

'No Light Sabres Allowed': Role-playing in Star Wars Galaxies™.

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While some MMOGs are worlds in their own right, i.e. where the game world and background story is designed for the particular game, other games may be derived from familiar popular culture narratives and other media forms such as films and literature. The MMOG Star Wars Galaxies (SWG) is an example of this trend and is based on the Star Wars Universe which has featured in 6 blockbuster films, books, video games, and a variety of other mediums.

This paper presents findings from an ethnographic research within the role-playing community of Freetown, which is located on one of the servers of SWG. The paper aims to demonstrate how, in addition to recognised player-typology (e.g. power-gamers, role-players and socialisers) player identity and community is established and maintained through readings and interpretation of the Star Wars narrative.

The Freetown players, like other SWG users, create and control characters in their game play. However, the Freetown players, in the name of role-playing, take on the role of the characters and use them to drive forwards player written storylines, which take part within the town. The role-play is coordinated and regulated by a team of players who serve as story coordinators (SC). Before each storyline is actualised in role-play, the SC team makes sure the storyline in question fits the Freetown role-playing agenda, the Star Wars extended storyline and the narrative context of Star Wars Galaxies.

As Freetown is situated within the Star Wars universe, the storylines bear the mark of being written for that specific context. While some role-players base their content loosely on the Star Wars universe, others delve more deeply into the narrative universe to find substance for their stories. References to the Star Wars Universe are used by players to gain credibility for their own stories by situating events and characters as situated 'correctly' within the storylines. Once a storyline is actualised by players, they strive to carry out 'good quality role-playing' which, among other things, is judged by their ability to take into account the context of the Star Wars narrative.

In this paper I will focus especially on a debate that was present in the community over whether players should be allowed to role-play Jedi Knights within the community borders. The Jedi Knights are iconic figures which have a prominent role within the Star Wars Universe and therefore it may seem surprising that players would debate the legitimacy of role-playing a Jedi Knight. The debate however unravels how players use their interpretations of the Star Wars narrative to maintain and strengthen the community of Freetown by attracting a group of 'like-minded' players. The paper will draw on literature on audiences, gaming, online - and fan communities in order to explore the 'Jedi debate' and explain how these specific readings and interpretations provided the people with a collective identity and a sense of belonging.

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