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Engaging with film characters: Empirical study on the reception of characters in *The Hobbit* films

Tanja Välisalo

Abstract: Characters are important for the audience reception of films, but little empirical research on actual audiences has been conducted on the topic of character reception. Are characters important for all audiences, and if not, what are the possible reasons and implications? How do audiences construct their engagement with characters? I argue that in addition to elements in Murray Smith's classic model, structure of sympathy, other elements should be included when studying character engagement. This article presents an empirical study on the reception of characters using the Nordic responses (4,879 total) drawn from the global audience survey on The Hobbit fantasy film trilogy (Jackson, An Unexpected Journey; The Desolation of Smaug; The Battle of the Five Armies). Based on the data, this study identifies two additional elements of character engagement. Firstly, aided by Anne Jerslev's model of emotions attached to fictional universes, the making of fictional characters is recognized as an essential element of character engagement, something audiences are drawn to. The second element is formed by connections outside the story, such as other works of fiction, conventions of the fantasy genre, and discussions and debates about the films. Including these contextual elements results in a more comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement with characters.

Keywords: characters, engagement, The Hobbit, audience reception

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Characters have a central role in the reception of fictional content. In films, characters are important in carrying the plot and building empathy in the viewers (Mikos et al.). While fictional characters in general and film characters specifically have been theorized by many researchers (e.g. Forster; Phelan; Smith; Michaels) and research on film stars has a long tradition as well (e.g. Dyer) there is still relatively little empirical research on the reception of film characters.

This article presents an empirical study on the audience reception of characters of the fantasy film trilogy *The Hobbit* (Jackson, *An Unexpected Journey*; Jackson, *The Desolation of Smaug*; Jackson, *The Battle of the Five Armies*). The multiple protagonists as well as the plethora of other characters create opportunities for diverse modes of character reception. *The Hobbit* film series also provides an excellent case for analysing the reception of film characters, because it is simultaneously an adaptation of a classic fantasy book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien as well as a prequel to the earlier film trilogy *The Lord of The Rings* (Jackson, *The Fellowship of the Ring*; *The Two Towers*; *The Return of the King*; from now on *LoTR*) also based on Tolkien's books. *The Hobbit* films are in fact a part of a "Tolkien universe" (Koistinen, Ruotsalainen & Välisalo 364) comprised of the aforementioned works as well other works by Tolkien, and the multitude of works and products created around them. The films, thus, provide audiences with several possible interpretational contexts, including the films themselves as well as the book they are based on, Tolkien universe, and the fantasy genre in film and fantasy literature.

I will approach the character reception of *The Hobbit* through the following questions: Are characters important for all audiences? How do audiences construct their engagement with characters? I seek answers to these questions by analysing survey data collected from the Nordic countries as part of a global audience study survey on the reception of *The Hobbit* film trilogy.¹

Theoretical approaches to character reception

When beginning to study audience reception of characters one cannot avoid the concept of *identification*. While the concept has been widely used to describe audience response to fictional characters, it has also been criticized by researchers, often because of its undefined nature and its function as "a blanket term covering too diverse a range of practices" (Rushton and Bettinson 165; cf. Cohen 254; Barker, "Identification" 354). An influential approach by Murray Smith (*Engaging* 75, 81–84) based on cognitive theory and textual analysis suggests replacing identification as a concept with *engagement*. Smith created what he called a "structure of sympathy" with three levels of engagement with characters: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. By *recognition*, Smith refers to the viewer's process of constructing a character, a necessary process for the other two levels: *alignment* consists of the ways the viewer gains access to the feelings, knowledge and actions of the character; *allegiance* refers to the viewer's moral evaluation of a character, how the viewer relates to the attitudes and values of the character. A viewer may align with a character but not necessarily ally with them and vice versa. Smith also differentiates between empathy and sympathy for a character: while sympathy is "acentral imagining," imagining from outside the character, empathy, "central imagining", consists of a range of mechanisms including involuntary reactions like the startle response, motor and affective mimicry of a character, and voluntary simulation of the character's perceived emotions (Smith, *Engaging* 96, 99, 103).

Smith's theory was an important step towards understanding different levels of reception of film characters. Still, excluding his mention of star system as an influence on character reception (*Engaging* 119, 193), Smith's model does not help us understand the impact of contextual factors outside the films themselves. Martin Barker ("Identification" 360) has criticized Smith's approach for dismissing the existence and meaning of spectator's previous knowledge or perceptions. Barker has called for retheorization of the audience-character relationship ("Identification" 374).

Anne Jerslev (207) has noted based on her empirical research on the audiences of *LoTR* film trilogy that, following Ed Tan's concepts of fiction emotions and artefact emotions, emotional engagement with films can be divided into two main categories of 1) emotions attached to a

¹ Barker, Martin, et al. The World Hobbit Project. Online-Survey. Aberystwyth, United Kingdom. 2014–2015.

fictional universe, and 2) emotions attached to the making of a fictional universe, with the former further divided into emotions attached to the narrative, and emotions attached to the *mise-en-scène*, that is, the visual realization of the films. Fiction emotions attached to the narrative, such as absorption in the story, or pity or joy for a character, are for Jerslev empathetic, and fiction emotions attached to the *mise-en-scène*, such as enjoyment of landscape, are non-empathetic; making of the fictional world is marked by mostly non-empathetic artefact emotions, such as admiration of technical skills (Jerslev 214–215). In her study, Jerslev (207) noted that enjoyment of films consisted of both kinds of emotional responses, empathetic and non-empathetic.

I argue that audiences conceptualize and structure their own responses to film characters in ways that are only partially mapped by Smith's theory, but can be understood more comprehensively by combining it to Jerslev's model. Even though Jerslev (215) associates characters with empathetic emotions, I will argue that there are also non-empathetic emotions connected to characters, thus resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement with them.

Character-oriented audiences

To delve into the reception of *The Hobbit* characters I used data collected from the audiences themselves. For this study, I used both quantitative and qualitative data gathered as part of *The World Hobbit Project*, a global audience study survey (see Appendix 1) on the reception of *The Hobbit* film trilogy. The survey gathered 36,000 responses from 48 different countries through opportunistic recruitment.² My analysis is based on the data from Nordic countries consisting of the responses from Finnish, Swedish and Danish participants.³ The data includes 1,191 Danish, 1,614 Finnish and 2,074 Swedish, altogether 4,879 responses.

In analysing the data, I used a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. To the written responses, I applied open coding, where codes are based on the data instead of existing theories or models, to identify different categories among the responses (Given 86). Coding was chosen due to its ability to reduce the massive amount of qualitative data. Coding also enabled descriptive statistical analysis of these responses, as well as cross tabulating between qualitative and quantitative data, the latter derived from the closed questions in the survey.

When studying the reception of *The Hobbit* characters in the survey data, the first step was to identify the respondents who found characters somehow meaningful for their viewing experience. I did this by analysing the responses to the question Q7 “Who was your favourite character, in the book or the films? Can you say why?” Altogether 4,075 participants (83.46%) mentioned favourite characters,⁴ typically one (55.93%) or two (17.24%). Even though a direct question is likely to elicit mentions of favourite characters, the amount of responses to this open-ended question along with the multitude of descriptive comments demonstrates the significance of characters for the respondents.

Are there differences between the respondents who chose a favourite character and those who did not? For now, I will call these two groups *character-oriented (CO)* and *non-character-oriented (NCO)* audiences. The names of these groups are not meant to indicate a comprehensive approach to characters by these respondents but rather represent a practical division of the data into

² More on the recruitment of respondents, see Barker & Mathijs.

³ Responses from Norway and Iceland were excluded from the data because of the small amounts of responses in comparison to other Nordic countries.

⁴ This includes respondents who, instead of or in addition to naming a particular character, mention groups of characters, such as elves, dwarves or hobbits. Altogether 561 respondents left the question unanswered, with 246 respondents expressing that all characters were their favourites, or that they could not choose a favourite character.

respondents who articulated attachment to characters and to those who did not. At the very least, these groups differ in relation to how important characters are for their engagement with *The Hobbit*.

Comparison of demographic data (see Table 1) reveals that somewhat more of CO respondents belonged to youngest age groups, that is, under 26 year-olds, in comparison to NCO respondents. A more significant difference can be found in connection to gender with a clear majority of “males” among the NCO respondents and a small majority of “females” among the CO respondents. When taking both age and gender into consideration “female” CO respondents were younger (56.57% in the youngest age groups) than “male” CO respondents (48.42%). These results could indicate that “male” audiences are less likely to find a particular character or characters meaningful.⁵

Table 1. Character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences by age and gender (N=4,879)

Age	Character-oriented (n=804)			Non-character-oriented (n=4,075)			Grand Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
6–15	5.74%	7.17%	6.53%	2.39%	3.97%	2.99%	5.94%
16–25	42.68%	49.40%	46.38%	40.84%	47.68%	43.41%	45.89%
26–35	22.30%	22.54%	22.43%	23.71%	23.18%	23.51%	22.61%
36–45	17.16%	11.09%	13.82%	16.53%	11.26%	14.55%	13.94%
46–55	8.47%	6.41%	7.34%	9.36%	10.60%	9.83%	7.75%
56–65	2.62%	2.76%	2.70%	5.38%	2.65%	4.35%	2.97%
66–75	0.98%	0.53%	0.74%	1.79%	0.66%	1.37%	0.84%
76–85	0.00%	0.04%	0.02%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.02%
86–95	0.00%	0.04%	0.02%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.02%
Over 95	0.05%	0.00%	0.02%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.02%

Ratings of the films were very similar by both, CO and NCO respondents, so attachment to a character does not seem to have a connection to how the respondent evaluated the films (see Figure 1). The situation is different when it comes to the book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. CO respondents were much more likely to have read the book and also more likely to have read the book more than once (48.25%) in comparison to NCO respondents (35.95%). CO respondents were also much more likely to rate the book *excellent* than NCO respondents (see Figure 2). These statistics indicate that being familiar with a character before seeing them on the screen had an influence on the importance of characters in the reception of *The Hobbit*. Similarly, CO respondents rated the *LotR* films as *excellent* more often in comparison to NCO respondents (see Figure 3). This difference could be the result of re-engaging with familiar characters but it can also echo the derived from re-entering a familiar fictional world.

⁵ The survey only gave options “male” and “female”, so the choice of gender may not coincide with the gender identity of all respondents.

Figure 1. Ratings of *The Hobbit* films by character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences. (N=4,879)

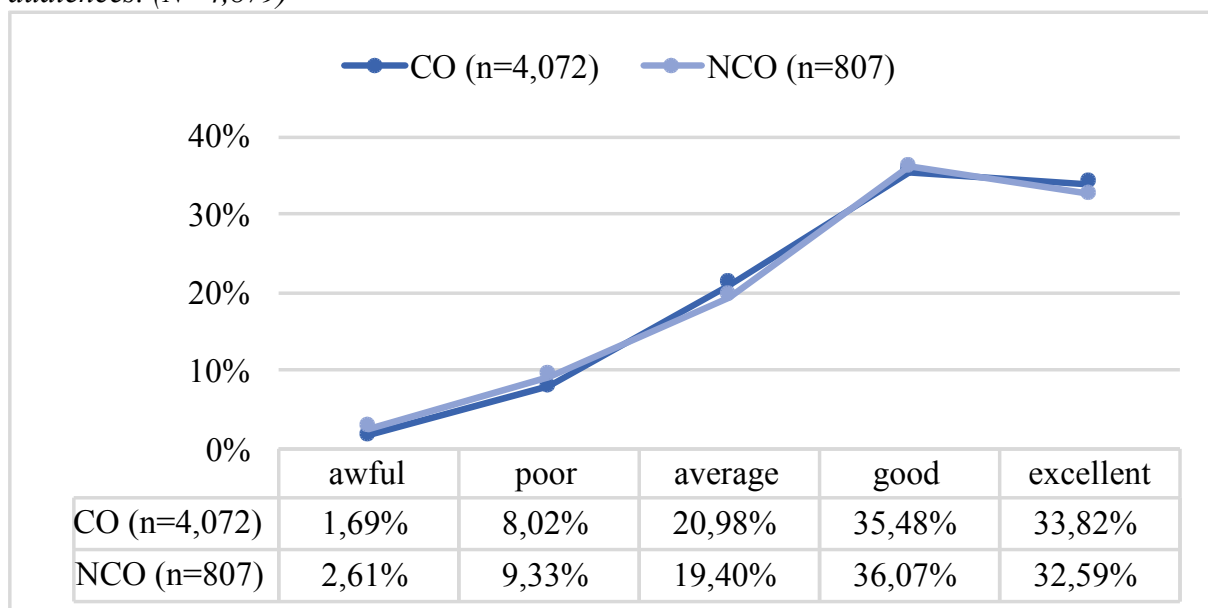


Figure 2. Ratings of *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* by character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences. (N=4,879)

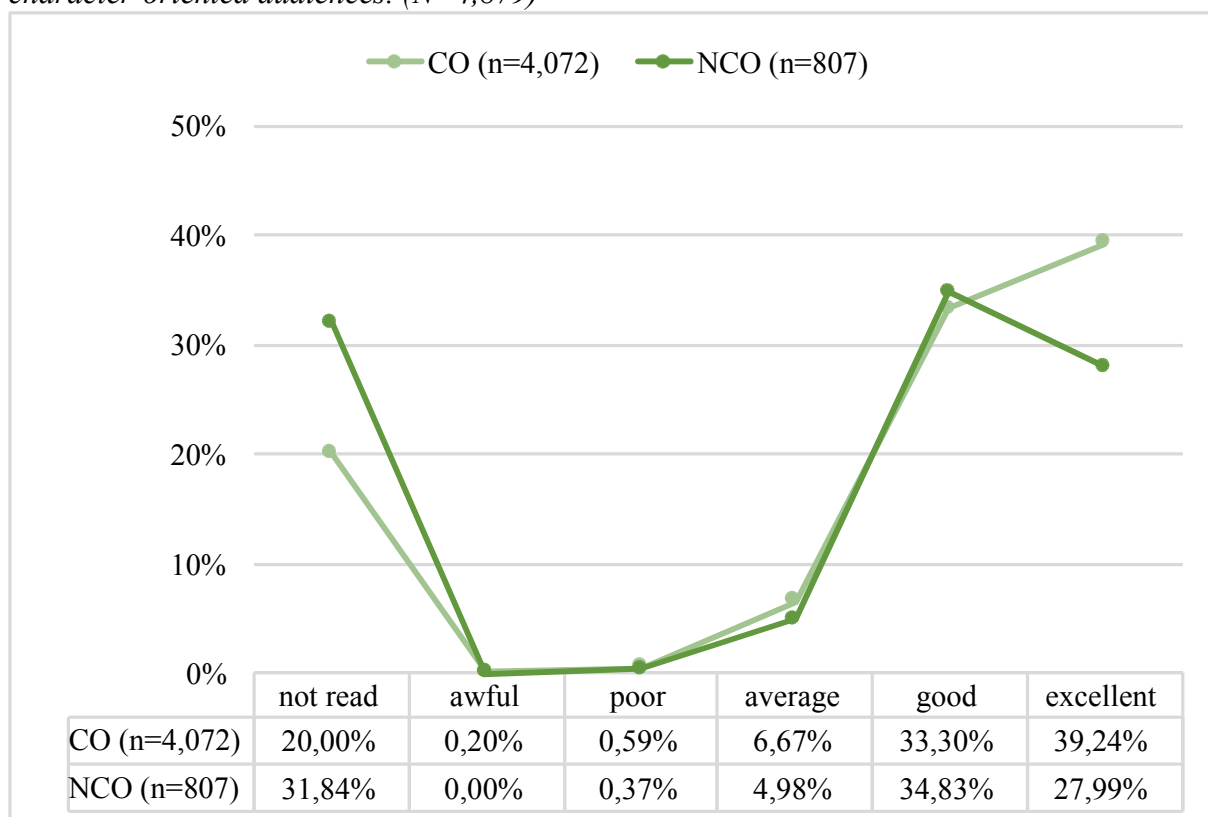
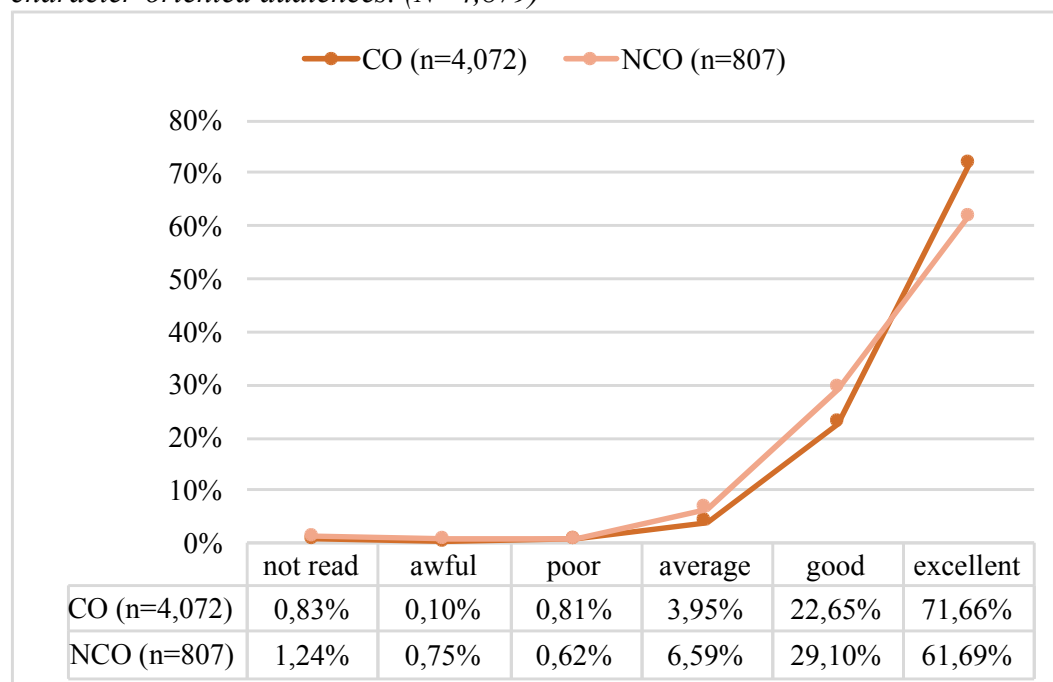


Figure 3. Ratings of *The Lord of the Rings* by character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences. (N=4,879)



CO and NCO respondents exhibited differences also in their engagement in other activities connected to the films. In the survey, the question pertaining to these activities (Q12) included several options: producing fan art, blogging, role-playing, writing fan fiction, collecting merchandise, seriously debating the films, commenting online, gaming, making fan videos, and visiting filming locations. These activities have been previously characterized as transmedial user practices, which, in addition to being mediated in some way, are defined by their ability to give new entrance points to the storyworld of *The Hobbit* (Koistinen et al. 357–358). The majority of CO respondents (67.09%) had taken part in some of these activities, while the same was true for less than half of NCO respondents (47.26%). The most popular activities were the same for both CO and NCO respondents, seriously debating the films and commenting online, as was the least popular activity, making fan videos. Commonly character-centric activities, such as producing fan art and writing fan fiction (Jenkins 235), were almost exclusive to CO respondents.

Making comparisons between CO and NCO respondents indicates that previous knowledge of the storyworld makes characters more meaningful for film audiences, whether or not they liked the film. In addition, participating in other activities was more common for CO respondents. These results show a connection between using multiple entrance points to the fictional storyworld and stronger engagement with characters, thus, making division of audiences into character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences plausible. Next, I will go on to analyse how *The Hobbit* audiences articulate their orientation towards characters.

Reception of *The Hobbit* characters

Who were the favourite characters of *The Hobbit* audiences and why? The characters mentioned most often were, not surprisingly, Bilbo (1933 respondents), the name character of the films and the book, a home-loving hobbit taken on an unexpected adventure, and the wizard Gandalf (1088), also

a central figure in *The Hobbit* book and films. In addition to them, twelve other characters were mentioned by a significant amount of respondents (see Table 2).

Table 2. Favourite characters in The Hobbit mentioned by at least 2% of the respondents (N=4072).

Character	Mentions	% of all respondents (N=4,879)
Bilbo	1933	39,62%
Gandalf	1088	22,30%
Thorin	476	9,76%
Legolas	352	7,21%
Smaug	332	6,80%
Kili	299	6,13%
Thranduil	241	4,94%
Tauriel	191	3,91%
Fili	178	3,65%
Gollum	169	3,46%
Beorn	145	2,97%
Bard	136	2,79%
Galadriel	124	2,54%
Radagast	103	2,11%

Explanations given by the respondents for their choice of favourite characters give insight into how audiences engage with characters and how they construct this engagement. The stated reasons for choosing a specific character as favourite are diverse, from short matter-of-fact mentions to long explanations, or something in between. Through data-driven analysis I identified eleven categories of character engagement.⁶ One mention of a character could include elements from several different categories. For example, the following was categorized into *physical and personality traits*, *embodiment of character type*, and *scenes and events*.

Legolas. As a forest elf he has qualities that people do not have such as a superior vision and hearing, he moves silently and is unmatched with his bow as well as in a close combat. That he as a prince chooses to leave the elf king to search his own way indicates character. That he also overcomes his own prejudices about dwarfs is a sign of characteristics of self-awareness and ability to change. It gives Legolas as a character even more life. (#16750)⁷

Empathy/sympathy category includes responses where an empathetic or sympathetic response to a character's emotions, actions or circumstance was explicitly indicated, often expressed as "identifying" with a character. This category is the largest in the data (2324 mentions of a

⁶ Similar categories were used by Martin Barker ("Identification"; "Legolas") in his earlier study on *The Lord of the Rings* audiences and they were used to iterate the categorization in this study: the categories of *actor/performance* and *technical creation* were separated whereas originally I used one category of *character realization* to describe these responses.

⁷ In this article, when I use citations from the survey data I will give an identifying number (#00000) for each respondent.

character), and Bilbo (848) is the character mentioned most often. Jyrki Korpua (245) has suggested that hobbits in Tolkien's works function as mediators between Middle-earth and the reader, familiarizing us with the world of fantasy. This is also evident in the responses, with Bilbo described as 'identifiable' or 'relatable'.

Best character is Bilbo, both in the book and the movie adaptation, as we can identify ourselves as him, unlike the wizards, dwarves and elves.... (#12261)

Typical responses in the category of *physical and personality traits* (2050 mentions) consist of lists of adjectives, for example "Gandalf is old, wise and therefore good" (#34607), or "Thorin was surly but good inside" (#7728). Physical traits are usually mentioned in concurrence with personality traits, while personality traits can be mentioned alone. Mentions of physical traits of the actors were categorized as mentions of *actor* or *performance*.

Actor/performance category (1040 mentions) holds references to the portrayal of a specific character in these films as well as references to a specific actor as a reason for the choice of favourite character. Mentions of Martin Freeman (424), the actor of Bilbo, dominate this category. When details of the acting style are mentioned, they fall in line with aspects commonly considered central in an actor's performance: gestures, facial expressions, and voice (Marcell 59). There are also mentions of the attractiveness of the actors. Barker has noted how among *LoTR* audiences mentions of sexual attractiveness were centered on the character of Legolas and how these responses often included mentions of the actor Orlando Bloom as well ("Identification" 372; "Legolas" 112). Among *The Hobbit* audiences similar engagement is evident in mentions of Legolas, but especially elven king Thranduil (Lee Pace) and dwarf Thorin, as in the description of Thorin as "an interesting character and, being played by [Richard] Armitage, very handsome" (#31889).

Character adaptation from the book (390 mentions) is connected to several different characters with comments ranging from very positive to very negative ones. Critical attitudes are connected to the reduced or expanded role of the character in the film adaptation or the perceived infidelity to Tolkien's work in the character design. For example, one in four respondents (34) naming Beorn as their favourite are disappointed in the small amount of screen time he has or the way his character looks in the films, whereas the adaptation of Thorin is mentioned (40) as a successful one with the character gaining depth or becoming more interesting.

References (313) to a *particular scene or event* are made in connection to both the book and the films. Respondents mention dialogue as a source of pleasure in certain scenes, such as the scene from the first film (*An Unexpected Journey*, 2012), where Bilbo and Gollum exchange riddles. Mentions of beautiful or "epic" (#857) fighting scenes by Legolas or Thorin are made as well. In addition to particular scenes, there are references to events unfolding over longer periods, such as the romance between dwarf Kili and elf Tauriel.

Character development is mentioned (231) almost exclusively in connection to Bilbo (181) and Thorin (36), whose journeys are seen as both physical and psychological. Bilbo's journey is described as that of finding himself or changing as a person for the better, and these narratives are sometimes accompanied by mentions of respondents identifying with him (13). Slightly darker descriptions concern Thorin following his goal of reclaiming his home, his descend to greed and madness, and his victory over his inner struggle.

Embodying a character type (220 mentions) is a category with responses describing a character as being a favourite due to how they represent a particular fictional character type. *Type* means both a cinematic stereotype such as a hero or a mentor that easily delivers the role of the character to the audience (Michael 10), and more often, a narrative stereotype from the fantasy genre (Schweinitz 283–284). The respondents were very aware of narrative stereotypes in fantasy and considered it a merit to the characters if they adhered to these models (Herman et al. 126) of

wizards, elves, dragons and other creatures. Responses in this category indeed included several different fantastical species, with most mentions for Gandalf (70), dragon Smaug (44) and Legolas (33).

Character's central role in the narrative (181 mentions) is a category consisting mostly of mentions of Bilbo (131) including simple statements of "he's the main character" (e.g. #8301). This category also includes descriptions of the story being told from his perspective, in both the book and the films. There are also similar mentions of Gandalf (40) but with a slightly different tone – he is characterized as someone who is more important to the story than he seems.

Mentions of favourite characters are sometimes accompanied with references to Tolkien's other works, for example *The Silmarillion* (1977). Indeed, many respondents referred (182) to the whole of *Tolkien universe*, formed by the books, the films and other media products. These mentions are frequently connected to Gandalf (63).

The most common references to Tolkien universe are mentions of *LoTR* films (180), mostly in connection with Legolas (55) and Gandalf (57). Respondents offer their familiarity with the characters as reason for liking them, or they express enjoying the new information about these characters provided in the *The Hobbit*. It is also worth noting that some respondents mention favourite characters who in fact do not appear in *The Hobbit* films or the book, even though they are created by Tolkien, such as Aragorn (23) and Tom Bombadil.⁸ References to *LoTR* also include comparisons between the protagonists of *LoTR* and *The Hobbit*. This indicates that the respondents consider these two trilogies strongly intertwined.

When *technical creation* (108 mentions) is given as a reason for choosing a favourite character, it usually refers to the animated characters of the films, Smaug in particular (65), but also to the make-up and design of the characters. The respondents might express criticism towards computer animation in general, but still feel that a particular animated character makes an exception.

Different interpretational contexts are actualized in these categories. *The Hobbit* films and the book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* form a single interpretational context, as seen in the categories of particular scenes or events, character development, central role in the narrative, physical and personality traits, and character adaptation from the book. The second context is Tolkien universe comprising of all his works and their adaptations and transmediations, evident in the categories of connections to *LoTR* and connections to Tolkien universe. The third context of fantasy film and fantasy genre is present in categories embodiment of character type and technical creation.

Constructing character engagement

How do theories of audience engagement reflect on *The Hobbit* audiences responses to characters? When considering Murray Smith's structure of sympathy, it is readily evident that different categories are connected to different levels of this structure. As described above, Smith's model of character engagement is constructed of three levels: recognition, alignment and allegiance, where recognition is the basis for either alignment, allegiance, or both. Recognition is, for Smith, a typically automated process of conceptualizing an individual agent that is continuous or re-identifiable; it is usually focused on physical traits, including body, face, and voice, and is sometimes aided by language, such as a character's name (*Engaging* 110, 116-118). Generic schemata concerning fantasy or adventure films may activate expectations about the characters (Rushton and Bettinson 170), which is evident in responses to the category of *embodying a*

⁸ Aragorn is mentioned in the third *Hobbit* film (*The Battle of the Five Armies*), where he is referred to by the name Strider.

character type, where conforming to a narrative stereotype was a sign of a plausible character and a source of pleasure for the respondents, as in the following quotations:

In both the book and the films I liked Smaug for its character. A traditional fantasy dragon, who likes treasures and riddles. (#25592)

Smaug because he is the best dragon I have seen in films. (#17218)

He is exactly as I imagined a dragon. (#16949)

While recognition is merely the foundation for other processes of engagement, in the audience perception it is clear that this particular form of recognition, based on former knowledge of the genre and its stereotypes, can be pleasurable for audiences.

Alignment with a character is produced by two features of the narrative, spatio-temporal attachment, which can be described as the way narration follows a particular character, and subjective access, access to the character's thoughts and emotions (Smith, *Engaging* 142). In the *The Hobbit* data, alignment is most obvious in the categories connected to the narrative: character's *central role in the narrative*, *character development*, and *particular scenes and events*. In the first category, the choice of Bilbo is explained by him being the main character, the story following him, in what is an obvious case of spatio-temporal attachment. One of the respondents was even very conscious of the personal effect of narration for their own reception: "I tend to sympathize with the main character" (#16765).

Smith (*Engaging* 187-189) considers allegiance to a character a result of a cognitive and emotional process, where the viewer morally evaluates a character and has an emotional response and a specific moral orientation towards the character. It is not always possible to distinguish *sympathetic* and *empathic* stances from the written responses. Indeed, for Smith, empathy and sympathy are intertwined in a sense that "we flit rapidly in and out of characters empathically, moving with imaginative agility through a variety of perspectives which are then aggregated and interrelated to produce the structure of sympathy" (Smith, "Further" 232). Nevertheless, the responses in this category are telling of an allegiance with these characters, for example:

Thranduil Oropherion, elven king of Mirkwood. I have a fascination of elves in general, and Thranduil truly captured me. He has a back story that captured my feelings, plus he is so fantastically gracious and beautiful. It was also interesting after *LotR* trilogy to see Legolas' family, home and backstory. (#7697)

Despite the usefulness of the structure of sympathy in understanding character engagement and how actual audiences construct it, some of the responses to *The Hobbit* survey have elements not fully addressed in Smith's model. Returning to Jerslev's (214-215) model of emotional responses to films sheds light on these elements. The model can be applied to characters, resulting in a division of 1) emotions attached to a fictional character, both a) empathetic and b) non-empathetic, and 2) emotions attached to making of a character, mostly non-empathetic in nature. Empathetic emotions are defined in more detail by Smith – in fact, Jerslev uses "empathetic" in a way that encompasses Smith's "sympathetic" and "empathic" responses, but it is her introduction of non-empathetic emotions that is especially valuable here. One category of *The Hobbit* responses specifically is better understood by applying Jerslev's model rather than through Smith's phenomenology, and that is the category of *technical creation*:

Thanks to wonderful CGI (it's not all bad after all) Smaug was just as magnificent and massive as I had always imagined him to be. (#30870)

Smaug. Amazingly made in the film, and really good voice acting. (#8265)

In the film my favourite was Thranduil even though his role was small, because I think Lee Pace is a good actor and this character's make-up and character design in general were a perfect success. (#32844)

The emotions attached to Smaug and Thranduil in these examples are non-empathetic in nature. They are not emotions born from recognizing, mimicking or responding to the character's emotions but are directed to the "spectacle" of the film (Jerslev 214), and to the creation of that spectacle. Non-empathetic emotions manifest as admiration for the skills needed in technical creation of characters and character design, as well as for the results of those skills. These responses contradict Jerslev's claim of characters being solely connected to empathetic emotions.

Actor/performance category is clearly connected to making of the character and shows the effects of the star system – but perhaps not quite as clearly as Smith described it: "the process by which we evaluate characters and respond to them emotionally is often framed or informed by our evaluation of the star personae of the stars who perform these characters" (Smith, *Engaging* 193). Actor or performance is most often mentioned in connection to the most popular characters, Bilbo (424 mentions) and Gandalf (172). Also in the responses to question (Q3) where the respondents could choose an actor they particularly liked as a reason for seeing the films, their actors were mentioned most often, Martin Freeman (Bilbo; 11.82% of respondents) and Ian McKellen (Gandalf; 10.96%). Even though both of these actors are well known, respondents do not mention their other works or describe their star personae, except for brief mentions of liking the actor already before *The Hobbit*. Indeed, there were overall very few mentions of other films or works by *The Hobbit* actors, in addition to *LotR*. Instead, the mentions of actors focused on admiration for their performance, also non-empathetic in nature, as in this response: "I must praise Richard Armitage for his character acting of Thorin, it is not easy to play crazy" (#17364).

Character adaptation from the book is the third category connected to making of character, and includes, as well as in the previous ones, evaluating the skills of the creator, be it an actor, director, or writer, named in some responses but merely implicated in others. Respondents express emotions such as admiration for the creators – or disappointment when the adaptation of a book character they liked failed to fill their expectations in the films. Even though these responses are analysed as non-empathetic, they can be as passionate as the responses in other categories (Jerslev 213).

Emotions connected to characters also derive from connections outside the text. Characters in *The Hobbit* are adaptations from *LotR* films as well as from Tolkien's book, and this forms the first, most obvious connection. The most popular characters Bilbo and Gandalf were familiar to audiences from *LotR*, and Gandalf, Legolas and elf Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) were even portrayed by the same actors. Legolas makes an intriguing example as those mentioning him were exceedingly generous in evaluating the films, with 62.39% giving an *excellent* rating to *The Hobbit* (all CO respondents 33.84%), and as many as 40.17% had not read the book (all CO respondents 20.00%). Attachment to Legolas originates exceptionally strongly from *LoTR* films and effects audiences' perceptions of the character in as well as well their engagement with *The Hobbit* films in general.

Other *connections to Tolkien universe* include references to narratives, places, and names not mentioned in *The Hobbit* films or the book. Using these enabled respondents to distinguish themselves as Tolkien connoisseurs, as this respondent referring to Gandalf as a favourite character without actually mentioning the character's name: "Mithrandir - for having patience with mortals and elves" (#2763).

Another manifestation of outside contexts occurs in the category of *embodying a character type*. Connections to the fantasy genre as well as awareness of narrative stereotypes of the genre are evident in this category. In addition to the pleasures of recognition mentioned above, further

connections to narrative stereotypes outside fantasy genre were significant for the respondents. Tauriel, a new character created for the films, was criticized for representing the stereotypical female role of a love interest and becoming subordinate to the romance plot. Criticism was evident in question (Q9) “Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films?”, where 401 respondents (8.39%) mentioned Tauriel. Even though genre-specific character stereotypes were welcomed by the audiences, this stereotype was seen as a negative one, foreign to the fantasy genre. It differs from the narrative stereotypes described above in that it occurs also outside of the fantasy genre, reflecting the everyday lives of audiences (Schweinitz 287–288). The negative perception was strengthened by Tauriel being a new character created for the films, which was also commented on by the respondents. The case is a reminder of the existence of negative emotions connected to character engagement. Nevertheless, altogether 191 respondents also mentioned Tauriel as a favourite character:

Tauriel was a welcome addition to the macho crowd, and a wonderful role model for girls watching the film. (#1080)

Respondents specifically mentioned that the films needed strong female figures and the story should be “updated” (e.g. #34433). Doing so they drew from cultural discussions of gender representation in films as well as indicated comparisons between *The Hobbit* and other films, thus, connecting their reception of characters to contexts beyond narrative stereotypes of the genre discussed earlier. Even the respondents mentioning Tauriel as favourite were often quite aware of the general criticism towards her addition to the story. This brings forth the final contextual element, *discussions and debates* about the characters.

Even though social context undoubtedly influences all audience-character relationships, specific debates of the fan community are mentioned repeatedly in *The Hobbit* data: the addition of Tauriel and Legolas to the story, the romance between Tauriel and Kili, and the handsome youthful appearances of some of the dwarves. The mentions of these debates are not surprising considering that character-centric user practices, such as writing fan fiction and creating fan art, have a strong social element, being based in fan communities and their interpretative practices (Jenkins 156, 248–249; Kaplan 151). Indeed, the significance of social context in connection to character reception needs further research in the future.

Conclusions

To understand audience engagement with *The Hobbit* films I analysed the responses of nearly 5,000 Nordic respondents to a reception study survey. Firstly, I identified segments of character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences in the respondents, with the former being the majority in this data. Those mentioning a favourite character were more often familiar with *The Hobbit* book or other parts of the Tolkien universe and more likely to participate in other activities connected to the films, such as commenting online or writing fan fiction. Even the respondents who gave low ratings to *The Hobbit* films were more likely to name a favourite character, if they had enjoyed other parts of Tolkien universe. The results indicate that characters are not equally important to all audiences, but vast storyworlds and transmedia universes increase engagement with characters. Further analysis of the actual processes is needed in order to understand how characters are positioned in audience engagement with fictional worlds. Indeed, the object of transmedia research has in recent years moved from transmedia production towards transmedia audiences (e.g. Evans; Harvey). The results of this study pose the question of whether character engagement described here is perhaps unique to fantasy film or transmedial production, and is character engagement different in nature or intensity in, for example, other film genres or stand-alone films with original scripts and characters.

Audiences construct their engagement with film characters in ways that are only partially mapped by Smith's structure of sympathy, but can be understood more comprehensively using Jerslev's conceptualization of emotional attachment, which includes non-empathetic emotions. In *The Hobbit* data this is evident in emotions connected to *making of characters*, that is, technical creation, character design, actor's performance, and character adaptation. *Contexts outside the text*, including connections to *LotR* films, the whole of Tolkien universe, narrative stereotypes, and fan communities, provide another new element to character reception. These results support Barker's demand for retheorization of the audience-character relationship to encompass diverse forms of character engagement. Indeed, further research should include deeper analysis of these contextual elements of character engagement to form a comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement with characters. Research should also look more in depth into the concept and cultural practices of non-character-oriented audiences. Who are the audiences who could not choose a favourite character? Does their engagement with films differ from that of other audiences?

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Appendix

THE WORLD HOBBIT AUDIENCE PROJECT

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

- Awful
- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

2. Can you sum up your response to the films in your own words?

3. Please choose *up to three* reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films, from among the following:

- I wanted to experience their special features (eg, high frame rate, 3D)
- I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films
- I love Tolkien's work as a whole
- I like to see big new films when they come out
- I wanted to be part of an international experience
- I love fantasy films generally
- There was such a build-up, I had to see them
- I was dragged along
- I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like
- I love Peter Jackson's films
- No special reason
- An actor that I particularly like was in them:

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Richard Armitage • Benedict Cumberbatch • Christopher Lee • Ian McKellen • Aidan Turner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cate Blanchett • Martin Freeman • Evangeline Lilly • James Nesbitt • Hugo Weaving | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orlando Bloom • Ian Holm • Sylvester McCoy • Jeffrey Thomas • Another? Please specify: |
|---|---|--|

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

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's story • Prequel / sequel • Multimedia franchise • Action-adventure • Stunning locations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairytale • Star attraction • Family film • Peter Jackson movie • Coming-of-age story | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World of fantasy • Part of Tolkien's legend-world • Digital novelty cinema • Literary adaptation • Hollywood blockbuster |
|--|---|--|

If you are unsure what we mean by one of these, hover your cursor over it, to see a short explanation.

Is there another? Please specify:

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

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

6. Can you tell us why you've made these choices in Questions 4 and 5?

7. Who was your favourite character, in the book or the films? Can you say why?

8. What element of the films impressed or surprised you most? Can you say why?

9. Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films? Can you say why?

10. Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?

11. Do you think there are people who would share your ideas about *The Hobbit*? What are they like?

12. Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • Producing fan art | • None of these |
| • Role-playing | • Blogging |
| • Collecting merchandise | • Writing fan fiction |
| • Commenting online | • Seriously debating the films |
| • Making fan videos | • Gaming |

- Visiting filming locations

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

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

14. How important was it for you to follow stories and debates around the films?

- Not at all
- Slightly
- Reasonably
- Very
- Extremely

15. Which stories or debates have most interested you?

--

16. What did you think of the *Lord of the Rings* films overall?

- Not seen
- Awful
- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

17. Have you read *The Hobbit*?

- Had it read to me
- Read once
- Read more than once
- Still reading
- Not read at all
- Planning to read

18. If you did, what did you think of it?

- Not read
- Awful
- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

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

	Original cinema release	Dubb- ed	TV	Sub- titled	IMAX	3D	48 fps	DVD/ Blu-Ray	Down- loaded	Stream on demand	Mobile device	Not seen
Unexpected Journey												
Desolation of Smaug												
There and Back Again												

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

Cinema release	IMAX	Home theatre system	DVD/Blu-Ray	TV	Stream on demand	Downloaded	Mobile device	Doesn't matter

21. Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?

Finally, a few simple facts about yourself:

22. In which year were you born? [Pull-down year list, beginning 2014 back to 1915]

23. Are you:

- Male
- Female

24. Which of the following comes closest to describing your position?

- Student
- Professional
- Home/child-care
- Service work
- Clerical/administrative
- Industrial labour
- Agricultural labour
- Unemployed
- Creative
- Executive
- Self-employed
- Retired

25. What level of education have you reached?

- Primary school
- University degree
- Secondary school
- Higher qualification
- Vocational qualification

26. What are your top three most common cultural activities? They can be of any kind – sports, reading, gardening, surfing the internet, whatever.

27. What are your three all-time favourite cultural or media experiences or products? Feel free to name any kind that you like.

28. What is your country of residence? PULL-DOWN LIST

29. What is your nationality? PULL-DOWN LIST

SUBMIT