Introduction: The World Hobbit Project

Martin Barker,
Aberystwyth University, UK

Ernest Mathijs,
University of British Columbia, Canada

This Themed Section is devoted to the outcomes of the 2013-4 World Hobbit Project: the hugely ambitious attempt to gather responses from around the world to the New Line Cinema/Peter Jackson adaptation trilogy of JRR Tolkien's children's story *The Hobbit*. The films were of course (in cinema history terms) a sequel to the 2001-3 *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy; and, at the same time (in narrative terms) a prequel to that trilogy, covering story-events prior to the final battles to destroy the One Ring, and to defeat Sauron, the embodiment of evil in Middle-earth.

These two facts are important to understanding why – and how – we developed and mounted the *Hobbit* research project. In 2003-4 we had managed to create an international project to study responses to the *Rings* trilogy. It was a big project (researchers in 18 countries were involved, offering a specially-conceived questionnaire in 14 languages), and managed to attract large numbers of responses (just under 25,000).[1] But in retrospect, we would argue that more important than the scale of our research was the event that it tapped into. We didn't know, we couldn't know, when we conceived the *Rings* project, that the films of *The Lord of the Rings* were going to become a significant world cultural event. We *got lucky*, in having a project running at the right time, and with (at least some of) the right frames to capture the significance of this event.

It was of course significant in a great variety of ways. The trilogy's success saved New Line Cinema – at least for a time. It transformed the careers of many, from Jackson and Elijah Wood onwards. The final film won a plethora of Oscars, and the trilogy overall made an awful lot of money. It reinvigorated the fantasy film genre, leading to many other book adaptations (eg, *The Hunger Games*) and one or two original stories (eg, *Avatar*). It helped to reinvent repeat cinema-viewing of films (not alone of course – the very different *Titanic* had done this too), and indeed became part of the emerging phenomenon of the 'all-night screening', with the three films shown back to back in various places. But there was

another level of significance, which had to be posed as a question. The question which engrossed us, and which was much harder to answer, was: what did these films mean to its particularly enthusiastic audiences, in a range of different countries and cultural contexts? Discovering some of the dimensions of the answers to this was, we believe, the key achievement of that earlier project. To borrow and expand an expression, our research snapshot 'caught an arrow in flight' – just at a point where by chance it seemed to burst into flames. The fire appeared to be focused around a new cultural significance attaching to the very idea of 'fantasy'.

When it was announced in 2011 that Jackson was going to direct the *Hobbit* adaptation, and that he would again be doing this as a trilogy, we realised that we had to try again – and maybe this time surpass what we had managed in 2003-4. Might a return-project capture more of this phenomenon? And when Jackson explained how he planned to stretch Tolkien's single slim volume into three full-length films – by enhancing the links with *The Lord of the Rings* and raiding Tolkien's 'legendarium' (the whole narrative universe that Tolkien created across his lifetime) – we could see the main framing for the new project. Over a period of a year we built the foundations of the second project, and in important respects succeeded greatly. This time, researchers from 46 countries joined the project, with representatives in all continents (albeit still with a concentration in Europe). We were able, with the support of a small research grant from the UK's British Academy, to offer the questionnaire in 34 languages. And we managed to gather a staggering 36,109 responses.

But this is where the story gets complicated. If we got lucky with *The Lord of the Rings*, we *got unlucky* with *The Hobbit*. After a *quite* promising first film – which did divide opinion on lots of grounds (characterisation of the dwarves, narrative additions, technical cinema styles) but was certainly no disaster (and won admirers for some things, perhaps most notably for Martin Freeman's portrayal of Bilbo) – things went sharply downhill. By the end of the third film, Jackson himself was led to admit that much about the films had been rushed and ill-controlled. And some key decisions bitterly divided responses: the addition of the female elf Tauriel, and the structuring of her narrative arc around a romance with the dwarf Fili; the stretching of the final Battle of the Five Armies to nearly three-quarters of the third film; the repeated chases and escapes from the White Orc; apparently endless special effects sequences involving collapsing bridges, etc. If any single word characterises responses overall to the films, the word is 'disappointment'. For a very large number of people – by no means always on the same grounds (which of course matters) – there was a sense of let-down. Even the most enthusiastic (and of course they are there) often put qualifications into their responses. 'Of course not as good as *Lord of the Rings*, but still …'. 'So good to get to go back to Middle-earth, even if …': these are typical kinds of response we received. A sense of high hopes dashed has provoked responses ranging from cautious, to feeling cheated, to anger. And it shows in the ticket sales. Where globally ticket sales for *The Lord of the Rings* went up across the three films (from $887m to $1141m), they went down for *The Hobbit* (from $1017m to $995m). Some people had just given up on the trilogy.

Just as we couldn't know in advance what enhanced impact *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy would have, we couldn't guess what diminished impact the *Hobbit* trilogy would achieve. It means, of course, that the *kinds of findings* possible from the project are necessarily different.

Planning and methodology

The World Hobbit Project was made possible by that grant from the British Academy. This enabled us to pay a web designer, Dave Gregory, to construct a complex website, questionnaire and database, which could cope with inputs from a range of technologies, and in a full range of scripts (many non-European). Our thanks go both to the Academy for their support, and to Dave for the quality and professionalism of his work.

Our British Academy application identified one overarching, and five subsidiary questions that would drive the research:

> The project's overarching question will be: How do films which originate as an English children's story acquire meaning and value for different audiences across the world? Within this broad question, we will ask: 1) How are responses to *The Hobbit* related to age, sex, income, nationality and reading experience? 2) How does wider knowledge (eg, of Tolkien's work, of Jackson's films) affect people's engagements? 3) How are vernacular labellings of the film patterned, and how do these relate to interpretive strategies (for example, to recalling and valuing particular elements of the story)? 4) How do different audiences relate their responses to wider (real, virtual or imagined) communities? 5) What criteria undergird different evaluations of the film, and how are these evidenced within responses?

The questionnaire's design followed that for *The Lord of the Rings* in quite a few ways. At its heart were careful combinations of quantitative and qualitative questions. On one side were a series of multiple-choice questions, recording not just some demographic information about our participants (age, sex, occupation, and education level; also, how the films were actually viewed) but also a range of measures of attitudes and orientations. Beyond simply rating the *Hobbit* films, the book and the earlier *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, these ranged from very closely focused multiple-choice questions about people's *preferred* ways of viewing the films, through involvement in various kinds of fan activities, up to wider orientations to 'fantasy' as a mode. Coupled with these were invitations to participants to explain their choices in their own words, or to talk generally about the topic under scrutiny. Alongside these were a number of more free-standing qualitative questions, designed to elicit talk that we hoped would throw particular light on the nature of responses. This kind of overall linking of quantitative and qualitative responses has generated what we like to call a *richly structured combination of data and discourses*.

What we aimed to gather, then, were rich resources that can be pursued and analysed along a range of routes. For instance, how does interest in and engagement with particular modes of exhibition (cinema, IMAX, home cinema, DVD, etc) relate to people's wider responses – including their attitude to 'special effects'? Or, how do different levels and kinds of engagement with fan activities (from none, through debating seriously the films, to collecting merchandise, and producing fan fiction or videos) connect with choices of favourite characters, and most memorable moments from the films? Or, how do different orientations to 'fantasy' (from escapism, through expanded imagination, to hopes and dreams for changing the world) interrelate with disappointments in the films? We choose these three, indicatively, to illustrate the very different levels (from technical, to productive, to ideological) at which our research is able to work.

In the end, our questionnaire was probably a bit too long and complicated. We did hear complaints from several quarters – and at least one heroic defender in British film reviewer Mark Kermode, who vlogged himself completing the questionnaire in well under the 20 minutes that we indicated as the likely duration – thanks, Mark! But it did become too long, we think, as an outcome of one important feature of the project. We were determined to offer everyone joining the project the chance to take part in a debate about the questionnaire's design. A long period of online debate culminated in a two-day symposium in Antwerp, hosted by Philippe Meers, at which the results of online voting on key topics were explored, and turned into a final version. This resulted in what we have come to call 'Questionnaire Creep': strongly-pressed claims for new questions overwhelmed our intended limits, resulting in the 29-question survey (which we append in full to this Introduction). We don't regret the process at all, even if it left us with some tricky outcomes.

Recruitment

We never sought, and we do not claim, to have a 'sample'. Rather, we recruited opportunistically – with one exception (explained below). Our aim was to try to ensure that all categories and all possible choices were well-stocked with responses. We were happy to have many students, for instance (among the easiest group to reach and recruit), but hoped that some at least of them would tell friends, younger or older siblings, parents, even grandparents about the project, so that we would get more of these harder-to-reach groups. Inevitably we recruited most heavily in younger age groups – but were pleased to have considerable numbers of older respondents (our oldest three were over 100 years old!).

Because we had no money to employ someone to publicise our website and questionnaire, we depended on the work and expertise of research teams in each country and language represented in the project. We had to hope that, at least through some of the routes tried, knowledge of the project might go viral. Reflecting on the outcomes, it looks to us as though this did happen in some very particular situations. Occasionally, someone with valuable connections would talk about the project, and this would lead to big boosts in the

numbers of responses – this happened, for instance, in the Czech Republic. In other places, despite colleagues' best efforts, levels of responses remained disappointing, often for complex reasons.[2] But overall, we cannot but be excited by the high overall 'turnout' of 36,109 completions.

The one exception to opportunistic recruitment occurred in Denmark, where colleagues managed to obtain funding support to conduct a national sample survey of responses to the film among general cinemagoers. This resulted in two distinguishable groups within the overall database, making it possible in this one case to compare the effects of opportunistic and purposive recruitment. (See the essay by Ann Jerslev, Christian Kobbernagel and Kim Schrøder in this Section.)

Modes of analysis

Analysis of results has taken place in stages. A preliminary sweep of totals and some main cross-tabulations were done by Martin Barker. This identified some very obvious tendencies inviting further consideration (see Lars Schmeink's essay in this Section, looking at the meanings and significances of the very widespread rejection of the label 'Children's Film' – one of the early discoveries from this). A gathering of a number of colleagues in the Project in Odense (Denmark) in November 2015 – made possible (thank you!) by Rikke Schubart, organiser of an important conference there on the Future of Fantasy – enabled an early exchange of ideas and issues. Thereafter, to a considerable extent, colleagues have perforce gone about these things either separately or in small semi-independent groups.

By chance, our World Hobbit Project took place alongside another project, using a different approach and methodology. This is pretty unusual, and surely of worth in itself, in allowing comparison of the value of different approaches. The Canadian/New Zealand Q-Methodology Project was recruiting responses to its very different project at the same time as ours. Working in a smaller number of languages, and with a smaller research team, they nonetheless attracted 1,000 responses for a study of audience prefigurations towards *The Hobbit*, and 2,800 to a post-film study of responses. The second project followed responses to the films after the final part's release, using the same approach (see Davis et al.: 2014, and 2016). Q-Methodology is an approach rooted in developments in the 1930s, originating in the work of psychologist William Stephenson. It is built around asking respondents to indicate their (degree of) agreement or disagreement with a series of propositions, via what is known as a 'Q-Sort'. The items in this are developed by the researchers, drawing on their knowledge of the debates, commentaries and reviews surrounding the 'object' they are interested in. The growth of computing power and the internet has meant that it is now relatively easy to automate large sections of both the gathering and the analysis of responses.

There are clear similarities and differences between the two approaches – neither one for instance depends on recruiting a sample –, and we don't want to claim better or worse for either. We are happy to leave such a consideration to future debate. What we would note as the distinctive feature of our own approach is the multiplicity of kinds of

analysis that the form of our database invites and allows – which are well illustrated in the essays which follow. These range across the following:

1. the pursuit of exceptional individuals: although not yet published, one presentation of results from the project put at its heart one person who gave the most extraordinary account of herself. A Syrian refugee now living in Russia, participant #13508 told us the story of her relations with both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* film series – films which, she says, saved her in a desperate situation and changed her life. She is not 'representative' (although some features of her responses are shared with other people). It is in fact the exceptional features of her responses that are so valuable. Across her answers to our questionnaire a rich 'portrait' emerges of the ways films can matter intensely to particular individuals.

2. probing patterns of response around particular topics: for example, those for and against the character (and narrative arc) of Tauriel. In our database it is quite easy to isolate those who mention 'Tauriel' within any or all of the open-text answers, and thence group and compare the characteristics of those welcoming or hostile to her. Or, the same can be done to isolate and compare those affiliating with Tolkien, or with Jackson, or with both (or neither), to see what if any consequences follow from such 'vernacular ascriptions of authorship' for wider attitudes to the films (see Martin Barker in this Section on this).

3. selecting for examination one or more subsets of our participants (by age, by sex, by occupation, by country or language, or whatever) to examine the spread and interrelationships of responses. Probably these are most effectively done as comparisons. For example, it could be extremely informative to compare two countries with substantial response-sets, where they are known to be differentiated along some other external dimension (say, levels of religiosity). Given Tolkien's High Anglican religious affiliations, and the ways it has been argued these provide one impulse for creating his mythology, there is a real potential for exploring and understanding the ways a 'religious' text is subsequently taken up and used. (See the essay in this Section by Sascha Trültzsch-Wijnen and Vanda de Sousa, for an example of this. See also the essay by Larisa Mikhaylova and colleagues.)

4. deploying sophisticated analytic software on the whole, or particular parts, of the database. As Alberto Trobia (this Section) argues, recent developments coinciding with the rise of 'Big Data', have expanded opportunities for doing various kinds of cluster analysis, crossing the classic quantitative/qualitative

divide. This is perhaps something still to be fully tested on our substantial database of responses. For this (among other) reasons, our plan is to make the database fully accessible to other researchers from 2018.

All these, and many more, stratagems are possible, as a consequence of the richly structured texture of our database. There is no *a priori* restriction on the range of approaches and questions which can be tackled in this way. Much depends on the imaginativeness with which any of us approaches this, and (of course) the very different skills backgrounds from which, inevitably, we come. Of course each and all carry a 'risk' with them. For many of these kinds of analysis, there are no very clearly established and agreed measures of effectiveness, validity and reliability (and we are well aware of the problems which these terms bring with them). But done with care, and with due acknowledgements of problems and limits, we are confident of the value of the work that can come out of this project.

From Raw Figures to Basic Statistics

We are not attempting here to display all the results – this would simply take up too much space. In all, we offered 18 multiple-choice questions, and all the answers are valuable – but some more than other, for the purposes of this Section and its constituent essays. Beyond some basic information about the general distribution of participation in our survey (where some important features already show), we are focusing on one topic in particular: what factors associate with either praising or criticising the films.

Our questionnaire attracted responses from a total of 143 countries. In many of course, these were only very small numbers. But in 13 countries (Brazil, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, USA), we gathered more than 1000 responses, and in a further 8 (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Greece, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia) more than 500 responses. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the largest number of responses (7664) were in English, followed by German (4869), Czech (4457), and Turkish (3014). Other languages attracting over 1000 responses were Finnish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish. Two questions at least arise from this distribution. (1) Is there any evidence that language is itself a factor, perhaps because of the 'English' origins of Tolkien's work? There are signs emerging from analysis of the nature and levels of disappointment around the films that language did indeed function as a variable in its own right. (For an attempt to explore this topic, see the essay here by Aleit Veenstra and colleagues.) (2) Although the results are not included in this Section, some important questions are raised by the number and nature of those people who responded from outside the country of their nationality, and in a language different from that the primary one where they are currently resident. There are possible contributions here to ongoing debates about migration, identity and hybridity in our contemporary world.

The overall sex and age distribution of our responses is interesting (see **Graph 1** below). There is an almost balanced mixture of male and female, but a substantially skewed spread of ages. Of course, it is well-known that young people are a significantly larger proportion of the general cinemagoing population; therefore we should expect higher proportions of these. But it is worth noting that, although in the Table the highest aged population looks vanishingly small, in fact our corpus still includes 172 aged over 65.

Graph 1: Distribution by Sex & Age
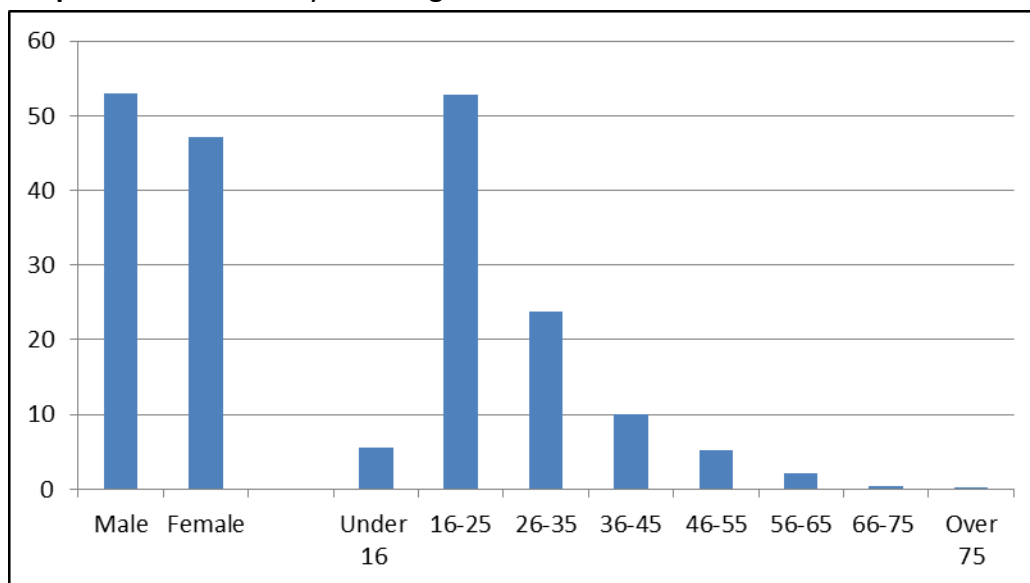
After lengthy debate leading up to and during our Symposium, it was agreed that we would include a question about levels of education, as another proxy for class position (alongside 'Kind of occupation'), despite some difficulties in translating the five levels into different languages/educational frameworks. On reflection, it is as well that we did, as the results have proved more striking than those for occupation (which for space reasons are not included here, but which we plan to address it separately on another occasion).

Graph 2: Level of education reached
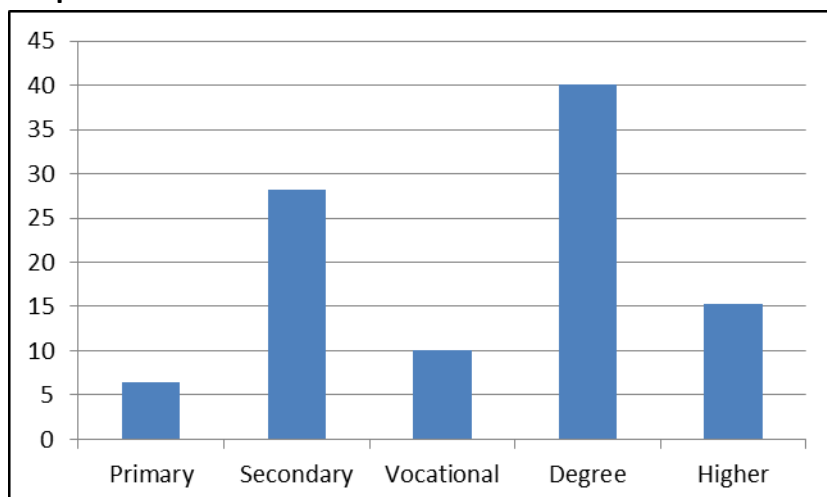
All education levels are well-represented in our population (with the smallest [Primary] still constituting 2,295 responses) – and as we will shortly see, there are some very striking differences in responses to the films across these. Cross-tabulations with Educational level, we will see, are rather extraordinary.

Reasons chosen for seeing the films (the topic of our Q3) show a considerable spread, but with some choices rising well above others.

Graph 3: Reasons for wanting to see the *Hobbit* films:
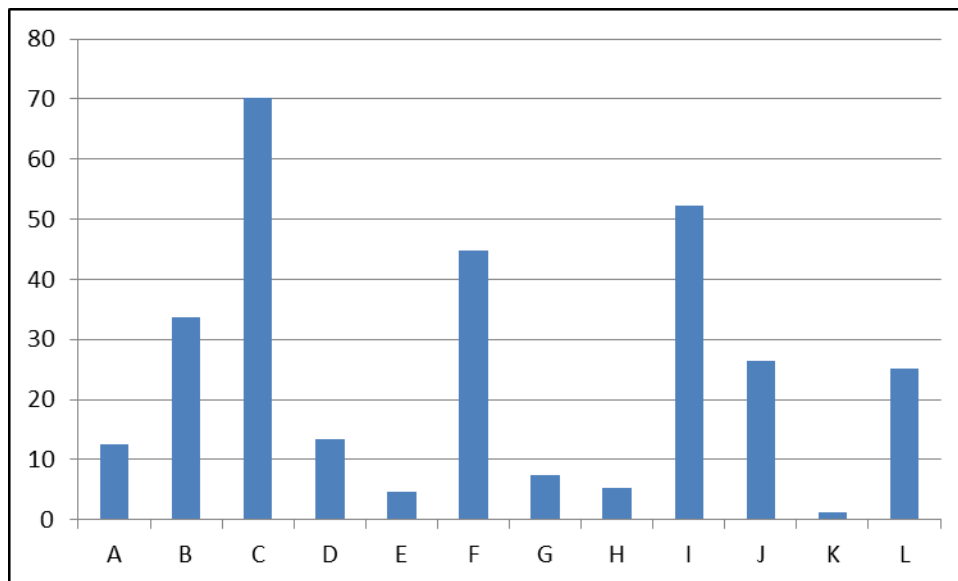
A. I wanted to experience their special features (eg, high frame rate, 3D); B. I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films; C. I love Tolkien's work as a whole; D. I like to see big new films when they come out; E. I wanted to be part of an international experience; F. I love fantasy films generally; G. There was such a build-up, I had to see them; H. I was dragged along; I. I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like; J. I love Peter Jackson's films; K. No special reason; L. An actor that I particularly like was in them. *NB: participants were invited to choose up to three. No barrier was in place to enforce this limit, and a small proportion did select more than 3 from our list of options.*

The very high figures for love of Tolkien, followed by the high interest in Jackson, and in fantasy generally are key indicators awaiting investigation for their relations with other answers.

Question 5 asked people to choose up to three from a list of fifteen options those descriptions which, in their judgement, best described the films. Question 6 then asked them to nominate up to 3 from the same list which they would definitely *not* use to describe them.

The overall results are striking in themselves, with the first choice – 'Children's story' – being among the *least positively chosen* and by far the *most refused*.   In the opposite direction, 'World of fantasy' and 'Tolkien's legend-world' are (as indicated above) highly

positively charged, and hardly refused at all. Again the significance of these will emerge more strongly when we move to examining the relations between these choices, and evaluations of the films. The strange pattern of responses to 'Coming-of-age story' – so significant in general responses to *The Lord of the Rings* films, hence included as a distinct option here – remains to be investigated (an oddity emphasised by the results reported below in **Table 2**).

**Graph 4:** Vernacular categories (chosen and refused):
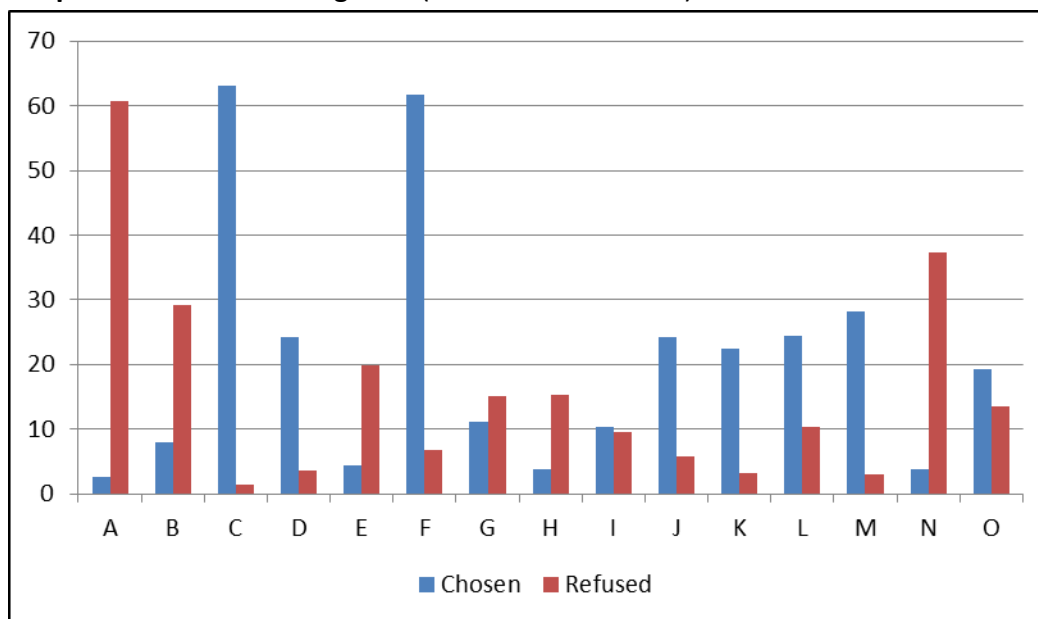
A. Children's story; B. Fairytale; C. World of fantasy; D. Prequel / sequel; E. Star attraction; F. Part of Tolkien's legend-world; G. Multimedia franchise; H. Family film; I. Digital novelty cinema; J. Action-adventure; K. Peter Jackson movie; L. Literary adaptation; M. Stunning locations; N. Coming-of-age story; O. Hollywood blockbuster.

An important ambition of our project was to be able to explore the differences between fan and non-fan audiences (something of course made possible by the breadth of our recruitment). We are keen to try to understand what variations in interests and responses occur as a result of different kinds of involvement in fandom. The basic data for exploring this we hoped would be captured through our Question 12 ('Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?').

Apart from the pleasing fact that clearly we managed to attract many outside fandom as well as many within (witness the result for K), perhaps the most interesting feature of answers to this question emerges from the facility of our database to allow us to identify those who *only choose one* among this set of 'Further activities'. Aside, obviously, from those who do 'None of these', it is very striking that those involved in making fan art or videos, or writing fan fiction, *almost always* (over 97%) involve themselves in other activities as well, whereas *more than a quarter* of those choosing 'Seriously debating the films' *only*

choose this. 'Gaming', 'Visiting locations', and 'Merchandise' are all positioned in between these extremes.

Graph 5: Other activities related to watching the films:
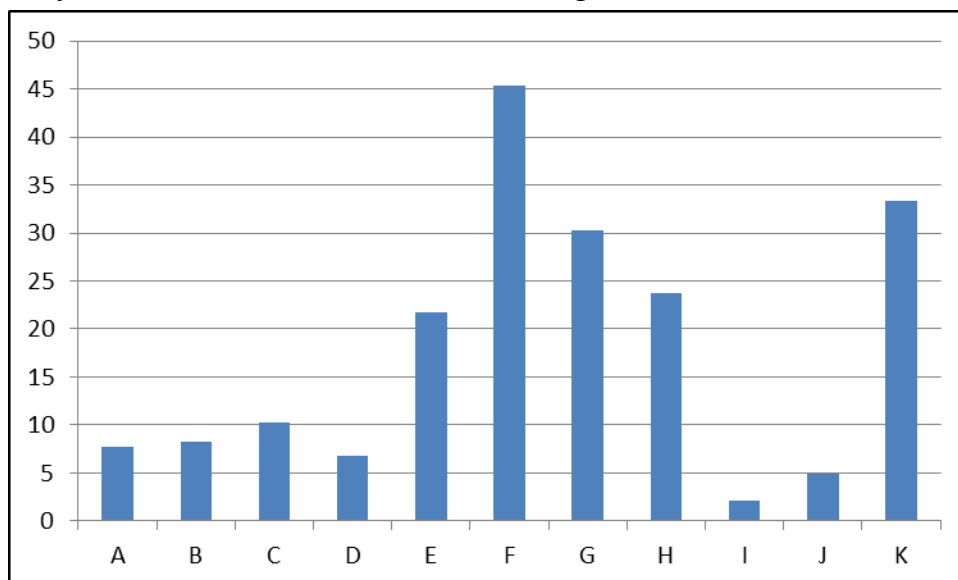
A. Producing fan art; B. Blogging; C. Role-playing; D. Writing fan fiction; E. Collecting merchandise; F. Seriously debating the films; G. Commenting online; H. Gaming; I. Making fan videos; J. Visiting filming locations; K. None of these.

While there are things to be learned from how people *actually* watched the films, the most interesting evidence, in our view, emerges from people's indicated *preferences* for how to view them (captured in our Q20).

Despite the youth of our audience, and their supposed preferences for new, mobile modes of participation, these films – or perhaps these *kinds* of films – are clearly still regarded by very large numbers (77.4%) as first and foremost a cinematic experience. Second comes DVD/BluRay (at 31.6%), with the enhanced experience that IMAX offers coming a clear third (at 25.1%).

Perhaps the most striking Graph to emerge from this first-level examination of our responses comes from a combination of answers to three questions. We asked our participants, separately, to give us their ratings of: the film trilogy of *The Hobbit* (the primary purpose of the questionnaire); of the *Hobbit* as a book; and finally of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films. As **Graph 7** below demonstrates, while almost all our participants had seen the *Rings* films, more than 20% had not read the book (although answers to a separate question revealed a small additional proportion still reading it at the time of completing our questionnaire). These aside, estimations of the book are strongly positive, with 'Excellents' slightly out-topping the more cautious 'Goods'. But the *Lord of the Rings* films are evaluated as 'Excellent' by almost 80% of our total population – whereas evaluation of the *Hobbit* films, while still broadly favourable, drops away from 'Excellent' to 'Good', and has a

markedly higher proportion of critical responses. We would argue (on the basis of this and other more qualitative evidence in the database) that Jackson's *Rings* films became, for very many people, a kind of template for judging Tolkien's storyworld as a whole, and also a measure of quality of experience – to which then the *Hobbit* trilogy simply didn't quite live up.

Graph 6: Preferences for ways of viewing the films:
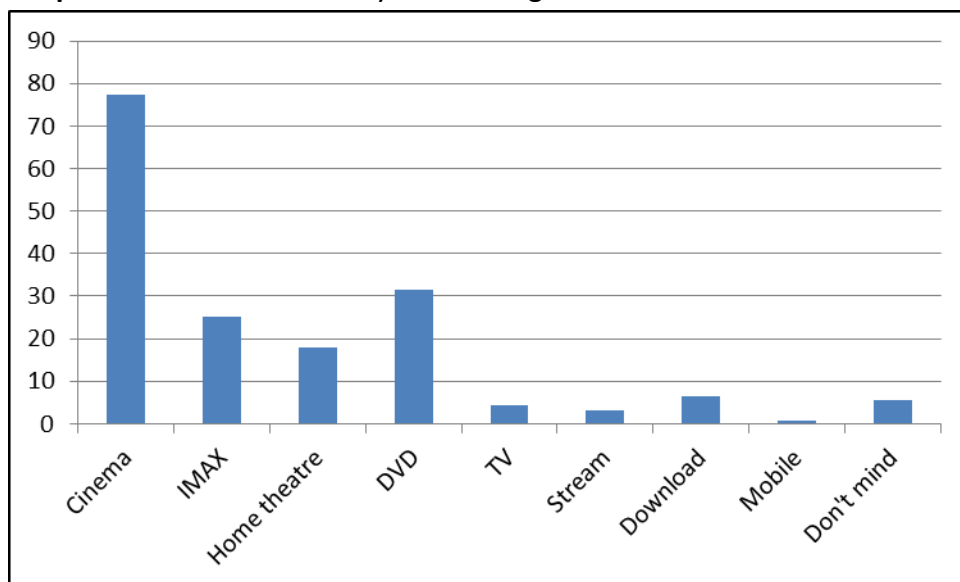
Graph 7: Comparative ratings of *Hobbit* films, *Hobbit* book, and *Lord of the Rings* films
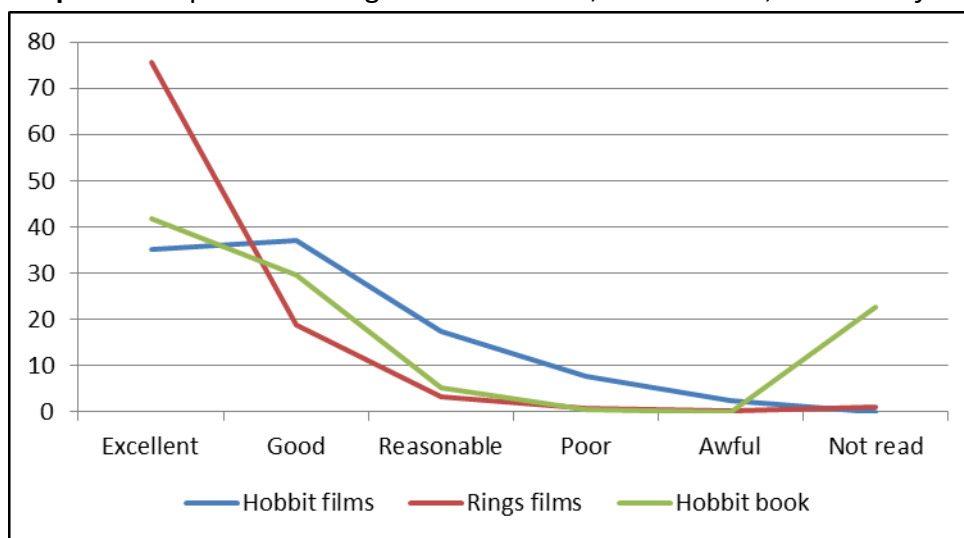
Cross-tabulations of responses for enthusiastic vs critical responses

What follows is a portrait of the characteristics of the most enthusiastic, versus the most critical, respondents. Who is most likely to like or dislike the films, and what wider orientations are in play as people evaluate the films? Given the way **Graph 7** points to a dividing line between awards of 'Excellent' and 'Good' as an indicator of wider judgements, in some of the following we follow this as a convenient shorthand.

Women are more likely than men to award 'Excellent' to the films (41.2%/29.9%). The age-group most likely by a large amount to award 'Excellent' is the youngest (Under 16 = 67.1%). But while all other age-groups are substantially lower, this is not related to age in some simple way. The lowest award is given by those aged 26-35 (25.2%), but rises again to almost 40% for the age-groups above 55. This unpredictable result is confirmed by the fact that, when looking at Occupations, the group with the overall highest ratings of the films are the Retired (at 44%) closely followed by Industrial workers, at 43.6% – with the lowest ratings awarded by those declaring themselves Creatives (27.9%). But the most striking figures on this emerge from achieved Educational levels, as **Table 1** shows:

Table 1: Relations between Ratings of the films, and Educational levels.

	Primary	Secondary	Vocational	Degree	Higher
Excellent	62.2	40.0	43.1	29.7	25.0
Good	26.8	36.6	36.1	38.9	37.6
Reasonable	7.0	15.5	13.8	19.2	23.5
Poor	3.1	6.2	5.2	9.4	10.4
Awful	0.9	1.7	1.8	2.8	3.5
TOTALS	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

These figures indicate a strong relationship between these two factors. We want absolutely to avoid any simple judgement that less educated respondents are less critical than more highly educated. Rather, we want to explore what *different criteria of judgement* are used by each group.

Reasons for seeing the films do not differentiate so sharply (with awards of 'Excellent' ranging from 47.1% to 30.0%), but they do point to two potentially interesting features. While interest in Peter Jackson associates with the highest figure here – and is accompanied in this by interest in Actor(s) – interest in Tolkien associates with much lower 'Excellent' ratings (34.9%), but still not as low as those who give among their motivations that they 'Knew the book' (this group gave the lowest award). Still more inviting are the results of cross-tabulating 'Excellent' ratings with answers to our Kinds of film question:

Table 2: Relations between 'Excellent' ratings, and 'Kinds of Film' answers

Children's film	11.6	Tolkien's legend-world	43.6	Jackson movie	39.8
Fairytale	34.5	Franchise	7.4	Literary adaptation	35.6
World of fantasy	38.4	Family	38.5	Stunning locations	48.6
Prequel/sequel	31.9	Digital novelties	26.9	Coming-of-age film	53.6
Star attraction	42.8	Action-adventure	35.2	Blockbuster movie	12.3

Note first that while (as we saw above, with **Graph 3**) few (in total 1365) chose 'Coming-of-age film' (and with high numbers refusing the label), those who did choose it awarded the

highest rankings to the film. They were followed by those attracted to the New Zealand locations, and then by those interested in Tolkien's legend-world. At the other extreme, those identifying this as in effect a Hollywood product ('Franchise', or 'Blockbuster') do this as part of being the most critical viewers. It seems as if the films look inauthentic to them.

Responses to our 'Other activities' multiple-choice question are again quite indicative:

Table 3: Relations between 'Excellent' ratings, and 'Other activities' around the films

Fan art	53.0	Merchandising	52.2	Fan videos	56.5
Blogging	42.4	Seriously debating	36.3	Visiting locations	47.4
Role-playing	42.5	Commenting online	38.9		
Fan fiction	51.0	Gaming	45.2	None of these	27.5

There is clearly a general relationship between degrees of further activity around the films, and evaluations of them – with those doing nothing around them valuing them least. The hunch that those nominating 'Seriously debating the films' are a distinctive group, by virtue of the high proportion of them who *only* choose this option, is confirmed by an examination of the proportion of this subgroup awarding 'Excellent'. Isolating this subgroup leads to the proportion of 'Excellents' falling to 26.2%, which is fractionally lower than those without any further involvement in the films at all.

Relations between film-ratings and general orientations to 'fantasy' are also interesting, if not as strong as some others:

Table 4: Relations between 'Excellent' ratings, and orientations to 'Fantasy'

A way of enriching the imagination	37.1	A form of shared entertainment	29.7
A way of experiencing/exploring emotions	40.5	Exploring different attitudes and ideas	35.3
Hopes and dreams for changing the world	43.3	A way of creating alternative worlds	34.5
A way of escaping	33.8	No particular role	17.7

Although the differences are not huge (aside from 'No particular role'), it surely is important to note that the highest ratings for the films came from those for whom 'fantasy' performs the most positive and productive roles. A question still to be explored is the way in which people of this kind managed their sense of disappointment at various aspects of the films by 'forgiving' the film-makers – the opportunity to 'return to Middle-earth' partly overrode objections, and raises a much broader question about the role that experiencing this world had for them.

There is a great deal more that can be said just from the most basic statistical analyses emerging from our database. Some of these are tackled in the essays in this Section. Others will have to wait for subsequent publications. The richness of the qualitative responses – some of them of remarkable length and density – is a further resource.

This *Participations* Themed Section

An important context for this whole Project is the rising ambition with which academic scholars of audiences now go about their work. In the period after the revival of audience research (outside the American mass communications tradition) from around 1980, at first most studies were quite small and 'local' – but still valuable. Gradual strengthening of methods, research training, interconnections among researchers, and a growing critical literature base has enabled many kinds of growth. Bigger questions, larger networks of researchers, more worked-through methods, and wider reach and recruitment have all emerged in the last decade or so. Our Project is part of that growth. We therefore particularly welcome the fact that, within this Section, you will find a wide range of approaches.

Curiously, although we began by saying that we had got 'unlucky' with *the Hobbit* because it had produced such a widespread sense of disappointment and let-down, in the main the essays here do not address this aspect – or at least, not directly. Rather, a major theme in three of the essays is the discovery that, even sometimes in the teeth of disappointment, people are finding something in their experience of *The Hobbit* that takes them ***beyond fantasy***. (See especially the essays by Uwe Hasebrink & Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Brigitte Hipfl & Jasmin Kulterer, and Larisa Mikhaylova et al.) 'Fantasy' is generating the resources for people to think and feel differently about the world they inhabit on an everyday basis. It is taking many audiences on journeys in the course of which they find themselves looking askance at their own lives, the workings of our world, and seeing things with a renewed clarity. In short, fantasy ***matters*** greatly, far beyond being good or bad storytelling. Whether new or simply becoming fully visible for the first time, we saw the signs of this in our earlier *Lord of the Rings* project. But we do wonder whether this is not in fact growing as a phenomenon. If true, it would make the examination of 'disappointment' all the more important, to explore in what ways people's sense of let-down might be because they are seeking *more* of this beyond-entertainment quality in the films, rather than just better films. This is a job remaining to be done.

But this is by no means all that is attempted in these 15 essays. Three essays address in different ways issues of cross-cultural comparisons, and how an unusual dataset such as this one can throw light on the ways in which nations, languages or cultural traditions affect responses to the films (see the essays by Irma Hirsjärvi et al., Sascha Trültzsch-Wijnen & da Souza, and Aleit Veenstra et al.) Two essays address the methodological opportunities and challenges posed by this kind of research (see the essays by Anne Jerslev et al., and by Alberto Trobia). Two essays address from very different angles the issue of the ways in which *The Hobbit* is, or ceases to be, a 'children's story (see the essays by Emily Midkiff, and by Lars Schmeink). The remaining six essays deal with quite other topics: the role of new digital technologies in Canadian and US audience responses (Doris Baltruschat et al.); the part played by ascriptions of 'authorship' in responses (Martin Barker); the handling by audiences of the book/film relationship (Jonathan Ilam & Amit Kama); the role of transmediality in responses (Aino-Kaisa Koistinen et al.); and the curious

case of the absence of mentions of 'myth' among Finnish respondents (Jyrki Korpua). Finally, one essay sets *The Hobbit* in the context of the distinct context of Brazil, and the Latin/South American tradition of theorising audience relations (Nilda Jacks et al.) The sheer range and variety of findings to emerge – just at this first attempt – is a kind of testimony to the project's value.

Biographical notes:

Martin Barker is Emeritus Professor at Aberystwyth University. He has researched and published on a wide range of cultural and media topics across his career, but in the last twenty five years has particularly focused on audience researches. He is currently co-leading a project on *Game of Thrones* audiences, using a version of the methodology deployed in the World Hobbit Project (see www.questeros.org). Contact: mib@aber.ac.uk.

Ernest Mathijs is a Professor in Film Studies at the University of British Columbia. He has written on the reception of horror cinema and fantasy, in particular *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and on Belgian cinema, and the reality-TV series *Big Brother.* Ernest is currently preparing a short book on *The Room*, and a longer project on actress Delphine Seyrig. Contact: ernest.mathijs@gmail.com.

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Notes:

[1] A quite substantial literature emerged from the *Lord of the Rings* project. Without trying to be completist, we have listed some of the most significant of these in the References to this Introduction.

[2] Although we cannot be certain, our low level of recruitment in India – despite the best efforts of our team – seems to have been a combination of a technical preference for completing the questionnaire on mobile phones (which was possible, but proved tricky), and a cultural expectation that completing a survey of any kind should have an accompanying reward or possible prize.