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Author(s): Siikilä-Laitila, Minna

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“I’m just being a difficult LoTR hardcore fan”: Tolkien Fans’ Actions and Reactions to Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit* Trilogy

Minna Siikilä-Laitila

Abstract: Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit* trilogy has been debated and discussed widely. Fans of J.R.R. Tolkien have had strong opinions about the films, and I believe that their online conversations about the movies call for a closer look. I am particularly interested in Tolkien fans’ reactions to the films; the reasons for these reactions; and the actions they provoked.

Some fans loved the possibility of revisiting Middle-earth. They drew a clear distinction between the book and the movies, showing understanding towards the changes and additions required by the adaptation process. Pitted against them were the fans who experienced the films negatively. This group did not differentiate between the movies and the novel, and saw the former as a problematic continuation of the latter. This study focuses on the latter group of fans and the disappointments caused by *The Hobbit* movies.

I will focus on the discussions on fan edits. Some Tolkien fans demanded new, more orthodox fan versions of *The Hobbit* movies. This was an attempt by the fans to integrate Jackson’s world with Tolkien’s world as seamlessly as possible. Most importantly, these fan edits appear as a moral statement, signalling the fans’ collectively experienced ownership of Tolkien’s legacy. I will argue that the fans’ experience of a moral duty to create their own edits of *The Hobbit* movies also shows that they do not recognise Jackson as the custodian of Tolkien’s cinematic world.

Keywords: *The Hobbit*; fans; J.R.R. Tolkien; Peter Jackson; reception; fan edits

According to Henry Jenkins, fans are unafraid to give feedback to the creators of media texts, and they tend to function as active consumers (287). They rarely have a say on the content of these texts, but they can stage loud protests if they believe that their favourite media text is not being handled appropriately (118).¹

One recent example of this is the 2019 fan petition "Remake *Game of Thrones* Season 8 with competent writers". The petition has attracted around one million signatures in one week (D.). Sometimes protests like this do bear fruit, as was the case with *Sonic the Movie*, for which the amount of negative feedback received by the trailer led the film's producers to change the look of the titular main character (@fowltown; L. Sullivan). As I will show in this article, fans can also claim authority through fan edits.²

For this study, I analysed two online articles and their public comments to see how Tolkien fans reacted to Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* movies; what prompted their reactions; and what kind of actions the films incited. The studied articles were written by and commented on by Tolkien fans. Both were published in January 2015, about a month and a half after the December 2014 release of the last instalment of *The Hobbit* trilogy, *The Battle of the Five Armies*. The method employed in this study, inductive content analysis, will be described more closely in the section titled "Analysing Internet Conversations: The Method".

This is a case study that focuses on the disappointments caused by and the critical perspectives on *The Hobbit* movies. As such, the findings do not necessarily reflect the movies' overall reception. Both articles were critical towards the movies, which left its mark on the readers' comments. The articles were chosen because of their critical approach to the topic. The aim was to gather comments from a Finnish and an international platform with criticism as the conjunctive factor.

Addressing the sense of disappointment caused by *The Hobbit* movies is an important and still unexplored field, as the results of the international World Hobbit Project have illustrated (Barker and Mathijs 172). With this article, I hope to illuminate the ways fans act and react when they consider their beloved media text to have been mistreated. Additionally, I will consider whether the argument made by Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and Ruotsalainen about the audiences in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden also applies to the audiences outside the Nordic countries, from which a large part of my research data (*Wired* magazine) comes. They argue that "those who have a more affective relationship with the book and/or the Tolkien community are on average a little bit more critical towards the films, unless they conceptualize the films as different or distinct from the book" (264).

Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and Ruotsalainen's paper was published as part of The World Hobbit Project. I will be using The World Hobbit Project's research

¹ The term "fan" itself, delivered from the "Latin *fanaticus*, meaning an attendant of the temple (*fanus*)" (Cusack, Morehead, and Robertson 3). Defining "fan" is not an easy task (Hills ix). The one thing researchers can agree on is that fans are a widely studied group of media consumers (i). In this article, I employ the term "fan" the way Matt Hills does in *Fan Cultures*. Being a fan or belonging to a fandom has two key aspects to it: performativity and a strong knowledge and attachment to the subject of fandom (xi). In other words, a fan is someone who invests time and feelings in a thing, such as a text or a celebrity, and knows a great deal about it.

² "Fan edits are essentially unauthorized alternative versions of films made by fans" (Wille, *Beyond the Phantom Edit* iii).

results as a point of reference when talking about the reception of *The Hobbit* movies.

I chose to focus on online conversations as they allow people to turn from being passive recipients to active consumers of media products, and usually also to express themselves more freely, especially if they are allowed to remain anonymous. In addition, the internet makes it easy for people with shared interests to find each other. Together, the internet, powerful home computers, and the digitalisation of the media industry have given fans the opportunity to produce and distribute their own versions of media texts, like *The Hobbit* movies, more effectively than ever before (see J. Sullivan 223).

1. Fandom, anti-fandom, and fan edits

Fan studies have given us insights into the world of fandom, informing us about the texts that fans love, what fans do with those texts and characters, and how fans interact with one another within the context of fandom (Chin 3).

It is not easy to define what it means to be a fan or to belong in a fandom, but media consumerism is a key part of the phenomenon (Hills i). Fandom is also performative, and having a strong knowledge of and attachment to the subject are its main elements (Hills xi). As a phenomenon, fandom is multifaceted and involves different activities and manifestations. Key aspects of fandom include active meaning-making and practical exercises (Jenkins 2). According to Jenkins, it is typical for fans to discuss their common interests intensively (53) and to construct meanings publicly, in a group (75). It is rewarding to study fans because they know their chosen media texts so well (Gray, “New Audiences” 67). It is therefore unsurprising that as media consumers fans have received a lot of attention from journalists and researchers (Gray, “New Audiences” 64; Hills i). Fandom is also a culture that breaks geographical boundaries and connects different generations (Jenkins 1).

The Hobbit movies caused some Tolkien fans to become anti-fans of Jackson. Anti-fandom could be understood as the opposite of fandom (Click 1). While anti-fans have a different attitude towards a particular media text than do fans, their behaviour and strategies often resemble those of fans (Sheffield and Merlo 209). However, Sheffield and Merlo note:

Rather than engaging the text directly, though, anti-fans often respond to a “text” they construct from paratextual fragments such as news coverage or word-of-mouth, reading, watching and learning all they can about a show, book, or person in order to better understand and criticize the text (and, very often, its fans). (209)

The avoidance of the source text was also present in the research material, with some Tolkien fans refusing even to watch *The Hobbit* movies. Yet they were eager to take part in online discussions on the topic. However, some anti-fans also receive satisfaction from close-reading media texts they hate because this activity gives them a chance to demonstrate their own know-how” (Harman and Jones 963).³

³ A good example are comments published under a heading such as: “I read this so you don’t have to”.

Barker has also discussed the demonstration of ability as anti-fandom practice. In his article on *The Hobbit* movies, "An investigation of the role of affiliations to 'authors' in audience responses to *The Hobbit* films", Barker writes about "negative Tolkien affiliators" (218). These people admire Tolkien and dislike Jackson. Barker describes their way of acting and thinking as follows:

But a matching affiliation with "Tolkien" in the hands of someone disappointed in films becomes a resource of confident criticism. "He" has been shabbily treated by "them"; Hollywood, the money-men, those who destroy literature by popularising it. "*Tolkien*" energises this critique, and at the same time helps to guarantee the position and status of its presenter (Barker 219, emphasis added).

Anti-fans are energised by demonstrating their level of knowledge, as this gives them a feeling of superiority. Also present is a keen sense of moralism. Anti-fans do not necessarily have anything against fandom as such; they simply dislike a certain media text or genre. They may perceive the object of their dislike as inane, stupid, morally corrupt, or just simply bad (Gray, "New Audiences" 70).

The second fandom-related phenomenon discussed in this article is the fan edit, which as a still under-researched topic. Joshua Wille's doctoral thesis, *Beyond the Phantom Edit: A Critical History and Practical Analysis of Fan Edits*, is a rare example of research on the subject. He defines fan edits as follows:

Fan edits are essentially unauthorized alternative versions of films made by fans, whom I define as people with intense interest in films and related media.... [F]an editing is a form of recombinant filmmaking that reactivates existing arrangements of audiovisual material. (iii)

As Nancy K. Baum has noted, fan edits are the product of media convergence and fans operating online:

As media converge more and more, and as more and more audience members go online, the absolute control of producers over their products might erode further. And if it does not, then the fans might well develop alternative products that gain greater audiences. Scholarship so far has barely scratched the surface of the interplays between media producers and online fans. (Baum 216)

Another key text on Tolkien-related fan edits is Maria Alberto's article "The effort to translate': Fan Film Culture and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien". One of Alberto's examples is TolkienEditor's 2015 edit of *The Hobbit*, which condenses the trilogy into a single film. This version stems from the fan-producer's "opposition to Jackson's work" (19).

Tolkien fan edits have also been discussed by Jackson himself. Wille ("Reforging the Rings" 32) reports that in the DVD audio commentary track to the extended edition of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Jackson has said that fans could always re-edit the movie to restore chronological order. This shows that fan edits "have changed the way some producers think about the creative role of their audience" in addition to facilitating a way of

communication between audiences and producers (Wille, *Beyond the Phantom Edit* 93).

2. Peter Jackson as an interpreter of the Tolkien universe

Tolkien's legacy reached vast new audiences when Peter Jackson's immensely successful trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* adaptations was released in 2001-2003. Tom Shippey writes, "These are arguably the most successful films ever made" (365). This is not an overstatement. For example, the last part of the trilogy, *The Return of the King* (2003), received eleven *Academy Awards*, and he continued the popular – if not critical – success of those films with his *Hobbit* trilogy: *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), *The Desolation of Smaug* (2013), and *The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014).

Despite the films' enormous success, Jackson's work has also been heavily criticised. This is only natural, considering the status of Tolkien as one of the most important fantasy writers of all time, if not the most important. For example, Dickerson and O'Hara consider Tolkien and C. S. Lewis to be the most important fantasy writers of the 20th century (17). Jyrki Korpua has described Tolkien's position in the genre as "monolithic" (11), and Brian Attebery has gone even further, defining "fantasy" as texts that resemble Tolkien's texts (306).

The Lord of the Rings trilogy (1954–1955) and *The Hobbit* (1937) had an ardent fan base long before Jackson made his films. In this kind of situation, the task of the director is anything but easy. It is impossible to avoid comparisons between the movies and the books. For example, Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn have paid attention to the demands of Tolkien fans (29). In their reading, Tolkien fans relate to the books the way audiences often relate to classics:

One of the central beliefs of film adaptation theory is that audiences are more demanding of fidelity when dealing with classics, such as the work of Dickens or Austen. But a whole new set of cult popular classics, especially the work of Tolkien, Philip Pullman, and J. K. Rowling, are now being made visible and audible on stage, in the movie theatre, on the video and computer screens, and in multiple gaming formats, and their readers are proving to be just as demanding (29).

The audiences of *The Lord of the Rings* movies were particularly critical towards the elements that were added for entertainment value. With *The Hobbit* trilogy, Jackson moved the story even further from the original text than he had *The Lord of the Rings* movies. *The Hobbit* trilogy is generally considered to be the weaker:

Even the most ardent defenders of Peter Jackson's three-film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* acknowledge that none of them come close to matching the highs of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Something about them just feels off from frame one, like something important is missing. Whatever spark made the first trilogy such a magical experience is missing here (Hall).

While this is just the opinion of one journalist, similar views have been expressed by others, including researchers and audiences.⁴

3. Analysing internet conversations: The method and research ethics

The method employed in this study is inductive content analysis, also called material-based analysis. In this type of analysis, the amount of material is first narrowed down, then grouped into clusters, and finally used as the basis for abstraction (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 111–114). The aim of the process is to give the research material a clear and concise form while retaining its informational content. Each stage is a part of the research process (110).

In this research, the three stages were realised in the following way: first, I reduced the data and placed it in tabular form. These two stages occurred in tandem. I started by identifying opinions and themes repeated in the conversations; their frequency revealed the biggest themes and most popular opinions. In some cases, I grouped related categories together under a more general concept. After this, I took the results to the abstract level, or, in other words, drew conclusions from the findings.

In the analysis, each opinion of a single commenter was counted only once to avoid statistical distortion caused by repetition. This was an issue especially with the *Wired* article that invited several debaters to return to the conversation and reiterate the same opinion or statement. I anonymised the commenters (see below) by replacing their names and pseudonyms with numbers. I then listed these numbers and linked the opinions to numbers. All the opinions (such as “*The Hobbit* movies were badly made”) and themes (such as comparing the movies to the original book) were also numbered and listed. While the research was not quantitative as such, I used tabulation as a practical aid to identify the prevalent opinions and themes.

When doing internet research, the ethical considerations that must be taken into account vary from study to study (Östman and Turtiainen 71). This provides a challenge because the field of internet research is young and multidisciplinary. At the moment, there are no customary practices or regulations formed by long research traditions (Östman 71). Currently the best one can do is to consider ethical issues on a case-by-case basis.

In this research I used as an aid the “Board of Ethics for Online Researcher” developed by Sari Östman and Riikka Turtiainen, who state for example that one must know the context and backgrounds of the research subject, and that one must consider how intimate or public the informants consider their online texts to be (69).

My own research materials are public and, most importantly, I believe that the participants also consider the spaces of these discussions as public. When the data was collected, *Wired*'s article and comments were visible to anyone without any logins or passwords, but they have since been removed from the website. The other research material, an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*

⁴ See, for example, “*The Hobbit 2* Is Bad Fan Fiction” by Christopher Orr (2013); “Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit*: A Beautiful Disaster” by Marek Oziewicz (2016); and “Introduction: The World Hobbit Project” by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (2016).

and comments on the Finnish Tolkien Society's (Suomen Tolkien-seura Kontury) public Facebook page about the article were also public.

I have anonymised my data (see above) because some people appeared to have used their real names.⁵ All quotes from the Finnish Tolkien Society's data set are also either paraphrases or translations from the original Finnish.

Sveningsson, Bergquist, and Lövheim have also said that the experience of publicity or privacy and the sensitivity or non-sensitivity of the research material are the main ethical issues (186). My research materials are non-sensitive (there is no sensitive information such as data on anyone's health or family relations) and, as noted above, the commenters knew their writings were public. For these reasons, I consider that there were no ethical issues in researching these data sets.

I have anonymised the data sets carefully so that they do not form a personal data registry and hence do not fall under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. I also want to emphasise that these data sets serve the public interest by enabling scientific research.

4. Analysing the *Wired* article and the conversation it generated

Ethan Gilsdorf's article was published on the *Wired* magazine website under the title, "Peter Jackson Must Be Stopped".⁶ This long and critical article drew significant attention. On September 1, 2015, just a couple of days after the article was published, it had 935 comments and it had been shared 12,500 times on Facebook, 281 on Google+, and 761 on Twitter. It is unsurprising that a *Hobbit*-themed article gathered this much attention, considering that *Wired* is a magazine with a focus on topics such as computers, video games, comics, and fantasy. An examination of the article and the comments soon made it clear that Tolkien fans were widely represented. Some of the fans appeared to be much more devoted than the ones writing on the page of the Finnish Tolkien Society, the other main source of data.

The article and the comments showed that most of the debaters reacted negatively to *The Hobbit* trilogy (Table 1). From the 256 commenters, 106 (41.4%) criticised the movies in all or some of the following ways: the movies are badly made; there are some unwanted additions; the movies are unconvincing; the CGI is bad; and the movies resemble bad fan fiction.⁷ These negative comments were clearly the most frequently shared among the debaters. The second most common theme in the conversation (underlining one's own know-how and exchanging information with other debaters) was present in 85 (33.2%) comments. Only 55 (21.5%) debaters defended Jackson and his choices as a director, and 32 (12.5%) debaters considered *The Hobbit* trilogy good.

⁵ The journalists Ethan Gilsdorf and Jussi Ahlroth are still named.

⁶ I have used the *Wired* article with the comments as data in another article, published in 2019 as "Experiencing the Sacred – *The Hobbit* as a Holy Text" (Korpua et al. 102–118).

⁷ This number of participants represents those whose comments were relevant to the theme of this research. Overall, there were 283 different commenters.

Table 1: Analysis of Ethan Gilsdorf's article "Peter Jackson Must Be Stopped" and its comments:

Prevalence	Opinion	Subtotal	Percentage of (relevant) commenters
1.	The movies are badly made; Jackson's own additions are not liked; the movies are unconvincing; the special effects are bad; "it's bad fan fiction"; predicting future defilements by Jackson	106	41.4%
2.	Emphasising the level of one's own knowledge; ego-tripping; exchanging information	85	33.2%
3.	Bringing up the original novel in different ways; comparing Tolkien and Jackson; discussing how many people have read the original novel; references to the original novel	64	25.0%
4.	Criticising Jackson as director for including too many action sequences and inappropriate jokes; calling him the new George Lucas; accusing him of robbing New Zealand financially and treating actors unjustly	63	24.6%
5.	Bringing up <i>The Lord of the Ring</i> movies; also references to <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> books; <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> considered better than <i>The Hobbit</i> , also as a book; discussing the homoerotic nuances in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	59	23.0%
6.	Emotional enunciations; fighting; criticising other debaters; calling other debaters "trolls"	57	22.3%
7.	Defending the movies and/or Jackson's choices as a director; "movies are a different discourse compared to books"; seeing imitation as a compliment; understanding the problems Jackson faced; noting that Jackson did not want to direct the movies	55	21.5%
8.	Discussing fans and fandom; enthusing about Tolkien; pseudonyms that signal user's fandom	41	16.0%
9.	Respect for Tolkien; bringing up Tolkien's opinions; discussing "faithful adaptations"; "Jackson's movies harm the original novel's reputation"	37	14.5%
10.	The movies are good	32	12.5%

11.	“Tolkien is too respected”; “Tolkien-religion”; criticising the book	22	8.6%
12.	Announcing a boycott of the movies	13	5.1%
13.	Hoping for a fan edit; announcement of a fan edit; discussion about fan edits	12	4.7%
14.	Tolkien’s original book is still available; “a book does not get damaged by movies”; “movies bring more readers for the books”	9	3.5%

As was expected, many debaters brought up Jackson’s well-received *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In total, 59 (23%) debaters mentioned *The Lord of the Rings*, and most of them preferred it to *The Hobbit*. These words by commenter #259 summarise the opinion of many debaters: “In LOTR Jackson took a fantasy world and made it real. In the *Hobbit* he took Middle Earth and made it hyper-real. Porn. Yes, less would have been so much more” (*Wired*). The word “porn” can be found several times in the research material. For example, this comment was made in the conversation on Kontu by commenter #30: “The last *Hobbit* was shameless combat porn...” (Kontu). In this context, the term “porn” stands as a metaphor for artificiality and profanity.

The preference for *The Lord of the Rings* movies over *the Hobbit* trilogy was also prominent in The World *Hobbit* Project’s research results.⁸ As Barker and Mathijs conclude:

We would argue ... that Jackson’s *Rings* films became, for very many people, a kind of template for judging Tolkien’s storyworld as a whole, and also a measure of quality of experience – to which then the *Hobbit* trilogy simply didn’t quite live up. (169)

One of the most interesting findings in the *Wired* material was the discussion on the relationship between the original book and the movie trilogy. To be exact, 37 (14.5%) debaters did some or all of the following: expressed their respect for Tolkien; brought up Tolkien’s own opinions; wanted to see faithful adaptations; and said that Jackson’s trilogy damages the original book. Meanwhile, only nine (3.5%) debaters made some or all of the following statements: Tolkien’s original book is still available; the value of the original book is not diminished by the movies; and the movies bring more readers to the original book. To be fair, there was also another related category that included opinions such as: Tolkien is overrated; the Tolkien cult has become a religion; and *The Hobbit* was not that good as a book. Overall, 22 (8.6%) debaters made comments that would fall into this category. However, it is important to note that the debaters make a strong link between *The Hobbit* films and the original book, which was bound to be reflected in the reception of the movie.

These negative emotions also brought out two more radical types of actions. First, 57 (22.3%) commenters behaved aggressively, picking fights with each other. They called each other trolls or criticised others in some other way. In addition to this, some took rough measures against the movies: thirteen

⁸ The World *Hobbit* Project attracted 36,109 responses. Answers were received from a total of 143 different countries. (Barker and Mathijs 162, 164.)

(5.1%) debaters said that they are boycotting Jackson's movies, while twelve (4.7%) discussed the possibility of more-faithful fan edits of *The Hobbit*. Some of them had already made their own edits. I will discuss fan edits towards the end of this article, as they reveal interesting things about Tolkien fans' perspective on the ownership of the legendarium; despite this, they have not been discussed much in academic studies.

Overall, the data collected from *Wired* was very extensive and diverse, which makes it an interesting subject for research. Furthermore, it showed that also outside the Nordic countries, "those who have a more affective relationship with the book and/or the Tolkien community are on average a little bit more critical towards the films, unless they conceptualize the films as different or distinct from the book" as is the case in Finland, Denmark, and Sweden (Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and Ruotsalainen 264). I would also like to suggest that when canonical books like Tolkien's *The Hobbit* are discussed, viewers are unlikely to view the adaptations and the source material as separate entities, even when there are essential differences between the two media. This is also supported by the research results of The World Hobbit Project. That study concluded that the most common reason for people to want to see *The Hobbit* films was their love for Tolkien's works (Barker and Mathijs 166).

5. Analysing the *Helsingin Sanomat* article and the conversation it generated

Jussi Ahlroth's column "Näistä syistä Peter Jacksonin Hobitti-elokuvat epäonnistuivat" ("These are the reasons why Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* movies failed") was published in *Helsingin Sanomat* on December 27, 2014. The online version was shared on the Finnish Tolkien Society's public Facebook page the same day. It received 44 comments (of which 39 were relevant to this study), 203 likes, and 36 shares (as of January 9, 2015, when the data was collected). All quotes are either paraphrases or translations from the original Finnish.

As an object of research, the Kontu page is remarkably interesting and apposite, as it is a homogenous Tolkien fan community. The writer of the critical column, Jussi Ahlroth, also mentions having watched *The Lord of the Rings* making-of documentaries at least ten times. Thus, it is safe to say that he is committed to the topic and knows a great deal about it.

The column and the comment thread on the Kontu page included 39 different debaters (including Ahlroth). Of these, 36 made comments that were relevant to this study. As there were 44 comments in total and 39 of these were relevant, it was common for participants to only comment once, in marked contrast to *Wired*.

Similar themes can be found in both threads. And, as in the thread on the *Wired* website, the most popular opinion at Kontu was that *The Hobbit* movies were bad: sixteen debaters (44.5%), expressed disappointment (Table 2).

Table 2: Analysis on Jussi Ahlroth’s article, “Näistä syistä Peter Jacksonin Hobitti-elokuvat epäonnistuivat”, and the comments on it on the Kontu Facebook page:

Prevalence	Opinion	Subtotal	Percentage of (relevant) commenters:
1.	The movies are badly made; they are not loyal to the book; they are too stretched; they are not memorable; there are too many special effects	16	44.5%
2.	Bringing up <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> movies; comparing <i>The Hobbit</i> movies to the <i>LOTR</i> movies; “Lord of the Rings movies were better”	15	41.7%
3.	The movies were good; “I liked them”	14	38.9%
4.	Comparing the movies to the original novel; mentioning Tolkien; respect towards Tolkien	13	36.1%
5.	Discussions about being a fan; bringing up one’s own fan activity	12	33.3%
6.	Emotional enunciations; fighting; criticising other debaters	11	30.6%
7.	Contemplating why the movies failed; “understanding Jackson”	8	22.2%
8.	Emphasising one’s own knowledge level; ego-tripping	7	19.4%
9.	Criticising Jackson as a director; Jackson anti-fandom	6	16.7%
10.	Jackson does not respect Tolkien enough	2	5.6%
10.	Jackson is a good director	2	5.6%
10.	Books and cinema are different media	2	5.6%

Fifteen (41.7%) debaters compared *The Hobbit* movies to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy; only one of them thought that *The Hobbit* was better (due to their antipathy towards the actor Elijah Wood). In addition, 13 (36.1%) debaters compared *The Hobbit* movies to the original book, and many of them expressed respect towards Tolkien. There is a clear correlation in these opinions: *The Hobbit* movies are not usually considered as stand-alone works. Instead, they are mostly seen in relation to Tolkien’s original book and Jackson’s earlier Tolkien films, which were more widely liked, even adored. Ahlroth summarises this in the beginning of his column: “The New Zealander directed three wonderful *Lord of the Rings* movies. Now he has made three bad *Hobbit* movies. What happened?” Later in the column, Ahlroth states that one of the reasons for the failure was that Peter Jackson lost the respect for Tolkien that was apparent in *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

Many commenters shared Ahlroth's view, as the numbers above show. For example, commenter #9 wondered whether as fans they should have been more critical towards *The Lord of the Rings* movies just to prevent Jackson from building up hubris. This comment shows that at least some of the fans consider themselves to be active rather than passive consumers.

Another commenter (#25) wrote that "*The Hobbit* movies were a disappointment, although I'm a relatively fanatical *The Lord of the Rings* fan. Or maybe the fandom is the very reason these movies were so disappointing". It is interesting that only two debaters pointed out that movies and books are two different media. An explanation for this is the debaters' strong attachment to Tolkien's legendarium, which a generic viewer might not share.

However, *The Hobbit* movies also had admirers in the Kontu thread, with fourteen (38.9%) commenters saying that the movies were good. It is worth noting that one fan of *The Hobbit* movies admitted to not having read the original book. Many of the debaters who thought the movies were good also pointed out problems in them. The movies were considered to be good "in spite of" the problems. Issues mentioned more than once include additions to the story and the length of the trilogy.

Unlike those commenting on the *Wired* article, the Kontu debaters showed only few signs of Jackson anti-fandom. They were simply disappointed that *The Hobbit* movies were not as good as Tolkien's original book and Jackson's earlier *The Lord of the Rings* movies. The most extreme, polarising opinions were rarely present. One probable reason for this is that the conversation took place on a platform that is not anonymous, unlike the comments section on the *Wired* website. It has been argued that anonymity in online conversations may lead to increased polarisation, while the obligation to register with an account tends to make the debaters act more objectively (Hardaker 60; Salmela 60).

6. General analysis of both sets of research material

Now that both sets of data have been discussed on their own, it is time to bring them together for cumulative analysis. First, I am going to discuss the viewers who saw *The Hobbit* movies positively. Thirty-two of the 256 debaters (12.5%) on the *Wired* thread expressed a liking for the movies, while in the Kontu thread, fourteen of the 36 debaters (38.9%) liked them. Here is a comment by a pleased viewer: "I stepped into the last *Hobbit* movie and was given hours of pure fantasy, pure thrills and pure excitement by some of the greatest artists working today" (commenter #207, Gilsdorf).

Some debaters loved both versions of the story: Tolkien's book and Jackson's films. Their Tolkien fandom included no Jackson anti-fandom, although many of them concluded that Jackson did better work with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Only a small minority of commenters said that *The Hobbit* trilogy was better than *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. These comments were usually based on the hatred of Elijah Wood and/or Frodo's and Sam's "too-close relationship" in *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

A key idea for this group was the notion that movies and books are two different media, and that movies must have market value and draw in big audiences. This requires action and drama. Profundity does not sell, as

commenter #31 said: “do not expect that anyone can bring Tolkien’s original stories in their original themes without pleasing the masses with degrading action and drama. It sells better than deep thoughts about things like disappearing beauty” (Kontu). On the *Wired* thread, 55 debaters (21.5%) either noted that a movie and a book are different discourses or sought to understand and defend Jackson in another way. On the Kontu thread, only two (5.6%) debaters mentioned this.

The differences between books and movies were brought up explicitly in this statement by commenter #207 on the *Wired* thread:

Your naivete’ [sic] is stunning. What you have just done is give a literary criticism of a visual work of art [sic]. A movie is DIFFERENT from a book!

Think about that complicated concept for a good long time. Jackson made thousands or tens of thousands of CINEMATIC decisions in mounting this productions [sic]. Here are a few you concentrate on that having [sic] NOTHING to do with the book.

seamless CGI

Good to great acting

state of the art sound design

expert staging of action scenes by one of the best ever.

And so on. Now, put down your literary hat and go out and purchase a cinematic hat. Put it on when you go to see a MOVIE. Its [sic] called a movie because things are MOVING. (commenter #207, Gilsdorf)

This group of debaters regarded Tolkien more highly than Jackson, but nevertheless considered watching the movies to have been either a neutral or a positive experience. They saw no rivalry between Tolkien and Jackson, or if they did, it had no negative impact on the experience.

This was not the case for the following group of viewers: those who disliked *The Hobbit* movies. On *Wired*’s thread, 106 viewers (41.4%) said that *The Hobbit* movies were of inadequate quality; 63 (24.6%) disliked Jackson as a director; and 37 (14.5%) believed that the movies would ruin the reputation of the book. On the Kontu thread, six debaters (16.7%) criticised Jackson as a director and sixteen (44.4%) disliked the movies. Feelings of betrayal and even occasional impressions of blasphemy are present for example in this comment, made by commenter #215: “The hobbit [sic] film is like fowling [sic] on Tolkien’s grave, they totally ruined it!” (Gilsdorf).

Vivi Theodoropoulou asserts that anti-fandom can be sparked by fandom, and describes a “particular category of anti-fans: those whose status as such is defined by the fact that they are fans. [This chapter] looks at the anti-fan within the fan” (316). This description, which Theodoropoulou subsequently places with the specific context of football fandoms, can also be applied to the anti-fans of *The Hobbit* movie, as their hatred is usually rooted in their Tolkien fandom. In the *Wired* thread, commenter #161 said that it is impossible for a real Tolkien fan to like Jackson’s adaptations. They thought that Tolkien overruled Jackson: “No one is [a] ‘die hard’ Tolkien fan who is not furiously hostile to there being any alternative version to Tolkien’s stories.

Christopher forever, PJ never ever!!" (Gilsdorf).⁹ Similar comments were also found on the Kontu thread. For example, commenter #4 identified as Jackson's anti-fan.

Anti-fandom can take strong forms. One dedicated Tolkien fan ended up walking out from the screening and starting a Jackson boycott. As was mentioned before, on the *Wired* thread thirteen debaters (5.1%) said that they were boycotting Jackson's movies. On the Kontu thread, boycotts were not discussed. Here are two examples of the boycott discussion from *Wired*:

I love the books, I was brought up by them, my father being a major fan of them. I saw some of the Peter Jackson movies and didn't like them. I walked out for a big chunk of one of them, and left during the show of another to get something to eat while my friends carried on watching. I simply did not recognise [sic] the stories I knew with what I saw on-screen, haven't bothered with the Hobbit at all. (commenter #121, Gilsdorf)

The boycott was total in some cases:

I haven't seen any of the Hobbit movies, and I don't intend to. -- I read the book, the Hobbit, which was my foyee [sic] into the Lord of the Rings, and I love it. I get the impression here that he just padded out the stories to make more money. I'm not interested in having my memories of the Hobbit tainted by greed. (commenter #35, Gilsdorf)

Comments like this reveal that inside a Jackson anti-fan is a Tolkien fan who wants to protect their beloved writer. Annoyance caused by perceived offenses towards Tolkien sometimes inspires very colourful forms of expression, as in the case of commenter #276: "He took my favourite book from childhood and pooped on it" (Gilsdorf). The core theme of all these conversations is respect. And members of the group "Negative viewing experiences and boycotts", whom Barker calls "Negative 'Tolkien' affiliators", see Tolkien's original book as culturally superior to Jackson's adaptations (218).

Theodoropoulou's research on football fans cannot be applied to other types of fandoms without certain significant changes. The dichotomy between fans and anti-fans is much sharper in the world of football: "These are cases where two fan objects are clear-cut or traditional rivals, thus inviting fans to become anti-fans of the 'rival' object of admiration" (316). In my research material, some debaters positioned Tolkien and Jackson against each other in this manner.

A large number of debaters did not oppose the filming of *The Hobbit* book as such; they simply did not like the way Jackson had executed the movies:

⁹ Here "Christopher" refers to J.R.R. Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien (1924-2020). He has edited his father's posthumously published works – for example, *The Silmarillion* (1977) – and worked as a chair of the Tolkien Estate, which controls J.R.R. Tolkien's literary legacy.

Yeah, Jacksonites always try to spin criticism as purism, that people who criticise PJ's changes are anti-any change, whereas most fans of the books are OK with changes as long as they are good. However, changes here are horrible, no way around it. For example, there are 13 interchangeable dwarves without personality (expect 2-3) in the book. fans [sic] of the book were hoping that 2-3 movies would give those underdeveloped dwarves attention and flesh them out. That didn't happen. Instead, we got awful dwarf/Elf [sic] romance, Alfrid, Radagast and his bird poop. Legolas [sic] endless ninja antics and Bard's useless children. Screen time that could have fleshed out characters people wanted to see more of ended up wasted on characters nobody asked for. (commenter #102, Gilsdorf)

Comments like this were quite common; it is only natural that fans would feel the need to protect what they love (Theodoropoulou 318). This kind of juxtaposition is bound to create anti-fandom.

7. Branching out further: Fan edits and their significance

To conclude my analysis, I will discuss fan edits further, as I consider them to be one of the most interesting phenomena in the research data. Some Tolkien fans on the *Wired* thread felt a strong need to correct Jackson's "mistakes". As was mentioned before, twelve (14.7%) debaters discussed both potential and existing fan edits of *The Hobbit* movies. In the Kontu thread, no such activity was found. In the *Wired* thread, the author of the original article, Ethan Gilsdorf, wished for a fan edit:

But meanwhile, he's surely preparing his extra-extended dance mix version of Five Armies for DVD, adding even more gore and hero moves. Before he does, let's hope some generous fan makes a cut of this entire Hobbit trilogy that restores it to sanity. And believability. (Gilsdorf)

Some of the debaters accepted the challenge, saying that they were willing to fix Jackson's mistakes. For instance, they wanted to remove Legolas and Tauriel from the films. Commenter #21 wrote: "... there really need [sic] to be a fan edit, and the process of fan edits and a way to find good fan edits should be more mainstream" (Gilsdorf). The conversation paid off. Commenter #13 wrote that he had already made a version of the first two *Hobbit* movies: "I agree WIRED! And you're welcome -- I'm working on an edit. already [sic] the first two movies and will work on the third as soon as it is released to [sic] blu-ray. Is there any legal way to show it to people?" (commenter #13, Gilsdorf).

This shows that dissatisfaction can work as a prime mover. Jonathan Gray, who established the concept of anti-fandom, is aware of this:

Hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and "effects" or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture. ("Antifandom" 841)

In this case, the moving force was the anti-fandom of a media text combined with the fandom of the source text, the original book. This can also be seen as an attempt to merge Jackson's world seamlessly into Tolkien's world – on

Tolkien's terms. In this way, it may manifest a need to remove the tensions and contradictions between the two creators' stories. The attempt also gives rise to interesting reflections on Tolkien fans' *conceptions of authority and the ownership of Tolkien's legendarium*. Some Tolkien fans do not want to recognise Jackson's position as the custodian of Tolkien's cinematic world, and, on a more general level, Tolkien fans do not respect Jackson's authority as much as some other fandoms might. This is also reflected in the comment that Jackson's *The Hobbit* movies were "bad fan fiction".¹⁰

To further illuminate my point, I would like to contrast my findings to a study on another influential fantasy fandom, that of *Game of Thrones*, and how it differs from Tolkien fans in regards of authorship and fan fiction. In my view, the fan edits of *The Hobbit* movies should be regarded as a sub-genre of fan fiction.

In their article "Defining Authorship in User-Generated Content: Copyright Struggles in *The Game of Thrones*", Sarikakis, Krug, and Rodriguez-Amat examine fans' understanding of authorship within their cooperative space. The authors analyse a fan board called "A Forum of Ice and Fire", which forms a part of the Westeros.org website, "the most important fan-coordinated network discussing GRRM's work and the TV-show and other Westeros-related content" (545).¹¹ There are both striking similarities and obvious differences between their research findings and mine. This highlights the differences between these two fandoms, especially the relationship between the fandom and the authors and other content providers such as movie directors.

In both cases, the community-building process was an important part of the conversation. In my own study, this can be seen from the tables above. What is interesting, however, are the vastly diverse ways that *Game of Thrones* fans and Tolkien fans position themselves as content creators. Sarikakis, Krug, and Rodriguez-Amat write: "Fans, the analysis has shown, do not portray themselves as creators, but they still produce elaborated interpretations" (554). Martin's fans do not see themselves as "interlocutors in the creative process" or as making "contributions to the storyline" (554). On the contrary, fan fiction and unlicensed fan art are forbidden on Westeros.org (553). This is in sharp contrast to my *The Hobbit* research material that includes discussions on fan edits. The creation of such material was encouraged even by the author of the *Wired* article, Ethan Gilsdorf.

The essential question is: Why? Why is *Game of Thrones* fan fiction frowned upon but *The Hobbit* fan fiction (or to be more exact, fan edits) wished for? The answer lies in the relationships Tolkien and Martin have to the texts in question. Martin's connection is much closer than the relationship Tolkien set up between his work and himself before he died. At least when Sarikakis, Krug, and Rodriguez-Amat published their article in 2013, the *Game of Thrones* author George R. R. Martin was not only alive, he also actively participated in the making of the series (545). Martin has "the ultimate authority", an idea connected to Romanticism and its idealised notion of the author (551). Fan fiction is considered objectionable since fans do not want to step on Martin's toes.

¹⁰ See Table 1.

¹¹ GRRM refers to George R. R. Martin.

Tolkien and Martin enjoy the same ultimate respect among their fans. However, and this is the crucial difference, Tolkien's relationship to *The Hobbit* movies is much more distant and debatable. Tolkien sold the movie rights of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* in 1969 to United Artists for "just over £104,000", motivated by his recent bad experiences with pirates, namely the pirated U.S. paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. Selling the movie rights released Tolkien from having to worry about copyright issues. He also needed the money (Oziewicz 256–57). The distance between Tolkien and *The Hobbit* movies gives his fans more space to work and make their own fan edits. In some cases, Tolkien fans see Jackson as a peer, creating his own fan fiction. In instances like this, the Tolkien fans do not want to recognise Jackson's position as the main creator and custodian of Tolkien's cinematic world. On the one hand, making fan edits responds to the need to defend Tolkien's inheritance; on the other, the fans do not feel that they could betray or offend Tolkien by re-creating *The Hobbit* movies. Most importantly, these fan edits are Tolkien fans' moral statement that signals the collectively experienced ownership of the Tolkien legacy.

8. Conclusion

This paper has discussed Tolkien fans' reactions to and actions spurred by Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* movies. I wanted to know what kind of reactions Tolkien fans had to Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* movies; why these reactions occurred; and what kind of actions they induced.

Tolkien can be considered one of the most noteworthy fantasy authors of all time, even the most noteworthy. It was therefore likely that Peter Jackson's movie versions of Tolkien's books (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*) would be widely commented on by Tolkien fans. The comments would include recognition, criticism, boycotts, and fan edits. Jackson would also gain some fans and anti-fans in the process.

In the research material, it was clear that Tolkien's original novel was appreciated much more than Jackson's movie adaptations. However, some fans loved the possibility of revisiting Middle-earth with Jackson. These debaters made a clear distinction between Tolkien's book and Jackson's film adaptations, emphasising that Jackson can make changes and additions because literature and cinema are two different media.

On the opposing side were the viewers who had negative viewing experiences. These disappointed debaters saw Tolkien's and Jackson's works as a problematic continuum, and they could not differentiate the movies from the original novel. This is in line with an earlier study by Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and Ruotsalainen (264).

Overall, Jackson's *the Hobbit* movies were considered a disappointment in comparison to the earlier *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The World Hobbit Project's research results (based on an exceptionally large amount of research data) drew similar conclusions (Barker and Mathijs 169).

The debaters who did not like Jackson's *The Hobbit* films said that Tolkien's valuable original novel was being violated, and that it was unrealistic to try to watch Jackson's movies without linking them to the original novel and

feeling betrayed. This feeling of betrayal even gave rise to some Jackson anti-fandom among Tolkien fans. Jackson was seen as being connected to Tolkien.

These negative feelings resulted in practical actions as well. Some Tolkien fans boycotted Jackson's movies altogether or rooted for some "pure" fan editions of the movies. In this way Tolkien fans try to integrate Jackson's world seamlessly into Tolkien's world and remove the uncomfortable juxtaposition between the two versions. In addition, these fan edits could be a way to challenge Jackson's position as the main custodian of Tolkien's cinematic world. So, in a way, these fan edits could be a moral statement by Tolkien fans, signalling their collectively experienced ownership of Tolkien's highly respected legacy.

Biography: Minna Siikilä-Laitila has a master's degree in communication studies from the University of Vaasa. She is currently finalising her doctoral thesis in contemporary culture studies at the University of Jyväskylä. Her upcoming dissertation discusses readers' views on the authorship of fantasy fiction writers. She also studies the group dynamics of fan- and anti-fan groups formed online; for example, from the viewpoint of interpretive communities. Siikilä-Laitila has been a participant in the research projects "The World Hobbit Project in Finland" and "Art, Copyright and the Transformation of Authorship".

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