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Bad Movie Hurts Jedi Down Under

Stewart Taggart  08.31.02 | 2:00 AM

SYDNEY, Australia -- More than 100,000 followers of the Jedi religion live in Australia and New Zealand, equal to several battalions of clone-warrior movie extras.

But now, given that *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* was such a forgettable movie sequel, this army seems to be dispersing after momentarily flexing its collective muscle.

In Australia, 70,509 people -- 0.37 percent of the population -- marked "Jedi" as their religion when the most recent national census was taken Aug. 7, 2001. In New Zealand, 53,715 people -- 1.5 percent of respondents -- marked "Jedi" on that national census taken March 6, 2001.

Each census occurred nearly a year before the new *Star Wars* installment came out. As such, it might have been merely a case of life imitating movie hype.

"We were **gobsmacked** by the result," said Chris Brennan, director of the Star Wars Appreciation Society of Australia ([Star Walking](#)). "We expected maybe 20,000 to 25,000 to mark Jedi. This was several times that."

Unfortunately, that may be as good as it gets. *Star Walking*, now dwindled to just a few hundred fans, has the dubious virtue of being among the last *Star Wars* fan organizations left standing in Australia and New Zealand. Two other organizations, JediFaith and JediAustralia, have fallen off ISP life support.

Brennan believes most people in Australia and New Zealand may have marked Jedi because traditional religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism are increasingly out of touch with today's world.

"It was a way of saying to traditional churches, 'You're not providing what we want,'" said Brennan. "This was a way for people to say, 'I want to be part of a movie universe I love so much.'"

But that same movie universe may now be part of the problem. For Peter Rohr, self-proclaimed Jedi knight and one-time head of JediFaith in Australia, supporters have become so mute that he's decided against paying the annual fee to keep his JediFaith website up and running.

As a martial arts and meditation aficionado, Rohr was attracted to the Jedi creed in the first three *Star Wars* films. That's because it emphasized self-knowledge and self-realization, he said. But the newest film introduced such previously unknown Jedi concepts as renouncement of social attachment, maintenance of chastity and a pursuit of neo-Franciscan poverty, he said. These now conflict with the lifestyles of most would-be adherents, leaving the movement in a bit of a hyperspace squeeze.

So, what now?

"Unfortunately, nothing," said Rohr. "The latest Lucas film has put a muffle on many people who might want to pursue the Jedi religion. I think this census may well just prove a one-off by people who wanted to stick it to traditional churches."

That, no doubt, should prove music to the ears of both the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) and [Statistics New Zealand](#). Both said answers like Jedi can confuse community decision-making regarding important social services.

"Outside of government, religious organizations are the biggest provider of a range of services to the community, such as education, hospitals and aged-care facilities," the Australian Bureau of Statistics said in a press release last week in response to queries about Jedi numbers in the country.

"Around 30 percent of Australian children attend schools provided by religious organizations. Census information is important for planning these facilities," the bureau said.

At Statistics New Zealand, they no doubt would be similarly happy if the Jedi religion just disappeared.

"We think most people realize how important the census is, and are committed to providing meaningful answers so the data isn't corrupted," said Denise McGregor, spokeswoman for Statistics New Zealand.

Clearly, both statistical agencies believe answers like Jedi just throw a wrench in the works. No doubt both hope Jedi renegades come to their census, er, senses, by the time the next counts take place. For his part, Brennan rejects that selecting Jedi as a religion screws anything up.

"I just can't see how this might affect anything practical," said Brennan.

The whole Jedi census movement seems to have gotten its start with the circulation of an e-mail of unknown origin around March 2001.

The e-mail claimed that if enough people cited Jedi on national census forms, the creed might become an official religion, with all the perks and privileges that come with it.

That belief seems to have been the most deep rooted in the United Kingdom, probably because its [Office for National Statistics](#) created a special output code to tally the number of people marking Jedi as their religion in the "other" box of the census form. However, there were also specific output codes for 350 other religions.

The U.K. statistics office says the special boxes were merely aimed at providing more speedy processing of census forms, and not convey an official recognition of any one religion over another.

Clearly, the next big development in this story should come in February, when initial results of the United Kingdom's 2001 census are released. However, no specific breakout of Jedi numbers is scheduled to be released, said Kathy Wright, spokeswoman for the statistics office.