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Report for the British Board of Film Classification on viewers of the Lord of the Rings, aged under 16

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Report for the British Board of Film Classification on viewers of the *Lord of the Rings*, aged under 16.

Professor Martin Barker

This is a report on what can be learnt from our world dataset about viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* who were aged under 16. In this report, I draw both on the world set, and on the UK subset, sometimes drawing comparisons between them. The reason for using both is that, obviously, the world set is so much larger (comprising 24,739 in toto, with 2475 under 16), but the UK set (comprising 3115 in toto, and 306 under 16s) allows us to explore both some of the specificities of responses here, the qualitative meaning of some responses (given we worked in 14 languages, many are inaccessible to us for analysis), and of course their relations to the quantitative patterns that emerge.

A reminder of what I am drawing upon: we created a questionnaire with some 25 questions, combining a series of Likert-type scale questions (how enjoyable, how important), some other quantitative questions (for example, the kind of story people judged *LOTR* to be, and the amount of contact with the book) with a series of free-text questions, asking people to tell us about their reactions to the film, why they saw it, where they learnt about it from, their favourite character, and their most memorable and disappointing moments. We also garnered some demographic information (age, sex, and kind of occupation). We gathered responses both via the Web, and by leafleting outside cinemas in 13 cities and towns around the country. All these were entered into a relational database, allowing us to search and locate patterns, and then examine the qualitative meaning of those patterns. This is a very unusual, but highly effective method for such research. I have gone as far as I can in the time I had available (which was limited).

It is very important to recall at all times that ours was an opportunist sample. We do not claim it to be a representative sample – indeed, it is not clear what it might be representative of. What we can say is that the resultant set is large enough, and the range of responses given sufficiently complex, that it is possible to do a very large amount of internal groupings and comparisons. So, we can explore the *relations between* a large number of variables and thus, for these audiences, look at how responses are *patterned and meaningful*.

We worked with broad age groupings, and did not differentiate within those under 16. We do know, from anecdotal experience and evidence that our group inevitably contained a large proportion of those aged 13-15, but it also includes some as young as 9. This derives from the fact that our questionnaires were partly completed on the web, partly on paper, and we know from both observing and hearing about the latter that some quite young children completed the questionnaire.

Some basic statistics, first, to provide a bit of a portrait of these young viewers:

Table 1: Sex ratio:

	Male	Female	Total
World set	940 (38%)	1535 (62%)	2475 (100%)
UK set	132 (43.1%)	174 (56.9%)	306 (100%)

Overall ratios (world set)	49.5%	50.5%	24739
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I was at first surprised by these figures. It was not a proportioning I had seen before, or expected. It shows that among young viewers there was a higher proportion of girls than would have been expected from the (uncannily evenly split) overall world set. It does on the other hand fit with some particular observations we have made, albeit these are not quantifiable. We noticed a strong sense that *The Lord of the Rings* constituted for many a very particular kind of family experience – something not just for children, but offering a kind of special experience that all would be able to participate in and enjoy. Second, it comports with the more fragmentary but still undeniable finding from a lot of our interviews of a curious special-case around this story: that a lot of *fathers* were especially keen to take their *daughters* to see it, and the daughters reciprocated, feeling that it gave them a new insight into what their fathers had long enjoyed, and a chance to build a relationship with them. But I do acknowledge the possibility that, for some reason, more young girls than boys came across, or were more willing to complete, our questionnaire.

Table 2: Enjoyment of the film:

	Male World	Male UK	Female World	Female UK	World comparison
Extremely Enjoyable	726 (77.6%)	105 (79.5%)	1265 (82.7%)	143 (82.2%)	17440 (70.8%)
Very Enjoyable	156 (16.7%)	20 (15.2%)	195 (12.7%)	24 (13.8%)	5160 (20.9%)
Reasonably Enjoyable	37 (4.0%)	7 (5.3%)	58 (3.8%)	6 (3.4%)	1577 (6.4%)
Hardly Enjoyable	6 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	8 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	262 (1.1%)
Not at all Enjoyable	11 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	4 (0.3%)	1 (0.6%)	201 (0.8%)
Totals	936*	132	1530	174	24640

*Slight variations from expected overall figures indicate that one or two people did not answer a particular question.

This Table shows that young people, both boys and girls, shared older people's overwhelming enthusiasm for the film – indeed, emphasised it, with girls taking the lead in this.

Table 3: Importance of seeing the film:

	Male world	Male UK	Female world	Female UK	World Comparison
Extremely Important	584 (62.3%)	86 (65.2%)	1149 (75.0%)	127 (73.0%)	14726 (59.7%)
Very Important	227 (24.2%)	29 (22.0%)	235 (15.3%)	25 (14.4%)	5979 (24.2%)
Reasonably Important	86 (9.2%)	14 (10.6%)	108 (7.0%)	16 (9.2%)	3043 (12.3%)
Hardly	26	2	33	5	639

Important	(2.8%)	(1.5%)	(2.2%)	(2.9%)	(2.6%)
Not at all Important	14 (1.5%)	1 (0.8%)	7 (0.5%)	1 (0.6%)	284 (1.2%)
Totals	937	132	1532	174	24671

As before, young people are broadly following – but slightly exaggerating – adults’ response patterns, with a slightly sharper gender divide than previously. It is worth considering more closely how this relates to patterns of relations to the books, which our questionnaire allowed us to do.

Table 4: Relations with book reading:

	Male world	Male UK	Female world	Female UK	World Comparison
Read more Than once	332 (35.8%)	33 (25.2%)	694 (45.4%)	69 (39.9%)	11608 (47.4%)
Read Once	213 (23.0%)	40 (30.5%)	276 (18.1%)	30 (17.3%)	5195 (21.2%)
Still Reading	95 (10.2%)	15 (11.5%)	181 (11.9%)	27 (15.6%)	1602 (6.5%)
Read Some	80 (8.6%)	14 (10.7%)	137 (9.0%)	17 (9.8%)	1625 (6.6%)
Haven’t Read	208 (22.4%)	28 (21.4%)	239 (15.7%)	30 (17.3%)	4467 (18.2%)
Totals	928	131	1527	173	24497

The raw comparison with the world set should not surprise. Young people have simply had less time to get to read the *Lord of the Rings*, and – although it clearly does get read with pleasure and enthusiasm by some remarkably young children – the sheer scale of the books and their lexical demands mean that the lower overall reading figures for young people are unremarkable. If anything, the opposite is true, in fact. The fact that fewer girls under 16 have not read the books than in the full world set is striking. Perhaps the other striking figure, for all the cohort is small, is the one for the young male UK once-readers. It looks as if something about this book has got them reading, and successfully (they have finished it).

What is interesting to check, then, is the relationship between book reading and enjoyment of the film:

Table 5: Relations between Book-reading and Film Enjoyment (Under 16s) – UK figures followed in each box by world figures:

	Extremely enjoyable		Very enjoyable		Reasonably enjoyable		Hardly enjoyable		Not at all Enjoyable		Totals
Read more than once	92	880	7	115	2	19	0	6	0	4	101 1024
	91.1	85.9	6.9	11.2	2.0	1.9	0	0.6	0	0.4	
Read Once	60	407	8	57	2	20	0	2	0	3	70 489
	85.7	83.2	11.4	11.7	2.8	4.1	0	0.4	0	0.6	
Still Reading	42	246	2	26	0	2	0	1	0	1	44 276
	95.4	89.1	4.5	9.4	0	0.7	0	0.4	0	0.4	
Read Some	23	162	6	42	2	10	0	1	0	1	31 216

	74.2 75.0	19.4 19.4	6.5 4.6	0 0.5	0 0.5	
Haven't Read	31 286 52.5 64.2	20 109 33.9 24.5	7 41 11.9 9.2	0 3 0 0.7	1 6 1.7 1.3	59 445

Some of the figures in here are getting ludicrously small, but the overall tendencies still deserve consideration. There is the same general relationship that we have found with the adult reading public – that book reading associates with pleasure – but while there clearly is a strong relationship here (compare the two Repeat-Readers, and Not-Readers for their levels of Extreme Enjoyment), it is just not as strong. The world figures certainly display a relationship between reading and film-enjoyment (compare again the Repeat-Readers and Not-Readers for their levels of Extreme Enjoyment). To my surprise, the young readers polarise more sharply. The question is: why?

Table 6: Relations between Book-reading and Film Enjoyment – world figures:

	Extremely enjoyable	Very enjoyable	Reasonably Enjoyable	Hardly enjoyable	Not at all enjoyable	Totals
Read more than once	8763 (76.2%)	2105 (18.3%)	569 (4.9%)	95 (0.8%)	64 (0.6%)	11506
Read once	3745 (72.2%)	1072 (20.7%)	288 (5.6%)	48 (0.9%)	34 (0.7%)	5187
Still reading	1279 (79.8%)	257 (16.0%)	47 (2.9%)	13 (0.8%)	6 (0.4%)	1602
Read some	1080 (67.0%)	384 (23.8%)	121 (7.5%)	20 (1.2%)	16 (1.0%)	1611
Haven't read	2428 (54.5%)	1317 (29.6%)	546 (12.3%)	84 (1.9%)	80 (1.8%)	4455

In the case of the world-set, we were able to get another measure relating to social status, through people's indications of their kind of occupation. This is hardly possible with under-16s, who in the UK and most other countries in the world are likely to be in school. A quick check on the figures returned do reveal some oddities. Disregarding very small groups (which could be the result of mistakes, or young people being jokey about this), the following meaningfully sized groups emerge:

Table 7: Numbers self-nominating as 'Student' or 'Unemployed':

	World set	UK set
Student	2110	266
Unemployed	134	27
Clerical/administrative	57	1
Creative	45	5
Total	2475	306

Early on, we tripped over that odd grouping of Unemployed, and tried to investigate them further. Sadly, very few had given contact details, so we could not do much by way of interview. Exploring their responses within the dataset, it did seem that there was a noticeable difference – in their levels of Enjoyment, not least.

Comparing those calling themselves Students with those calling themselves Unemployed, and limiting ourselves simply to Extreme Enjoyment and Repeat Reading (because the numbers are getting very small), we found the following:

Table 8: Relations of Nominated Occupation to Enjoyment, and Book-reading:

%	World 'Students'	UK 'Students'	World 'Unemployed'	UK 'Unemployed'
Extreme Enjoyment	1699 (80.5%)	212 (79.7%)	115 (85.8%)	26 (96.3%)
Read more Than once	889 (42.1%)	84 (31.6%)	59 (44.0%)	10 (37.0%)
Overlap	765 (36.2%)	77 (28.9%)	52 (38.8%)	9 (33.3%)

What these figures suggest (they are getting perilously small, therefore cannot do more than that) is that book-reading is *less important to enjoyment in the UK* than in the rest of the world; and that it is *least important* to those with the highest level of Enjoyment: those UK under-16 respondents who chose to call themselves 'Unemployed'. We tentatively suggest from this that there is a strand among young people who (a) do not want to think of themselves at school, (b) experience book-reading as something quite alien to them, and yet (c) respond very strongly indeed to a fantasy film which derives from a book. I think of this as an 'alienation-effect'.

A key indicator in understanding audiences generally has been their Modality choices, that is, their selections of the *kind of story* they believe *The Lord of the Rings* is. This is trickiest to consider with the younger viewers, since here there has to be a question about their grasp of the meanings of some of the terms (eg 'allegory'). But it is nonetheless worthwhile to consider if, and how far, their choices differ from those of the overall population. (NB: it must be remembered that respondents were invited to give up to three responses. Very many did, but some gave only one or two responses. The percentages therefore are against the total number of response, not against the number of respondents.)

Table 9: Under 16s Modality choices, compared with UK and world sets:

	World U-16s	World set	UK U-16s	UK set
Allegory	146 (2.1%)	2592 (3.8%)	18 (2.1%)	361 (4.2%)
Epic	1030 (15.1%)	13038 (19.1%)	149 (17.2%)	1765 (20.4%)
Fairytale	270 (4.0%)	2809 (4.1%)	16 (1.8%)	204 (2.4%)
Fantasy	1050 (15.4%)	9882 (14.5%)	132 (15.2%)	1205 (13.9%)
Game-world	70 (1.0%)	583 (0.8%)	5 (0.6%)	33 (0.4%)
Good vs evil	1184 (17.4%)	10721 (15.7%)	172 (19.9%)	1467 (17.0%)
Myth/legend	745 (10.9%)	8895 (13.1%)	73 (8.4%)	996 (11.5%)
Quest	978 (14.3%)	8282 (12.2%)	146 (16.8%)	1215 (14.1%)
SFX film	173	2037	10	144

	(2.5%)	(3.0%)	(1.2%)	(1.7%)
Spiritual journey	500 (7.3%)	5408 (7.9%)	58 (6.7%)	741 (8.6%)
Threatened homeland	254 (3.7%)	1686 (2.5%)	32 (3.7%)	261 (3.0%)
War story	419 (6.1%)	2172 (3.2%)	55 (6.4%)	250 (2.9%)
Totals	6819	68105	866	8642

There are few strong tendencies in here. Younger respondents by and large are assessing *The Lord of the Rings* to be pretty much the same kind of story as are older respondents. Where there are shifts, they tend to present in both world and UK sets. So, in both cases, Good vs Evil has become the most chosen Modality category, replacing Epic. There is minimal variation in two categories that *might* have been seen as likely to attract younger viewers' nominations – Game-world, and SFX film. But two do show small but interesting rises – Quest (rising slightly), and War story (doubling, albeit from a small base); while Allegory and Myth/:Legend show small corresponding falls. To me, these suggest a slight tendency (not to be overstated) *not* to turn *the Lord of the Rings* into a 'children's story', but to find within it some simpler ways of naming adult themes.

In choosing their Favourite Characters, younger viewers are a little more 'stereotyped' than older viewers. I took a random sample of 100 UK under 16s, and examined both choices and reasons. There is a strong preponderance of a few characters. – notably Aragorn (21 mentions) and Legolas (29 mentions). What is interesting is the ease with which female respondents see separately their sexual attraction to an actor, and their pleasure in the role he plays (so, as with more adult respondents, Legolas can be simultaneously 'hot' and 'cool' – no problem ...!). The one surprise, compared to older respondents, is the near-absence of mentions of Frodo (only mentions in the 100). This does perhaps require a little thought. It isn't clear why this should be so. Noone appears to complain about the acting or the casting. But his character as presented is in some way *not particularly relevant* to younger people. I wonder (it is no more than that) if adherence to Frodo requires too much of a *protective* attitude – as it were, an adult-child relationship – which would be quite hard for a young person to manage, except with a smaller child.

This is about as far as we are able to go with purely quantitative indicators. Overall, what they suggest is that young viewers are really not that different from older ones. They are differentiated precisely by being younger, but take up, as they can, the same kinds of interest and orientation in the book and film, as older readers and viewers do. Where perhaps they differ, is not in having distinct (childlike, or incomplete) interests, but in not having taken on that veneer of sophistication that leads people to judge for others. These are largely viewers who go for enjoyment's sake, and are unembarrassed about their enjoyments.

If we look at some of the indicators of kinds of response, we see what I might call a *clearer patterning* than in older viewers. Take two cases: Most Disappointing, and Most Memorable. In the former case, it has been possible to explore in considerable detail the reasons for disappointments, and to outline changes across generations of respondents. Using, again, a random 100 sample, a definite patterning shows.

Younger respondents give a wide range of responses, but their answers do tend on average to be shorter, and less elaborated than those of older respondents. Top Mentions are:

1. Nothing wrong at all = 28 (and it is worth noting that a good number of these are sufficiently savvy to be able to defray a disappointment by expecting something later in the DVD).
2. The ending, variously called too long, boring, too emotional, etc = 14.
3. The loss of Saruman = 13. *This is a distinctive characteristic of young viewers, not found as a major issue among other viewers. It deserves investigation in its own right, and may be an indexical disappointment.*
4. Generalised mentions of changes from the book = 10 with a good number of other individual bits being mentioned.

The Most Memorable demonstrate this even more strongly. In the adult viewers' responses, from our analyses so far, it was very difficult indeed to find any clear patterning – this was indeed the point at which they appeared to be most individuated. With the younger audiences this is not so much the case. Whilst I have not, for reasons of time, done this as a Table, taking a random sample 100 and doing a broad sweep of both references and reasons, it becomes clear that there is a predominance of three kinds of response, which I would characterise as follows:

1. Delight in the cinematic cleverness of the film. A considerable number recalled specific moments when the film enabled them to *see something extraordinary, a piece of visual splendour*. Perhaps the most commonly referred to things were the battles, but it could be a stunt (some young women definitely chose Legolas' mamaluk-hunt), it could be the lighting of the warning beacons. The point was that these were celebrated for their sheer technical/aesthetic achievement. (NB: noone chose the music as their most memorable, whereas some adults did.)
2. Recalled moments where their emotions overflowed, and got the better of them. Although this is more female than male, it isn't exclusively so. What they love and recall is the point at which they are 'got' by the film, because in a way that is what they go hoping to get!
3. Moments of heightened drama + meaning in the film. These are points at which the film *goes to another level*, where a decision, or a conflict, or an encounter, raises the stakes on the meaningfulness of the action. So, Pippin's song to Denethor *epitomised* for several people the sheer desperateness of a small person. Or, Frodo telling Sam to go away *epitomised* for others how corrupting the Ring could be.

Finally, I looked at answers to our second question – what was your response overall to the film? I looked in particular at an array of those who most celebrated it, to see what it was that they particularly loved about it. Answers were repeatedly hyperbolic. Many described it as the best film they had ever seen, several said it had changed their lives, several said they were sure it was the best film they would ever see in their lives. The qualities they celebrated in it were:

- a) Its sheer technical brilliance – with a frequent reference to it being 'life-like'. By this they do *not* mean that they have been taken over by

the film. On the contrary, life-likeness is an achievement which they recognise – and partly because of the next factor.

- b) Its updateness: in complicated ways they see it as a film of our time. This is partly to do with all they know about the ways it was made, their ‘recognition’ of the actors, etc who were given parts in it. It is also to do with a sense that the *story* is ‘of our time’, even if Tolkien wrote it a long time ago.
- c) They have a strong sense of *cinematic history being made*. They are pleased to have been in on the event. Many people (actually, both adults and young people) say they will be glad to tell their children/grandchildren that ‘they were there’ when *LOTR* was first shown.
- d) It was an *ensemble of problems, emotions and situations*. It had love, friendship, dangers, battles, a quest, an array of creatures, a history. Its profusion, and its ability to hold all these together, are what made it so powerful for them.

So, any *apparent* negatives are contained within these, as can be seen from these three randomly-chosen remarks:

“It was brilliant and some clips in it were scary” – the point being that it couldn’t have been brilliant if there weren’t such bits within it.

“The greatest film of the three and of all time – it made me cry again and again” – the measure of its greatness is its capacity to do that.

“It was breathtaking and amazing. I couldn’t get it out of my head for ages afterward” – and s/he didn’t want to, that was the point.

Conclusions

I am going to venture a few conclusions on the basis of the evidence that emerges from our under 16s dataset:

1. There are no clear lines or distinctions between adults and young people, in respect of their responses to a film like *The Lord of the Rings*. Young people may almost by definition have less experience of the world, but in responding to this film they respond with much the same *categories* that older people did. It is that the categories are not yet as nuanced or individually shaped as they might be in older people. **To me, this is an important conclusion in itself.**
2. It is important to recognise that responses to this film are a function of the very particular status it attained, and which was largely recognised and understood by young people. This was a *family film*, but not of the *Lion King* or *Shrek* kinds – this was a film which was widely seen to be of a kind that all ages could gain pleasure and meaning from it. It was not just fun and entertainment, it was going to be challenging in lots of ways (length, scale, emotions, narrative span, issues, etc). To go as a young person to see *The Lord of the Rings* was therefore to go **as a potential future adult**. So, even if (as for many young women) part of the reason for going is to see the ‘hot’ Bloom, that was held separate from seeing him play *this part in this film*. If

for a young man seeing the film was partly about seeing epic battles, that was just an aspect of an experience in which the *battles mattered* because of their staging of an essential good vs. evil conflict.

3. The implication of this categorisation as ‘new kind of family film’ is that, whoever who might *actually* go to see it with, there is a sense in which it is proper to have cross-generational company. It is natural for the cinema to be full of both young and older people. It is something to be talked about between parents and children. ***It belongs in a different way than many films do.***
4. There are nonetheless a few particulars which I could reflect on. One, I touched on earlier: the absence of Frodo as a character of choice. The other which most stands out for me is the fascination with the character of Saruman. An element within this is respect and liking for the actor Christopher Lee, but it is only a component, and whereas with Orlando Bloom his name is often cited as is the name of his character, with Lee/Saruman it is the character name which most often gets cited. Another element within this will be, I suspect, that many young people used the internet to keep up with emerging news about the film, and the controversy over the cutting of Lee’s role featured there. But again, I don’t think this is the full explanation. There is something about the kind of character he represented which chimed with many younger viewers. Although I have not included it within this report, I do have worked-through evidence that this is something distinct to this ‘generation’ of viewers.
5. Finally, I would argue that we should stop being so worried about the *emotional responses* that people have when they see films (or etc). Our evidence shows that it is the interplay of understandings, emotions, and sense of the kind of ‘reality’ a film offers that is most crucial – even, perhaps especially, in the young. This will mean dispensing with the kind of crude distinction which dominates much public discussion of this – can children and young people ‘tell the difference between fantasy and reality’, might they lose it? This sadly misses all that is interesting and important in their reactions. Films can be ‘real’ in ways which have *nothing to do* with literal reality – and that is a good thing, because it is the source of all imagination. It is *imaginative convincingness*, and a sense that a *world that matters in some way has been created*. How even quite young children then build links from those mattering worlds to their lived reality, is very, very complicated – but researchable.

I haven’t a clue if this report from our findings is of interest or use to you. I hope it is.

Martin Barker
30 August 2005.