

Hogwarts Legacy – cultural studies

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Secretly, we all want to be bad.

If you have read, seen, or played any Harry Potter book, movie, or game, you are acquainted with the famous wizarding school from Scotland, Hogwarts. And inherently, you are aware all the students in the school enroll in a house of their choice, each with its unique appeals and downsides.

The latest installment in the Harry Potter franchise (or better yet, the Wizarding World franchise), Hogwarts Legacy, allows players to immerse themselves into an overwhelming world that draws its content from a plentitude of books, movies, and games. This is the ultimate experience of being a wizard.

Embarking on the fascinating journey to master spells and enchantments, one of your very first endeavors is to pick your very own Hogwarts house. The decision for the school to separate itself in such a way had the purpose of creating a tight community among wizards and witches with similar traits, thus providing a sense of belonging, support, and identity. They were supposed to grow and nurture their natural-born talents, along with similar-minded students, and be inspired to embody the ideals of their house.

But this sounds like a magical Utopia, where everyone is happily integrated and they all work to aspire to be the best versions of themselves by receiving such support. And if this sounds impossible, it is probably because Utopias are not sustainable. Inevitably, Slytherin became pure-bloods who constantly think they are superior and are portrayed as the villain, Gryffindor becomes the hero, Hufflepuff are the useless underdog that never wins, is always too nice, and no one wants to be part of, and Ravenclaw is just there.

J. K. Rowling's intention, when writing the original material, was exactly this – to portray Slytherin as the villain, to make them the bad guy, so the audience would get the immediate correlation between the Hogwarts house and their traits, thus ending up repulsed by them as the reader.

*[Games access the public imagination, and in their carefully crafted expressions, they fulfill a persuasive function (as other image-making practices), and they mirror aspects of society within a particular historical moment. Analysing them closely can help us reflect upon and understand the ways culture works on us – something that is otherwise difficult to grasp from within that culture.] [1]*

Fast forward 25 years or so into the future. Hogwarts Legacy is based on the source material and faithfully adheres to it. One of the things it develops well is the Slytherin characters. Sebastian Sallow learns dark magic to try and save his sister from a curse, unavoidably killing their uncle in the process. Ominis Gaunt's family tortured muggles (people who are unaware magic existed) with unforgivable curses. Imelda Reyes organizes broom racing, despite the headmaster forbidding the well-known broom sport, Quidditch. The potions professor is a Slytherin, working in a cold, dark dungeon.

If we were to pretend to remain inside the Wizarding World universe, we can already observe a socio-political cultural bias being created by simply accentuating and repeating the traits of a particular group. The Slytherin are ambitious, cunning, and resourceful. This is further reinforced by their mascot, the serpent. When used as a symbol, it fits perfectly into the values of the community that was created.

If we were to look strictly at the symbol from a negative perspective, this is associated with death, evil, poison, and destruction. We should also take into account other uses of the symbol, including the Bible. This is probably the most widespread and well-known book in the history of mankind. One of the points it gets across is that there was a serpent in heaven and that serpent was evil and tempted Eve to commit the sin. This is the story everyone knows. This is the story embedded in the collective unconscious.

We now have a social construct embedded in our brains, that is further reinforced by the author's worldbuilding and further modeled into the world by the game designers. Are all Slytherin bad?

No. Does the usual player understand that? Maybe. We don't know. The problem becomes the identity the player has for themselves.

Upon arriving at Hogwarts, the first quest you need to complete is the sorting ceremony. You will pick your favorite house and this will represent your ideals, your essence, and the potential of your wizard self. The all-knowing hat is placed on your head, and it looks deep inside your brain, asking you simple questions about your personality traits. Based on your short answers, you are then recommended the best house for you.

None of that matters, as the last question has 4 choices, with each corresponding to a house: Gryffindor – daring, Ravenclaw – curiosity, Hufflepuff – loyalty, Slytherin – ambition. Even after picking a trait, you are still given the option to review and change your final house, reviewing all the details of each community.

The house you pick has little impact on the gameplay. There are only 2 differences in the entire game based on that. Otherwise, you will be basically experiencing the same content. The first change is purely cosmetic and includes the house color, the house emblem, and the common room. Surely, you get to explore a different room for each of your choices, but will otherwise not matter much. The second difference is one of the quests. This is particular to each house and depending on your favorite place, you will have different objectives in different areas. These do not include any special powerups or collectibles.

Despite picking different houses, the experience you get immersed in is very much the same. The game plays the same regardless. But there is another reason for picking a certain house. It will offer you a sense of belonging, of being in the place you want, of perpetuating the same beliefs and preconceptions about each of the houses.

Only 13% of players choose Hufflepuff. They have not been portrayed very kindly in the franchise. They are just too nice, not very good at anything, and their mascot is a badger. Compared to the mascot of the other houses, the griffin, the serpent, and the eagle, theirs is the most mundane and boring creatures of all.

In the middle, with 21% and 23%, we have the two next best houses, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Slytherin has a distant first place with almost 30% of the players preferring this house. Without any major difference in gameplay, the only reasons that remain are the way that they are portrayed.

Whether it is power, ambition, the fact they are pure blood, or just their villainous portrayal, people tend to incline that way. Some just say they like the combination of colors – silver and green. Others are attracted to the serpent. Many acknowledge that they try to look past the villainous portrayal of the students. They remember great wizards that were part of Slytherin, such as Merlin. The content that is produced and perpetuated influences what people actually want, as the designer has a high influence in depicting their wants and needs.

*[The problem with media representation, regardless of who produces it, is that it is selective even when it is not necessarily distortive, as film scholar Richard Dyer discusses in “Stereotyping” ... Dyer points out that stereotypes are not necessarily negative or false. He argues that their veracity is less important than their power. Stereotypes are used as disciplinary forces that clearly demarcate the norm from its “other”. Dyer unpacks the complexities of stereotypes.] [2]*

Whatever the appeal, the way the house is portrayed is a direct influence on how it will be propagated in further media. This will influence players’ choices and further strengthens a power knowledge that reinforces the discourse, thus becoming a deterministic aspect.

One aspect remains unknown, and that is the influence actual players will have upon the houses. Surely, we now have the internet, where everyone is free to express their ideas, and people will portray the houses they pick through their own perceptions and biases. Nonetheless, the only situation where we can observe the actual actions of players could be an online MMO. The question remains if a Slytherin will act the way a Slytherin is portrayed and if all the Hufflepuffs will actually be good for nothing. Or maybe players will end up preferring a certain house, just to create a different gameplay and thus create a new depiction of the group, while erasing an old system of beliefs.

*[Just as stereotypes are neither inherently good nor bad, judgements about what counts as a “positive” or a “negative” representation are political questions and must be interrogated as such. As media scholar Julie D’Acci argues, many descriptions of the negative effects of television representations rely on a notion of “real” world that mediated images distort.] [3]*

Furthermore, we can extrapolate the attributes observed in such a world to the people we interact with every day. Maybe your teacher is a knowledge-seeker, or maybe the shopkeeper didn’t manage to achieve much in their life, or maybe the guy next door plans to take revenge on his

cheating ex. Whatever their motivation and history, making choices based on shallow labels distracts us from the complexity that any unique character may portray.

In the end, Sebastian did everything just to save his sister, Ominis refused to cast unforgivable curses, and Imelda brought hope to Quidditch lovers by restoring old broom tracks. And that could be enough just to change perspectives, maybe even a little.

1. Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 30;
2. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 30;
3. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 31;