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The World Hobbit Project in Finland: Audience responses and transmedial user practices

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Abstract:

This article examines audience engagement with *The Hobbit* fantasy film trilogy as a participatory and transmedial experience. To do so, we use the data collected by The World Hobbit Project in order to investigate the transmedial user practices of the Finnish audience of the trilogy. We will, firstly, look at what kinds of transmedial user practices – and transmedia users – emerge from our data. Secondly, we will ask the following questions: How do transmedia users receive and experience the films? What are the meanings assigned to The Hobbit films and the fantasy texts and user practices related to them, and what do these meanings tell of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy? Doing so, we use both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Key words: transmedial user practices, transmediality, fantasy, adaptation, Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, audience experiences

Introduction

In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins famously coined the term ‘transmedia storytelling’, which he dubs a story that ‘unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’ (Jenkins 2006, 95–96; see also Jenkins 2013). In this article, we examine the audience engagement (i.e. how audience members experience the films and take part in user practices around them) with *The Hobbit* fantasy film trilogy (Jackson, USA & New Zealand 2012; 2013; 2014) as a participatory and transmedial experience. As research material, we use the data collected by The World Hobbit Project¹, more specifically the Finnish responses to the online survey on *The Hobbit* films.

The aim of the article is to investigate what we call transmedial user practices (i.e. audience practices that are somehow transmedial in nature) of the Finnish audience of *The*

Hobbit films. In Jenkins' definition, *The Hobbit* film trilogy and the Tolkien book (*The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, 1937, henceforth *The Hobbit*) they are based on would not constitute a transmedia storyworld as such as they do not together form the unfolding elements of a particular story. In fact, the films are more like Tolkien's story retold. *The Hobbit* film trilogy can, indeed, be seen as an adaptation of Tolkien's book, a prequel to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (henceforth *LotR*) films (USA & New Zealand 2001; 2002; 2003) and simply as a series of films, more or less independent of other works of cinema or literature (see also Harvey 2015, 63–92). For the audience, engaging with *The Hobbit* book, films and other related fantasy texts and user practices may, nevertheless, be a transmedial experience. To put it simply, the term transmedial user practices therefore refers to the way audience members access *The Hobbit* story (or more broadly, *The Hobbit* universe) via different mediums, which also has an effect on how they experience *The Hobbit* films.

The focus on user practices therefore blurs the line between the original and its adaptation – as well as adaptation and transmedia, at least on the level of audience experiences and practices. Jenkins (1992) along with John Fiske (1992) has been among the researchers promoting the change of paradigm in audience research from how the media affect audiences to how audiences actively construct meaning. In the present article, we therefore look at not only the transmedial user practices but also the meanings that these fantasy texts and practices related to *The Hobbit* films seem to have for the respondents of the survey – and how these meanings are constructed. We will, firstly, look at how many audience members have engaged with the transmedial user practices available to *The Hobbit* trilogy, such as writing fan fiction or commenting online. Secondly, we will ask the following questions: How do transmedia users receive and experience the films? What are the meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* films and the fantasy texts and user practices related to them, and what do these meanings tell of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy?

Transmedial User Practices: Theories, Methods and Definitions

In order to answer the research questions stated above, we use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. To be more precise, we examined the answers given by the Finnish respondents to specific multiple choice questions in the survey and performed descriptive statistical analyses of this data. In addition, we used the method of thematic analysis to record recurring themes in the responses given to open-ended questions and to categorise the responses according to these themes. In the course of the initial analysis a broad range of themes were found. A closer analysis was then conducted on the themes related to transmedial user practices and the experiences and meanings assigned to the fantasy texts and practices connected to *The Hobbit* films. Our analysis is based on the responses given by a specific group that had, in their answers to one question in the survey, chosen at least one of the activities that we call transmedial user practices. This question was 'Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?' (question twelve in the survey, henceforth Q12). The options given were the following:

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

Even though the options are phrased as ‘other activities’ instead of ‘transmedial user practices’, we argue that these activities can be considered transmedial. On some closed-ended questions we also made comparisons between the respondents that chose an activity in Q12 – who we call transmedia users – and the rest of the Finnish respondents to provide background information.

Before going further, it is necessary clarify how we understand the terms ‘transmedia’ and ‘transmedial user practices’ in this article. In addition to Jenkins’ definition of transmedia storytelling, another way to understand transmedia is through the concept of memory, as does Colin B. Harvey (2015). For Harvey, memory is what distinguishes adaptation from transmedia storytelling. Whereas, ‘[f]rom the perspective of authorial intent’, adaptations tend to remember their so called original versions vertically, meaning that memories travel only from the source material to the adaptation, in ‘transmedia storytelling memories can travel back and forth across the horizontal axis’ (Harvey 2015, 91). However, what is at play in creating transmedia worlds is not only how transmedia expressions remember each other in the level of the narrative, but also the memories of the storyworld these expressions evoke in the audience (Harvey 2015, 3). Thus, when audiences engage with transmedia worlds, their past memories affect their engagement with the text at hand and they take with them their memories of different parts of these worlds (Harvey 2005, 3).

When one considers audiences instead of authorial intent, the process of remembering is also what can blur the boundaries between adaptation and transmedia, at least on the level of audience practices and experiences (see also Harvey 2005, 91–92). Indeed, while reading the responses to the *Hobbit* survey we noticed that even though many respondents interpreted *The Hobbit* films as adaptations, many also experienced them as part of, or in relation to, a broader storyworld. In this sense, the memories of *The Hobbit* book, or of Tolkien’s work more generally, may affect the interpretation of the films – and do, indeed, affect, as our analysis will show. This also makes the audience experiences of *The Hobbit* films transmedial, in the sense of the experience being mediated through and affected by content on different mediums. When it comes to the memories of audiences, these memories can also go both ways between *The Hobbit* book and films, for example, if one has seen the adaptations first and only afterwards read the book.

Thus, audience engagement seems to go beyond experiencing *The Hobbit* trilogy as an adaptation, inviting various transmedial user practices. Furthermore, this raises questions about the definitions of transmedia storytelling and transmedial worlds. Lisbeth

Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2004, 409) have introduced the concept of transmedial worlds defining them as ‘abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms’. They emphasise the importance of a shared mental image instead of particular material products (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 409; 2014, 296). In other words, the audience’s shared mental images or memories are what create a broader transmedial world, not so much in the sense of transmedia as storytelling as creating a coherent storyworld, but as an abstract construction binding together different productions and practices across the media and beyond it. In their ongoing work with Professor Raine Koskimaa at the University of Jyväskylä, some of the authors of this article (Koistinen and Välisalo) have also been theorising a concept of transmedia universe that takes into account the way users contribute to the construction of a transmedia universe that can consist of multiple worlds. Thus, we would claim that a broader *Hobbit* universe emerges through audience practices and experiences from our data. We will return to this concept later on.

It is therefore the starting point of this article that audience engagement with *The Hobbit* trilogy may be a transmedial experience including practices such as reading the book, watching the films, and accessing other media products and platforms – for example playing games, visiting filming locations or writing fan fiction. Even though some of the practices are non-mediated in the traditional sense, we use the term media in a similar manner to Christy Dena (2009, 56–57), who, drawing on Ryan (2003), includes material objects that are considered mediums in disciplines such as the arts in her concept of ‘transmedia practice’. Thus we consider, for example, board games and merchandise as mediums.

Moreover, we argue that user practices that are not clearly connected to any particular medium, such as visiting filming locations, can nevertheless be said to include interaction with media. It can be argued that visiting filming locations always requires some sort of information gathering via the media (for instance, visiting online sites for information on these venues). From the perspective of the audience, filming locations can also be seen as belonging to the fictional world, hence visiting them is an act of ‘inhabiting the world’ (Hills 2002, 144, 151).² Role-playing can also be interpreted to include playing in different contexts such as tabletop role-playing games, live action role-playing and different digital role-playing games and environments. Even though the first two are non-digital they usually involve media-related practices such as creation and use of game scripts or manuals, and character sheets or character descriptions. Furthermore, these practices are transmedial also in the sense that they contribute to the understanding of and engagement with the fictional narratives that they are connected to; in this case, *The Hobbit* films.

In relation to transmedial user practices, a specifically problematic option in Q12 is the one considering debating the films, as the survey does not specify, whether these debates take place on a media platform or in a face-to-face setting. Therefore, the option ‘Seriously debating the films’ can also be connected to a medium. Even though there is an option called ‘Commenting online’, this does not encompass all online discussions (as there is a difference between posting a comment and engaging in discussion), and online

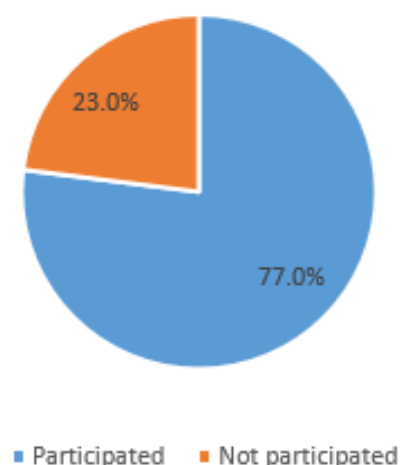
discussions thus cannot be excluded from the option ‘Seriously debating the films’. Therefore, this option also cannot be excluded from our list of transmedial user practices.

In our analysis of the survey data, we also discovered that these participatory practices that are not clearly related to any particular media were often accompanied by practices that were connected to media – for example, this was always the case with visiting filming locations and often in the case of debating the films. Indeed, while participatory culture as a phenomenon expands beyond popular culture to areas such as political, educational or economic cultures, the common thread in all of these is the presence of media and technology (see e.g. Jenkins 2006, 170). In the following, we will, firstly, present the basic information on the Finnish transmedia users of *The Hobbit* films (i.e. respondents of Q12), also comparing it to the rest of the Finnish respondents, and the transmedial user practices that emerge from our data and, secondly, move onto a more sophisticated analysis of the experiences and meanings connected to *The Hobbit* films and their broader universe as expressed in our data.

***The Hobbit* Films and Transmedial User Practices**

In order to grasp what kinds of transmedial user practices – and transmedia users – emerge from our data, we examined how many of the Finnish participants chose at least one of the options in Q12, excluding the option ‘none of these’. Doing so, we found that 1242 (77.0%) out of the 1614 Finnish respondents indicated that they had participated in at least one activity (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Participation in transmedial user practices



It thus appears that the Finnish audience of the *Hobbit* films has rather actively taken part in transmedial user practices. Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that it is possible that the ‘active’ or participatory part of the audience is also more likely to participate in the collection of this sort of survey data. From these 1242 transmedia users 70% (869 respondents) had chosen the option ‘female’ and 30% (373 respondents) had chosen ‘male’.³ The ratio between these two genders is similar to that of the whole Finnish data as

from all of the 1614 respondents (including those who did not choose any activities in Q21) 33.2% were male and 68.8% female. This seems to suggest that women might be more willing to participate in the collection of survey data. Of those respondents who did not take part in transmedial user practices (i.e. did not participate in any of the activities in Q12), a much larger share was male (43.8%). It should also be noted here that the survey only gave these two options for gender, which may have limited the scope of respondents or affect the choice that the respondents have had to make considering choosing their gender in the survey – two of the respondents in our research material (i.e. the transmedia users) also criticised the survey of this limited range of options.

The most common occupation chosen amongst the transmedia users was student: 57.6% of transmedia users indicated this to be the case (**Figure 2**). This was also the most common option (40.9%) chosen amongst the respondents who did not participate in any transmedial user practices (other activities in Q12), but in this group also more than one in every five respondents (23.1%) had chosen ‘professional’. Moreover, 97.0% of transmedia users answered they have completed at least secondary school, which was almost the same as for those who did not participate in transmedial user practices (97.8%). The age of the transmedia users varied, but most commonly (72.4%) the respondents answered that they were between 16–35 years old (Figure 3), which was also true for the respondents who did not take part in transmedial user practices (61.6%).

Figure 2: Occupations of the transmedia users

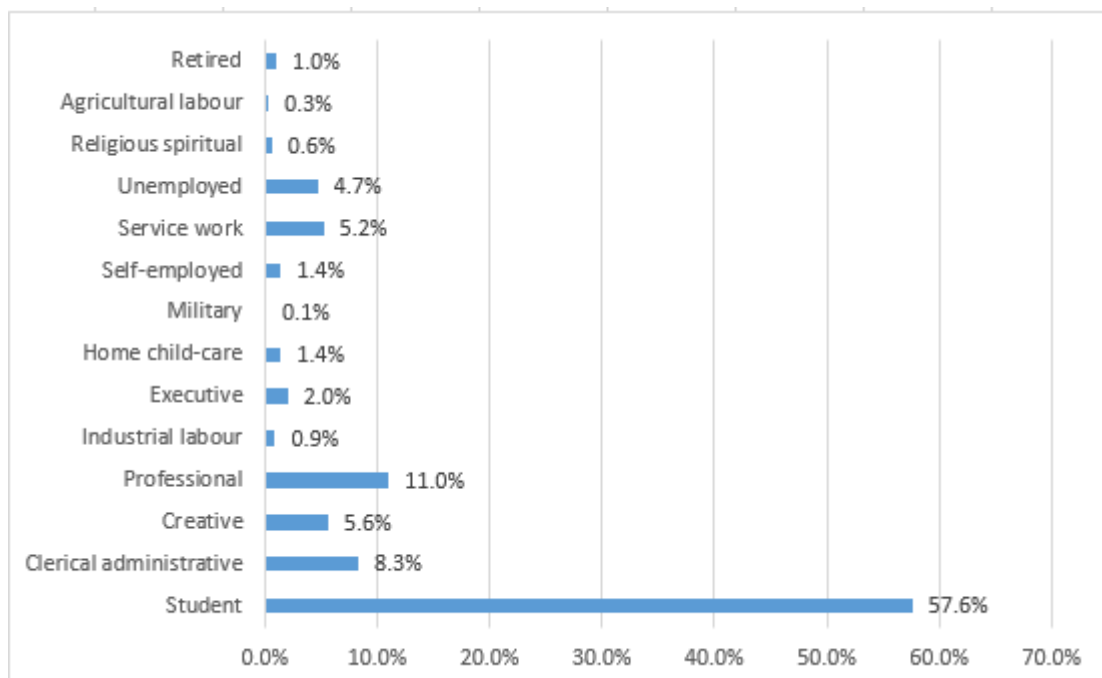
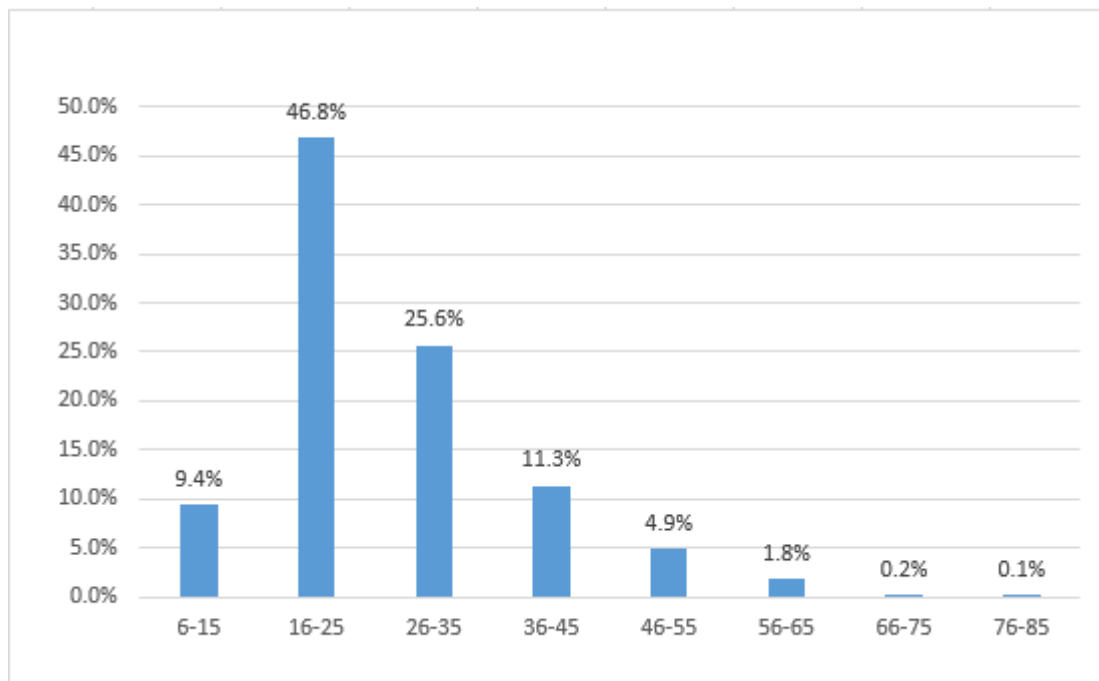


Figure 3: Age distribution of the transmedia users

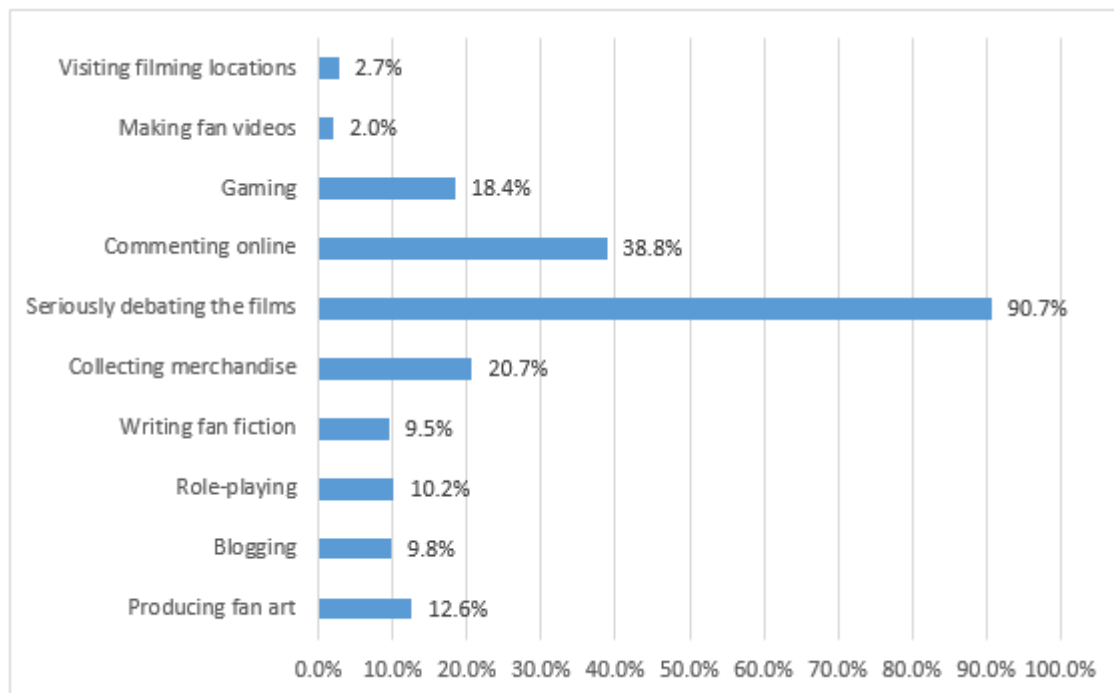


We also examined how frequently certain activities were chosen by the transmedia users. From the ten options presented in the beginning of this section (**Figure 4**), the respondents were able to choose as many as they liked. The most popular activity chosen was ‘Seriously debating the films’, chosen by 1127 respondents – 90.0% of those respondents who chose any activity at all (**Figure 4**). Here it should be noted that the translation of the Finnish survey may have had an effect on how many respondents chose this option, as the Finnish translation ‘Elokuvista keskusteleminen’ roughly translates back to English as ‘discussing the films’, which has a far more casual feel to it than ‘seriously debating’. This was also the option most commonly chosen alone as 467 respondents chose only this activity. The second most frequently chosen activity was ‘commenting online’ (38.8%). Other popular activities were collecting merchandise (20.7%) and gaming (18.4%).

It is important to note that Q12 also leaves out many transmedial user practices. As one of the respondents argued, especially the seemingly more passive modes of participation were not offered among the choices:

Since there doesn't seem to be a comments -slot anywhere, I think I should also comment about question 12 here. Why on earth is there no ‘reading fan fiction’ or ‘watching fan vids / fan art’ there as an option? The amount of fans who don't create fanworks but enjoy it is much bigger than the ones who do write/draw/create. The lack of this option feels weird to me, especially since while I do write fanfiction, I have lots of friends who do read it but don't write it themselves. [#34095]

Figure 4: The activities that the transmedia users participated in.



Another respondent [#22654] also mentioned appreciating other fans' creative work. Indeed, in addition to the options in Q12, transmedia users mentioned many other activities elsewhere in the survey such as following the production of the films through different media, participating in the queuing for the film tickets, which became events of their own, watching making-of documentaries and interviews, attending fan conventions and meetups, and cosplaying. They also mentioned specific merchandise such as books written after *The Hobbit* films and gaming on specific platforms, such as playing PC games, console games and board games. Two of the respondents even had a Middle-earth themed tattoo, making their own bodies the medium where the transmedial user practice takes place (see also Dena 2009, 62–63). Another transmedial user practice emerged in the responses to the question inquiring if the respondents followed events or debates⁴ connected to the films (Q15) – altogether over half of transmedia users (51.6%) mentioned particular events or debates they found interesting and either participated in themselves or followed through different media.

What was interesting is that the transmedial user practices that the respondents mentioned in their answers to the open-ended questions included activities that were connected to *The Hobbit* book or Tolkien's work more generally, making it visible how audiences participation with Tolkien's world had been participatory – or transmedial – even before the films, at least for some. These activities included learning how to write runes, learning the Elvish language, analysing Tolkien's world with friends or playing games, from which at least gaming can be considered a transmedial user practice. Indeed, as an interesting example of transmedial user practices related to gaming, one of the respondents

[#34016] wrote that his father had made a board game based on Tolkien's world. Also, some respondents mentioned watching early Hobbit stories, such as a play based on the *LotR* book made by Finnish theatre group Ryhmäteatteri as well as their television series *Hobitit* (*The Hobbits*, 1993) – also a transmedial user practice. One respondent [#34289] even said that their family still sings the songs of that theatre piece, highlighting a sort of continuity in their user practices.

To recap, our analysis shows that a significant amount of the Finnish respondents had taken part in what we call transmedial user practices; in other words, they have somehow engaged with *The Hobbit* trilogy via different mediums and practices beyond the film trilogy. This would suggest that the way that the Finnish audience engaged with *The Hobbit* films is largely transmedial. However, as the most popular option chosen was 'Seriously debating the films', there is also the problem of not knowing, if the discussions have, in fact, included access to a medium. Because of the possibility of discussions taking place online, the option 'Seriously debating the films' cannot be excluded from the transmedial user practices, either.

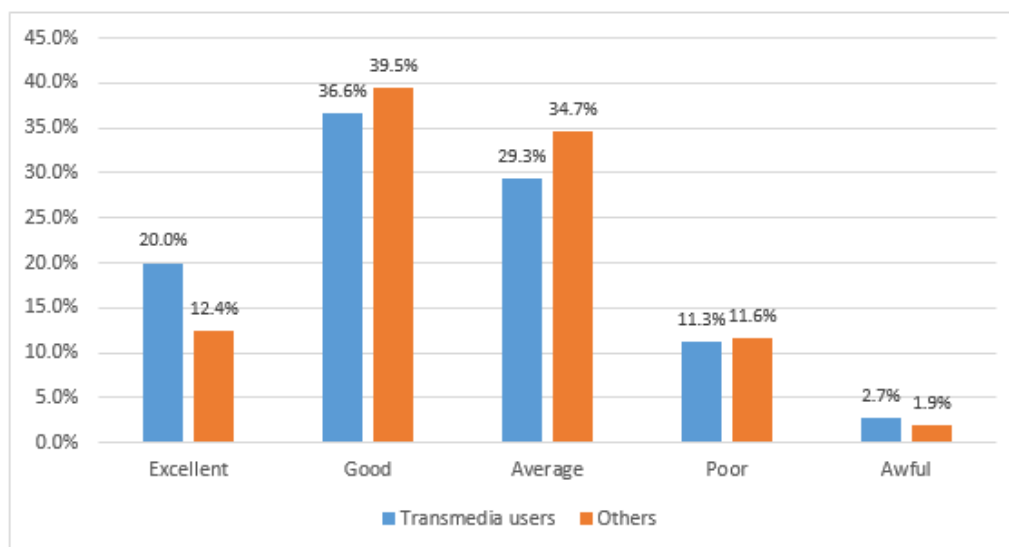
The prevalence of the transmedial user practices in our data is indicative of a larger change in media audiences, where practices previously embraced by fan communities have spread to larger audiences and have been recognised by production companies as well (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 122; Jenkins 2006, 246–248). In other words, the fact that the majority of Finnish respondents did take part in transmedial user practices implies that these have become more common in the mediascape of today. However, it could also imply transmedia users are more prone to answer to surveys – a practice that is, indeed, transmedial. What is interesting is also that in the answers to the open-ended questions, practices related to *The Hobbit* book or Tolkien's other works were also revealed, making visible practices that the users engaged with even before the films. Our research also shows that most of the transmedia users were women between the ages 16–35 who had completed secondary school and were currently students. It seems that women might take part in transmedial user practices more often than men while there were no similar differences to be perceived in connection to age, education or occupation, but due to the small amount of respondents in the group that did not choose any of the transmedial user practices, generalizations cannot be made at this stage. Further research would therefore be needed in order to examine what these findings tell of how not only gender but also age, education and occupation affect transmedial user practices.

Experiencing *The Hobbit* Universe

In order to answer the second research question on how transmedia users receive and experience *The Hobbit* films, we examined how the respondents rated the films and how they articulated their experiences with them – or with the broader range of fantasy texts and transmedial user practices related to them. We discovered that transmedia users tended to rate the films excellent (on the scale of awful to excellent) more frequently than other respondents (i.e. those Finnish respondents who had not participated in any of the

activities mentioned in Q12), but with the lower ratings there weren't significant differences between transmedia users and other respondents (**Figure 5**). This can possibly be explained by the composition of respondents, since it is likely that those who chose to participate in the survey in the first place considered the films at least on some level important or meaningful to them – that is, important enough to take part in the survey.

Figure 5: How transmedia users and other respondents rated *The Hobbit* films

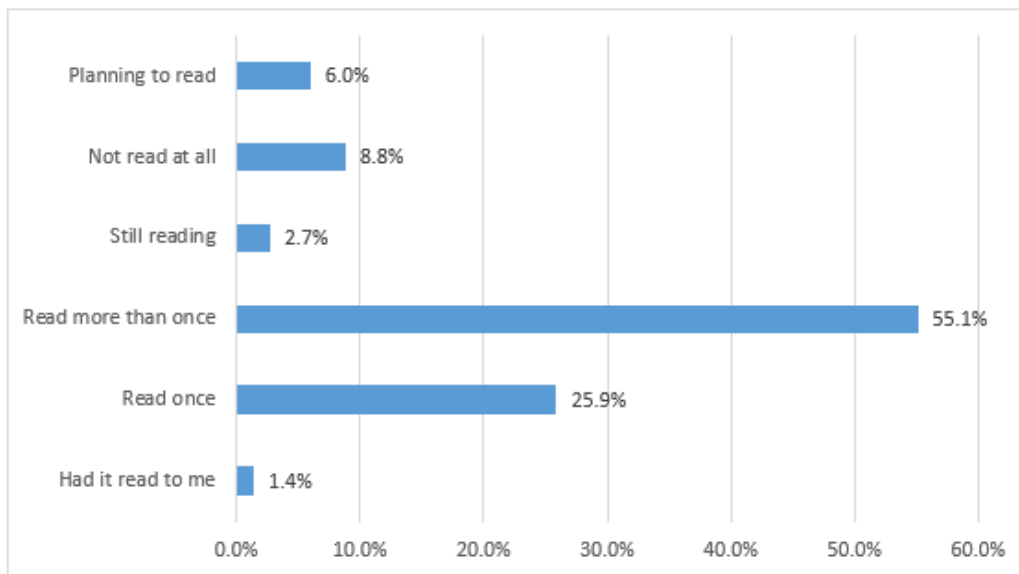


The way transmedia users experienced the films also varied depending on whether they had read *The Hobbit* book and whether they considered the films as adaptations of the book. When asked, 85% of the transmedia users replied that they had read or were still reading *The Hobbit* book (**Figure 6**), indicating that most of the respondents were familiar with the book when engaging with the films, thus situating the films, as well as the transmedial user practices they evoked, also in relation to the book (Q17). Indeed, more than a quarter (28.7%) of the transmedia users considered the films ‘a literary adaptation’ when asked to choose maximum of three from different options (Q4). Many also mentioned the original Tolkien book – and specifically used the term ‘adaptation’ – while they discussed the film in the open-ended questions, and loyalty to the book and its content appeared in some of the responses as important criteria when the films and their success were evaluated.

It is also worth noting, that those transmedia users who had read *The Hobbit* book tended to give the films a lower rating (Q17), while those who had not read the book or were still reading it, were more inclined to regard the films ‘excellent’ (**Figure 7**). This might imply that users who did not have a strong relationship with *The Hobbit* book rated the films higher. In some of the responses to the open-ended questions it was also indicated that it was the films which had inspired the respondent to read the book, not the other way around, which, in a sense, blurs the hierarchy between adaptation and the original. These findings resonate with Harvey’s (2015, 91) work on vertical and horizontal memories. As stated before, for Harvey adaptations can only remember vertically from the source text to

the adaptation(s), whereas transmedia texts can remember horizontally, meaning that memories can move back and forth between different works (2015, 91). For audience members, however, the memories and experiences of adaptations are not necessarily vertical in the sense of the original preceding the adaptation and the memories can thus also move back and forth between them. Indeed, sometimes the transmedia users even called the *LotR* films ‘the original works’ that *The Hobbit* films refer to – complicating the idea of adaptation and its original source.

Figure 6: The amount of transmedia users who have read, are planning to read, or have not read *The Hobbit*

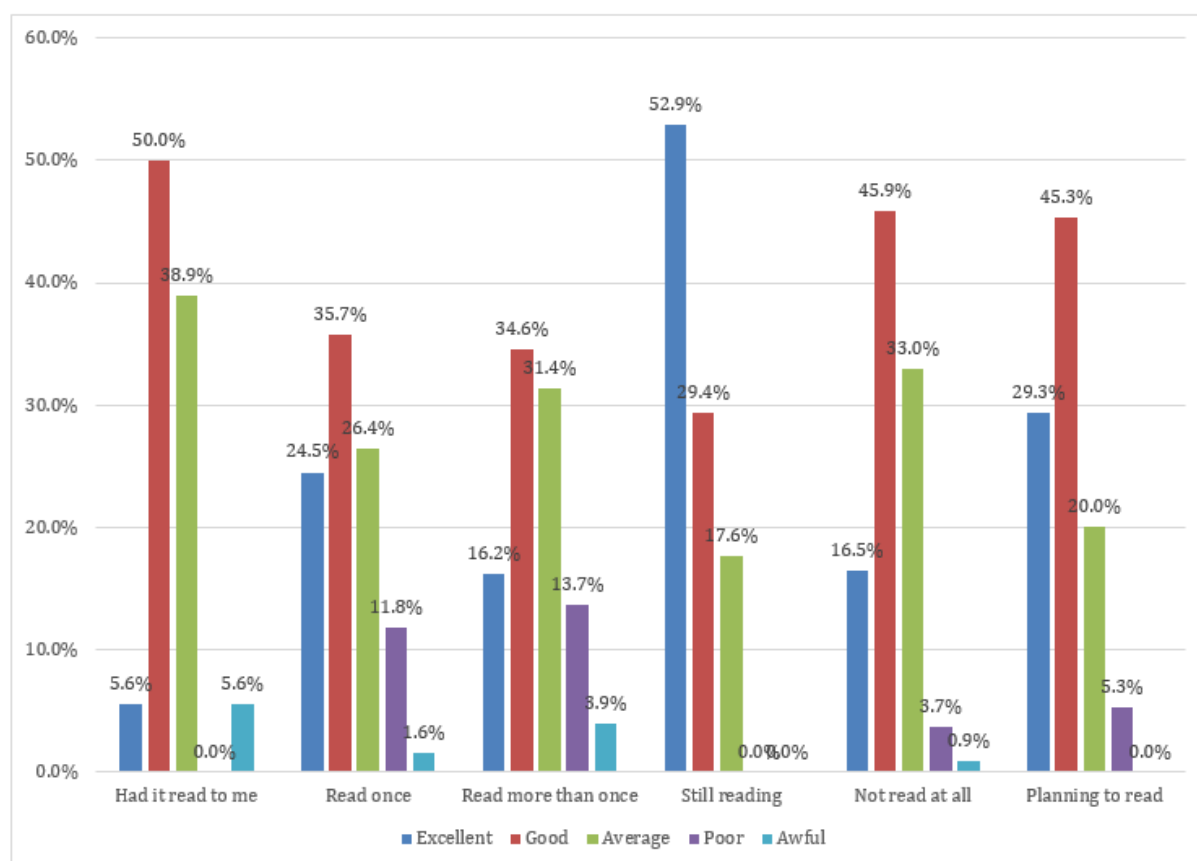


As stated before, Harvey (2015, 3) claims that the audience’s past memories affect how the audience experiences elements of a transmedia storyworld as ‘authentic’ or ‘genuine’. In our analysis of the transmedia users’ descriptions of their experiences, we found that audience experiences were often connected to past memories of *The Hobbit* book, *LotR* books and/or films, Middle-earth and Tolkien’s works or world more broadly. We also discovered that engaging with *The Hobbit* films was an emotional⁵ experience for many of the respondents, and the experiences were articulated in relation to their experiences of these aforementioned works/world:

I have no words, how could I in any way describe my feelings for Middle-earth. I don’t understand myself, how anyone can be so divinely in love with a fantasy world. And now I have to mention that Fili’s, Kili’s and Thorin’s death broke my heart in a thousand pieces and after those movies I’m always totally broken and crying for a couple of weeks in a row :DD. Yeah sorry I’m such a fangirl. But I’m so thankful that Tolkien wrote these stories. What would we do without Middle-earth? (Transl. from Finnish⁶) [#34215]

The Hobbit was the favourite childhood book and I am speechless and bitter of how classless *The Battle of the Five Armies* was. I lost respect for Peter Jackson as a director. I still love the book, but the film series was just a 3 movie long commercial to get people to watch *The Lord of the Rings* movies again. And fuck that's what I'm gonna do just as soon as I drink some bleach to forget I've ever watched shit like the battle of five armies. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3706]

Figure 7: How *The Hobbit* films were rated, depending if the respondent had read the book



As the previous responses illustrate, emotional engagement often manifested either as pleasure related to being able to experience the wonderful world of specific fictional works through *The Hobbit* films, or as disappointment, which was explained by the films' lack of fidelity with these works/worlds. This also makes visible how the respondents' do not experience *The Hobbit* films only as adaptations of a specific work but the interpretive framework of their experience is formed by broader contexts – such as how they remember Tolkien's works.⁷ We therefore claim that through these interpretive frameworks consisting of *The Hobbit* book, Tolkien's work/world, Jackson's films and the audience's own practices, a broader Hobbit universe emerges. In fact, the respondents sometimes used the term 'Tolkien universe' to refer to Tolkien's literary works and the works created around them and felt that *The Hobbit* films added new layers to this universe.

Writing on the *LotR* audiences, Anne Jerslev (2006, 212) has noted that emotional experiences with films can also be evoked by the *mise-en-scène* (i.e. the visual setting of filming) as well as the film narrative. This is evident also in the responses to several open-ended questions, where visual effects, scenery, acting, and other production aspects were mentioned as important to the emotional experience. Indeed, for some respondents *mise-en-scène* was the source of the previously mentioned emotions of pleasure and disappointment. Some respondents seemed to have an emotional experience also with ‘different contextual practices’ (Jerslev 2006, 213), such as following the production of the films, as well as the films itself:

In connection to the first film I followed precisely all the news about the film on websites dedicated to the topic and other internet blogs. I followed the Production Diary published online, watched live the premiere of the first film and followed the main actors for example by watching their interviews online. I gathered a lot of information on the subject and discussed it with my friends and the fan community. I also followed certain award galas in the hope that the first film would win awards. After my enthusiasm disappeared and disappointment grew by the time I saw the second film, my interest in following *The Hobbit* news online / on other channels also ended. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1804]

All the filmmakers’ interviews were must-see. Also premiere broadcasts on the Internet were delicious. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34413]

The films were written and filmed superbly and with respect to the original. Especially the first film excellently reached the same spirit I got from reading the book. The special effects were successfully executed, Smaug was astonishingly well made, filming locations were impressive and the casting was spot on. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1319]

Moreover, the respondents mentioned practices such as queuing for the premiers or special screenings and visiting filming locations. Therefore, emotional experiences were also connected to specific transmedial user practices instead of a fictional work or world – even though these practices are, of course, connected to these works/worlds – as well as to the visual setting of the films.

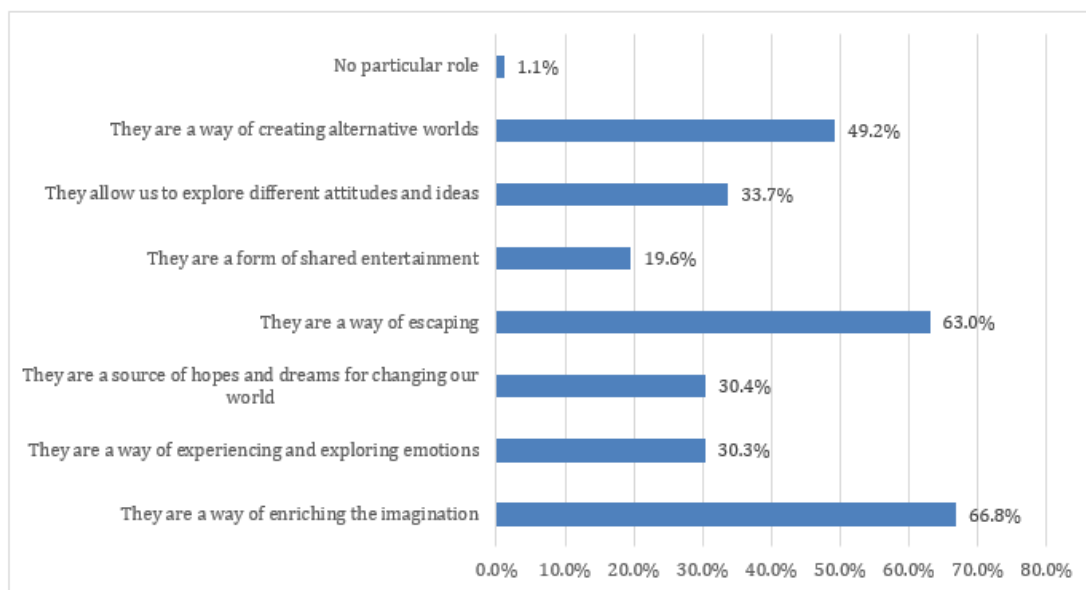
Thus, our analysis of the audience’s experiences of *The Hobbit* trilogy illustrates that while the film trilogy and *The Hobbit* book do not constitute a coherent storyworld in the sense of transmedia storytelling defined by Jenkins (2006; 2013), *The Hobbit* trilogy was described and experienced with more variety than simply as an adaptation. In fact, in many of the responses we analysed the original work was not mentioned at all. This makes visible how shifting the focus to transmedia users and user practices can also bring new

perspectives onto analysing the sometimes fluid boundaries between adaptations and transmedia and the way these boundaries are constructed, but also broken, by the audiences. Indeed, we discovered that audience experiences were often articulated as an emotional engagement with specific texts or a broader storyworld. This often manifested either as pleasure or disappointment on how that world or those texts had been dealt with in the *Hobbit* films, resonating with Harvey’s (2015, 3) ideas how audiences judge the authenticity of a transmedial world. Thus, the responses construct a broader *Hobbit* universe, where *The Hobbit* films are experienced in broader interpretive frameworks.

There and Back Again – Meanings of Fantasy

To return to the final research question concerning the meanings and uses of fantasy, we discovered that the respondents assigned various meanings to *The Hobbit* films and these meanings were often explicated through references to emotional experiences in their lives. In fact, when asked ‘What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today?’ (Q13), 30.3% chose ‘They are a source of experiencing and exploring emotion’, making emotional experiences one important meaning of fantasy (**Figure 8**). Furthermore, it was found that the meanings articulated by our respondents can be roughly divided into two categories: personal and societal meanings, emotional experiences belonging to the former. We read personal meanings in the respondents’ descriptions of their personal lives, including those more related to the self, such as emotions, values and identity, as well as those related to life events, such as relationships and experiences with other people, and societal meanings from descriptions dealing with the broader themes that fantasy can discuss. In addition, we used multiple-choice questions to support our analysis. As our analysis shows, explicit mentions of societal meanings were somewhat scarcer than those of personal meanings and demanded more interpretative reading.

Figure 8: The role of fantasy (respondents could choose up to 3 options)



For *personal meanings*, perhaps the most significant question was ‘Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?’ (Q21), but these meanings were also evident in responses to other questions in the survey. We discovered that the way the respondents negotiated personal meanings can be categorised under three overlapping themes:

1. *The context of life narrative:*

It was expressed in many of the answers that the transmedia users had a long history with Tolkien’s work, or that Tolkien, *The Hobbit* book or the *LotR* films and book had somehow influenced the respondents’ personal history. In other words, in many responses these fictional works were situated within the respondent’s life narrative. These responses resonate with the so called becoming-a-fan narratives that are typical in media fandoms; for long-term fans the fan object can also create structure to life narratives (Harrington and Bielby 2010, 438–439). For example, many respondents considered it worth mentioning that they had first come across Tolkien’s world or the *LotR* films when they were young, or that they had enjoyed Tolkien’s work already for several years – in some cases, even decades. Some even said that Tolkien’s work had had a significant impact on their values and their growth as a person:

Ever since we watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* in a lesson at primary school right after it was released to be sold, love for Tolkien has been one of the factors that define me most as a person. Someone might say that it could even be a small obsession... Indeed, I was in primary school when *LotR* movies came out, so I couldn’t yet understand their significance and the whole of their greatness, or participate in the surrounding communal activity, so I am eternally grateful that now with *The Hobbit* films at a bit later age I have been able to experience the unbelievability of it all. But on the other hand I now also realize better the ending of this all, which hurts and grieves me now even more than with *LotR* then. (Transl. from Finnish) [#12763]

Ever since I was little I have been a Tolkien fan and read many of his books. *Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* I have read several times. For me his books are important and they have affected the kind of person I became as an adult. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3679]

Some respondents also explained their emotional experiences of pleasure or disappointment with *The Hobbit* films specifically in relation to their life narratives. There it became evident that long history with *The Hobbit* book or the broader *Hobbit* universe often

made it hard to accept *The Hobbit* films as part of Tolkien's fantasy world. Some responses, on the contrary, implicated that *The Hobbit* films were a welcome return to this world:

I have loved Tolkien's work since I was a child - I grew up with it and it made me into the person I am today. I'm also very by-the-book type of person, and the changes that have been made from books to movies have been hard for me to accept. [#28233]

I grew up with Tolkien's work. Consider that when thinking where this resistance [to *The Hobbit* films] comes from. (Transl. from Finnish) [#13711]

In these two quotes, Tolkien's work is connected to growing up, transitioning from child to adult, and the same connection is made in several other responses. It has been suggested 'that as normative adult life destabilizes, cultural objects are increasingly providing a reference point for navigating the trajectory through adulthood and later life' (Harrington and Bielby 2010, 445). Indeed, it seems that for some respondents Tolkien's works did serve as reference points for the narration of their life trajectory. Many of these responses could also be called nostalgic in the sense that the meaning of *The Hobbit* films was connected to feelings of the past (see Cashman 2006, 138).

In addition to connecting *The Hobbit*, *LotR* book or films, or Tolkien's works to a certain age or transitions between life stages, some respondents (Q21) told that Tolkien's world had helped them get through difficult times in their life, marking the importance of these fantasy texts, as comes across from these following quotations:

I've been suffering with anxiety for several years. Both the books and the movies are a way for me to escape reality, calm down and immerse myself in a great world. These movies have helped me a lot with my mental health. [#22275]

For me Tolkien's work, both in films and books, and other big phenomena, such as *Harry Potter*, have functioned as a place of escape from my everyday reality as a bullied and depressed youth. These worlds give a world where one can immerse completely and forget oneself, to even for a moment imagine being an elf warrior or elf maiden or fighting beside one's people. (Transl. from Finnish) [#28473]

I am a bit antisocial and secluded, so for a long time these movies were all that I had. When the film series ended, I was left afloat. (Transl. from Finnish) [#23458]

I read *The Hobbit* very young, and my bond with Tolkien's world has been strong for years. I read *LOTR* on the same Christmas when my grandmother died, after which I clung to the book even more closely. My experience of the books, and that way also of the films made out of them, is thus coloured by childhood enchantment and the need for an escape after a death in the family. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1022]

These quotations make visible that the way the respondents situate various works of *The Hobbit* universe in their life narratives is telling of the personal meanings of these fantasy texts. In our analysis, specific meaningful experiences arise from the responses: at certain points of the respondents' lives, these fantasy texts have affected their growth as human beings, helped them through difficult times, or served as portals to nostalgic return into the past.

2. Escape or immersion in Tolkien's world or fantasy worlds in general:

The previous responses concerning escape during difficult times are also intertwined with the next theme: immersion and escape in a fantasy world. For example, one respondent wrote:

Perhaps my identifying myself with Tolkien's world, where even a small hobbit can achieve great things, is somehow connected to the fact that I feel completely trivial and useless in the reality I live in. It is comforting that someone succeeds in creating a fictional world, where one can escape to even for a few hours. The films made of Tolkien's world have also without exception managed to emphasise genuine friendships with different people, which always makes me hope that these kinds of friendships would really exist. If I cry watching these films, it usually doesn't have to do with characters dying or other unpleasant events, but rather to the wonderful great and small acts of friendship and working together, that my own life is irretrievably lacking. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34082]

Here, the meaning of a fictional world is described as bringing something more to one's life; something that the respondent's life is lacking. Immersion and escape in fictional worlds are also connected to nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym, '[n]ostalgia (from nostos – return home, and algia – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed ... a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with our own fantasy' (Boym, 284). In her keynote lecture at the Transmedia Use(r)s Summer School (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Lisbeth Klastrup used Boym's definition to argue that nostalgia can be focused on the first time we encountered a transmedial world, and our fascination with that world has to do with returning to that first encounter (Klastrup 2016). Moreover, following Klastrup and Tosca, some transmedial user practices, such as roleplaying and cosplay, are

performative in nature and can also be seen as manifestations of ‘a sort of playful desire to re-live certain experiences, prolong them and give them a manifestation in the real world’ (Klastrup and Tosca 2016, 119). In this sense, the personal meanings of transmedia can be connected to – as pronounced in the very title of the *Hobbit* book – the performance of going there and back again. One respondent [#23503] described that watching *The Hobbit* films felt like returning to home after an absence of ten years, whereas another wrote that:

I read Tolkien’s work and saw the *LotR* films when I was in junior high. They had a huge influence on a growing person. *The Hobbit* films were also associated with a sort of nostalgic longing to get back to those feelings which they, being so bad, could only make happen from time to time. Jackson did what Lucas had done. And it’s not about some You have grown past it effect; John Carter did the same for me at my adult age than the original *Star Wars* trilogy did when I was a child and the *LotR* trilogy when I was a teenager; transported me to a totally different world. (Transl. from Finnish) [#14898]

This emphasis on immersion and escape in fictional worlds implies that world-building, which is the very core of fantasy, is important for the immersion of audiences. This is also emphasised by the frequency of gaming connected to *The Hobbit* among the respondents, as games are often considered to take place in a so called magic circle, which has its own rules, time and space, forming a temporary world (Huizinga 1955; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). The centrality of these meanings is also enforced in responses to the survey question about the roles that fantasy can play today (Q13), where the respondents were able to choose three options. The option chosen second most often was ‘They are a way of escaping’ (Q13.4), chosen by 63.0% of the respondents (see **Figure 8**), and the third most popular choice was ‘They are a way of creating alternative worlds’ (Q13.7), chosen by 49.2%. It is also interesting that escapism, of which fantasy has often been criticised, comes across in our data as an important resource for fantasy users, making escapism not just a childish pastime but a tool for coping with the world we live in.⁸ Escape or immersion thus also became an important use of fantasy.

3. Shared experiences:

The responses also indicated that engaging with *The Hobbit* universe was a shared social experience. In many responses it was articulated that transmedia users had seen the films with their family and/or friends. Many also had had their parent read *The Hobbit* to them as a child, making it a cross-generational experience. Also, in one response [#1200], it was told that the respondent had met their future spouse in the meeting of the Finnish Tolkien society, which made the ‘Middle-earth very close to [the respondent’s] heart’ (transl. from Finnish). Indeed, these fantasy texts were for many respondents connected to shared experiences with specific people or a group of people.

The Hobbit films are important to me, because I went to see all of them at the cinema with my closest friends. We all live in different places in Finland and seldom see each other, so getting together to watch the *Hobbit* films each year at the same time became very important for us all. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3264]

One of my first memories is my father reading *The Lord of the Rings* to us as a bedtime story. I have spent six birthdays taking my closest friends to watch the premiers of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, then the *Hobbit* trilogy. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3854]

I've been involved with The Finnish Tolkien Society for years ... Tolkien's work has had crucial meaning for my life; I have found most of my friends through the Tolkien fan community. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1922]

Some responses also indicate that their writers identified as Tolkien fans, emphasising their belonging to a group of Tolkien enthusiasts, fans of *LotR* book or films, or fans or nerds more generally, which implies identification within a community. While discussing/debating the films and commenting online were the most popular activities for the respondents, as mentioned previously (**Figure 4**), particularly interesting for many were discussions with friends and family, or amongst fans (Q15). When asked (Q11), if they thought there are people who would share their ideas about *The Hobbit* films and what are they like, 15.7% of respondents mentioned specific people or communities, some even emphasising that they were referring to actual people instead of merely speculating. These responses would, then, suggest that the personal meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* universe are, for some, connected to communal feelings of belonging.

In addition to self-identified fans, an interesting group emerging from the responses is that of viewers and fans, who describe themselves as 'non-fanatic' or 'not hardcore fans', defining themselves through the (lack of) intensity of their relationship to *The Hobbit* universe. Interestingly, these distinctions are in some responses made between the respondent and those fans who have strongly criticised *The Hobbit* film trilogy, and in others between the respondent and the fans who passionately love the films:

There are a lot of people, who think about *The Hobbit* like I do. I would categorize this group – that I belong to – as great Tolkien fans, although not extreme fans. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34532]

Perhaps other *Lord of the Rings* fans who have turned into adults also watch *The Hobbit* with nostalgic acceptance, perhaps without getting too excited (or at least not like they would have when they were 15), but lovingly. (Transl. from Finnish) [#29822]

I am sure there are. They are not superfans, who can't admit that anything coming from Tolkien / Peter Jackson could be anything but perfect. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34286]

Klastrup and Tosca have emphasised the shared nature of engagement with transmedial worlds using the concept of 'networked reception', where '[a]cts of reception ... are nearly always related to other people's experience of the same media products' thus powerfully impacting the transmedial experience (2016, 110, 120). This resonates with accounts of experiences and participation in transmedial activities we found among *The Hobbit* viewers in the whole of our data as well as the aforementioned 'non-fanatic' fans, who shared an emphasis on the moderate nature of the emotional reaction to the films and their awareness of the more passionate reactions of others. Interestingly, compared to this, only 19.6% of the respondents considered 'They are a form of shared entertainment' (Q13.5) as a role that fantasy can play today. However, it could be argued that, perhaps, the shared experiences explicated by the responses are more than 'mere entertainment'.

Besides these three themes, another personal meaning for *The Hobbit* films is indicated in responses to the survey question on the role of fantasy (Q13) where the most popular option was 'They are a way of enriching the imagination' (Q13.1), chosen by 66.8% of the respondents. Interestingly, in the open-ended questions, only a few of the respondents specifically mentioned *The Hobbit* or other Tolkien's works/world having enriched their imagination.

In addition to the personal meanings outlined above, societal meanings were most clearly articulated in the responses to the question 'Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?' (Q10). The most frequently mentioned themes were greed (or materialism) and hunger for power, and friendship and caring. Other, less frequently mentioned themes were moral values (usually expressed through the dichotomy of good versus evil), multi- and inter-culturalism (and tolerance/difference more broadly), security and stability (such as the juxtaposition of adventure with a simple life with friends and family), trust and integrity, the importance of individual choices (including the 'smallest person's' ability to make these choices), power relations, war, and gender issues.

The aforementioned societal themes are also telling of broader cultural values, for example considering if we value material assets or care, as well as fantasy genre's potential to address pressing cultural concerns like inter- and multiculturalism.⁹ Also, the question (Q10) specifically asked for 'broader themes', which, we would argue, connects these responses to a broader societal framework. Some respondents also noted that there could have been broader themes in the films, while 16.9% of the respondents said that there were no broader themes or that they could not think of any. Interestingly, thirty respondents also said that they did not want to comment (or could not comment as, for instance, there was not enough space in the survey). It is also interesting that while less than half of the

transmedia users, 39.0%, mentioned broader themes in Q13 when asked about the role of fantasy stories, only 0.1% chose the option that they have no particular role. From the options available in Q13, the ones most clearly connected to the broader societal meanings of fantasy were 'They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world', which was chosen by 30.4% respondents, and 'They allow us to explore attitudes and ideas' chosen by 33.7% of the respondents. These results support the argument for broader societal themes connected to the way transmedia users experience *The Hobbit* films, the broader *Hobbit* universe, or fantasy more generally.

Here it should be noted that the boundaries between societal and personal meanings are, of course, fluid and overlapping. This is evident from the responses to open-ended questions as well as the more multiple choice question on the role that fantasy can play today (Q13). For instance, the option 'They are a way of creating alternative worlds' (chosen by 49.2%, Q13) is linked to both personal and societal meanings: whereas many respondents specifically emphasised how the escape and immersion into alternative worlds was meaningful for their life narratives, if one thinks of fantasy's potential for political commentary through the imagining of alternative worlds (see Jackson 1981, 19; Bould and Vint 2012, 110), the option is also clearly connected to broader societal meanings.

To sum up, we found that the meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* films or universe – and fantasy more generally – as expressed in our data can be roughly categorised into personal and societal meanings. Personal meanings were most often connected to three themes: the context of life narrative, escape or immersion in Tolkien's world or fantasy worlds in general, or shared experiences. Within these themes, meanings were articulated in relation to times spent with family or friends, hardships weathered and pleasure gained by escaping reality to Tolkien's fictional world, or belonging to a certain group or community. Personal meanings were also often expressed emotionally as the respondents' experiences were connected to the discussions of pleasure or disappointment with *The Hobbit* films. The personal meanings that our respondents attached to *The Hobbit* films were also not separable from the meanings attached to the broader *Hobbit* universe, which becomes clear in the recurring references to *LotR* book and films or Tolkien's works/world in general. In addition to these, the option 'enriching the imagination' was chosen as the most important role for fantasy in Q13, but as it was not mentioned in many open-ended questions, its broader meanings for the respondents are hard to analyse. The most commonly mentioned societal meanings were greed (or materialism in general) and hunger for power, and friendship and caring, but other interesting themes, such as multi-/inter-culturalism and tolerance more broadly were also mentioned. These answers make it clear that audience members use fantasy texts in order to give structure to their life narratives, cope with personal issues, bond with other people or enjoy the rich fantasy worlds, but they also see fantasy as having potential to discuss important societal questions. For instance, multi- and inter-culturalism surely are among those important themes today, as xenophobia seems to be gaining ground all over the world.

Conclusions and Further Research

In approaching the transmedial user practices of the Finnish *Hobbit* audience we asked the following research questions: Firstly, what kinds of transmedial user practices – and transmedia users – emerge from our data? Secondly, we asked the following questions: How do the transmedia users receive and experience the films? What are the meanings assigned to these fantasy texts and the practices related to them, and what this tells of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy?

Examining the data, we found that a significant amount of the Finnish respondents had taken part in what we call transmedial user practices; the most popular activity being debating/discussing the films (which, however, may have been affected by the Finnish translation of the survey). Other most frequently chosen activities were commenting online, collecting merchandise and gaming. Thus, it would suggest that the way the Finnish respondents use fantasy, or engage with fantasy texts, is transmedial. This conclusion may, however, be a bit skewed because of the fact that the survey does not specify if debating/discussing the film takes place online or in a face-to-face setting. Since most of the respondents were female students between ages 16–35, our research suggests women might take part in transmedial user practices more often than men. There were no similar differences to be perceived in connection to age, education or occupation. Due to the small amount of respondents in the group that did not choose any activities, generalizations cannot be made at this stage. Further research would thus be needed in order to examine, how gender, age, education and occupation affect the Finnish *Hobbit* audience's transmedial user practices.

We also discovered that engaging with *The Hobbit* films was an emotional experience for many of the respondents, and these emotional experiences were articulated in relation to their past experiences of Tolkien's work/world or the *LotR* films. This often manifested either as pleasure or disappointment on how that world or those texts had been dealt with in the *Hobbit* films. However, we also found that *The Hobbit* trilogy was described and experienced with more variety than simply as an adaptation. Thus, the responses construct a broader *Hobbit* universe, where *The Hobbit* films are experienced in broader interpretive frameworks. Our analysis therefore makes visible how shifting the focus to transmedia users and user practices brings new perspectives onto investigating the sometimes fluid boundaries between adaptations and transmedia and the way these boundaries are constructed, but also broken, by audiences.

When it comes to the meanings of fantasy, we found that these can roughly be categorised into personal and societal ones. Personal meanings were most often negotiated in reference to three themes: the context of life narrative, escape or immersion in Tolkien's world or fantasy worlds in general, or shared experiences. Within these themes, meanings were articulated in relation to personal growth and nostalgia, giving structure to life narrative, hardships weathered and pleasure gained by escaping reality into Tolkien's fictional world, times spent with family, or belonging to a certain group or community. Personal meanings were also often expressed emotionally as the respondents' experiences

were connected to the discussions of pleasure or disappointment with *The Hobbit* films, or *LotR* book and films or Tolkien's works/world in general. Thus, these meanings are also not separated from the meanings attached to the broader *Hobbit* universe, which becomes clear in the recurring references to texts beyond *The Hobbit*. 'Enriching the imagination' could also be considered as one of the personal meanings of fantasy as it was chosen by the respondents as the most important role of fantasy in Q13. Imagination was, however, rarely mentioned in the open-ended questions, making it harder to interpret the meanings that respondents assigned to it. The most commonly mentioned societal meanings were greed (or the overall focus on materialism) and hunger for power, and friendship and caring, but other interesting themes such as multi-/inter-culturalism and tolerance more broadly were also mentioned. These answers make it clear that fantasy texts have potential to discuss not only personal but also important topical questions.

It therefore becomes clear that engaging with *The Hobbit* universe was a meaningful experience for the respondents of the survey, both on a personal and a societal level. In our data, personal meanings were more emphasised. Thinking of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy, our analysis suggests that fantasy as a genre can create meaningful experiences for the users, and these experiences range from deeply personal to broader societal ones. It could also be argued that fantasy's potential for creating meaningful experiences is tied to the very features of the genre, as it seems that the meanings expressed by the respondents are often connected to fantasy's potential of world-building and escapism. Further research should, thus, pay even more attention to these meaningful experiences evoked by fantasy texts in order to find out the roles that transmedial fantasy worlds can play in today's societies – and to what cultural fantasies they tap into.

We suggest that further research should aim to combine the user perspective with analysis of transmedial fantasy worlds in order to tackle these questions. As our analysis of *The Hobbit* audience has shown, focusing on user practices is important in order to grasp how transmedial worlds or universes are built and how users assign meanings to them. The focus on users also raises interesting questions concerning transmediality, such as how practices that go beyond the traditional conceptions of a medium take part in producing a transmedia universe and how should we then, in the end, define a medium when discussing transmedia. Indeed, during our research process we had many discussions on what kinds of practices can be defined as transmedial. Also, is accessing a universe via two mediums enough to talk about transmedial user practices, or should there be a more complex cluster of media use? Thus, the concept of transmedial user practices also needs further developing.

There are also other more specific ideas for further research considering the analysis of our data: the next step in our research could be to investigate if there are specific groups of transmedia users that emerge from our data. Then it would be useful to compare the Finnish data to the global data, in order to discover what kinds of cultural differences can be found in terms of transmedial user practices and the experiences, meanings and uses of *The Hobbit* universe, or fantasy more broadly. Further research could also go deeper into the

emotional experiences evoked by *The Hobbit* universe as well as the sense of belonging that seemed to be important for the users. It could be interesting, for instance, to analyse if transmedia users in particular are the ones that express their engagement with *The Hobbit* through emotional experiences and a sense of belonging, or if this is common for all Finnish respondents – and if this is, in fact, typical for fantasy users in general. It would also be interesting to go deeper in the question of how audiences understand adaptation, as a significant amount of the Finnish respondents somehow comment on *The Hobbit* films as adaptations. In addition, further research could explore more how audiences experience *The Hobbit* as belonging to different (transmedial) worlds, as it becomes evident from the research material that respondents consider the Hobbit as belonging or not belonging to different worlds, such as the world of Tolkien, Middle-earth, or the world of Jackson's *LotR* films. In other words, it would be intriguing to analyse what kinds of worlds emerge within the broader *Hobbit* universe, and do different worlds also imply different transmedial user practices.

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Notes:

¹ Barker, Martin, et al. *The World Hobbit Project*. Online-Survey. Aberystwyth, UK. 2014–15. Finnish translation by Irma Hirsjärvi, Jyrki Korpua and Urpo Kovala.

² In her keynote lecture at the Transmedia Use(r)s Summer School (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Lisbeth Klastrup used the term 'transmedial world tourism' in order to connect visiting filming locations to transmedial worlds (Klastrup 2016).

³ From now on we call these respondents 'female' and 'male' or 'women' and 'men' to make our text more readable – even though we are aware that the choice of gender may not coincide with the gender identity of the respondent, particularly as the survey only gave these two options to define one's gender with.

⁴ Here it should be noted that there are slight differences between the English and Finnish survey. Whereas in the English survey, this option reads 'Which stories or debates have most interested you?', the Finnish translation, 'Mitkä tapahtumat ja keskustelut ovat kiinnostaneet sinua eniten?', can be roughly translated back to English as 'Which events and discussions have most interested you?' Out of the 1242 transmedia users 1134 filled the survey in Finnish, 87 in English, and there were also responses in other languages: 18 in Swedish, 1 in Russian, 1 in Danish and one in Spanish. It is likely that those answering in other languages than Finnish answered to the questionnaire in that particular language, and therefore differences in the choices of words in these surveys may have caused different interpretations of the questions. From the answers to the open-ended questions we only analysed the ones given in Finnish, Swedish or English.

⁵ We chose the term 'emotion' here instead of, for example, 'affect' or 'feelings' because emotion was the term used by the respondents. For more on the discussions on the conflicting definitions of these terms, see e.g. Ahmed 2014; Grossberg 1992; Massumi 2002.

⁶ All translations by the authors. In the translations we have attempted to preserve the spirit of the original Finnish quotations with their nuances of (and occasional imperfections in) the Finnish language, sometimes at the expense of English spelling and grammar.

⁷ The way transmedia users experience *The Hobbit* films is thus affected by the way they make intertextual connections between the films and other texts (see also Harvey 2015, 21; Korpua forthcoming). Although these connections the audience makes may be best called intertextual, the way the audiences take part in different practices and experiences through various mediums make *The Hobbit* universe not only an intertextual but also a transmedial one.

⁸ For more on the discussions on fantasy and world-building, see Jackson 1981, 19; McHale 1987; Harvey 2015, 40–62; Korpua 2015, 21–22, 34; on escapism, see Jackson 1981; Shippey 2001, viii, cited in Korpua 2015, 119.

⁹ On the potential of fantasy works to discuss societal and political issues, see Jackson 1981; Bould and Vint 2012.