

Film Feature: Why Studios Need to Start Working on New Harry Potter Movies Right Away

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on July 15, 2011 - 2:54pm

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CHICAGO – It might sound like sacrilege (or even sound redundant) to say this, particularly on a day that sees the release of “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part Two,” but I just have to say it - Daniel Radcliffe can’t be Harry Potter forever.

Granted, at the moment, he IS Harry Potter, the living physical representation of the boy wizard, and he always will be for a generation of film and literary fans. But that doesn’t mean that Radcliffe’s sweet visage will or even should be the only representation of the Boy Who Lived for generations to come. Radcliffe, Robbie Coltrane, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, even the iconic design work by Stuart Craig – they’re pop culture icons, to be sure, for now, but eventually, culture will move on. We’ll forget their impact, they’ll come across as dated or overly familiar, and Potter fans, down the road, will start craving something different.

It’s hard to see now, but the story of Harry Potter is far, far bigger than a few Warner Brothers films and a theme park. A perfect example is J.K. Rowling’s recent announcement about “Pottermore”, an upcoming online home for the series, which will blend e-versions of the text and fan interaction with whole new swaths of storytelling and back history from the Potter-verse. It’s less of a home for seven individual novels and more of a home for the Harry Potter WORLD, a multifaceted storytelling universe that more closely resembles a MMORPG than anything else.

While the Harry Potter films are amazing movies, they’re, by their very nature, linear and a bit confining. They’re solo adaptations of each individual Potter novel and, as such, until director David Yates took over and the Potter novels concluded in 2007, it was hard to treat each movie as a part of a series. The filmmakers couldn’t anticipate story developments, they couldn’t plan out character arcs, because, simply put, Jo Rowling wasn’t finished baking the world yet. But, now that the world is complete – fresh out of the oven with the beginning, middle, and end in place – it opens up a whole new vista of storytelling opportunities that, frankly, weren’t available for the Radcliffe movies.

And when you look at the public appetite for the world of Harry Potter – the theme parks, the museum tours, “Pottermore”, fan fiction, wizard rock, the legions of imitators – I think you can see that there’s a definite demand out there for more. And, while I don’t think that means we should bully Jo Rowling into writing more Potter books – leave her be, she’s given us enough - I do think it means we have to re-examine how long we’re willing to take the Radcliffe Potter movies as the one and only canonical Potter films.

So, though I realize that Dumbledore’s corpse is still warm and scalpers are still gleefully counting the money they made off midnight screening tickets for “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows — Part Two”, I honestly do believe that Warner Brothers should already be working on the NEXT series of Harry Potter movies. The work needs to begin now. And, in the best tradition of internet armchair quarterbacking, here are my three main suggestions – my own modest proposal – on how a new Potter movie series could step out of the shadow of the Radcliffe films and actually work.

1. IT HAS TO BE ANIMATED

As I mentioned, Daniel Radcliffe has become synonymous with Harry Potter and the idea of casting someone else in the role – while Radcliffe is still spry and dancing down Broadway – seems like the definition of the phrase “too soon.” Recasting a character like Spider-Man is no problem because Spidey has been around for decades and Tobey Maguire is only one of MANY representations of Peter Parker that the world has seen since the webslinger first appeared in 1962. But, aside from Radcliffe, the book illustrations by Mary GrandPré and Jason Cockcroft, and some great fan art, there have simply not been that many visual representations of Harry Potter. A vast, vast majority of licensed Potter art is clearly based either on young Daniel or the novels’ cover illustrations.



Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Photo credit: Bloomsbury

Maybe it's because the movies came out while the series was still being published, but the Warner Brothers cast has seemingly become the default visuals for the Potter books as a whole. And that's unfortunate – not because the movie visual aren't cool, but rather because the Potter world that Rowling created is so vivid and packed with details that it would be a shame to limit it to ONE interpretation. The Potter universe needs to be opened up to a wider canvas of artistic interpretations.

And animation definitely opens up a whole new world of visual possibilities. It means you wouldn't have to worry about comparing Radcliffe's Potter to the Potter of some sparkling new UK ingénue – if the next Potter was animated, those comparisons would largely be rendered moot. Also, animation design tends to hold up longer than live-action films – if it's done right (i.e. Disney's classic fairy tales) – so, an animated Potter series might be the “timeless” option that will help us span the years until another live-action Potter movie is mounted. Because, let's be honest, doing another live-action Potter flick anytime in the next 10 years is a terrible idea. What else can be done in live-action with the Potter stories that hasn't already been done in the Radcliffe movies? Animation, again, unleashes a limitless horizon of visual scope that – until James Cameron the 4th invents 5D movies – really can't be matched by live-action.

There are two other reasons why animation would be the preferred medium for the next Potter movie – one creative, one financial. In terms of creativity, after seeing a very human, very real-world-based film version of the Potter novels, I'd love to see something wilder, more out-there, more impressionistic. For example, take a look at the concept images for the upcoming Guillermo Del Toro-produced, stop-motion-animated “Pinocchio”. Artist Gris Grimly's new designs for the wooden puppet are breathtaking, miles away from the Disney version, but undeniably the character of Pinocchio all the same. I'd love to see someone do the same thing for Harry Potter. And, in terms of financial benefit, an animated version would prevent the next Potter film from getting into a pointless budget competition with the previous series (“Their ‘Chamber of Secrets’ cost \$200 million? Ours cost \$400 million! So ours must be better!”) AND it gives Warner Brothers the added bonus of not having to worry about paying for likeness rights, a benefit that saves them some corporate cash and allows the characters to evolve artistically while not being tied to the chiseled physiques of British equity actors.

2. IT CAN'T FOLLOW THE BOOKS EXACTLY

This is a hard one because, as moviegoers, we're so used to traditional book-to-film adaptations. We're used to one book = one movie. And it's funny how revolutionary even splitting one book into two movies – as they did with “Deathly Hallows” – seems to normal audiences. It just hasn't been done before. And, while somewhere down the road, it might be time for another “Sorcerer's Stone” adaptation or another “Chamber of Secrets”, for right now, I think it would be best if any new Potter adaptations forgot about the books themselves as framing narratives and, instead, just focused on assembling together the proper storylines to make a movie.

Let me explain – what if, to start off a new series of Potter animated films, the first film didn't follow the story of “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone”? I'm not saying that the animated films should ignore the order of the series or invent new material, but what if they, instead, created a new story chronologically out of all of the material Rowling created in the seven novels? What if the first new film – let's call it “Harry Potter: Year Zero” – instead focused on the drama and machinations that came together to send Harry to Hogwarts in the first place? Rather than a straight adaptation of “Sorcerer's Stone”, we'd get all the pieces of back-story and history that we now know had to happen to make “Sorcerer's Stone” possible.



Pottermore

Photo credit: Pottermore

Because any new Potter series can't be afraid of spoilers in the traditional sense. If you want movies that will simply introduce kids to the books, leaving them blissfully unaware of what comes next, send them to the Radcliffe movies. But, if you want a living, vivid adaptation of the Potter series, made for the billions of people who already know and love the series, you have to tell the story differently than J.K. Rowling did in her original books. Have "Harry Potter: Year Zero" show us the fall of Voldemort's first reign, Peter Pettigrew's betrayal of his friends, Sirius Black being sent to Azkaban, the final sacrifice of James and Lilly Potter, Dumbledore leaving Harry with the Dursleys... set up the world, the motivations, the character arcs that will last throughout the entire series and – BOOM – end the first movie with Harry getting ready to leave for Hogwarts for the first time.

Then, as we follow Harry through years one, two, three, and beyond, you've already established a network of parallel stories that strengthen and enhance Harry's heroic quest. Fine, you won't get to debate "Is Snape evil or not?" or "I wonder if Sirius Black really was a death-eater", but, thanks to the popularity of the novels and the films, those cats are already out of the bag. Let's not go into another Potter series with our head stuck in the sand, having to pretend that we don't know what we definitely already know. Let us go into the series knowing that, while Harry is struggling through his first year, Dumbledore is looking for the deathly hallows, Snape is on Harry's side (but hates him), Ron's rat is an evil bastard, Hermione and Ron will definitely hook up, Dobby will become a tragic hero, and so forth.

In fact, there are so many storylines that this approach could open up, this alone might make it impossible to confine each movie to the range of a specific book. Once you insert Hermione's house-elf activism (even haters need to admit that the whole SPEW storyline pays off beautifully with Ron and Hermione's first kiss) and Sirius Black hiding out in 12 Grimmauld Place into "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" – maybe that makes the story too big for just one "Goblet of Fire" movie. Maybe that means there needs to be "GoF: Part One and Part Two", maybe that means they explore multimedia storytelling options – like the TV show/movie plans for Stephen King's "Dark Tower" series. Maybe you don't even call the movie "Goblet of Fire." (Call it "Year X", call it "Harry Potter, Chapter X, or, heck, just let Rowling come up with a new title.) But, however, they approach it, it ultimately means that the overall story – the complete saga - is more important than the traditional novel structure of the seven original books.

And the great thing is – all of this material exists. It's material that was cut out of the Radcliffe movies, or it's material that was flashback fodder that can be worked back into the main plot. Even the new material that Rowling is writing for the "Pottermore" website could be weaved into the narrative for the new movies. Look at what Peter Jackson did with "Lord of the Rings" – taking material from Tolkien's appendices to bolster the storyline, moving bits of action from book to book to make the movie versions better. The same thing could work for Harry Potter. Even though the subplots and added material didn't appear in the series' original timeline, while it was being written, all of these storylines are definitely part of the collective over-arching Potter timeline that we're now all familiar with.

3. IT CAN'T BE ALL ABOUT HARRY

This might go without saying, particularly after I called for the movies to ignore the book structure and ramp up the subplots, but I think any new Potter series, if it's going to be about the larger Potter world, can't just be told from Harry's perspective.

As I mentioned, the world already knows the story of Harry Potter. No matter what, in future Potter movies, we will always know more than our lightning-scarred protagonist, and that's OK. It doesn't lessen Harry's journey at all, in fact, it gives his struggles and the world he lives in considerable more texture and depth.

Going back to "Lord of the Rings" as an example, in a new animated Potter-verse film, Harry should be positioned like Frodo Baggins. Frodo's story is the core of "LOTR". His journey is the backbone of the narrative and his final confrontation on Mount Doom is the emotional climax of the films. But can you imagine his story without the stories of Sam, Aragorn, Gimli, or Legolas to support it? Frodo is the lynchpin of the story, but he, alone, is not the whole story. The same can be said for Harry Potter. While Harry holds up the narrative on his back, there are many, many other storylines intersecting with Harry's, and, if a new Potter film series could find the proper way to embrace those stories, the result has the potential to be epic storytelling at its finest. With Harry as the core, you could create a network of intertwined stories – Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, Sirius, Dobby, the Dursleys, the Malfoys, and so on – all with their own victories and tragedies and all slowly slouching towards that final last battle at Hogwarts. Imagine something less like "Star Wars" and more like "Lord of the Rings" mixed with "The Wire". There's that kind of depth in Rowling's Potter novels, and opening up the film universe to the wizarding world BEYOND Harry could both

drastically differentiate the movies from the Radcliffe films AND create a vital, creatively compelling reason to greenlight a return to Hogwarts.

So, that's my proposal. It might be unrealistic. It has flaws, it has prejudices. Heck, it might work better as a TV series. But, the main point I wanted to make is – while the Daniel Radcliffe Harry Potter movies are expert pieces of filmmaking – we can't let our respect and reverence for them make us ignore the untapped potential for continued tributes, adaptations, and storytelling in J.K. Rowling's fantastic fictional universe.

That'd be such a Muggle thing to do.

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