

## Julia Leavitt

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Claude Shannon theorized that information is not the meaning. The actual meaning lies in the interpretation of that information. In face-to-face conversation voice intonation, volume, physical expressions and gesticulations aid interpretation. Basic human communication relies on the physical presence of the participants. The telephone took us one step away from this physicality. The physical expressions and gesticulations are removed. Voice intonation and volume are the only tools left to interpret a phone conversation. The Internet has seized these tools as well.

I've never been a big fan of the chat environment, although I love the telephone. I feel like we have learned to live without the physical presence, but we still rely on sound. The sound of a phone conversation is so vital to the interpretation of the information. We have all received that call, from a client or a boss. You know the instant you hear that tone, you should return their call immediately. The chat environment with all of its :) and :( cannot replicate that intonation. Maybe in a few decades when we have a larger bandwidth, or maybe no bandwidth at all, a chat environment will do better than a face-to-face conversation. It's a possibility that we won't ever leave our homes and spend all day connected to *Habbo Hotel* 3000. But that day is not today.

The *Habbo Hotel*, created by Sulake in Finland, offers a chat environment that is personable. For chat enthusiasts I am sure it's a blessed break from the normal text environment of a chat room. But for a proponent of face-to-face conversations there are a few questions I must ask. First, why are we encouraging our teenagers to communicate through a screen? Don't we have enough trouble getting teenagers to relate to the outside world, without creating an environment where they don't have to? It seems to me that *Habbo* encourages all of the social awkwardness of adolescence. You are openly encouraged to form cliques ("friend groups"); to gossip (the whisper feature) is one of the great breakthroughs of *Habbo's* chat environment; you can pretend to be something your not and essentially you don't have to tell the truth about anything. It seems to me that *Habbo* is recession, not a progression in communication and in education for that matter. From what I remember of adolescence, I would have rather have been anyone but myself. Well, in *Habbo* you can do just that. Another question I'd like to bring up is who said it is all right to charge children for "virtual soda" and "virtual furniture". Isn't that a little like stealing a child's milk money?

On to the space in *Habbo*...

Though *Habbo* looks like a cross section of Lego land, its true aesthetic weakness is in the simulation. Like *Bob*, *Habbo* is being hindered by simulation. Rather than allowing the user's imagination to take the leap between content and form, *Habbo* literally draws out the tiles on the floor. Unlike the *World of Awe*, which expects the viewer to throw them-

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selves completing into the visual puzzle, *Habbo* stays close to home (or should I say a hotel.) Everything we encounter in *Habbo* spatially is understandable. Even the bird's eye view is comprehensive. There is no leap of imagination that is necessary to participate. Maybe because I'm not a teenager or maybe because I enjoy visual puzzles *Habbo* did not draw me in like the *World of Awe* did. *Habbo* seemed to me more grounded in the world of commercialism, than in the world of experiential design or in the exploration of internet space.

The *World of Awe* on the other hand demanded that the user was an active and curious participant in the exploration of the space. In some ways the site reminded me of the feeling I get when reading the postmodernist author Haruki Murakami. It is almost as if you are traveling in a dream, where there are objects you recognize, but your not sure how they got there and where you are going. Like a dream there is that unknown quest, you move through the space without controlling where you will end up. The *World of Awe* transported me.

The non-linear story of the *World of Awe* relied on ambiguity the way that a Tarantino film relies on violence. The ambiguity and uncertainty is what keeps the user interested, it is what keeps the viewer actively searching for the answer. Unlike *Habbo*, the *World of Awe* relies on the fact that the viewer has the capability of filling in the visual blanks and imagining the empty gaps in the story. For me traveling through the *World of Awe* was less like visiting a website and more like participating in a dream diary.

The *World of Awe* is not flawless. There was instances of technological hindrances and the evidence of the opacity of the medium, but as an experiential space it was fulfilling.