Virtual Teenage Talk in Game Play: The Nuances and Variants in Interactive Written Discourse

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) via the Internet has revealed the fostering of a sense of community in which special, close, and intimate interactions can be traced. These research studies have employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to get insights into the understudied virtual phenomenon. In an attempt to add to this body of knowledge, a study was conceptualized to analyse interactive written discourse (IWD) that takes place in game play. Game play attracts teenagers as participants and allows them to express themselves in virtual space that invites reciprocal exchange in a variety of contexts. These exchanges are subject to content and textual analysis to show the forms and performatives of language use in a specific sub-community of teenagers which invariably forms part of the larger community. The data give information about 'virtual speak' that helps to illuminate how and what teenagers talk about in virtual space through IWD. The results show specific themes of social interaction and particularities in language use that characterize the social dynamics of engagement in teenage game play.

Keywords: Computer mediated communication, interactive written discourse, game play, sub-community of teenagers, content and discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

The Internet as a form of electronic media came about due to the promotion of new interfaces between man and machine. This has led to the exciting creation of virtual reality that attempts to simulate the real world. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been described as an altered state of communication (Argyle & Shield, 1996) and the experience of virtual reality through CMC is fast gaining currency with unparalleled developments in new interactive engagements. This form of communication allows interaction and the forming of new social relationships that are not constrained by time and space giving a new form of social phenomenon that has made its mark in communication and language studies.

CMC could use social software to mediate the communication between individuals. As a result, a new sociological approach (that could include the study of language) can be developed in novel ways where individuals form, support, and maintain relationships with others, and in the event, regulate the flow of information through this form of interaction. The encounter could result in identity construction, fostering

relationships and maintaining changes in them, and the process may be characterized by emotional consequences. What CMC can offer in terms of research in language change is noted by Stein (2003) in his review of David Crystal's book, *Language and the Internet.* He comments that Crystal's work in CMC is a welcomed initiative for more research into the multifaceted, dynamic and fascinating new medium that would bear evidence of a language revolution.

Figures from Mckay *et al*. (2005) show that the number of children and teenagers in the world who are net users stands at 77 million, and this figure is likely to grow. One area of Internet use that is fast developing is rooted in the domain of entertainment such as game play. Many would agree with Fromme's (2005) observation that video and computer games have become a matter-of-course in the everyday life of young people (in societies that can afford them). There is, as he says, "cultural and social significance of electronic games", and by extension of web-based virtual games as well. Among the web-based games created are those like *Cyworld* and *Habbo Hotel* that appear to incorporate game features for socializing purposes. In *Habbo Hotel,* the focus of study, real people are able to create characters that can have authentic conversations, play games, enter competitions, and develop new friendships. The game markets itself as a fun game within a non-violent environment and upon close inspection and participation, *Habbo Hotel* in fact offers more than games. The ecology may be described as a hybrid that allows game play and social interactions as provided in the form of sites that resemble chat rooms.

Social dynamics, relationship formation, and identity roles are played out constantly in society, and they undergo change depending on new demands and situations that arise. As a result, existing social theories often need to be re-examined or revised to explain how communication works. In the event, predictions about the outcomes of new phenomena are made and tested to achieve an understanding of the new events. In the CMC context, much of the communication is in the form of 'interactive

written discourse' (IWD) which attempts to simulate real time speech. Many researchers have noted the psycho-social dimension of IWD involvement. According to Shortis (2001), the new genre has invited many research comments on how IWD has led to social disinhibition where the traditional notion of commitment and trust in the group is given new meaning. This generalization could be further anchored on a specific group of participants that is youth. It has also been claimed that cyberspace is operating as an unregulated frontier which continues to be under-examined (Shields, 1996). New knowledge frontiers that need to be chartered invite research investigation, as principled approaches could give some answers to questions raised.

This study is an attempt to provide principled insights into a relatively new area in IWD that concerns virtual game play with youths as participants. Traditionally in many academic representations, youth has been constructed as 'problems' and as actively deviant (Griffin, 1997, p.1). This view appears to be restrictive. A more neutral and perhaps more productive standpoint could be adopted, whereby young people could be studied to reveal idiosyncratic features that mark them at a developmental transition between distinct age stages, or as teenagers morphing into adults. Much more therefore needs to be understood about youth in specific CMC situations and this also poses as a cultural challenge in terms of how virtual communication takes place primarily through the use of written language.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the twenty-first century, the gaming industry has grown and revolutionized itself through the technology of the Internet and there has, in fact, been an explosion in the many different types or genres available in online gaming. The genre that we will be focusing on will be MMORPGs or known as "massive multiplayer online games".

On-line computer games are most likely here to stay, judging by the popularity of this

form of entertainment. With this recognition, we need to give fair treatment to a technological phenomenon that can have far-reaching and diverse effects on the community or society and the individuals involved. The general objective of the study is to investigate the nature of online social interactions of teenagers who play *Habbo Hotel* which is viewed as a representation of virtual interaction. Social dynamics that operate in a computer mediated environment where interaction is not facilitated by physical contact is explored.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the dominant functions that characterize social interactions in relation to language use in an online game for teenagers?

2. What is the intensity of the functions and the accompanying variant language forms in an online game for teenagers?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The overarching framework for this research rests on Communication Theory which defines the elements of human communication. In brief, the elements involved are: (1) context, (2) sources-receivers, (3) messages, (4) channels, (5) noise, (6) effects, and (7) ethics (DeVito, 2006, p.3). DeVito further elaborates on the communication context as having four dimensions: the physical, socio-psychological, temporal and cultural. This study focuses on the socio-psychological and cultural dimensions in the way language is used, though the other elements certainly have a place in the whole connection. For example, the message is essentially realized through IWD as the participants engage in game play, and the channel used is CMC-based.

Within the identified elements, researchers have theorized on many other aspects that impinge on the outcome of a communication. For example, many theories have been forwar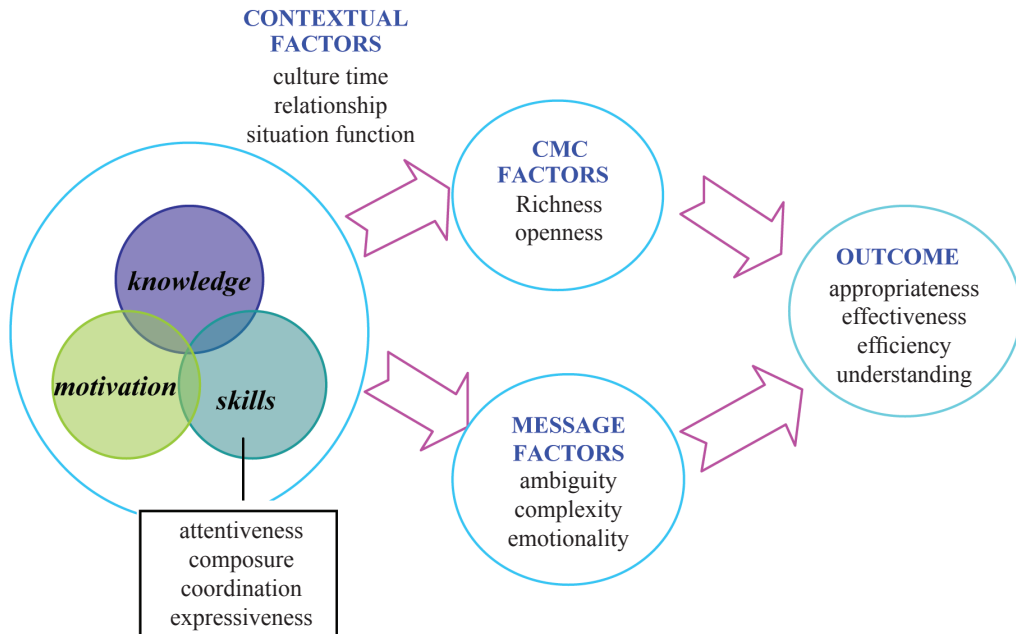ded to explain the relationship between the source-receiver interactions that is mediated by the message. In this study, the relevant theories identified are those that explain social and cultural reality, and that of signs and language (LittleJohn, 2002; Miller, 2005). The theories of social construction of reality foreground the notion that reality is not objective; rather, it is constructed through interactions which are situated in specific cultures. The reality that is socially constructed could also be determined by the self and his/her emotions. In addition, there is a close relationship between reality and language. At one level, the theories of sign and language make reference to semiotics that explains the meaning of signs. Differentiated from symbols, signs serve as an instrument of thought. Meaning is captured by what is termed as propositions which in turn can be expressed through language. Language is further defined through discourse with its associated power to signify, denote, connote and abstract in the context of human communication (van Dijk, 1995; Searle, 1969). The theories point to the concept of representation which is discursively determined. The representations can be unpacked by content and textual analysis of discourse to reveal the cultural signification and the shaping of language behaviour assumed by communicators.

Morreale *et al*. (2001) forwards a CMC Competence Model that explains the nuances of all the elements involved in communication (see *Fig. 1*). The model basically elaborates in greater detail what DeVito has summarized about the elements of communication. According to the model, the individual (the potential *Habbo* in this research) may be motivated to use a specific medium (the virtual game play) to derive a preferred outcome in the communication. The person using a computer should not have fear for technologies (an assumption about the youth population engaged in *Habbo Hotel*). The interface with the software reveals focused behaviour in achieving outcomes. This focused behaviour is enhanced by attentiveness, composure, coordination, and expressiveness as the participants go into the game play. Attentiveness refers to the giving of due attention

to the other participant in order to establish a rapport with him or her. Composure, on the other hand, deals with the ability to show control and ease of communicating through the chosen environment. Someone who is composed will exhibit confidence. Coordinating a message requires temporal appropriateness and content relevance. In that way, the communication becomes efficient, thus establishing a firm interaction between the players. Finally, the concern with expressiveness in a mediated environment deals with the vividness of the message. The more vivid the message, the more revealing it is, in terms of how the participants are able to show how they act and feel. In *Habbo Hotel,* this has been facilitated through creative inventions of emoticons, use of acronyms and other special use of language.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologies involved in obtaining information about online computer gaming have been subject to scrutiny. There are several questions that need attending to as online gaming is a new field with few established answers. Morris (2004) addresses some of the dilemmas and challenges faced by online researchers. In her study, she investigated the kind of extra knowledge that a researcher may need to have in order to make pertinent interpretations of online community actions. She emphasized the importance of being a researcher cum player. She also cautions against the danger of starting research on an unproductive footing, such as having the prior assumption that intellectual analysis of computer games may be frivolous and also the danger of getting into stereotyping imaging of gamers and academics involved. Thus the researcher needs to be open-minded and not be influenced by any existing bias.

Fig. 1: A Model of Mediated Communication

(*Source*: Morreale, Spitzberg & Barge, 2001)

In this study, the researchers took on analytical and participatory roles in the game play especially at the initial stage. At the later stages, however, the researchers became observers in order to gather field notes more efficiently. In essence, the approaches used in data collection are mainly qualitative supported in part by quantitative data. A disadvantage with qualitative data, unlike quantitative data, is that it can be more difficult to interpret. Statistical data can be more easily summarized, but qualitative data must be managed in a way that the data can become meaningful and rich in providing salient information to explain the phenomenon under study. The data usually consists of many different layers of information which call for sensitive interpretation. There are in fact few canonical approaches for qualitative data analysis and Patton (2002, p. 433) offers advice that underlies the techniques used in this kind of study. He believes that the qualitative approaches are unique for each study. Much in fact depends on the ability of the researcher who must have the necessary skills to bring out the salience of the inquiry. This forms strength as well as weakness in qualitative research as the human factor is paramount.

The quantitative aspect in this study involves frequency counts (through content analysis) while the qualitative method involves narrative description of participant observation and analysis of the social structure of the game discourse and textual analysis of the discourse.

CONTENT AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Berger (2000, p. 173) explains that the use of content analysis is a research technique that can be viewed as qualitative or quantitative in nature, or a combination of both. The rationale rests on the use of a classification system to capture the richness of the communication content. Other researchers may prefer to separate the quantitative and qualitative aspects more clearly. Thus content analysis is seen to yield quantitative data while textual analysis is oriented towards qualitative means. In this study, the researchers see both content and textual analysis as inextricably linked. They could be distinct and at the same time, each feeds into the other.

Content analysis calls for an exercise with caution in being able to identify the trends and categories to show the nature of IWD that has taken place on *Habbo Hotel*. The data has to be systematically analyzed and the interpretation needs to be objective and quantified. However, this does not mean a meaningless counting of categories. Language, in whatever form, is still the vehicle for the conveying of a message and by itself is sometimes ambiguous. The categories established through pure content analysis would not do justice to the richness of the text. To take account of how the text actually works, it would be prudent to complement the approach with textual analysis.

Textual analysis helps to construct a world view inherent in the message, bearing in mind that there is no one single correct interpretation. It is through language and its analysis that we are able to impose a coherent understanding of the communication and the society that we live in. Fundamentally, it is about making sense of the world that we live in, be it physical or virtual. Making sense is naturally related to context. As such, textual analysis is not just about looking at words but also at the context in which the text is realized. O'Shaugnessy (1996, p. 67) emphasizes that textual analysis "explore the ways that language is deployed, how images, sounds, and statistics are organized and presented and where relevant, how these various elements are combined."

In this study, the language realizations are mainly in the form of conversations. Images in the form of pictures and emoticons which are used to give the social settings of the interactions are noted, and statistics are gathered through content analysis. The text will help to explain the nature of the social interactions in *Habbo Hotel*.

According to Montgomery (1995, p. xxii), speech is the core feature of any communicative act. This is true even in new technologies, (such the Internet), where conversation forms a focal point in any interaction. Conversations serve to develop, maintain or even end relationships, and

they also constantly help to shape and reshape our world views. To analyze speech in the form of a conversation, the notions of turn, exchange and adjacency pair are relevant in the study of the IWD in game play. In linguistic jargon, a turn is taken when a person receives a signal to speak. As a conversation may be long and complex, it helps in interactive discourse analysis to examine the smallest building block that contributes to a meaningful discourse. This meaningful unit can consist of several turns. The smallest meaningful unit is an exchange and in its simplest form consists of two turns. Crystal (1997) provides this example:

> A: What's the time?
> B: Two o'clock.

Such a unit is also referred to as an adjacency pair. The value of identifying adjacency pairs is that they provide what Montgomery (1995, p. 194) calls a small scale organizing device within the flow of talk. Adjacency pairs become islands of predictability though at times, the exchange may not be as predictable as expected. Most exchanges (whether they consist of two turns or more) will conform to a pattern of regularities and it is precisely these regularities that could give characteristic information about the online social interaction under investigation.

SAMPLING PROCEDURE

The virtual game chosen for analysis is *Habbo Hotel* which was created as a small project initially by Sampo Karjalainen and Aapo Kyrölä. *Habbo Hotel* is a virtual community that combines the features of both a chat room and an online game. Data on the extent of its popularity is not empirically available (Wikipedia.com, however, noted that *Habbo Hotel* is currently considered as one of the largest non-violent online game communities on the Internet, operating in 17 countries). It is run by a Finnish telecom company, Elisa Oyj. The *Habbo* community is full of colourful characters and offers great potential for research into social dynamics in the context of online gaming and

chatting in an online environment. Anyone entering the site can access the following information:

> Habbo Hotel is a virtual hotel where you can hang out and make new friends. It's designed for 13 to 20 year olds in Australia, but visitors from other countries are also welcome. When you register you 'become' a Habbo and then you can walk, dance, eat, drink and chat in the cafes, restaurants, swimming pools and games rooms. You can even decorate and furnish your own room.
>
> (http://www.habbohotel.com.au)

Thus, the participants in this game are assumed to be young teenagers or adolescents. The two terms are used rather interchangeably in this study.

To gather data for analysis, the game *Habbo Hotel* was logged on 3-4 times a week for 1-2 hours each session over a period of two months. Random screen shots were taken and recorded to make up a total of 150 shots. These shots consisted of the game structure itself and the conversation that illustrate the participation and observation. In order to make sense of a stretch of conversation, there must be meaningful units of exchanges. This means that the conversations analysed consisted of exchanges or adjacency pairs that lent themselves to be categorized as a complete message.

From early trial participation prior to the research, it was observed that a meaningful unit of exchange consisted roughly of about 5-10 turns. Most of the conversations analyzed fell within this number of turns. However, for illustrative purposes of specific language use, shorter excerpts in the form of adjacency pairs were also analyzed.

Since social interactive discourse was the focus of this research, the popular places that the *Habbos* frequently gathered were focused on to obtaining data which are concentrated and therefore could yield rich and thick data. These places were the welcome lounge and the

swimming pool. Heuristics was also employed as part of the approach to arrive at information driven by the data. Heuristic inquiry taps on the personal experiences and intense interest of the researcher in the phenomenon under study. The reporting of the research is anchored on discoveries, insights, and reflections of the researcher as he or she grapples with the phenomenon that is studied (Patton, 2002).

In sum, the procedure involved four steps. They were:

1. Obtaining representative samples,

2. Determining measurable units,

3. Confirming reliability in coding by asking for confirmation from colleagues who were also game players when in doubt, and

4. Fitting the data into terms or themes that are defined operationally to explain the social interactive discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In playing the game, it has been observed that players must be familiar with the language of the *Habbo Hotel* subculture. It requires a common language, and the *Hobo* community has developed its own terminology (*see* Appendix 1).

Much of how we feel and think is conveyed through language even in a virtual world. However, *Habbospeak,* though based in English, can be quite difficult to understand and comprehend at times. Players tend to use a mixture of Standard English, non-standard English, acronyms, game-related terms, Internet jargon, icons and occasionally non-English words to communicate. The details of the findings are presented in the next section.

TEXTUAL AND CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DISCURSIVE FEATURES

The analyses focus first on the use of abbreviations, the nature of the conversations, and the token counts of specific discourse functions.

ABBREVIATIONS

Many *Hobos* use short abbreviations instead of writing the full words or sentences. Sometimes without understanding the common gestures used by the community, a player cannot fully participate in the community. Although it would have been possible for the players to have conversations in Standard English, most players chose not to do so as they adopt *Habbospeak*. Only people who were new to the game use Standard English (*see* Appendix 1 for a list of such words).

Another form of abbreviated communication is the use of emoticons and symbols found frequently to graphically express feelings. Without fully understanding the terminology of the emoticons and symbols, it can also be difficult and confusing for new players to participate in the game. Thus, to help readers along in understanding this discourse feature, the signs and abbreviations are transcribed (noted in brackets) and placed immediately after the original forms found in the text. The use of these abbreviations is shown in the following conversation (marked in bold) that involves the turns to form the exchange.

Example 1

007:james.bond	:	been for a swim yet
firefly-baby	:	nahhhh…just looking around
007:james.bond	:	**asl?** *(age/gender/location)*
firefly-baby	:	16/f/vic (*female Victoria*)
firefly-baby	:	**u?** *(you)*
007:james.bond	:	17/m/nsw (*male New South Wales*)
firefly-baby	:	☺ (*smiley face icon*)
007:james.bond	:	♥♥♥♥♥♥ *(love)*
firefly-baby	:	so **wat** *(what)* do u **wan** (*want*) to talk abt (*about*)?
007:james.bond	:	I dont know lets just go to the disco

NATURE OF THE CONVERSATIONS

Common topics revolve around recent holidays, movies or music. The sentences are also very short, containing less than 10 words per sentence. A fair portion of conversations in the game are found to be 'surface' social talk. The players mostly have short conversations and they seem to mirror the kind of daily conversations that take place between strangers. Most of the time, these conversations do not lead to anything important as they are just idle chatter. This appears to characterize the social talk that takes place in such an interaction. The following excerpts from a game log (Examples 2 and 3) illustrate this kind of conversation.

LANGUAGE FUNCTION: IDLE CHATTER

Example 2

hot.surf.dude : hey

hot.surf.dude : hows it goin (*going*)?

.x!x.JeSs.x!. : how woz (*was*) qld (*Queensland*)?

.x!x.JeSs.x!. : o gud (*good*)

hot.surf.dude : yea it was aaite (*alright*)

hot.surf.dude : how was ur (*your*) easter

.x!x.JeSs.x!. : um not bad..urz (*yours*)?

hot.surf.dude : yeh same here

.x!x.JeSs.x!. : kool (*cool*)

hot.surf.dude : lol (*laugh out loud*)

.x!x.JeSs.x!. : im going to have a sleepova (*sleep over*) at mi (*my*) frens (*friends*) place tonite (*tonight*)

.x!x.JeSs.x!. : theres gonna b (*be*) like 6 of us

hot.surf.dude : lol

hot.surf.dude : kool

Example 3

FlowerCrown : They changed the cinema Zrelease date of Silent Hill…

FlowerCrown : i'm in pain

FlowerCrown : serious mental pain…

Aiden2006 : aww

FlowerCrown : www.welcometosilenthill.com

LANGUAGE FUNCTION : STANDARD GREETING AND LEAVE-TAKING

The standard greeting that most *Habbos* used to start a conversation is "Hey" followed by the question on age, gender, and location (Example 4). There is normally not much conversation after both users have introduced themselves. This could be because users feel that they only want to talk to someone who is from the same state or the interest of taking the conversation further is gone after the initial introduction. As for leave-taking, the common form used is the variation of 'bye' (as in Example 14). Often, these features of greeting and leave-taking are not used by the players. In *Habbo speak*, the participants more often than not chose to ignore such speech conventions. It could be interpreted as a form of economy and directness that teenagers prefer in virtual communication of this sort.

Example 4

.::MITCHY::. : hey

aussie-chick : asl (*age/gender/location*)

.::MITCHY::. : how ya been

aussie-chick : pretty gud (*good*)

.::MITCHY::. : 15/m/aus (*male, Australian*)

.::MITCHY::. : u (*you*)

aussie-chick : 15 f WA (*female, Western Australian*)

.::MITCHY::. : kool (*cool*)

_____end of conversation _____

LANGUAGE FUNCTION: EXPRESSING SUPERFICIAL CONCERNS

Some of the conversations seem to indicate some kind of ego trip, in which beauty and looking good are the prior concerns. The use of capital letters that shout out the message acts as an idiosyncratic attention getting device, as shown in Example 5 below.

Example 5

falloutgirl-xox	:	WELL THIS SEXY BIKINI IM WEARING IS A GUCCI
falloutgirl-xox	:	IT COST ABOUT 500 DOLLARS
falloutgirl-xox	:	BUT IT WAS TOTALLY WORTH IT
falloutgirl-xox	:	OMG *(oh my god)* IM TOTALLY THE HOTTEST PERSON HERE
falloutgirl-xox	:	I FEEL KINDA GUILTY, SINCE IM PRETTIER THAT EVERYONE ELSE HERE
falloutgirl-xox	:	AND MY SKIN IS SO PREFECTLY EVEN
falloutgirl-xox	:	IM SO GOOD I FEEL GUILTY
x!x.JeSs.x!.	:	SHUT UP WOMAN
falloutgirl-xox	:	IM THE BEST YOU ALL SUX *(sucks)*

LANGUAGE FUNCTION: FLIRTATIOUS TALK

A significant phenomenon in virtual gaming is often the need to look for a virtual 'partner,' as noted by Zybnek, Šmahel & Divínová (2006), and this is paralleled in *Habbo Hotel*. Many *Habbos* seem to be looking for online boyfriends or girlfriends (Examples 6 -11). Moreover, there seems to be a need for intimacy and a sense of belonging. They appeared to be looking for comrades and new groups where they could feel a sense of belonging. Forming relationships could become a big part of exploring one's own social identity. In *Habbo Hotel*, there is an almost limitless array of people and groups to interact with to form social relationships - all kinds of people and groups with all kinds of personalities, backgrounds, values, and interests.

Example 6

DerekOz	:	r *(are)* u *(you)* here alone
firefly-baby	:	yup….just looking around

DerekOz	:	found anything interesting
firefly-baby	:	u *(you)* r *(are)* ;p *(emoticon of tongue sticking out)*
DerekOz	:	☺ *(smiley face icon)*
firefly-baby	:	;p *(emoticon of tongue sticking out)*
DerekOz	:	u *(you)* here often
firefly-baby	:	not really…i only come here when i have nothing else to do
firefly-baby	:	u *(you)*?
DerekOz	:	same
firefly-baby	:	wat *(what)* do u *(you)* normally do around here?
DerekO	:	flirt abit..lol *(laugh out loud)*

Example 7

boymagnetxoxo	:	u *(you)* single cutie???
Xx:CuTiePie:xX	:	yerrr ;p *(emoticon of tongue sticking out)*
Xx:CuTiePie:xX	:	wat *(what)* abt *(about)* u *(you)*?
boymagnetxoxo	:	yea of course 4 u *(you)* i wud *(would)* be
boymagnetxoxo	:	*pashes*
boymagnetxoxo	:	ur *(you are)* adorable

Common short one-liners for this purpose are illustrated below:

Example 8

2cexy2byou : lookin for a bf *(boyfriend)* press 111 *(type the number 1 three times)* to be mi *(my)* bf

Example 9

roXyGurL : Hit 123 if u wanna go out wit me and come here 2 *(too)*

Example 10

lanafox	:	hey rugby guy
lanafox	:	ur *(you are)* cute
lanafox	:	i luv *(love)* a guy who plays a rough game like that

Example 11

mint12 : im lookin 4 a cute guy
mint12 : cute guy anywea (*anywhere*)????

LANGUAGE FUNCTION: VENTING FRUSTRATIONS

Swear words are usually associated with the venting of frustration. In the game, the use of swear words or terms that are considered racist or sexual are not allowed in the game. Filtered words are replaced with the word 'bobba'. E-mail addresses and phone numbers are also filtered. The bobba filter works in all rooms, stickies and console messages. However, there are sometimes flaws with the filter and players get around it by putting full stops in between swear words (see *Fig. 2*). Players who bent the rules or caught swearing by the moderators could be banned from the game. Meanwhile, other players who are offended by the swear words could also report the offender to the moderators.

Figure 2: An example of swearing

Expectations from school, family, and friends can overwhelm teenagers, as noted by Abbot (1998), and *Habbo Hotel* in a way appears to provide them with an outlet to vent their frustrations. In the anonymous world of cyberspace, teenagers are able to vent their frustrations without facing any repercussions. They can also get other players to sympathise with them at the same time. It affirms that cyberspace presents them an opportunity to escape from reality. These forms of frustration are illustrated in the following examples.

Example 12
(Betrayed by friends)

wokina	:	all this stuff happened at skool (*school*) and now everyone hates me for sumthing (*something*) I didn't do
Yasmyne	:	awwwwwwww
wokina	:	yea..
Yasmyne	:	i h8 (*hate*) wendat (*when that*) happens
wokina	:	its stooped (*stupid*)
wokina	:	yea
Yasmyne	:	some1 (*someone*) makes up a roomor (*rumour*)
Wokina	:	my friends have turned agenst (*against*) me
Yasmyne	:	and EVERY1 (*everyone*) believes it
Yasmyne	:	OMG (*oh my god*)
Wokina	:	yea
Wokina	:	exactly (*exactly*)
Yasmyne	:	☹ im soo ssosz (*sorry*) for ya (*you*)

Example 13
(Do not like adults)

FlowerCrown	:	I've had 30 something year olds after me…
Aiden2006	:	rawr they annoy me. i don't go after those types.
Aiden2006	:	BAHAHAHA
Aiden2006	:	poor u
Aiden2006	:	lol
FlowerCrown	:	Heh. Indeed.

Example 14
(Do not like school)

Flamesmaster9	:	I met a girl and she was 21
Flamesmaster9	:	and she plays Habbo
Flamesmaster9	:	haha
Cleo.	:	Ye
Flamesmaster9	:	like yer
Cleo.	:	Aw ok

Cleo.	: To bed coz skool (*school*) tomoz (*tomorrow*)
Flamesmaster9	: omg (*oh my god*) i no (*know*)
Flamesmaster9	: stupid skool (*school*)
Flamesmaster9	: bi bi (*bye bye*)
Cleo.	: Byee

From the above descriptions, the salient features of the sample discourse used by the teenagers in their interactions in *Habbo Hotel* have been analyzed. The main characteristics are the use of abbreviations and emoticons, as well as the talk that ranges from idle chatter, flirtatious talk, self-centred superficial talk, and the venting of frustration. Some of these features are given further treatment through content analysis accompanied by frequency and appropriate description.

FREQUENCY COUNT OF SPECIFIC DISCURSIVE FUNCTIONS

A word count is carried out on seven main categories from the 150 screen shots captured. Abbreviations are found to be used on almost every page and are thus not given a count. The categories that are counted are presented and discussed below. All the tokens reflect the actual number of times they occur in the discourse captured in the 150 screen shots and the variants involved in the language function.

Greeting

Item variation	Frequency (total = 28 out of 150)
ASL - address sex and location	7 out of 28 9 out of 28
Haii/hei/hi	9 out of 28
Hey	2 out of 28
Hello	1 out of 28
How are you?	1 out of 28

From the data, a formal identification of a demarcated exchange related to greetings did not yield a high figure. In fact, most of the conversations tended to begin without this preamble. Where identified, the most popular is the variations of *haii*, *hei* and *hi,* followed by the variant *hey.* ASL is also a high variant which is direct and to the point. The expression that sounds more formal such as '*How are you?'* is noted only once. This indicates that formal English is not the preferred style in greeting. Even *hello* is not often used.

Taking Leave

Item variation	Frequency (total = 24 out of 150)
G2g/g2run (got to go/got to run)	5 out of 24
Brb	3 out of 24
Cya/ See you all	2 out of 24
Byee/Bye	4 out of 24
Bibi	7 out of 24
Talk to you later	1 out of 24
I have to go	1 out of 24
My dad needs the comp.	1 out of 24

As can be seen, *bibi* is the most variation used compared to the more recognisable *bye*. Once again, it illustrates a kind of teenage speak which is often creative and novel. The other frequently used expression is *g2g* (5 tokens), while the formal *talk to you later* and *I have to go* register only one count each, which again supports the observation that standard English is not a preferred style in this type of virtual communication. Interestingly, there is one reference to an adult party as being contributory to a Habbo having to exit from the game. The exertion of independence that is supposed to be associated with the virtual space of a make-believe world could still be tampered by real-life concerns.

Flirtation

Item variation	Frequency (total = 17 out 150)
Forms of address: cutie, sweetie, my baby, cute boys	8 out of 17
Invitation to forming friendship: Will you be my friend, Single??? Looking for a bf? NO I LKYES U R u looking for a gf?	9 out of 17

Flirtatious talk was identified among the teenagers with expressions like *sweetie,* and *cutie* as forms of address. Looking for boyfriends or girlfriends is also obviously a thing to do online for teenagers. In fact, forming relationships is part and parcel of the social interactions found.

Venting of Frustration

Item variation	Frequency (total = 22 out of 150)
Bobbas (referring to censored words)	13 out of 22
Use of swear words that can be overtly identified: damn, fucken ugly,	4 out of 22
Dislike adults, school, having to be home early	3 out of 22
I hate my life	1 out of 22
I have no friends	1 out of 22

Twenty-two instances were identified for this category. The use of swear words, though of low frequency, is unfortunately the most common. As mentioned earlier, swear words are not allowed, although some teenagers chose not to respect the rule. These words are automatically censored and the frequency is indicated. Nonetheless, some managed to avoid censorship. It would seem that swearing is still the most common form of venting frustration, and other forms of frustration, like those listed in the above table had relatively low incidences of occurrence (which is similar to the findings of Subrahmanyam *et al*., 2006). Although the talk was monitored, there were still attempts to use unsavoury expressions (see *Fig. 3*), indicating teenagers found a creative way through punctuation to get around the Bobba filter.

Exclamatives

Item variation	Frequency (total = 15 out 150)
Omg (oh my god)	14 out of 15
What the hell?	1 out of 15

Such exclamatives are not rampantly used. Among the two identified, *omg* was more used. If there was a need to express one's surprise or similar feelings, this form of expression is less resorted to compared to the use of a stronger version in that of venting frustration, particularly through the use of swear words.

Expressing Superficial Concerns

Item variation	Frequency (total= 12 out of 150)
Use of capital letters	5 out of 12
Self- centred expressions: e.g. I'm the hottest person here, My skin is so perfectly even I'm prettier than everyone else, etc.	7 out of 12

There are an identifiable number of expressions that concerns the self. In this category, two sub classes were noted: one that dealt with the use of capital letters to draw attention to the speaker, and the other revolves around self-praise. Both were considered as superficial talk.

Use of Emoticons

Item variation	Frequency (total = 76 out of 150)
Varieties of symbols (e.g. smileys, hearts, cups, etc.)	76 out of 150

This category ranks very high and it can be concluded that there is a high preference for such use among teenagers in their online communication. Emoticons, aside from replacing words, are also used as punctuation marks to indicate tone, intention, and emotion. It is a manner of written communication that has crept into the Internet and it is definitely here to stay. This particular type of virtual communication attests to the need to speak fast and economically in online talk. However, in studies on SMSes, which is a delayed form of synchronous interaction (see for example, Thurlow *et al*., 2003; Crystal, 2008), the feature was also found to be well used. It is likely an ingrained characteristic of the younger generation which is techno-savvy and which relies heavily on a form of graphic communication that conveys a vivid message.

Forms of Positive Acknowledgement

Item variation	Frequency (total = 50 out of 150)
Lol (laughing out loud)	43 out of 50
Kool (cool)	7 out of 50

This final category shows the kind of teenage attempt at giving positive judgment or response. The *lol* registers a high frequency of use and the reason could be that it is associated with sound which is generally not an element denoted in writing. As such, interjections of this nature could provide a break from written monotony and add a personal and friendly flavour to the interaction. Teenage online expression of acknowledgement through *lol* could be described as a peculiar discursive feature. It brings to mind the kind of devices that are used in dramatic dialogues that characterize plays. It is not uncommon in this genre to resort to the use of asides given in parenthesis to indicate the mood of discourse. Online communication could be viewed as a kind of dramatic dialogue and as the participants play out their roles, interjections that resemble laughter or other forms of feelings would require techniques to capture such needs of expression. Similarly, the word *Kool* is also identified as a comment that indicates approval with a special meaning other than the literal. It is well associated with informal real speech, and it also transposes into the virtual domain.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The virtual game offers a place for personal expression in terms of space and character emulation, and it is an avenue for cultivating and maintaining friendship. As a popular form of entertainment, the game is a realization of a current fad in which interactive social moves mirror a variety of functions. It is also definitely a place for the expression of emotions, as revealed in the captured screens of the conversations which revealed tokens of interactions where the participants flirted with each other, showed their frustration, and used exclamatives as a form of emotional response. In addition, there were elements of talk that displayed competitiveness and a sense of achievement. If these features are an extension of real life, then, it could be concluded that these are reflections of current teenage urban values captured through a virtual recorder. In a small measure, the study has shown that engaging in a teenage virtual game can lead to the understanding of a sub-culture where particular values and interactive behaviours can be exhibited. As Jenkins (2003) noted, games can provide an escape from reality as well as an avenue to live out fantasy. Morris (2004) found that gamers' opinions are not just confined to gaming matters. According to her, there are many 'free flowing and uncensored' discussions, thus giving the communication a performative perspective that may characterize the gaming community and this is uncovered in the discourse in *Habbo Hotel.* Nonetheless,

she also cautions that one needs to be sensitive to the cultural context of the communication so as to avoid misinterpretations about statement intention. Small talk is also identified as another performative indicating shared humour and light hearted indulgence among gamers. Such small talk in fact is characteristic of *Habbo Hotel.*

More importantly, the study has shown that a teenage hybrid game and chat room software can be exploited to provide illumination into a variety of social interactions that appear to cater to the need for teenage expression. An analysis of the dialogic engagements offers insights into how teenagers attract each others' attention or what catches teenage attention and in the event, how the social interactions are realized.

The descriptive study uses content and textual analysis to obtain the objective and qualitative data. The objective counting of the tokens of occurrence of the identified categories of discursive practices illustrates the degree or frequency of the incidence of particular language use. Textual analysis, on the other hand, provides further salient information about the nature and type of interactions that have taken place. It also gives insights into language preference and forms of stylistics that are peculiar to teenage talk.

In sum, the research has addressed the issue of real-time communication. It gives proof of our innovative use of language as we exist not in a vacuum but with others. Along with communication, relationships are formed, and identities are moulded to provide telescopic insights into the ways of culture and contexts of social expression among adolescents. In exploring the teenage talk, it has implications on the meaning of the bigger 'us' in our existence. Part of the 'us' refers to an important segment of adolescents who is in transit to adulthood. In understanding how teenagers do virtual speak through IWD, we came to appreciate a form of language use that appears to be both unique and characteristic of a community that is part and parcel of the big "I".

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APPENDIX 1

ABBREVIATIONS AND GAME TERMINOLOGY

asl	-	Age/Sex/Location
abt	-	about
atm	-	at the Moment
bak	-	back
bf	-	boyfriend
bobba	-	Habbo's word censor for rude or inappropriate words (an in game built feature)
bi	-	Habbo slang for the word be
bibi	-	Habbo slang for Goodbye mainly used by girls
brb	-	Be right back
creds	–	credits
furni	-	Habbos name for furniture that you can buy for your room
gf	-	girlfriend
gtg	-	got to go
k	-	short form for ok
kool	-	alternate spelling for cool
mi	-	Habbo slang for the word my or me depending on the context of the conversation
n00b	-	Name used for new Habbos/ new players
ty	-	thank you
ttyl	-	talk to you later
lol	-	laughing out loud
neva	-	never
nm	-	nothing much
np	-	no problem
nty	-	no thank you
nvm	-	never mind
r	-	are
ur	-	your
omg	-	Oh My God
ppl	-	people
plz/pls	-	please
u	-	short form for you
wth	-	What the hell?
w8	-	wait
y	-	why
ya	-	you

GAME TERMINOLOGY

auto	–	win the game automatically by trading with the maker of the game
bomb	–	remove 3 other players
poi	–	poison
p2p	–	pay to continue playing game
p2s	–	pay to stay in the game
rev	–	take revenge on other players
kik	–	player is removed from game