

The reception of *The Hobbit* in Canada: Does fantasy need technology?

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Abstract:

To what extent do digital technologies and the visualization of fantasy go hand in hand – or stand in each other's way? In 2002, Peter Jackson commented that, 'there was a chance...that visual effects technology had just about reached the point where it could tackle the legends and landscapes of which Tolkien dreamed.' Has that point been surpassed, or have digital technologies of production and delivery (e.g. CGI, 3D, 48 fps, IMAX, etc.) ruined it all? Do visual effects and digital technology 'enhance' or 'narrow' the imagination? Would *less Computer Generated Imagery* actually inspire *more imagination*? And what does that tell us about the meaning of 'escapism'? This paper will explore the Canadian responses to the World Hobbit Project survey (N=647), and, by comparing it to the US responses (N=2005), ascertain if Canadian audiences of *The Hobbit* (Jackson, 2012-14) felt that digital technology enhanced, enabled or impoverished the visualization of fantasy worlds, given similar marketing strategies for the North American audience.

The first part of the paper outlines the basic figures of the Canadian reception of *The Hobbit* through the context of Canadian news reports and marketing of the films. Next, the paper concentrates on how the trilogy was regarded as a 'Digital Film' (questions 4, 5, 6 and 8, as well as 19 and 20 of the World Hobbit Project survey). One focus here is on the ambiguity between 'lovers' and 'haters' of *The Hobbit* as a 'digital novelty film.' This analysis is related to Canadian audiences' responses to the role of fantasy (questions 13, 10 and 11). The paper uses Netlytic software to visualize Canadian audiences' sentiments toward

technology and fantasy aesthetics. In conclusion, our paper speculates on the relationship between fantasy's role in the world and the representation of 'alternative' worlds and beliefs through corporate digital technology.

Introduction

'Fantasy, is I think, not lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) most potent' (J.R.R. Tolkien; Essays, 67).

With the release of *The Hobbit* trilogy, digital film production has reached a new benchmark, from higher frame rates (48 fps) to providing audiences with the greatest variety of viewing options: standard format (24 fps) and IMAX, 48 fps, 3D as well as high-frame-rate 3D and IMAX. Similar to *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* trilogy, Peter Jackson relied heavily on digital effects to create Tolkien's fantasy world of Middle Earth. Yet, even though the *LOTR* movies received worldwide acclaim and three Oscars for their novel use of digital effects, including the combination of CGI-imagery with motion capture to create the character Gollum, *The Hobbit's* reception was mixed. Peter Jackson's use of high-frame-rate was criticized for its hyper-real aesthetic – reminiscent of a 'video game' – which in its crystal clarity did not seem appropriate for a fantasy genre that tends to be expressed in Tolkien-related art through pastel-coloured, romantic overtones, as for example in the depiction of the Shire (Hamilton, 2012).¹ While Jackson slightly improved the look in 48 fps for the second and third instalments of the trilogy, critics continued to focus on the overuse of CGI and the lack of practical effects, especially for characters like Azog (the White Orc) and his son Bolg (Lussier, 2013). In addition, *The Hobbit* was critiqued for its length, introduction of non-Tolkien characters (e.g. the female elf Tauriel) and other additional storylines not found in the original text (e.g. the love triangle between the dwarf Kili and elves Tauriel and Legolas).

Throughout the films' production and release/distribution history, Peter Jackson (<https://www.facebook.com/PeterJacksonNZ/>) responded to his critics through his on-line vlogs and interviews. These para-texts provided extremely detailed background stories to each film, especially with regards to innovation of digital production techniques. Even in their official release strategy, the focus remained on the novelty factor of production, explaining in great detail the availability of different formats for exhibition and distribution. Any viewer and fan of *The Hobbit* would have likely been exposed to these para-texts, which was reflected in the Canadian and US responses to the World Hobbit Project (WHP), the online film audience survey that provided the data for this study. Here, 69 Canadian and 171 US respondents identified *The Hobbit* as 'digital novelty cinema'. However, for the same question '*Which of the following come closest to capturing the kind of films you feel The Hobbit trilogy are?*' the strongest responses were 'World of Fantasy' (Canada, 264 responses; US, 1150 responses), and 'Part of Tolkien's legend-world' (Canada, 381 responses; US, 1180 responses). See **Figures 1** and **2**.

Given Peter Jackson's oeuvre, it comes as no surprise that he has become known as one of the pioneers of digital cinema. A long-time admirer of special effects by Ray Harryhausen (Adler, 2010), he began experimenting with practical effects in his first features (e.g. *The Frighteners*, 1996) followed by exploring computer-generated imagery (CGI) for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. *LOTR* featured 540 effects in the first film (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001), 799 in the second (*The Two Towers*, 2002), and 1488 in the final instalment (*The Return of the King*, 2003), amounting to 2730 effects in total (Mitchell, n.d.). In comparison to *The Hobbit*, Jackson and his Weta team combined more practical effects with digital effects for *LOTR* as described by visual effects supervisor Jim Rygiel (as cited in Robertson, 2001):

This movie is kind of an effects person's dream.... We have miniatures, pyrotechnics, bluescreen, practical elements, and CG elements all mixed and matched. Sometimes the Fellowship might be digital; sometimes they might be real; sometimes they are scale doubles (para 4).

A major milestone for the *LOTR* production team was the early development of motion-capture (mo-cap) technology exemplified by the character Gollum (portrayed and 'animated' by Andy Serkis). James Cameron further perfected mo-cap for *Avatar* (2008), which in turn led to a more advanced '2nd generation' of the Gollum character in *The Hobbit* (McIntyre, 2012a). Given the advances in CGI in the late 2000s, Jackson (as cited in McIntyre 2012b) made extensive use of new digital tools for *The Hobbit* films:

Prosthetic makeup is always frustrating, ... At the end of the day, if you want the character to talk ... you can design the most incredible prosthetics, but you've still got eyes where the eyes have to be and the mouth where the mouth has to be. ... A lot of the Orcs even though they're played by performers, the makeup is going to be CG makeup, which allows me to put their eyes further apart. They can open their mouths and scream in a much more dynamic way than they ever could (para. 5).

This extensive use of CGI in *The Hobbit*, replacing practical effects and prosthetics, has been criticized for turning characters into video game-like figures that 'defy the laws of gravity and physics'. The result: audiences could invest little empathy or emotions in some of the scenes, such as the dwarves tumbling down a bridge in the caves of the Misty Mountain (compared to a similar dramatic scene in *The Lord of the Rings* featuring the Fellowship in the Mines of Moria), or the elf Legolas 'flying' through a debris field of falling rocks in *The Battle of the Five Armies* (Lussier, 2013). For many critics (and viewers) this meant that *The Hobbit* did not live up to the narrative – and emotional – depth of *The Lord of the Rings* (Hickey, 2015).

Figure 1: Canadian responses to Q4

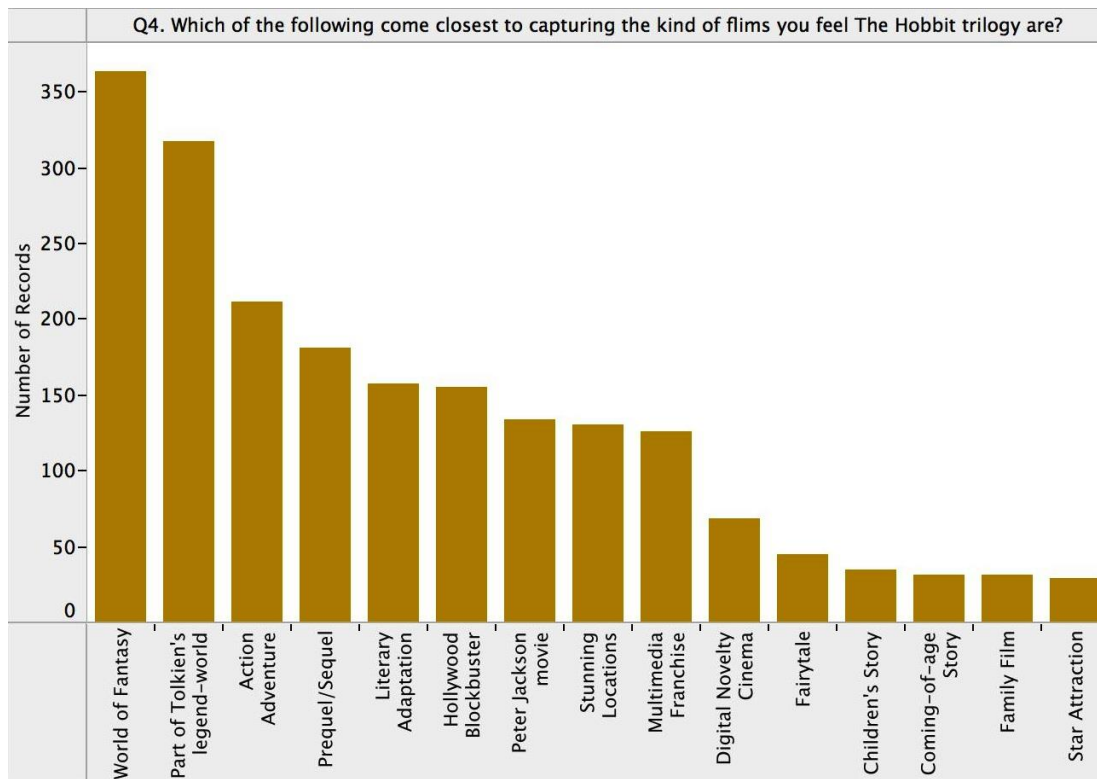
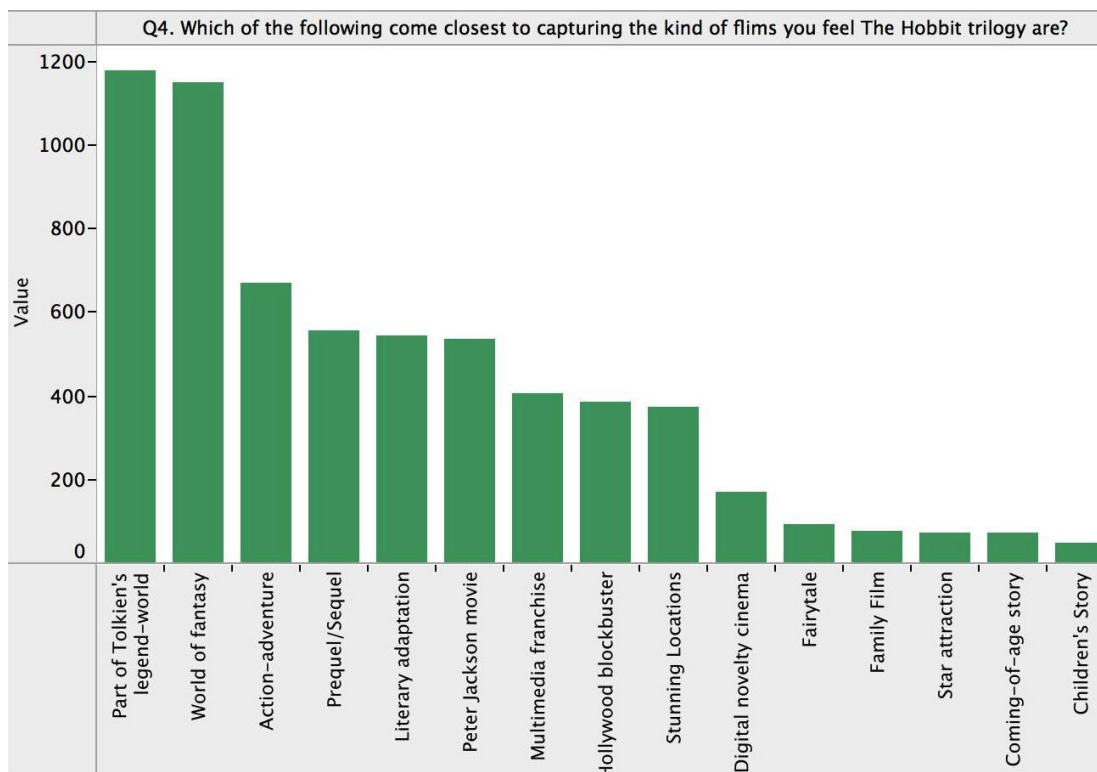


Figure 2: US responses to Q4



The Hobbit as a Digital Film

The notion of 'Digital Cinema' encompasses a broad range of meanings, from technological innovations to new approaches in media production, distribution and reception. It provides for a fundamentally new understanding of cinema, now based on binary algorithms that enable digital and interactive viewer engagement across multiple platforms and screens. In spite of the dramatic shift from analog to digital, few outside the film industry seem to be aware of this transition. Some facts that are openly discussed relate to diminishing stocks of photographic film materials and a heightened perception around the closures of community theatres in some countries, which are disappearing due to the lack of funding for digital upgrades. However, in spite of the majority of today's films being produced and distributed via digital means, many viewers are not aware that they are no longer looking at celluloid images. That is, with one exception: namely, if a director, like Peter Jackson, rolls out an extensive 'behind the scenes' promotional campaign for a multi-million franchise like *The Hobbit*.

Over the past ten years, filmmakers have gradually transitioned from using 35mm as a film stock to adopting new film formats shot on digitally enabled cameras. Movie theatre proprietors also had to convert to exhibiting digital film via projectors that form part of a 'Digital Cinema Package' (DCP), which, since 2014, has become the new standard for all North American screens. Indeed, major studios like 20th Century Fox issued a 'convert or die' decree as early as 2011, reinforcing that digital would be the only format for the studio's future (as cited in Burr, 2013). Pressures to convert to digital came not only from the major studios, but also from pioneering filmmakers like Peter Jackson and James Cameron. Indeed, Jackson lobbied theatre owners to invest in a software upgrade to show *The Hobbit* at 48 fps. Hancock (2013) estimates that internationally nearly 1,200 screens were upgraded to play the high-frame-rate, 3D version of the film.

A key difference between celluloid and digital film is the shift from a linear format to an indexical system, essentially a database that allows for the retrieval and storage of information using computerized functions. As such, digital film can be subjected to algorithmic manipulation (e.g. changes to contrast, saturation, size of an image, etc.). This ability to store computer data in files allows post-production teams to work on scenes jointly, especially in large productions like *The Hobbit*, which generated 2200 hours of footage, the equivalent of 24 million feet of film. Yet, the goal of most manipulations of digital visuals, as Belton (2012) points out, is to simulate the codes, practices and look of 35mm: thus, continuing aesthetic traditions rather than revolutionizing them. Digital cinema therefore has had *less of an immediate impact* on audiences, especially when compared to past transitions and novelties such as the introduction of sound, colour, 3D and widescreen. On the other hand, given the fact that production, distribution and reception are converging, the viewing experience is increasingly influenced by access to different screens, from IMAX to mobile, and by greater immersion and interactivity with cinematic texts and para-texts through social media exchanges. These innovations and varied experiences

provide the broader contexts of today's digital cinema, and mark a clear break with traditions associated with 35mm movie production in the past.

Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy has been widely publicised in Canada and the US as an experience that would herald a new era in cinema. Its stereoscopic production combined with high-frame-rate (48fps), a new immersive sound environment (Dolby Atmos) and its first-time distribution via a cloud-based streaming service ('Ultraviolet') in New Zealand, were widely discussed even before the release of the first instalment of the trilogy: *An Unexpected Journey*. In addition to advertising the films as a novel digital experience, Jackson made extensive use of social media – especially on his Facebook vlog – to underscore the innovative style of the films. Consequently, expectations were high, especially within the context of the successful reception of the preceding *Lord of the Rings* trilogy a decade earlier, which were rated as excellent by n=437 Canadian and n=1563 US respondents to the WHP survey. It therefore came as a surprise that the first *Hobbit* films were widely criticized for their use of high-frame-rate and extensive use of CGI.

Interestingly, critical reception and commentary about *The Hobbit* films changed over the course of their three-year release, shifting from the scrutiny of their visual aesthetic to their 'excessive' length (especially for the final instalment of *The Battle of the Five Armies*), inclusion of new characters not featured in Tolkien's book (the elf 'Tauriel'), and the 'gamification' of characters that defied the 'laws of physics' (i.e. the elf Legolas' video-game like stunts). Peter Jackson (2011, April 11) defended his use of higher frame-rates, saying that:

Film purists will criticize the lack of blur and strobing artifacts, but all of our crew--many of whom are film purists – are now converts. You get used to this new look very quickly and it becomes a much more lifelike and comfortable viewing experience. It's similar to the moment when vinyl records were supplanted by digital CDs. There's no doubt in my mind that we're heading towards movies being shot and projected at higher frame rates (para. 8).

Indeed, critics of higher frame-rates tend to neglect that fast motion scenes in stereoscopic production often result in an unwanted blur effect, which necessitates correction. Lack of understanding digital film production often forms part of a broader sentiment: namely, lamenting the transition from celluloid to digital film as a loss of a 'cinema paradiso', accompanied by feelings of nostalgia. Yet, historically, during the early exhibition of motion pictures, hand-cranked cameras inevitably delivered a variation of frame rates, even with the best intentions of the projectionist. And, as Manovich (1995) poignantly describes, the manipulation of digitized film frames with a computer paint program today is reminiscent of the hand-crafted images used for the Zootrope in magic lantern slide shows during the 19th century, or later the hand-applied colourization of 35mm film by George Méliès.

Our study revealed that *The Hobbit* trilogy's digital production and exhibition contexts influenced its reception by audiences, who commented extensively on the films' high-frame-rate, (over)use of CGI and unnecessary embellishments. However, the reaction and responses to the use of CGI tended to be uneven across the Canadian and US responses. For example, the digital creation of the dragon Smaug for the second film (*The Desolation of Smaug*) was generally hailed as a success, while other CGI manipulations were criticized and dismissed. Interestingly, Smaug, the CGI-dragon, has come to represent another milestone in the historical evolution of creating mythical creatures on film, dating back to the beginnings of movie production: from the stop-motion animation in Willis O'Brien *The Lost World* (1925) and *King Kong* (1933), to Ray Harryhausen's elaborate stop-motion creatures in films like *Clash of the Titans* (1981), to the Go-Motion animated dragon in *Dragonslayer* (1981). With Smaug, a new generation of 'beast' with a high degree of realism was achieved that was consequently further developed into a virtual reality gaming experience. In 2015, the prototype titled *Thief in the Shadows* (in real time at 90 fps and in 3D stereoscopic) was revealed to positive reviews at the Game-Developer-Conference in San Francisco (Ingraham, 2015; Lang, 2015; Burns, 2015).

This differentiation in the reception of CGI characters (e.g. the White Orc) versus 'beast' (Smaug) was evident in the Canadian and US responses. One US respondent described this sentiment in the following:

I did not like some of the CGI. I absolutely understand it's necessary in some situations, and it was brilliantly done with Smaug, but part of what makes the LoTR movies so magical is the extensive use of practical effects. It's things like animating horses which could have been live action and--I'm not 100% sure about this one--but I think Dain Ironfoot looked CGI. He looked WEIRD... [#22915]

In comparison, a Canadian response highlighted:

The lack of practical effects, and the apparently low quality of those present. 'The Hobbit' was so much about demonstrating cutting-edge digital effects that it lost sight of one of the great strengths of the Lord of the Rings films. That trilogy relied heavily on physical prosthetics and set design, and the world it presented felt 'real', it had a weight to it that was believable. 'The Hobbit' felt more like a well-rendered video game, sometimes to distraction (Billy Connolly's seemingly-digital face, for instance). [#22493]

These two responses are representative of one type of sentiment around CGI use, which was negatively received with regards to some characters, but positively received for others. Another interesting differentiation in the Canadian and US responses is the reception of the

'fantasy' aspects of the trilogy. Many respondents commented on the 'reality' aspects of the fantastic elements of the films, as in the statement 'They truly brought the world of Middle Earth to life in such a realistic and BELIEVABLE way!' [#24123]. In comparison, a US respondent stated:

The overwhelming use of CGI, which was amazing in certain areas (Gollum and Smaug), and so appalling/gratuitous in other areas. For instance, that scene where Gandalf, Bilbo, and the Dwarves were riding up to Mirkwood - did they really need to CGI that? Could they not have found a real forest in New Zealand? The battle in the third movie was especially terrible in this regard - none of the fighting seemed real, and the scene with the Elves helping the Dwarves looked like something straight out of a video game (which was unfortunate, because it would have looked so cool if it had been real). [#27840]

To gauge the sentiment of our respondents, we used the on-line software tool Netlytic for an analysis of the qualitative data (resulting from open-ended questions) of our study. The software allowed for the discovery of patterns in survey responses, generated in the form of word clouds, word-rivers (highlighting predominant words and expressions used across the data set, e.g. Smaug) as well as graphic representations showcasing the frequency of wordchoices, see **Figures 3** and **4**.

Netlytic allowed for the detection of predominant words and expressions that were used by WHP respondents in Canada and the US to describe their reception of *The Hobbit* films, which could then be correlated with our quantitative data sets. In particular, the software enabled an exploration into the positive and negative sentiment around the depiction of Peter Jackson's CGI-generated elements of Middle Earth.

Netlytic as a Tool for Content and Sentiment Analysis

Netlytic (2016) is a 'cloud-based text and social networks analyzer' that is most often used for social media network analysis, particularly of social media data captured from Twitter (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013; Gruzd & Roy, 2014). While less robust than other content analysis software or applications (e.g. In-spire), Netlytic has been used for a great variety of texts and sentiment analyses (Alyami & Toze, 2014; Drsicoll, 2013). The software proves to be particularly useful in its ability to highlight the context for a particular word or phrase, in which case individual records can be checked for accuracy as well as for nuances in meaning (Grek Martin, Gruzd & Howard, 2013; Gruzd & Rehberg Sedo, 2012). In comparison to comparable software like Storify and DMI-TCAT, Netlytic is user-friendly; is capable of analyzing other media formats apart from Twitter, including RSS Feeds, text, and CSV²; offers instant visualizations of collected data; and has the capacity to export data in a

format compatible with more robust content analysis applications (Felt, 2016; Netlytic, 2016).

Figure 3: Canada Top 10 Most Frequently, for Q9_CAN_disappointed

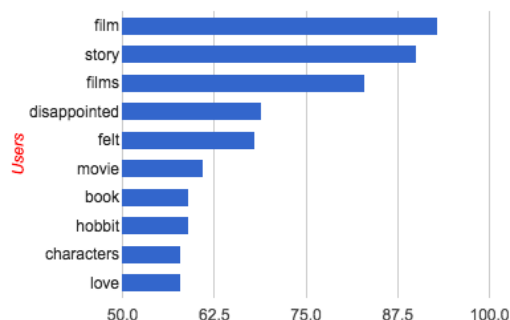
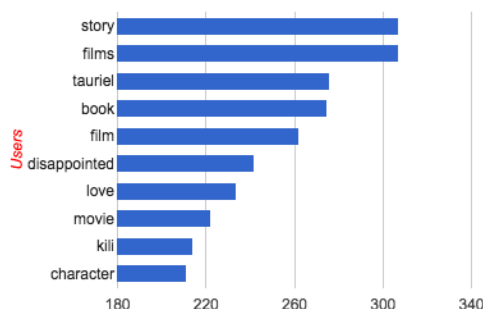


Figure 3: US Top 10 Most Frequently for Q9_US_disappointed



For the purposes of our study, we used only the responses of survey participants living in Canada (N=647) and the United States (N=2005). Of these responses, 30 responses from Canada and 25 responses from the US were in a language other than English. These responses were translated into English using Google Translate (<https://translate.google.ca/>) in conjunction with several other online translation tools³, and, most important of all, with assistance from native language speakers involved in WHP.⁴ Canadian and US responses were stored in separate Excel files and then imported into Netlytic software for analyses.

To analyze the survey data, and to allow for the comparison between questions as well as between the Canadian and US responses, the survey responses for each open-ended question were stored in Excel, saved as a CSV file and imported into Netlytic. Netlytic automatically identifies the most-used words and presents them visually as ‘word-clouds’ of 30, 50, or 100 terms. These word-clouds can be modified by eliminating terms that are too general or irrelevant. From the word-cloud, the context of each instance of a term can be displayed (e.g. the entire response from a survey respondent can easily be accessed), in addition to the relative frequency of term use.

Netlytic can also display terms and phrases by category and has several pre-made categories to capture sentiment analysis like ‘agreement’ and ‘disagreement’. Researchers can modify these categories or create new categories to capture specific sentiments and moods present in the data. Beginning with these frequently found words, we created categories of terms denoting computer-generated imagery (e.g., CGI, digital, technology, Smaug) and evaluation (e.g., impressed, disappointed, better, worse, mistake) to discover patterns of content and sentiment in the responses. Netlytic was then used to analyse each dataset based on the terms chosen for each category, which allowed for further, more directed, comparisons between datasets.

One of the limitations of Netlytic is that responses between different survey questions cannot be correlated. For example, it is not currently possible to compare through Netlytic one respondent's personal information (Questions 22-27 in the WHP survey) with what impressed, or disappointed that particular person. However, the ability to quickly upload data and to create and customize the categories functionality of Netlytic allows a researcher to discover common terms and patterns and to compare a general sense of content or sentiment between several datasets at once.

Additionally, the context of any term in any given response is immediately accessible (e.g. the entire response can be read and compared with other responses), giving the researcher an important understanding of how a term is used in any given dataset. This highlighted that certain words like 'love' referred to less to the sentiment around the overall reception of the films, but to particular narrative arc. Consequently, in the 'Evaluation' category, the term 'love' was disabled as it almost exclusively referred to the 'love triangle' or 'love story' between the characters Tauriel, Legolas, and Kili. Incidentally, the context for the term 'love' was not only different than we anticipated – we were looking for the sentiment 'love' as an evaluative marker (i.e., 'I loved the part in the film when...') – but often indicated a negative or disappointing aspect of *The Hobbit* trilogy (e.g., '... disappointed by the love triangle ...'). Netlytic therefore helped us to identify our respondent's predominant word choices in describing their reaction to the films, in addition to highlighting key contexts in which these words were used.

Analysis and Findings

Our study aimed to discover the sentiments toward the extensive use of digital effects in *The Hobbit* for the North American audience. To understand this phenomenon, we looked at the responses to closed questions about the film as digital media (Questions 3, 4, 5, 19, and 20) and at the sentiments discovered through the use of Netlytic to find frequently used words and categories of terms in the open-ended questions (6, 8, and 9) of the WHP online survey.

Examining the top three responses for survey Question 3 (*Please choose up to three reasons for seeing The Hobbit films*) it is clear that the survey participants were most interested in the films as part of Tolkien's work, and as fantasy films in general, compared to those respondents who went to see the films' advances in cinematic technology and special features. The responses in **Table 1** are echoed in the paired Questions 4 and 5 (*What kinds of films are The Hobbit trilogy? / What kinds of films are they not?*) Here, Canadian and US respondents identified the films as 'world of fantasy,' 'Part of Tolkien's legend-world,' and 'Action-adventure'. However, only 69 Canadian and 171 US responses identified the films as 'Digital novelty cinema,' and, perhaps even more interesting, more respondents (77 Canadian and 318 US responses) identified the films as definitely *not* 'Digital novelty cinema'.

Table 1: Top three responses to Question 3: Reason for seeing *The Hobbit* films, compared to number of responses for ‘special features’.

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Canada (647)</i>	<i>US (2005)</i>
I love Tolkien’s work as a whole	420	1605
I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like	345	1286
I love fantasy films in general	237	744
<i>I wanted to experience their special features (e.g., high frame rate, etc.)</i>	124	201

In response to Questions 19 ‘*What formats have you seen The Hobbit films?*’ and Question 20 ‘*What format do you prefer to see The Hobbit films in?*’ respondents favoured the original cinematic release for all three parts of the trilogy. It was the most frequently chosen option in Question 19 and the clear winner in Question 20, with 441 of Canadian and 1426 of US respondents preferring to see the films in this format (see **Figures 5 and 6**). For the formats featuring technological innovations, the responses were remarkably consistent, though the format of 48fps showed a remarkable downward trend from the first film to the second.

Table 2: Canadian and US responses to Question 19 ‘*Which formats have you seen the films?*’; focus on technologically innovative formats:

<i>film</i>	<i>Canada (647)</i>			<i>US (2005)</i>		
	48fps	IMAX	3D	48fps	IMAX	3D
<i>Unexpected Journey (UJ)</i>	151	146	274	478	453	777
<i>Desolation of Smaug (DoS)</i>	117	134	270	366	445	732
<i>Battle of the Five Armies (BFA)</i>	112	146	259	328	440	698

The responses to Questions 19 and 20 suggest that the North American WHP survey participants were in large not seeing the films in enhanced formats, though it is unclear why. The low numbers may be a result of a lack of access to theatres which carried the technological upgrades needed to show the films in these formats, or it may be due to a lack of knowledge or interest in cinematic technology innovations.

So far, the North American survey participants have shown interest in Jackson’s *Hobbit* films as part of Tolkien’s world and as part of the fantasy film genre, and they prefer to see the films as the original cinematic release. There is a small, but fairly consistent, subset of this population, however, that is interested in viewing the films in one or more of

the more technologically innovative formats. Through Netlytic it was unfortunately not possible to link this subset with the responses to the open-ended questions, but the patterns discovered in these sets of responses provided interesting insights. Many respondents referred to 'visiting Middle-earth' again (after *LOTR*) and being 'immersed' in that fantasy world; therefore, whether the digital effects used by Jackson in the *Hobbit* trilogy could 'transport' the spectator to Middle-earth is an important factor to consider. Individual responses ranged from 'total immersion' into that world to 'cartoonish' in response to the open-ended Questions 6, 8, and 9. Some respondents respected the amount of detail that Jackson put into *The Hobbit*, while others compared it favourably (or unfavourably) to *LOTR*.

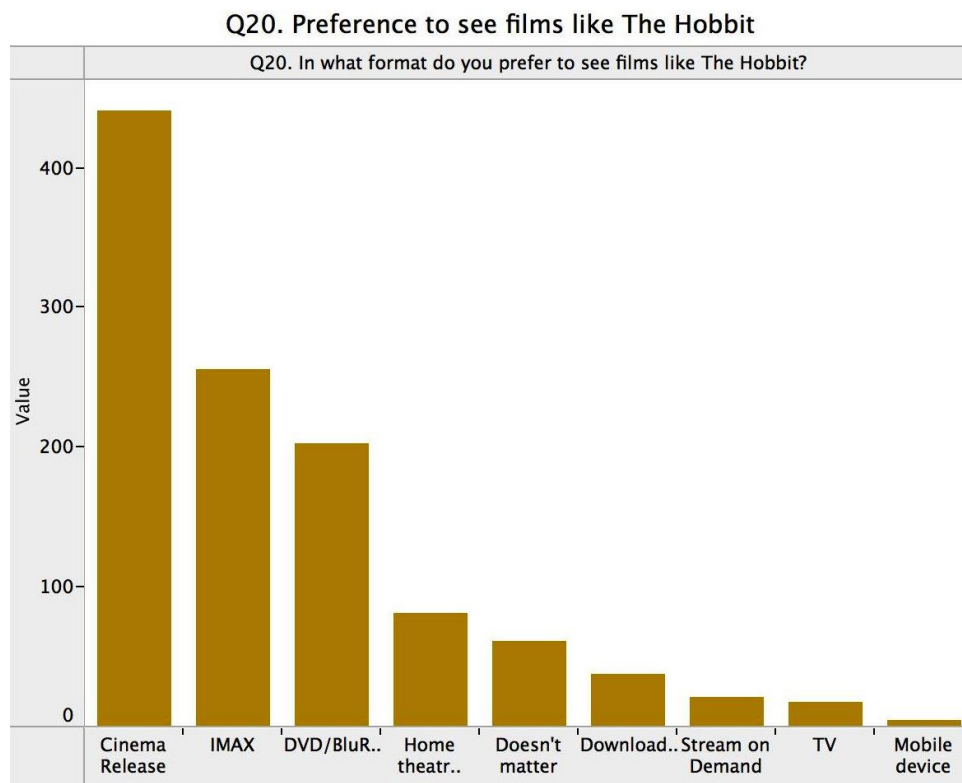
To answer our questions related to audience sentiment around CGI in *The Hobbit*, terms that referenced aspects of cinematic technology were gathered under the category heading 'CGI' in Netlytic. These terms included both specific technologies (CGI, computer, computer generated imagery, digital, graphics, animat***, effects, green, 3D, visual**, CGILE, and motion captur**) as well as characters that were exclusively or heavily computer-generated (Smaug, dragon, azog, orc*, gold**, necromancer, goblin*, goblin king).⁵ While comparing the number of responses that fell under the category CGI, we uncovered some interesting patterns: for Question 8, '*What element of the films impressed or surprised you most?*', almost 42% of both the Canadian and US respondents mentioned some form of CGI.

A similar pattern held true for the open-ended questions: for Question 2, '*Reasons for rating the films*', nearly 28% for both Canadian and US respondents referenced CGI-use in the films; for Question 6 '*Reasons for kinds*' approximately 6% for both Canadian and US respondents addressed CGI, and for Question 15 '*What stories or debates interested you?*' roughly 16% for both Canadian and US respondents commented on digital effects. Overall, the Canadian and US respondents of the WHP survey were consistent in their comments on CGI use in *The Hobbit* and what impressed them most about the film trilogy, why they rated the films the way they did, why they categorized the films as they did, and what stories and debates they followed. However, one survey question elicited slightly different results: Question 9 '*Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films?*' Here, Canadians mentioned some aspect of CGI in only 22% of the responses, while 34% of US responses highlighted the use of CGI.

Additionally, what is interesting here is the bifurcation of sentiment surrounding CGI and related cinematic technology. If the CGI was universally good (or bad) we might expect references to CGI in only Question 8 (Impressed) or in Question 9 (Disappointed), but to see 42% of responses mentioning CGI in Question 8 as well as 22% (Canadian) and 34% (US) mentioning CGI in Question 9 suggests a mixed reception. This mixed reception is reiterated in responses such as US (Question 8): 'Beautiful scenery, excellent cinematography, epic fight scenes. One word: Smaug. When the CGI is good, it's great. When it's bad, it's terrible.' [#8740] While both Canadian and US survey participants heralded both the digital effects and the real world setting of New Zealand, a few specifically separated these two elements,

as in the Canadian response to Question 8: ‘The extensive New Zealand scenery always impresses me, knowing that most of it isn’t cgi.’ [#30772]

Figure 5: Canadian Responses to Question 20



Conclusion

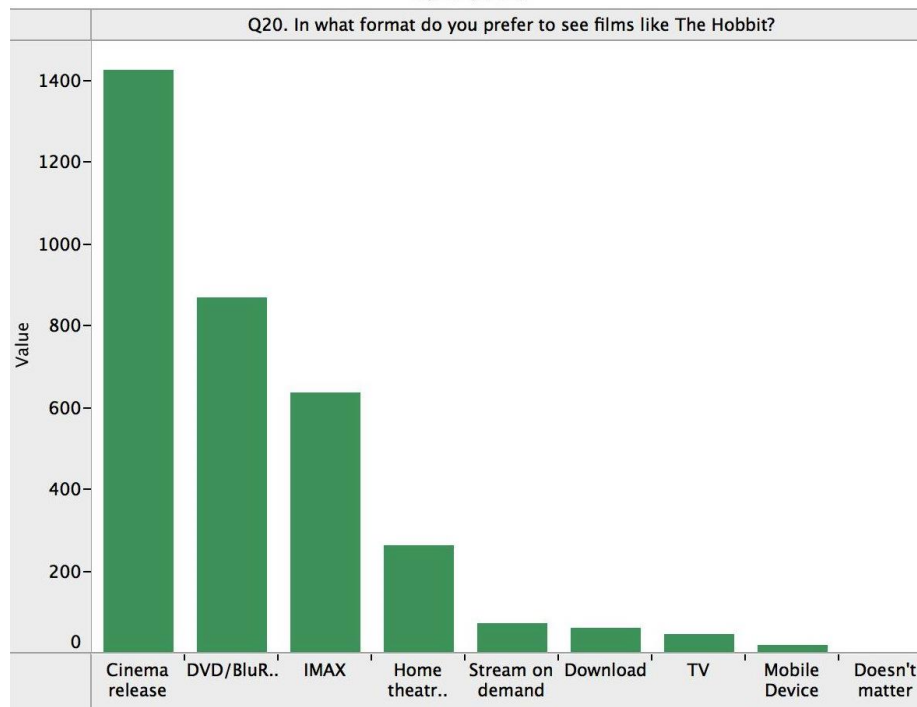
While the responses to the set of closed questions (Questions 3, 4, 5, 19, and 20) suggested a fairly homogenous population that saw the films as part of Tolkien’s world and the fantasy genre, Canadian and US responses with regards to *The Hobbit’s* digital fantasy world are varied across the data sets. While for some respondents Jackson’s use of CGI resulted in the following:

Over-use of CGI and, like I said before, some of the miraculous saves. Once you start doing things like that, none of the action scenes seem that impressive and takes away the illusion that this fantasy world could be real. [#9882]

others revealed the exact opposite sentiment:

The reality of the fantasy, if that makes any sense. I love becoming immersed in the story, in the world. It takes me away. I am also blown away by the sheer creativity of the filmmakers and their co-workers. I am a ‘special features’ person and there is NO[O]NE who does special features better than PJ & Co. [#10060]

Figure 6: US Responses to Question 20
Q20 (USA)



These responses point towards the question of verisimilitude and Jackson’s ability to portray characters in a ‘believable way’ across the various narrative arcs of *The Hobbit* trilogy. It points towards an ‘unevenness’ and inconsistency in *The Hobbit* films, where some digital production processes may have received more careful attention than others (e.g. the impressive creation of Smaug). The inability of some viewers to ‘suspend disbelief’ could also be tied to the production history of the films. In 2016, Jackson revealed that in contrast to the lengthy pre-production period for *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* was rushed into production, due to the fact that director Guillermo del Toro had bowed out of the project (Child, 2015).

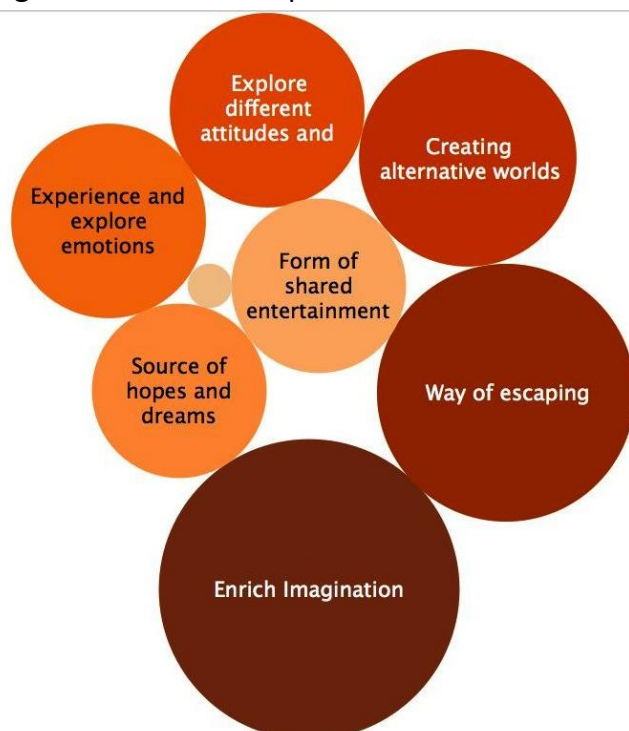
In contrast to official critics of *The Hobbit* trilogy, the overall reception of the films (including the execution of CGI) was positively received by both Canadian and American audiences, who participated in the World Hobbit Project. Over half of the Canadian survey respondents rated *The Hobbit* as either ‘excellent’ (N=174) or ‘good’ (N=260). Similarly, over 50% of the American responses were positive with N=720 for ‘excellent’ and N=683 for ‘good’. Even though many respondents commented on the use and overuse of CGI, they also favourably commented that the films created a Tolkienesque fantasy world they could immerse themselves in. For example, a Canadian respondent states: ...‘While the books are unbelievably filled with detail and prolific, the movies don’t have the same capacity to detail the story. That said, the movies have the visual capacity to bring the aesthetic world of Middle Earth to life, which is what keeps audiences coming back to see each movie.’ [#27356] Another Canadian response echoes this sentiment: ‘The look of the entire universe. In the broad spectrum I’d have to say Kudos to the set builders and especially the

MAKEUP ARTISTS and ANIMATORS! They truly brought the world of Middle Earth to life in such a realistic and BELIEVABLE way!' [#24123] A similar sentiment came from a US respondent:

The locations always impress me the most. I generally dislike heavily CGI films, and one of the reasons I love the Hobbit so much is that Peter Jackson works his CGI into the natural landscape of New Zealand. So instead of creating a world that is entirely computer generated, he instead enhances our world with CGI fantasy elements. This to me, makes the movies so much more enjoyable because I believe in the world, that it could exist and therefore am so much more immersed in the movies. [#7278]

Our study suggests that there are similar sentiments about *The Hobbit* trilogy among its fans across Canadian and US respondents. Both Canadian and US fans relished Jackson's digital special effects noting that they helped create a more believable world – from enhanced landscapes to the creation, in particular, of the dragon Smaug – while others had the opposite reaction, regarding the effects as cartoonish and disconnecting them from Middle-earth. Canadian and US respondents also highlighted that the role of fantasy stories lies in enriching the imagination (Question 13), see **Figures 7** and **8**. In expressing disappointment

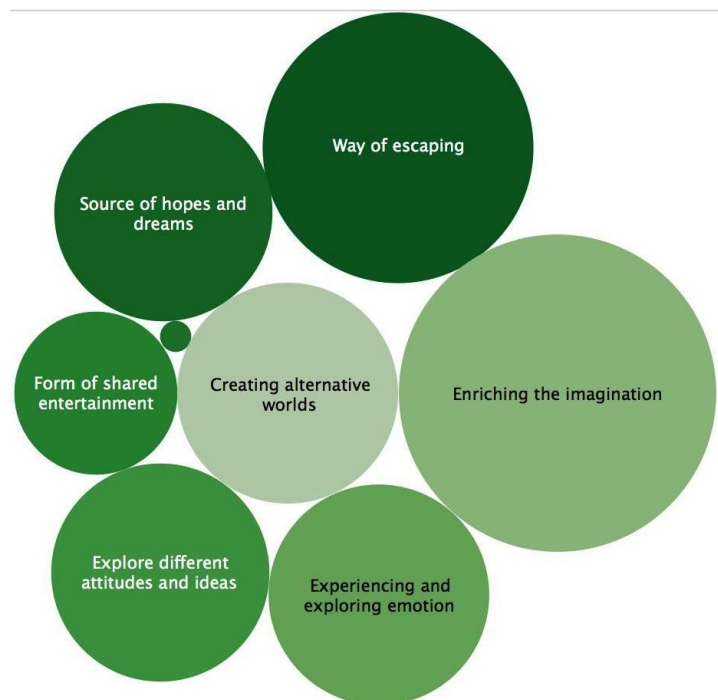
Figure 7: Canadian Responses to Question 13



with the films, several similar terms were also used in both datasets (film(s), story, book, characters), but interestingly fewer Canadians than US respondents cited CGI-related terms. This pattern might suggest that another factor is at work; for example, fewer Canadian respondents may have watched Jackson’s vlogs, or were interested in the technological aspects of the films; therefore, further investigation into this dataset is warranted.

For those who loved *The Hobbit* trilogy – whether fans who were educated on digital film innovations through Jackson’s vlog’s appreciated the special effects more, or whether other fans were just happy to visit Middle-earth again – is therefore yet to be determined. We are also left with the questions, if for those fans who were disappointed, digital technology continues to be a poor compromise for well-made prosthetics and practical effects, or if current (post) production technologies are still ‘not good enough’ to allow for the successful transition from Real World to Middle-earth? What does seem apparent, however, is that Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* trilogy has inspired a fascinating discussion about the relationship between evolving cinematic technologies – and special effects in particular – and the future of digital cinema’s ability to make the fantastical ‘real’.

Figure 8: US Responses to Question 13



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Appendix:

Additional details from the Canadian and US quantitative data sets: Questions 1, 4, 5, 13, 19 and 20.

THE WORLD HOBBIT AUDIENCE PROJECT: Canadian and US responses

Overall total (all countries) after cleaning = 36,109.

Canada (647) and US (= 2005) (includes citizenship and country of residence): Total = 2654

1. What did you think of the *Hobbit* films overall?

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
Awful	= 24	= 83
Poor	= 62	= 189
Average	= 129	= 320

Good = 260 = 683
Excellent = 174 = 720

4. Which of the following come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three. (They are in random order.)

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
Children's story	= 35	= 48
Fairytale	= 45	= 93
World of fantasy	= 364	= 1150
Prequel / sequel	= 181	= 558
Star attraction	= 29	= 75
Part of Tolkien's legend-world	= 318	= 1180
Multimedia franchise	= 126	= 406
Family film	= 32	= 77
Digital novelty cinema	= 69	= 171
Action-adventure	= 212	= 671
Peter Jackson movie	= 134	= 537
Literary adaptation	= 158	= 544
Stunning locations	= 131	= 374
Coming-of-age story	= 32	= 75
Hollywood blockbuster	= 156	= 385

5. Are there any of these that you definitely would *not* choose? Again, please pick up to three.

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
Children's story	= 334	= 1108
Fairytale	= 164	= 514
World of fantasy	= 15	= 26
Prequel / sequel	= 17	= 59
Star attraction	= 139	= 429
Part of Tolkien's legend-world	= 71	= 228
Multimedia franchise	= 53	= 190
Family film	= 112	= 263
Digital novelty cinema	= 77	= 318
Action-adventure	= 13	= 31
Peter Jackson movie	= 12	= 74
Literary adaptation	= 69	= 232
Stunning locations	= 26	= 54
Coming-of-age story	= 236	= 723
Hollywood blockbuster	= 60	= 234

13. What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today? Choose *up to three* which are nearest to your opinion:

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
They are a way of enriching the imagination	= 501	=1558
They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions	= 210	= 753
They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world	= 169	= 736
They are a way of escaping	= 369	=1134
They are a form of shared entertainment	= 169	= 411
They allow us to explore different attitudes and ideas	= 210	= 740
They are a way of creating alternative worlds	= 262	= 755
No particular role	= 11	= 15

19. In which formats have you seen the *Hobbit* films? Please pick as many as are relevant for each film.

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
<i>An Unexpected Journey:</i>		
Original cinema release	= 475	=1687
Dubbed	= 25	= 46
TV	= 74	= 424
Subtitled	= 32	= 175
IMAX	= 146	= 453
3D	= 274	= 777
48fps	= 151	= 478
DVD/BluRay	= 265	=1278
Download	= 113	= 287
Streamed on demand	= 47	= 169
Mobile device	= 28	= 151
Not seen	= 26	= 13

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
<i>Desolation of Smaug:</i>		
Original cinema release	= 465	=1659
Dubbed	= 26	= 35
TV	= 59	= 332
Subtitled	= 30	= 165
IMAX	= 134	= 445
3D	= 270	= 732
48fps	= 117	= 366
DVD/BluRay	= 228	=1125
Download	= 98	= 283
Streamed on demand	= 48	= 177
Mobile device	= 21	= 132
Not seen	= 32	= 27

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
<i>Battle of the Five Armies:</i>		
Original cinema release	= 422	=1609
Dubbed	= 19	= 20
TV	= 14	= 42
Subtitled	= 14	= 58
IMAX	= 146	= 440
3D	= 259	= 698
48fps	= 112	= 328
DVD/BluRay	= 38	= 204
Download	= 33	= 79
Streamed on demand	= 13	= 21
Mobile device	= 10	= 35
Not seen	= 114	= 211

20. In what format do you *prefer* to see films like *The Hobbit*? (Please pick up to two.)

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>US</u>
Cinema release	= 441	=1426
IMAX	= 256	= 635
Home theatre system	= 81	= 261
DVD/Blu-Ray	= 203	= 869
TV	= 18	= 46
Stream on demand	= 21	= 73
Downloaded	= 38	= 62
Mobile device	= 5	= 20
Doesn't matter	= 61	= 179

Notes:

¹ A special 'Thank you' to Meghan A. Wong for her analyses and creation of Figures 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

² RSS is the abbreviation for 'Rich Site Summary' and the standardized web feed formats that allow for the publishing of frequently updated information. A CSV is a 'comma separated values file' that allows data to be saved in a table structured format.

³ Additional online translation websites: for Czech translations, Lexilogos (http://www.lexilogos.com/english/czech_dictionary.htm), for Turkish translations, IMTranslator (<http://imtranslator.net/translation/turkish/to-english/translation/>), and for Swedish Babylon (<http://translation.babylon-software.com/swedish/to-english/>) were used.

⁴ Thank you to the WHP researchers who kindly assisted us in the translation of the non-English Canadian and US responses.

5 The use of asterisks accounts for differing grammatical configuration possibilities of a word (e.g. as in animation, animated, animate).