

## **Framing audience prefigurations of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*: The roles of fandom, politics and idealised intertexts**

Charles H. Davis

Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

Carolyn Michelle

University of Waikato, New Zealand

Ann Hardy

University of Waikato, New Zealand

Craig Hight

University of Waikato, New Zealand

### **Abstract:**

Audiences for blockbuster event-film sequels and adaptations often formulate highly developed expectations, motivations, understandings and opinions well before the films are released. A range of intertextual and paratextual influences inform these audience prefigurations, and are believed to frame subsequent audience engagement and response. In our study of prefigurative engagements with Peter Jackson's 2012 film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, we used Q methodology to identify five distinct subjective orientations within the film's global audience. As this paper illustrates, each group privileges a different set of extratextual referents – notably J.R.R. Tolkien's original novels, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, highly localised political debates relating to the film's production, and the previous associations of the film's various stars. These interpretive frames, we suggest, competed for ascendancy within public and private discourse in the lead up to *The Hobbit's* international debut, effectively fragmenting and indeed polarising the film's prospective global audience.

**Keywords:** Prefiguration; audiences; film; *The Hobbit*; *The Lord of the Rings*; reception studies; Q methodology

## Introduction

Audiences encounter films in prior possession of a diverse set of discursive resources, often developing expectations, motivations, knowledges and opinions well in advance of viewing. Especially in the case of heavily promoted products such as ‘blockbuster’ event-films, desires and expectations are often framed by official marketing efforts that seek to build awareness and stimulate demand among a viewing audience before release, and to encourage a positive or ‘preferred’ reception of the forthcoming film. But expectations also may reflect the influence of broader discussion, speculation and debate occurring within mainstream news or specialized entertainment news media, via social media, and among friends, family, fans and colleagues, most of which falls outside the control of film producers and publicists. Here, expressions of enthusiastic anticipation as well as apprehension, ambivalence and outright opposition often freely circulate. While this pre-release discourse implies that audiencing often begins well before a film’s release in the form of ‘pre-viewer’ engagements with a ‘pre-text’ (Chin & Gray, 2001), relatively little empirical research is available on the prefigurative expectations, hopes, fears and social characteristics of pre-release film audiences. This is surprising, as it is reasonable to assume that closer examination of prefigurative audience engagements might offer insight into the nature, varieties and dynamics of audience reception *per se*.

In this paper, then, we focus on prefigurative engagements within the global audience for Peter Jackson’s ‘blockbuster’ feature film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), drawing on results from the initial phase of a larger and ongoing study of receptions of *The Hobbit* film trilogy. Our study of the pre-release *Hobbit* audience combines an online Q methodology<sup>1</sup> survey with a conventional questionnaire, generating rich data reflecting the perspectives of a diverse group of 1,000 individuals located in 59 countries. Our respondents were invited to chart their own subjective viewpoints by situating themselves within the wider field of prefigurative discussion and debate about *The Hobbit* in the three weeks prior to its world premiere in Wellington in November, 2012, and to comment on the issues most salient to them.

We seek to make two key contributions to the scholarly literature on media audiences with this paper. First, we consider the extent to which pre-release discussion, debate, marketing and promotion of an event-film might influence subsequent responses to it. Specifically in the case of this particular film text, we ask: How does the prefiguration of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* – a film which possesses a significant ‘public presence’ (Mathijs, 2006a) as an adaptation of a classic literary work and a heavily-promoted continuation of Peter Jackson’s earlier *Lord of The Rings* film trilogy – inform and shape the ‘horizon of expectations’ (Jauss, 1970), hopes, and concerns of film audiences? While major film studios routinely conduct research on pre-release audiences to gauge responses to screen tests and to assess the effectiveness of advertising campaigns in creating awareness of forthcoming offerings among targeted audience groups (Drake, 2008; Epstein, 2005; Gitlin, 1983; Marich, 2009; Zafirau, 2009), this commercially sensitive research has left few traces in the scholarly literature. More immediately relevant and accessible is the small

body of academic research examining the role of marketing and promotion in creating a public presence and building anticipation for event-films such as the *Lord of the Rings* (Biltereyst & Meers, 2006; Hedling, 2006; Mathijs 2006a; Biltereyst, Mathijs & Meers, 2008; Luthar, 2008). Other studies have focused on public discussion and debate relating to the production and critical reception of such films (Mathijs, 2006b; Thornley, 2006). However, the greater part of scholarly attention has been specifically devoted to fans' anticipation and prefigurative engagements with film adaptations of comics, short stories and novels.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, we seek to expand this growing body of scholarship by charting the specific nature and tenor of diverse prefigurative perspectives among 'pre-viewers' of the 'pre-text' of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, including both existing fans of the novel and earlier film trilogy, and also members of the general *non-fan* audience, who have often been overlooked (although see Burke, 2012, and Gray, 2003). By identifying key distinctions among anticipatory audiences, we are also responding to calls for research that supports theory building and reliable generalisation about audiences (e.g. Schrøder, 2012), notably through identification of audience *typologies* (Barker, Mathijs & Trobia, 2008: 222). Our findings reveal a diversity of specific meanings and significances ascribed to *The Hobbit* by a broad range of potential future viewers, and confirm that fans are neither a homogeneous group, nor alone in formulating strong feelings and opinions about cinematic pre-texts. The inclusion of non-fans in this study, we believe, facilitates a more complete understanding of the role of prefiguration in shaping subsequent modes of reception.

Our second proposed contribution is to identify connections between these varieties of prefigurative audiencing and dimensions of social location, uncovering some of the extra-textual factors that shaped prefigurative dispositions among different audience groups toward this much-anticipated Hollywood blockbuster. Our analysis shows that nationality, gender, age and pre-existing fandoms are significant features of certain prefigurative dispositions, which are in turn expressed through clearly marked patterns of engagement in anticipatory activities and media consumption practices.

The paper proceeds as follows: we first review theory and research relating to audience prefigurations of film, most of which has focused on the expectations and activities of highly engaged audience members or fans, and which has also emphasised that the elicitation of anticipation among addressee audiences is the key goal of film marketing campaigns. Following this, we outline the marketing and promotion of *The Hobbit* as a major blockbuster event-film with a significant public presence. Here, we seek to show that *The Hobbit* pre-text was subject to intense discussion and debate via mainstream and especially social media prior to its cinematic debut, making available a greatly expanded set of discursive and intertextual resources for its prefigurative construction by pre-viewers. Next, we describe our research methodology and our approach to data collection and analysis, before presenting an interpretive profile of the five principal groups of prefigurative *Hobbit* audience members identified through our research. In a concluding section we discuss the implications our findings may have for reception theory and for future research, and consider the potential relationship between prefiguration and post-

release modes of engagement and response amongst differently-located interpretive communities. Here, we effectively ‘prefigure’ our forthcoming analysis of global audience receptions of the first *Hobbit* film, in which we will apply Michelle’s (2007) Composite Model of modes of reception to interpret the results of a significantly larger, multi-lingual online survey.<sup>3</sup>

### **Prefigurative Audience Engagements: Current Theory and Research**

In approaching this research we were mindful of the rather intriguing phenomenon our study hoped to trace, whereby people are formulating and expressing often detailed and keenly felt opinions about a film ‘which does not yet truly exist’ (Chin & Gray, 2001, para. 1). As Gray (2008) notes, while audience reception is normally understood as a process that follows on from the consumption of a media text, discourse and competing meanings can begin circulating around (especially highly anticipated) texts well prior to their release via marketing and promotional hype, media coverage and commentary, and public and fan discussion and debate. These official and unofficial materials may in turn convey various impressions of genre, aesthetic style, intended audience and preferred reception, in response to which others may express their own hopes, expectations, and anxieties (see also Biltereyst & Meers, 2006; Kernan, 2004).

As Biltereyst and Meers (2006:72) contend, these activities form part of ‘the (discursive) creation of a certain horizon of expectation, the promise of pleasure, spectacle and imagination, the attempt to mediate audiences’ movie experiences, public reception and discourse’. These and other ‘paratexts’ (Genette, 1997, as cited in Gray, 2008:37) constitute a film’s public presence, leading some (especially highly anticipated) texts to be partially ‘pre-decoded before they exist’ (Gray, 2008:33), in the sense that the frames through which they can be understood and the strategies that should be used to interpret them are often established well prior to their materialisation, creating ‘structures of meaning for texts-to-come’ (p. 38). As Gray cautions:

We may in time resist this, by not “judging the book by its cover” or not “believing the hype”, but first the cover and the hype tell us what to expect, fashion our excitement and/or apprehension, and begin to tell us what a text is all about, calling for our identification with and interpretation of that text before we have even seemingly arrived at the text. (Gray, 2008: 34)

Gray also observes that ‘different paratexts will be at odds with each other at times, arguing over the interpretive terms that they would like viewers to employ when ‘entering’ a text’ (2008: 38). This notion of a wider discursive struggle to affirm and contain textual meaning is particularly pertinent in the case of *The Hobbit*, as we shall demonstrate below. Elsewhere, one of us has argued that processes of prefiguration clearly shape, but do not necessarily *determine*, modes of reception (Michelle, 2007) – a distinction that Gray also

alludes to above. Here, we seek to gain clearer insight into the ways in which pre-viewer expectations, concerns, worries and understandings might operate as interpretive frames that can potentially be activated during the reception process, and to further delineate the relationship between prefiguration and viewing modes.

In seeking to understand the nature and significance of pre-viewer activities and meaning-making, we turn to the growing body of research on fans for additional insight. Within cultural studies and film studies, emphasis has been placed on the creative, consumerist and at times counter-hegemonic activities of fans (Fiske, 1992; Hills, 2002, 2006) and the construction of highly productive, participatory fan communities (Jenkins, 1992; Pullen, 2006). Such communities thrive online and periodically seek to influence textual producers to ensure the realisation of their collective vision; their favour is also actively courted by publicists (Murray, 2004).<sup>4</sup> Jenkins (2006) proposes that fans are the vanguard of contemporary audiences, exhibiting characteristic motivations and behaviours that are now moving into the mainstream with the advent of Web 2.0 culture and the spread of digital media literacy (Busse & Gray, 2011; Green & Jenkins, 2011).<sup>5</sup> He further demonstrates that serious fans often develop deep emotional, psychological and nostalgic investments in, and loyalty to, their preferred intertexts. In the case of a highly anticipated text such as *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, such fans may regard Tolkien's original novel and/or Jackson's original film trilogy as highly idealised benchmarks against which any new text in the franchise will be evaluated and judged worthy of joining the existing canon. Positive evaluations, we propose, are likely to be primarily based on whether the new contender successfully evokes the same powerful and highly meaningful experiences to which fans have become deeply attached and wish to recreate. While for some fans, textual fidelity and conformity to the original and authoritative work may be of crucial importance, for others the desired effect may be the (re)production of a particular *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977), such as that associated with viewing Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, or reading the books, in a given historical moment or in a particular social context.

As noted by Rae and Gray (2007), very few reception studies have explored the significance of these kinds of distinctions and competing affiliations among audience groups, nor the ways differently-endowed viewers read and make sense of film adaptations. Their research suggests that those who are familiar with the source text of a film adaptation (or others in a film series) draw and rely upon a wider range of intertextual references to the original works than do viewers who are not existing fans, who are more likely to view the text as distinct and to evaluate it on its own terms. Burke (2012), however, challenges the notion that non-fans are necessarily 'intertextually poor', pointing to their ability to make intertextual comparisons with alternative reference texts. Furthermore, even among those with a shared familiarity with the texts from which an event-film is adapted, divergent responses can be identified.<sup>6</sup>

In the most directly comparable study to our own, exploring online fan prefigurations of *The Lord of The Rings*, Chin and Gray (2001) observe how Tolkien fans actively drew on rumours, news coverage, and their own speculative musings and critiques

to assess *in advance of its release* the likely degree of fidelity of the films to Tolkien's books, and to formulate their response to this constructed perception. These scholars identify three distinct pre-viewing responses among *Lord of The Rings* discussion forum respondents: A Tolkien purist position which regarded any deviation from the books as objectionable; countered by a more moderate and cautious Tolkien-oriented position which sought to understand the need for certain modifications when translating books to screen, but was apprehensive and endeavoured to prepare for potentially unpalatable changes; and a third, less ambivalent position marked by wholesale enthusiasm and excited anticipation for the long awaited film version of a favourite book series, seen as destined to enshrine its place in literary and cultural history (Chin & Gray, 2001).

Brayton (2006) likewise notes the internal diversity that has existed among the Tolkien fan community since the 1960s, distinguishing between Tolkienists, whose primary focus of attention is the author and his corpus of literary works and who are often dismissive of screen translations due to their diversion from Tolkien's original vision (see also Barker, 2006), and Ringers, who are more specifically fans of the *Lord of the Rings* novels. In the wake of the commercial and popular success of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, a new generation of Ringers has emerged – 'the fan of all things Lord of the Rings' (2006:144), who are also avid consumers of the huge array of merchandise now associated with the franchise. Yet, even within this new form of fandom, there are different interests, loyalties, concerns and priorities, leading to internal debates and at time conflicts relating to the inclusion, exclusion, or presentation of characters and scenes (Brayton, 2006), conflicts that persist to this day and were evident in online discussions leading up to *The Hobbit's* November 2012 premiere.

Brayton also observes that active online discussion and debate about Jackson's film adaptations of Tolkien's works have been going on since 1998, with TheOneRing.net being a key location for the expression and dissemination of fans' hopeful imaginings and anxious speculations relating to a very wide spectrum of issues. Moreover, she notes that it was not only existing Tolkien fans to whom the first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, appealed, but also followers of Peter Jackson as 'an oddball New Zealand filmmaker' and cult auteur (see also Wu, 2003; Hills, 2006), fans of its stars (including Sir Ian McKellen, Viggo Mortensen, and Elijah Wood), and sci-fi/fantasy fans seeking a successful addition to a marginalised film genre; to this list we might add fans of high-tech special effects. As Hills (2006) notes, blockbuster event-films are intended to attract diverse interpretive communities of viewers. In other words, blockbuster event-films need to yield multiple 'viewing positions' in order to appeal to large, diverse audiences (King, 2000). These audiences bring with them disparate interests and priorities and 'project-forward' different visions of the text in advance of their viewing.

In our research, then, we adopted strategies that we hope will delineate the various types of *Hobbit* pre-release audiences, in order to expand our understanding of the range of prefigurative engagements with this and other blockbuster event-films. Our research confirms that many *Hobbit* prefigurative audience members do indeed sort themselves

according to a core distinction between *Lord of The Rings* film fans and fans of Tolkien's books, as previous research suggests. Between these two groups, fidelity of the book-to-film adaptation is an important issue, but so too are questions of cinematic style, taste, and convention, which were intensively debated amongst pre-release *Hobbit* audiences. Furthermore, some highly engaged pre-viewers of *The Hobbit* pre-text were not at all concerned about textual fidelity, continuity or any such matters related to the Tolkien or Jackson canons, and instead expressed a range of alternative priorities and preoccupations.

### **The Hobbit's Public Presence and the Audience's Horizon of Expectations**

Marketing, promotion, and word-of-mouth play critical roles in the creation of a film's public presence. As a highly perishable cultural product, feature films undergo intense competition among suppliers for rapid consumer acceptance during the first few weeks at the box office. Audiences must be actively persuaded to partake of the cinematic experience; movies do not sell *themselves*. As Epstein (2005: 177) notes, studios 'have to manufacture not only the movies but the audiences to watch them'. Creation of awareness, positive disposition, and intention to view the film among targeted audience groups is the key goal of the pre-release marketing campaign. Blockbuster film marketing, advertising, and promotional campaigns are shaped by the need to create 'sales momentum' (Lampel & Shamsie, 2000), a virtuous cycle of growing positive consumer awareness relying on a permanent advertising and marketing campaign to support a 'sustained event' (Grainge, 2008; Jöckel & Döbler, 2006). Consequently, marketing budgets of mainstream 'blockbuster' Hollywood films have become huge, representing around a third of the total cost of production of a film (Drake, 2008), although in the case of *The Hobbit* the figure is thought to be \$81.5 million on top of a US\$270 million production budget (Rosz, 2012). Pre-release marketing and promotion campaigns for feature films typically include trailers, previews, posters, print advertisements, advertisements on national television, billboards, and the deliberate creation of publicity via the entertainment press in the form of rumours, gossip, leaks, and factual news items (Epstein, 2005; Grainge, 2008; Kerrigan, 2010; Marich, 2009).

Throughout the promotional campaign, an 'avalanche' (Biltereyst, Mathijs, & Meers, 2008) of hype consisting of thousands of media messages is placed in the path of the potential moviegoer, creating a massive 'public presence' (Mathijs, 2006) of attention-grabbing discursive signifiers to create brand awareness.<sup>7</sup> However, once films are in theatres, 'advertising can do little to alter the public's impression because word-of-mouth among moviegoers and reviews from media outlets shape public perception' (Marich, 2009: 8). The prefigurative audience plays a key role in this market development process. Today's event-films incorporate communities of engaged audience members who serve not only as a standing audience base but also as amplifiers of awareness that elicit interest among mainstream audiences. While repeated exposure to promotional material is expected to generate awareness of a film and positive disposition toward it that will elicit audiences for the crucial opening weekend, nothing overcomes formal opinion gatekeepers' tepid or

ambivalent reviews like an outpouring of enthusiasm on discussion boards, movie review sites, and fan websites.<sup>8,9</sup> Clearly however, it is not without risk for a studio to count on word-of-mouth opinion to drive post-release performance of a film. Audience awareness does not necessarily translate into endorsement which, in any case, is difficult to manipulate through promotional hype once the audience has experienced the film. As Williams (2012, para. 4) notes, 'studios wish to direct audiences' excitement, but audiences are also capable of directing and marking their own desire and anticipation'. Of course, elicitation of pre-release audience engagement, a necessary step in the manufacture of demand for an expensive film product, inevitably creates expectations, and may also fuel certain apprehensions. It is the specific nature of these prefigurative anticipations and misgivings, discussions and debates that are of central interest in this paper, along with their possible implications for post-release audience receptions.

In the case of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, the available information that prospective viewers could draw from in formulating their prefigurative responses was rich and extensive, and likely magnified by the very long shadow cast by the film's relationship with Jackson's earlier trilogy (Gray, 2010), itself a social phenomenon which inspired a large, very lively and highly productive fan community. Intense publicity and media coverage commenced well before production of the film began, with the pre-release *Hobbit* audience base receiving a steady stream of tidbits in the form of news and gossip, video blogs fronted by Jackson, posters, trailers, special previews at fan conferences, and interviews. The film benefited from an official Facebook page, blog, YouTube channel, and official website. The *Hobbit* production diaries and vlogs maintained fan interest until the release of the first trailer at the end of 2011. The marketing campaign accelerated from April 2012, with a preview of the film at ComicCon, a contest to choose the ending of the first trailer, the release of the second trailer, the creation of a Twitter profile, merchandising of the Lego *Lord of The Rings* and *Hobbit* sets, the launch of *The Hobbit* video game, fan events, a viral Air New Zealand safety video featuring actors in Middle-earth garb along with Gollum and Jackson himself, apps, wallpapers and posters, *Hobbit*-themed meals at the Denny's restaurant chain, and even a fan-produced Bombur Recipe Book.

Simultaneously, an avalanche of attention on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook further contributed to the wealth of material in which pre-viewers could potentially immerse themselves. From July 2011, eighteen months before its release, *The Hobbit* remained in the Top 100 movies according to the IMDB MovieMeter, which measures users' search queries. By the time of its release in theatres in December 2012, *The Hobbit* was the top-rated movie in the IMDB MovieMeter, the trailers had been seen more than ten million times, and 1,310 other websites were hyperlinked to the official *Hobbit* website (Fiorelli, 2013). This prefigurative marketing and promotion process also, and most importantly, created such a state of suspense that by November 2012, a multitude of individuals were frequenting various online fan sites and discussion groups - most notably, TheOneRing.net - and many could no longer contain their excitement.

While *The Hobbit* was able to rely first and foremost for market resonance and positive audience disposition on its acquired base of *Lord of The Rings* and Tolkien fans, these fans expressed a variety of expectations, hopes, apprehensions, and in some cases strong reservations about the forthcoming film. Notably, some sought a familiar look and feel from Jackson's earlier *Lord of The Rings* film trilogy, while others required fidelity, credibility, and a compelling interpretation in the *Hobbit* book-to-film screen adaptation. Furthermore, as an intended global blockbuster, the film also sought audiences beyond its acquired fan base. In a widening circle, *The Hobbit's* addressee audiences included younger males with an interest in action adventure and special effects films, families with children, individuals interested in one or another of the actors in *The Hobbit*, and casual holiday-period movie-goers.

Along with those eagerly anticipating *The Hobbit's* resounding success were others frequenting fan sites and discussion boards who were apprehensive, quizzical, skeptical, and in some cases deeply unhappy about certain aspects of the film in advance of its premiere. Given the very extensive and diversified debate around the film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* clearly had multiple channels through which it might become 'pre-digested' by prospective viewers, and not all pre-viewer responses were positive. Even among fans of the franchise, signs of anxiety and discord became evident well in advance of the film's cinematic release. Thus, while speculation, commentary, discussion and debate can be highly pleasurable aspects of prefigurative audiencing, they may also challenge marketing and promotional efforts to determine the generic frameworks (Neale, 2000) through which an event-film such as *The Hobbit* is perceived. At times, fans' prefigurative engagements potentially thwart marketing efforts to effectively contain the range of meanings circulating around the main text and stimulate favourable word-of-mouth buzz.

As we show below, different pre-viewers bring different discursive resources, interests, concerns, experiences, and motivations to their textual encounter. In the case of dedicated Tolkien or *Lord of the Rings* film fans, cinematic anticipation began to crystallise several years prior to the *Hobbit* film text's materialisation and developed in a close intertextual relationship with associated works – *The Hobbit* novel or Tolkien's whole body of works, the earlier film trilogy, and in many cases, both - whereas for casual viewers or those with closer proximity to the context of production, the intensification of a film's public presence and marketing hype in the lead-up to its release may be more immediately salient. As Gray (2010) illustrates, multiple and at times competing intertexts thus have the potential to inflect the nature of pre-viewer engagements with cinematic pre-texts.

## **Methodology**

In seeking clearer insight into the role of prefigurations of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, we adopted an innovative mixed-methods approach combining online Q-sorting with a survey questionnaire eliciting information about respondents' familiarity with

intertextual sources, engagement in prefigurative activities, and socio-demographic characteristics.

### ***Q methodology***

While Q methodology is now relatively frequently utilised in psychology, environmental studies, political science, policy studies, and health research, it is only occasionally applied in studies of media audiences (see Davis & Michelle, 2011; Michelle, Davis & Vladica, 2012). Briefly, Q is a rigorous quali-quantitative research methodology that discerns and describes people's shared subjective viewpoints and understandings around a particular object of interest. These viewpoints are elicited in response to stimuli, (a *Q sample*, in Q terminology), a set of statements drawn from the existing discourse (the *concourse*) that circulates around a given text, or set of texts. Q methodology thus acknowledges the inherent sociality of reception, in that even the most seemingly idiosyncratic responses emerge within a wider discursive context that necessarily informs individual understandings of media texts, their content, and contexts of production. Respondents are asked to rank-order the statements from 'most strongly disagree' to 'most strongly agree', usually in a forced-distribution pattern, as shown in Figure 1. By asking participants to preferentially rank-order a set of statements carefully chosen to represent the universe of possible responses, Q allows each individual to 'model' his or her subjective viewpoint in a holistic sense. Q is thus self-referential: each individual independently ranks each statement and determines its placement within the array of statements in the manner that best reflects his or her own unique subjective perspective. Sorts are then factor analyzed *by person*, a procedure that locates groups of like-minded respondents, making it possible to identify and systematically compare the range of viewpoints shared by a variety of individuals within a wider public (for further details see Brown, 1980, 1994; McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

### ***Selecting the Q sample***

For *The Hobbit* prefiguration survey, a structured Q sample of 38 statements<sup>10</sup> was devised drawing on an extensive 'cultural trawl' of dominant and marginal themes, opinions, concerns and fears articulated in the public commentary of fans of the *Lord of the Rings* films and Tolkien followers, media and film commentators, and in news items relating to the production, all of which formed part of the wider concourse that circulated around the *Hobbit* 'pretext' in the six months leading up to its release. An important methodological principle of Q is that the statements considered for inclusion take the form of subjective opinions rather than facts; also, opinions are considered valid irrespective of their origin. Thus, we made no distinctions between the origin of statements considered for inclusion, and instead aimed to gain a very broad and inclusive impression of the full range of things being said about *The Hobbit*, its production, speculated content, and technological innovation within the wider public sphere. Our cultural trawl incorporated Twitter and Facebook comments, blogs, print and online news items, media commentary, fan forum and general film discussion board comments, and comments on the production videos and

Hobbit trailers. The following list of topics was used to guide the process of sampling from the existing discourse:

Story/narrative structure; book-screen adaptation; continuity with the Lord of The Rings films; use of additional materials; decision to make three films; 3D/visual effects; use of 48fps; characters/ casting; meanings; relevance; nostalgia; film craft; director; importance of seeing/desire; excitement; emotional impact; identification with characters; social experience; route to spiritual ecstasy/sacred text; expressions of devotion/faith; imagining the text; production envy; speculation; opposition/dislike/antipathy; disengagement; other.

Initially, several hundred 'raw' statements articulating the most frequently recurring ideas, opinions, or concerns relating to each topic were cut and pasted into an Excel file, a process which continued until a significant degree of redundancy began to emerge among the statements. Since it is not practical or desirable to include very large numbers of statements in online Q surveys (see note 10), it was necessary to then progressively compare and eliminate statements until a final Q sample was obtained in which each item clearly articulated a distinct perspective on a major topic. A few composite statements were created to capture perspectives alluded to in several statements but inadequately expressed by any single one, while in other cases revisions were made to enhance clarity and correct syntax.

### ***Participant recruitment***

We adopted a very broad recruitment strategy which began by posting brief invitations containing the survey web link in a wide range of relevant Facebook groups whose members, we believed, would have a range of different views, including *The Hobbit* book and movie groups, *Lord of The Rings* pages, various Tolkien pages, film societies in a range of countries, political parties in New Zealand, followers of other fantasy series, and pages devoted to various stars of the film. We also targeted fan forums, especially TheOneRing.net. From there, responses spread further afield as fans reposted the invitation on other sites, such as <http://www.richardarmitagenet.com/> and a Russian Tolkien website. Press releases generated further coverage in two of New Zealand's major daily papers, *The Herald* and *The Dominion Post*, as well as on the web-based news service *Stuff.co.nz*. Finally, each author circulated information about the research through our professional, institutional and personal networks.

### ***The Q survey and questionnaire***

Respondents to the survey were told "in this study we are interested in your opinions about the forthcoming feature film *The Hobbit - an Unexpected Journey*, and wish to know how

you think and feel about the film before having seen it” and were asked to “please recall your thoughts and feelings about *The Hobbit* while you rank the following statements”. Respondents then considered and rank ordered the 38 statements on a 9 point scale from *most strongly agree* (+4) to *most strongly disagree* (-4) according to the forced distribution shown in Figure 1. They were then invited to comment further, in their own words, on the four statements with which they most strongly agreed/disagreed. Finally, respondents completed a conventional questionnaire seeking information about their socio-demographic characteristics and affiliations, as well as information about the meanings they attributed to the film, what they were most looking forward to, and which prefigurative activities they were engaged in.

### **Data analysis**

In preparing our data for analysis, we reviewed raw responses to the survey and discarded those in which the respondent declined to provide socio-demographic information or any qualitative comments.<sup>11</sup> Our final sample (or *P-set*) consists of 1000 qualified responses, composed of Q sorts and associated fully or largely completed questionnaires, from respondents in 59 countries and territories.<sup>12</sup>

We performed by-person principal components analysis on these Q sorts using SPSS and rotated the components using the Varimax procedure, investigating several possible solutions. Using a coefficient of .42 as the threshold of 1 percent significance (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013), we sought a solution that accounted for the largest overall number of representative sorts (i.e. non cross-loaded sorts with a coefficient of .42 or greater), and which furthermore included no components characterized by only a small number of representative sorts. A four-component solution best satisfied these criteria, accounting for 555 of the sorts and 65.2 percent of the variance.<sup>13</sup> To characterize the four components and produce model or ‘typal’ arrays<sup>14</sup> for each component, the most representative sorts from each component were entered into PCQ, a dedicated commercial software package for analysis of Q sorts.<sup>15</sup> The results are shown in **Table 1**.

There remained more than three hundred cross-loaded sorts. We examined the common variance of each loading to identify those responses that yielded half or more of the variance among the four components.<sup>16</sup> This allowed us to allocate many of the cross-loaded sorts to one or the other of the identified groups. Our four-factor solution accounts for 77.6% of the sorts, as shown in **Table 2**. We discarded from further analysis the 224 sorts that were either irreducibly cross-loaded or did not load significantly on any of the four factors.

In the analysis below, the notation should be read as follows. The main audience groups (each defined by a viewpoint) are referred to as G1, G2, G3, and G4. The largest group (G1) is bi-polar, meaning that a number of respondents expressed the *opposite* perspective to the majority in this group. We refer to these two groups as G1+ and G1-. A notation of (10, +4) indicates very strong agreement (+4) with statement 10. A notation of (15, 0) means indifference or neutrality with respect to statement 15. A notation of (26, -3)

means strong disagreement with statement 26. All statements and their scores for each audience group are presented in **Table 1**. Examples of relevant qualitative comments are included in our analysis to further illustrate the dominant concerns commonly expressed by each audience group.

### **Varieties of Prefigurative Audience Engagement**

Here we present the results of our quali-quantitative analysis of respondents' Q sorts and survey responses, and attempt to shed further light on the diverse range of intertexts that shaped our respondents' anticipatory engagement with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* prior to its cinematic debut. Briefly, the five prefigurative audience groups are as follows:

- Eager and enthusiastic fans of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (G1+), a group whose principal frame of reference consists of Jackson's previous screen adaptation of Tolkien's work.
- Angry and disappointed Jackson critics (G1-) who are unhappy with the ways that Jackson is bringing *The Hobbit* to the screen.
- Tolkien aficionados (G2) whose expectations are framed mainly by their reading of Tolkien.
- Celebrity followers (G3), who are primarily interested in the forthcoming film's actors.
- Anxious investors (G4), who are more interested in the film's localized spillovers than in the film itself.

Each group is discussed in greater detail below.

#### ***Eager and enthusiastic fans of Jackson's Lord of The Rings film trilogy: G1+***

For our largest group of respondents, the most salient referent was undoubtedly Peter Jackson's resoundingly successful *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. G1+ and G1- are the poles of a major bi-polar factor expressing opposite viewpoints, indicating a controversy. The particular controversy in question revolves around the suitability and motivation of Peter Jackson to lead the effort to bring *The Hobbit* to the screen. The majority of G1 respondents express a viewpoint that is highly supportive and even protective of Jackson as the director of the first film trilogy. 514 respondents are in group G1+, most strongly agreeing with statements 10 and 27, 'Peter Jackson is a genius and I have complete faith that he knows what he is doing' (10, +4) and 'No one but Peter Jackson could tell this story and do it justice' (27, +4). G1+ respondents also strongly agree with statements claiming that Peter Jackson is doing the best he can to bring a complex storyworld to life (33, +3), and strongly disagree with statements that attribute the decision to make *The Hobbit* into a trilogy to commercial greed (24, -4), that express scepticism that use of advanced cinema technologies will produce satisfactory effects (8, -3), that diminish Jackson's skills as a

director (26, -4), or that claim that Jackson has taken too many liberties with Tolkien's work (21, -3).

Surprisingly perhaps, G1+ respondents' confidence in Jackson's ability to deliver a compelling film adaptation of a Tolkien book is not based on self-identification as a Jackson fan. Indeed, only five percent of G1+ members claim that being a Peter Jackson fan was their primary motivation to see *The Hobbit* (see **Table 2**). Instead, nearly half of G1+ members were in the first instance motivated by being a fan of *The Hobbit* book or of Tolkien, followed by about a third who cited their fandom of the first *Lord of The Rings* film trilogy. Having seen these films on average nineteen times, G1+ members have the highest degree of familiarity with the *Lord of The Rings* film trilogy among the five audience groups. They have also read *The Hobbit* an average of eight times, and so can claim sound knowledge of Tolkien's novel. Their familiarity with Tolkien and with Jackson's previous work gives them confidence that the production of *The Hobbit* is in the hands of a gifted filmmaker who is also a knowledgeable reader and heartfelt fan of J.R.R. Tolkien, and hence the forthcoming film will not disappoint. Two respondents commented that:

He did such an amazing job with the Lord of the Rings trilogy... It's obvious that with how he has immersed himself in the world of Middle-earth, he would be the only choice to continue and in fact I believe that this movie will be a huge success. (American man, age 22)

I trust Peter and his team love and respect the material they are using for these films and want to bring it to life in the best possible way. I think the [LoTR film] trilogy speaks for itself as a reference of what we can expect. (Finnish woman, age 41)

While not disputing the commercial intent of the *Hobbit* film undertaking, adherents of the G1+ viewpoint believe that Peter Jackson's fundamental motivation is creative, not pecuniary, and that the Tolkien corpus is so extensive that it can easily accommodate adaptation of *The Hobbit* in the form of a trilogy:

He is very passionate about the story and quality of film, and is not doing them just for the money. So much so that even the smallest details which can't even be seen on screen are made to high quality. (New Zealand woman, age 23)

Peter Jackson has already given his reasons, and it is not because of money. He has a lot of that already. He just realized that there is more of the story to tell. Tolkien didn't write *The Hobbit* with the *Lord of The Rings* in mind, and so there were many things he explained that happened at the same time as *The Hobbit*, but [weren't] in the book. Peter Jackson is taking the opportunity

to show a more complete picture. Also, he can never make a short movie. And he has a lot of footage. (Filipino woman, age 18)

Significantly, G1+ members are generally more oriented toward film than toward written literature. Many G1+ audience members were first introduced to Tolkien by the *Lord of The Rings* films, only later reading the books, and now are eager for a new Tolkien film experience:

I grew up watching the movies, then I got into the books and then when I first heard *The Hobbit* was going to be made into a movie I was really excited to see Middle-earth again on the big screen and all the characters. And now that I'm older I find myself able to attend this kind of phenomenon from zero, so I'm really looking forward to it. (Argentine woman, age 21)

Others readily acknowledge that a filmic adaptation of a book can potentially deliver greater value than the original book:

Because Middle Earth is such an enormous setting for characters and narrative, any film adaptation will and must deviate from the book to some degree. I believe that Peter and his team are capable, as they were with *Lord of The Rings*, of creating the best possible adaptation. I'm not a purist, and I don't freak out at the slightest change to the story. I trust the narrative judgement of the scriptwriters in knowing what to change and what to leave alone. To be honest, I didn't enjoy the book much but loved the *LoTR* [films], so whatever the end result is will be an improvement in my opinion. (New Zealand woman, age 22)

A number of G1+ respondents consider the adaptation of the *Hobbit* book into a film trilogy to be a fundamentally good thing, reckoning that it will give them several additional pleasurable hours in Middle-earth: 'I am SO excited. It really feels like a blessing that Middle Earth is returning 3 times! I was 12 when I watched *LoTR* for the first time and that's 10 years ago. I cannot believe it myself' (German woman, age 22).

The G1+ audience strongly agrees with two statements that express a high level of anticipation to see the film: 'This film can't get here soon enough. I've been waiting for this my whole life, and I can't wait to see this adventure up on the big screen' (35, +3) and 'I am really looking forward to returning to the wonderful world of Middle-earth' (38, +3). Many G1+ respondents disclosed that they had been waiting for years for the film version of *The Hobbit*, illustrating the high level of loyalty and eagerness among this pre-release audience, as well as the appeal of *The Hobbit* across age groups:

I have wanted to see *The Hobbit*, the LoTR trilogy and *The Silmarillion* filmed since I first read the books more than 35 years ago because the world created by Tolkien is so interesting, engrossing and fantastical. (British man, age 49)

I have been waiting and waiting for the *Hobbit*, me and my friend Rosie have annoyed the rest of our friends so much about it. We [had] a *Hobbit* day when they finished filming. It's so close now, it's almost unreal. (British woman, age 14)

In summary, G1+ is a broad audience segment with considerable Tolkien literacy but with special attachment to and affection for Jackson's film adaptations of Tolkien's work. This group expresses fierce devotion to the person who brought Middle-earth to cinematic life, agreeing that Peter Jackson is uniquely suited to the important task of adapting *The Hobbit* for the big screen. 94% percent of G1+ audience members declared it 'extremely' or 'very' important to see *The Hobbit*, the highest level of prefigurative desire expressed by any of the five audience groups. In anticipation of the film, practically all G1+ audience members were engaged in prefigurative activities, especially viewing *The Hobbit* film trailers, and the majority also had discussed it with friends or family, visited the official *Hobbit* website and Peter Jackson's production blog, watched *The Hobbit* production videos, and followed news coverage of the film (see **Table 3**).

### ***Angry and disappointed Jackson critics: G1-***

Twenty-seven respondents expressed the viewpoint of group G1-, the opposite of G1+. These respondents are on average eleven years older than G1+ audience members (on average forty-five years, the eldest of the five audience groups, compared to the thirty-four years average of the G1+ group), and more than half of them are New Zealanders. In this sense, G1- has significant local and age-related dimensions.

The unhappiness of G1- respondents is variously related to the destructive aesthetic and political roles that Peter Jackson is believed to have played in bringing *Lord of The Rings* and *The Hobbit* to the screen. G1- members most strongly agree with statements to the effect that the film is overhyped (7, +3), that it is technology-driven at the expense of cinematic quality (8, +3), that its design is determined by commercial ambitions (24, +4), and that Peter Jackson is over-rated as a director (26, +4). They therefore disagree strongly that one can have 'complete faith' in Peter Jackson's efforts (10, -4) or that no other director could do justice to *The Hobbit* (27, -4).

G1- aesthetic anger and disappointment revolve around perceived grievances to the Tolkien corpus by a self-indulgent and crassly commercial director, as expressed here:

As a decades' long student of Tolkien, I looked forward to Jackson's original trilogy with almost unbearable anticipation. While "Fellowship" fulfilled my hopes that the director would treat it with respect and make only those

changes necessary to convert a literary work to film, "The Two Towers" was an abomination and an insult to the author. "Return of the King" was almost as disappointing, in large part because of Jackson's belief that he knew better than Tolkien how the story should have been written. "Spoiler" has taken on a new meaning for me. Each new media release only confirms my belief that PJ's ego has only grown in the intervening years between LoTR and The Hobbit trilogies.... I am repulsed by Jackson's obviously massive ego and crassly blatant greed. A high-school dropout rewriting the epic works of one of the greatest authors of the 20th century? Really???(American woman, age 60)

So far, all of Jackson's interpretations have been literal to the point of lacking any artistic vision. Seeing as how much thought was put into his books by Tolkien, adding random sequences to the story in the film can only do the whole thing harm. (German man, age 38)

He gutted Tolkien's characters and devastated his vision in LoTR. Genius? No. He's all about CGI, battles, and technology and cares nothing at all about story, character development or loyalty to the Professor's work. (American woman, age 68)

As these comments suggest, several G1- respondents articulated a sense of authoritative expertise relating to Tolkien's works, and expressed deep dismay at previous violations of their integrity by a director whom they regarded as wholly unsuited to such an important task (see also Barker & Brooks, 1998).

In contrast to earlier very favourable perceptions of the film's New Zealand production (Pullen, 2006) and of Jackson as a homegrown hero and eccentric genius who had 'done good' internationally (Thornley, 2006), the New Zealanders among this group expressed bitter disappointment and indeed anger about certain aspects of the film's local production. We can thus perceive a clear division within the G1- group on the basis of nationality. Those G1- members who are New Zealanders or currently residing in New Zealand have read *The Hobbit* and seen the *Lord of the Rings* films on average two times, whereas non-New Zealander G1- members have read *The Hobbit* on average fourteen times and seen the Lord of The Rings film trilogy on average ten times (although we should note that these figures are skewed by a few cases where particular respondents had read the book or viewed the films as many as 50 times). This would seem to suggest that non-New Zealand Jackson critics are mainly highly knowledgeable fans of Tolkien, the *Lord of The Rings* films, or both, who have become subsequently alienated by Jackson's behavior and artistic contributions in adapting Tolkien's works for the big screen, as the above comments suggest.

The political anger expressed towards Jackson, on the other hand, is more specifically (but not exclusively) articulated by New Zealand G1- members, and is related to the Hobbit 'labour crisis' issue, in which a local actors' union sought a production-specific minimum standards agreement with *The Hobbit* and threatened a boycott in the absence of an agreement. The issue concerned procedures governing the use of non-New Zealand actors and crew. The union backed down at the counter-threat by Warner Bros to relocate production of *The Hobbit* to another country. However the conglomerate, the New Zealand government, and Jackson continued to express fear of work stoppage, causing widespread apprehension in the country. The affair ended when Warner Bros, in return for assurances that the production would remain in New Zealand, received millions in additional financial subsidies and a special policy accommodation: the New Zealand government passed legislation changing the status of local screen workers from employees to contractors, thereby immunising the New Zealand film industry 'against both union-negotiated and legislated protections for workers, both for the Hobbit production and for the future' (McAndrew & Risak, 2012: 71).

Around 60 percent of all survey respondents were aware of this dispute, including 80 percent of G1- respondents. The issue left a bitter taste for New Zealand-based G1- respondents, in particular:

It annoys me that multimillion dollar companies exploit us and reap the rewards for doing so. (New Zealand woman, age 46)

Peter Jackson had the opportunity to show real class and make these films not only a joy to watch, but a hallmark in the lives of those who worked on them. Instead, he had a very public tantrum. It was disgusting to watch and has probably destroyed the films for me. That's hard to forgive. (62 year-old American living in New Zealand)

Warner Bros. has bought NZ's labour laws, it is not a NZ movie. (New Zealand man, age 32)

Consistent with their shared antipathy toward the production and more especially its director, only eleven percent of members of the G1- group considered it to be 'extremely' or 'very' important to see the film, while 30 percent were not planning to see the film at all. Most of their prefigurative activities involved viewing the film trailers, following related news coverage, and discussing the film with friends or family.

### ***Tolkien aficionados: G2***

Most of the 182 respondents affiliated with audience group G2 define themselves as Tolkien fans (see **Table 2**), and their high level of interest in the film version of *The Hobbit* (13, +3; 38, +3) is primarily motivated by their affection for and knowledge of Tolkien's work. They

have read *The Hobbit* on average ten times, and have seen the *Lord of The Rings* films on average thirteen times (**Table 2**). Like those fans in Chin & Gray's (2001) research, for this group the movie is perceived as a continuation or expansion of their experience of the book, which is considered the primary text and thus accorded greater importance than the film. Their anticipation and prefigurative expectations of the film are thus colored by and framed in intertextual relation to their deep sense of connection with the novel, which they keenly hope the film will successfully embody, even as they express some reservations about its ability to do so. Since *The Hobbit* is one of their favorite books, they are very concerned about the quality of the film adaptation (5, +4). G2 audiences consider *The Hobbit* to be a must-see film (2, -4; 13, +3); 89 percent of them consider it to be 'extremely' or 'very' important to see *The Hobbit*.

G2 members express their psychological engagement with *The Hobbit* book experience with reference to 'the spirit of the book'. They harbour nostalgic memories of encountering *The Hobbit* at a young age, and their view of 'the spirit of the book' is inextricably bound up with their memories of childhood (1, +4) and also their cultural sociability, since this group especially looks forward to seeing the film in the company of friends or family (20, +3). They are willing to accept some compromises in the book-to-film adaptation *as long as* the spirit of the book is not altered:

Even though choices will be made that I might disagree with (which I expect to happen, particularly based on stylistic/creative choices made for the original trilogy) I hope that those decisions will be made in the spirit of the book. I hope that the changes will be done to propel the story forward, or to facilitate its transfer to the big screen, rather than be made to attract audiences/money. The Hobbit was a big part of my childhood, so I hope they're able to recapture that. (Canadian woman, age 23)

I have actually read the book as an adult as well and would like the movie to touch more than the surface story and events. I don't mind changes in detail, pacing, focus etc. that the translation to a different medium necessitates anyhow. But there is certainly such a thing as the "spirit" of the book that I'd like to see respected and explored, not mangled and "modernized" in the movies. (German woman, age 49)

A screen adaptation of this text of childhood significance thus poses a special challenge to the filmmaker. For a G2 audience member, viewing a poor screen adaptation of *The Hobbit* would represent more than simply a disappointing cultural consumption experience: it would crush a childhood dream. A thirty-two year old Australian woman with a self-described 'fantasy addiction' commented, 'This was my childhood, and most of my fantasy life is built upon the foundations of The Hobbit, the Lord of the Rings, and the Chronicles of Narnia. If the movie sucks I will WEEP'.

Since for these pre-viewers failure would be deeply disappointing, some consciously lowered their expectations in preparation for a text that would almost inevitably fall short of the original (see also Barker & Brooks, 1998; Chin & Gray, 2001; Gray, 2010). As Burke (2012) notes, concerns with fidelity are a prominent feature of fan critiques of film adaptations. G2 audience members, as readers with deep familiarity with Tolkien, often expressed detailed concerns about the film's fidelity to Tolkien's original storyworld:

Jackson has a tendency to run away with himself and enlarge on what he sees as the 'big spectacle' moments. For instance, I have concerns that the Battle of Five Armies, which in the book is quite small (with 500 dwarves and 1000 elves etc) and takes place over one chapter will on film have a 'cast' of tens of thousands and take half of a film to show. Another example. The novel's Bilbo encounters a trio of foolish trolls with names like Bert and Sam. Jackson has already demonstrated that his trolls are basically beasts, and certainly wouldn't have names like that or engage in conversation. He has to be true to either the book or his films, and I suspect the films will win. (New Zealand man living in Australia, age 37)

G2 members express general approval for Jackson's version of the *Lord of the Rings* (26, -3). Although most do not self-identify as *Lord of The Rings* film fans (**Table 2**), G2 members are nonetheless very eager to return to Middle-earth (38, +3). The prefigurative publicity and news have somewhat maintained their interest in the production (19, -3), and they remain involved as a pre-release audience by viewing Hobbit trailers, watching production videos, following news coverage, and discussing the film with family and friends (**Table 3**).

In sum, the G2 audience is knowledgeable, attentive, and eagerly hopeful. As one fifty-one year-old American woman commented: 'the Tolkien universe is in my blood, and I couldn't miss this opportunity to revisit Middle Earth. The build-up to the release makes me cautiously optimistic that Jackson will deliver another winner.' But as Chin & Gray (2001) also found, these pre-viewers appear to be 'not so much "pre-viewers" of the films as they are simply viewers of the books. And yet, truly they are viewers *between* texts, anticipating one text *with* the other, already reaching to one *by way of* the other' (section 5; original emphasis).

### ***Celebrity followers: G3***

A small group of seventeen individuals constitutes G3. The average age of this group is forty. Notably, all members of G3 are female. This group appears to express a gendered variety of prefigurative audience engagement organized around celebrity fandom.

Audience group G3 does not particularly care about Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*, which members have read on average only once (**Table 2**). Their exposure to the *Lord of The Rings* film trilogy is slightly greater, having seen it, on average, twice. They strongly disagree that *The Hobbit* is one of their favorite books (5, -4), but nonetheless are very interested in

the film production, despite the intensive hype surrounding its cinematic debut (7, -4). Indeed, for this group, prefigurative media coverage is likely to be welcomed as it may provide glimpses of a beloved film actor in action. Of all the groups, G3 is the most attentive to casting issues: 'Looks like PJ and producers understand and respect the characters to look for actors that were perfect matches' (American woman, age 41). 76% of G3 members are primarily attracted to *The Hobbit* movie by one of its stars (**Table 2**). Members of group G3 most strongly agree with the statement 'I'm very happy that one of my favourite actors will appear in *The Hobbit*' (23, +4) and also strongly agree with the statement 'What a great cast! Perfect choices in most cases' (17, +3). For this group of respondents, *The Hobbit* is a must see film and will be a major cinematic event (13, +4), with several specifically citing the importance of the film in boosting the career of their favourite actor. The most frequently-mentioned casting attraction is Richard Armitage as the 'sexy dwarf', Thorin Oakenshield:

The book itself means nothing to me as I've never read it and don't care to. The [Hobbit] movie trilogy, however, is very important to me because it is a huge break through role for my favorite actor, Richard Armitage. I have to see him in this important moment in his career, on the big screen, in such an important role (for him).... I could say, also, that I'd have no interest in seeing the movie in the theater if Armitage wasn't in it. But then, that might be obvious. I'd probably watch it on Netflix, though. And I'll probably buy it, as I've got to have it if Armitage is in it! Never thought I'd descend into such nutty fandom, but he is awesome! (American woman, age 35)

As this declaration illustrates, pre-viewers can 'arrive' at a text through preferences and affinities that are unrelated to the 'main text' – in this case, a pre-existing celebrity fandom (see also Chin & Gray, 2001; Brayton, 2006; Gray, 2010). Indeed, it seems likely that at least some *Hobbit* casting decisions were designed to appeal to audiences with potentially little prior interest in Jackson or Tolkien, by drawing together an ensemble of actors with existing star power and established fan followings, in an attempt to capitalise on the long shadows cast by their previous roles (Gray, 2010). This potential 'new' viewing audience included devoted *Dr Who* fans (Sylvester McCoy, the seventh Dr Who), fans of the highly successful British comedy, *The Office*, and the BBC crime drama *Sherlock* (Martin Freeman), the long running soap opera, *Eastenders* (Rob Kazinsky), and BBC dramas *Robin Hood* and *Spooks* (Richard Armitage). As others have noted, this kind of intertextual strategy has been successfully adopted in other fantasy films, presumably to widen the audience base (Gray, 2010)<sup>17</sup>.

In sum, G3 is an audience segment with little prior interest in Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, or *The Lord of the Rings* in book or film format. Its members' involvement in pre-release prefigurative activities is mainly due to their keen interest in certain actors, not the story. Landscapes and the excitement of the event are also draw cards (12, +3; 13, +4; 7, -4), but without the presence of specific celebrities, those other attributes are less compelling. A

thirty-four year old Italian woman summed up the attraction of *The Hobbit* film for her: 'Richard Armitage, let's be frank. But of course, I'll also be interested in the scenery...'

### ***Anxious investors: G4***

A group of thirty-six respondents represents group G4. Notably, 90 percent of G4 members are New Zealanders or resident in New Zealand. They are for the most part neither Tolkien nor LoTR fans, and their exposure to the book and the film trilogy is very low compared to groups G1 and G2: they have read *The Hobbit* twice on average, and have seen the film trilogy three times (**Table 2**).

G4 audience members are especially concerned about how the evolving reputation of the film will affect its commercial success, and the possible implications for anticipated economic spillovers for New Zealand. They agree strongly with statement 37, 'This film will really help to spur tourism in New Zealand, which is great for the economy. I understand why the government would provide some public support' (37, +4) and they express film patriotism by feeling 'excited and proud when I think about my country's contribution to this major international film production' (36, +3). They also express strong concern about the effects of the Hobbit labour issue (11, +3) and strongly agree that the conversion of *The Hobbit* into a trilogy is commercially motivated: it is designed 'to make more money at the box office. They're milking it for all it's worth' (24, +3).

G4 members regard the film as a public investment and are concerned that it may not have been worth the trouble and considerable expense, as suggested in this comment from a twenty-two year-old New Zealand man:

The law changes and mud-slinging at the union that tried to protect our workers is a great travesty and I personally don't know if it was worth it. Jackson was quoted as stating the international unions "Didn't understand the laws here" yet here we are changing them to cater to corporate America. It is very sad that John Key and Jackson bent over for Warner Bro's. This has added to my distaste for the studio system and I wish the government would give equal support to true New Zealand cinema.... I find it strange that there has not been a huge amount of publicity surrounding the law changes and the impact on our actors and crew. We make Peter Jackson out as a saint yet he really did the dirty on Helen Kelly by demonising her and the unions.

G4 members do not find much value in participating in prefigurative activities. They don't enjoy discussing, speculating, or debating about *The Hobbit* before seeing it (34, -3). Further, they are quite skeptical about all the hype and speculation, and 'have heard negative comments about *The Hobbit*' but nonetheless prefer to reserve judgment until personally viewing the film (25, +4):

I'd never read the books before LoTR came out, so had no anticipation. I did really enjoy them, and was initially looking forward to *The Hobbit*, but it's been so long and there's been so much nonsense it's evaporated my interest. (New Zealand man, 36)

Most G4 members have viewed the movie trailers but their rate of viewing online production videos, the official *Hobbit* website, or production blogs is among the lowest of the five audience groups we identified. G4 members do not look forward to seeing the film, strongly disagreeing with statements that express high anticipation (6, -3; 35, -4). Only fifteen percent of G4 members believe it is 'extremely' or 'very' important to see *The Hobbit* film. Indeed, their primary concern is not the film *per se*, but rather its potential economic and reputational spillovers:

I lived overseas when LoTR was released - many people in that country (South Korea) based their (positive) opinions on NZ on those films. It made NZ look beautiful. (New Zealand man, 32)

I'm not a huge LoTR or *The Hobbit* fan but I like what the series (both) have done for my country's reputation and our tourism/industry etc. Plus I think the fan side is interesting, although I'm not a hardcore fan myself... *The Hobbit* as a book doesn't really matter for me: I'm into the experience AS A FILM and as a community/family event. (New Zealand woman, 41)

Hopefully, another great achievement for New Zealand on the world stage. I hope it succeeds hugely for that reason. Publicity, appreciation, all those things. (New Zealand man, 39)

G4 members defend the reputation of Peter Jackson by most strongly disagreeing with a statement that he is a sloppy director (26, -4), while at the same time allowing that other directors might have successfully brought *The Hobbit* to the big screen (27, -2).

### **Varieties of prefigurative engagement: Some implications of our findings**

In contrast to much audience scholarship that has yielded many rich qualitative insights with limited generalisability, our mixed quali-quantitative research approach has allowed us to identify and describe the nature of prefigurative engagement amongst five segments of the global pre-release *Hobbit* audience: *fans of Jackson's Lord of the Rings film trilogy* eagerly anticipating another instalment from a celebrated director, *Jackson critics* expressing opposition to aspects of the film's direction and conditions of production in New Zealand, *Tolkien aficionados* with significant concerns about the fidelity of the novel's film adaptation, a *celebrity followers* group attracted to the film by specific cast members, and

*anxious investors* hoping for localised economic spillovers from a successful film. These five groups account for 77.6 percent of our 1000 respondents. As this analysis suggests, the *Hobbit's* pre-release audience was not defined primarily by distribution along a single dimensional spectrum having to do with reception of a particular reference text. Instead, we found two competing reference intertexts: Jackson's *Lord of The Rings* films, and Tolkien's *Hobbit* text (along with the larger Tolkien corpus). We also discovered three audience groups that were oriented only partially or not at all toward the *Lord of The Rings* or *Hobbit* texts *per se*.

Of the principal groups, two represent the film's immediate pre-release addressee audiences (G1+ and G2, *fans of Jackson's Lord of The Rings film trilogy* and *Tolkien aficionados*) and only one (G3, *celebrity followers*) represents a newly interested addressee audience that may enhance the film's post-release market traction. The two other pre-release audience groups seem unlikely to become devoted viewers. Segment G4 (*anxious investors*) is mainly interested in the film as a national commercial product and is quite indifferent to the storyworld it offers, while audience segment G1- (*angry Jackson critics*) is actively oppositional.

As emphasised in the film marketing literature, the purpose of the avalanche of attention-grabbing marketing and promotional hype unleashed during a film's pre-release campaign is to create urgent intent among addressee audiences to view the film during its short run in theatres. In the case of our survey respondents, that marketing effort clearly resonated among the G1+ and G2 groups: 94 percent of *fans of Jackson's Lord of The Rings films* and 89 percent of *Tolkien aficionados* considered it 'very' or 'extremely' important to see the film. It also caught the attention and raised the interest of *celebrity followers* (G3), among whom 69 percent believed it to be 'very' or 'extremely' important to see the film. But the campaign convinced few *angry Jackson critics* (G1-) or *anxious investors* (G4) to see the film, and may even have had dissuasive effects.

Film trailers were the most widely consumed promotional materials among survey respondents, followed by news coverage, production videos, and the official website (see **Table 3**). As we noted from the outset however, prefiguration is clearly influenced by broader discussion, speculation, controversy and debate which falls outside the control of film producers and publicists. In the case of *The Hobbit*, localised public and media discussion regarding Peter Jackson's involvement in a local labour dispute and the New Zealand Government's response clearly informed the ways in which many New Zealand respondents perceived this locally-produced transnational film production. More generally, in a strong face-to-face 'watercooler' effect, pre-release audience members in our sample were more than twice as likely to discuss the film with friends or family as with other fans in online fora (**Table 3**).

To return to our original question, how do varieties of pre-release audience engagement convert to post-release audience reception, and how does engagement among fannish audiences elicit or hinder the attraction of the mainstream audiences that are crucial to the commercial success of blockbuster feature films? It is clear from our research

that G1+ members are very favourably disposed toward Peter Jackson and his previous work as director of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. The G1+ pre-release audience thus appears most clearly predisposed to enjoy *The Hobbit* as a CGI-intensive fantasy and adventure spectacle, and to be most susceptible to what Michelle (2007) describes as a *transparent* mode of reception marked by suspension of disbelief, narrative transportation, identification and strong emotional affect, even after multiple viewings. We anticipate that many newcomers, especially younger persons having little familiarity with Tolkien, will join these *Lord of The Rings* film fans in their appreciation of Jackson's rendering of *The Hobbit*.

As we earlier noted, studios need to manufacture audiences. The pre-release hype and social media campaign helps to assemble a reference audience segment oriented toward the film's 'preferred reading' and who thus can be expected to express enthusiasm once the film is in theatres. We suggest that this reference audience in the case of *The Hobbit* is constituted by the G1+ pre-release audience segment, *fans of Jackson's Lord of The Rings film trilogy*. G1+ tastes and dispositions thus prefigure those of the more enthusiastic post-release audience segments, illustrating how makers of major capital-intensive entertainment products cultivate particular fannish audiences as proxies for the post-release audience in the pre-release period, expecting these enthusiastic pre-release audiences groups to serve later as 'brand ambassadors' among the post-release global addressee audience.

The degree to which G2 members (*Tolkien aficionados*) are satisfied that *The Hobbit* film suitably conveys the 'spirit of the book' seems likely to be the most important factor in their disposition to experience the film either in a *transparent* mode, or in modes with lesser degrees of positive affective engagement, such as a critical *mediated* or even *discursive* mode (see Michelle, 2007). The issue of fidelity in *The Hobbit's* book-to-film adaptation has no simple solution for the G2 audience, who necessarily will spot in the film numerous factual, thematic, or stylistic divergences from Tolkien's original masterpiece. We therefore expect G2 audiences to splinter, with some accepting the filmic interpretation as sufficiently faithful to the novel to permit suspension of disbelief and resulting highly pleasurable viewing, while others experience the film in a critical mediated or discursive mode, their pleasurable engagement thwarted by the film's perceived failure to adequately convey the 'spirit of the book' and/or preserve its important message for a new generation. Thus, overall, the G2 audience seems likely to provide a basis for word-of-mouth reviews that are positive but not necessarily laudatory.

Of course, such predictions remain speculative, since the extent to which modes of prefigurative engagement might subsequently shape the form and content of audience reception remains an unanswered question, one that we explore in our ongoing research. The findings presented in this paper nonetheless contribute to our understanding of the range of potential 'prefiguration effects' by demonstrating that the interpretive resources that might accumulate and circulate in advance of a forthcoming film production derive not merely from official marketing materials, prequels, source texts, celebrity associations, entertainment news, and critical commentary. They also emerge from the social

environment of pre-textual pre-viewing and anticipatory consumption created by massive fan engagement, hyper communicability, and, at times, competitive intertextual feuding (Gray, 2010) among different taste subcultures. Any one, or indeed any combination of, these intertextual referents may shape and inform viewers' prefigurative engagements with a major blockbuster event-film. However, their ability to subsequently determine the form and content of audience reception itself is less clearly apparent, and requires careful investigation.

We acknowledge certain limitations of our research to date. While we have obtained rich insights from a large and diverse participant sample, our P-set was self-selecting rather than representative, and hence we make no claims about the distribution of the subjective orientations we have discovered within the general population. On its own, Q methodology cannot be used to estimate the distribution of holders of viewpoints throughout a population, and this is not its purpose; the purpose of Q methodology is to identify types of viewpoints and characterise them so that they may be interpreted. For this reason, selection of the *P-set* or population of respondents in Q does not seek to construct a representative sample of the wider population. Rather, Q studies normally specifically target respondents who are thought likely to have very different perspectives on the topic at hand, in order to maximise the range of viewpoints that can be identified. As Stenner, Watts and Worrell (2008) note, 'participants in Q studies are...treated as strategic "sites" from which a limited independent variety of subjective viewpoints can be heard. The aim is to gain access to that range of viewpoints, and not to make claims about the frequency of their occurrence amongst the general population' (p. 221). Of course, our P-set extends well beyond the minimum numbers required to identify the range of viewpoints, but our interest lies not merely in understanding audience members' diverse perspectives. We are interested in tracing the possible relationships between subjective viewpoints and people's identities and socio-demographic characteristics, and in this way seek to contribute to our understanding of audience reception as a social, rather than individual or idiosyncratic, phenomenon.

Our explorations in this area are nonetheless themselves constrained by a number of factors. Most notably, our P-set excluded respondents unable to communicate sufficiently well in English,<sup>18</sup> along with those without access to the Internet. Recent estimates suggest that 70-90 percent of people in Western developed nations have such access, but in the developing world, only 25 per cent are online (International Telecommunication Union, 2012). Hence, our research is likely to over-represent the views of internet savvy "cosmopolitans": people whose life orientation revolves around global interconnectedness rather than their local communities' (Hannerz, 1990, as cited in Kuipers & Kloet 2009: 104), and these are likely to be relatively economically empowered individuals. This bias appears to be a significant shortcoming of online research generally. Many tablet and smart phone users were also excluded unless they had other means of accessing the Internet, since our Q sorting site used the open-source programme FlashQ and Adobe Flash is not supported on iOS devices, and requires manual installation on newer Android devices.

Nonetheless, we believe our findings make a significant contribution to understanding audience prefiguration, and add to the existing body of research by attending to the perspectives of a wide range of potential viewers, including some of Peter Jackson's ardent critics. The methodological approach we have developed, we believe, provides a powerful tool for gaining rich qualitative insight whilst retaining the capacity for rigorous and productive quantitative analysis. Using this approach, we have been able to identify and describe five distinct audience groups whose members share significant commonalities in their perspectives, preoccupations, and (in some cases) socio-demographic characteristics. In the process, we have gained clearer insight into the respective roles of fandom, politics and idealised intertexts in shaping modes of prefigurative engagement with a highly-anticipated spectacular blockbuster event-film.

### **Biographical notes:**

Charles H. Davis is a Professor in the RTA School of Media at Ryerson University in Toronto, where he holds the E.S. Rogers Research Chair in Media Management and Entrepreneurship. His research and teaching interests broadly concern media audiences and media product development. Email: [c5davis@ryerson.ca](mailto:c5davis@ryerson.ca).

Carolyn Michelle is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at The University of Waikato, 40 minutes west of Hobbiton. She is an active member of the Audience Research Unit, with a focus on reception theory and research.

Ann Hardy is a Senior Lecturer in the Screen and Media Studies Programme at the University of Waikato. Her research specialities include the production context of New Zealand media and the intersections of media, religion and culture.

Dr Craig Hight is an Associate Professor in Screen and Media Studies at the University of Waikato. His current research focuses on the relationships between digital media technologies and documentary practice, especially the variety of factors shaping online documentary cultures.

### **Acknowledgements:**

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Association for Media and Communication Research annual conference, Dublin, June 2013. We are grateful to Christian Kobbernagel and reviewers Kim Schrøder and Simon Watts for highly valuable feedback on earlier drafts. A much condensed version focusing on localised reactions to *The Hobbit* in New Zealand appeared in the online proceedings of the ANZCA Perth Conference, July 2013.

## **Bibliography:**

- Barker, Martin, 'The functions of fantasy: A comparison of audiences for The Lord of the Rings in twelve countries', in M. Barker and E. Mathijs (eds.), *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 149-180.
- Barker, Martin, 'On being a 1960s Tolkien reader', in E. Mathijs and M. Pomerance (eds.), *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, pp. 81-100.
- Barker, Martin, 'News, reviews, clues, interviews and other ancillary materials: A critique and research proposal', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film & TV Studies*, February, 2004.
- Barker, Martin and Brooks, Kate, *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press, 1988.
- Barker, Martin, and Mathijs, Ernest, 'Researching world audiences: The experience of a complex methodology', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 9(2), 2012, pp. 664-689.
- Barker, Martin, and Mathijs, Ernest (eds.), *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Barker, Martin, Mathijs, Ernest and Trobia, Alberto, 'Our methodological challenges and solutions', in M. Barker and E. Mathijs (eds.), *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 213-240.
- Bennett, Tony and Wollacott, Janet, *Bond and Beyond: the Political Career of a Popular Hero*, London: MacMillan, 1987.
- Bilteyst, Daniel, Mathijs, Ernest and Meers, Philippe, 'An avalanche of attention: The prefiguration and reception of The Lord of the Rings', in M. Barker and E. Mathijs (eds.), *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 37-58.
- Bilteyst, Daniel, and Meers, Philippe, 'Blockbusters and/as events: Distributing and launching The Lord of the Rings', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006, pp. 71-87.
- Brayton, Jennifer, 'Fic Frodo slash Frodo: Fandoms and The Lord of the Rings', in E. Mathijs and M. Pomerance (eds.), *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, pp. 137-154.
- Brooker, Will, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-first Century Batman*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012.
- Brooker, Will (ed.), *The Blade Runner Experience: the Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*, London: Wallflower, 2005.
- Brown, Steven R., 'Q methodology as the foundation for a science of subjectivity', *Operant Subjectivity*, 18, 1994, pp. 1-16.
- Brown, Steven R., *Political Subjectivity: Applications Of Q Methodology In Political Science*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Burke, Liam, '“Superman in Green”: An audience study of comic book film adaptations of Thor and Green Lantern', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 9(2), 2012, pp. 97-119.
- Busse, Kristina, and Gray, Jonathan, 'Fan cultures and fan communities', in V. Nightingale (ed.), *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, Chichester, U.K.: WileyBlackwell, 2011, pp. 427-442.
- Chin, Bertha, and Gray, Jonathan, '“One ring to rule them all”: Previewers and pretexts of the Lord of the Rings films', *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media*, 2, 2001.

- Cucco, Marco, 'The promise is great: The blockbuster and the Hollywood economy', *Media, Culture & Society*, 31(2), 2009, pp. 215-230.
- Davis, Charles H., and Michelle, Carolyn, 'Q methodology in audience research: Bridging the qualitative/quantitative 'divide'?', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 8(2), 2011, pp. 559-593.
- Drake, Philip, 'Distribution and marketing in contemporary Hollywood', in P. McDonald and J. Wasko (eds.), *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, pp. 63-82.
- Epstein, Edward Jay, *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*, New York: Random House, 2005.
- Fiorelli, Gianluca (2013) 'Prelaunch and the Marketing of Suspense: The Hobbit History Case' [WWW document] URL <http://www.stateofsearch.com/hobbithistorycase/#>. Data from IMDB MovieMeter.
- Fiske, John, 'The cultural economy of fandom', in L. A. Lewis (ed.), *Adoring Audiences: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Routledge: London and New York, 1992, pp. 30-49.
- Fiske, John, 'Moments of television: Neither the text nor the reader', in E. Seiter et al. (eds.), *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp.56-78.
- Gitlin, Todd, *Inside Prime Time*, London: Routledge, 1983.
- Grainge, Paul, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Gray, Christy, 'Originals and copies: The fans of Philip K. Dick, Blade Runner and K.W. Jeter', in W. Brooker (ed.), *The Blade Runner Experience: the Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*, London: Wallflower, 2005, pp. 142-158.
- Gray, Jonathan, 'Television pre-views and the meaning of hype', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(1), 2008, pp. 33-49.
- Gray, Jonathan, 'Scanning the replicant text', in W. Brooker (ed.), *The Blade Runner Experience: the Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic*, London: Wallflower, 2005, pp. 111-123.
- Gray, Jonathan, 'New fans, new textualities: Anti-fans and non-fans', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 2003, pp. 64-81.
- Green, Joshua, and Jenkins, Henry, 'Spreadable media: How audiences create value and meaning in a networked economy', in V. Nightingale (ed.), *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 109-127.
- Hedling, Erik, 'Framing Tolkien', in W. Wolf and W. Bernhart (eds.), *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, pp. 407-425.
- Hills, Matt, 'Realising the cult blockbuster: The Lord of the Rings fandom and residual/emergent cult status in 'the mainstream'', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006.
- Hills, Matt, *Fan Cultures*, London: Routledge, 2002.
- Jauss, Hans Robert, 'Literary history as a challenge to literary theory', *New Literary History*, 2(1), 1970, pp. 7-37.
- Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture*, New York: New York University, 2006.
- Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

- Jöckel, Sven, and Döbler, Thomas, 'The event movie: Marketing filmed entertainment for transnational media corporations', *International Journal on Media Management*, 8(2), 2006, pp. 84-91.
- Kernan, Lisa, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- Kerrigan, Finola, *Film Marketing*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2010.
- King, Geoff, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000.
- Kuipers, Giseline and de Kloet, Jeroen, 'Banal cosmopolitanism and *The Lord of the Rings*: The limited role of national differences in global media consumption', *Poetics*, 37, 2009, pp. 99-118.
- Lampel, Joseph, and Shamsie, Jamal, 'Critical push: Strategies for creating momentum in the motion picture industry', *Journal of Management*, 26(2), 2000, pp. 233-257.
- Luthar, Breda, 'Promotional frame makers and the meaning of the text: The case of *The Lord of the Rings*', in M. Barker and E. Mathijs (eds.), *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 59-68.
- Margolis, Harriet, Cubitt, Sean, King, Barry and Jutel, Thierry (eds.), *Studying the Event-film: The Lord of the Rings*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008.
- Marich, Robert, *Marketing to Moviegoers*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009.
- Mathijs, Ernest, 'Popular culture in a global context: The Lord of the Rings phenomenon', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006a, pp. 1-22.
- Mathijs, Ernest, 'Reviews, previews and premieres: The critical reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006b, pp. 119-142.
- Mathijs, Ernest, and Pomerance, Murray (eds.), *From Hobbits to Hollywood. Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006.
- McAndrew, Ian, and Risak, Martin, 'Shakedown in the shaky Isles: Union bashing in New Zealand', *Labor Studies Journal*, 37(1), 2012, pp. 56-80.
- McKeown, Bruce, and Thomas, Dan, *Q Methodology*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2013.
- Michelle, Carolyn, 'Modes of reception: A consolidated analytical framework', *The Communication Review*, 10(3), 2007, pp. 181-222.
- Michelle, Carolyn, Davis, Charles H., and Vladica, Florin, 'Understanding variation in audience engagement and response: An application of the Composite Model to receptions of *Avatar* (2009)', *The Communication Review*, 15(2), 2012, pp. 106-143.
- Murray, Simone, 'Celebrating the story the way it is': Cultural studies, corporate media and the contested utility of fandom', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 2004, pp. 7-25.
- Pearson, Roberta and Uricchio, William (eds.), *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Super Hero and His Media*, London: BFI, 1991.
- Pullen, Kirsten, 'The Lord of the Rings online blockbuster fandom: Pleasure and commerce', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in a Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006, pp. 172-188.

- Rae, Neil, and Gray, Jonathan, 'When Gen-X met the X-Men', in I. Gordon, M. Jancovich, and M.P. McAllister (eds.), *Film and Comic Books*, Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2007, pp. 86-100.
- Rosz, Jeff (2012) 'How Much Did the First 'Hobbit' Movie Cost to Make and Market?', *Media Market Journal*, 4 December. [Online] URL <http://www.mediamarketjournal.com/2012/12/how-much-did-the-hobbit-an-unexpected-journey-cost-to-make-and-market/>
- Schatz, Thomas, 'The new Hollywood', in J. Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbuster*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 15-44.
- Schrøder, Kim Christian, 'Methodological pluralism as a vehicle of qualitative generalization', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 9(2), 2012, pp. 798-825.
- Stenner, Paul, Watts, Simon and Worrell, Marcia, 'Q methodology', in C. Willig and W. Stainton-Rogers (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sociology*, London: SAGE, 2008, pp. 215-239.
- Thornley, Davinia, 'Wellywood and Peter Jackson: The local reception of The Lord of the Rings in Wellington, New Zealand', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006, pp. 101-118.
- Wasko, Janet, 'The Lord of the Rings: Selling the franchise', in M. Barker and E. Mathijs (eds.), *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 21-36.
- Wasko, Janet, and Shanadi, Govind, 'More than just rings: Merchandise for them all', in E. Mathijs (ed.), *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, London and New York: Wallflower, 2006, pp. 23-42.
- Watts, Simon, and Stenner, Paul, *Doing Q Methodological Research: Theory, Method and Interpretation*, London: Sage, 2012.
- Williams, Kathleen, 'Fake fan film trailers as incarnations of audience anticipation and desire', in F. Coppa and J.L. Russ (eds.), 'Fan/Remix video', special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 9, 2012 [online], URL <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc>.
- Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Wu, Harmony, 'Trading in horror, cult and matricide: Peter Jackson's phenomenal bad taste and New Zealand fantasies of inter/national cinematic success', in M. Jancovich, A. Lazaro Rebol, J. Stringer and A. Willis (eds.), *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 84-108.
- Zafirau, Stephen, 'Audience knowledge and the everyday lives of cultural producers in Hollywood', in V. Mayer, M.J. Banks and J.T. Caldwell (eds), *Production studies: Cultural studies of media industries*, London, UK: Routledge, 2009, pp. 190-202.

**Figure 1:** Model factor array showing the forced distribution of sorted items (example of G1+, *Lord of The Rings* fans)

most strongly disagree			neutral or indifferent				most strongly agree		
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	
24	7	15	2	1	12	9	33	10	
26	8	19	4	3	14	13	35	27	
	21	22	6	5	17	16	38		
		31	11	23	20	32			
			18	25	30				
			28	29	34				
				36					
				37					

**Table 1:** Q-set statements and scores by audience group viewpoint

No.	Statement	Viewpoint				
		G1+	G1-	G2	G3	G4
1	I remember reading the book when I was younger. I hope the film reflects, in every way possible, the spirit of the book.	0	0	4	-1	1
2	I don't care that much about The Hobbit, but will probably watch it just to see what all the fuss is about.	-1	1	-4	0	1
3	I hope that the feel of the movie is fantastical and fun and mystical and like a children's movie. Because that's how the novel was.	0	0	1	0	2
4	Using 48 frames per second will destroy the film experience for me; it detracts from the warmth and artistry of film.	-1	1	-1	0	-1
5	The Hobbit is one of my favourite books, so I really want this film to be perfect.	0	0	4	-4	-1
6	I have waited so many years for this movie and now am scared that it will only be a disappointment.	-1	+1	2	-1	-3
7	My disinterest grows with each passing bit of media and publicity released. I am underwhelmed by what I've seen and heard so far.	-3	3	-2	-4	1
8	Peter Jackson has just used these films as a testing ground for his new technology and it sounds like it has backfired big time, because he has sacrificed the story and the look of the films.	-3	3	-1	-2	-2
9	I have complete trust in WETA workshops. This film will be groundbreaking in its use of digital effects.	2	-2	0	1	2
10	Peter Jackson is a genius and I have complete faith that he knows what he's doing.	4	-4	-2	0	1
11	I was very concerned to hear about Warner Bros' exploitation of workers on The Hobbit set.	-1	1	0	0	3
12	I'm looking forward to seeing the beautiful New Zealand landscape on the big screen again.	1	-1	2	3	2
13	The Hobbit is definitely on my 'must go see' list for this year. It will be a major cinematic event.	2	-2	3	4	-1
14	The switch to 48 frames per second will greatly improve the viewing experience with no strobing or flickering, more depth of detail and smoother motion.	1	-1	-1	0	0
15	Based on the trailer, this film seems like some producer's attempt to appeal to the lowest common denominator.	-2	2	-1	-3	-1
16	I really wish I could have been part of this film production, creating movie magic.	2	-2	1	1	0
17	What a great cast! Perfect choices in most cases.	1	-1	0	3	0
18	I worry that there will be a lot of cheap slapstick and family-friendly script gimmicks and cheesy one-liners in the film.	-1	1	1	-2	-2
19	The more I hear about what they are doing with this movie, the more I don't want to see it.	-2	2	-3	-3	-2

20	I am especially looking forward to going to see the film with my friends / family.	1	-1	3	2	0
21	All the non-book additions and story and character changes are starting to concern me. Tolkien would turn in his grave if he saw how far Jackson has diverged from his original work.	-3	3	0	-1	0
22	I seriously doubt this film will do justice to J.R.R. Tolkien. It doesn't feel like an adaptation of his work, more like an adventure-comedy. It has lost its epic scope.	-2	2	-1	0	0
23	I'm very happy that one of my favourite actors will appear in The Hobbit.	0	0	0	4	-1
24	Making The Hobbit into a trilogy is just Jackson and the studio stretching out a short book to make more money at the box office. They're milking it for all it's worth.	-4	4	1	2	3
25	I've heard negative comments about The Hobbit, but I will reserve judgement until I see the film for myself.	0	0	1	1	4
26	Peter Jackson is an immature, sloppy, artistically tone-deaf director with no ability to edit, and I enjoy few of his films.	-4	4	-3	-3	-4
27	No one but Peter Jackson could tell this story and do it justice.	4	-4	-2	-2	-2
28	I refuse to pay full price to see the films and give Warner Bros any more of my hard earned money.	-1	1	-3	-1	-1
29	This film seems to have only one significant female role and it doesn't have as many 'heart-throbs' as Lord of the Rings. It will be interesting to see how many women will go to watch the movie.	0	0	-2	-2	1
30	What I've seen so far looks breathtaking and the colours are fantastically vivid; I feel like I'm really there!	1	-1	0	2	0
31	I don't like the Lord of the Rings films or fantasy films in general, and probably won't watch The Hobbit.	-2	2	-4	-1	-3
32	I really hope that the fantastic once-in-a-lifetime movie experience that was The Lord of the Rings can happen again.	2	-2	2	1	2
33	Middle-earth is a massive world with a rich history and Jackson is doing the best he can to bring as much of that history into these movies as possible.	3	-3	0	2	2
34	I am enjoying discussing, speculating and debating about The Hobbit before seeing it.	1	-1	2	1	-3
35	This film can't get here soon enough. I've been waiting for this my whole life, and I can't wait to see this adventure up on the big screen.	3	-3	1	-1	-4
36	I feel excited and proud when I think about my country's contribution to this major international film production.	0	0	0	1	3
37	This film will really help to spur tourism in New Zealand, which is great for the economy. I understand why the government would provide some public support.	0	0	0	3	4
38	I am really looking forward to returning to the wonderful world of Middle-earth.	3	-3	3	0	0

**Table 2:** Characteristics and motivations of The Hobbit pre-release audience groups

Audience group	G1+	G1-	G2	G3	G4
N = 1000 (of which cross-loaded and non significant sorts = 224)	514	27	182	17	36
% female (of those disclosing gender)	61.8%	46.2%	55.9%	100.0%	61.1%
Average age	34.0	45.1	30.4	40.3	36.8
Three principal countries of residence	US (36.8%), NZ (19.8%), UK (10.0%)	NZ (51.9%), US (18.5%), UK (14.8%)	US (41.7%), NZ(12.2%), UK (8.3%)	US (37.5%), UK (12.5%), Canada (12.5%)	NZ (88.9%), UK (5.6%)
Consider it 'extremely' or 'very' important to see the film (%)	93.8%	11.1%	89.0%	68.8%	14.7%
Fan of the Hobbit book or of Tolkien	48.2%	43.5%	87.3%	5.9%	20.0%
Fan of the LoTR films	35.7%	4.3%	9.9%	11.8%	25.7%
Fan of one of the stars in the film	7.4%	-	.6%	76.5%	-
Not planning to see film	-	29.6%	.6%	-	2.9%
Fan of Peter Jackson	5.1%	-	.6%	-	8.6%
Average number of times group members have read <i>The Hobbit</i>	8	7	10	1	2
Average number of times group members have seen the LoTR film trilogy	19	6	13	2	3

**Table 3:** Principal prefigurative activities of pre-release Hobbit audiences

Audience group	G1+ (N=514)	G1- (N=27)	G2 (N=182)	G3 (N=17)	G4 (N=36)
Viewed Hobbit film trailers	91.6%	82.5%	89.6%	82.4%	55.6%
Visited Hobbit website	75.3%	22.2%	60.4%	58.8%	2.8%
'Liked' Hobbit Facebook page	60.7%	3.7%	42.3%	35.3%	5.6%
Viewed Hobbit production videos online	85.4%	37.0%	77.5%	88.2%	27.8%
Read Jackson's production blog	67.5%	18.5%	45.6%	47.1%	5.6%
Followed news coverage of film	85.8%	77.8%	76.9%	76.5%	55.6%
Discussed film with friends or family	88.5%	77.8%	86.3%	88.2%	38.9%
Participated in online fan discussions	37.2%	25.9%	42.3%	41.2%	2.8%

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> As discussed below, Q methodology is a mixed qualitative-quantitative methodology that is specifically designed to uncover similarities and differences in people's subjective viewpoints, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences.

<sup>2</sup> For example, *Batman* (Brooker, 2012; Pearson & Uricchio, 1991), *James Bond* (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987), *Judge Dredd* (Barker & Brooks, 1998), *Blade Runner* (Brooker, 2005; C. Gray, 2005; J. Gray, 2005), *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker, 2006; Brayton, 2006; Chin & Gray, 2001; Hills, 2006; Pullen, 2006), *The Dark Knight* (Brooker, 2012), *Thor*, *Green Lantern* (Burke, 2012), and *Twilight* (Williams, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See also Michelle, Davis & Vladica's (2012) application of the Composite Model to receptions of *Avatar* (2009).

<sup>4</sup> This was indeed the case with the TheOneRing.net, which remains the most active and comprehensive *Lord of the Rings* fan website. Key contributors gained unprecedented access to the production of Jackson's first film trilogy, published official and fan-generated news stories, interviews and analysis, conducted polls of fan opinion, and facilitated lively discussion and debate (Pullen, 2006). Our observations suggest this close relationship was to some extent reactivated during the production of the first *Hobbit* movie.

<sup>5</sup> Busse & Gray (2011: 430) however warn that contemporary audiences differ significantly from classical fandom: 'media convergence, new technologies, and transmedia marketing have all created new types of fans who exhibit many similarities and yet may not be quite the same'. Notably, new consumer-fans do not have deep roots in fan communities or deep historical knowledge of a fan culture. Their fandom is less a way of life than a hobby or consumption style, induced by the entertainment industry 'actively interpellating viewers as fans' (Ibid.: 431). But this distinction between genuine fans and fannish consumers may not explain some key differences in media consumption preferences and expectations between Tolkien readers, who often have a strong sense of loyalty to (and detailed familiarity with) the original works and their creator (Chin & Gray, 2001) and *Lord of The Rings* film fans, who, although they are less invested in the adapted texts than Tolkien readers, are nonetheless able to draw on a considerable range of intertextual resources related to the films. Of course, when a film franchise is based on an adaptation of a successful novel *and* follows previous films in a series, its potential audience is more fully diversified: A segment of the pre-release audience for one offering is then a post-release audience from one or more previous offerings, and those earlier experiences inform and colour any subsequent textual encounter. Bennett & Woollacott (1987), Pearson & Uricchio (1991) and Barker & Brooks (1998) all explore how intertextual links with related texts – such as the novel or comic from which a film is adapted, its prequels, and paratextual sources (Gray, 2008) such as marketing and promotion and media coverage – inform, contribute to and become absorbed within the meaning of a film prior to seeing it. As 'ghost texts' (Fiske, 1989: 66), their traces remain present within the meanings created around each new addition to a body of works.

<sup>6</sup> Mainstream audience members are likely to be more interested in the film itself than in any of its textual antecedents, privileging more extra-textual experiential aspects of the film, especially in the case of spectacular blockbuster event-films such as *The Hobbit*.

---

<sup>7</sup> This was clearly evident in the case of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. As Biltereyst, Mathijs & Meers' (2008) study of pre-release extratextual and paratextual ancillary marketing materials reveals, more than 2,500 prefigurative press and publicity materials circulated in the United Kingdom alone, including marketing materials, merchandise, coverage in the press, magazines, radio, and television, and material on official and unofficial websites.

<sup>8</sup> Professional reviewers are especially prone to dislike Hollywood blockbusters, finding them formulaic and superficial (Cucco, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the preponderance and growing significance of fan word-of-mouth is amply demonstrated by Biltereyst, Mathijs & Meers (2008) with reference to a large-scale international online survey of *Lord of The Rings* audiences, where the Internet was listed among the three most important sources of information by 11,617 of nearly 25,000 respondents. The official *Lord of the Rings* website was listed among the three most important sources of Web-based information by 796 respondents, *second* in rank to the unofficial fan website *Theonering.net*. Over 700 unofficial websites were devoted to *The Lord of the Rings* (Pullen, 2006). In order of importance, after the Internet come trailers, friends, TV programmes, and posters. Needless to say, in the decade since this earlier film trilogy, the Internet and social media have further transformed the ways that pre-release audiences are elicited and engaged, and by whom, rendering the virtual realm a significant site of prefigurative engagement, discussion and debate in the build-up to the international release of the first *Hobbit* movie.

<sup>10</sup> When administering Q sorts in a physical environment, respondents place the items on a flat surface and can see where every item has been placed in relation to every other item. FlashQ reproduces this physical layout on the screen, but beyond a certain number of items the statements lose their legibility on the screen. We thus chose to limit the number of items in order to maintain the on-screen legibility of the statements, and thereby to preserve the ability of respondents to make the essential cross-wise comparisons among statements placed on the grid.

<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this triage was to eliminate frivolous responses or ones in which the respondent, perhaps due to limited linguistic capability or distraction, was unlikely to have understood the survey instructions or the Q-item statements.

<sup>12</sup> In Q research, a P-set of this size is unusual, as it is considered to represent an unnecessarily large sample for the purpose of identifying the viewpoints within the population of respondents. We note, however, that three of the five viewpoints we identified were each expressed by only 2% or 3% of respondents. In the absence of prior theory predicting their existence, our large sample was an effective way to identify viewpoints that otherwise would have been imperceptible within the G1+ and G2 viewpoints, which were expressed by a large majority of respondents. Furthermore, one of our key research aims was to identify relationships between viewpoints and socio-demographic characteristics such as nationality, gender, age, and education, and hence we deliberately sought a sufficiently large P-set to facilitate such analyses.

<sup>13</sup> All four components in the four-component solution are sound, according to the stringent version of Humphrey's Rule (Brown, 1980: 223), which considers that a factor is significant if the cross product of its two highest loadings is greater than twice the standard error. No solution with more than four components passed the Humphrey's Rule test.

<sup>14</sup> A model factor array represents the aggregated ranking of statements for each factor, calculated as a weighted average of the loadings of each representative Q-sort. Factor arrays can be calculated in SPSS, but dedicated Q Methodology software such as PCQ and PQMethod greatly facilitates not

only calculation of arrays but also display and interpretation of results by producing comparative tables that include the Q statements.

<sup>15</sup> That is, the top 45 sorts from component 1 (23 positive and 22 negative sorts), 40 sorts from component 2, 20 from component 3, and 15 from component 4, or 120 sorts in all, were used to produce the factor arrays, or model Q sorts. PCQ does not accommodate larger datasets. Although SPSS uses principal components analysis and PCQ uses centroid factor analysis, the results are very similar. The 4-factor solution produced by PCQ with the 120 most representative Q sorts, as determined with SPSS, accounted for 116 of the 120 sorts used in this procedure.

<sup>16</sup> In other words, for each cross-loaded sort, we summed the squares of the loadings. Each sort that accounted for half or more of the variance among the four components was assigned to the respective component. This procedure for 'flagging' significant sorts is used in PQMethod.

<sup>17</sup> Barker & Brooks (1988), for example, found that along with fans of the original comic book, *Judge Dredd* was eagerly anticipated by fans of Sylvester Stallone (*Rambo*), science fiction, and the action-adventure genre.

<sup>18</sup> The next stage of our project involves a multilingual study of the film's international reception, which includes Spanish, French, German, Dutch, Flemish, and Danish translations of an initial English language Q survey. This expansion of the project was made possible thanks to a grant from the University of Waikato's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Contestable Research Fund, for which we are extremely grateful.