

Review: More adventures, insights with Potter site

July 12 2012, by ANICK JESDANUN



This undated screenshot shows the website Pottermore. One million fans who were able to solve riddles and find a Magical Quill have had a chance to try out Pottermore for nearly a year. The rest of us, the magic-free Muggles, had to wait until it opened to the general public this spring. (AP Photo/Pottermore)

(AP) — Shortly before the Harry Potter saga came to an end on movie screens a year ago, we were teased with more adventures about the young wizard through a website called Pottermore.

One million fans who were able to solve riddles and find a Magical Quill have had a chance to try out Pottermore for nearly a year. The rest of us — the magic-free Muggles — had to wait until it opened to the general public this spring. Even then, much of the attention was on the fact that Pottermore was making e-book versions of the [Harry Potter](#) novels

available for the first time.

As the anniversary of the final movie approached — it opened in theaters a year ago this weekend — I gave the rest of Pottermore a try.

The free site takes you through the novels chapter by chapter as if you're playing a game. Starting with "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," you're given imagery and summaries of key plots and characters. You must look for picture frames and other items along the way to access certain content and move to the next chapter. Miss one, and you might find yourself unable to brew a potion later on.

As Harry is ready to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, you even get your own wand, customized to your height, eye color and personality traits such as your biggest fear and source of pride.

Later, the Sorting Hat will place you in one of four houses at Hogwarts based on how you answer questions designed by author J.K. Rowling. You and others in your assigned house compete with others in periodic House Cup tournaments. The Slytherin house won the inaugural round and got early access to new content as its prize.

Along the way, Pottermore offers new tales from Rowling and insights into her thinking behind characters and plotlines. You also get excerpts from the books and encyclopedia-like entries on people, places and things. I was reminded that a put-outer is a device used to magically turn off street lights on Privet Drive.

Pottermore delivered for the most part, but what's available is limited.

Clips from the Harry Potter movies would have been nice, but Pottermore chose to focus on the reading experience. Even then, the site so far has only the first book and the first four chapters of the second

one, "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets." The latter arrived just this week.

I've read all seven books and watched all eight movies, many of them multiple times. I was at a Borders book store at midnight when the final book came out in 2007 and paid several dollars extra to watch the final movie in 3-D on a giant Imax screen last year. It's not a surprise that I found lots to enjoy in Pottermore.

Other adults should find much to like, too, but it's clear that kids are a big part of the target audience.

During the wand selection, for instance, you're asked whether you consider yourself short, average or tall — "for your age."



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Many sites exclude kids under 13 because of additional consent

requirements under a 1998 U.S. law. Laudably, Pottermore doesn't do that. Instead, the kid must provide a parent's email address, and an email is sent to obtain permission. Nothing prevents a child from lying about his or her age or email address, though.

Pottermore does a good job of keeping child safety and privacy in mind. You're asked for your full name if you're at least 13, but it's not displayed — not even if you wanted it to be. Kids and adults alike must choose a username from a handful presented. You can't write your own, lest you include your real name or attributes such as your school or city.

You can add friends to your Pottermore network, the way you have a circle of friends on Facebook, but you must already know that friend's username. You can't look for friends by entering their email addresses, the way you can elsewhere. That hinders Pottermore's community experience, as I have no way of knowing whether any of my friends are already on Pottermore. But it also helps keep kids and strangers apart.

I do like that e-commerce is secondary at Pottermore. I had expected the site to continually blast me with offers for books, DVDs, mugs and posters. The shop only has e-books and audio books for starters, and you have to look hard for the link at the bottom. You can't even buy more coins to spend on virtual items; you have to find them as you move through the site.

Another nice touch: Pottermore is available in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish from the start. Japanese, Korean and others are coming soon. You can choose the American or British flavor of English. The name of the first book even changes to reflect the fact that the Sorcerer's Stone is known as the Philosopher's Stone in Britain.



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As I journeyed through the early chapters, I found many of the tasks overly simplistic. Much of my time was spent moving a cursor around the page looking for objects to collect, such as an alarm clock and seaweed.

Part of the challenge is Pottermore's desire to cater to a diverse audience. Kids might find tasks too difficult, while adults might find them too simple. The site also tries to serve both first-time readers and those reading them for the umpteenth time. In order to not ruin tales that come later, Pottermore has to hold back on some of the extra content early on.

Pottermore started getting interesting in Chapter 5, when Harry visits Diagon Alley to buy books and supplies for his first year at Hogwarts.

But even then, Pottermore holds your hand. You're given 500 galleons to spend, but you must buy the required items first, before you can splurge

on that unicorn horn (21 galleons, three times the price of a wand). How about teaching kids some tough lessons about budgeting by letting them make some mistakes?

That said, I had trouble finding my way through Gringotts Wizarding Bank, the financial center run by goblins. I was overthinking the challenges and went back several chapters looking for a key to unlock a bank vault. There weren't any goblins around to point out that the large golden key hanging right above the keyhole was all I needed.

What I liked most about Pottermore were the writings from Rowling. I learned how Rowling named the street where Harry grew up (Privet Drive was derived from a suburban plant called privet bush, meant to evoke associations with suburbia and enclosure). I also learned that Rowling had to resist efforts by her publisher to change measurements to the metric system. And I read the fictional account of how Harry's mean aunt and uncle met and started dating.

I longed for more backstories.

I'm still on Chapter 6 of the first book as I write this, and I'm getting more intrigued as I move further along. There are some stores in Diagon Alley I can't enter yet and hints of opportunities to earn house points by brewing potions and dueling with other wizards.

Pottermore's CEO, Charlie Redmayne, told me that I can eventually expect different experiences on mobile devices and some targeted to certain audiences, so that long-time fans like me won't have to wait for first-time readers to catch up.

The site, which has had 35 million unique visitors worldwide so far, also wants to improve its community features. Redmayne wouldn't say how, though.

Ultimately, Pottermore wants people to keep coming back for new content and new social interactions, even after going through the basic story lines once or twice.

I felt a void after watching "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2" last year. Even with the site's limitations, I'm glad Pottermore is around to offer more of Potter.

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