, the European Journal of Information Systems and the Journal of Information Technology.

## **Abstract**

*Within the field of Information Systems, a good proportion of research is concerned with the work organisation and this has, to some extent, restricted the kind of application areas given consideration. Yet, it is clear that information and communication technology deployments beyond the work organisation are acquiring increased importance in our lives. With this in mind, we offer a field study of the appropriation of an online play space known as Habbo Hotel. Habbo Hotel, as a site of media convergence, incorporates social networking and digital gaming functionality. Our research highlights the ethical problems such a dual classification of technology may bring. We focus upon a particular set of activities undertaken within and facilitated by the space – scamming. Scammers dupe members with respect to their ‘Furni’, virtual objects that have online and offline economic value. Through our analysis we show that sometimes, online activities are bracketed off from those defined as offline and that this can be related to how the technology is classified by members – as a social networking site and/or a digital game. In turn, this may affect members’ beliefs about rights and wrongs. We conclude that given increasing media convergence, the way forward is to continue the project of educating people regarding the difficulties of determining rights and wrongs, and how rights and wrongs may be acted out with respect to new technologies of play online and offline.*

*Keywords: Social Networking, Digital Gaming, Ethics, Classification, New Media, Social Media, MUDs, Online Community, Play, Household Adoption.*

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we raise some of the ethically related challenges faced by users when social networking and digital gaming media converge. Within the sociology of technology, there is extensive research regarding the appropriation of information and communications technologies (ICTs) within society and specifically in the home (Haddon 2006; Haddon 2007). Within the field of Information Systems however, the major foci of research has tended to be the work organisation (arguably because many Information Systems researchers are located in business schools). Whatever the reasons, tied to this are restrictions regarding the kinds of ICT applications deemed appropriate for study. Although the majority of applications studied tend to be those associated with the organisational environment, there is of course research that links work organisations and society e.g. (Holmström 2001; Scheepers and Scheepers 2004; Walsham 2001) and some which focuses solely upon domestic usage e.g. (Adam 2005; Adam and Green 1998; Light 2007; Oates 2006). Clearly we are not the first to do work in this area. Our argument is simply that we need to do more of this work within Information Systems research. If we adopt a broader view of information systems as related to work organisations and society then we open up the range of applications we can study to include digital gaming, internet dating, social networking, mobile phones, television, home computing and the like. Such attention to the area of ICTs and society is important given its continued significance within our lives even though not everyone has, or desires, access.

One area that is becoming increasingly noteworthy is media convergence. Media convergence involves the combining of several different products into one. The Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3) console is one such example – it is, amongst other things, a gaming console, Blu-Ray disc player, CD player, and access point to the internet. We argue that such convergence brings problems of classification, and from this, amongst other things, ethical challenges in appropriation. Classification can be seen as a spatio-temporal segmentation of the world, sets of ‘boxes’ into which things can be put (Bowker and Star 1999). Although ideally classification systems would be consistent, mutually exclusive and complete, the matter is much more complicated. For instance, as Bowker and Star state, people disagree about their nature (leading to inconsistencies), where a particular thing being classified sits (in one or more sections – leading to erosions of exclusivity) and it might be that systems are not necessarily able to accommodate new entrants (they are incomplete). Clearly, media convergence as exemplified by the

PS3 console attunes us to the problems of classification. Yet, despite the problems of classification, taxonomy can matter as this can affect how such things that are being classified are given meaning. For example, in defending their business model against the recording industry, Napster's lawyers claimed that computers were like cassette based video recorders and should be regulated as such according to the 1992 Audio Home Recording Act in the United States (Spitz and Hunter 2005). The Recording Industry Association of America's response was that this classification was flawed, as a computer was nothing like a video recorder because of its potential other uses. Given the rise of media convergence, this kind of argument arguably takes on interesting importance.

We are interested in what classifications do, who does that work and the ethical challenges that arise as a result. It is perhaps best therefore to set out our stall with respect to ethics at this point. We have purposefully chosen not to subscribe to a particular strand of philosophical ethics as even though there are strengths and weaknesses that come with various bodies of thought, it is well known that any one strand is never going to provide all the answers (Adam 2005; Johnson 2001). Broadly conceived, ethics concerns questions of the nature of morality, its requirements, and its justification (Sterba 1998). Ethics involves classification and thus comes with the complexities that we have already mentioned. For our purposes here then, we are interested in taking the basic features of ethics – a concern with interpretations of morality - and developing an understanding of the ethical issues that arise in the context of the convergence where media components have previously been classified in different ways.

With this as a backdrop, we provide an analysis of Habbo Hotel<sup>1</sup> (Habbo), something which is simultaneously classified by developers and members as a social networking site and an online digital game. Of particular interest to us is the relationship (or lack of) between such classifications of Habbo functionality, the meanings ascribed to the classifications of online and offline, and the scamming activities that are performed in this play space. Habbo incorporates social network site features through member profiles, which include text, images, and video created by the member, in addition to comments and chat narratives from other members. Sulka Haro, a Habbo Developer, makes a comparison of Habbo with the social networking site Facebook, and its use of applications, characterising it as a playspace in which you can 'do stuff with other people' (Sheffield 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.habbo.co.uk](http://www.habbo.co.uk)

However, it is important to note that boyd<sup>2</sup> when attempting to define social network site functionality, maintains that defining a category through articulated boundaries is problematic (boyd 2008). Indeed, as Bowker and Star state classification systems can valorise one point of view whilst silencing others (Bowker and Star 1999). Thus, we can envisage social network sites taking other forms and incorporating features of other classifications of online space. In this respect, Habbo includes features of Multi-User Domains (MUDs) in that members create avatars, which are used to facilitate playing and the exploration of the environment alongside other members. Habbo also incorporates digital gaming functionality as many ‘mini games’ such as Wobble Squabble and Snow Storm are available within the site too. Aside from any other interpretation then, we can see at least two classifications – Habbo as a place to socially network and to play games.

It is also necessary to consider the classification of online and offline given Habbo’s internet based nature. Early research saw online activity as not as important as deemed online. For a convincing refutation of this thesis see Carter’s (2005) study of online friendship making. It is generally the case that online activity is now seen as just as important as that offline to the extent that it has been argued that it is possible to have real moral wrongs in virtual communities (Powers 2003). It has been further argued that in the ‘network society’ it is a misnomer to label online ties as insufficient and incomplete when compared with those associated with the ‘real world’ as they are part of the same social system (Hampton 2004; Mesch and Talmud 2007). More specifically, given the gaming content of Habbo, it is important to note that it is not always easy to draw the boundary between the virtuality of a game and the world as is, the so-called ‘real’ (Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson 2005).

In the next section, we briefly historically contextualise contemporary play and then consider recent debates regarding social networking sites and digital gaming – the predominant ways that Habbo is classified. In particular, we attend to the ethical issues that have been raised in these areas. Following this, we describe our research approach, a qualitative field study guided by the social shaping of technology. We then present an interpretation of our findings which involves an examination of the different classifications of Habbo, how the space is further developed in situ, and the ethical issues this raises. Finally, the paper concludes. Our findings demonstrate that Habbo matters online and offline yet

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<sup>2</sup> This is not a typographical error – danah boyd prefers not to use capitalisation in her name – see [www.danah.org](http://www.danah.org).

this might not be so clear to members, resulting in differing ethical stances. Moreover, this lack of clarity could be attributed to the fact members are simultaneously using a technology of play that involves elements of social networking and digital gaming.

## **2 Technologies of Play**

Childhood leisure activities have long been known to be fraught with fighting and other such pursuits deemed harmful (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971; Fine 1987). Moreover, if we attend to what we might call technologies of play, there are examples of what might be seen as harmful conditions created and subsequent moral panics. For example, it was reported that active secondary markets grew around the collection and trade of Pokemon cards and Beanie Baby toys in the 1990s. Reports of thefts, violent assault, bamboozlement, gambling addiction and greed surrounding these goods were rife throughout the media during this period (Cook 2001). This was fuelled by the production of limited quantities of particular cards or Beanie Babies (some Beanie Babies were also 'retired'). Such was the demand for rare Beanie Babies, cases emerged of 5 dollar babies being sold on eBay for 1200 dollars. Regarding Pokemon, older or more knowledgeable children cheated others out of valuable cards. Even more dramatically, a 14 year old boy ran over his school mate on his bike and stole 150 of his cards (Cook 2001). Some saw this situation as unethical and filed lawsuits against the manufacturers; others lauded the 'real world' lessons learned from it. The technology of play of interest here, Habbo, is classified as a social networking site and as a digital game. In the following sections therefore, we will consider some of the issues associated with these two technologies in order to inform the interpretation of our fieldwork.

### **2.1 Social Networking Sites**

Social networking sites have become a favoured online destination for many people (comScore 2007a; comScore 2007b). Yet, while not all teens are members of social network sites, they continue to be an important part of teen social life (boyd 2008). Some have even argued that the pleasure derived from such sites, gained by their ability to inform you of others paying attention to you, makes social networking the 'social grooming' of the information age (Donath 2007). In some areas, such pervasion of ICTs has been seen in a negative fashion and it has been argued that they erode the social fabric of society. For example, a gay personals section of the French Minitel system was labelled an 'electronic

brothel' and condemned by several public figures as a venue for the seduction of boys (Livia 2002). Furthermore Larsen found that Arto, a Danish teen social networking site she studied, was presented in the media as an 'Eldorado' for predators and paedophiles and that accusations were commonly made regarding girls exposing themselves in an inappropriate manner (Larsen 2007). However, an alternative perspective is that ICTs in the household have allowed networks to form whereby members can go about their separate activities yet stay connected via the use of technologies such as mobiles, and the internet – using email and instant messaging services for example (Kennedy and Wellman 2007). Rather than treating the conceptualisation of the effects of ICTs and society upon one another as a polarized phenomena, we agree with Lisa Nakamura's assessment - something between everything changes and nothing changes (Nakamura 2002). It is not all good, but it is not all bad either. As Winner states, while technologies are introduced into society it is important to ask what kinds of bonds, attachments and obligations are in the making (Winner 2004).

In terms of social networking sites, it is important to consider the links between online and offline given that such engagements have been argued to involve instances of online friends meeting up offline (Gennaro and Dutton 2007), and the trajectories of the development of artefacts shifting from the online space to those offline (Fletcher and Light 2007). Moreover, we cannot ignore the use of sites such as Facebook, which allow offline friends to increase the sophistication of their interaction with those same friends online. Social networking tools such as Facebook also allow people to search for past friends and acquaintances resulting in old friendships being rekindled offline. Larsen, based upon her study of Arto argues that such sites can be seen as a continuation of young people's everyday (offline) lives and thus they try to be as sincere as possible (Larsen 2007). During her ethnography, she observed several actions that led her to conclude that a strong sincerity discourse exists amongst those on Arto. A particular example is what she calls the fight against 'Fakers' – those who are felt to have false profiles – such as older men presenting themselves as 17 year old lesbians. Members of the community would post messages stating such members were 'Fakers' and sometimes this would also be accompanied by an explanation of how they know this to be the case (Larsen 2007). Whilst we would certainly agree with Larsen that sincerity is an important feature of such interactions, Larsen would most likely agree us too, that not all interactions are so well intended (as evidenced by the presence of Fakers). Indeed, boyd also notes that even genuine users of social networking sites may

engage in deception (change their age/location for example) to avoid the watchful eyes of their parents (boyd 2008). Deception in such networks is thus, of course, not unheard of.

## **2.2 Digital Gaming**

It has been argued that academic and public discourses on digital gaming have tended to focus upon such issues as addiction, isolation and impaired social skills (Yates and Littleton 1999) despite, the isolated studies which suggest they can be a healthy part of adolescent development (Durkin and Barber 2002) and their widespread use as educational tools (Selfe and Hawisher 2007). Indeed, a cursory glance at the internet reveals many studies concerned with the problems of digital games, in particular as related to discourses regarding the portrayal of sexual and violent activities mirroring debates regarding acceptable television viewing and film classifications<sup>3</sup>. One such example is that which performs a content analysis of digital games, demonstrating how this might not match the age rating of the game (Haninger and Thompson 2004). Yet, it is important to contrast this with contemporary gaming research within the social sciences which shows that gamers can be incredibly social beings who see collaboration and socialisation as a necessary and integral part of game play (Chen 2005; Smith 2006). Although many games deploy competition to facilitate play, cooperation can also be seen as key – especially in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). The production of social networks and the circulation of social capital has been argued to be one of the most important aspects of MMORPGs (Kolo and Baur 2004; Taylor 2006). Indeed, it has been argued that cooperation is crucial in any game where opportunistic behaviour on the parts of individuals can diminish the playability or enjoyment of the game (Smith 2006). Contemporary gaming can be a positive social experience – it is definitely our experience as digital game players ourselves! However, multiplayer games can also be rife with tension brought about by social dilemmas (Taylor 2006). Smith (2006) suggests three aspects as particularly important: cheating, grief play (players choosing playing styles that, although afforded by the game code, run contrary to the enjoyment that others can achieve from the game) and irresponsible participation (disrespecting interaction conventions that players must abide by if they wish to keep the playing experience enjoyable for others).

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<sup>3</sup> In February 2008 we entered the search terms “digital game adolescent violence sex tv film ” into Google Scholar and returned 2010 associated links. Obviously, there are minimal rigour in this approach but it gives a good indication of the presence of such discourses.



Such tensions within multiplayer games are also intertwined with arguments regarding the ethics of games developers. It has, for example, been argued that by modelling the relation of an act to its consequences, the designer signals social approval or disapproval (Brey 1999). It has also been suggested that games designers decide the set of possibilities and meanings for a game including the atmosphere, interactions, actions and feedback, yet rather than elaborating on ethics, they often rely on free speech legislation to defend their right to not take such considerations into account (Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson 2005). Irrespective of the responsibilities of games developers, the argument that they define the parameters of a game and by implication, that these are adhered to, is technologically deterministic. It is technologically deterministic because it assumes that the technology will play out in the way the designer intended, otherwise, why the concern regarding their ethical position? However, players do not have complete agency. The ability to read the affordances (properties and environment of the system) and employ effectivities (actor abilities that allow them to make use of affordances) is dependent upon the users' interaction with the content and the context of the game they are playing, which in turn is based upon their position in the game which is based upon the cultural competencies they bring to the table (Yates and Littleton 1999). Thus, a sensible position to take is that gamer and game mutually shape each other as the game is enacted.

### **3 Research Approach**

This study is part of a wider research programme aimed at understanding ICTs and Society, in particular social networking and digital gaming appropriation. This particular contribution arose out of the desire to consider what might be deemed anti-social networking and to add some balance to the discussion of such technologically mediated interactions as either wholly good or bad. In common with interpretive research practices, data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously. For this study, we drew upon theory to help us approach these processes in a systematic fashion. Eisenhardt (1989) identifies three distinct uses of theory: as an initial guide to research design and data collection; as part of an iterative process of data collection and analysis; and as a final product of the research. We employ it here in the first two senses. However, we are attuned to the point Silverman (2000) makes, theories provide the impetus for research by provoking enquiries about the unknown, but they can be self-confirming in that they instruct us to look at phenomena in particular ways. Throughout the

process of analysis then, we checked back with the Habbo site, and our interviewees to clarify our interpretations in a reflexive fashion.

The body of theory we draw upon is the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) – for overviews see (Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999; Sørensen 2002; Williams and Edge 1996). SST is based upon a critique of social and technological determinism. It challenges the view that ICT based systems are often reported as being delivered as complete solutions whereby systems are built by involving users to produce a working system that it is used in the fashion the designer intended. If we theorize adoption in this way, it becomes quite a linear process. This has been further linked with the design fallacy – the presumption that the primary solution to meeting user needs is to build ever more extensive knowledge about the specific context and purposes of various users into technology design (Stewart and Williams 2005). Stewart and Williams argue that the problem with this thinking is that it privileges prior design, it is unrealistic and unduly simplistic, it may not be effective in enhancing design/use and it overlooks opportunities for intervention. An SST informed view requires that the appropriation of sociotechnical networks is seen as nonlinear and indeterminate. Such processes are dependant upon who is, and is not, involved along the way. Therefore the analysis of their appropriation must incorporate a wider context that may include for instance - the actors that design, construct and use particular technologies and the norms that shape expectations of its uses (Monberg 2005). To structure our data collection and analysis we drew upon a variety of concepts from this body of work.

- Relevant Social Groups – those groups who share a particular view of an artefact (Pinch and Bijker 1987)
- Interpretive flexibility – the potential for different groups to give different meanings to an artefact (Pinch and Bijker 1987)
- Inscription – the idea that artefacts are constructed, based on a prediction about the worlds in which they will be used (Akrich 1992).
- Configurational technology – the idea that technologies are not completely specified apriori and require ongoing work in situ (Fleck 1994)
- Innofusion – the recognition of innovation occurring in the process of diffusion at the local level (Fleck 1994)

Thus, we sought out various groups of people who were defined by their relationship to a particular interpretation of Habbo. Further we aimed to highlight Habbo's inscriptions and, importantly the processes of innofusion taking place given our starting point was to conceptualise it as a configurational technology.

Through informal channels we found out about Habbo and whilst evaluating the site to determine if would be a suitable research opportunity, we found a section about security which detailed elements of scamming. Thus, we read through this area to understand the kinds of interactions that might be taking place. To further enhance our understanding of Habbo we also reviewed a range of Habbo forums and the blogs that members contributed to. As part of this process, we asked some participants, who had categorised themselves as above the age of 16, questions about Habbo. In doing this we made it clear that we were researchers. We did not act as covert participants in the community. Any pertinent comments that have been used for this study have been with the consent of the individuals concerned and, further, have been anonymised. In addition, we have also chosen not to reveal the exact forum or blogs we examined for additional protection. Thus far then, we had engaged with what Nakamura would call 'narratives about cyberspace'. Such narratives inform user views and interactions. We then considered 'user-interface narratives'- where users encounter design issues and interact with them (Nakamura 2002). We could get some of this information from the various advice sections on the Habbo site, forums and blogs as they were very clearly articulated as such interactions. However, we felt more would be gained by talking with some Habbo members whom we had access to. Thus, we interviewed several members, with parental/guardian consent, and who were present as necessary (Alderson 2004). The interviews involved story-telling activities. Such work was well-suited to capture and generate relevant data, in order to produce a rich insight from a range of sources as although this group might not be described as 'hard to reach' they maybe 'hard to engage'. Story telling offered a space to explore the 'situated knowledges' that structure the users perspectives of the Habbo game or Habbo social networking environment that they negotiate, and provided the opportunity to explore the nuanced links between their online and offline lives. Story telling also provided a helpful method for younger participants to discuss their experiences. Early in this process, it was also felt that we should really also consider Nakamura's 'user-to-user narratives' those arising through, for example, online chat. Therefore, we took time to observe the site in use by sitting beside some Habbo members as they interacted online. The protection of the research subjects was of concern to us (Alderson 2004; Brownlow and O'Dell 2002; Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002). We did not meet any scammers face to face in order that we could not identify anyone if we were asked to. Our face-to-face interviews merely concerned the member's experiences of Habbo. Any details of scams performed were second hand accounts, although we did speak with some members who had been scammed.

The data are reported as follows. The story begins by familiarising the reader with the Habbo. Then, a combination of thick and thin description is used to present an analysis of the processes of innofusion and classification taking place within Habbo, and the various meanings given to these. Thin description states 'facts' and thick description gives the context of an action, aims to brief the reader about the intentions and meanings that organised the action, traces the evolution and development of the action, and presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted (Denzin 2001). For example, data about the structuring of Habbo are provided, and these are put into context with information about how this is used in scamming activities.

#### **4 Interpretation of Findings**

Habbo launched in Finland in 2000 and currently operates in 32 countries. In February 2008 Habbo was comprised of 89 million avatars with 90 per cent of those being registered as between the ages of 13 and 18 (Sulake 2008b). Habbos are customisable avatars that inhabit a simple graphic isometric tile-based environment (Figure 1). There are three main worlds, one based in Canada, another in the United Kingdom and a third in the United States. In 2006 Habbo Home was launched bringing what would commonly understand as social networking functionality to the site.

Habbos communicate while in the Hotel via a chat system that is dependant upon distance. The tiled floor environment is used as a basis for this. Habbos within five tiles of each other can converse with each, as the Habbos move away the text facilitating the conversation becomes incomprehensible. This system allows several conversations to occur in a small area without the Habbos interrupting each other. Members can meet up with existing friends, make new friends, buy a pet, play online games together, personalise their own home pages or decorate their private rooms with virtual Furniture or 'Furni' which is bought with Habbo credits. Habbo provides a catalogue of a wide-range of Furni that can be bought or traded including refrigerators, chairs, beds, benches, toilets, television sets and teleporters. The cost of credits depends upon how they are bought but they range from £3 for 35 credits if bought via a mobile phone account to £1 for 10 credits if bought online using a credit card. The purchasing of Habbo credits represents over 50% of Sulake's revenue. In 2007, Furni in Habbo Hotel was estimated to have a total value of around USD\$550,000,000 (Nutt 2007).



**Figure 1: A Typical Habbo Guest Room**

Other revenue is generated by in-world advertising. The Habbos are heavily targeted by organisations such as Coca-Cola, Nike, EMI, Gillette, Procter & Gamble and Playstation. L’Oreal even have themed a beauty salon where Habbos can compete to win virtual L’Oreal products. This marketing extends to ‘live’ celebrity appearances, where Habbos can engage in conversation with their favourite film star or watch a ‘live music’ concert. Previous guests include: Akon, Ashlee Simpson, Avril Lavigne, the Beastie Boys, Bullet for my Valentine, Chris Brown, Cradle of Filth, Faithless, Fergie, Gorillaz, H.I.M., Hilary Duff, Jamelia, Jesse McCartney, Lily Allen, Lordi, Ozzy Osbourne, Pink, Pussycat Dolls, Rihanna, Sean Kingston, Sugar Babes, The Dudesons, The Rasmus, Tokio Hotel and Westlife. Currently there are almost forty million private rooms across the network. Habbos may also meet in themed communal rooms such as games rooms, mazes, hairdressing salons, cruise ships, market places, army bases, churches and even casinos.

Apart from a wide range of standard Furni available, to buy or trade, rare Furni, prizes or seasonal Furni can also be bought or won by participating in online games. Habbo Hotel encourages Habbos to join in member generated events and official Habbo competitions. Rare Furni such as thrones (costing 25 credits) are available for short periods including Christmas, Valentines Day and Halloween. In October 2007 we found a throne on sale on eBay with an auction starting price of £19.99 even though it is against Habbo rules to do this. Habbos can trade with other Habbos to officially swap Furni if both parties agree. However, trading is supposed to be take place on the Trading Floor. Alternatively, Habbos dupe other Habbos of their Furni and this is referred to as scamming. Figure 2 details a Habbo's room full of Furni. One of our interviewees said this was most likely a scammer showing off what they had as the room is packed full of Furni (it turned out to be a Casino theme room!). Nevertheless, we counted 11 thrones equivalent to the value of £25 if bought legitimately or £250 sourced via eBay.



Figure 2: A Room Full of Furni

## 4.1 Classifying Habbo

Through identifying various relevant social groups, it is possible to identify different intersecting classifications of Habbo. In particular, the social groups we identify are the Habbo owners (Sulake) and two membership groups - 'regular' Habbos and Scammers. Obviously, regular Habbos can also be Scammers and vice versa. As we mentioned earlier, the official line regarding Habbo, from Sulake, is that it is an online hangout/play space. Further to this, it is also the case that this group share a view of the artefact as a source of income generation. This is most clearly articulated within the site by the presence of the virtual economy of Habbo credits. Moreover, a visit to Sulake's site suggests to potential advertisers:

*"The Habbo community is an environment, where you are able to influence teen opinions in an immersive and non-intrusive way. Brands can even create environments as a part of the virtual world, a form of advertising far more effective than simply displaying an advertisement. Executed correctly, these campaigns result in brands becoming the buzz of the community."* (Sulake 2008a)

Thus it is important to remember the vested interests that Sulake have in the continuance of Habbo. Sulake clearly do not condone scamming and make interventions in an attempt to deal with this (as we shall discuss in the next section). Yet, it is impossible to ignore the commercial interests this particular group has and this raises questions regarding how such a classification might affect their ethical position. We have to ask, does scamming merely act as a 'hook' to give life to Habbo and thus encourage participation, and subsequently income generation? In terms of members, we uncovered a variety of interpretations. Some emphasised the space as a chat room or social networking site for example:

*"A virtual chat-room where you swap messages with other Habbos."*

*"A bit like Facebook, but you have a Habbo to chat with"*

Others emphasised the gaming side of the site:

*"An one-line game not like playing X-Box 360 on-line because that is sold and bought as a game this [Habbo] is free and on the internet."*

*"A MUD or an MMORPG? Never heard of them but you play a game online, well sort off."* (Interviewee)

A forum member who openly admitted that s/he actively scammed made the comment:

*"Yeah it is a game definitely a game but you chat as well. You have to be able to chat to them and be nice to them to gain their trust."*

If we take the idea that social networking sites offer social grooming in the information age (Donath 2007), then those being ‘groomed’ for scamming might not realise this as they are merely participating in an exchange they would naturally associate with Habbo - as classified as a social networking site. We cannot assume that all members are in the same position to employ effectivities as related to the affordances of Habbo. This is exemplified in the vignette of the ‘Art Money’ scam detailed in Table 2. Moreover, even if those being scammed further recognise Habbo’s classification as a digital game, there are still potential problems given the increasing importance attached to social networking in such environments. As stated earlier, socialisation, collaboration and social capital are integral parts of digital game play (Chen 2005; Kolo and Baur 2004; Smith 2006). From these descriptions it becomes clear that although Habbo might have official readings regarding play as related to social networking and digital gaming, additional work is undertaken to create further opportunities for interventions in Habbo in the shape of scamming. It is this idea of Habbo as a configurational technology that we turn to next.

## **4.2 Habbo as a Configurational Technology**

It has been argued that although the games industry only wants to make a certain kind of game (one that makes money) the games people play are (or should be) more important to academics than the games people buy because they represent communicative practice (Aarseth 2002). Although Habbo is inscribed with a preferred reading, in line with Fleck’s (1994) notions of configurational technology and inno-fusion, it is developed throughout its use in unintended ways by different groups. Thus, even though it has been suggested that developers of play spaces set their ethical parameters (Brey 1999), we believe that this is a deterministic view. Such assumptions are rooted in the design fallacy whereby such spaces are built and then used in the way they are intended. As shown generally, and with the case of Habbo, this clearly is not the case. Scammers have thus gone beyond the designer’s original intentions and have created their own games within the Habbo environment – there are winners and losers in their attempts to accumulate Furni. Table 1 details some of these games and Table 2 incorporates a vignette of a popular scam in detail. Much scamming activity involves gaining access to fellow member’s accounts. Thus rather than it being difficult to develop trust in an online environment (Johnson 1997), the scammers find this rather easy. Ironically, in other online gaming environments



shared account access has been said to be rooted first and foremost in friendship (Taylor 2006), a mechanism the scammers rely upon.

The Habbo developers show no intention to create an environment that facilitates scamming. Indeed, they go to great lengths to educate Habbo members about the potentialities for scamming that they may encounter online. A Habbo Council also monitors the Habbo worlds. The council awards an automatic ban for eighteen months if they discover a member has been engaging in scamming activities. Moreover, the Habbo's account can be closed and their computer's IP address will be barred. However creating an account in another Habbo world easily solves that issue because we were told that the three worlds seem to be monitored in isolation. Still, Community Managers monitor online activity looking out for anti-social behaviour or when numbers are observed in the chats as they have the potential to be telephone numbers or credit card numbers. They respond to victims of scams and persuade victims to join or set-up anti-scamming groups where there is an open discussion forum. However, we were told by one of our interviewees that scammers also join these groups to learn about scams and find the whole process amusing. Thus, as we alluded to in the prior section, the question is raised regarding the role of scamming in keeping Habbo alive as a community and income generator.

The continuing development of cyberspace raises issues which are fundamental to human safety and security (Mansell and Collins 2005). Albeit in the form of a game we show here one mechanism by which such issues can be raised. Allied to this is the attention now being given to what are known as 'Serious Games' within the digital gaming studies community. These games can, for example, aim to educate. It is suggested that key components of serious games are: the highlighting of differences in interpretation in order to surface conditions of social difficulty, the construction of social structures as intentionally unequal or unbalanced and the differential nature of how individuals or groups may be informed about the goals of the game (Woods 2004). Habbo, although positioned as a fun game, has simultaneously evolved to include some elements of serious gaming. It has the potential to educate members about the possibility of being deceived in life. It also surfaces conditions of social difficulty in that members may make friends and lose them, on the basis of being scammed or just as in life more generally. Social structures are unequal and unbalanced in Habbo too – at the very least there is the distinction of 'Gullible Guys' and 'Scammers' as detailed in the Art Money scam. Furthermore, as

members are making their own games, around scamming, this affords differential access to the purposes of a given game to the extent that ‘Gullible Guys’ might not even realise they are part of the game.

**Table 1: Scamming Games in Habbo**

Email scam	Habbos are warned not to give out their e-mail addresses used to register with Habbo Hotel. Scammers send e-mails that are designed to mimic official Habbo e-mail. The e-mail may ask a Habbo for their password and direct them to a bogus website where they are asked to sign in with the Habbo details.
Furni Cloning	Habbos claim that they can clone Furni by placing it in a certain place or by clicking the mouse a number of times. They obtain member account details to do this and then steal Furni.
Gold Digging	One of the male Habbos told us a story about how he was scammed by a female Habbo via the process of getting married – a common feature of the Habbo community. A marriage was arranged in one of the Chapels. This included bridesmaids, a best man and a vicar. Even the Habbo’s mother and brother came into his bedroom to watch the ceremony. The Habbo said he was not really knowledgeable about what other Habbos may do to get Furni. He quickly learned. When recalling the incident he said <i>“She was just a gold-digger, the minute we were married she wanted to know how much Furni I had, so I gave her a stool and got away.”</i>
Rogue Decorators	Habbos pose as decorators, offer to decorate a room, obtain member account details to do this, and then steal Furni.
Virtual Prostitution	A relatively new phenomenon is the ‘Furni whore’ male and female Habbos who will offer to bobba for virtual Furni. Bobba is a word used for any expletives in this community. This exercise (apparently) is relatively easy to execute by finding a private room. Habbo rules against this kind of behaviour, the Habbos cannot touch each other, but this activity may be performed through words. We were told that sometimes ‘the bobba’ didn’t happen once the Furni had been handed over.

**Table 2: A Vignette of a Scam**

### **The Art Money Scam**

This scam involves two Habbos. The aim is to look for ‘gullible guys’ people who are usually Habbo Club members who have paid membership fees and thus can buy Furni. Scammer 1 begins by befriending a Gullible Guy. The victim is drawn in by Scammer 1, who tells them about a cheat their cousin/friend has found called Art Money that will add free credits to an account. Scammer 1 tells the victim that they will get in touch with their cousin (Scammer 2) so they can arrange to meet up in Habbo and explain the cheat. Scammer 1 takes the victim to meet Scammer 2 outside their ‘set-up’ private room. This room is stacked with Furni indicating that the Scammers do not need the victim’s stuff and it also reinforces how successful the cheat is. The victim is told that once the cheat is activated their account will show the free credits in a week’s time. Additionally they are told that once the cheat has worked they will be kicked out of the private the room. This information is retold in a casual manner and no login details have been asked for by Scammer 1 (the user name, password and date of birth data are needed to access and take over an account).

Scammer 2 then teleports into the room and tells the victim about the cheat as if they did not know what has previously been said by Scammer 1. He asks the victim his D.O.B. and the user name and tells the victim not to give out his password until he is in the private room where no one can see his password. Scammer 1 says good-bye to the victim saying he has to go offline but in reality he hides in the private room. This is done by stacking Furni on top of each other and then finally a teleporter, the scammer hides in the teleporter so is hidden from the victim. Scammer 2 constantly asks the victim ‘do you still trust me’. Once in the private room the victim types in his password but unknown to him Scammer 1 is hiding and sees the typed password. Once the victim types in the password, they are kicked out of the private room by Scammer 1 who is hidden there. The victim believes that the cheat has worked.

The Scammers now have the date of birth, username and password and thus control of the account. They change the password to lock out the victim, the Furni is dispersed across a number of accounts and the scammers swap and trade it so they do not get caught with it.

### **4.3 Habbo Gaming Ethics**

The creation and playing of scams raises various ethical questions. The scammers take up a relativist position in that they see their activities as right for them in the context of playing a game that resides within a commercial system. A popular discourse in Habbo forums concerns the characteristics of Habbo club members. Habbo club members are viewed as naïve people who have little ‘street cred’ and who do little to protect themselves. This assumption is based on the belief that such members are

willing buy credits for virtual Furni with real cash and thus they are actually getting ‘ripped off’ by the makers of Habbo as much as they are by scamming activities. We were told that American Habbos are apparently the easiest to scam, ‘the gullible guys’. Scammers scam Furni, crash accounts for fun, and really have little remorse. As we were told by one member: *“Let’s get real here; we are dealing with virtual TVs and fridges it is not real life.”* When asked if they thought it was anti-social they replied: *“Yeah it is but it does not bother me, it is different to real-life and it is funny.”* Indeed in one of our interviews, a group joked about this:

*Jason: “Arrrr you got blagged by Red Mario.”*

*Alex: “Remind me who is the hell is Red Mario?”*

*Jason: “David’s wife, remember he got married, you went to the wedding and she scammed all his Furni!” (all three laugh)*

*David: “No no no no no that was on Habbo not IRL (in real life) so shut the hell up, well I saw you (points at Jason) in bed with him (points at Alex) and that was IRL. Ha ha ha!”*

*Alex: “No way, you just crossed the line, you should not say stuff like that happened, especially in IRL!”*

Cheating, grief play and irresponsible participation as described by Smith (2006) although not necessarily welcome in digital gaming environments, form part of the discourses within Habbo even though, because of media convergence, social networking occurs in tandem (which may command a different set of ethics). However, many sites that would be classified solely as social networking sites also incorporate elements of gaming. For example, Facebook members utilise a range of mini-games to facilitate connection, such as Scrabulous and Pac Man. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that members have difficulty in ethically navigating Habbo, unpacking converged media, separating the ‘real life’ (offline) consequences associated with social networking versus the ‘fantasy’ (online) world of digital gaming. We asked a scammer on one forum if they were the same person online as offline. They were very clear regarding what being on line required:

*“having to pretend to be really nice but be really clever at the same time because you are scamming... oh my god, you don’t act the same I wouldn’t even speak to these people in IRL!!!!!!”*

Such conversations were prevalent in the forums scamming was often seen as fun and different to ‘real life’ (being offline). When asked how they felt about deceiving people another Scammer continued:

*“Deceiving people? We are probably chatting to a 40 year old guy who is pretending to be some kid. Let’s get real no one is who they say they are, no-one. You have to have a totally different mentality on-line, totally different. It is not how we act IRL. We are not robbing off old ladies, you can’t get arrested for it, it is totally different – the only thing they can do is block your account or IP address. Would I steal in IRL? No it is totally different, yeah, yeah, yeah, some Dutch kid got arrested but that is 1 in a million, it is the chance you take of getting your account banned, that is the fun, beating Habbo.”*

*“Everyone’s at it, or at something, it is fun, when you get their account details it is a rush to get to the account first because they instantly know they have been scammed, that is why I use two computers. It is dead funny because when you log on to the account your Habbo waves to you all nice and then I wave back....I empty their account and then I delete the account.”*

Various Habbo members, as shown above, went to great lengths to justify their actions in two ways. First, no doubt having been exposed to many of the negative discourses surrounding social networking and digital gaming spaces (as alluded to by (Larsen 2005; Larsen 2007; Livia 2002; Yates and Littleton 1999)) they emphasised the fact that online activity ‘was not real’ stating that no one was who they really said they were. Second they stated that they were really just ‘ripping off’ the owners of Habbo Hotel, not other Habbos. However, clearly there are legitimate members. One interviewee had in fact made some friends whilst on holiday in Greece and had continued communicating with them through Habbo when they returned home. We asked this interviewee how he thought people who had been scammed felt about it, provoking a different response: *‘when I was scammed I just felt like a fool after the initial shock. I don’t want to think of them being all sad’*

As Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson (2005) suggest it can be difficult to draw the boundary between the virtuality of a game and ‘real life’. This is the case in Habbo yet real money is at stake. Unlike the many of the virtual objects people play with in Facebook, Habbo’s Furni has a monetary value online and offline – as we discovered, one item was being resold on eBay at a start price of £19.99. Thus, this is a continuation of technologies of play potentially causing harm. Consider the work of Cook (2001) who points to limited edition and retired Beanie Babies being resold on eBay for huge amounts of money and Pokemon trades gone bad. Habbo developers release special classes of Furni and it is no surprise that these are coveted just like the limited edition Beanie Babies. Therefore, as others have questioned the motives of offline toy makers for making acquisition so competitive, Habbo could be seen as operating in this mode too because of Sulake’s desire to generate income.

Whilst we agree with Larsen (2007) that a strong sincerity discourse exists on such sites we also point to scammers as fakers, as an important constituent of such communities. People will deceive on such websites, whether it is so that parents do not know they are interacting on such sites (boyd, Forthcoming) or to elicit Furni on Habbo through elaborate scams where elements such as piles of Furni and teleporters are enrolled in the process. Indeed, the problem of invisible audiences in networked publics raises its head here, but in a slightly different context to the one boyd presents. She argues that whilst we can visually detect most people who can overhear our speech in unmediated spaces, it is virtually impossible to ascertain all those who might run across our expressions in networked publics (boyd 2008). In the case of Habbo, it is not just that we may say something on a profile at some point for someone else to see later without us knowing. In the Art Money scam, there literally is an invisible audience hiding in the room! Interestingly though we also see such deception played out by drawing upon social activities performed offline – Gold Diggers (Marriage for money), Furni Whores (Prostitution) and Rogue Decorators (Home Improvement/Dodgy Builders) appear. Of course again, this is all enrobed within a particular view of Habbo – as not real life. As one interviewee said, *“of course what goes off on here is something people wouldn’t do in real life”*. This view is popular, despite the multitude of references back to the offline world through the various genres of scamming, in-world advertising and public appearances by celebrities.

## **5 Conclusions and Implications**

Giving attention to the area of ICTs and society is necessary given its importance within our lives and increased media convergence. Within the field Information Systems however, the major foci of research has tended to be the work organisation and this has, to some extent, restricted the kind of application areas given consideration. We argue that if we adopt a broader view, then we open up the range of applications we can study to include, as covered here, social networking for pleasure and digital gaming. Our research highlights the ethical problems that may be associated with media convergence given the prior classification of included components. In sum, Habbo is comprised of social networking and digital gaming activities. Habbo originally started out as a game but has since evolved to included social networking functionality. Moreover, both classes of these technologies have evolved to incorporate features of the other. Thus, social networking includes gaming and gaming includes social networking. This evolution further blurs ethical considerations as social networking might normally be associated with ‘reality’ and digital gaming with ‘fantasy’.

Within Habbo a range of scamming activities are evident that we understand Habbos would not engage with offline. Such practices appear not to have been intended by the original developers of the space and, indeed, they do not directly promote such practices. Some might, however argue that they fuel scamming by charging for Furni and releasing special pieces of 'rare' Furni in particular. The Habbo development team engage in practices, and encourage other Habbos to engage in practices of education to alleviate the problems of scamming. The scamming practices are enacted by a range of techniques deployed by Habbos who consider their actions as fun and nothing to do with the real world. On this point at least, our work suggests that sometimes, online activities are bracketed off from those deemed offline because of how such activities are classified – as social networking or digital gaming.

So what next? Clearly things happen in spaces like Habbo that many would regard as unacceptable, particularly those recent commentators who have dammed teen social networking sites because of issues to do with soft porn and a lack of socialisation. However, these spaces also are incredibly social and are not disconnected from offline activities. Even in our study, Habbo does offer a positive social space online and it also creates social spaces that shift offline too. Good examples of this are the marriage ceremony that involved a Habbo's Mother and Brother attending at the side of the computer and the friendships continued via this channel following a family holiday. The implications of our work echo back to more traditional views of how technologies of play are made to work and incorporated into the lives of people in their homes and society. As Cook (2001) suggests, people cannot be insulated and protected from 'the outside'. They probably never could have been. Thus, maybe the way forward is to continue the project of educating people, as best we can, about the difficulties of determining rights and wrongs and how rights and wrongs may be acted out with respect to new technologies of play. This point is just as relevant to developers of such spaces, as it is the people who use them. Whilst we would not want to fall into the technologically deterministic trap of the design fallacy, developers clearly have a hand in shaping such spaces.

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