

Work Package 5: The ‘vernacular categories’ question

One of the innovations in the *Lord of the Rings* questionnaire was its inclusion of one particular question. This was a multiple-choice question:

5. Which of the following expressions comes closest to capturing the kind of story *The Lord of the Rings* was for you? Please choose *up to* three. We realise it is likely that you could choose more than this, but please help us by limiting yourself to the three most important.

| | | |
|------------|-------------------|--|
| Allegory | Good vs evil | Threatened homeland |
| Epic | Myth/legend | War story |
| Fairytale | Quest | |
| Fantasy | SFX film | <i>None of these (please suggest an alternative)</i> |
| Game-world | Spiritual journey | |

Answers to this question proved amazingly useful. ‘Epic’ proved the most popular across the world, but we were able to explore the range of meanings this condensed within itself. Cross-tabulating with levels of pleasure and importance showed that ‘Spiritual journey’ stood head and shoulders above the rest – while ‘Fantasy’, ‘Game-world’ and ‘SFX film’ scored lowest. We were then able again to explore other answers to find out what people *meant* by these choices.

We plan to include a question of this kind again. But clearly we need to rethink the list of categories which we offer. We believe that the overall number should be roughly the same, and that ‘up-to-three’ is the ideal number of choices to ask people to make. The purpose is to try to capture in quantifiable forms the *kinds of meanings* that attach to this story-world, in order then to be able to (a) explore inside each, for what it means and how it works, (b) explore beyond it, for who chooses it, and what else in their responses it connects with, and (c) explore the relations among them – which ones are strongly or weakly associated? Does this vary by kind of audience?

How did we arrive at the twelve for *Lord of the Rings*? To be honest, it was a mixture of intuition, linked to our perceptions of debates accompanying the films. But we think we got it about right, as very few people took the option of proposing their own additional expression.

On reflection, however, we realise that the options we offered for *The Lord of the Rings* were all tied to the *kind of story* it was. We did not offer any choices that related to its wider cultural status. This was neither right nor wrong, it simply meant that there were some questions we couldn’t ask. With *the Hobbit*, however, we think it is necessary to ask some broader contextual questions. For instance, there has been a good deal of controversy has surrounded Peter Jackson’s decision to film at 48 frames-per-second, and in 3D. What is not clear is how this has affected different people’s experience and enjoyment

of the film. There has also been debate about Jackson's decision to draw heavily on Tolkien's wider mythology, to flesh out the film to three parts. Again, we want to what different audiences think of this. In light of these kinds of considerations, we have begun to reformulate the set of choices.

Here is the working list we have formulated to date. For reasons of the overall questionnaire design, we think that the overall number of choices cannot be more than 12-14.

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Action adventure | Hollywood blockbuster franchise |
| A Peter Jackson film | Part of a legend-world |
| A Tolkien tale | Magical journey |
| Children's story | Prequel |
| Digital cinema | Sequel |
| Fairytale | Trickster's tale |
| Game-world | |

Question to all our partners

- 1) What do you think of this question generally?
- 2) What do you think of the categories we have so far suggested? Are there any you would add, or alter, or delete?
- 3) Are there any which will be difficult to translate into your country/language?
- 4) In 2003 we wanted to be able to include a follow-on question, asking people which ones from this list they would definitely not choose. We hoped that this would enable us to see which conceptions of the film were least compatible with each other. For reasons which will not apply this time (we were using a paper version of the questionnaire in some countries), we were not able to do so. What do you think of the idea of including the follow-on question this time?