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→ Virtual Sex: Pornography, Immersion, and Erotic Environments

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HABBO (M)HOTEL – A Tale on Abstract Sex and Early Digital Girlhood Erotics*

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***INVITED PAPER**

Abstract This paper proposes a media-archaeological exploration of early digital desire, focusing on the experiences of teenage girls and femme-identifying youth in the early 2000s Italian context. Situated against the patriarchal and hypersexualized media landscape of Berlusconi-era Italy, it examines how the domestic bedroom became a site for the rehearsal of intimacy through opensource chatrooms, social platforms, and early online gaming environments. By tracing the intersections of libidinal curiosity, cybernetics, and digital architecture, the study foregrounds how early online spaces enabled experimentation with desire, gender, and pleasure beyond the constraints of heteronormative, reproductive, and familial scripts. Drawing on autotheoretical reflection and dialogical memory-work with former users of Habbo Hotel, the essay investigates the ambivalent nature of these proto-immersive platforms: offering both refuge and risk, enabling playful, disembodied erotic exploration while potentially advancing patriarchal abstractions of femininity. By attending to these early experiences as historically and politically charged archives of deviation, fantasy, and technosexual relationality, the paper contributes to understanding the emergence of post-internet erotics and the complex inheritance of intergenerational sexual hauntologies.

Keywords Virtual reality archaeology Technosexuality Gendered labour Internet

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Fig. 1. Screenshot from *Habbo Hotel*, captured by the authors (2025).

Opening Reflections

"Do you think you have a better sex life than your mother? And what about your mother's mother? And her mother?" (Malou Lyse 2021). It's not my therapist asking, but an animated sex toy in Maja Malou Lyse's film *Antibodies*[1]. Since encountering her work at Index Foundation in Stockholm last year, this deceptively innocent question has replayed in my mind with an oddly persistent urgency, touching on the affective residues of post-internet erotics and the inheritance of intergenerational hauntology. Think

1 Exhibited in the context of the show "Bodies and Antibodies", held at Index Foundation in Stockholm between 17 November 2023 and 28 January 2024. See https://indexfoundation.se/exhibitions/bodies-and-antibodies.

of AI girlfriends[2], deepfake pornographies, immersive VR sex, gamified affects – and the vibrator's voice sounds less absurd than it should.

While the public discourse appears increasingly fixated with predicting the architecture of the 'sex-of-the-future', I find myself reflecting on my own sexual prehistory. Long before my girl friends and I had any language for consent or pleasure, before our bodies had even fully arrived, our *desires* – unlike those of our mothers, and certainly their mothers before them – were already *online*. Dispersed across servers, filtered through avatars, and whispered through usernames. As part of the very first generation that experienced puberty with internet access, I think of my grandmother's generation libido and how it had been systemically silenced. While mine, without my consent, was suddenly accelerated, mediated, and spatially reconfigured by the proto-immersive architectures of early social platforms.

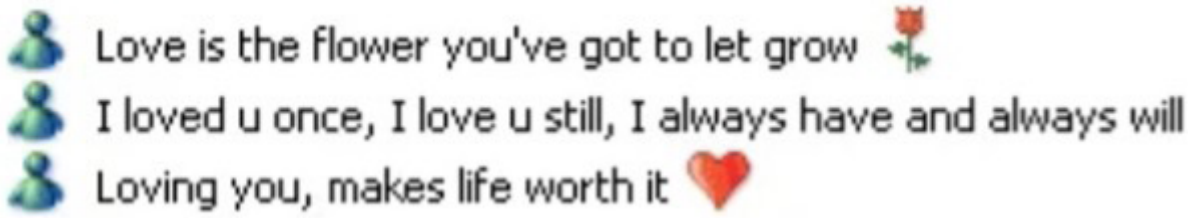

Fig. 2. MSN Messenger lovechain status, early online chatroom archive.

It's hard today to do justice to the chaotic, horny absurdity of those early digital encounters. Even harder to recall the exact moment the internet entered our teenage girls' bedrooms like an uninvited guest: disruptive, undisciplined and far too intimate. Against the backdrop of Berlusconian Italy, far from Catholic guilt and the daily broadcast of neoliberal fantasies of femininity, early online chatrooms seeped into the domestic space carrying a privilege both illicit and liberating: to be *unwatched.*

Only today I see just how deeply we were longing for a space that could feed our fantasies, fictions, crushes and connections. How desperate we were to flirt,

2 I suggest to look into the work of Carmel Lael on AI Girlfriends. See Carmen Hines and Morgane Billuart, "Episode 13 – AI PornBots," Girl Employee, June 26, 2024, https://open.spotify.com/episode/7crSgZBun0ZRSnVwGIvF8L.

tease, play, misbehave, exploring the erotic in its feral and unrestrained potential. It now feels almost inevitable how our teenager selves, aching for intimacy, felt so hard for the digital elsewhere. The excitement of navigating desire unanchored from the body, yet charged with feelings, had just entered our lives. And with touch gone, vulnerability seemingly appeared to vanish too. At the time we had no idea that our love affair with screen-time might have been the lovechild of a centuries-old lineage of repressed desire; passed down to us like recipes from our mothers, their mothers before them, our great-grandmothers…

In a time when digital desire drifts under the gaze of algorithmic governance and resurgent fascisms, it feels almost necessary to return – as one would to a tale – to those first moments when the web, and its awkward portals of e-dating, still appeared as a refuge. When wet dreaming managed to slip past economization, unclaimed by algorithms. If it is true that sex, far from being a liberatory experience, is now conceived as yet another form of inconvenient labour (Pettman 2017), the stories of early digital girlhood erotics let us glimpse more clearly on how the promise of the early web was indeed seductive: to outsource not just touch and vulnerability, but the struggle of *desiring* itself.

Introduction

Amid the restless questioning to decode the libidinal crisis we currently inhabit, this paper proposes a media-archaeology of digital desire. Both a nostalgic excavation and a forensic unpacking of cybererotics, it begins where so many adolescent libidos were first staged: inside the pixelated and unregulated interiors of *open source chatrooms*. This investigation stems from a precise historical, geographical and affective temporality. Against the backdrop of Silvio Berlusconi's patriarchal saturated-media, televisual hypersexuality, and neoliberal fantasies of femininity, the early 2000s were a moment in which internet access, particularly within domestic spaces, became increasingly widespread and normalized in Italy. This shift allowed net-

worked platforms to extend domestic intimacy, transforming the bedroom into a site where libidinal curiosity could be explored without the physical presence of others.

This research, however, is deliberately situated from the perspective of teenage girls and femme-identifying youth of this time, who, unlike first-time adult users, encountered sexuality under historically unprecedented conditions. If the early 2000s marked a shift for rerouting desire and intimacy through the apparent safety of texts, usernames, and avatars, young users had the possibility to do so prior to any real-life encounter(s) with the erotic. I thereby encourage to understand early online chatrooms less like adolescent playgrounds and more like rehearsal spaces for emerging libidinal protocols that Luciana Parisi would name “abstract sex” (Parisi 2004). Namely, those intimate engagements with others that unfold not between bodies, but between systems, circuits, and interfaces. Online chatrooms were arguably the very first platforms to dissolve the boundary between biology and cybernetics, inaugurating a new paradigm of technosexual relationality – one in which the libidinal self was not only shaped by digital architectures but came into being with them.

For femme-users, early digital erotics offered a temporary relief from normative, reproductive scripts – a suspension of real-life consequences that allowed for experimentation, role-playing, and an unruly assertion of desire. The digital space soon became a refuge that allowed the exploration of pleasure in anonymous and curiously disembodied forms – untethered from the moral surveillance of society or family members, and the physical vulnerability that so often accompanied female sexuality in offline life. Yet this transformation should not be read solely as emancipatory. While digital erotic exploration offered a fleeting escape, it also risked realizing a longstanding patriarchal fantasy: the abstraction of female sexuality from its embodied, material presence. As Luciana Parisi warns, the autonomy of cybersex from reproduction may disrupt biological essentialism, but it also advances a technofantasy of femininity stripped of flesh – disembodied, programmable, and

Fig. 3. Italian show *Ciao Darwin* host Paolo Bonolis kisses the hand of Madre Natura.

ultimately more manageable (Parisi 2004). In this post-flesh paradigm, desire risks being severed not only from consequence, but from the very matter that grounds it.

As much as our twelve-year-old selves could have possibly grasped the political and social implications of the digital environments we inhabited, this essay seeks to take seriously those early *e-dating* and *cybersex* experiences, as valuable archives of deviation and fantasy beyond the heteronormative scripts of televised girlhood. This text unfolds through a dialogical and autotheoretical reflection between visual artist Attila Manfredi and me, revisiting our respective memories of early digital femininity within the social gaming platform of *Habbo Hotel*. Although Attila and I only met in our mid-twenties, we both grew up in the same small town in Northern Italy, attended the same schools, and independently immersed ourselves in the unregulated interiors of habbohotel.com. Upon reconnecting as adults, we discovered a striking overlap in how our first romantic and erotic encounters were mediated through the spatial and social architecture of the game – its rooms, avatars, and interaction scripts that simulated intimacy while operating within the constraints of a gamified economy and

moral code. Over the years, countless relationships have spawned from within the *Hotel*, some of them leading to in-person meetings and memories. However, *e-dating* culture on Habbo cannot be addressed without acknowledging the way it has been stigmatized, while also doing justice to the heavy toxicity associated with it – the broken hearts, revenge porn scandals, cheating, roleplay, and age-difference-prohibited occurrences (Habbo Legends Wiki 2025). In the context of this essay, autotheory thus becomes a tool to revisit digital girlhood as a formative space for erotic becoming, where early online experiences are not merely anecdotal, but politically charged sites of gendered socialization, experimentation, and pleasure.

Fig. 4. MSN Messenger emoticon, early online chatroom archive.

Intermezzo – Attila Manfredi

Habbo looked innocent on the surface – cheerful, childish, harmless. A game, supposedly. But it was also strangely perverted, or maybe just soaked in the confused hunger of teenagers suddenly alone with their desires. Most of us were young – twelve, thirteen – maybe even younger. One of the strangest things was how much cybersex was allowed. You would meet a random player in the hotel lobby, then start a relationship with them, or engage in a one-time sexting moment.

Habbo Hotel's cybersex usually went like this: bump into a random stranger in the hotel lobby, head to their private room, lie down side by side on a pixelated bed – and then the grand digital striptease.

Avatars' outfits were swapped for sexy alternatives – reminiscent of lingerie, swimsuits or the closest thing to nudity a cartoon game could offer. Then type, line by line, messages that were awkward, tender, copied from something you had seen or heard on tv, or something outrageous and completely imagined. Sometimes you pretended to sleep together afterwards. Most times you wondered why you said things you didn't fully understand.

There were moments when things went further. You would exchange usernames (Channel 4 News 2012) – on MSN, Facebook – and maybe go all the way and turn on webcams. With enough hormone-peaking users online, it was only a matter of time before Habbo started featuring strip clubs, sex clubs and even some sex cults for erotic roleplays. Being wildly under-protected as it was, the platform eventually made headlines in 2012 when Channel 4 News reported a major scandal involving paedophiles on the platform, exchanging sexual chats and contact info with minors (Channel 4 News 2012).

Habbo Hotel
Cyber sex in a 6x6 tile room

Fig. 5. Cyber sex in a 6x6 tile room – furnitrader, “Habbo Hotel: Most Awkward Cyber Sex Prank,” 1'04", YouTube video, accessed July 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h6HlO27E7g.

Fig. 6. Cyber sex in a 6x6 tile room – furnitrader, “Habbo Hotel: Most Awkward Cyber Sex Prank,” 4'19", YouTube video, accessed July 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h6HlO27E7g.

Habbo Hotel
Sex-themed rooms

Fig. 7. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *The pegging room*, owner: tinuviel.

Fig. 8. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *The Gentlemans Club*, owner: Limpbizkit.

Fig. 9. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *Red Light District: The Cuckening*, owner: Cakebutt.

Fig. 10. Habbo Hotel sex-themed rooms – *Speed Dating room*, owner: Maliya.

Figure 11. Archival screenshot from Habbo Hotel (source unknown). The image is reproduced as an example of the platform's interface and user-generated environments.

The precise moment of my first Habbo Hotel log-in calls for a recollection – the name of my avatar, the outfit I selected, the hue of my digital bedroom walls, have all faded into the haze of digital memory. What remains vividly present, however, is the affective atmosphere of the boredom that surrounded it. The long, meaningless afternoon after school, when a sense of close friendship came through the dial-up connection and a bulky desktop computer stationed in the living room. The idea of being constantly connected hadn't yet arrived; being online was an event, an appointment. Early virtual encounters were scheduled by calling friends on the landline: *Are you logging in?* we would ask. During our secret online getaway moments, my girl friends and I would indulge in long-distance gossip, trading school crushes updates, planning looks for upcoming parties and sending chain messages for good luck in love.

While the specifics of my first login to Habbo Hotel escape memory, I clearly recall the thrill of discovering it combined two of my deepest pre-teen obsessions. On one hand, the fantasy of building your own house and "doll". On the other, the strange and exciting prom-

ise of being able to socialize with strangers all over Italy. Launched in 1998 by the Finnish company Sulake, Habbo Hotel was indeed among the earliest browser-based platforms to integrate digital architecture with real-time social interaction. The choice of a hotel as the platform's central metaphor might have seemed odd at first – hotels are sites of transience, typically reserved for adults, couples, and families. But it was precisely this tension – between the hotel's adult-coded exclusivity and our solitary child selves' access to it – that made Habbo Hotel so intriguing to our eyes.

Unlike the open, expansive geographies of later open-world games, Habbo offered a tightly enclosed spatial network, emphasizing encounters within its curated interiors rather than exploration of infinite terrains. The platform staged a temporary, semi-private sociality – rooms to check into, lobbies to linger in, strangers to meet and flirt with. Its promotional slogan promised exactly that: "Make friends, create your own room, become famous!" (Habbo Hotel 2025) – an early articulation of lifestyle-oriented digital networking where interior design, performance, and social climbing merged into a seductive promise of visibility and belonging.

Fig. 12. Habbo Hotel, Introduction on Habbo Hotel's first login.

Upon entering, users were asked to create an avatar and design a private room. Avatars could either navigate the shared public spaces provided by the website – parks, nightclubs, cafés, and lobbies, where you would encounter other users – or furnish, expand and personalize their own private room. Private rooms could be opened to selected friends or made accessible to all, those with the highest visitor counts being featured on the homepage under “Most Popular Rooms” (Habbo Hotel 2025).

Fig. 13. Reddit, source unknown. Author: personal-growth.

It did not take long before I understood the unspoken class system embedded within Habbo, a realization that, unsurprisingly, led me to beg my parents to purchase *Habbo credits* (paid with real-world currency) – to access a broad catalogue of virtual furniture and decorative objects known as *Furni*. This term encompassed everything from basic chairs and rugs to luxury items and rare design collectibles – the latter only available to *VIP Habbo Club (HC)* members, at the modest cost of a 10-euro phone credit recharge.

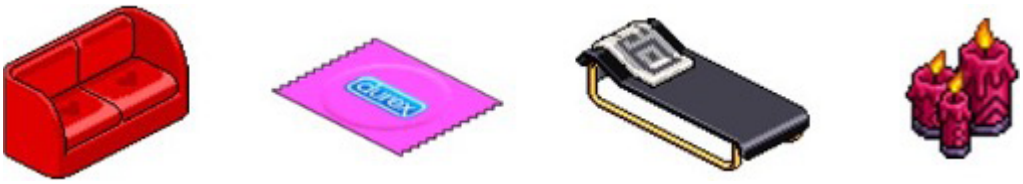

Fig. 14. Habbo Hotel, erotically charged furni selection – Heart Sofa, Durex Rug, Leather Bed, Red Candles.

The thrill of acquiring digital status symbols was addictive, as each item was a marker of desirability. All users craved the king-size bed, the heart-shaped rug and the VIP badge next to their usernames. Owning VIP furniture and clothes signified status and taste within the

highly codified economy of display of the platform, which positioned interior design and looks as the primary form of social currency, indeed the very foundation of Habbo Hotel's microcosm.

Habbo's investment in interior aesthetics unfolded within a broader spatial logic of enclosure. While avatars could move freely across an expansive constellation of spaces, this freedom was always confined within the rigid architecture of the Hotel. Navigation was permitted, but only laterally: users could teleport from one room to another, but there was no "outside" to escape to, no exterior world beyond the hotel's symbolic and infrastructural perimeter. Even so-called 'outdoor' areas – gardens, rooftops, beaches, and town squares – were not true exterior environments but enclosed rooms disguised through visual motifs and ambient *Furni.* The beach, for instance, fondly recalled in nostalgic blog posts by early users who flirted poolside in pixelated bikinis (LMV Blog 2009) was not a liminal open space, but a themed interior: a set meticulously assembled from palm-tree *Furni*, wave-patterned tiles, and sun-loungers.

Fig. 15. Habbo Hotel, Beach, public room.

Fig. 16. Habbo Hotel, Speed Dating Room, user generated.

The *Hotel* functioned as a totalizing environment – its very architecture determining not just where avatars could move, but how intimacy, affect, and desire could circulate within it. And if that architecture was modelled entirely on the spatial grammar of an adult leisure resort – clubs, spas, pools, saunas, bars – then the social scripts it encouraged leaned toward adult fantasies, role-playing, and forms of relational experimentation far beyond childhood. While the explicitly erotic dimension of this environment will be explored further on, it is worth noting here that Habbo's architecture offered a suggestively adult spatial lexicon masked by a child-friendly aesthetic. Within such interiors, relationships did not simply happen – they were inextricably tied to the Hotel's social mimicry of adulthood.

Although Habbo avatars' actions were quite restricted, the game had its own encoded language to allow for more. Anything apart from your avatar's standing, dancing, waving, walking or sitting, had to be written enclosed in asterisks. This limitation produced a powerful linguistic workaround, a collective grammar of gestures and insinuations understandable only to its community. Through this simple typographic device – *kisses*, *touches thigh*, *moans*, *licking your neck* – users could stage full-blown erotic encounters, circumventing censorship. Asterisks be-

came the easy cue to sexting, to fantasy, to the simulation of bodily acts that were neither seen nor sanctioned yet vividly imagined. Erotic subjectivity, in this sense, was not only expressed but performed, line by line, within the very syntax of the game.

Fig. 17. Habbo Hotel, rare VIP *Furni* selection.

The Dollhouse

Let us indulge, just for a moment, in the sheer glamour of the carefully curated *Furni* selection above – a decadent wish-list of teenage fantasy, where heart-shaped Jacuzzis, rotating love beds, and velvet sofas were not just decorative choices but emblems of prestige and disposable income.

Rooms adorned with these coveted items operated as spatial self-portraits of their owners, immediately readable as social status within the social economy of the website. In screenshots shared across early forums

and blogs, rooms with prestigious VIP items became aspirational spaces, their objects functioning like digital heirlooms passed between users in the speculative economy of teenage capitalism (Atrioc 2021).

Many *Furni* items on Habbo carried an erotic charge that went far beyond suggestion: stripping poles, velvet rugs, silk curtains, red-light interiors. Here I recall a friend's experience that perfectly captures the messy and thrilling contradictions of exploring sexuality and identity while surrounded by these intensely charged objects. She kept not one, but *two* avatars – her official, "good girl" profile – where she met IRL friends and kept things polite – and a secret alter ego, a full-on "bad girl" persona who visited every virtual bar in scandalously revealing outfits, even performing cheeky stripteases. This digital double life was her private space to play with desire and indulge in a "sexiness" that she could not afford yet in the outer world. But as all great dramas go, the curtain fell abruptly when her friend logged into her account and stumbled upon the "wild side" alter ego. The reveal was so scandalous that her friend eventually ghosted her – convinced she was crazy (Manfredi 2024).

Fig. 18. Habbo Hotel, heart shaped Furni.

It is important to emphasize that the real drama was rather scripted by the game itself. Through its visually charged and erotically suggestive architecture, Habbo constructed a distinctive environment which functioned as a proto-immersive social stage where boundaries between play and affective experimentation were continually blurred. Within such stage, users could reimagine themselves through their avatars and perform identity in intimate, carefully curated spaces. Combined with the platform's logic of visibility through decorated interiors, Habbo shifted from being just a game to becoming a fully-fledged

dollhouse society – one where identity, desire, and social dynamics were staged and made visible through space.

Fig. 19. Habbo Hotel, Luxury 1970s-Inspired Rooms, author: @ogsef_habbo.

In the traditional dollhouse, theorized as a disciplinary object for young girls, domestic interiors serve both as fantasy and training ground: spaces in which aesthetic sensibility, emotional labour, and the orchestration of social scenes can be practiced through miniature furniture and silent dolls (Stewart 1993). Habbo revived and reanimated these dynamics in a digital idiom. Here, avatars functioned as animated dolls – self-styled, costumed, and maneuvered through choreographed interactions – while rooms became modular domestic scenes to be furnished, curated, and shown off. The interface invited users to perform this type of affective labour: crafting atmospheres, hosting guests, and investing emotional attention in the care of interiors designed for both intimacy and social visibility.

This gendered labour was neither neutral nor equally distributed. While femme-coded spaces often centred on idealized domesticity – dreamy bedrooms, romantic villas, pastel-coloured bathrooms – male avatar's rooms mirrored fantasies of autonomy and economic power: casinos, private offices, mafia hideouts (Wizold Sage 2024),

nightclubs. These contrasting spatial logics echoed broader cultural narratives – the dollhouse was not just a metaphor, but a structural paradigm, naturalizing the aesthetics of care for some, and command for others.

This dynamic must also be read in relation to the sociopolitical climate of the early 2000s in Italy, when Berlusconi's hyper-gendered media culture amplified already existing gender stereotypes. The national television programming of the time centred around idealized domestic femininity, eroticized hospitality, and male entrepreneurial spectacle. Habbo, in its own way, mirrored and extended these cultural scripts into the digital sphere. While shows like *Striscia la Notizia* (Mediaset, 1999) staged the spectacle of the *Veline*[3] beside the "businessman", Habbo gamified these same tropes – hosting as labour, interior design as social capital, seduction as aesthetic performance. The digital dollhouse thus functioned not only as a space of play, but as a training ground for internalizing, reproducing, and performing gendered expectations embedded in both domestic and offline life.

Fig. 20. Mediaset Video. "Stacchetto Story 1999-2000." Striscia la Notizia.

What appeared as innocent and childlike actions – arranging furniture, dressing avatars, hosting friends

3 In Italian national television, "Veline" (singular: *velina*) originally referred to the young women who assisted the hosts on the satirical news program "Striscia la Notizia". Since then its usage has expanded to encompass more showgirls in Italian television and media.

in your “digital house” – was in fact a microcosm of a wider affective regime. It taught young users, especially girls, how to inhabit space not merely as occupants but as caretakers, decorators, and entertainers; to aestheticize intimacy, perform value, and once again internalize “visibility” as virtue. Habbo Hotel, under the disguise of the ‘game’, was then more like a training platform of formal education that aligned closely with the normative scripts assigned to femininity, echoing lessons that would go far beyond the screen. Much like its *analog* predecessor, the dollhouse, Habbo Hotel’s ambient charm masked a deeply pedagogical architecture – one that rehearsed future roles through ritualized interface habits, sweetened by animation and reward. Even though Habbo has long since faded from the digital mainstream, its gendered scripts persist in today’s platforms that gamify domesticity, in influencer aesthetics that equate care with capital, in the economies of visibility that still shape how women perform online. What began as play now reads, in retrospect, as preparation.

Fig. 21. Habbo Hotel, Nightclub Public Room.

Fig. 22. Habbo Hotel, Girl-coded cafè, private rooms.

Intermezzo – Attila Manfredi

Apparently, the screenshot dates back to 2011 — the year Habbo Hotel (or Bobba Hotel) was our weekday after-school hangout. Saturdays were for catechism and pre-Confirmation activities at Church, but from Monday to Friday, this was our spot. We would gather here with

the same classmates I used to eat sandwiches with during lunchbreak – except now we were having sex with strangers dressed in swimsuits, bunny slippers, and shopping bags on our heads.

I don't remember exactly how the first time went – which bed it was, in which room, or what outfit I had picked. But I do remember the ritual.

Someone would whisper to you in a public room: "sex?" Or they would friend you, then slide into your private chat with the same question. I'd say yes (I didn't even really know what sex involved).

So: friend request > private chat > you see your partner vanish from the public room, and that's your cue to follow.

You would end up in a private room – I remember especially the classic 6x6 tile layout (like the one in the screenshot). Intimate. Just for two. Barely enough space for a few Furni (even if you're broke, my love don't cost a thing – as J.Lo *would say). Just big enough for a bed to lie on – one of the few actions my 8-bit body could perform. Sometimes it was just a plain little box, grey walls, grey floor, no windows, no Furni – maybe one of those bugger-coloured stools (which cost a few cents of phone credit).*

And there I was, ready to have sex with my partner. I wasn't into eccentric stuff – I never roleplayed as a baby[4]*. At most, I would wRiTe LiKe ThIs because all my friends did it & I wanted to feel grown too.*

Anyway, lying on the bed: *kisses kisses* *mmmmm mmmm* *puts it in* *I'M A VIRGIN* *moans* *oh yes*

thrusts it in *mmmmm*

I never liked having sex on Habbo. I didn't get why people did it – sometimes not even how. So I would sneak into other people's rooms (when I saw two users were inside – sometimes I even rang the doorbell) just to study how the sexting worked. Most of the time I got kicked out pretty fast (not everyone liked having a voyeur in the room – or maybe that concept of kink/fetish was still few

4 Habbo Baby is a term used to describe Habbo users playing as infants or babies.

years away from reaching the habbo.it *server). Not that I was there with such intention – I was there as an 11-year-old anthropologist.*

That was my sex education.

xx_Kekko_xx was the first penis I ever saw – from Napoli, and apparently well experienced. When I asked "age?", he didn't even bother to ask mine before replying "12." Who knows if it was true.

Anyway, the photo of my vagina travelled from my iPhone 4 to his phone via the Kik app.

Our one-afternoon love story began right there on Bobba Hotel (a retro clone of Habbo). After the climax, he left me alone in the room like some miserable leftover, and when I followed him to the other room, I found him already hitting on someone else with a simple: "u got a bf?"

Heart shattered.

The Masquerade – Skins, Scripts, Selves

In a moment when terms like *queerness* or *non-binary* were still years away from entering our vocabulary, Habbo set the stage for one of its most compelling features: the possibility of reimagining ourselves entirely. For a generation of young teenagers, Habbo Hotel offered an early, unspoken initiation into the performativity of the self within digital space, allowing for experimentation with relational codes, visual self-presentation, and sexuality. While such exploration was often deeply intertwined with normative gender roles and aesthetics that came from offline life's media and family culture, it also offered space for moments of radical subversion, ambiguity, and role-play.

Unlike platforms that anchored users to their existing social circles or physical appearance – think MSN Messenger, or webcam-based platforms like ooVoo, and Chatroulette, which required names, photographs, real-time audio-visual presence – Habbo offered the possibility of radical dissociation from real life. The platform was structured around anonymity and self-fabrication,

each user being represented by an avatar highly customizable in every aspect of its appearance: hairstyles, clothing, accessories, skin tones, piercings. More than visual cues, each of these choices contributed to the construction of a persona that was at once artificial yet affectively resonant.

Fig. 23a. HABBO HOTEL Avatars, VIP Habbo Club members.

Fig. 23b. HABBO HOTEL Avatars, non-VIP members.

Fig. 24. HABBO HOTEL, VIP HC Limousine.

For my girl friends and me, Habbo soon became an early laboratory for rehearsing forms of femininity not yet accessible or permissible in the public spaces of our offline life. Our avatars wore miniskirts, fishnets, heavy makeup and flamboyant accessories, partially to reflect our personal aesthetic preferences, but also as instruments of speculative embodiment. If the avatars were digital prostheses through which we could exaggerate, distort and eroticize ourselves, the Hotel indeed offered a low-risk territory for testing visual libidinal cues often associated with adult womanhood; and we enjoyed playing a femininity that was camp, extravagant, seductive, and unapologetically performative.

The virtual dressing room seemingly echoed our offline rituals: sneaking into our mothers' bedrooms to try on fancy clothes, high heels, smudging colourful makeup on our faces, and striking exaggerated poses in front of the mirror. But unlike those solitary playful rehearsals, the web was suddenly allowing that disguised version to be met by others. What set Habbo Hotel apart from other online doll-making games of the time – such as *Stardoll*, *Barbie.com*, and partially *The Sims*, which isolated the avatar in a loop of aesthetic play – was precisely the possibility of merging shapeshifting within a live social architecture. The platform did not simply allow users to decorate a doll; it invited that doll to speak, move, desire, interact with others. This very separation between our physical body and digital identity granted the opportunity to disappear as much as to multiply, allowing us to navigate the early stages of gendered socialization, and explore our subjectivities outside the confines of physical embodiment or normative social expectations.

Gender presentation on Habbo was inherently fluid and porous: while users were required to select a gender at the moment of registration, the platform's system of avatar customization allowed for femininity and masculinity to be exaggerated, subdued, or entirely reconfigured. Through aesthetic choices, users could construct gendered appearances that often departed from normative expec-

tations, enabling playful negotiations of identity as much as profound personal realizations. Numerous testimonies over the years attest to how the game enabled users to first articulate or encounter their queer desires. I here recall the article of a former player that recounts how Habbo was the place where she “learned how to be gay” (Schaufeld 2018), describing the transformative experience of user-generated rooms such as the *LGBT Wonderland* (Rogers 2020). In this kind of queer space, avatar’s stylistic choices – cropped hair, bright colours, gender non-conforming outfits – signalled affective belonging; and more than vessels for disguise, they were rather tools for revelation and identification.

Fig. 25. Habbo Hotel, Pride Promo 2025.

This capacity for self-discovery was not limited to solitary experiences. In a now-mythical anecdote from one of my friends, I recall one of them being in a relationship with a male-presenting avatar throughout her early teens, only to discover years later that the character had been played all along by a lesbian woman. Rather than deception, this moment revealed how the mediated space of Habbo allowed for mutual projection, emotional investment, and cross-identification, regardless of the player’s offline body. This was precisely the radical potential of shapeshifting – not the erasure of identity, but the surfacing of submerged desires through speculative embodiment.

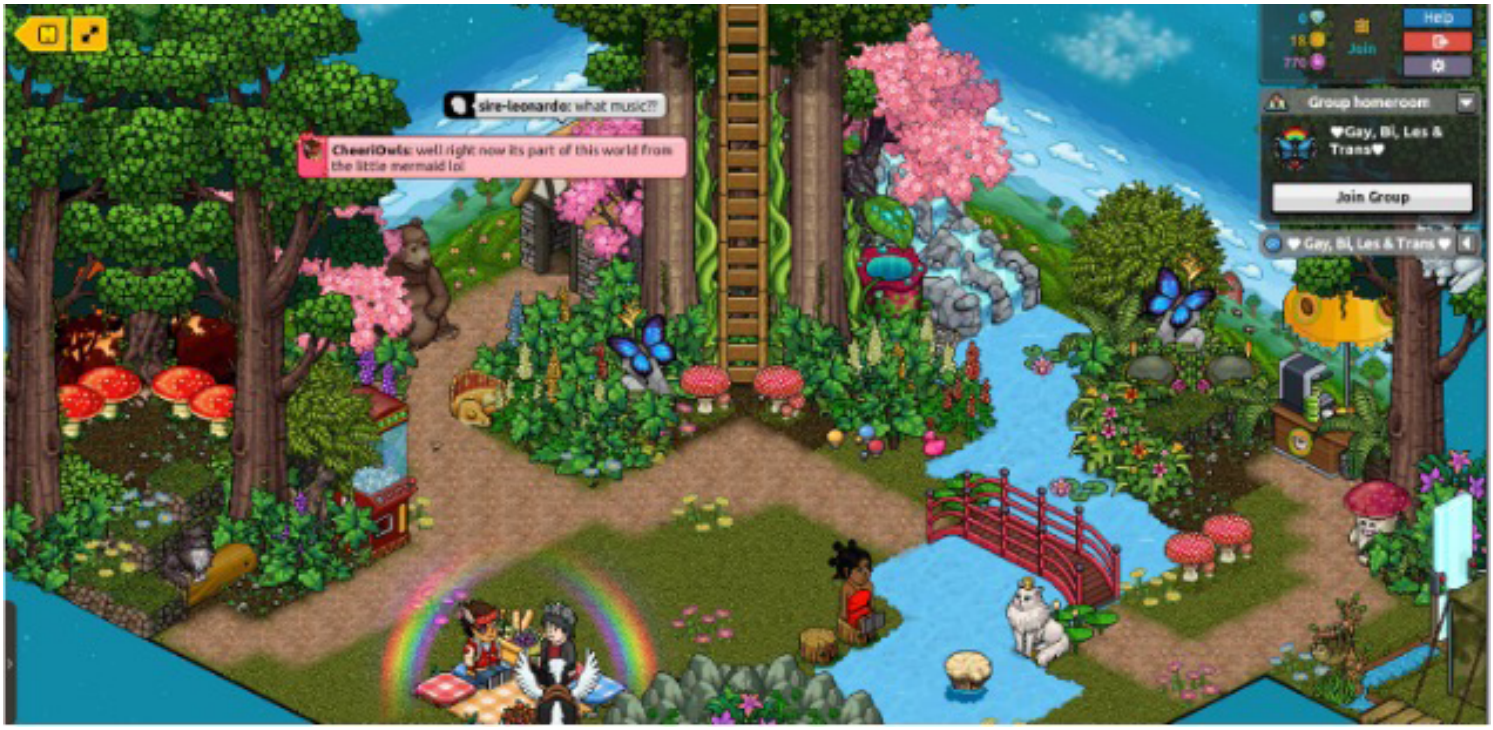

Fig. 26. Habbo Hotel, LGBT Wonderland Public Room.

Although racial experience is rarely documented within the Italian Habbo Community, it remains a crucial dimension to consider when examining the platform's dynamics of sexuality – particularly in non- Italian servers, where race emerges as a visible and affective axis of interaction. Despite the limited variety of body modifications available in the platform design – for example, in terms of body size or height, which was not variable – Habbo offered a wide variety of visual indicators of identity – through skin tones, facial features, hair types, or culturally coded fashion – resulting in users still projecting, interpreting, and reacting to racialized bodies within the Hotel.

In a striking user testimony from Habbo US, one player recounts being approached by "the only other African American woman-avatar" (LMW 2009) in the room, followed by a proposition for dirty sex. In their blog post, the author wonders how this person assumed that they might possibly be interested in partaking in intercourse – "Who are these people? Who are these characters? What do these various personalities represent in this virtual world? What do they seek to accomplish?" (LMW 2009). In their blog post, they end up describing how these interactions unex-

pectedly provoked a deeper awareness of their own racial perception, unconscious biases, and affective responses.

While the digital realm of Habbo Hotel was often understood as a space of identity abstraction, it also unveiled the ways in which racial and sexual scripts persist and circulate even in environments that are ostensibly liberated from physical identity and real-world consequences. While avatars offered the promise of reinvention, fantasy, and disidentification, this user's experience makes clear that pre-existing cultural logics about race and sexuality are re-inscribed within virtual interactions – determining which bodies or visual cues are read as hypersexual or available. Being unanchored from the body, yet pushed towards intimate encounters by the platform, inevitably highlights the ambivalence of virtual play in Habbo – on one hand, its freedom served as a site liberation or experimentation, on the other, it opened the door for the reproduction and amplification of harmful tropes, unmediated by social accountability. Habbo's supposed anonymity, then, offered a stage on which users could reproduce, negotiate, or subvert hegemonic logics of identity – including the intersecting dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality.

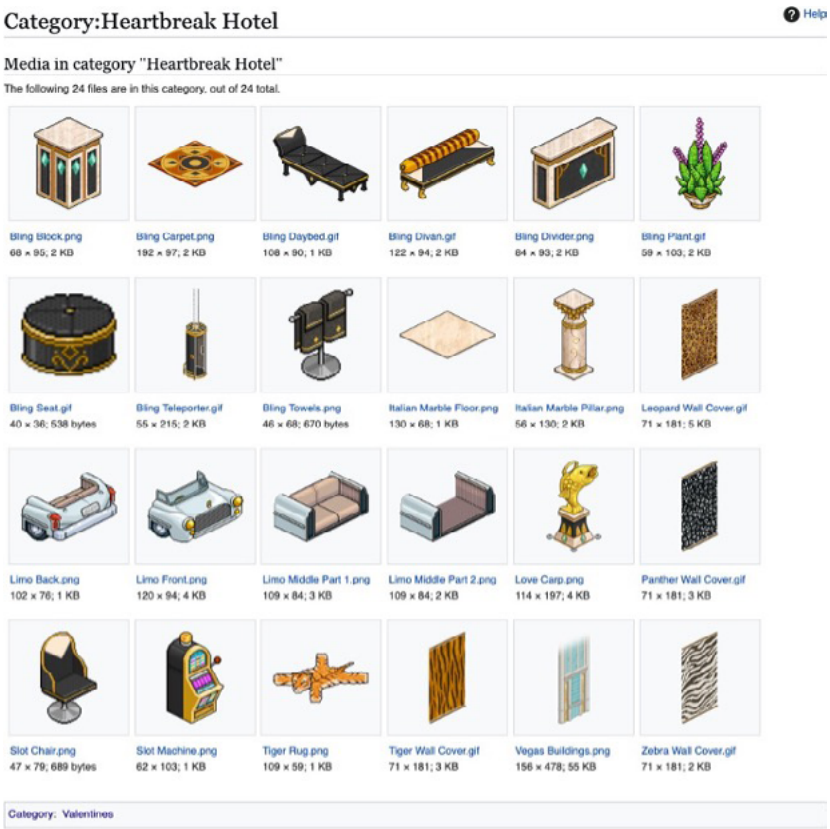

Fig. 27. HABBO's Furni Selection – Heartbreak Hotel.

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