

Virtual Knights and Synthetic Worlds: Jediism in Second Life

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Under a pink sky dominated by the giant red planet Yavin, a seeker, head bowed, climbs the steep stairs to the great stone temple. He walks to the front, falling to one knee before the Jedi Master. No words are exchanged but in those moments the seeker pledges to begin the long journey from Padawan to Jedi Knight (see Lukas 2015). This is not a scene from one of the Star Wars movies, this is a ritual enacted many times over, on the small moon of Yavin IV recreated in the Second Life universe. Seekers from far and wide are drawn here to begin their spiritual quest or to dip a toe into another way of being. The experience is direct, and the seeker forges the path.

Introduction

Almost every manifestation of religion finds expression in the virtual world of Second Life. Established religions have a presence; for example, Epiphany Cathedral is home to Anglicans in the virtual world (Hutchings 2011). Geographically dispersed adherents gather for communion, Bible study and regular services. Those manifestations of the numinous bordering on religion, depending on the definition employed, can be found in every corner. Masonic temples abound and all the paraphernalia required for the mysterious rituals of Freemasonry can be bought from the Second Life Marketplace (Farley 2010). There are some religions that only find expression in this virtual space. There are all manner of temples, churches, sacred grottoes, simulated stone circles and the opportunity for religious pilgrimage. Some of these expressions can be seen as virtual missionary activity, taking religion to a new frontier. Some religion in virtual worlds is just for fun; people experimenting with a new religion for a while and trying on the trappings for size.

One of the more interesting manifestations of religion in Second Life can be found in role-play. There is a growing scholarship about religion in the Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* or *Runescape*, but religion still remains in the service of the overall narrative that drives the gameplay. Role-play in Second Life is different: it is entirely created by its users, not the owners of the platform (Guitton 2012). This freedom allows expressions, religious and otherwise, that cannot be readily found within MMORPGs.

This chapter considers the expression of hyper-real religion through role-play in the virtual world of Second Life. There are a number of role-playing groups that draw their inspiration from Jediism in the virtual world including Jedi's [sic] of the Republic and Jedi of SL. Most require strict adherence to a code of behaviour, context-appropriate apparel that could reasonably appear in *Star Wars* which must be worn at all times, and a requirement to remain in character while role-playing. This chapter conducts an etic investigation into the motivations behind role-playing in Second Life and whether or not role-play acts as a form of religious expression in this environment by using Johan

Huizinga's concept of the "magic circle", a walled off but temporary spot within the real world dedicated to the performance of an act alone (Huizinga 1949). Rather than regarding spaces within virtual worlds as being totally sealed, Edward Castronova considers them to be porous, leaking through into the real world and vice versa (Castronova 2005). Hyper-real religion in Second Life is considered in light of this theoretical lens.

The Emergence of Jediism

Some fifteen years ago, an email did the rounds urging people to claim 'Jedi' as their religion in response to a question on the national census forms in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK. The author claimed that such an action would force the governments of these countries to include 'Jedi' as an option for selection in response to an enquiry about religious affiliation in future census collections (Singler 2014). In response, some 70,000 Australians, 53,000 New Zealanders and 390,000 Britons claimed they were 'Jedi' in the 2001 census in these countries (McCormick 2006). Though it was widely viewed as a joke or a statement by atheists objecting to the idea of religion, data collected in the 2011 census saw 65,000 Australians and 177,000 from the United Kingdom claiming 'Jedi' as their religious affiliation (de Castella 2014). Almost certainly, a small number of those respondents, identifying as Jedi, desperately wanted Jediism to be a real religion and wanted their beliefs to be more broadly recognised by the community in which they lived (Singler 2014).

Jedi are an order of warrior monks, first seen in George Lucas' science fiction epic, *Star Wars* (1977), who claim to be "the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy" (de Castella 2014). Most followers claim to use "the Force," which is similar in concept to the Chinese *qi* (Cusack 2010: 121), an echo of many of the holistic spiritual ideals touted in the 1960s and 1970s (de Castella 2014). Believers claim the Force is generated by all living things and binds the Universe together; it seeks balance and to regulate destiny itself (Peters 2012). Through rigorous training, Jedi learn to conquer fear and anger, learning to wield the 'Light' side of the Force (Cusack 2010: 121). The idea was borrowed from a number of religious traditions including Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity (Bowen and Wagner 2006), the cultural and spiritual ideals of the *samurai* of Japan (de Castella 2014) and the monks of the Shaolin Temple of China (Cusack 2010: 121). Certainly, Jediism draws extensively from the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell, particularly *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in constructing a modern mythology and marrying it to popular culture, transcending both to frame a coherent ideology (Peters 2012).

Initially, the divide between adherents of Jediism and fans of the franchise were difficult to discern as both groups took what they could from the seemingly never-ending stream of movies, series, fan fiction, video games, comics, role-playing books and so on, and filled in the gaps as they became obvious. Anthropologist Matthew Kappel believes that Jediism became participatory when a *Star Wars* role-playing guide from 1987 laid out a

coherent code for aspiring Jedi to follow (Collman 2013). Certainly, among the charters of groups claiming the Jedi title in Second Life, this code is oft repeated and many times expanded upon.

There is no emotion, there is peace
There is no ignorance, there is knowledge
There is no passion, there is serenity
There is no death, there is the force (Costikyan 1987).

Since that time, Jediism has been formed into a coherent religious code (de Castella 2014), drawing from the plethora of franchise-generated and fan-generated media that accompanied and developed from those original films.

Interestingly, just as there is a light side of the Force; there is also a “dark side” which is exploited by the Dark Lords of the Sith (Cusack 2010: 121). The term ‘Sith’ first appeared in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999). In the first video games of the *Star Wars* franchise such as *Jedi Academy* and *Jedi Knights*, aspiring Jedi Knights or Padawans had to overcome challenges and obstacles to become Jedi. Later games gave players the opportunity to choose the side with which they wanted to align. In *Star Wars: The Old Republic* players can choose to either play as a Jedi Knight or to align with the Sith (Loh 2008).

Second Life

At first, the relationship between Jediism and Second Life is not obvious. From 2007, Second Life exploded into the public perception through a number of high profile scandals. It was variously seen as an environment that could give vent to a range of often-unsavoury sexual activities (Brookey and Cannon 2009); and as a money-laundering venue for potential terrorists (Leapman 2007). But for its millions of users, Second Life provides a three-dimensional area of the Internet, where an individual is represented by a highly customisable motional avatar, able to interact and commune with others who may be geographically distant in the real world, commonly known as “meatspace” (Bardzell and Bardzell 2008). For users, the interactions and activities that take place in this virtual space are as real as those in the virtual world. The user, through his or her avatar, can perform actions including religion and rituals with an “embodied body” (Radde-Antweiler 2008: 174).

Second Life is a virtual world (VW), a three-dimensional virtual environment resembling a physical space that exists on a computer, some external storage device or server, and is generally – though not always – accessed via the internet (Pereira 2010: 94). It allows participants to create a virtual identity that persists beyond the initial session (Maher 1999: 322; Ritzema and Harris 2008: 110). The term “virtual world” was first coined by Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer in 1990 (Morningstar and Farmer 1991: 273). Virtual worlds, sometimes called “Multi-user Virtual Environments” (MUVES), are spaces where the most elaborate buildings can take shape within minutes

or hours. To all intents and purposes, if something can be imagined, it can be created in a virtual world environment. Historical, generational, professional or gender gaps are rendered obsolete in a virtual space where users cooperate to create knowledge and experiment with identity (Farley 2014).

Second Life was publicly released in 2003 by the San Francisco-based Linden Lab. Then CEO Philip Rosedale was inspired by the 1992 cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*, which prominently featured a persistent, ubiquitous metaverse where users could “digitize everything: and collaborate in a 3D environment that would be built by the users themselves (Jennings and Collins 2008: 181; Hendaoui, Limayem et al. 2008: 88). Second Life is the most mature and undoubtedly the most well-known virtual world probably due to the intense media scrutiny it has attracted, but many others exist such as Jibe, OpenSim, Active Worlds, Kitley, IMVU, Twinity and Blue Mars. As of November 2015, Second Life has around 44 million registered user accounts with between 8,000 to 10,000 new user accounts registered each day (Voyager 2015). There are slightly fewer than 25,000 regions or sims (a sim represents a virtual area of 256m x 256m) (Linden Labs, n.d.). There are between 25,000 and 55,000 users online at any time (Voyager 2015).

Role-Playing on Screen

In Second Life, the appearance of an avatar can change just by dragging a folder across the screen. In this way gender can instantly be changed, as can height, age, outfit, culture, occupation or religion (Ducheneaut, Yee et al. 2006: 294; Wadley 2011: 114). This makes virtual worlds an optimal venue for experimentation and role-playing (Farley 2014). Consequently, role playing is very common in virtual worlds as it is in Massively Multi-player Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) (Farley 2014). Though there are many similarities between virtual worlds and MMORPGs, what distinguishes the latter is the presence of an overarching narrative theme or plot-driven storyline (Jennings and Collins 2008: 181; Warburton 2009: 416); or even the pursuit of a high score (Radde-Antweiler 2008: 174). Though these can be built into a virtual world by a single user, or group of users, a narrative is not a necessary condition of its existence or functioning (Farley 2014). Role-playing in this environment requires that users exert higher cognitive efforts and ensure that there are sufficient elements to allow for the emergence of spontaneous complex behaviours (Guitton 2012). In this way, users become active participants instead of just being passive observers or simply re-enacting a particular scene or sequence from an established narrative (Guitton 2012).

Religion frequently forms an integral part of the rich narrative structure in digital gaming. Games such as the *Elder Scrolls* games of *Skyrim*, *Morrowind* and *Oblivion* are examples of the fantasy Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre in which religion is made explicit through the presence of deities, moral codes and cults (Thames 2014). The mythos of *Star Wars* also makes an appearance here through *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, featuring an epic power struggle between the Sith Empire and the Galactic

Republic (Thames 2014). Likewise, religion is often integral to role-play in Second Life. Leigh and colleagues describes religious role-play in a community recreating life in Ancient Egypt (Leigh, Elwell, and Cook 2010).

Meeting to role-play in Second Life engenders “social presence” in users, the ability to project themselves emotionally and socially (Pereira 2010: 94). If other people in that environment acknowledge one’s presence, it offers further affirmation that one actually ‘exists’ in that environment. Social presence results from communicating with others in any of a variety of ways including using voice or text chat, using gestures, or by otherwise interacting with those in the environment (Sadowski and Stanney 2002: 795). In general, there are three factors that impact the extent to which immersion and presence occur. These are commitment (individual-level, to the character and the community), cohesion (group-level, between the members of the community), and coherence (environment-level, between the community and the environment) (Guitton 2012: 1689).

Jediism in Second Life: A Methodology

Baym and Markham note that in conducting qualitative research on the Internet, there are fewer bounded places than in the ‘real’ world (Markham and Baym 2008). This is especially true when conducting research in virtual worlds; there is very little space that is truly private. The user’s ability to move his or her vantage point allows visibility of just about every space. Anyone with a Second Life account can explore most spaces, can view the charters of groups and buy the regalia of most religions via the browser-based Second Life Marketplace. Groups may link spaces in the virtual world with web-based spaces such as web pages or discussion forums through the web-on-a-prim functionality, whereby an object can act as a web link and either be displayed on the object or open a web page (Linden 2011).

Adherents of Jediism make substantial and effective use of the Internet to communicate via email, newsgroups and particularly through social media. Beth Singler has explored how the Jedi leverage social media, particularly Twitter, and the Internet to create legitimacy (Singler, 2014). On October 18, 2015, a Google search on Jediism revealed that there are some 62,200 websites accessible on this topic and while many will contain information for fans or fan fiction or other, many represent groups of people who consider Jediism to be a legitimate religion, such as The Temple of the Jedi Order (Temple Of The Jedi Order 2015).

For this chapter, data was collected from a number of public spaces in Second Life and virtual artefacts gathered. The author assumed a Jedi identity, including appropriate apparel, in order to blend into the *Star Wars* role-playing regions and in order to not violate the rules of engagement in those regions. Group descriptions and group charters were examined. The Second Life Marketplace was searched in order to gather information about the sorts of resources available to Jedi role-players. A number of SWRP and other Jedi/Sith role-playing regions were visited. Though engaging in

conversation, either through text or voice chat, with participants, there was no discussion about the religious or role-play aspects of Jediism as “out of character” (OOC) chat was usually prohibited during role-play. Though it would be possible to converse with these people outside of role-play, this remains an objective for future research.



Figure 1: The author as Helen Frak dressed as a Jedi.

Jedi in the Second Life Economy

In contrast to some other virtual worlds, Second Life has an economy fuelled by a currency based on Linden Dollars and regulated through the LindeX or Second Life Stock Exchange. This allows for the co-creation of value by the both the owners of Second Life and the users of the platform (Bonsu and Darmody 2008: 356). One thousand Linden dollars is worth around \$USD4 (Linden Labs 2015). Goods or services can be bought or sold, mostly mediated through the Second Life Marketplace (Linden Labs 2015) but it is possible to buy goods through shops and kiosks throughout Second Life. The Second Life Marketplace is searchable and will order results according to search preferences including categories of content (apparel, hair, gestures and so on), cost, maturity level and relevance.

A search (conducted 17 November 2015) reveals some 1,668 results across all maturity levels and merchandise categories for the search term ‘Jedi’. A similar search with the term ‘Sith’ returns slightly fewer results at 1,442. There are likely to be many products in common between these searches as the search function is powered by keywords selected by the seller. The products available include complete avatars, outfits, vehicles, weapons, scripts and animations. Outfits vary from revealing outfits probably used for sexual role-play (Brookey and Cannon 2009) to outfits which very closely resemble those depicted in the *Star Wars* franchise.

Movement of avatars in Second Life is usually mediated through a keyboard and mouse, which does not lend itself to natural movement, particularly that movement not associated with locomotion. Animations can help render this movement both more complex and more natural. For example, within the native Second Life interface there are few opportunities to simulate combat with light sabres. An animation, which becomes linked to a particular avatar, can allow a reasonable simulation of light sabre combat. Though this allows more natural movement in real time, it can become particularly important when creating machinima. Machinima, short for “machine cinema,” is where “3D computer animation gameplay is recorded in real time as video footage and then used to produce traditional video narratives” (Bowen and Wagner 2006: 66). A search of YouTube reveals a number of machinima created featuring Jedi and Sith role-play. Some of these are informational, describing the ethos and ideals of the Jedi, many more document battles and events in Second Life (see X6GrimReaper9X 2015).

In essence, all of the accoutrements required to equip an avatar as a Jedi knight or as a Sith lord for role-play in Second Life, can be bought for a few US dollars and are readily available through established commercial channels. The barriers to role-play are small, excepting the possession of sufficiently powerful computer hardware and adequate Internet bandwidth.

Jedi and Sith Groups in Second Life

Collaboration and socialisation in Second Life are facilitated by the use of ‘groups’. Groups allow constituent members to communicate directly with each other through instant messaging or voice chat wherever they are in the metaverse. These conversations are private from other Second Life users. Group owners are able to name and regulate the permissions and duties of office bearers. They are also able to regulate membership, allowing avatars to join and expel them from the group should the need arise. Groups can jointly own land or other assets. Access to certain regions can be restricted to the members of certain groups. Hence, role-play in Second Life is facilitated by the presence and functionality of groups (Linden Labs 2011).

Using the search functionality of Second Life with the search term ‘Jedi’ within ‘groups’ some 415 results are returned (as of July 27 2015). Though the vast majority of these groups communicate in English (that is, group descriptions are in English), there also a number of groups that use other languages, namely Japanese, Portuguese, French, Italian, Spanish, German and Polish. This approximately reflects the makeup of the Second Life population by nationality: United States 31%; France 13%; Germany 10%; United Kingdom 8%; Netherlands 7%; Spain 4%; Brazil 4%; Canada 3%; Belgium 3%; and Italy 2% (Hachmann 2007).

Interestingly, though there are some 372 groups that are returned in a search for ‘Sith’ large number of Jedi groups also claim some affiliation with the dark side of the Force, perhaps as many as a quarter. Such groups include the Order of the Dark Jedi (ODJ),

which claims to be fallen Jedi who serve the Sith Emperor ({{ODJ}} Order Of The Dark Jedi n.d.) and the Jedi Crusaders. Another grouping, the Gray Jedi, are those who make use of the Force, treading a fine line between the light and the dark aspects of the Force. The term can also refer to those Jedi who distance themselves from the Jedi High Council (Gray Jedi 2005). The Gray Jedi are well represented in Second Life by groups such as The Galactic Imperial Knights (The Galactic Imperial Knights n.d.) and the Force Vigilante. The latter group states that there is no good without evil and pledges to do whatever is necessary to maintain the balance between the two (Force Vigilante n.d.).

Jedi Knights and Sith are not the only characters residing in the Star Wars universe, and many take on roles representing the myriad of other humanoid and alien characters that have emerged from the franchise. Many Second Life groups support Star Wars role-play in general and Jedi Knights seek membership of these groups for a more complete role-playing experience that better reflects the *Star Wars* universe. To enable them to be found, these groups identify themselves with the acronym SWRP (for *Star Wars* Role Play) (Guitton, 2012). A search using this acronym reveals some 239 groups including SWRP SANITY (SWRP SANITY n.d.) and SWRP Spacers United (SWRP Spacers United n.d.). Many of the groups identified with this acronym appear to serve as a means of promoting Star Wars role-playing by acting as a communication and dissemination portal.

It is difficult to discern which of these groups are for role-playing for entertainment and which represent a genuine religious community. What is most likely is that there is no clear boundary between these types of groups. Some groups explicitly state that they are true believers and adherents of Jediism. The Temple of the Jedi Force state that they are true adherents of Jediism and also promote this through a web presence. The web site grants access to a wide range of resources to facilitate learning in the ways of the Jedi and is available once a user has registered. Accounts are free and immediate access is granted (Temple of the Jedi Force n.d.). A post on their Q&A page explains their position on the religious value of Jediism:

Jediism is a modern conglomeration of widely accepted adaption of beliefs. George Lucas portrayed an already growing trend of people combining beliefs trying to form a unified religion. When he created the Star Wars saga, he portrayed this so well, using various aspects of Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Mysticism, and many other Religions' universal truths as well as a combination of different martial arts, and the Code of Chivalry, in order to create the Jedi and the philosophies behind the Force. The Jedi are modern versions of the Shao Lin Monk, the European Knight, and the Samurai Warrior all mixed together. The Jedi religion has become an inspiration and a way of life for many people throughout the world who take on the mantle of Jedi. Even though the name Jediism is fairly new, it is just as real as the ancient faiths and philosophies that it came from (Temple of the Jedi Force 2011).

This unambiguously marks the religious intent of the Temple of the Jedi Order, while acknowledging the fiction of the Star Wars franchise. **Jedi Role-Playing Regions in Second Life**

Grand spaces are relatively easy to create in Second Life. Users have all the tools to build spaces as long as they have some land and the skills. Or buildings, forests, temples or landscapes can be purchased for as little as a few hundred Linden dollars from the Second Life Marketplace and unpacked and modified to suit the needs of the user. Weapons, animated objects and HUDs (heads up displays) are similarly available and make it relatively easy to create a space for role-playing. All of these objects can be infinitely modifiable to suit any purpose or to satisfy any aesthetic ideal. A relatively unskilled user, without too much effort or time, can create a professional-looking environment that is attractive and functional. Given the ease with which bespoke spaces can be created, it is not difficult to create spaces that echo the feel and intent of the *Star Wars* universe.

There are 33 regions in Second Life that are identified as spaces for tagged with the label 'Jedi' in Second Life. Most of these also share the SWRP tag. Some are training academies where young Padawan or Jedi in training can visit to learn the doctrines and skills needed to be a Jedi Knight. Yavin IV is such a place (Yavin IV (ILM-CS AoWCS FFC) n.d.). Again, the name of this region is taking from the fictional Star Wars universe (see Yavin 4 n.d.). Notecards are given upon arrival at the region, outlining, the history of the region (in the larger context of the *Star Wars* universe), and the rules of participation. More typical are the role-playing sims such as New Alderaan. Named after Alderaan featured in the first movie of the Star Wars franchise and home to Princess Leia (later Leia Organa Solo) (Anon n.d.a.), the blurb that describes New Alderaan claims it is the home of thousands after Alderaan was destroyed by the first Death Star (Anon n.d.b.). Upon arrival at this destination, a notecard containing the rules of role-play and of sim is automatically provided. It asks that avatars remain in character, that any OOC (out of character) discussions occur only in private chat, and that overt sexuality be avoided because of the classification of the sim (rebeldyke n.d.). Apparel for the role-play is provided at New Alderaan for those without his or her own.

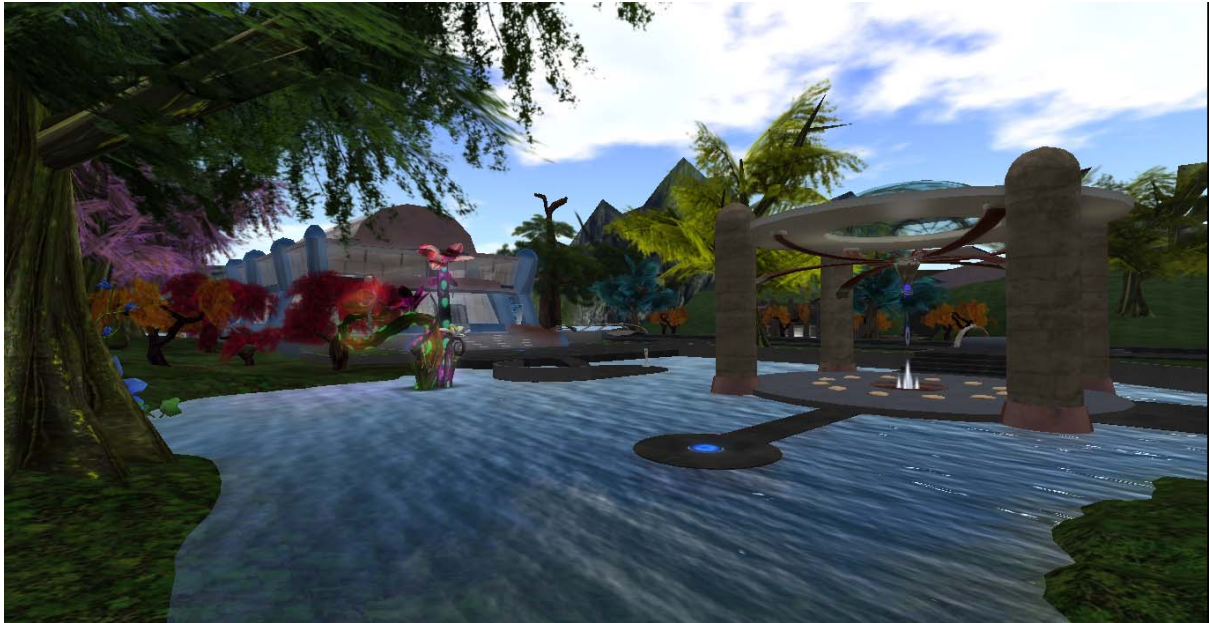


Figure 2: The Wilderness in Yavin IV.

The Magic Circle

Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga wrote his seminal work, *Homo Ludens* in 1938, surmising that to be human was to play (Huizinga 1949). He emphasised that play is voluntary, creative and altruistic, tends to foster secrecy and community among the players, is temporary and repetitive, and takes place in ‘special’ places (Cusack 2013: 363). The connection to religion is striking. Even though the participants in Second Life role-plays may not specifically espouse religion, there is something religious in their participation (Plate 2010). Huizinga described play as:

“a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga 1949: 13).

Religionist William E. Paden recognised that religions exist in another world with their own sets of rules, beliefs, and behaviours (quoted in Plate 2010). Plate takes this further by declaring that we live in concentric worlds in which neighbours keep different calendars, with their lives oriented to different gods, goddesses, books, and places (Plate 2010: 220). Each alternate world functions as what Huizinga described as a “magic circle,” characterising religion as much as it characterises play. In this way Jediism role-play spans the divide between religion and play with each having more in common with the other than not. In each there are different rules, a different timeline (literally in the

case of Jedi role-play), with players taking on different masks and identities (Plate 2010). What is to differentiate the Padawan learning the ways of the Jedi Knight on Second Life's Yavin IV from the Catholic Novitiate?

Conclusion

Though Jediism owes its origins to a social protest in response to a census in a number of countries, there is no doubt that in many cases, it has emerged as a hyperreal religion manifesting in many real and virtual spaces, including the virtual world of Second Life. Second Life users may overtly assert their belief in Jediism as a legitimate religion as with The Jedi Temple of the Force or they may don the garb, take up a virtual light sabre and participate in the many role-playing groups that market themselves as such with the SWRP tag; wanting no more than to pass a few hours in the company of a virtual brotherhood. The functionality built into the virtual world of Second Life enables those who are interested to form groups to enable communication, voice or text, between like-minded individuals who may be remote geographically. They can gather to talk, enact rituals and to engage in combat. Almost universally, this kind of role-playing requires that players/adherents remain in character (IC) so as not to disrupt the 'magic circle' characterised by strict rules, a code or credo and a parallel timeline.

Spaces sacred to Jedi (and their Sith antagonists), role-playing regions with lofty stone towers, otherworldly technologies and a strict dress code, can be readily manufactured from the inexpensive resources made available through the Second Life Marketplace. The magic circle takes a pixelated form, yet is no less real than a Gothic cathedral or a mosque with its imposing towers and a plaintive call to prayer (these too can be found in Second Life). Participants would look at home in any of the *Star Wars* films. The attention to detail in their dress, speech and the make up of their weaponry belies the perceived connection to the fictional characters of the franchise. The struggle between good and evil is writ large in the battles between the Jedi Knights and the Sith, but the dichotomy is not so clear cut with the Gray Jedi walking the line, their sacred duty to restore balance to a disordered universe.

Much remains to be done, and this chapter forms only the first part of a great journey. It explores those very public virtual artefacts of Jediism in Second Life. How those role-plays impact the real lives of the participants and the complex interplay between religion, religious role-play and play remain to be plumbed. Can we really say that to be virtually religious is religious enough or is it more than enough?

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