

**Wake up, Henry Jenkins, this is no *Star Wars Galaxies*: *Hogwarts Reborn* and the gamer-free zone of Second Life's fan-created role playing games**

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When I first arrived in Second Life, a three-dimensional, free, open-source Internet virtual world, I felt a profound sense of isolation. I had expected to be confronted with masses of other avatars, but for the most part, I was alone. When my father (a long-time SL “resident”) suggested to me to look up a group to join in order to meet people, I couldn’t think of anything else to search for in Second Life’s worldwide search engine, and typed the name of my long-time fandom: “Harry Potter.” What I found would lead me to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a fan in Second Life, and the ways in which Second Life differs profoundly from other Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs).

*Hogwarts Reborn* is a role playing game created by Second Life residents (Second Life users do not call themselves “players,” since as my father explained to me, “Second Life is not a game”). The world of *HR* comprises Wizard’s Alley (a virtual recreation of Diagon Alley from the *Harry Potter* series), Knockoff Alley (corresponding to Knockturn Alley), and the Hogwarts castle and grounds. Residents seeking to join the role-play fill out a standard character sheet describing the person they would like to be in the Harry Potter world, including Hogwarts students from first through seventh year, Hogwarts professors, and adult wizards. However, since the game takes place after the end of the book series and before Harry Potter’s children enter Hogwarts, no player can assume the identity of any of the characters mentioned in the series. *Hogwarts Reborn* players live in the world of their fan object and become characters that could exist in that world, but do not act out events from the fan text.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of *Hogwarts Reborn* for a new resident of Second Life is the visual accuracy espoused by its users. Though Harry Potter fan art may take liberties with the modesty of Hogwarts uniforms and the types of muggle (non-wizard) clothing favored by Harry Potter characters, dressing some in leather pants, transforming some into anime-inspired chibis or willowy giants, Hogwarts Reborn operates under a strict dress code. As my orientation officer described to me, the rules are, “No shouting, no sex, no flying [without brooms], no skimpy clothes.” Skirts must be below the knee, and avatars’ belly buttons and chests must be covered. The thin, winding streets of Wizard’s Alley seem to be paved with cobblestones, and the dark, gloomy passageways of Knockoff Alley have old-fashioned gas streetlights, with a Grim Reaper-like “Death Eater Bartender” at the Hog’s Head Pub. Walking through these streets, a student may come across the wobbly-columned silhouette of Gringotts, the wizard bank as depicted in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the film directed by Chris Columbus. The alleys are dotted with shops and residences, selling everything from standard school robes and wands to thong-back leather chaps (not allowed for Hogwarts students, naturally).

Henry Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture* about how Raph Koster, head of production for *Star Wars Galaxies*, a MMORPG deliberately designed for fans of the Star Wars series, designed a similar roleplay system. Though Jenkins hails *Star Wars Galaxies* as a major step in a more symbiotic relationship between fan text producers and fan communities, it is still a producer-created fantasy of a space where fans can exist, and, as such, has some elements that make it a very producerly game indeed.

From 2003 until 2005, when the Jedi class was opened to beginning players, the only way to become a Jedi in the *SWG* universe was to go through an elaborate set of

actions set by the producers but kept a secret from gamers. Because the process of “becoming a Jedi” was initially set by a mysterious upper level of programmers in the *Star Wars Galaxy* universe, it assumed the aspect of a traditional producer-created “quest,” in the sense of traditional gaming: for the two years in which the Jedi quest was open to players as a gameplay option, *Star Wars Galaxies* users tried feverishly to “beat” that aspect of the game, avoiding the “perma-death” that would occur for their character after three in-game deaths, rather than interacting with other fans in the virtual world or creating their own quests.

*Star Wars Galaxies’* Jedi system was catered to a certain idea of fandom, where the more informed or more skillful have markedly higher social status than the uninitiated. When the Jedi class was opened to new players, therefore, those who had earned their status through the arduous producer-created process of 2003-2005 protested that it was “off-canon” to have so many Jedi in the time period specified by the game. A certain segment of *Star Wars Galaxies’* gamer audience seems to have greatly enjoyed the more “game-like” aspects of *SWG*, at the expense of forming an in-game *Star Wars* fandom. In fact, the quest of becoming a Jedi, as specified in the original version of *Star Wars Galaxies*, does not even require a gamer to be part of *Star Wars* fandom: it only requires a certain gaming skill and persistence shared by many fans of video games in general. After all, isn’t a “gamer,” just a video game fan?

*Hogwarts Reborn* parallels Second Life itself in that it is not a “game,” and is not populated by “gamers.” Requiring only the most basic level of Second Life technical skill, its only standard for membership is that a resident must have been in Second Life for at least fourteen days before joining. Players do not have to begin as a first year

student and work their way through their Hogwarts education by passing a series of tests, but they choose their class year, or they choose to become an adult wizard or witch. Since spell casting is only allowed with permission, and dueling is only allowed during Defense Against the Dark Arts class, the “game” aspect of *Hogwarts Reborn* takes place on a largely social level, in verbal interactions between fans of the *Harry Potter* series assuming identities within that world. Thus the almost immediate acceptance I gained when I admitted to being a fan of *Harry Potter*. Though I was ultimately unable to join as of my first visit to the world of *HR*, not having been logged on for over fourteen days, my orientation officer excitedly described the world of *Hogwarts Reborn* to me and promised to keep me updated on in-world social events (I had just missed a slumber party the weekend before I arrived). Several students I met raved to me about the beauty of the Hogwarts campus, telling me that if I had read the *Harry Potter* books, I would truly enjoy *Hogwarts Reborn*.

*Hogwarts Reborn* is unlike *Star Wars Galaxies* in the same way that Second Life is unlike other MMORPGs. Rather than involving a central “game,” it is centered on what amounts to a social club for fans of *Harry Potter*, taking place in a three-dimensional recreation of the world of the fan text. Users may take pleasure in visually recreating the trappings of the *Harry Potter* series and taking on the identity of an imagined resident in that world, but the social bonds between residents are more important than the pursuit of some overarching goal. Though space has constrained me from discussing them in detail, large-scale plots are designed to be inclusive of as many characters as possible, and major players agree in advance upon the outcome. The visual fetishism of *Hogwarts Reborn* in general, as well as the prevalence of shops and objects

for sale, are also influenced by the format of Second Life. Second Life's status as a largely visual environment makes the visual accuracy of any fan recreation its salient point. Residents' desire to make in-game spending money by selling objects fuels an ongoing competition as to who can design the "best" uniforms, schoolbooks, wands and spells. These visual elements are married to the social interaction facilitated by Second Life's chat-centered interface, to create what is less of a game and more of a location for a fan community. *Hogwarts Reborn*, like Second Life, is ultimately a place and a community, rather than a "game" in the sense of many MMORPGs, even those created for fans like *Star Wars Galaxies*.