

# THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



## The Hobbit box set released – and finally, the Jackson saga is over

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Freedom. Think Jam

With the release of the DVD box set of The Hobbit, Peter Jackson's stronghold on the trilogy may finally be over.

Undeniably, the trilogy has been incredibly successful on a US and worldwide stage. The three-film trilogy cost around US\$765m to produce and made almost US\$3 billion worldwide – so, a triumph for all those who had anything financial to gain from the franchise.

But despite this, it gained little attention. No mention on the award circuits. Not a very positive reception. The problem is, the films just aren't very good. The Hobbit trilogy can be seen as one of the lowest points of the blockbuster culture and modern Hollywood film-making.

For over two years now, the Hobbit films have fascinated us and other scholars alike. The three instalments have even inspired an international research project.

Fascinated, not exactly in a very positive way though. The films fail on the most central point of storytelling – painting an immersive picture. Here's how.

### Authors



#### Tom van Laer

Senior Lecturer in Marketing, City, University of London



#### Thorsten Hennig-Thurau

Professor of Marketing and Media Research, University of Münster



One of the five armies. Think Jam

Watching *The Hobbit* is like a bad taxi ride in a new town. Instead of staying on the perfectly scenic direct route to your direction, your driver decides to take you up every side street just to show you the sights. Eventually you get so tired that you lose all interest in what attracted you to the town in the first place.

This is what can happen when you take a small novel and transform it into three overly long films. The films throw out hook after hook after hook but never follow through in a meaningful way on any of them. This means you can't really connect to any character who might transport you into the narrative world.

Peter Jackson's adaptation suffers from a drastic case of over-dramatisation, failing in terms of storytelling quality. The underlying problem is that Tolkien's novel is a relatively linear story that is coherent and enjoyable because it does not pretend to be more than the tale of a group of unusual heroes that travel a long way to fight a dragon. Jackson blows this up to a much larger scale by adding lots of links to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and characters.





Fresh from *Lost*. Think *Jam*

All these additions don't blend with the main journey story. They seem like awkward and artificial add-ons. Jackson may have been aiming for something "richer" and more "ambitious" than the straightforward source he was adapting, but instead he just produced an incoherent and overblown *Lord of the Rings* copycat. The old adage "less is more" has hardly been truer than for these films.

Probably as a result of its blown-up nature, the storytelling pace varies, with the films arbitrarily changing from high-speed action-adventure to slow-moving character piece. It is like your taxi driver not only ruins your experience of the new town, but also changes gear every second.

The films oscillate between breath-taking action, human drama, quasi-religious pathos, and stupid comedy, *Dumb and Dumber* style. Just think of Radagast the Brown covered in bird droppings. Worse still, all this change in tone appears to happen on an involuntary, random basis. Even the greatest, most captivating drama loses its appeal when over-the-top thrills and cheap gags surround it.



Ridiculous Radagast. Think Jam

Another way that the films fail to captivate audiences is the excessive CGI and trashy makeup. Jackson spent US\$560m to bring his hobbits, orcs, and dwarfs to life, but when the orcs ride on screen on their horse-like creatures, they move like they have been animated with Ray Harryhausen's good old stop-motion special effects.

And dwarves may be comical creatures, but they lose all dramatic power altogether in their 48 frames per second Hobbit renditions. The way they seem to shrink when on screen with humans or wizards only heightens the sense of play-town. Watching the romance that evolves between “honey-I’ve-been-shrunk” Kili and the elven Tauriel made us chuckle, nothing more.



Dwarvish. Think Jam

Some thought that The Battle of the Five Armies, the final of the three was the most lacking, but we thought it the best. It's the only one that is able to add at least some value by drastically extending

Tolkien's fable. Yet it is also a case study of why believability and lifelikeness are key for narrative transportation and that Jackson is not aware of that.

What a disaster. Neither Tolkien's family nor we can think of another film series that has adapted a well-known and beloved book in a less authentic and truthful way. There is hardly any resemblance left, except for some occasional names that readers might have heard before and that might resonate emotionally, only to certainly be destroyed in the next scene. The Hobbit not only fails as a cinematic achievement; it is also a lousy adaptation.

We can only hope that Peter Jackson's epic failure might provide a blueprint to future directors as to how not to make a movie.



Film   Fantasy literature   Storytelling   The Hobbit