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Cover Page Footnote

Parts of this essay, concentrating on audience expectations towards a „Children’s Story“ were originally published in a different form as „How Bilbo Lost his Innocence: Media Audiences and the Evaluation of The Hobbit as a Children’s Film“ in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 13.1 (2016). The article is the result of research done as part of the German-language team for the World Hobbit Project.

The Hobbit, Media Audiences, and the Question of Genre

Lars Schmeink

With a combined revenue of close to 3 billion dollars at the box office worldwide, Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy (2012-14) occupies a secure place (three, actually, as each film is rated separately) among the top 35 highest grossing films of all time (cf. "All Time Box Office", n.p.). The films were a world-wide success, garnered awards, produced an avalanche of merchandise and tie-ins, and managed to extend the Middle-earth film franchise beyond the scope of its original entry, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-03). In fact, *The Hobbit* proves, as Kristin Thompson has argued since the release of *LotR*, that the "franchise is not nearly over" (*Frodo Franchise* 9), and that Peter Jackson's Middle-earth has had a lasting influence on fantasy film production until this day. As Jordan Adcock argues, the original three films are so defining for the fantasy film as a genre, that they continue "to cast a shadow over fantasy cinema" which has been hard to shake for other productions. He continues by pointing out "what a game changer *Lord of the Rings* was. [...] It] marked a huge break from conventional big screen fantasy" in terms of production value, faithfulness to its source material, and commitment to move fantasy beyond any black and white or good vs. evil binaries. The problem with the second trilogy then is exactly this overbearing shadow: *The Hobbit* is seen by many in relation to the original trilogy and has thus become a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. This brought with it criticism against the films with regard to its deviance in tone from the source material due to this prequel-ization. Regarding the novel and its creation, Tolkien himself had had trouble reconciling the two books, as Judy Ann Ford and Robin Reid argue with reference to Tolkien's letters: "*The Hobbit* is a children's story and *The Lord of the Rings* is not, as Tolkien acknowledged in letters to his publisher which described *The Lord of the Rings* as 'more grown up' and *The Hobbit* as 'matter from the great cycle susceptible of treatment as a fairy-story; for children'" (209; citing Carpenter and Tolkien 159). In contrast to the original novels' different tones and audiences, Jackson has opted to build upon the continuity of his audience and adapt *The Hobbit* as "a new trilogy of films that incorporates every chapter, nearly every scene, and most of the dialogue of *The Hobbit*, and then setting that faithful adaptation within a far-less-faithful framework that reads *The Lord of the Rings* back into *The Hobbit*" (Markos 21). Adapting *The Hobbit* as part and parcel of the filmic Middle-earth cycle was thus a necessity for Jackson in order to provide "fidelity to the epic universe he'd created in film for general audiences" (Adcock). More to the point then, the filmic experience of *The Lord of the Rings* shapes the audience's understanding of *The Hobbit* as a filmic experience, as Thompson points out: "Even if *The Hobbit* were adapted page by page [...] those of us who have seen the *LOTR* film or read the book could not see

it as a separate tale. We know already what the Ring is and what eventually happened to it, while readers, if they started with *The Hobbit*, do not” (“A hobbit is chubby”, n.p.).

It is this field of inquiry, the territory covered by genre, adaptation and audience expectations, that this essay will map with the help of data gathered by the World Hobbit Project, arguing that the success of *The Hobbit* trilogy by Peter Jackson is indeed linked to its continuation of the filmic world-building and storytelling of *The Lord of the Rings* and that it is read by audiences as part of the ‘game-changed’ fantasy film genre, inaugurated by the original trilogy.¹

Methodology

The World Hobbit Project (WHP) is to-date the largest global ethnographic study of contemporary media audiences undertaken. It was conducted in 46 countries worldwide and gathered data from audiences in 35 different languages, managing answers from over 36.000 participants. The data was collected via an online survey held from December 2014 (scheduled to coincide with the release of the third film, *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*) to May 2015, which consisted of 29 questions: 11 were qualitative in nature, the remaining 18 quantitative. The mixture of methodology is important to the WHP, as the principal investigators Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs² explain: “Audience responses to films are complex, even when they are short. They can include feelings, views, and opinions that are not easily condensed into numerical codes [...] But some sort of quantification of data is needed if we are to pass beyond snapshots” (Barker et al. 9). Consequently, the survey combined questions into

¹ Parts of this essay, concentrating on audience expectations towards a “Children’s Story” were originally published in a different form as “How Bilbo Lost his Innocence: Media Audiences and the Evaluation of *The Hobbit* as a Children’s Film” in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 13.1 (2016).

² Barker and Mathijs were also the principal investigators of the Lord of the Rings Research Project, the precursor study to the WHP, conducted in 2003/04. Methodology of the WHP was adapted from the LotRRP. In the introduction to *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien’s World Audiences*, Barker et al. explain the methodology of the research in detail (1-20).

Methodologically, Barker and Mathijs want to resist the mass communications approach and its prescriptive strictness and quantification, which lead to a reduced perspective on audience experiences (9). Similarly, they reject the British cultural studies approach that loses itself in semiotic detection of resistant readings and thus merely provides detailed snapshots of reactions without larger, comparative frameworks. Instead, audience research should provide opportunity to engage individual responses while at the same time maintaining some categorization. They manage this by incorporating quantifiable questions into the open qualitative ones, combining them into sets of questions that interrelate. For example, questions 1 and 2 address the audience’s evaluation of the films in general. Q1 is quantitative suggesting comparative readings among audience groups (such as age, gender, nationality), whereas the open-ended Q2 provides individual audience engagements with how individuals reacted and related to the films within their own life worlds, providing nuanced qualitative readings for why quantitative evaluations were given.

sets of both quantitative and qualitative questions that could be cross-examined and focused on what Barker describes as “dimensions of self-allocation”³ (10) for questions such as “reasons for seeing the films” or what “kinds of films” audiences thought *The Hobbit* was. The survey was designed to capture reactions to the films, rating of the films, reasons for seeing them, allocations of what kind of films they were, specific likes and dislikes about them, issues raised by the film, the role of fantasy, and self-allocation of audiences towards their engagement with the text, the media formats used, their gender, occupation, and education level.

My research is situated in the project as part of the German-Austrian team, consisting of colleagues at the Universities of Hamburg, Klagenfurt and Salzburg. The WHP has managed to gather an overall worldwide sample of more than 36.000 answers (n1=36109), out of which the German sample is the second largest in regards to language (n2=4861), with only English having produced more responses (n3=7665). To discuss my findings here, I will use the German-language sample. My particular interest for this paper is the perception of genre and its function within society. It is possible to analyze this via two specific parts of the survey, which contain quantitative closed questions and open-ended self-allocations. The first part is a set of questions, Q4 to Q6, which asked audiences to choose from preset descriptions of “kinds of film” and situate *The Hobbit* among these. The section asked for positive and negative associations of *The Hobbit* and then gave participants the option to comment on their choices:

³ Barker and Mathijs are aware of the limitations of this approach and recognize that in determining specific key dimensions on which audiences could position themselves, the survey designer’s “choice of dimensions for self-allocation is critical” (10). For example, the categories chosen for the film’s genre attribution did not include options for romance or comedy. Given that the WHP survey has been created as a collaboration of 150 researchers worldwide and translated into more than 40 languages, discussion of the pre-set dimensions was a crucial aspect in the planning stages. Limitations were a) the nature of the categories themselves: German, for example, crucially distinguishes between two types of fairy tales, i.e. oral folk traditions (“Volksmärchen”) or literary creations (“Kunstmärchen”), and clearly differentiates these two from fantasy, whereas Danish subsumes all three story types under the same term as “fairy tales.” Analyses of the number of evaluations for *The Hobbit* as a fairy tale thus significantly deviate between German and Danish audiences. This was countered by providing qualitative questions in which audiences could reframe their answers - to the point where some participants reject categories or redefine them, as my discussion below will show. Further limitations were b) the challenge of a faithful translation to ensure comparability. For example, there are no equivalent German terms for a “blockbuster” or a “coming-of-age” story. The translation thus opted to either use the English term (“blockbuster”) or circumscribe the fixed terminology (“a story about becoming an adult”, which does not fully cover the ideas associated with “coming-of-age”). However, broad cross-cultural analysis cannot ever fully address these kinds of translational issues and cultural differences; they will instead need to be fully disclosed and discussed in specific, detailed analyses.

- Question 4: Which of the following come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three.
- Question 5: Are there any of these that you definitely would *not* choose? Again, please pick up to three.
- Question 6: Can you tell us why you've made these choices?

The options given as preset answers for Q4 and Q5 were as follows:

- Children's story
- Fairytale
- World of fantasy
- Prequel / sequel
- Star attraction
- Part of Tolkien's legend-world
- Multimedia franchise
- Family film
- Digital novelty cinema
- Action-adventure
- Peter Jackson movie
- Literary adaptation
- Stunning locations
- Coming-of-age story
- Hollywood blockbuster

The second part of the survey that addresses the function of genre is a specifically tailored self-allocation in Q13, which asks respondents "What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today? Choose up to three which are nearest to your opinion," with the following as options to answer:

- They are a way of enriching the imagination
- They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions
- They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world
- They are a way of escaping
- They are a form of shared entertainment
- They allow us to explore different attitudes and ideas
- They are a way of creating alternative worlds
- No particular role

Before I consider these two aspects, I want to make a few general observations, which are central to the ascription of genre and my further analysis. One of the most basic questions in the survey asked audiences to evaluate and rate the film.

Further, another set of questions asked about previous contact with *The Hobbit* as a novel on one side, and Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies on the other and how audiences rated these. Out of the context of these three ratings, let me point out the following results:

1. *The Hobbit* films were overall well received by audiences, which is in contrast to some of the critical commentary that the films produced. 43.6% of German audiences gave the film a rating of "excellent," 34.1% a rating of "good" – a result confirmed by the audience ratings on www.rottentomatoes.com.⁴
2. *The Hobbit*, as a book, received better ratings: 52.4% "excellent" and 39.5% "good" – adjusted for the 18.9% of participants, who answered they had not read the book.
3. Lastly and most strikingly, the *Lord of the Rings* films received an overwhelming rating of 81% "excellent," 15.7% "good," with only 1.3% of participants claiming to not know the *Lord of the Rings*.

The results of these ratings and the extremely high number of participants already familiar with the franchise, both through the original novel and the first film trilogy, is of course relevant in terms of the existing evaluation and pre-knowledge of Middle-earth, the general story development, and of the characters that populate both narratives. This relates back to Kristin Thompson's observation that for audiences familiar with the *LotR*, the *Hobbit* films cannot be viewed completely detached from this knowledge. It thus stands to reason that audiences surveyed will have a strong bias towards the films and its genre ascription based on pre-existing knowledge of Tolkien's novels, Tolkien's world, and Jackson's adaptation of it. Especially the high approval of the *Lord of the Rings* films, compared to the lower rating of the *Hobbit* films, will have an impact on the ascription of genre and its function for audiences.

Genre Ascription of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* as Fantasy

Starting with observations on the first set of questions, asking German audiences to associate *The Hobbit* with specific categories of "kinds of film" or rejecting it from specific categories, I want to point out two trends. The first trend concerns the most noticeable positive association that audiences had, which is the category "World of Fantasy" (76.5%). This seems little surprising, considering the discussion of the films by critics such as Thompson or Adcock, who rank *The*

⁴ The site both aggregates professional criticism and polls audience ratings. The *Hobbit* films are listed as having a critic score of 60%, 74%, and 64% respectively for each part. The audience scores are noticeably higher (75%/85%/83%), but still remain significantly lower than the scores for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (91%/96%/95% for critics and 95%/95%/86% for audiences).

Hobbit as exemplary fantasy films, standing “taller than the vast majority of screen fantasies” (Adcock). It is thus no wonder, that on the opposite side, “World of Fantasy” received only a 0.8% rejection rate as a genre category attached to the film. 37 participants chose this option on Q5 (negative for “kind of film”), with 26 of these also choosing the same option on Q4 (positive for “kind of film”), thus possibly constituting a mistake or insecurity regarding the question. Some of the explanations given in Q6 clearly indicate this contradiction to be accidental, as demonstrated by the phrasing “Of course it is a world of fantasy, it is Middle-earth” (#10713⁵) or a statement such as “I love fantasy!” (#25178). Only two of the remaining eleven responses gave an explicit reason (on Q6) for their negative association with the genre category: “A world of fantasy looks different” (#9042) and “They are rather fairy tales than fantasy films, because Tolkien has written *Hobbit* and *LotR* as fairy tales, because he was of the opinion that England was missing a grand fairy tale epic” (#28762). There is no explicit mention as to what constitutes a world of fantasy and how it is not met in this case.

In order to get a fuller description of what constitutes a “World of Fantasy” and what aspects problematize such a categorization, the only answer on Q6 that openly address the contradiction as purposeful might provide an interesting case study. Participant #35506 is a German male high school student. His reason to choose both positive and negative association with “World of Fantasy” is: “In my opinion, it is partly a fantasy film, constructed schematically and presenting typical elements. Even though it alludes to and is mainly visually connected to the *LotR* trilogy, which separates it from ordinary fantasy films, the cliché pomp of Hollywood dominates the film.” On Q21⁶ the participant further answers that seeing the *Lord of the Rings* when he was 8 or 9 years old was a transformative experience: “I used to be critical towards fantasy until I saw *The Lord of the Rings*, which is more like a historical film than a fantasy film in my opinion. I think that people do not want to see fantasy films but they want to see good films.” For him, *The Hobbit* could have been such a “good film” had it not been for what he calls “Hollywood schema in terms of construction of story” and the films’ desire to satisfy “fantasy and CGI customers.” The participant thus indicates that specific schema and prototypical elements connected to CGI and Hollywood production processes are part of a definition of “ordinary fantasy,” which the films partly conform to. His statements contrast these evaluations by stating that *Lord of the Rings* is better than “ordinary fantasy,” and that it changed the way he saw fantasy, thus generating a construction of the genre he deems

⁵ All data sets in the worldwide sample have been given unique ID-numbers so as to be able to reliably identify them. Translations of the German original statements are mine, phrasing, diction, and tone are kept as faithfully as possible in translation.

⁶ The question from the survey reads: “Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?”

closer to historical drama. *The Hobbit* has markers of both, good historical fantasy (such as *LotR*) and clichéd Hollywood fare, thus explaining the double categorical association, both negative and positive for “World of Fantasy.”

In contrast, the films are overwhelmingly seen as a “World of Fantasy,” as the 76.5% choice of the category on Q4 indicates. Out of the 3.726 people that chose the category, 998 (20.5%)⁷ specifically reacted to the genre category in their open answer. These reactions ranged from simply stating the genre to detailed definitions of it. A majority of 690 participants (14.2%) simply stated that the story was set in a fantasy-world (some naming Middle-earth) or that the original novel was a fantasy, but not explicitly giving prototypical elements or markers that guided their decision to categorize the films this way. #35273, for example simply states: “Middle-earth=fantasy” and #20043 says “Tolkien’s works are fantastic worlds of fantasy.” One subset of these non-specific answers is noteworthy, though: 123 participants (2.5%) responded to the question by pointing out that their decision to mark the films as “World of Fantasy” was self-evident. Not only does this group not feel the need to clarify what makes a film participate in the genre, they argue that audiences cannot perceive *The Hobbit* as anything but a “World of Fantasy”. Typically, this group uses far fewer words on the subject, averaging 57 characters in their answer (relating to “World of Fantasy”), whereas the group that gives a definition of the genre averages 105 characters. The “self-evident”-group are also rather consistent in their phrasing (“clearly,” “naturally,” “definitively,” “self-explanatory,” “without discussion,” “undoubtedly,” “obvious”), shutting down any further argument. Even if a bit extended, the argument is final, as #1930 shows: “If the Hobbit-films don’t belong to the fantasy genre then Dirty Dancing is a horror film.”

The remaining 308 participants (6.3%) do find reasons to include the films in the genre, citing a number of prototypical elements as belonging to a “World of Fantasy,” specific aspects of the story world, such as the existence of magic and of creatures such as orcs, goblins, dwarves, elves and, of course, the hobbits. Participant #25424, for example, states that “the magical elements and the races of the Tolkien universe (orcs, elves, etc.) clearly make the film a fantasy film.” The demarcation of fantasy here seems to be the diegetic presentation of creatures that cannot exist in real life, as this statement indicates: “It takes place in a world of fantasy, for sure – who would encounter elves on the back of stags wearing golden armor in the city” (#23499). The status of the world is a central argument for participants, even though many seem to struggle with terminology, equating fantasy with any form of fictionality and contrasting it with aspects of ‘reality.’ For example, participants note that “the films are a ‘World of Fantasy,’ because Middle-earth only exists for real in fantasy” (#13031), argue that they show

⁷ For easier comparison and clarity, the percentages given always reference the complete German-language sample of n=4689.

“definitely alien [German: *fremde*] (and not real) characters and lands” (#333), state that the films have “unrealistic plots” and “characters with supernatural abilities” (#18160) and point out that the “films take place in fictional world, thus making it undoubtedly a fantasy” (#9686). Clearly, audiences perceive a ‘World of Fantasy’ as impossible in comparison to their own lifeworld and define the genre by this status, thus aligning fully with the definition given by scholar John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Clute defines a fantasy as a “self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it [...]; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms” (338).

It is interesting to note though that the world depicted is perceived as impossible (not-real), while at the same time providing an authentic experience for audiences, as the answer of participant #1592 shows: “The film clearly falls into the genre of fantasy. The setting is a fictional place, Middle-earth, that reminds of the Middle Ages and the time of Nordic heroics, in combination with mystical creatures, that can wield magical powers. Tolkien is able to create a world that seems realistic, through detailed description, through the imagination of their own languages for the different races and their own mythology. As if these events could have really happened in the past.” Participant #1592 is Austrian, female and university student, age bracket of 16-25. She describes the film’s world as being similarly fictional and realistic, providing lots of detail for engagement with it and linking it to elements of ‘real’ history. Tolkien himself has linked the successful production of fantasy, of a “Secondary World” (49), to the ability of the author to create “the inner consistency of reality” (46), claiming that fantastic creation needs “hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun” (55). The connection of realistic depiction and fantastic images is key for the “World of Fantasy” to function. Both the detail of the world (its consistent description of scientific laws, history and politics, for example) and the opportunity to engage with the world (to feel it, experience it, make it mean something) are described by many participants as central to their experience of the ‘World of Fantasy.’ Middle-earth, to them, is a world which “one get’s kidnapped into” (#455), a “full world that gets newly invented and [...], which one follows willingly” (#18614), the story “puts you into another world” (#19730) and “gets you to become part of it” (#20081). Tolkien’s creation is a “‘World of Fantasy,’ because [...it] does not just have normal things and people [...] but contains a unique mythology, different races and creatures, with their own historical backgrounds and corresponding world” (#678).

Indeed, audiences specifically connect detailed descriptions of the world to Tolkien’s Middle-earth, prompting many to associate Tolkien with fantasy not just in terms of being one author of the genre, but rather as *the* ultimate creator of it. Audiences here clearly pronounce, what scholar Brian Attebery claimed in his

Strategies of Fantasy, when he approached the genre not by prescription but rather description, arguing for a “fuzzy set” (13) radiating outward from a mid-point of the genre. In his book, Attebery claims Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as “quintessentially fantasy” (13) and “stand[ing] in the bullseye” (14) of the set. He says that “Tolkien’s form of fantasy [...] is our mental template.” In the survey, 85 participants (1.7%) expressed this sentiment, linking the genre essentially to the figure of Tolkien. Participants describe his works as “setting the standard for fantasy” (#19884), as “the epitome of fantasy” (#10412), as the “Bible of fantasy” (#1306), as well as Tolkien himself as an “icon of fantasy” (#19449), or the “father of fantasy” (#1294): “There would be no fantasy without Tolkien!” (1504) Some of this identification of the author with the genre even rubs off on Peter Jackson, who is famed for his adaptation of the classic story (e.g. #171, #1708) and is credited with envisioning “the visual version” (#18320) of this legendary Middle-earth.

What the numbers and the specific commentaries provided suggest is that audiences have a strong perception of the *Hobbit* as a “World of Fantasy,” without explicit knowledge of, but nonetheless recurring on, scholarly definitions. Tolkien, as central to the fuzzy set of the genre, is recognized by audiences as a source for definition, as is his concept of a Secondary World, a fantasy thus describing in detail a world perceived as impossible when compared to ours and drawing the reader in via its detail and ‘realism.’ Even more so, not only does a significant portion of the audience recognize the *Hobbit* as adhering to those aspects of definition, the mere statement of the film’s use of genre by many, without the need to explain, suggests that the ascription is not contested, to the point where audiences feel it to be self-evident or self-explanatory.

Rejection of Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* as a Children’s Story

Returning to my observations on the first set of questions regarding the “kinds of film,” the second trend noticeable concerns its perception as a “Children’s Story.” Only 120 people (2.5% of all German-language answers) explicitly chose this option from the presets of Q4, thus linking the *Hobbit* to this category. If participants give an explanation for this choice, they often claim that Tolkien’s original novel was written for children and is considered a classic “Children’s Story.” Participant #25604, for example, says that the choice “is probably related to the book being meant for children. Anyway, the characters are rather simple, the world is almost like a fairy tale and made for children, and many things are overdrawn, so that children are able to get it.” Interestingly, the films are not explicitly included in this category of answer, many participants use the term “children’s book” instead, suggesting an exclusion, rather than opting for the neutral “story”: “*The Hobbit* is a children’s book by Tolkien [...] filmed by Peter

Jackson” (#25452), “*The Hobbit* is a children’s book, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is not” (#23922), “I always found the *Hobbit* to be a strange and humorous children’s book” (#21810) and “already in Tolkien’s book *The Hobbit*, a distinct difference towards *The Lord of the Rings* is noticeable, for example [...] in the language, which is much more childish” (#11967). As noticed in these examples, audiences strongly relate the films to the original novel – so much so, that they choose “Children’s Story” as a category despite their own judgment of the films as unfaithful to the novel’s tone: “There is little here that relates to the book from my childhood days” (20017), “There are severe discrepancies between the book and its cinematic adaptation. Especially the children’s book character gets totally lost” (#3022), “Stretching a children’s book over three parts is daring, but losing the book’s honest allure in the process, that is bad” (#13612). Moreover, audiences also compare the *Hobbit* films to the older trilogy and thus relate the category of “Children’s Story” in contrast to the dark and adult tone of the *LotR* films: “I think the *Hobbit* is more childish than, e.g. the *LotR*” (#23269), as “prequel to the *Lord of the Rings* series, the *Hobbit* trilogy wants to be a children’s film, that also contains a lot of action and violent scenes” (#10671).

In the opposite category of Q5, though, audiences overwhelmingly rejected the films as a “Children’s Story” (72.5%), more than two-thirds of which then gave a meaningful commentary about their choice in Q6. Most of these comments (34% of the German sample) simply stated that the films were “not a ‘Children’s Story’” (#11702) or that they found them “unsuitable as a ‘Children’s Story’” (#1177). If audiences did mention specific reasons for rejecting the category, two main arguments arose: (1) that the films were too violent for children, had too many fight scenes, and showed too much brutality, and (2) that the films were too complex in their storylines, and dealt with topics deemed ‘too adult,’ especially when considered as part of the *LotR*-franchise.

In terms of group (1), 236 respondents (4.9%) commented on action and fighting in general as inappropriate for children, some noting the pace of these scenes, others the rush of action. For example, #19842 argues that “this is too full of action, too many fast cuts, it is too complex and too violent for a children’s story,” and #4012 finds, the “fight scenes are just way too harsh for a kid’s movie.” But it is due to the general nature of “action” and “fighting” that responses here are less detailed. Answers that mention the films’ brutality, violence and cruelty as the reason to exclude them from the category of “Children’s Story” are more explicit and graphic. In total, 679 respondents (14%) gave this answer, with specific phrases coming up repeatedly. Regarding the film’s violence the most common words used were: “brutality” (340 mentions), “battle” (116), “war” (74), and “blood” (35). Audiences stated they saw the films as “clearly too violent for children” (#1461), arguing that for a “children’s film [...] way too many heads are rolling” (#23624) and that the films contain too

many “brutal and scary scenes” (#1638). 236 respondents (4.9%) picked up that the films were too scary for children due to their visual presentation. Audiences especially see Jackson’s visualization of the orcs and spiders as frightening and too dark for children: “Kids will get nightmares, especially because of the sequence with the spiders” (#24093), the films are “not really a children’s story, because [...] the depiction of violence is too explicit and some creatures are too scary for small children” (#6680).

In terms of group (2) audiences argue that the film’s complexity and tone make them less suitable for children. 126 respondents (2.6%) argue, that the films, for example, “deal with a lot of adult themes, such as war, greed, decay and revenge” (#25038), that they deal with issues beyond the scope of a child’s comprehension. “The whole thing is unsuitable for children, in my opinion. There is too much war and death (e.g. burning down Laketown)” (#14758). 209 respondents (4.3%) expressed that children would not be able to follow the complexity of the story, that the narrative structure with its references to other parts of Tolkien’s world would confuse children: “In no way are the films a children’s story, [...] the whole story is too complicated and complex, so that children would not be able to understand it” (#35268). In fact, the sentiment that you need an adult mind to appreciate the intricate web of relations and the different aspects of Tolkien’s stories can be found in several responses: “I don’t think *The Hobbit* is a children’s film. Many children [...] will not be able to grasp the narrative strands correctly and understand the deeper meaning. They will not be able to appreciate its value” (#3556). Some respondents further link both complexity and more adult themes to Peter Jackson and a conscious decision to connect *The Hobbit* with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. “The book was written for children, but the film adaptation is much deeper. It tries to portray the fantasy world of Middle-earth as intensely as the *Lord of the Rings* films did. This is why the films are much more complicated than the book and why they contain more connections to later events in the history of Middle-earth” (#2222). As has been stated before, audience perception here is clearly shaped by the connection of the *Hobbit* films with the larger franchise. The films are in large part seen as belonging to the Tolkien-Jackson-world that audiences are already familiar with. Reading them as a “Children’s Story” does not fit with this larger frame; instead the films are understood as part of the “rich historical drama of [...] Middle-earth,” (Ford and Reid 208), as part of a fantasy story for adult audiences.

The Function of Fantasy

The second part of the survey that deals with genre is Q13, which asks participants to choose from a table of options those that come closest to their opinion on what role fantasy can play today. In effect, this question deliberately asks participants to determine a lifeworld function for fantasy (note, that the

question does not specify the medium of film, nor *The Hobbit* as an example of fantasy). Since participants were asked to choose up to three options and these were highly subject to interpretation, the resulting numbers are limited in their meaning without connection to other qualitative statements. Here are the results from the German sample:

They are a way of enriching the imagination	53.3 %
They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions	25.4 %
They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world	37.5 %
They are a way of escaping	63.8 %
They are a form of shared entertainment	27.0 %
They allow us to explore different attitudes and ideas	22.3 %
They are a way of creating alternative worlds	57.4 %
No particular role	2.2 %

Taking into consideration the relatively strong perception of *The Hobbit* as a “World of Fantasy,” as discussed above, the results of Q13 are not surprising. Given the explicit definitions of fantasy from Q6 as impossible worlds that invite their audiences in, allowing them to escape a quotidian reality and to explore their fictional world, the three highest ratings are easily explained. What is interesting to note is that out of all of the options, only one makes specific mention of “our world” and thus connects with Tolkien’s ideal of a Secondary World that provides a “hard recognition” of this Primary World. 37.5% of audiences thus connect the imaginary world of Middle-earth with our world and allow fantasy to have influence on their lifeworld. Fantasy, to these audiences, is a relevant socio-cultural factor for their life and produces meaning outside the realm of entertainment.

In all, the majority of audiences participating in the survey seem to agree on how they read the film. They understand the *Hobbit* as a “World of Fantasy,” many relate them to Jackson’s vision of *The Lord of the Rings* films, which are unequivocally approved of (96.7% ratings of “good” or “excellent”) and have been seen by 98.1% of all participants. This seems to confirm the centrality of *The Lord of the Rings* for the fuzzy set of fantasy. In addition, the majority rejects the category of “Children’s Story,” thus arguing for the fantasy film to be beyond the audience scope of children, having moved the genre away from its originally perceived limitation (cf. Schmeink). But these are not the only possible readings in the survey, and it does seem prudent to illuminate the two minority reports that this majority vote produces. On the one hand, there is a small number of participants that do read *The Hobbit* as a “Children’s Story,” and on the other, there is an even smaller number of participants who have not been shaped by their perception of *The Lord of the Rings*. In the last part of this paper then, these two

minority readings will be used to contrast and thus sharpen the results of the majority reading.

As stated above, only 120 people (2.5%) have selected the category “Children’s Story” as a “kind of film” for *The Hobbit*. When asked about their reasons, many explained a choice of the category with the novel being a children’s book. This would suggest a nostalgia for the book, which is not borne out in the ratings of the novel though, as these do not significantly deviate from the overall ratings. The only difference being that a smaller percentage had not read the book yet, 15% instead of the overall 18.9%. It is interesting to note though, that this group does in fact rate the *LotR*-films somewhat lower with ‘only’ 93.3% approval rating (“excellent” or “good”). The most obvious difference towards the overall sample is this group’s rating of the film, which marks a drastic slide of the scale. Instead of 43.6%, only 12.5% rated the film “excellent.” The biggest gain was in the “average” rating, which leaped up from 16.6% to 30%. The disapproval rating (“poor” and “awful”) also went up significantly, from 5.7% in the overall sample to 20% with those that categorized the film as a “Children’s Story.” Clearly, reading the film with the generic attribution of “Children’s Story” in mind provides a set of expectations that the films disappoint or even violate, thus resulting in significantly lower ratings. In addition, this audience group sees the role of fantasy differently than the overall sample. Their answers show a significantly lower rating of fantasy as a “source of hopes and dreams for changing our world,” which drops from 37.5% to 30.8%, and a significantly higher rating of “no particular role,” which almost doubles from 2.2% to 4.2%. For this group, fantasy has less impact on their lifeworld and is seen as more of an entertaining pastime.

The other minority report comes in the form of those people who claim to not have seen the *Lord of the Rings* films. In addition, this group not only has no pre-knowledge of the first trilogy of films, but also, very significantly, not of the original novel. Out of 64 participants that have not seen the *LotR*-films, 54 claim to never have read Tolkien’s novel *The Hobbit* either. One can thus argue that they are less pre-disposed to a specific reading of the *Hobbit* films specifically and of fantasy as a genre in general. In terms of the films’ rating, comparing the results of these participants to the overall sample reveals them to be more pronounced with both a higher approval rate, with 51.9% “excellent” and 27.9% “good,” and a higher disapproval rating of 9.3% (“poor” and “awful”). In contrast, the “average” rating went down from 16.6% to 11.1%. In terms of their genre ascription, this group is also more pronounced than the overall group: 85.2% claiming the films as a “World of Fantasy” (instead of 76.5% overall) and 79.6% rejecting it as a “Children’s Story” (instead of 72.5% overall). What is interesting to note, is that the most prominent divergence from the overall sample is on ascription of the films with the category of “Tolkien’s Legend-World,” which drops from 65.6% in

the overall sample to 25.9% with this group, thus clearly underlining their lack in pre-knowledge of the story world. In terms of the role of fantasy, the allocations of this group are lower in almost every aspect, with “a way of escaping” staying almost level at 63%, and “no particular role” more than quadrupling to 9.3%. What these numbers suggest is that audiences without the extensive pre-knowledge of Tolkien (and possibly fantasy) do nonetheless easily connect the *Hobbit* films with the generic attribution of fantasy and reject it for child audiences, while at the same time seeing less specific function in the genre other than “escape.”

Conclusion

What should have become clear from these observations is that audiences have a firm grasp on generic attributions and (maybe even instinctively) evaluate filmic events such as *The Hobbit* with specific readings in mind. It is thus important to note once again that generic attribution is an important factor in producing a meaningful film experience. And this extends to categorizations such as the films being part of a specific filmic universe as well, as Kristin Thompson has pointed out: “And while the novel *The Hobbit* is not a prequel, the film adaptation certainly is” (“A Hobbit is Chubby”, n.p.). That audiences come with pre-knowledge is thus relevant for their perception of the films as fantasy. Jackson’s *LotR*-trilogy has become as much the center of the “fuzzy set” of the genre for its filmic variety as Tolkien’s novel has for literature. And with this, the adult-oriented complexity and seriousness in tone and topic have become linked to the genre, decoupling it from “made for children” evaluations and thus resulting in audience rejections of that category. The minority readings provided in the survey support this thesis by confirming a much lower approval rate of the films when seen with the expectations of fantasy as a ‘mere’ children’s genre and by confirming an ‘instinctive’ reading of the film as fantasy by those audiences with little (or no) pre-knowledge of the franchise. In all then, *The Hobbit* proves to be a successful contemporary fantasy film not despite its unfaithfulness to Tolkien’s original children’s novel, but specifically because of its faithfulness to the larger adult-oriented cinematic fantasy world of the *Lord of the Rings*.

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