The Medium Experience of Hollywood Blockbusters:
A case study on the effects of new technology on the viewing experience of *The Hobbit* and *Avatar*

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The Medium Experience of Contemporary Hollywood Blockbusters: A case study on the effects of new digital technologies on the viewing experience of The Hobbit and Avatar

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Prologue

From its birth at the end of the nineteenth century film has been a medium heavily influenced by technology. Many technological breakthroughs were made at the start of cinema history. Better quality film stock made it possible to create feature length films while the addition of sound and color drastically changed the experience of the medium. These technological innovations laid the foundations for cinema as we know it today. They were used to improve the viewing experience by making the medium a more realistic, immersive and unobtrusive storytelling device. This attitude toward the technological greatly contrasts with those from the early pre-narrative period of film history. The first filmmakers were more inventors and businessmen than artists. They experimented with film to explore and demonstrate the medium's capabilities and potential. The medium itself instead of its contents was celebrated and promoted as a technological novelty. People came to see and experience the sensations promised by the new medium.

Many technological innovations were introduced throughout film history, most of them during periods when the Hollywood film industry was in decline. Technology can provide an innovative forward drive to a medium when it is threatened by rival new media. When television threatened to keep people at home instead of going to the theatres, Hollywood introduced new medium-exclusive features such as color, widescreen, 3D and even scents in the form of Smell-O-Vision. Some of these technological innovations became industry standard features while others were mere gimmicks destined for oblivion. But they all shared a common goal, namely to re-new the film viewing experience and to attract a larger film audience. Still, most technological innovations had only a minor impact on the viewing experience of the medium, which remained heavily focused on narrative storytelling. I want to investigate if and how the viewing experience of contemporary Hollywood blockbuster films has changed because of the (re-)introduction and continuous innovation of technologies such as computer-generated imagery, stereoscopic 3D, higher resolutions and higher frame rates. Although narrative will always remain an important component of every film, blockbusters seem increasingly to favor visual spectacle and technological novelty over narrative quality to attract their audience. The cinematic medium is continuously trying
to distinguish itself from other media by providing unique viewing experiences. At the same time, other types of entertainment media are increasingly influencing the cinematic medium in various ways. The production of CGI-heavy blockbusters is showing similarities with the practice of video game production, in which the medium content is entirely computer-generated and made by visual effects artists. The experience of films is also increasingly stretched across different media through transmedia storytelling with prequels or sequels in the shape of books, video games or comics. I want to investigate if and how new technologies such as digital special effects, 3D, higher resolutions and higher frame rates function as digital attractions in the production, marketing and reception of contemporary Hollywood blockbuster films. Two recent, popular and technologically innovative blockbusters (The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey and Avatar) are used as case studies. Each case study will investigate which technologies are used in the production of the films, how those new technologies are used by the film studios in the marketing to frame the viewing experience, and finally, the reception analysis investigates how the new technologies are actually perceived by the viewers. By combining theories from both film studies and new media studies this thesis primarily aims to add to the theorization of cinema as a medium strongly influenced by technology, as well as a medium that influences and is influenced by other types of (new) media. Therefore, this research is of interest for both film theorists and new media theorists. The results may also prove useful for theatre owners because they have to make important decisions about whether to invest in new technologies and if they should provide their customers with the choice between 2D and 3D or a higher frame rate. Providing this freedom of choice will be at the expense of theatre room and time slot allocation of other films. Film directors and producers also have to make important artistic and financial decisions about the use of new technologies.
1. Introduction

The subject of this research was formed as a result of observations about my personal film viewing habits. As a film student and film enthusiast I have developed a broad taste in films. I watch old films and new films, art-house films and Hollywood blockbusters. Certain films I rather watch at home while other films must be experienced in the cinema. It occurred to me that I am increasingly making a strong distinction in my viewing habits between what I call conventional narrative films and Hollywood blockbuster spectacle films. To attract an audience, the former type of film depends mainly on a strong immersive story while the latter group heavily focuses on action, technological novelties and state-of-the-art special effects. The story is delegated to the background and only serves a sort of support function for showcasing the latest technologies. The main attractions are the digital special effects and recent technological innovations such as stereoscopic 3D, filming in a frame rate higher than the industry standard 24 frames per second and digital projection in a 4K resolution or higher. All these developments seem to indicate that Hollywood blockbuster films are increasingly being produced, promoted and experienced as a technological attraction. I choose to focus here on contemporary Hollywood blockbusters because these films especially seem to employ non-narrative strategies to captivate and attract their audience.

1.1. Theory on Hollywood blockbuster films

“When, on a Friday night, we go to the movies, what do we want to see? Nine times out of ten it will be a big movie, which has announced itself like a weather front weeks before, by the turbulence it creates in the news media, the novelty shops, and the department stores. In short, we want to see the movie that promises to be an event. This movie may have many different titles, but essentially it has one generic name: it's called a blockbuster.”

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1 Thomas Elsaesser, "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, but Not Everything Goes," in The End of
In the field of blockbuster studies blockbuster films are variously defined as ‘events’ and ‘spectacles.’ Production-led definitions focus on the forever increasing budgets of these films. These huge budgets enable filmmakers to attract audiences because “a substantial appeal of many blockbusters lies precisely in the scale of spectacular audio-visual experience that is offered, in contrast to the smaller-scale resources of rival films or media.” Older blockbusters from the pre-digital special effects era mainly employed lavish sets and make-up, huge numbers of extras and exotic locales, whereas contemporary blockbusters focus mainly on a CGI-driven audio-visual sensation. Thus, new technology is an important characteristic of the modern Hollywood blockbuster. Technology not only allows for the creation of increasingly impressive computer-generated imagery. It also improves the audio-visual qualities of the theatrical experience, specifically by introducing bigger screens, digital 3D images, faster frame rates and ultra sharp high-resolution projections. Here, the spectacular technological characteristics of the medium itself are promoted. The viewing experience of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters can be described as a special effects-driven spectacle instead of as a predominantly narrative experience that aims for a complete suspension of disbelief. Although the CGI perfected spectacle aims for a suspension of disbelief through a (perfect) mimetic representation of the real, it can also emphasize its artificial nature to strengthen the impact of the technological attraction on the viewer. The ratio of narrative-spectacle (leaning more toward spectacle) was also used by Tom Gunning to analyze the viewing experience of the very early period of cinema from 1895 to 1908, which he called the cinema of attractions, a term he derived from Eisenstein’s theories on audience attraction or manipulation through shock.

The blockbuster strategy is a common strategy in many entertainment industries. Producers tend to invest heavily to produce and market films with very strong hit

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3 Ibid., 114.
4 Ibid., 116.
potential. Studios bet on four or five of these films a year and when they prove to be successful the profits can be used to cover the costs of the smaller often less profitable films that the studio produces. Anita Elberse, who studied the business strategies of Hollywood blockbusters, found that this is the most successful strategy for film studios to stay profitable: "rather than spreading resources evenly across product lines (which might seem to be the most effective approach when no one knows for sure which products will catch on) and vigorously trying to save costs in an effort to increase profits, betting heavily on likely blockbusters and spending considerably less on the "also rans" is the surest way to lasting success in show business." The high costs for blockbusters are mainly composed of investments in star actors and spectacular special effects. These are the main factors that generate hit-potential. With the recent success of superhero movies (The Avengers, The Dark Knight, Spider-Man) and fantasy book adaptations (the Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings films) investing in popular franchises from other media is also a common strategy. Alan Horn, who was the president of Warner Brothers and started the event-film strategy in 1999 with The Perfect Storm, calls these films “four-quadrant movies” because they must appeal to young and old audiences, both male and female. He also stressed that the marketing campaigns of these blockbusters should showcase the film’s spectacle: "We wanted to create the best visual experience for audiences, and we spent a lot to showcase those in our marketing campaign. I remember I saw an early cut of the trailer and asked, ‘Where is the storm?’ I wanted a shot of the boat in the storm, with the high seas. It took half a million dollars, but they made it happen in a week. We wanted everyone to know this was going to be big. So we had to have that shot.” Here we see what, according to Leon Gurevitch, is characteristic of the cinema of transactions: the use of the latest technologies and special effects as a promotional tool to attract an audience. As Horn’s example of The Perfect Storm shows, key shots from blockbusters are specifically constructed as showcases of spectacular special effects. These expensive special effects shots function not only within the film itself. They can also be constructed as isolated,

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8 Ibid., 39.
9 Ibid., 39.
attractive iconic images; promotional tools separated from the film to be shown in trailers and film posters for the blockbuster’s event- and spectacle-based marketing.

1.2. Theory on attractions and monstration

To understand the medium of film as a technological novelty to which its spectators are attracted it is necessary to look at early cinema studies, in particular at research on the historical avant-garde in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. This was the period of the discovery of cinema, a “medium-specific period in film history” with a “medium-sensitive film viewer who went to see a film show in order to experience the new medium more than to see a specific film.” Seeing moving images projected on a screen for the first time was a thrilling and astonishing experience for early film viewers. The Russian avant-gardists were attracted by the disruptive impact of the early cinema experience and began theorizing and experimenting with the impact of (optical, visual and audio) technologies on perception. Sergei Eisenstein first introduced attractions to film studies with his concept of the montage of attractions. The concept refers to a set of montage techniques used by Eisenstein to influence his audience through psychological effects caused by thrills and shocks. Eisenstein aimed to attract the attention of the spectator by producing specific emotional shocks in the spectator, thereby subjecting him to elements that may influence him emotionally or psychologically. Tom Gunning adopted Eisenstein’s concept of attractions to study the period of very early cinema. By focusing on the cinema as a technological attraction instead of a narrative medium, Gunning created a new and better theoretical perspective for studying a type of cinema that was less oriented on narrative and more on the attractive properties of the images and of the medium itself. Moving images alone were enough to shock and amaze the early film audience because they had never seen anything like it. The very early films were mainly short, non-narrative actuality films that showed documentary-like footage of real events, places and curiosities. Film

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viewers were not quietly absorbed into a fictional story world through a suspension of disbelief and a strong narrative. Instead, the very early film viewer was more a “gawker who stands alongside, held for the moment by curiosity or amazement.”

The images were presented in such a way that their shock effects were maximized, a practice described by André Gaudreault as monstration. According to Gaudreault a film is conveyed by both a narrator and a monstrator. The narrator tells the story and advances the narrative, while the monstrator has the task of showing everything on the screen. Many film style elements, such as mise-en-scène, lighting, acting and special effects, belong to the monstrator. Gaudreault and Gunning worked together to combine both terms into the concept of a system of monstrative attraction (roughly from 1895-1908) as opposed to the system of narrative integration (1909-1914). Both monstration and attraction work together to oppose the narrative by emphasizing the visual. With monstration the film shows its filmic elements to the spectator, while with attraction we see this process in reverse: the spectator’s attention being attracted toward the filmic. In the system of monstrative attraction both forces work together in opposite directions to attract the attention of the spectator. They are not synonyms but complementary concepts that refer to the film medium’s tactics to grab the spectator’s attention through visual means. Gunning characterizes the various monstrative techniques as an aesthetic of astonishment. The cinema of attractions is more concerned with engaging the viewer’s curiosity than with creating strong involvement with narrative action or empathy with character psychology. Instead of getting lost in a fictional story world, the viewer “remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfillment.” The aesthetic of astonishment is aimed at creating feelings of anxiety and pleasure by combining reality effects with the open acknowledgement of the images’ artificiality. According to Gunning one could even call it an anti-aesthetic “because it so contrasts with prevailing turn-of-the-century norms of artistic reception –the ideals of

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17 Ibid., 70.
19 Ibid., 17.
21 Ibid., 121.
detached contemplation (...).”\textsuperscript{22} The effects of the very early viewing experience can be characterized as a “shock of recognition.”\textsuperscript{23} This refers to the double nature of the pleasure derived from the experience of the medium. Pleasure is the result of a combination of shock caused by an illusion of danger and of delight in the illusion itself. Early film spectators were aware of the medium's illusionistic powers and were even delighted by them.

Another important concept from early cinema studies is de-familiarization or “making it strange,” a term borrowed from Viktor Shklovsky by Gunning to explain how old technologies can be experienced again as fresh.\textsuperscript{24} One's first experience of a new medium or technology often triggers a sense of awe and wonder. After some time, when the technology has lost its newness, that sense of awe and wonder is lost. Through a process of habitualization people are rendered unconscious of the experience. But the initial stage of wonder can be renewed through the technique of de-familiarization.\textsuperscript{25} The implementation of new technologies in film, such as computer-generated special effects and stereoscopic 3D, de-familiarize the activity of watching films. They present to the audience something they have never seen before. By re-newing the film viewing experience new technologies grab the attention of the viewer. They can be considered attractions because they shock and amaze the viewer by presenting something unusual and curious. The tendency of filmmakers to implement and “show off” state-of-the-art digital special effects is therefore like the process of monstrating an attraction. Gunning likens the monstration of new technologies to a spectacle:

“A discourse of wonder draws our attention to new technology, not simply as a tool, but precisely as a spectacle, less as something that performs a useful task than as something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before.”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 45-46.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 45.
The ways in which early films were demonstrated and promoted as a technological attraction show similarities with our contemporary cinema. Today’s Hollywood blockbuster films also rely heavily on monstrative attraction by implementing the latest computer-generated special effects and the use of new technologies such as stereoscopic 3D. The promotion and experience of these types of films is increasingly less orientated on narrative and more on the experience of thrills and shocks made possible by technological progression. In this way, these early film theories can serve to better understand the contemporary use of computer-generated special effects and other new technologies as digital attractions.

1.3. Theory on new technologies and new media

There are few researchers who investigated the relationship between the roles of special effects as digital attractions on the one hand and the mutual influence of various media in our current digital and technological culture on the other. Both subjects have been researched individually in film studies and new media studies in works such as The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded and Henry Jenkins’ Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide, but not as a combined subject of analysis. This research is partly inspired by the works of a few new media scholars who already did investigate the relationships between cinema and new media. But their articles are not very comprehensive, more observing than theoretical and not strongly embedded in existing film theory. This research uses those works (of Grusin and Gurevitch) as a foundation and builds upon them through a more film theoretical and case-oriented approach. Richard Grusin and Leon Gurevitch recognize new technologies and special effects as digital attractions and see them as not only characteristic of the current cinema experience but also as a common factor throughout different (new) media. They both call this phenomenon the cinema of interactions. It is a relatively new concept that both Grusin and Gurevitch use to describe the recent intermedial developments between the cinema and other media. Although there is a difference of four years between the two

articles, it seems that neither author was aware of each other's use of the concept. Both Grusin and Gurevitch reference early cinema studies and derived their concept from Tom Gunning's *cinema of attractions* with which he describes the attractive characteristics of the very early experimental, non-narrative cinema. Both authors see our current digital cinema as an extension of the period of early cinema in which film as an attraction and its effects on the audience are central characteristics of the medium. They also recognize the practice of using technological attractions as a promotional tool in our contemporary cinema. The *cinema of interactions* is not regarded as a completely new digital filmic medium but more as a hybrid network consisting of different types of media, each bringing with them their own practices and conventions. Therefore, cinema is increasingly being influenced socially, technologically as well as aesthetically by other popular new media such as video games and the Internet. According to Gurevitch it is not only the narrative component of films that crosses the boundaries of different media. The experience of digital attractions also happens across media. This is why contemporary cinema can be regarded as a *cinema of interactions*, because the medium itself interacts with other media. Users not only interact with digital texts (like a gamer controls his digital protagonist in a virtual world), digital texts themselves also interact with other surrounding forms of audiovisual culture. It is this medium interaction to which Grusin refers when he states that the medium of film will not disappear, but that it will increasingly influence and be influenced by the social, technological and aesthetic practices of other digital media. These medium specific influences create an increasing interrelatedness with other media and change the ways in which film is distributed, produced and experienced. Both Gurevitch and Grusin observe that the traditional *cinema experience* of watching a film in the theatre is now just a small part of a distributed aesthetic or cinematic experience (what I call a *medium experience*) that crosses the boundaries of the cinematic medium. To understand how the viewing experience of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters is changing from a traditional *cinema experience* with an emphasis on an immersive story to a *medium experience* in which technological novelty forms the main attraction it is necessary to clearly define these two concepts.

New media studies provide some interesting theories for understanding the changing practices of contemporary film production, marketing and consumption. A relatively recent development in contemporary cinema is that the film viewing experience does not start and end in the theatre. Many Hollywood blockbuster films form only a part of a much broader universe that spreads across different media. Franchises are created with multiple media in mind and each medium contributes to the overall experience in its own way. This development is described by new media theorist Henry Jenkins as *transmedia storytelling*, which "refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence – one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities."\(^{33}\) The main story can start as a film while a comic can serve as a prequel to the film story. A videogame can then recreate the story universe and let the user explore it freely and interactively. The viewer or user is central here, not only as a passive consumer but also as an active creator who influences the creation of media content through fan feedback and fan fiction. But *transmedia storytelling* is not the only way through which filmic content can transcend the boundaries of different media. Technological attractions in the form of digital special effects also function across media. Trailers and other promotional videos do not reveal much of the film's story but instead focus on showing action sequences and special effects, while also emphasizing that viewers should watch the film in 3D. Official homepages devote much space to explaining technological novelties and often entire sections of DVD extras are devoted to explaining and showcasing the technology behind the film. Furthermore, the medium of video games has undergone a strong technological development during the last decade. The quality of computer animation is now comparable to that found in film. Both media are growing toward each other as Hollywood and the games industry are increasingly cooperating by sharing technologies and resources. This new hybrid cinema, one that simultaneously influences and is influenced by other media, is described by Leon Gurevitch and Richard Grusin as the *cinema of interactions*.\(^{34}\) With this concept they refer to a type of cinema that is increasingly being influenced socially, technologically as well as aesthetically by other popular new media.

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\(^{33}\) Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 20-21.

\(^{34}\) Grusin, "DVDs, Video Games, and the Cinema of Interactions," and Gurevitch, "The Cinemas of Interactions: Cinematics and the 'Game Effect' in the Age of Digital Attractions."
Ariel Rogers' *Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of New Movie Technologies*\textsuperscript{35} was released during the early stages of writing this thesis. Her research on new technologies and its effect on the cinema experience shares the same broad subject with this thesis but differs in breadth and scope. Rogers’ approach is more historical and more narrowly focused on three types of technologies: the introduction of stereoscopic 3D and widescreen in the 1950’s, the transition to digital cinema in the 1990’s and the re-introduction of (digital) 3D since 2005. This thesis also includes CGI, motion capturing, higher frame rates and higher resolutions as new technologies but only focuses on contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, while Rogers uses both old and new Hollywood and independent films as case studies. One important point of difference is the definition of the cinema experience. Rogers uses a broader definition of this concept, extending it to include all the various ways in which people can view films today, which ranges from watching a film on a small phone screen on the go to watching DVDs at home in a home theatre setup. I use a more strict definition of the concept as described in the paragraph below, partly to make a clearer distinction between cinema experiences and medium experiences. *Cinematic Appeals* is divided in chapters based on historical periods and types of technologies while this thesis is structured around two case studies about two specific films. Rogers’ research is primarily based on industrial and critical discourses surrounding widescreen, 3D and digital cinema as well as on marketing materials and the production and exhibition of some films. This research centers on two contemporary Hollywood blockbusters (*The Hobbit* and *Avatar*) and takes into account not only the production and marketing but also the reception of these films and their technologies. *Cinematic Appeals* provides a more historical and in-depth analysis of the film industry’s production and promotion of new technologies as ‘cinematic appeals.’ Therefore it should be read as a complementary work on the same subject with the added note that its focus and some of its definitions of certain concepts differ from this thesis.

1.4. Cinema experience and medium experience

I use the term *cinema experience* to refer to the most dominant way of producing, distributing and consuming films. This is the century-old classical Hollywood system with its many basic principles and film practices: the story is at the center of the experience and everything else serves to make this experience as easy, immersive and realistic as possible.\(^{36}\) Technology is important but only when it makes the viewing experience more immersive and engaging. Audiences of all ages and walks of life must be able to comprehend the story. Hollywood invented the *continuity system*: a now standardized way of editing that matches spatial and temporal dimensions to achieve continuity and narrative action.\(^{37}\) The *cinema experience* takes place under specific conditions and circumstances. With this I mean that traditionally films are experienced in a dark theatre, on a big screen and often in the presence of many (unknown) people. These characteristics not only make the *cinema experience* an immersive and sensational experience (by darkening the room and displaying the images in larger than life proportions) but also a shared communal activity (many different kinds of people experiencing the same film at the same time). Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault use the concepts of *cinema of attractions* and the *cinema of narrative integration* to make a distinction between the earliest period of cinema, which was experimental and heavily focused on technological novelty, and the now dominant way of filmmaking, which is mainly focused on narrative. Frank Kessler remarks that this dichotomy between technology and narrative must not be read at a narratological level but as two different modes of spectatorial address.\(^{38}\) This implies that films should not strictly be categorized as either based on narrative or technology. It is always a combination of both but with an emphasis on one or the other. The way in which the film or filmmaker addresses the spectator reveals which part of the narrative-technology continuum is emphasized. The concept of the cinema *dispositif* can be a great aid in researching the cinematic medium’s dominant mode of address at different points in the medium’s history. The cinema *dispositif* refers to the medium’s viewing situation and how it is constructed by the configuration of technology, text and spectatorship. According to


\(^{37}\) Ibid., 194-213.

Kessler “a historical investigation of historical and present dispositifs would thus have to take into account the different viewing situations, institutional framings, the modes of address they imply, as well as the technological basis on which they rest.”

Viewing films on other devices such as televisions, computers and mobile phones can never constitute a cinema experience because they always miss something “that makes the dispositif ‘all of a piece:’ silence, darkness, distance, projection before an audience, in the obligatory time of a session that nothing can suspend or interrupt.” Note that I strictly define cinema experience as a film being viewed in the theatre with that particular cinema dispositif as described above. Not every film is produced with a theatrical release in mind but Hollywood blockbusters generally are. For blockbusters that strongly rely on the cinematic medium’s specific technology (such as 3D, surround sound and a big screen) the viewing experience in the theatre is noticeably different from the viewing experience at home or in public transport. While the narrative experience remains largely the same, this is not the case for the experience of spectacular action scenes and the computer-generated visuals. Both benefit greatly from the bigger screen, higher resolution, stereoscopic 3D, higher frame rate and surround sound.

To further nuance the narrative-spectacle dichotomy it is important to note that this strict distinction does not exist in reality and that spectacle, in different forms and shapes, has always been an important aspect in the history of Hollywood cinema. Geoff King argues that in debates about the relationship between narrative and spectacle in contemporary blockbusters there is a tendency to overemphasize the importance of the classical narrative in the studio era and to underestimate the importance of narrative in current Hollywood blockbusters. The classical Hollywood studio system was always highly commercial in nature and the story film only became the dominant form of American film production since the 1910s for commercial reasons, namely to make films more appealing to a middle-class audience that was willing to pay higher ticket prices and could attach a more respectable reputation to the film business. As examples of non-narrative pleasures in classical Hollywood cinema King mentions: action or motion (such as chase scenes), performance (musical numbers or star presence), spectacular

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39 Ibid., 61-62.
vistas (exotic locations and special effects), emotional intensity (f.e. ‘tearjerking’ devices such as mental illness) and spectacle both as formal innovation and as violence and bloodshed. Fred Pfeil distinguishes the use of narrative and spectacle between classical Hollywood cinema and contemporary Hollywood blockbusters. Generally, the first contains a gradual narrative development that builds up and ends in a climax that is often spectacular in nature. Sometimes the build up also contains smaller spectacular elements that can be visualized with smaller peaks. This development can be described as a ‘rising curve’ of which a simplified graphical version is provided in appendix 1, figure A. The graphic profile of contemporary blockbusters is depicted in figure B and its series of peaks can be described as a ‘rollercoaster.’ Many blockbuster films stretch the spectacular throughout the film instead of only strengthening the story’s climax with it. Therefore it “offers us an altogether different economy of pleasure, in which the giddying blur of the high-speed chase and/or the gratifying spectacular release of aggressive impulse occurs at regularly recurring intervals throughout the film.” Figures A and B emphasize that narrative and spectacle are both almost always present in a film but for contemporary Hollywood blockbusters the amount of spectacle in relation to narrative development is greater and more consistent during the story’s progression. Very specific graphs could be drawn for individual blockbusters to map the changes in narrative development and spectacular action.

Raymond Bellour argues that a new kind of spectatorship has emerged at the end of the 20th century, one formed by the information revolution and the logics of the digital image. The current cinema situation can be characterized by two kinds of cinema that stand at two stark extremes. The main kind of cinema is “a globally dominant, commercial cinema that is ruled by its own by-products, a falsely spectacular art still supposed to attract a large audience – above all those young spectators enamored of technological mutations, especially the video games with which film must compete: a cinema based on a degraded aesthetic of stereotypical shock and the unspecific violence of images.” At the other extreme stands “a cinema that is increasingly local, diversified, at the same time as it becomes ever more international, seeking everywhere to gain

spectators’ attention (...)” and of which the cinema spectator is no longer a mass subject. Bellour adds some nuance to this dichotomy by mentioning that in this “double cinema, ambiguous and complex bridges come into being.” I would like to add that those ambiguous and complex bridges can also be traversed by cinema spectators. Not every spectator is either passively consuming commercial films or actively seeking out local, diversified films exclusively. There are cinema spectators, such as cinephiles and critics, who seek out and enjoy a wide variety of different cinema experiences. Instead of being passively subjected to commercial, mass-market films they actively seek them out. With the globally dominant and commercial cinema Bellour obviously refers to the Hollywood blockbuster and the event film strategy when describing the dominant form of contemporary digital cinema and its spectator. It is a globally dominant cinema that has a broad appeal to general audiences all over the world. The spectacular is used to attract these audiences but Bellour calls it “false” because the spectacular is (in his opinion) achieved through “unspecific violence” and “stereotypical shock” that degrade the film’s aesthetic. Bellour also recognized the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster experience as medium-specific and its spectators as medium sensitive because the spectator is captivated by “technological mutations.” It is interesting to note that Bellour primarily characterizes the youngest generation of film spectators as medium sensitive. These are viewers born in the digital age who grew up playing video games, a medium that is very much grounded in the experience of technology and its continual innovation, and who therefore have developed a certain desire for technological novelty and violence. This stresses the importance of the historical context of the cinema spectator. Before the emergence of television, home video and other types of new media the traditional cinema experience and its matching dispositif constituted the ‘true’ and only type of viewing experience. With some nostalgia Bellour poses the question if “it is possible that such a view of cinema as I have presented here belongs to a generation for which ‘cinema, alone’ actually existed, and for whom, as such, it is forever inscribed.”

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47 Ibid., 208.
48 Ibid., 208. Interestingly, Bellour mentions Avatar as an example but does not clearly explain why, other than that we see “through the very excess of its spectacle, a new perceptual sensibility emerging.”
49 Ibid., 216.
With *medium experience* I refer to a different way of experiencing films, one in which the medium itself is the center of attention instead of the story. It is both old and new because it already existed before the classical Hollywood system as the *cinema of attractions* and resurfaced with the introduction of new digital technologies, starting with the use of computer-generated imagery in the late eighties/early nineties. Both are “medium-specific periods in film history”\(^{50}\) with a “medium-sensitive viewer” who mainly goes to the cinema to experience the medium itself instead of a specific film.\(^{51}\) A story still remains one of the essential requirements of an enjoyable viewing experience for the average viewer but the quality of that story may become less and less important to medium-sensitive viewers if the medium provides attractive technological novelties. *Medium experience* implies a shift in focus from narration to technology. Tom Gunning identified this different focus in film production, distribution, promotion and consumption in the short experimental films from the period of early cinema as the *cinema of attractions*. The technological novelty of the medium itself was the main attraction and its experience was not unlike other novelties from the age of modernity, such as rollercoaster rides in amusement parks.\(^{52}\) People went to see these films to experience the sensation of watching moving images on a screen. The newness of this technologically advanced medium formed the main attraction for the public and filmmakers presented their films accordingly through a *system of monstrosative attraction*.\(^{53}\) Films were presented and promoted as technological novelties promising thrills and amazement. According to Tom Gunning, attractions did not disappear when narrative films became the dominant form of cinema at the start of the previous century. Instead, the attractions went “underground” and formed a component of narrative films that was more obvious in some genres than in others.\(^{54}\) In today’s special effects-laden Hollywood spectacle cinema we can observe a resurfacing of technological attractions. According to Gurevitch we now find a renewed focus on attractions with “the emergence of a new mode of audiovisual content creation that extends the potential of the attraction as it operated in early cinema to feature length.”\(^{55}\) With this new mode of

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\(^{51}\) Gunning, “Foreword,” XXI.


audiovisual content creation he means the heavy use of computer-generated special effects and technological novelties such as stereoscopic 3D and projection in high frame rates. These are the new (digital) attractions that again de-emphasize the narrative experience and emphasize the medium experience. It seems that in contemporary Hollywood blockbuster films we are less in search of new engaging stories and more in search of spectacular, awe-inducing experiences. Another important aspect of the medium experience is that the experience is not limited to one medium. A film experience does not start and end in the cinema as it would under the traditional cinema experience. Instead, other media have an important influence on the filmic experience. The medium of film will increasingly influence and be influenced by the social, technological and aesthetic forms and practices of other digital media. This has a big impact on the production and exhibition of films in that they will become more multiply networked and distributed across the media landscape. Grusin is convinced that the current cinema is already digitized, “not as a distinctly new medium but as a hybrid network of media forms and practices.” He calls this kind of cinema the cinema of interactions. Thus the concept of medium experience as used in this thesis is derived from both early cinema studies and new media studies. The concept consists of two different but complementary definitions. On the one hand it includes the medium sensitivity and medium awareness of contemporary viewers and their desire for digital attractions and technological spectacle. On the other hand it includes the current practice of distributing and consuming the filmic experience across various media. Finally, it must also be stressed that cinema experience and medium experience are not mutually exclusive concepts. They should be seen as existing on a continuum similar to the narrative-technology or narrative-spectacle continuum. All Hollywood blockbuster films include a narrative and are viewed in the theatre and can thus be defined as a traditional cinema experience. Depending on the blockbuster’s emphasis on technological spectacle (specifically in relation to narrative quality) and depending on its distribution across various media, the viewing experience may shift toward the medium experience end of the continuum. Every medium experience also implies a cinema experience but not every cinema experience implies a medium experience.

1.5. Realism and special effects

One of the biggest attractions of new technologies and state of the art digital special effects is the increasing realism with which the image content is represented on the screen. Viewers derive great pleasure from an appreciation of a perceived reality, i.e. they know it is artificial, created by digital special effects artists, but it is of such a high quality that the viewer perceives it as realistic, either in the sense that it could possibly exist in some other universe (f.e. with fantasy and sci-fi films) or that it actually exists as having an indexical relationship with the real world. Warren Buckland makes a distinction between visible special effects and invisible special effects. Invisible special effects are most common in the film industry (around 90% of all special effects) and they are primarily used to simulate objects and events in the actual world that are too difficult or costly to film. Examples are natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes or epic battles with hundreds or thousands of soldiers. It is important that these invisible special effects are believed by the viewer and not recognized as being artificial. Visible special effects, on the other hand, are meant to stand out. They “simulate events that are impossible in the actual world (but which are possible in an alternative world).” This means that it is important that the viewer must still believe in the special effects although he knows they are impossible in the real world. An example is the creature Gollum from The Lord of the Rings trilogy. This is a fantastical being that belongs to a fictional universe. We know he cannot exist in the real world but because of the advanced motion-capturing technology and computer animation with which Gollum is created he is perceived as real within the fictional world of the film. Alison Griffiths argues that visible special effects can be of a wondrous or fantastic nature: “not only do they hail the spectator, but [they] seem to say while this could not or probably would not happen to you, thanks to the skills of an effects house or art designer it is brought to you.” These special effects not only want to grab the attention of the viewer. They also refer to themselves as technologically advanced, artificial constructs by emphasizing that they are something that was deemed impossible or unimaginable before. They are

58 Ibid., 28.
able to make the fantastical visible. According to Griffiths the effect of special effects can be summarized as the “hey moment.” This is the moment at which the attention of the viewer is attracted and he or she is amazed and wonders how something so obviously artificial and unreal can be experienced as real on the cinema screen.\textsuperscript{60}

Realism is a term that will appear often in the case studies. Viewers use it to describe their amazement and wonder at the films’ impressive computer-animated visuals. Therefore it is important to explain exactly how they use the term in their written accounts. Realism is not used here as a generic term to refer to some specific genre of film such as neorealism or documentary. These are genres that aim to represent the real and provide a truthful account of the real world or a very close approximation of it. This is not the case with Hollywood blockbusters and special effects. \textit{The Hobbit} and \textit{Avatar} are fantasy and science fiction films respectively and thus evidently far removed from any indexical relationship with reality as desired by most documentary films. Instead, realism is mainly used to describe a hedonistic appreciation of an illusion of the real. It refers to a visual credibility within an obviously fictional story world. When viewers mention realistic visuals in their written accounts they mainly speak of impressive \textit{visible} special effects, those computer-animated visuals that they know to be artificial but nevertheless experience as real (in that they are credible within the fictional story world.) Besides motion capturing and computer-generated imagery, technologies such as stereoscopic 3D, higher frame rates and higher resolutions can also enhance the perceived realism of a film’s visuals. 3D provides more depth to the images by mimicking how the human eyes work together to discern foreground and background objects. 48 FPS doubles the amount of projected images per second so that our eyes see fast moving images just as smooth and detailed as in real life. In the traditional 24 FPS this often results in stuttering camera movement and blurred visuals. A higher resolution enhances the sharpness of the picture so that the individual pixels of the projected digital image become unnoticeable. These technologies work together in a certain cinema setup that aims for an experience of the real, not an actual experience of reality but a close approximation of it. Whereas advanced CGI and motion-capturing technologies provide a perceived visual credibility of the images \textit{on screen}, 3D, higher

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\item Ibid., 166.
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frame rates and higher resolutions provide an increased realism and credibility to perception or the *process of seeing* itself.

1.6. Research question

New technology seems to function as a very important attraction for the medium-sensitive audience of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, in the production, marketing as well as reception of those films. Can we therefore state that technology nowadays acts as the main attraction in Hollywood blockbuster cinema instead of a compelling and immersive story? This does not mean a weakening of the blockbuster's narrative inclination or even necessarily a simplification of its stories. What it does imply is a diminishing role of stories as the main attraction in the production, promotion and reception of blockbusters in favor of spectacular technology. And can we also assume that the viewing experience has changed profoundly since the introduction of computer-generated special effects and other technological novelties such as 3D, 4K resolutions and higher frame rates? Based on the above observations I would like to propose that the viewing experience of recent Hollywood blockbuster films changed from a traditional *cinema experience* to a *medium experience* and that new technologies and special effects, in the form of *digital attractions*, lie at the basis of this new experience. This translates into the following main research question for this thesis:

*Can the cinema experience of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters be described as a medium experience?*

The aim of this research is to analyze the influence of new technologies on the film viewing experience in order to better understand the contemporary viewing experience of Hollywood blockbuster films. This requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines theories from the fields of film studies and new media studies outlined in this chapter. This enables the reframing of early film theories such as the *cinema of attractions* and *monstration* to make them useful for analyzing the contemporary digital cinema and its attractions in the form of new technologies and digital special effects. Through the combination of both fields of study this research will add to the theorization of cinema as a medium heavily influenced by technology and as a medium
that is influenced by and influences other media, in particular video games. This makes this thesis not only interesting for film theorists but also for new media theorists. Also, some of the results may be of interest for film theatre owners and film producers. With new recent additions such as stereoscopic 3D, 4K resolutions and higher frame rates, theatre owners have to make strategic and financial decisions about whether or not to invest in new equipment to provide these new features to the film public. Film directors and producers must also make financial as well as artistic decisions with regards to these new technologies. The results of this research on the effects of new technologies on film and the viewing experience may prove to be of interest for these parties.

The main body of this thesis exists of two chapters. Each chapter will apply the theories outlined in the introduction to two case studies. One film is central to each chapter and the chapter’s content will be divided into a short formal analysis, an analysis of the film’s marketing and a reception analysis. This will clarify how new technologies, functioning as digital attractions, can impact the film viewing experience, how this experience of the \textit{cinema of interactions} is influenced and changed by the implementation of converging media technologies and, ultimately, how the traditional \textit{cinema experience} is increasingly showing similarities with the experience of video games and other types of media. Because this thesis focuses on contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, two recent high-budget Hollywood films will be the subjects of these case studies. Peter Jacksons \textit{An Unexpected Journey} (2012), the first part of his \textit{The Hobbit} trilogy, and James Cameron’s \textit{Avatar} (2009). At their time of release, both pioneered the latest digital special effects and introduced new technologies that refashioned the traditional \textit{cinema experience}. \textit{Avatar} was the first film to successfully re-introduce stereoscopic 3D to the cinematic medium and it also incorporated the latest technologies in motion capturing and CGI to translate real-life actors to life-like computer-generated blue fantasy beings. The title of the film already alludes to the concept of the \textit{cinema of interactions} with its strong ties to video games. An avatar, in computer terms, is a graphical representation of a user’s virtual persona, for example the protagonist with which the player identifies and interacts within a game world. \textit{The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey} is the first, and at this time of writing with the exception of its sequel, the only film to combine all of the most recent technological developments into one big spectacle film. These are digital special effects, stereoscopic 3D, high resolution 5K projection and a frame rate of 48 frames per
second, double that of the industry-standard 24 FPS. All of these technologies work together to create a new experience that is in 3D, is ultra sharp and moves much smoother than traditional films.

To answer the main research question the two case studies will be based on the following three sub-questions:

1. *Can new technologies, such as computer-generated special effects, stereoscopic 3D, a higher frame rate and a higher resolution, be defined as digital attractions in contemporary Hollywood blockbuster films?*

2. *How do these digital attractions function as a promotional tool in the marketing of these films?*

3. *What effect does the heavy use of new technology as digital attractions have on the viewing experience?*

First, a short formal analysis will look at which special effects and new technologies are used and how they function as digital attractions. Second, an analysis of the films’ marketing will investigate how much the promotion of these two films focused on the technological aspect of the films. Analyzing if and how the experience of the films is framed through marketing as a *medium experience* will clarify how and why new technology can be used as an effective promotional tool for attracting audiences, even across different media. And third, a reception analysis will be used to analyze how people actually experienced these films and their new technologies and if it corresponds with how the films were promoted and framed by the film studios. It will be interesting to collect and compare writings from both professional film critics as well as analyses and reviews from film fans. Both groups may offer different insights into the viewing experience of these films, particularly in their preference for either story or technology as the main attraction of *An Unexpected Journey* and *Avatar.*
2. Case study Peter Jackson's The Hobbit

2.1. Introduction

When Peter Jackson showed the first footage of The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey in April 2012 at the CinemaCon in Las Vegas he did this in stereoscopic 3D and projected in the higher frame rate of 48 frames per second, double that of the traditional 24 FPS. An Unexpected Journey (the first part of The Hobbit trilogy) was the first film shot in the higher frame rate to be released in theatres and experienced by audiences worldwide. Due to the popularity of both Jackson's The Lord of the Rings trilogy and Tolkien's The Hobbit book those audiences certainly wouldn’t be small. The initial reactions to the first preview footage at CinemaCon were generally negative. For a film that is based on a classic and much beloved children's book and a prequel to one of the biggest trilogies in cinema history, one would assume that the negativity would be aimed at Jackson’s interpretation of the book and his realization of its story world on film. Instead, most of the critique was aimed at the technology behind the film, most notably the use of 48 frames per second and its effect on the viewing experience.61

“I’ll admit, it was fascinating to watch a movie in 48 FPS because, honestly, I’ve never seen anything like it. Ever. So, from a technology standpoint, I enjoyed it quite a bit. But! To the extent that I simply wanted to watch a movie and be immersed in another world, it was distracting.”62

It seems that viewers can enjoy a film for its technological novelty alone even though they may not be immersed in the story world or captivated by the narrative. This may indicate that viewers are medium sensitive and that the experience of a contemporary blockbuster like The Hobbit is (at least by some viewers) experienced as a medium experience. The specific nature of these negative reactions and their relation to the

viewing experience will be explored later on in this case study as part of the reception analysis. For now this anecdote suffices as an example of the significant impact that new technology can have on the experience of a film. Because *An Unexpected Journey* was the first film to introduce higher resolution frame rates in mainstream cinema it generated a discourse about the effects of new technology on the cinema experience. This is one of the main reasons why *The Hobbit* films form such an interesting case study for this thesis: They combine the latest technological novelties of the cinematic medium (stereoscopic 3D, higher frame rates and a 5K resolution) with state of the art computer-generated special effects to offer filmgoers a unique experience. Peter Jackson’s aim was not only to deliver a truthful adaptation of the book and please its fans but also to reinvigorate the traditional cinema experience through new technologies not available in other media:

"The real question is: Do we basically sit back and continue to watch audiences dwindle and surrender to kids watching movies on iPads or do we see what we can do with the technology today to enhance the cinema going experience? To me, it's a very fundamental decision, whether it's high frame rate or 3-D (which is more immersive) or 4K or 8K."\(^{63}\)

This is a very explicit statement of Peter Jackson about the function of technology in the cinematic medium. For him there are two complementary reasons for the development and adoption of new technologies: to improve the cinema experience by making it more immersive and to compete with other rival digital media platforms for film consumption. These two reasons are complementary because the improvement of the cinema experience through new technologies (not available in other media) distinguishes the cinematic medium from rival media by providing a unique viewing experience.

The main research question of this thesis asks if the viewing experience of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters changed from a traditional cinema experience to a medium experience because of the heavy use of new technologies as digital attractions.

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Hollywood blockbuster films were defined as big budget ‘spectacles’ and ‘events’ that deliver an impressive audio-visual experience not possible in films with smaller-scale resources. They are also produced, promoted and experienced as a technological attraction, more so than as an engaging and immersive story. With an estimated budget of around 200 million dollars, *An Unexpected Journey* is one of the most expensive films in recent cinema history. The fact that the film’s source material is a book of only about 200 pages, while the film adaptation spans across three two-and-a-half to three-hour films already suggests a rather shallow narrative per film. Because *An Unexpected Journey* is the first part of the trilogy it cannot have a spectacular climactic ending. Therefore the film mainly relies on a chain of episodic spectacular action scenes, interspersed with the occasional plot furthering narrative expositions. Here we observe a typical characteristic of most Hollywood blockbuster films, namely favoring spectacular action over narrative density in order to thrill and amaze its audience.

The first quote from this introduction indicates why *An Unexpected Journey* is an apt film for analyzing the medium experience in contemporary Hollywood blockbusters. A medium experience differentiates itself from the traditional cinema experience because the medium itself becomes the center of attention instead of the story. The newness of the technology sensitizes the viewer, thereby making him a medium-sensitive viewer. This particular viewer states that he had not seen anything like *An Unexpected Journey* and enjoyed it quite a bit from a technological perspective. But the film failed to deliver a good cinema experience because the technological spectacle distracted the viewer to such an extent that he could not become captivated by the narrative and immersed in the story world. At least for this viewer, narrativity and story quality remain important requirements for an enjoyable viewing experience. Here we see technological innovation renewing the viewing experience of the medium itself, but not necessarily improving the experience of the medium’s content. The medium of film becomes interesting in and of itself because the combination of 3D, a higher frame rate and a

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65 The three films were shot consecutively for practical reasons and cost efficiency. The estimated budget for the whole trilogy lies around $600,000,000.
66 Of course there are exceptions to the rule such as Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010), which is a high-budget production that combines action and spectacle with narrative complexity.
67 This does not mean that the story is not important for *The Hobbit*. There is always a balance between technology-based spectacle and narrative. For most contemporary Hollywood blockbusters this balance has shifted to technological spectacle.
higher resolution alone can awe and amaze the viewer. These new technologies, together with the latest advances in CGI, can be regarded as digital attractions that emphasize the viewing experience of *An Unexpected Journey* as a medium experience.

Interesting in this case study is that Peter Jackson’s goal with the higher frame rate was to offer higher realism and a more immersive cinema experience with *The Hobbit*: “As a filmmaker, I try to make my movies immersive. I want to draw the audience out of their seats, and pull them into the adventure.”68 It seems that, at least for some viewers, the opposite is true. While the higher frame rate inspires awe and amazement from a technological standpoint, and can thus be described as a successful medium experience, it fails as a so-called cinema experience in the sense of being captivated by the narrative and immersed in the story world. The audience gets too distracted by the newness of the technology to get absorbed in the story world. This may be attributed to the process of de-familiarization of the viewing experience through new technology as described by Tom Gunning.69 After more than a hundred years of projecting films in 24 frames per second (and *The Hobbit* being the first mainstream film to be projected in 48 frames per second) it is understandable that the audience must get used to the higher frame rate through habituation.70 But this depends entirely on how hard this new technology is marketed and on how it is received by moviegoers. Because *An Unexpected Journey* is the first film to use this technology, an analysis of the marketing and reception of its digital attractions will hopefully provide interesting insights into the future development of Hollywood blockbuster cinema.

Peter Jackson, together with James Cameron, is part of a group of filmmakers that is trying to raise the technological bar with every new film they make. It is no surprise that Jackson is one of the founders of Weta Digital, one of the most progressive digital special effects studios in the industry. Jackson works closely with the studio for each of his films. This close relationship has resulted in many technological innovations made

70 Note that this process of habituation may be much shorter for younger viewers who have a shorter history of watching films in 24 FPS and may have grown up playing video games in a frame rate of 30 FPS or higher.
specifically for his films that were later used in other films by other directors. Peter Jackson may be compared to a modern day Méliès or Lumière in that he aims to make the cinematic medium more magical through special effects, like Méliès, while also constantly trying to improve the technology and display the power of the medium, like the Lumière brothers.

"HFR 3D is ‘different’ - it won’t feel like the movies you’re used to seeing, in much the same way as the first CDs didn’t sound like vinyl records. We live in an age when cinemas are competing with iPads and home entertainment systems. I think it’s critical that filmmakers employ current technology to increase the immersive, spectacular experience that cinema should provide. It’s an exciting time to be going to the movies.”

Here Peter Jackson presents himself as an innovator of the medium. According to him the cinema should provide an immersive, spectacular experience and technological innovation is the way to achieve this goal. He sees this as necessary because the cinematic medium must increasingly compete with other new media that are also able to deliver film content. *The Hobbit* films are important Hollywood blockbusters that use new technology as digital attractions to revitalize the cinematic medium. And Peter Jackson, through a process of monstrative attraction, shows off the power of these digital attractions, aiming to create a discourse of wonder and amazement and present his film as a spectacle that cannot be experienced in any other medium. An analysis of the marketing of *An Unexpected Journey* will reveal if and how the film is promoted as a digital attraction. The reception analysis will subsequently investigate how this affects the viewing experience from an audience perspective and if different audiences experience the film differently. An analysis of the audience reaction to the viewing experience of *An Unexpected Journey* may also reveal comparisons to other types of media such as the experience of playing video games or watching theatrical play. This may provide evidence of contemporary Hollywood blockbuster cinema being a cinema of interactions in the sense that the cinematic medium increasingly influences and is

71 Jackson, “Q&A ON HFR 3D.”
72 With “any other medium” I refer to other new media or digital platforms on which films can be viewed, such as televisions, mobile phones, tablets and personal computers.
being influenced by other types of media socially, aesthetically as well as technologically.73

2.2. The use of new technology and digital attractions in the production of An Unexpected Journey

This section details what kind of technologies are used in the production of An Unexpected Journey and why. A short analysis of a key action scene from the film explains how Peter Jackson is able to create unique spectacular action sequences with the help of computer animation. Besides its big budget and focus on action over narrative An Unexpected Journey is also one of contemporary cinema’s most technology-heavy films. Arguably the film’s most important technological aspect is the fact that it was shot in 48 frames per second. Instead of projecting 24 still images (or frames) per second The Hobbit films are projected in twice that amount, essentially doubling the information on screen. This means that our eyes can perceive smoother motion by removing motion blur and flickering. Motion blur and flickering are more noticeable in stereoscopic 3D so one of Jackson’s reasons for using 48 FPS was to improve the experience of stereoscopic 3D, another new technology that is often criticized for causing eye strain and headaches. Joe Letteri, senior visual effects artist at Weta Digital who worked on the Hobbit films, explains it as follows:

"Everyone describes it as strobing,” said Letteri, “but it's the opposite of strobing - it is actually related to motion blur. If characters are running across the screen really fast, for example, because my eyes can track with them in 2D, I don't see the motion blur. But in stereo [3D], your eye has trouble locking onto a character, and so that character winds up looking blurry."74

The higher frame rate helps improve the stereo 3D picture while also making the image clearer during camera movement. This is most noticeable during fast-paced action scenes in which the camera must zoom in and out and pan and tilt in all directions to

follow the actors on screen. The 5K high-definition digital cameras with which the film was shot make the visuals even more vivid and clear, revealing for example the smallest hairs or drops of sweat on character’s faces, even during fast camera movement. This increase in detail and clarity of the image demanded even more attention from the visual and practical effects artists because the audience could perceive every potential flaw in make-up, set design and computer animation. Charlie Tait, head of compositing at Weta Digital:

“We found that, at 48 frames per second and in stereo [3D], the green screen composites had to be done really well, because you saw everything much more clearly. And, of course, stereo made life more difficult because it took away our ability to do a lot of cheeky hiding and covering up that we can do in 2D. Overall, the higher fidelity meant that everything had to be almost twice as good, twice as well done.”75

In the case of The Hobbit the use of 3D, 48 FPS and a 5K resolution imposed constraints on the more traditional way of producing special effects cinema. Because these technologies make the visuals so sharp and clear it is almost impossible to hide the artificiality of film. That is why The Hobbit trilogy uses much more computer-generated imagery than The Lord of the Rings trilogy. The way make-up, costumes, props, set-design and other physical special effects were used in the former trilogy proved to be lacking for the latter trilogy. The high-definition resolution and the clarity of the images revealed too much of the artificialness of the film, thereby decreasing the ‘magical’ ability of cinema to let the viewer immerse and loose him- or herself into the story world fantasy. The latest technologies in motion capturing and computer modeling were therefore used to replace human extras with CGI models and create fully digital backgrounds. So, as a consequence of introducing new technologies such as a higher frame rate and a higher resolution, the use of computer-generated special effects also greatly increased. This was not only a necessary evil though. The digital nature of An Unexpected Journey provided Peter Jackson with the freedom and ability to create over the top spectacular action sequences that were otherwise impossible:

75 Ibid., 93.
"Digital environments enabled me to change camera angles and to keep experimenting with the coverage of the shots right up through the final stages of postproduction. It allowed me to organically develop the film all the way through post, rather than lock myself into something with miniatures. It gave me a lot more freedom as a filmmaker."76

This practice of digital filmmaking approaches that of video games where the content is fully digital. Because the director is not limited by a physical camera and environmental obstacles he is free to choose where to position the camera and move it through the environment without constraint. The camera can closely follow an actor while he or she runs through a dangerous environment, evading falling debris, collapsing stairs and burning flames, all the while free to zoom in or out and frame the action from left or right, above or below. The goblin chase scene from An Unexpected Journey77 provides a good example of the freedom of the filmmaker to direct spectacular action scenes through the use of digital special effects. The underground goblin cave mainly consists of wobbly wooden bridges and platforms tied together with rope (see appendix image 1). Together with Gandalf the 13 dwarves must flee from the goblin king and his minions, which results in an intense chase scene across unstable bridges and collapsing platforms. Because all of the goblins are computer-generated, as well as most of the environments, it was very easy to populate the cave with hundreds of goblins that climb walls, sling on ropes and jump across gaps (see appendix figures 2 and 3). The digital nature of this scene made it possible for Peter Jackson to direct his cameras with much freedom. The chase scene consists of some impressive shots in which the camera starts zoomed out to give an overview of the dangerous, primitively constructed cave dwellings, after which the camera elaborately follows the characters through the cave in order to zoom in on Gandalf and the dwarves who are fighting off hundreds of goblins while ducking under bridges and evading falling enemies. This very intense and dynamic way of filming the action would never have been possible if the goblins were played by real actors and if the director had to physically move the camera through a real setting. The digital nature of the film allows the director to place and move his ‘camera’ practically anywhere he wants. Because the camera and its operator are not susceptible

76 Ibid., 105.
to the physical environment it is possible to combine camera techniques such as pans, tilts and dolly shots in ways that would not be possible otherwise. The goblin chase scene therefore serves as an example of CGI spectacle that is characteristic of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters. The stereoscopic 3D effect emphasizes the verticality and depth of the goblin cave, especially when the camera impossibly tilts and pans through the environment. Furthermore, the higher frame rate and resolution ensure that the fast-paced action, specifically during fast camera movement, remains clearly visible at all times. Digital special effects make it possible to create a highly unrealistic but spectacular action scene that is more reminiscent of other media traditionally less grounded in realism, such as comics and video games. The goblin chase scene is one of An Unexpected Journey's many scenes in which technological innovation serves as a digital attraction to inspire awe and amazement in its audience.

2.3. Digital attractions as a promotional tool in the marketing of The Hobbit

This section of the case study is concerned with the marketing side of The Hobbit trilogy. The analysis will be based on the first two films, An Unexpected Journey and The Desolation of Smaug, because most of the studio's marketing material is now focused on the second film. It must be noted that this is not an all-encompassing analysis of Hollywood blockbuster marketing strategies. Instead, it will be narrowly focused on the role of digital attractions in the promotional material of The Hobbit. The aim is to get a better understanding about if, how and how much film studio's present and market their products as spectacular attractions by emphasizing new technology and special effects. The promotional material consists of film posters, trailers, the official website, the official blog and the DVD/Blu-ray releases.

2.3.1. Posters and trailers

With its appeal to a broad and diverse audience and its big budget (an estimated 600 million for the whole trilogy) the Hobbit films follow the typical blockbuster strategy of high-risk high-returns, although it must be noted that because of the huge popularity of
the Lord of the Rings trilogy there is considerably less risk involved compared to making a completely new film without an established fan base such as Avatar. A huge part of the production budget of blockbuster films is spent on star actors and special effects because these two factors can generate the biggest hit-potential. Digital special effects not only function within the filmic story world to provide spectacular attractions. Because of their digital nature they can also be easily transferred to other types of media to serve as iconic images, signifiers of the film’s excessive production values and the spectacle it promises to deliver. The spectacular computer-generated imagery itself can be extracted from the film to be used as a promotional tool in advertisements such as film posters and trailers.

The main film posters of the first two Hobbit films put the emphasis mainly on star actors instead of special effects (see appendix figures 4 and 5). The poster of An Unexpected Journey shows a medium close-up of the film’s main protagonist Bilbo, played by actor Martin Freeman. The main poster of The Desolation of Smaug takes the same star approach but presents a collage of seven of the film’s main characters with an emphasis on Gandalf played by Ian McKellen. There are even additional posters that show a close-up of each of the 13 dwarves. The films do contain some iconic computer-generated characters, such as Gollum, the dragon Smaug and the orc leader Azog, but they do not feature on the film posters. The studio could have used these monsters to attract the spectator by monstrating the monstrous. New digital technologies are well suited for the creation of grotesque monsters through techniques such as enlargement, deformation and distortion of the natural proportions. These fantastic and unnatural beings can serve as grotesque (digital) attractions. The marketing team behind The Hobbit clearly chose for a star approach in favor of a special effects approach with regards to the promotional posters. The posters do not even mention that the film can

79 Gurevitch, “The Cinemas of Transactions: The Exchangeable Currency of the Digital Attraction,” 375-376. Gurevitch uses Titanic (1997) as an example. The sunken ship was digitally recreated which at the time was a great but costly technological achievement. The iconic image of the CGI ship functioned as a digital attraction in posters and trailers to indicate the film’s huge budget and technological novelty.
80 The star system is one of the main strategies for Hollywood blockbuster to attract a large audience. See Elberse, Blockbusters: Hit-Making, Risk-taking, and the Big Business of Entertainment, 15.
81 The word monster is derived from the Latin word monstrum which means sign or portent as well as monstrous. The word is also etymologically related to monstrum which means to show or demonstrate. See Annie van den Oever, “Monstration and the Monstrous. The Grotesque in the Very Beginning and at the Very End,” in Proceedings of the XVI International Film studies Conference-Permanent Seminar on History of Film Theories. Film Theories in Perspective, eds. F Casetti, J. Gaines, V. (Udine: Forum, 2010): 13.
be viewed in a higher frame rate and the consumer is only informed about stereoscopic 3D by a small logo on the bottom.

The first trailer of An Unexpected Journey follows the same strategy as the film poster by mainly focusing on the main protagonist. Much time is dedicated to introducing the hobbit Bilbo and the group of thirteen dwarves. Most of the scenes in the trailer emphasize comedy with verbal and visual jokes. Some shots of impressive computer-generated environments are implemented to convey a feeling of wonder about the exotic fantasy world, but these images are not strong enough function as isolated digital attractions. The follow-up trailer also focuses more on story exposition and comical scenes than action. There are more wide shots of lush and splendid landscapes and the last quarter of the trailer is comprised of a montage of action shots, mainly from the goblin cave scene described earlier. Through intertitles the film experience is promised to be an ‘epic journey’ and ‘an adventure.’ These are words that specifically frame the film experience as a spectacular event. The two official trailers for The Desolation of Smaug put a bigger emphasis on spectacular action. About three quarters of the trailers is composed of action sequences while most of the remaining time is used to show the film’s impressive locales. With the second film we see a marketing strategy that is more directed at digital special effects spectacle than on star actors and story exposition. The second film’s biggest digital attraction and main antagonist is the impressively computer-generated and motion-captured dragon Smaug. He is shown at the end of the trailers but the viewer is only given a short glimpse of just parts of the dragon. Smaug is not shown in its entirety and therefore it is difficult for the character to function as a spectacular digital attraction. Instead, the marketing team chose to shroud the creature in mystery to raise audience curiosity and anticipation. Finally, just as with the film posters, there is no explicit mentioning of the higher frame rate in which the

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85 Interestingly, the natural beauty of the New Zealand landscape is not only used to create speechless moments of awe and wonder, reminiscent of the sublime as described by Kant in the Critique of Judgement. They are also used to promote the country and its wild, pristine landscapes, just as with the Lord of the Rings trilogy the films are almost entirely produced in New Zealand. They are an important export product to improve the country's international reputation and its tourism.
films were shot. It is remarkable that two of the film’s main promotional materials do not emphasize the fact that consumers can and should view the film in 3D and 48 FPS because it provides a more immersive and spectacular viewing experience. This may have been a strategic decision made after the backlash against the higher frame rate after the first screenings, as mentioned at the start of this chapter. This was at least the reason why the studio (and Peter Jackson) chose not to show the 48 FPS version of *The Desolation of Smaug* at the first press screenings. They wanted the critics to focus on the film itself, not only to write (negatively) about the higher frame rate.86

### 2.3.2. Websites and the home video-release

The posters and trailers analyzed above can be regarded as passive promotional materials because most consumers will run into these advertisements either willingly or unwillingly during other activities such as taking a walk outside or watching television. Therefore the target audience is very broad and the marketing team behind *The Hobbit* mainly relied on the conventional marketing strategy of displaying star actors and protagonists as well as imagery already familiar from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.87 Websites and DVD/Blu-ray editions of the film are active promotional materials because most consumers willingly and actively choose to search out these materials. They are targeted at a more narrow audience, either fans or other people that already have an interest in and some knowledge of the films. The marketing team may therefore follow a different strategy that is more concerned with fans and their interests in specific elements of *The Hobbit* such as the special effects and background information about the fantasy world of the films.

The official homepage88 contains all the usual elements of official film websites such as a summary of the story, information about the cast and crew and a collection of film trailers and stills. More interesting is the “features” section of the website. It contains


87 The style and composition of the film posters is very similar to those of *The Lord of the Rings* films for example.

two simple web browser-based games in which the user can re-enact two main action sequences from *The Desolation of Smaug*. In “The Spiders of Mirkwood” the player must navigate Bilbo Baggins through a dark forest while climbing trees and slaying huge spiders in order to save his friends who are wrapped in spider webs (see image 6 Appendix 1). In “Barrel Escape” the player’s goal is to safely navigate a dwarf in a barrel through a wild river by avoiding rocks and arrows and shooting down enemy orcs (see image 7 Appendix 1). Both games are fairly simple and straightforward but they provide an interactive way for fans to relive and experience two important action scenes in a new way. The games may also serve as a preview for potential audiences by already presenting them with some key elements of the film. A more elaborate interactive aspect of the official homepage is “A Journey Through Middle-Earth,” a web experiment developed specifically for Google Chrome web browsers (see figure 8 Appendix 1). It shows a map with the various locales of the *Hobbit* universe. The user can click on these dots on the map to explore the history, characters and creatures inhabiting these territories through text and images, as well as play small interactive games that take place in these specific locations. The web browser experiment is an interesting mix of an interactive encyclopedia of Tolkien’s fantasy world and a collection of interactive mini-games, providing both background information and a way to further interact with the story world.

The official Hobbit blog⁸⁹ complements the official homepage of the trilogy by providing a more news-oriented approach to marketing that is specifically targeted at fans of the franchise. The main content of the blog consists of an ongoing series of production diaries. These are 10-minute videos that inform the viewer about the various aspects of the production of the trilogy. Most of the behind-the-scenes videos emphasize the technologies used for the special effects in the films such as green screens and motion-capture suits. As an example, there is a video that explains in technical detail how the crew shot the films in stereoscopic 3D while also convincing the audience of why they should see *The Hobbit* in 3D. In the video Peter Jackson says shooting *The Hobbit* in 3D is a dream come true because it provides a more immersive experience by opening up the flat cinema screen so that the audience can get absorbed into the story world. It is

pointed out that technology has advanced considerably since *The Lord of the Rings*, thereby implying that this new trilogy will be even more spectacular and immersive. Here we see that the studio is already framing the viewing experience in their marketing as medium-specific technological attraction. Together with the official Facebook page the blog provides a platform for fans to engage with and show their love for the films. The websites post various fan-made materials such as video compilations, drawings and photos of fans dressed as characters from the films. The Facebook page has a weekly “Fan of the Week” item in which they highlight individual fans and the ways in which they profess their love for the films. Furthermore, the Facebook page provides a social platform for fans to gather, share and discuss everything *Hobbit* related. Here we observe the marketing team acknowledging the concept of *Henry media convergence* and acting to its principles accordingly. Digital distribution channels, in this case the social media and blogs, are used to deliver content to consumers faster and more directly. Direct contact with the fans is increased to generate bigger consumer commitment to the films. By providing a social platform the marketing team provides the space for a *participatory culture* to flourish in which active audiences are able to interact with each other before, during and after media consumption.

The home release of *An Unexpected Journey* employs a similar approach to the blog based on the showcasing of technology and special effects. There are multiple home releases of the film but the 3D Extended Blu-ray Edition is the most comprehensive one. It is comprised of five discs, three of which contain the 3D and 2D versions of the film. The other two discs are filled with many extras and special features. They contain more than nine hours of mini-documentaries and featurettes, ranging from the planning and pre-production stages to in-depth background information about the world created by Tolkien. Just as with the videos on the official blog many of the videos focus on the special effects, mainly on the motion-capturing techniques and the computer-generated creatures and locations. The aim of these videos is to provide hungry fans with more information about their favorite films, to convince people of the state-of-the-art technologies and special effects of *The Hobbit* that help make it a unique audio-visual

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91 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 18.

spectacle and consequently communicating the marketing position of the film by framing it as a technologically advanced ‘epic’ blockbuster. The official website of the DVD/Blu-ray release of *An Unexpected Journey* also contains a section about the higher frame rate and 3D.\(^93\) Its goal is to inform the viewer about how the technology works and why it enhances and enriches the cinema-going experience. A quote from the page:

> “HFR 3D is ‘different’ — it won’t feel like the movies you’re used to seeing, in much the same way as the first CDs didn’t sound like vinyl records. We live in an age when cinemas are competing with iPads and home entertainment systems. I think it’s critical that filmmakers employ current technology to increase the immersive, spectacular experience that cinema should provide. It's an exciting time to be going to the movies.”\(^94\)

The experience of watching *The Hobbit* in 3D and 48 frames per second is described as different from the normal cinema experience. By using the transition from vinyl to CD as an example the new technology is framed almost as comprising a new medium that is qualitatively much improved. The text also stresses that, although the film can be viewed on other devices such as tablets and televisions, the most immersive and spectacular experience can only be found in the cinema because of the new technologies of 3D and higher frame rates.

\(2.3.3.\) *Conclusion*

The analysis of the marketing behind *The Hobbit* has shown that, depending on the kind of promotional material, different strategies with different goals were used. Film marketing’s most conventional promotional materials, film posters and film trailers, are encountered passively. Therefore its target audience is very broad and the marketing strategy is tailored to this genderless public of all ages. The posters and trailers mainly focus on star actors, a common strategy used for blockbuster films, and less and only implicitly on technology and spectacle. This seems like a logical choice because the films include many famous actors widely known among the general film public. Some of the


\(^{94}\) Ibid.
actors and the characters they portray, such as Gandalf and Gollum, are already beloved iconic characters from the hugely popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The marketing team hopes to convey the same quality of those films by focusing on these popular figures and closely adapting the style and composition of the posters of the previous trilogy. Other reasons for the focus on star actors instead of technology and special effects may be the early negative critiques on 3D and the higher frame rate or the fear that the novelty status of digital attractions may wear off very fast. What should have been a main selling point of *The Hobbit* as a spectacular event film seems to have been intentionally ignored in the marketing. Technologically impressive computer-generated characters such as the dragon Smaug and the orc captain Azog, who could have been constructed as spectacular digital attractions, are also largely ignored in the posters and trailers.

The websites and home release of *The Hobbit* films show a different marketing strategy aimed at a more specific target audience that mainly consists of fans or at least people with an interest in the films. They are largely active promotional materials because people actively seek them out instead of unwillingly coming into contact with them. Other media (the internet and Blu-ray discs) are used to reach different audiences and extend and enrich the viewing experience beyond a visit to the cinema. This approach to marketing and the construction of the experience of *The Hobbit* by the film studio in particular is characteristic of the *cinema of interactions* as defined by Leon Gurevitch and Richard Grusin. The theory of the *cinema of interactions* defines contemporary digital cinema as a medium that influences and is influenced by the social, technological and aesthetic forms and practices of other digital media. Films are becoming more networked and distributed across the media landscape in a hybrid network of media forms because of changing production, distribution and exhibition practices.\(^5\) Film is no longer a passive medium that starts when the audience enters the theatre and ends when they leave it. Now there is a continuity of the audience and its interaction with the cinematic artifact, which is distributed and interacted with across various media.\(^6\) Watching a film in a theatre is now only a small part of a much broader aesthetic experience that is extended to other media such as DVD’s, books, video games and the Internet. Consumers can watch deleted scenes or behind-the-scenes footage at home on...

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 75.
DVD or Blu-ray, they can discuss the film on the official Facebook page and they can even interact with the fictional story world through the various games found on the official homepage. The websites and home releases are promotional materials that consumers can interact with before and/or after watching the film in the theatre. They may not only persuade a person to watch The Hobbit in the cinema but also influence his or her viewing experience beforehand and afterwards through other media. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that there is a huge commercial reasoning behind extending the experience beyond the cinema. The studio can increase its profits through franchising by convincing audiences to buy Hobbit-themed products such as video games, DVDs, books and mobile apps. Enriching the viewing experience by spreading it across various media provides the studio with new ways to make money off the film. Additionally, some audiences may decide to watch the film in the cinema after they came into contact with the franchise through other media. As an example, this is one reason why video games based on film franchises are often published before the cinema premiere, to generate interest and demand for the film within the gamer public.

The fact that the higher frame rate and stereoscopic 3D are not overtly presented as spectacular attractions seems to indicate that the marketing team did not recognize its potential audience as medium-specific viewers who would want to see the film primarily because of the new technology. Therefore, at least in the marketing, the film experience is not framed as a medium experience by the film studio. Instead, the experience is framed more as a traditional cinema experience because the focus lies mainly on the fantasy story, the iconic characters and the film’s star actors. One reason for this is the huge popularity of The Lord of the Rings films and its existing fan base on which the studio can rely for a safe marketing strategy. The other reason may be the early negative reactions to the higher frame rate, in which case the studio was indeed aware of a medium-sensitive viewer and intentionally chose to not market The Hobbit as a medium experience. The following reception analysis will reveal if the audience of The Hobbit is indeed medium sensitive and the extent to which they perceive its viewing experience as medium specific, either negatively or positively.
2.4. Reception analysis of the effects of new technologies on the viewing experience

The source material consists of the written accounts of both professional film critics and non-professional filmgoers. The former is made up of reviews from well-known and reputable American and British newspapers and (online) film magazines while the latter group consists of amateur user reviews from IMDB. There is a plethora of reviews to be found online so to make the source material more manageable the analysis is based on a selection of 15-20 accounts from both categories of viewers. The professional reviews were collected from Rotten Tomatoes, a well-known film review aggregator website that at the time of writing contained a total of 270 professional reviews about An Unexpected Journey. The IMDB user review section provides the easiest and most comprehensive way to collect non-professional written accounts with a growing collection of over a thousand user reviews. IMDB is the biggest worldwide film website that is visited by both casual filmgoers and serious film fans. The choice was made to not source the reviews from various Hobbit fan websites because there is a greater chance that those reviews will be influenced by fans’ various preconceptions and specific demands. Those websites also did not present user reviews in an organized way, which makes structured data collection difficult. Still, it must be noted that the IMDB user reviews are not representative of the general film audience. People who take the time and effort to write a review do this because of their passion for the medium. Therefore it is important to understand that the user reviews are written by film fans (not necessarily fans of The Hobbit specifically) and not by casual viewers, who make up a significant part of the general blockbuster audience. It was decided to take both professional and non-professional reviews into account to provide more breadth and depth to the written accounts of viewing experiences. Non-professional reviewers (and fans specifically) tend to be more vocal, though often less eloquent about what they did and did not like about a film. Critics also tend to rely more on traditional film criticism,

97 "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey Reviews & Ratings," IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0903624/reviews> (Last accessed 30 June 2014). There are over a thousand user reviews on IMDB. Because they are anonymous and all collected on the same page the quotes from IMDB users will not be references individually. They can be found at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0903624/reviews.

which is more concerned with aspects such as narrative and acting quality and less with new technology and special effects.99

Until now this case study was concerned with the use of new technology as digital attractions in the production and marketing of *The Hobbit*. Digital attractions feature heavily in the production of the films, not only as impressive digital special effects in the form of CGI creatures and environments but also on the level of the cinematic *dispositif* with stereoscopic 3D, a higher frame rate and a higher resolution. The analysis of the marketing revealed that the studio chose not to rely strongly on framing the viewing experience of *The Hobbit* as a technological spectacle worth watching for its state of the art special effects and novel frame rate alone. Instead they took a more safe and traditional star system approach that mainly promotes the film’s well-known actors and characters from the previous *Lord of the Rings* films. This final part of the case study will take the opposite approach to the question if *The Hobbit* can be described as a medium experience through an analysis of the audience reception of the first *Hobbit* film. This will reveal if and how much viewers are affected by the film’s digital attractions, providing insights with regards to contemporary Hollywood blockbuster’s experience as a medium experience and its viewers as medium aware and medium sensitive.

The analysis will primarily focus on the experience of the higher frame rate of 48 frames per second. Because *An Unexpected Journey* was the first film to feature this new technology it can be expected that the audience experienced the film as strange and novel through a process of *de-familiarization*, thus triggering a sense of awe and wonder.100 A quick look at the source material indicates that almost every reviewer mentions the effect of 48 FPS on his or her viewing experience, which at the time created a discourse among film critics and fans about the de-familiarizing effects of the new technology. Gunning states that *de-familiarization* leads to a re-newed awe and wonder for the medium.101 The words ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’ have very positive connotations but in

99 Some critics may not even have seen the film in 3D and 48 FPS because the studio chose to screen the film in 2D during press-screenings after the initial backlash on the higher frame rate.

100 Through the technique of *de-familiarization* (a concept borrowed from Viktor Shklovsky) an old and familiar medium can be re-newed and made fresh again. See Gunning, “Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century,” 40.

101 Ibid., 45-46.
this analysis it will become evident that the discourse surrounding 48 FPS is certainly not solely positive in nature. The higher frame rate may not have made the cinema experience strange by making the viewing experience fresh and new again. Instead, the de-familiarization of the cinema experience may have paradoxically taken place through a process of familiarization, not with the cinematic medium itself but with elements from other visual media such as home videos and video games. Viewers are recognizing new elements of the cinematic medium with which they are already familiar in other media, such as the higher frame rate of video games and some television shows. Therefore, this analysis is both a reception analysis (that investigates if the audiences experience the new technology as disruptive, either in a positive or a negative way) and a perception analysis (that looks at how viewers perceive the new cinema experience to be by comparing it to other types of media).

2.4.1. Positive experiences

As the shorter length of this paragraph already suggests most of the viewers were not positive about An Unexpected Journey. Only three out of sixteen IMDB user reviews were fully positive about the influence of 48 FPS, 3D and a 5K resolution on the viewing experience. One viewer seems completely overwhelmed by the extra clarity provided by the higher resolution and frame rate:

"The movie is amazing. It is unlike anything I've ever experienced in a cinema. The vividness of the colors and light and movement is something to behold. And then the 3D takes it all to another level. It was a little unnerving at times."\(^\text{102}\)

This user's reaction to new technology seems typical of the cinema of attractions. Early cinema audiences experienced the sensation of watching moving images on screen for the first time. This particular viewer seems to have experienced a similar sensation. New technologies (acting as digital attractions) have completely renewed the cinema experience for him. And just as early cinemagoers were initially shocked by the moving

images, this viewer found the clarity of the images a little unnerving at times (possibly because they provided a higher sense of realism heretofore not associated with the cinematic medium). The other two IMDB users were also positive about the improvements the higher frame rate brings to the viewing experience, but they were not overwhelmed in the sense that it provided a new or renewed cinema experience:

“All in all, I consider 48 fps to be an improvement over 24 fps (without diminishing the ‘cinematic’ look of a film), but I didn’t have the feeling that I had witnessed a ‘revolutionary new cinema experience.’”

The professional critics were even less positive overall, either weighing the advantages and disadvantages of 48 FPS or praising the new technological sensation while at the same time dismissing its effect on the narrative experience of the film. Bob Mondello is of the opinion that the film relies too heavily on action scenes and, although the technology enhances those action sequences significantly, it is ultimately to the detriment of the story:

“Still, even if it’s mostly technology this time rather than story that’s providing the depth, there is a new feel to reckon with. Director Jackson takes to 3-D like an orc to battle, turning an escape from a cave full of goblins into a plunge inside a Rube Goldberg contraption (...) all in a new process that doubles the number of frames per second, making even the fastest action clear, smooth and stutter-free.”

Richard Corliss from *Time Magazine* also applauds the improvements 48 FPS brings to the clarity of the image but stresses that it only works for fast-paced action scenes:

“The Hobbit’s most startling innovation — shooting at 48 frames per second — is also the most challenging. Filmgoers have been trained for almost a

103 Note that the term realism is used here to indicate a perceived visual credibility of an obvious fictional story world. See chapter 1.5 for a detailed definition of realism and special effects as used in these case studies.


century to watch movies at 24 frames per second. Doubling the rate keeps the image from blurring when the camera moves, which is ideal for Jackson’s action sequences but disorienting in the more static interior scenes, where the scenery upstages the characters. The clarity of the image is sometimes magical, occasionally migraine-inducing."¹⁰⁶

Both Mondello and Corliss share the opinion that the higher frame rate provides a better viewing experience in the case of action scenes. These scenes often contain camera movement that consists of fast pans and tilts.¹⁰⁷ The traditional 24 FPS causes the image to become blurry, making the action hard to follow. Projecting at double the frame rate removes this blurring effect considerably because every second double the amount of visual information is displayed. Projection in stereoscopic 3D is even more sensitive to fast camera movement because it can lead to crosstalk where the stereo left and right images are not perfectly aligned, which causes double images. Because An Unexpected Journey is a 3D spectacle film with a strong emphasis on action it seems a logical choice (for the reasons above) to make the film in 48 FPS. But many of the written accounts indicate that the advantages of the higher frame rate become disadvantages when slower non-action scenes are considered. At once, scenes become disorienting and migraine inducing as Corliss puts it. The moving image is perceived to be too clear and too fast. It affects the viewing experience negatively because the images become too real and un-cinematic. These issues will be explored below in greater detail.

The fact that all of the written accounts devote so much space to the advantages and disadvantages of the higher frame rate indicates that the contemporary blockbuster audience is susceptible to the effects of new technology on their viewing experience and to the marketing of those technologies as spectacular attractions. Mike Ryan from the Huffington Post perfectly puts into words why he is a medium-sensitive viewer:

“I’ll admit, it was fascinating to watch a movie in 48 FPS because, honestly, I’ve never seen anything like it. Ever. So from a technology standpoint, I

¹⁰⁷ See the description of the goblin chase scene at page 27-28 for an example of a fast-paced action scene.
enjoyed it quite a bit. But! To the extent that I simply wanted to watch a movie and be immersed in another world, it was distracting.\textsuperscript{108}

And how \textit{An Unexpected Journey} is a medium-experience, worth seeing for its technological novelty alone:

"Honestly, if you're curious about the technology, see it in 48 FPS – if only to see something you've never seen before. But if you're just a fan of the \textit{Lord of the Rings} trilogy and you want to watch \textit{The Hobbit} without any distractions, see it in 24 FPS."\textsuperscript{109}

Here, again, we observe similarities with the \textit{cinema of attractions} and the awe and wonder associated with the experience of a new technology. Most early film audiences went to see a film primarily for the novel technological medium itself. The cinematic apparatus and its experience by the audience formed the main attraction. Mike Ryan places \textit{An Unexpected Journey} in the same category of films as those from the very beginnings of cinema. He says that it is fascinating and enjoyable to watch the film from a technology standpoint alone, thus indicating that \textit{The Hobbit} can be regarded as a medium-experience that is mainly interesting and entertaining for its technological novelty. This becomes even more evident when Ryan stresses that viewers have the option to experience the film in two ways: as a traditional cinema experience in 2D and 24 FPS or as a medium experience in 3D and 48 FPS. For these two viewing options exist two corresponding types of audiences: First, the fans of Tolkien's fantasy books who primarily want to be engaged by the narrative and immersed in the story world and, second, a group of technology-savvy viewers that is always looking for new spectacular thrills in the cinematic medium.\textsuperscript{110} This seems to indicate that, although all viewers are medium sensitive, they may not all prefer a medium experience to a traditional cinema experience that is more concerned with story and narrative quality. This variety in audiences may be especially crucial for a film like \textit{An Unexpected Journey} that has many

\textsuperscript{108} Mike Ryan, “"The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey": How Is 48 Frames Per Second?”

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} The second group may be characteristic of a specific sub-group of the Hollywood blockbuster audience. A group of medium-sensitive viewers that mainly goes to the cinema to experience action and spectacle and marvel at technological novelty.
viewers already familiar with the exceptionally intricate narratives of Tolkien's literary works.

2.4.2. Negative experiences

Most of the written accounts were predominantly negative about the heavy use of technology as digital attractions in An Unexpected Journey. 13 out of 16 IMDB user reviews and 16 out of 18 professional criticisms expressed their concerns about the higher frame rate and the use of computer animation. Two main points of criticism can be derived from the written accounts, one concerned with the overabundance of action and CGI in favor of narrative quality and the other with the negative effects of the higher frame rate on the viewing experience.

The first main criticism is that An Unexpected Journey relies too much on spectacular action scenes and computer-generated special effects. Christopher Orr from The Atlantic remarks that, after an overlong introduction of the hobbit and the thirteen dwarves, the film becomes a chain of spectacular action scenes without the necessary moments for story exposition as “(Peter) Jackson begins piling on layer after layer of extraneous action and incident.” 111 Ann Hornaday from The Washington Post is also of the opinion that the overemphasis on spectacle impedes the narrative of the film, describing the narrative flow as “long, monotonous stretches interrupted by moments of bombastic, bone-crunching nastiness.” 112 Film critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, Mick LaSalle, felt like more than half of the film’s length was filled with action scenes:

“The three "Lord of the Rings" were heavy on battle scenes, but "The Hobbit" is almost nothing but battles. Without a stopwatch, it would be hard to know for sure, but probably 50 percent of screen time is taken up with fighting -

perhaps up to 80 percent if you count planning for and recovering from battles."\textsuperscript{113}

The CGI-driven spectacle seems out of place in \textit{An Unexpected Journey}, merely implemented as digital attractions separated from the story. As one IMDB user puts it:

\begin{quote}
“Everything is CGI overload; there's no tension. (...) Unfortunately everything in "The Hobbit" is cartoonish. Not to mention most of the action has no impact on the story whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

The overabundance of digital special effects is used to mask a lack of story depth:

\begin{quote}
"The script is short on themes, characterisation and subplots. It's overly rigid structure means the film becomes too absorbed in its sets and its environments, instead of the story.”\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

These criticism are all concerned with \textit{The Hobbit}'s nature, namely that it is a spectacle-driven Hollywood blockbuster or event film. For a film trilogy that is based on a widely respected literary work there is too great a lack of narrative quality. The story progression is too often interrupted by overstretched action scenes. Peter Jackson evidently approached the making of the trilogy from a blockbuster standpoint, thereby shifting the narrative-spectacle continuum strongly in favor of the latter. The reason for this is probably a purely business-based choice. The source material for \textit{The Hobbit} trilogy is a novel of roughly 200 pages whereas the film adaptation consists of three film of two-and-a-half to three hours each. To transform a 200-page book into a nine-hour long trilogy Peter Jackson had to make up new scenes, stretch others and fill the rest of the films with spectacular action scenes. Many fans find that the films have lost the connection with their source material and have instead become generic spectacle-driven blockbuster films. Instead of making a single \textit{Hobbit} film that remains true to the book and its pleases its existing fan base, the studio chose to target a more general

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
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blockbuster audience (via an emphasis on action and spectacle) and to stretch the story to three films (to the detriment of the story quality) in order to generate as much revenue as possible.

The second main criticism is concerned with the impact of the technologies on the viewing experience. The heavy use of CGI, 3D, a higher resolution and in particular the higher frame rate seem to impact the viewing experience negatively for viewers. Many reviews on IMDB not only mention the excessive use of CGI but also its ‘fake’ look:\footnote{116}

“The use of CGI is also glaringly obvious and fake; like with the prequels of Star Wars, when the movie cuts between humans and CGI blobs, your brain is onto it. Stop relying on CGI for everything.”\footnote{117}

And:

“The 3D HFR, though spectacular at times, is a nearly total catastrophe, or perhaps the film was not ready for release. Everything outdoors is badly over-lit. (...) The characters do not blend organically with their environments. Rivendell looks like a matte painting. The film is often (but not always) ugly, period.”\footnote{118}

These accounts seem to indicate that there is a fake quality to the digital special effects even though they were created by Weta Digital, one of the industry’s leading digital effects studios. A closer look at another IMDB user review reveals that the artificiality is not so much a result of bad CGI production but more a side-effect of the higher frame rate and resolution:

“The IMAX HFR 3D at 48fps (...) in my opinion is a grave error and turns the movie into an amateurish looking farce in places. The slick action from previous films is gone with this higher detail and resolution of movement creating the placeholder for a very fake looking movie. The use of CGI is also

\footnote{116} ‘Fake’ in the sense that the artificiality of the special effects becomes evident when compared to what the viewer perceives as ‘real’ actors and ‘real’ environments. In other words: compared to the viewer’s habitualized perception regarding the ‘true’ cinematic image.
\footnote{117} Ibid.
\footnote{118} Ibid.
excessive and the fine detail really shows you that it's computer generated and in no way believable. I'm not saying the CGI looks bad, I'm saying that the detail of the CGI due to the 48fps playback really makes it stand out from the actors which spoils it completely for me.”

The improvements that 48 FPS and a 5K resolution bring to the clarity of the image (as described in the paragraph about the positive reception) seem to have a negative effect on the CGI's visual credibility in an otherwise obviously fictional story world. Because of the extra clarity of the image the computer-generated characters, objects and environments do not blend in properly with the rest. This is most obvious in action scenes where the use of CGI is more widely spread. One of the reasons why Peter Jackson shot The Hobbit in 48 FPS was to make the viewing experience more immersive but the result, most notably in the case of CGI-heavy action scenes, is the opposite. The artificiality of the digital special effects becomes obvious which affects the suspension of disbelief of the viewer who loses his immersion in the story world.

All three of The Hobbit's main technologies aim to make the moving images on screen more like reality by removing the ‘imperfections’ of the cinematic medium: 3D brings an extra dimension to the traditionally flat 2D cinema screen, a digital 5K resolution removes film grain and reduces the visibility of pixels, while a higher frame rate doubles the projection to make moving images appear as fast and smooth as our eyes see in reality. All three technologies strive to make the traditional cinema experience as close to reality as possible with the goal to make the viewing experience ever more immersive. The written accounts from professional critics indicate that this may have an adverse effect on the viewing experience. Most critics share the opinion that because of the new technologies, and 48 FPS in particular, the moving images become too much like reality, leading to a loss of the “magic” of cinema:

“There is something awry in the idea that Tolkien's wondrous inventions—an entire history and landscape, plus trees of unknown languages, grown from one man's fancy—should be transmitted through a medium newly and utterly bent on realism. When the imaginary is presented as fact, hard and
hypervisible, right down to the popping buttons of a waistcoat, does the magic not drop off?”

The magic of cinema refers to the medium’s ability to immerse the viewer in an imaginary story world. Because of the extra sharpness of the image it becomes possible to notice artificial aspects of the setting and make-up that were unnoticeable before, such as fake beards and noses. This is especially problematic for a film like The Hobbit that creates a fantasy story world not grounded in reality. Make-up and set design are very important tools for creating a believable imaginary world, so when their artificiality becomes obvious to the viewer it compromises a great deal of the film’s immersive powers. Anthony Lane already described the image as “hyper-visible” in the quote above. Other critics used a similar term by describing the viewing experience as “hyper-real.” Peter Travers from Rolling Stone:

“Couple that with 3D and the movie looks so hyper-real that you see everything that's fake about it, from painted sets to prosthetic noses. The unpleasant effect is similar to watching a movie on a new HD home-theater monitor, shadows obliterated by blinding light like – yikes! – reality TV.”

And A. O. Scott from the New York Times:

“Over all, though, the shiny hyper-reality robs Middle-earth of some of its misty, archaic atmosphere, turning it into a gaudy high-definition tourist attraction.”

All three critics use the term “hyper” in the postmodern sense to describe their inability to discern the imaginary or simulation from reality. It must be noted that they do not use the concept in the strict sense as defined by Jean Baudrillard who argues that simulation


is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” and that the postmodern era of simulation (which is dominated by hyper-reality) is formed by a “liquidation of all referentials,” leading him to define the art or process of filmmaking as a “simulacrum” or a “copy without a model.” In the case of The Hobbit there is a model on which the copy is based and this is made all too clear by the new technologies of 3D, 48 FPS and 5K. The film, viewed in 3D and 48 FPS, is “hyper-real” in the sense that the origin or reality of the objects on screen is too obvious to the viewer. The film contains clear referents to the real world in the form of fake noses and contact lenses. It can be argued that these are elements that make the viewer more medium aware because the viewers are taken out of the story world and are constantly reminded that they are watching a film. This goes against the traditional cinema experience that aims to make the viewing experience as immersive as possible by transporting the audience into an imaginary world through a suspension of disbelief. The hyper-realism exceeds and counteracts the cinematic medium’s inherent drive toward realism and an ideal state of total representation.

2.4.3. Comparisons to the experience of other types of media

“Thanks for the Video Game. When is the movie coming out?”

"Peter, Life ain’t 50% MTV and the rest video-games. There is literature as well. We appreciate you aren’t interested, so leave it alone."

These quotes from anonymous IMDB users are exemplary for many of the reactions to the effects of new technology on The Hobbit’s viewing experience. One of the most interesting results from the reception analysis is that many of the written accounts include comparisons to other types of media when describing The Hobbit’s viewing experience in 3D and 48 FPS. A look at the written accounts of both professional and

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126 Ibid.
non-professional reviewers led to a collection of the following medium comparisons: television, home video, theatre, documentaries, tourist attractions and video games.

Kenneth Turan from the *L.A. Times* is of the opinion that *An Unexpected Journey* loses its cinematic aesthetics in favor of a high-definition television feel:

> “Whatever its virtues may be from a technical point of view, audiences looking for a rich, textured, cinematic experience will be put off and disconcerted by an image that looks more like an advanced version of high definition television than a traditional movie.”

Peter Travers attributes this feeling of watching a reality TV show at home to the hyper-real characteristic of the image as described in the previous paragraph.

Another interesting medium comparison is the one with home video, which often has an amateurish quality, and a documentary feel of being on set and looking over the shoulder of the cast and crew while the film is being shot. Mick LaSalle articulated this as “looking over Peter Jackson’s shoulder to watch a computer screen.” Dana Stevens describes the quality of the 48 FPS image as looking like “an ‘80s-era home video shot by someone who happened to be standing around on set while The Hobbit was being filmed,” while also observing visual analogues to the *Teletubbies* children’s show and day-time soap operas. Anthony Lane from *The New Yorker* sees the higher resolution of 5K as the cause for the documentary feeling because it reveals too much of the actors’ make-up:

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128 The relevant quote can be found on page 51.
130 LaSalle, “‘The Hobbit’ review: Chore of the Rings.”
"HD has the unfortunate effect of turning every film into what appears to be a documentary about a film set, not just warts-and-all but carefully supplying extra warts where a wart has no right to be."\(^{132}\)

This documentary look is described by others as a theatrical feeling for the same reasons, namely that watching *The Hobbit* feels like watching the actors rehearse or play on stage on a set that is clearly fake. David Edelstein argues that this theatrical aesthetic look of *The Hobbit* is not appropriate for a fantasy-film epic:

"The immediacy of the actors is startling, but the background is weirdly foreshortened, the fakeness of the sets and makeup an endless distraction. Staginess does nothing for a fantasy-film epic ... the grandeur of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy having been replaced by something that resembles tatty summer-stock theater."\(^{133}\)

The theatrical look is especially evident in “cramped interior scenes in Bilbo Baggins’ home”\(^{134}\) and in one case the fake hyper-real look together with the audiovisual bombast of its action scenes is compared to an opera:

"The Hobbit” in the 48 format resembles an incredibly high-definition simulcast of “The Metropolitan Opera Live from Middle-earth.” I hate it. It looks like test footage, devoid of warmth and texture, and when backed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, sloshing through Howard Shore’s musical score, the mismatch of sound and visuals is remarkable."\(^{135}\)

Many viewers use the adjective ‘fake’ in their medium comparisons. They use this word to indicate that what they see on the screen does not seem to belong to the cinematic experience but to the experience of other types of media. Each medium has its own

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\(^{132}\) Lane, “Ring Cycle: Peter Jackson returns to Middle-Earth.”


practices and conventions and consumers have their preconceived notions of what is and what is not acceptable in each medium. Obvious cardboard trees and foam rocks may be acceptable on a theatre set but not as part of a film set. The visibility of contact lenses or make-up may be normal or even desirable in documentaries but not in fiction films. Interestingly, both elements that are not real enough and elements that are too real are regarded as ‘fake.’ They all work against the viewer’s desire and ability to suspend their disbelief. The previous medium comparisons are primarily based on the effects of new technologies on the aesthetics of *An Unexpected Journey*. The comparisons to tourist attractions and video games are mainly based on the film’s status as a blockbuster spectacle film, which favors action and digital special effects over narrative. One filmgoer compared his first experience to the higher frame rate to a roller coaster ride, saying: “You have to hold your stomach down and let your eyes pop at first to adjust. This is not for wimps.”\(^ {136} \) Another compared it to a Universal Studios 4D theme park ride “where everything is painfully fake, but at least THERE you’re moving fast enough on that ride to forget that and you can let yourself be distracted by the thrill of the ride.” Gunning acknowledged that “clearly in some sense recent spectacle cinema has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects” but that these were only “tamed attractions” when compared to the early cinema of attractions.\(^ {137} \) It is mainly because they focus on action over narrative that those films can be called tamed attractions. The written accounts about the viewing experience of *The Hobbit* in 3D and 48 FPS seem to indicate that it lies closer to the early cinema of attractions. The associations with roller coaster rides and other theme park attractions suggest that there is a certain physical reaction the moving images on screen, which appear to move faster, in more detail and in closer proximity to the viewer. The reactions are not that different from the early written accounts of viewings of the Lumiere brothers’ *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1897) where people ran away because they thought the approaching train would appear out of the screen and run them over.\(^ {138} \) This ‘train effect’ is observed again with *An Unexpected Journey*, albeit in a different form, when viewers watch the film for the


first time in 3D and a higher frame rate. Just as the early film audiences were not familiar with the cinematic medium, contemporary viewers are not familiar with the effects of new technologies on the viewing experience. Apparently, for some viewers 3D, 48 FPS and a 5K resolution have such a physical impact that they arrest the senses for a while, making the audience having to adjust to the faster and clearer three-dimensional images.

Eight of the IMDB user reviews mention video games when describing the viewing experience of An Unexpected Journey. In some cases this comparison is made because of the fake look of the film’s CGI. Traditionally, the CGI in video games is of a lesser quality because the 3D characters and environments must be rendered in real time, which requires greater computing power, whereas in film the CGI is pre-rendered allowing for much more detail. Some viewers found the quality of the CGI of An Unexpected Journey on par with the visuals of contemporary video games, thereby implying that the viewer is always aware of the computer-generated world of The Hobbit. Others associate the film’s heavy emphasis on spectacular action and technological novelty with the medium of video games: 139

“Both men (Jackson and Cameron) have become transfixed by spectacle, with each of their films more elaborate and technically sophisticated than the last. They seem intent on blurring the lines between video games and cinema, which means more investment into technology and effects, rather than the scripts. Someone distanced from the source material and video game culture might have made The Hobbit less self-indulgent and plodding.” 140

The way the narrative is structured is also reminiscent of video games:

“As it stands, Jackson’s love for video games is all too visible here. The script is short on themes, characterisation and subplots. It’s overly rigid structure means the film becomes too absorbed in its sets and its environments, instead

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139 The video game medium has a very strong technological forward drive. This becomes evident when one compares the graphical quality of early games from the eighties, which consisted of blocky two-dimensional pixels of only a handful of colors, with the elaborate three-dimensional free-roaming worlds of some contemporary video games.
of the story. Each scene is like a level from a game, designed to showcase a
gallery of monsters, which are cogs in the film’s tired formula for suspense.
Exposition is followed by danger and then an escape route. Press start to
begin.”

*An Unexpected Journey*’s narrative is merely a crude line on which to hang the multitude
of spectacular action scenes. The same is true for many big-budget action games where
the main part of the game consists of interactive action sequences, which are
interrupted by short non-interactive CGI scenes to further the plot. Just as with video
games, the narrative of *An Unexpected Journey* exists mainly in service of spectacle, a
necessary tool to present its audience with action scenes in a believable and logical way.

This collection of medium comparisons made by professional and non-professional
viewers results in the following conclusions. One, the digital special effects and new
technologies have renewed the cinema experience in such a way that the viewers cannot
describe the experience within the boundaries of the cinema *dispositif*. The technological
basis of the medium is one of the components that form the cinema *dispositif*. In the
case of *An Unexpected Journey* this technological basis has changed so profoundly
because of 3D, 48 FPS and 5K that viewers can only describe the new viewing
experience in terms of other media. Second, comparisons to some specific types of
media, such as documentaries and theatre, indicate the “hyper-real” characteristics of
the technologies that take the viewing experience ever further toward reality. This has
the unwanted effect of revealing the artificiality of the image, thereby removing the
‘magical’ and ‘fantastical’ qualities of the medium. Third, comparisons to other types of
media, such as video games and theme park rides, reveal that *The Hobbit* is indeed
experienced as an action-heavy technological attraction that causes thrills and
amazement. Fourth, the fact that viewers describe the viewing experience of *The Hobbit*
as similar to other media demonstrates that contemporary filmgoers are very much
medium aware and medium sensitive. They not only describe their viewing experience
as something unfamiliar to the cinematic medium but are also able to articulate how and
why the experience is reminiscent of other types of media. Lastly, we see that *The
Hobbit*, as a contemporary Hollywood blockbuster film that relies heavily on digital

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141 Ibid.
attractions, is characteristic of the concept of the cinema of interactions as defined by Gurevitch and Grusin as a hybrid cinema that both influences and is influenced by other types of media socially, technologically as well as aesthetically.\textsuperscript{143} Technologically, we see that with the higher frame rate the cinematic medium has become more like video games and television, two types of media that often display content at a higher, smoother frame rate. Aesthetically, the blockbuster film seems increasingly influenced by video games’ CGI visuals and reliance on spectacular action.

2.4.4. Conclusion

The analysis of the marketing of The Hobbit ended with the conclusion that the film studio did not explicitly market the film as a medium-experience. The question arose whether the film’s target audience was recognized as medium sensitive and medium aware or not. The results from the reception analysis suggest that the studio may have anticipated the negative reactions to the higher frame rate, based on the early critique during press screenings, and purposefully chose to downplay the new technologies in their marketing campaign. This indicates that the studio was indeed aware of the medium awareness and medium sensitivity of its audience but intentionally chose to minimalize the framing of the viewing experience as a medium experience.

The reception analysis was based on a collection of both professional and non-professional written accounts of the viewing experience of An Unexpected Journey. The analysis focused on viewers’ experiences with and opinions of the use of digital special effects and 3D, 48 FPS and a 5K resolution. The goal was to answer the third sub-question of this thesis, which asks what effect the heavy use of new technology as digital attractions has on the viewing experience of An Unexpected Journey. Only a handful of reviews were positive about the effects of the new technologies on the viewing experience and they were mostly from non-professional reviewers. One IMDB user review was very positive about the higher frame rate and resolution, stating that he or she was completely overwhelmed by the resulting extra clarity of the image. The experience was described as something never seen before in the cinema and the viewer

was sometimes a little unsettled by it. This account is reminiscent of Tom Gunning’s article on renewing old technologies where he states that old technologies can be experienced as fresh again through a process of *de-familiarization*.\(^{144}\) In this case the higher frame rate and resolution renewed the cinema experience in such a way that the viewer was amazed and in awe of its novelty. *An Unexpected Journey*, as the first film to combine 3D, 48 FPS and a 5K resolution, shows that new technologies have the power to act as digital or technological attractions to amaze and attract the audience.

Most of the viewers were negative about the effects of the new technologies on the viewing experience, although it is important to note that some recommended viewing the film at least once in 3D and 48 FPS just because it provided something new, but not necessarily better. This indicates that for *An Unexpected Journey* the new technologies can indeed act as digital attractions that provide a medium-experience because viewers want to visit the cinema solely to experience its technological novelty. Instead of wanting to enjoy an engrossing story and a captivating fantasy world, the main reasons for seeing *An Unexpected Journey* become its technological attractions in the shape of state of the art computer-generated special effects, stereoscopic 3D, a higher frame rate and a higher resolution.

The two main points of criticism are the film’s overabundance of spectacle and the negative effects of the higher frame rate and resolution on the viewing experience. The first critique is mainly attributable to *An Unexpected Journey’s* construction as a typical Hollywood blockbuster that diminishes story in favor of spectacle in the form of CGI-heavy action scenes. Here we see that the narrative-spectacle continuum from the cinema *dispositif* has greatly shifted to the side of spectacle. Critics argue that the film’s many CGI-heavy action scenes do not further the plot, which suggests that they are merely implemented as independent digital attractions, with the narrative’s main function being to tie those spectacular action scenes logically together. The second point of criticism is that the higher frame rate and resolution make the CGI look fake and the image in general hyper-real. 48 FPS and a 5K resolution make the image much sharper and clearer, especially during action scenes with fast camera movement. This extra

clarity of the image has the negative side effect of increasing the contrast between computer-generated and real objects and background, while also accentuating the artificiality of stage props and the actors’ make-up and wardrobe. Critics use the postmodern concept of hyper-reality to indicate their difficulties with discerning the imaginary from reality. The moving images on screen are perceived to be too real and this leads to a failure of suspension of disbelief, which is a necessary process to get absorbed or lost in a film's story. Some viewers described this as a loss of the ‘magic’ of cinema, thereby referring to the medium's powers of immersion. In interviews Peter Jackson stated that he wanted to make the cinema experience more immersive with the help of 3D, 5K and 48 FPS but the result seems to be the opposite. It seems that an increase in immersion is not directly related (and may even be inversely related) to an increase in realism.

The final interesting result from the reception analysis is that many reviewers compare the viewing experience of An Unexpected Journey in 3D and 48 FPS to other types of media. Comparisons were made to television, home videos, theatre, documentaries, tourist attractions and video games. The hyper-real visuals were found to be more akin to those of high-definition television. The decrease in immersion reminded some of watching a theatrical play where one is more aware of the artificiality of the setting and the fact that the characters are being played by professional actors. There seems to be a greater distance between the observer and that what is being observed. This distanced, objective relation to the images was described as a documentary feeling of being present on set while the film is being made and looking over the shoulder of the director. Most of the analogies were made with the medium of video games. In some cases the overabundant use and fakeness of the CGI visuals was reminiscent of video games, whose visuals are entirely computer-generated and of a lower quality than in most films. For others, the strong emphasis on spectacular action and simple narrative was similar to video games. These medium comparisons are very interesting because they reveal that the viewers of An Unexpected Journey are very much medium aware. They not only frame their viewing experience of the film as a medium experience by describing and analyzing their individual experiences in terms of technology, but they are also able to make interesting and well-argued comparisons to other types of media. In terms of the cinema of interactions we can state that An Unexpected Journey, as an example of
spectacle-driven contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, is not only produced and marketed as a medium experience, but also perceived as a medium experience by its audience. The fact that the studio intentionally chose not to explicitly frame the viewing experience as a medium experience but the audiences did nevertheless experience it as such reveals that the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster audience possesses a strong medium awareness. It is not the question if they are sensitized by new technologies but how their viewing experiences are affected by them. In the case of *An Unexpected Journey* those experiences were dominantly negative in nature.
3. Case study James Cameron’s Avatar

3.1. Introduction

James Cameron’s Avatar is widely considered as a milestone film of the twenty-first century for various reasons. For one, it set many new records for Hollywood blockbuster releases. It trumped James Cameron’s own Titanic (1997) in being the highest grossing film to date with a worldwide gross of 2.8 billion dollars. When one adds the production costs of 237 million dollars, the marketing budget of roughly 150 million dollars and the R&D costs for the development of the 3D cameras and motion capture technology the total budget of the film comes in at a record-breaking 500 million dollars. Avatar is also one of the best-selling home video releases with nearly seven million Blu-ray copies sold in the United States.

Another reason for Avatar’s status as a milestone film is the fact that it introduced many new film technologies or improved upon existing ones. James Cameron already conceived the story and general visual look of Avatar in 1994 but realized quickly that the technologies for CGI and motion capturing were not advanced enough in the nineties to realize his vision. More than ten years later film technology had progressed enough to allow James Cameron to realize his vision of the jungle-like planet Pandora and its inhabitants in the form of the alien but human-like blue Na’vi and various six-legged animal monsters. When finished, Avatar consisted of 60% CGI imagery and only 40% live-action footage. At its release the film raised the bar for the visuals quality of CGI-heavy Hollywood blockbusters. While it was not the first to re-introduce 3D technology in the twenty-first century, it is widely regarded as the first film to successfully implement stereoscopic 3D as an added value to the immersion of the cinematic experience and not merely as a gimmick to generate more ticket sales.

Finally, since its release *Avatar* has proven to be a popular film text for analysis with both film critics and film scholars, not only because of its state of the art CGI, motion capturing technology and intelligent use of 3D but also because of its story and narrative themes. There are many textual analyses ranging from political readings about human imperialism and colonialism, anti-war propaganda and religion to ecological readings about technology’s destructive effects on nature.148

James Cameron is a veteran Hollywood blockbuster director famous for his expert use of digital special effects beginning with films such as *The Abyss*’ (1989) alien water tentacle and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day’s* (1991) morphing T-1000 Terminator. With *Avatar* Cameron took the next big step in Hollywood spectacle films, not only by implementing stereoscopic 3D (and co-developing the technology himself) but also by making a film that consists of more computer-generated imagery than live-action footage. While fully computer animated films have been gaining popularity since *Toy Story*’s release in 1995 it was never deemed possible to create a believable, realistic-looking live-action/CGI hybrid film before the existence of *Avatar.*

In an interview with CNN before the release of the film Cameron spoke about how he wants to take people to another world and out of their daily lives, on a fantasy journey and to travel in the shoes of another guy (here referring to the main protagonist Jake Sully, performed by Sam Worthington). This was not done before like this, according to the director. He describes *Avatar* as an experiential journey that is highly immersive, especially in 3D, and the viewer is going to see things that he has never seen before other than probably in his own dreams.149 It becomes clear from this interview that James Cameron intended to create *Avatar* mainly as a unique experience, characterizing it for example as an “experiential journey.” To fully immersive the viewer, the quality of the computer-generated visuals must be of such a high level that the viewer cannot distinguish live-action footage from computer-generated footage. Just as the technology within the film’s diegesis enables Jake Sully to take possession of an alien Na’vi body, the 3D and CGI technologies enable the viewer to be absorbed and immersed in the foreign

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fantasy world of Pandora. After a while Sully doesn’t want to leave his Na’vi avatar, a desire that is not unlike reports of viewers who experienced depression because they longed for the beautiful alien planet Pandora after the film ended. This is one of the main reasons why Avatar forms such an interesting case study. For most Hollywood blockbusters computer animation primarily serves as a tool to create and enhance spectacular action scenes. Although Avatar includes a multitude of spectacular action scenes, enhancing those moments is not the only function of 3D and CGI. Instead, their main purpose is to create a believable, immersive alien world and its inhabitants that are at once so alien (because of their blue skin color and cat-like eyes) and so human (for their ability to show a wide range of human emotions through facial expressions). For James Cameron, it seems that new technology is not just a means to create bigger spectacle. CGI and 3D enable him to create a more immersive story by making the illusion that is cinema as real as possible. In an interview with Variety he makes the bold statement that Godard got it exactly backwards:

“Cinema is not truth 24 times a second, it is lies 24 times a second. (...) It’s all illusion, but the prize goes to those who make the fantasy the most real, the most visceral, the most involving. This sensation of truthfulness is vastly enhanced by the stereoscopic illusion. Especially in the types of films which have been my specialty to date, the fantasy experience is served best by a sense of detail and textural reality supporting the narrative moment by moment.”

Avatar meets all of the characteristics of a Hollywood blockbuster, typically defined as big budget “spectacles” or “events” that deliver an audio-visual experience only possible with those high budgets. The film’s enormous budget of 500 million dollars was needed to realize James Cameron’s vision of a fully immersive CGI fantasy world that in his words has never been done before. Another characteristic of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters is that they are often produced and promoted as a technological

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attraction, more so than as an immersive, narratively complex story. This is where **Avatar** interestingly stands out from other blockbusters because according to Cameron it mainly employs 3D, CGI and motion-capture technologies to increase immersion and enhance the quality of the narrative, not just for the sake of providing the viewer with technological spectacle.

For this case study the focal point of analysis will be the use of new technologies as digital attractions and their impact on the viewing experience, in particular the use of stereoscopic 3D, computer-generated imagery and motion- and facial-capturing technologies. Just as with the case of **The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey**, this analysis is divided in three parts. The first part explains what the main technologies of **Avatar** are and how they are implemented. Instead of using a key scene to exemplify this (as was done with the case study of **The Hobbit**), this analysis uses the computer-generated world of Pandora and its inhabitants to illustrate how these digital attractions can generate feelings of the grotesque and the sublime. The second part is concerned with the marketing and investigates specifically if and how **Avatar**'s viewing experience is framed as a medium experience with new technologies functioning as digital attractions. The third part, the reception analysis, is crucial for understanding if the viewing experience is indeed perceived as a medium experience by its viewers, both by professional film critics and by general film fans. It must be noted that, although 3D is a very important digital attraction of **Avatar**, the reception analysis will not be an analysis of the discourse about the positive and negative effects of stereoscopic 3D. Instead, just as with **The Hobbit** and 48 FPS, the focus will not only lie on if the new technology influences the viewing experience positively or negatively but also on how and why it influences and changes the viewing experience.

### 3.2. The use of new technology as digital attractions in the production of **Avatar**

This section describes what the main technologies of **Avatar** are and how they function as digital attractions to awe and amaze the viewers. In the introduction to this chapter it already became clear that James Cameron did not wanted to use new technologies to just create bigger, spectacular action scenes. His main goal was to create a realistic and
immersive story (and especially story world) that viewers believe in and experience as being there themselves. For this, three main digital technologies had to be improved upon: stereoscopic 3D, computer-generated imagery and motion capturing, particularly the capturing of facial expressions. These three technologies and their uses will be discussed below, followed by an analysis of the capacity of these technologies to create grotesque and sublime feelings. Because CGI plays such an important role in Avatar (about 60 percent of the footage is computer-generated and there is always some form of CGI present in every shot) it could be argued that Avatar is the first film to successfully stretch the digital attraction to conventional feature length films.\textsuperscript{153} Gunning stated in his essay that: "Clearly in some sense recent spectacle cinema has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects"\textsuperscript{154} and that "In fact the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others."\textsuperscript{155} With its fully 3D computer-generated visuals and nearly three-hour length Avatar greatly prolongs the cinematic attraction when compared to the short non-narrative films from early cinema history. It could be argued that with the release of Avatar and despite the presence of narrative, the cinema of (digital) attractions has resurfaced from the underground to become the dominant form of filmmaking in Hollywood blockbuster spectacles.

The effect of stereoscopic 3D is two-sided and somewhat paradoxical. It strives to shock and amaze the viewer by providing a novel technological experience that may even physically disturb some viewers.\textsuperscript{156} It also aims for more immersion and realism effects by bringing the visual representation of objects and persons on screen closer to how we perceive them in real life, in three dimensions with more depth of field and different

\textsuperscript{153} Here I do not include fully computer-generated animation films such as Pixar’s Toy Story because these films adhere to different genre conventions and do not aim for a fully immersive and realistic viewing experience.

\textsuperscript{154} Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction(s): Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” 387.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 382.

\textsuperscript{156} These physical reactions can be positive or negative. There were many news articles after the release of Avatar about viewers experiencing headaches or nausea due to the 3D effect. Other physical reactions can occur for example from trying to evade or touch objects that appear to move out of the screen.
planes of focus. The 3D effect is clearly related to the cinema of attractions, in particular to the *train effect* as described by Steven Bottomore. According to Bottomore audiences of the early cinema of attractions were most often amazed by the reality effects of the moving images:

"(...) what often impressed audiences most (or at any rate the reviewers who wrote about the screenings) was the uncanny realism of certain films and their ability to reproduce complex, natural movement: in portraying the undulations of smoke and water, for example, or the movement of crowds of people."

A famous example is the account of the first viewings of the Lumiére brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896). The story (or myth) goes that some viewers ran out of the theatre because they believed that there was an actual train approaching them out of the cinema screen. This account, whether true or not, attests to the powerful force of realism effects on the viewer. Eisenstein already defined the slightly opposing effects of stereoscopic 3D as inward and outward effects. The stereoscopic representation both “recedes deep into the screen, drawing the spectator into unknown depths” and “falls out of the screen into the auditorium” – an effect which can be “overwhelming.” Here, the former inward effect is aimed at immersion and realism while the latter outward effect aims mainly for attraction through disruptive shock effects. James Cameron also recognizes both effects of 3D. He claims that “when you see a scene in 3D, that sense of reality is supercharged” and that “a 3-D film immerses you in the scene, with a greatly enhanced physical presence and participation.” He also understands that 3D can function as an attraction, both for commercial and artistic purposes, noting that “3-D is also a chance to rewrite the rules, to raise ticket prices for a tangible reason, for demonstrable value-added” and admits that he is “not above milking a good 3-D

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157 Note that the term realism is used here to indicate a perceived visual credibility of an obvious fictional story world. See chapter 1.5 for a detailed definition of realism and special effects as used in these case studies.
159 Ibid., 179.
161 David S. Cohen, “James Cameron supercharges 3-D.”
moment, as long as it doesn’t interrupt the narrative flow.” This last remark is characteristic of the director’s goals with using new technology in *Avatar*. Technologies should serve the narrative instead of subverting it. 3D, CGI and motion capturing must make the fantasy world of *Avatar* as realistic and immersive as possible to increase the audience’s emotional engagement, instead of disrupting the audience through shock and the narrative flow by the inclusion of loosely related spectacular action scenes, which was one of the main critiques on *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. It can be argued that *Avatar’s* most spectacular and awe-inducing moments are not its CGI-heavy action scenes (which it does abundantly provide according to the blockbuster formula) but its more intimate and emotional scenes between Sully and Neytiri, where the viewer is emotionally engaged by ten-foot tall, blue alien creatures.

CGI and motion capturing are important tools for digital attractions in that they provide the means to create the wonderful, believable fantasy world of Pandora as well as the human/animal hybrid alien race of Na’vi. Arguably the biggest achievement of *Avatar* is the creation of grotesque creatures in the shape of human-like Na’vi and various six-legged beasts that all vaguely resemble animals from the real world. The Pandorapedia (the official encyclopedia of the planet Pandora and all of its inhabitants) describes the Na’vi as humanoid bipeds that are morphologically similar to humans. Their skin is smooth and has an iridescent cyan color, as well as bioluminescent markings for identification of mood display. They have a long tail, a proportionally small skull, high cheekbones and feline ears. Their average length measures three meters (see Appendix 1, images 9 and 10 for examples of the Na’vi). According to Noël Carroll, the grotesque has become the dominant form in contemporary popular art and culture. In his preliminary taxonomy of the grotesque he identifies several features of the grotesque such as disproportion, gigantism, formlessness and fusions of different creatures. A creature with one or more of these features becomes a grotesque being “if it is a being that violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms. That is, the grotesque subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and

162 Ibid.
ontological order.” The inhabitants of the planet Pandora clearly meet one or more of these requirements of the grotesque. Some of them generate reactions of wonder and awe (most notably the Na’vi) while others are more horrifying such as some of the six-legged predators hunting the forests (see Appendix 1 images 11 and 12 for examples). Generally and on a meta-level in aesthetics, feelings of horror are associated with grotesque beings while feelings of awe and wonder belong to sublime landscapes. Carroll argues that the grotesque can also be a vehicle for awe and wonder instead of either horror or comic amusement. He uses the herbivorous dinosaurs from Jurassic Park to illustrate his point. The existence of contemporary dinosaurs is certainly a categorical anomaly that defies our categorical expectations of the natural and ontological order of things, but there is no immediate fear or threat. Instead, the existence of the dinosaurs is regarded as a miracle. The miraculous, according to Carroll, is “mysterious, inexplicable, baffling, unexpected, astonishing and impossible.” Awe is experienced not only because of a curiosity toward these grotesque beings but also because of an appreciation of them. The Na’vi do not elicit fear in the viewer because they are a harmless and harmonious alien race that stands close to nature. The existence of these grotesque aliens, who possess the intelligence and social skills of humans but also the innocence and close proximity to nature of animals, seems like a miraculous categorical mistake. Viewers are curious and appreciative of these beings and their harmonious lifestyle and even long to be or live as Na’vi themselves. In contrast, many of the other creatures inhabiting Pandora are horrific grotesque beings that are feared because they pose a threat to the humans. The Na’vi as grotesque beings can be defined as “attractions” because they solicit euphoric exclamations such as “absolutely amazing,” “astonishing” and “awe-inspiring” as descriptors of the creatures. The effect of experiencing the grotesque is also reminiscent of Eisenstein’s description of attractions as triggering “emotional shocks in the spectator.”

Cameron employed the latest advancements in CGI and motion capturing to create these fantastical, grotesque beings in the most realistic way possible. This means that the

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165 Ibid., 297.
166 Ibid., 305.
167 Ibid., 307.
Na’vi, despite their many grotesque features, move and act realistically and human-like, both in their physical movement and their emotional expressions. The Na’vi are grotesque but human enough for the audience to identify with them and create emotional attachment. The same applies to the planet of Pandora. From far away the planet looks like Earth with similar jungles and oceans (see Appendix 1 image 13). At night, the planet changes into something magical with bioluminescent plants and creatures illuminating the blue and purple hues of the night (see Appendix 1 image 14). Another example of Pandora’s exceptional features are the floating Hallelujah Mountains (see Appendix 1 image 15), their aptly chosen name already referring to exclamations of awe and wonder. The science fiction genre itself is generally characterized by a sense of grotesque wonder as a “response to new, boundary violating phenomena that are either discovered by scientific observation or synthesized by scientific invention. The grotesque phenomena are believed to be intelligible in naturalistic terms, but are nonetheless surprising prodigies of nature’s imagination.” The world of Pandora and the Na’vi are not only grotesque but also evoke the sublime because they remind the viewer of nature’s greatness. Kant stated that “we call that sublime which is truly great” and “showing a faculty of the mind surpassing every faculty of sense.” The sense of the sublime differs from the sense of beauty in that beauty is understood (emotionally) while the feeling of the sublime is generated through cognitive reasoning, only when the object is truly great and surpasses our understanding. The Na’vi are a harmonious race living in close proximity to nature while Pandora itself is reminiscent of a pristine, pre-industrial world where nature’s splendor is untainted by human hands. Pandora not only awes the viewer with its natural beauty but also sets in progress a cognitive reaction in which the viewer compares Pandora with Earth and develops a longing for this impossible utopian future of our own planet.

As reported by CNN, the fan forum site “Avatar Forums” contained a rapidly growing topic called “Ways to cope with the depression of the dream of Pandora being intangible.” The forum thread, with more than a 1000 reactions from disturbed

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172 Ibid.
viewers, was created so that people could discuss and help fellow fans to cope with their feelings of depression. Some even contemplated suicide:

"Ever since I went to see ‘Avatar’ I have been depressed. Watching the wonderful world of Pandora and all the Na’vi made me want to be one of them. I can’t stop thinking about all the things that happened in the film and all of the tears and shivers I got from it. I even contemplated suicide thinking that if I do it I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora and everything is the same as in ‘Avatar’."\(^{174}\)

Accounts such as these, whether they are truthful or not, clearly illustrate the sublime powers of technology when used to create beautiful, realistic yet imaginative worlds. In *Avatar*, new technologies do not only function as digital attractions in that they offer new novelty experiences in the form of 3D and the latest and greatest in CGI. Awe and wonder is not only aimed at the technology itself but even more so at what James Cameron was able to create with those technologies: a beautiful utopian fantasy world, so realistic and immersive that it generates feelings of the sublime.

### 3.3. Digital attractions as a promotional tool in the marketing of *Avatar*

This part of the case study analyses the marketing of *Avatar* as a Hollywood blockbuster spectacle. Just as with the previous case study of *The Hobbit* this is not a complete marketing analysis of *Avatar*. Instead, it will focus more narrowly on to what extent and how the film’s three main technologies (3D, CGI and motion capturing) are promoted as digital attractions to frame and sell the film as a medium experience to its audience, as a unique viewing experience that only *Avatar* is able to provide because of its state of the art technology. The promotional material used for the analysis will be similar to that used in the previous case study, consisting of official posters and trailers, the official website(s) and other medium platforms to experience the world of *Avatar* such as the DVD/Blu-ray release and the video game. But before starting with the specific analysis

\(^{174}\) Ibid.
of *Avatar* it is important to note the ways in which 3D technology in general serves the commercial interests of the film industry.

2009-2010 was the year that 3D was re-introduced and marketed most heavily as a new gimmick for Hollywood blockbuster films. *Avatar’s* huge box office success confirmed for the film studios that 3D could indeed function as a new attraction, a new selling point for visiting the cinema. Just as anaglyph 3D was introduced in the 1950's to combat the rising popularity of television, stereoscopic 3D was introduced to compete with audiences’ changing habits in film consumption. Besides the various alternative legal ways of film consumption (watching DVD/Blu-ray releases at home, internet video-streaming services such as Netflix, watching films on portable devices such as smartphones and tablets), piracy is another obvious cause for a decline in cinema attendance. Although 3D technology is implemented in other media, most importantly televisions, the immersive power of 3D is stronger when experienced in the theatre as part of the cinema dispositif. The darkness, the size of the screen and surround sound complement and amplify the immersion and reality effects of 3D, creating a sense of “being there.” With 3D, Hollywood can further differentiate the viewing experience in the cinema from alternative viewing practices and make it more appealing. The moderate success and popularity of 3D also provides theatre owners with a valid reason for raising ticket prices for 3D films and selling 3D glasses. The premium price was initially introduced to offset the costs for purchasing new 3D-compatible digital projectors but the ticket prices have not been lowered after the initial investments were recuperated. Another commercial reason for introducing 3D is that film studios can now re-release films as 3D remakes both in theatres and on Blu-ray. Popular Hollywood blockbusters such as *Jurassic Park* and *Titanic* were remade in 3D and re-released theatrically. The 3D Blu-ray release of *Avatar* was at first only exclusively available for owners of a 3D compatible Panasonic television. Only two years later did the 3D Blu-ray become generally available, making many fans that bought the 2D version buy the home release for a second time in 3D.
3.3.1. Posters and trailers

In an interview with CNN James Cameron said that he made *Avatar* with an 8-80 audience in mind. The film must appeal to a broad audience of all ages and both genders. The film should also reach beyond the niche science fiction audience and it aims for repeat viewers who want to watch the film again and again, just like they did with *The Titanic*.\(^1\) This appeal to a broad and diverse audience, together with its record-breaking budget, is characteristic of the typical high-risk/high-return blockbuster strategy as described by Anita Elberse.\(^2\) For *Avatar* the risks were especially high because the film was not based on an existing popular franchise.\(^3\) Whereas *The Hobbit* could partially rely on the popularity of the *Lord of the Rings* films for its success, it was uncertain if the blue Na’vi and the world of Pandora would appeal to a wide audience, especially because of the early negative reactions to the design of the Na’vi.\(^4\) Another risk factor for *Avatar* was the fact that it relied on the Na’vi as a selling point instead of star actors. The actors playing the main protagonists, Sam Worthington and Zoe Saldana, were relatively unknown at the time and certainly not actors that could sell a film. According to Elberse the main part of a blockbuster’s production budget is spent on star actors and special effects because these are the two factors with the biggest hit-potential.\(^5\) In the case of *Avatar* almost the entire budget was spent on special effects and technology, as Cameron himself confirmed in an interview: “We put every dollar up there on the screen in *Avatar* – [the money] is not squandered on star salaries.”\(^6\) This was done not only to create a realistic and immersive CGI fantasy world but also to create the Na’vi. In fact, huge sums of money were spent on CGI and motion-capturing technology to create these grotesque, computer-generated creatures and promote them

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1. Carroll, “‘Avatar’ director speaks.”
3. Only two live-action films that were not sequels or based on existing properties (*Hancock* and *The Day After Tomorrow*) are among the 50 highest-grossing films of the last decade. See Peter Sciretta, “Only Two of the Top 30 Grossing Films of This Decade Are Original,” *Slash Film*, 16 November 2009, <http://www.slashfilm.com/only-two-of-the-top-30-grossing-films-of-this-decade-are-original/> (Last accessed on 8 June 2014).
as digital attractions. Here we see the spectacular CGI object in the shape of the Na’vi fulfilling essentially the same role as star actors, namely that of a promotional tool separated from the film’s diegesis to be used in advertisements such as film trailers and posters.181

The main film poster (see Appendix 1 figure 16) illustrates this use of the Na’vi as digital attraction. It shows two close-ups, one of Jake Sully in his human form and one of the female Na’vi Neytiri. Although it is only a partial close-up, the image does pronounce some of the Na’vi’s grotesque features such as the blue skin color, the yellow cat-like eyes and the luminescent spots. Its strange features are even more pronounced because they are contrasted with the familiar human face of Sam Worthington. This depiction of the Na’vi functions as an attraction in several ways. Annie van den Oever notes that the attraction of early cinema was a “demonstration of the ‘monstrous’ powers of the close-up as well as a ‘monstration’ of a technical novelty at the same time.”182 Here the close-up emphasizes and enhances the monstrous features of the Na’vi. The Na’vi itself also acts as a signifier of the film’s technological novelty because the creation of this fantastical creature was only possible because of the latest advancements in motion capturing and computer animation. The poster is a collage of some of the attractions described in chapter 3.2. In addition to the Na’vi, it depicts the grotesque animal creatures of Pandora (here the flying dragon-like Banshee), the sublime elements of Pandora itself (here we see the planet behind the close-ups and the floating Hallelujah mountains), as well as a hint of the destructive powers of human technology (the choppers flying in the background that will try to destroy the planet at the end of the film). Finally, there are also two textual elements of the poster that frame the film as a digital attraction and a medium experience. First, the line “From the director of Terminator 2 and Titanic” directly refers to James Cameron’s status as a great spectacular blockbuster director and indirectly refers to Terminator 2 and Titanic’s status as groundbreaking CGI spectacles. Second, the line “Experience it in IMAX 3D” specifically encourages the viewers to watch the film in 3D and on the biggest screen.

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181 See “chapter 2.2.1. Posters and trailers” for an explanation of how CGI objects can function as iconic images and signifiers of the film’s spectacle. See also Gurevitch, “The Cinemas of Transactions: The Exchangeable Currency of the Digital Attraction,” 375-376.
possible, thereby addressing the audience as medium-sensitive viewers and implying that the viewing experience is enhanced by cinema’s medium-specific technologies.

The same logic and strategy behind the film poster are also found in the official trailer of Avatar. The trailer does not mention any of the actors’ names, indicating that the studio does not follow the star actor approach. The trailer mainly focuses on spectacular action scenes and the computer-generated elements of the film, specifically on the Na’vi, the sublime beauty of Pandora and some of its grotesque creatures. The trailer opens with an extreme close-up of Jake Sully opening his eyes. The shot is given a blue tint, which refers to Sully’s impending transition into his blue avatar body. It may also refer to the amazing and wondrous moment at which the viewer opens his eyes and experiences the 3D film through tinted glasses for the first time. Following this is Sully’s arrival at Pandora and his look of astonishment at this extraordinary planet. The shots clearly showcase the greatness of this computer-generated landscape, thereby functioning as a monstrative attraction. Next we see Sully’s transition into his avatar body. The shot in which he gets used to his new body by moving his hands and toes also functions as a demonstration of the film’s realistic motion- and facial-capturing technologies. This is also the only time in the trailer that a line of text is spoken. Sully exclaims: “this is great!” This can be interpreted both as Sully’s reaction to his new body and the audience’s reaction to the film’s highly realistic and immersive use of CGI and motion capturing. The second half of the trailer follows the logic of Hollywood spectacle cinema because the narrative-spectacle ratio greatly shifts toward spectacle. It is comprised of a quick succession of spectacular action shots that mainly depict the fight between the humans and the Na’vi. Other shots concentrate on the dangerous CGI creatures inhabiting the planet. Similar to the poster, the trailer mentions that Avatar is coming “from the director of Titanic,” thereby referring to Cameron’s status and past success as a Hollywood spectacle film director. Interestingly, the trailer does not make any mention of the fact that the film can (and should) be experienced in 3D. This is remarkable because James Cameron has always been very outspoken about the immersive powers of stereoscopic 3D. The trailer frames the film not so much as a medium experience that should be watched because of its novel 3D technology but relies

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more on the attractive powers of the spectacular CGI image in the shape of the Na'vi, the planet Pandora and its various creatures. A reason for this may be the fact that a negative stigma surrounded 3D prior to Avatar because earlier films made only ineffective, gimmicky use of the technology.

3.3.2. Websites, the home video-release and the videogame

Because Avatar was released more than four years ago the official homepage is relatively empty when compared to those of recent releases such as the homepage for The Hobbit. The primary function of the website now seems to be to inform visitors about the various home releases of the first film as well as provide them with news about the upcoming sequels. The main content of the website consists of a news section, a collection of stills and wallpapers, information about the DVD, Blu-ray and online streaming releases of Avatar and a comprehensive video section. The video section is the most interesting section for this case study. It shows a total of twelve videos ranging from traditional trailers for the home releases to in-depth informational videos about the technologies behind the film. One video explains how the motion-capturing technology works and how it enabled the makers to create revolutionary new immersive experiences. Most of the videos focus on the world of Pandora and its various inhabitants. These videos are meant to inform the viewer that Avatar is more than just a feature film to be experienced for the duration of its running time. It is sold as a completely thought-out, believable fantasy world that is designed for the user to get immersed and lost in. Every computer-generated element of Pandora has a function and meaning in the planet’s ecosystem.

This laborious undertaking of world creation becomes even more evident when visiting “Pandorapedia: The Official Field Guide.” This is a very comprehensive, interactive encyclopedia of the planet Pandora. Among other things, it provides detailed information about the flora and fauna of the planet. The fauna section contains 21 different entries for animals, all complete with encyclopedic information such as

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taxonomy, habitat, anatomy and feeding ecology. The flora section even lists 44 different kinds of vegetation, ranging from enormous trees to small flowers. The Pandorapedia is indicative of Cameron’s vision of *Avatar* as an immersive world instead of a traditional cinema experience. The huge information database provided by the Pandorapedia is absolutely not essential for the cinematic experience of *Avatar* but it can extend the experience beyond a visit to the cinema. It is one of the ways in which fans can further engage with the story world of *Avatar* across different media. The Pandorapedia can be regarded as a form of transmedia storytelling defined by Henry Jenkins as “the art of world making:”

> “To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.”

Often this act of world creation is the result of what Jenkins calls a “participatory culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.” In the case of *Avatar* the marketing team already anticipated this desire of fans to generate and consume more knowledge about the world of Pandora. According to the logic of transmedia storytelling they provided fans with an expansive website with which viewers could enrich and extend their cinematic experience. A similar and even more expansive encyclopedic work on the planet Pandora was published as a 224-page book called *Avatar: A Confidential Report on the Biological and Social History of Pandora.* As the title already indicates this book provides insights about the fictive biological and social history of the planet and is written as a human account of a foreign world.

Another way in which the marketing of *Avatar* increased viewer engagement and interactivity with the film was through the website “AVTR.” The website was the

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187 Ibid., 331.
result of a marketing partnership between Coca-Cola Zero and *Avatar*. It provided a platform for fans to interact with the film via augmented reality.\(^{190}\) More than 140 million Coke Zero cans and 30 million fridge packs contained AR-capable logos.\(^{191}\) When these logos were held in front of a webcam on the AVTR website the user could interact with various 3D objects from the world of *Avatar*. The commercial\(^{192}\) shows a person holding his Coke bottle in front of his computer screen and by moving the bottle he is controlling a computer-generated chopper superimposed on his live webcam feed (see Appendix 1 figure 17 for an example from the commercial). Although this is a simple, gimmicky implementation of augmented reality technology it is fitting for *Avatar*'s premise. The user’s ability to manipulate digital objects with the help of an AR-bottle can be seen as a crude and simple representation of how Jake Sully is able to interact with the planet Pandora as an indigenous Na’vi because of the film’s avatar technology. In 2009 augmented reality was a very novel technology, which made it very much a technological attraction similar to 3D but separated from the film itself. Rita Drucker, senior VP-film promotions at Fox stated that it was their aim with the marketing campaign for *Avatar* to extent the technology-based experience of the film and appeal to the consumer’s desire for interactivity:

> “Augmented reality has become a unique way for consumers to interact with an IP, and for us it’s a way to extend the experience with the movie. Given that consumers are interacting with the interactive space in a much more aggressive way, we’re looking at unique ways to engage that digitally.”\(^{193}\)

As was mentioned at the end of the introduction to this paragraph, the 3D Blu-ray version of *Avatar* was only available to owners of a Panasonic 3D television for the first two years. This distinction between 2D and 3D versions has led to a total of four different Blu-ray releases released between 2010 and 2012 with each subsequent release providing more features in the form of 3D capability, an extended cut of the film

\(^{190}\) Augmented reality, or AR, is a technology that enables the combination of live images from reality with computer-generated elements via the use of a camera. Real-world elements are supplemented or augmented by computer input in the form of sound, video, graphics or GPS data.


\(^{193}\) Hamp, “Marketers Hop on Augmented Reality Bandwagon to Promote ‘Avatar’.”
and many other extras. The Extended Collector’s Edition\textsuperscript{194} of \textit{Avatar} is the most comprehensive home release and clearly showcases the studio’s emphasis on technology as a digital attraction. This edition comes with two extra discs providing nearly nine hours of extra video material, ranging from deleted scenes and making of videos to a feature length documentary about the motion-capturing technology. In addition, it contains the full Pandorapedia guide and 633 full high-definition images of all of the planet’s flora and fauna. The studio used a similar strategy to their online marketing campaign, one that aims to please the desire of fans to get to know as much as possible about the world of \textit{Avatar}. Many of the extra video materials also heavily emphasize and praise the technological accomplishments of the film. This is illustrated by the interactive scene deconstruction feature, which lets viewers dissect 17 of the film’s scenes on three different levels of visual effects completion. The home release of \textit{Avatar} should not only be regarded as an alternative way of viewing the film but also as an extension or continuation of the traditional cinema experience. Richard Grusin explains that home releases are not merely an afterthought today but part of the digital cinema of interactions in which the cinematic artifact is distributed and experienced across multiple medium platforms:

\begin{quote}
"Today, the production, design, and distribution of DVD versions of feature length films are part of the original contractual (and thus artistic) intention of these films. Consequently, it is now customarily the case that the conceptualization of the DVD precedes the commencement of production of the film itself."
\end{quote}

This indicates that the release of \textit{Avatar} on DVD and Blu-ray is not merely an easy way to increase profits. It is part of the overall viewing experience that continues beyond the theatre and is dispersed across multiple medium platforms. The home release enhances \textit{Avatar’s} medium experience in that it provides its medium-sensitive viewers with nine hours of additional content that strongly emphasizes the film’s technological novelty, while also increasing the film’s technological attraction by adding new, interactive ways to further explore the world of Pandora.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[195] Grusin, "DVDs, Video Games, and the Cinema of Interactions," 76.
\end{footnotes}
The distribution of the cinematic artifact as part of the cinema of interactions is best reflected in the release of *Avatar: The Game*. Whereas the online Pandorapedia and the Blu-ray extras provide fans to explore the world of Pandora through reading and watching, the video game actually enables fans to interact and explore the planet on their own. The video game was released a couple of weeks before the theatrical release and serves as a prequel to the story of the film, which makes it part of the transmedia storytelling of the *Avatar* universe. Production of the video game started in 2007 and the developer Ubisoft Montreal collaborated closely with both the scriptwriters and the visual effects artists of the film. This led to a sharing of resources and because of the CGI nature of the film many computer-generated assets could be used in both the film and the video game. This is a key characteristic of the cinema of interactions in that these medium-specific influences change the ways in which films are distributed, produced and experienced. The traditional cinema experience not only changes because it is distributed and experienced across different media such as video games and Blu-rays, it is also produced across different media. The CGI special effects (for example a computer-generated Na’vi) can easily be transferred from the film into the video game and vice versa. The graphical fidelity of video games has always been one of the medium’s strongest attractions because they immediately impress the player. For example, players often pause their progression in the game to wonder and marvel at visually impressive computer-generated landscapes. Leon Gurevitch calls this the *game effect* and describes it as a “digital sublime equivalent of what the romantic painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced.” Video game graphics possess the same sublime characteristics ascribed to the CGI world of Pandora earlier in this case study. Both the film and the video game medium strongly rely on high quality CGI as digital attractions. Because the quality of the digital image in both industries is increasingly converging these digital attractions are not bound to their specific medium but can instead function across different media.

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196 Ibid., 70-71.
198 Ibid., 12.
3.3.3. Conclusion

The analysis of the marketing of Avatar has shown that the marketing team's strategy was even more focused on technology and spectacle than the marketing of The Hobbit. Similar to The Hobbit and most Hollywood blockbusters the target audience is very broad, described by James Cameron as an 8-80 audience. One of the most remarkable things about Avatar as a blockbuster film is that the film does not rely on star actors as a main selling point. Instead of spending huge amounts of money on popular but expensive actors the production budget was mainly allocated to the technology behind the film. This is reflected in the posters and trailers. They strongly emphasize the film's technologically advanced special effects and the impressive world and creatures that were created with it. Although the marketing does not follow the star actor strategy it does follow a star director strategy. Both the posters and trailers mention James Cameron and some of his previous technologically advanced blockbuster works, thereby presenting him as a successful director of Hollywood spectacle films. While the latter half of the trailer showcases a succession of spectacular action scenes, the first half takes a different approach in attracting the viewer. Here the focus lies on the sublime landscapes and the grotesque creatures of Avatar. Technology is not simply used to create spectacular action scenes but also to create highly realistic landscapes and monsters that inspire awe and amazement or horror. Interestingly, 3D is not promoted as much as a technological attraction. It is not mentioned once in the trailer and only shown at the bottom of the poster. Both promotional materials focus more on action than on narrative but even more so on CGI itself as a digital attraction. Whereas The Hobbit strongly emphasized its star actors and recognizable characters from The Lord of the Rings, in Avatar the fictional Na'vi function as a kind of star actors in the sense that they are technologically impressive computer-generated creatures, featured prominently in the promotional material.

The official homepage and Blu-ray release also present Avatar as a technological attraction, which is primarily reflected in the inclusion of a plethora of videos detailing and praising the technological innovations used in the production of the film, with an emphasis on motion- and facial-capturing technology. More interesting and specific to Avatar is the huge effort put into the creation of a realistic and immersive Pandora that
crosses the boundaries of the theatrical experience. Both the website and Blu-ray contain the encyclopedic Pandorapedia that provides fans with a vast information database about the fictional world. According to the logic of the cinema of interactions the experience of *Avatar* is not limited to the viewing experience in the theatre. The experience starts before and continues after the cinema experience across various media. The film's technological attraction is experienced most strongly in the theatre because of the cinema *dispositif*, which includes the darkened room, the stereoscopic 3D and the big screen, but the computer-generated world and creatures also function as digital attractions outside of the film itself. The Pandorapedia enables fans to further engage with and immersive themselves in the universe of *Avatar*. James Cameron himself mentioned that *Avatar* is not just a blockbuster film but also a realistic and immersive computer-generated world in which fans can lose themselves. *Avatar: The Game* provides fans with another means to extend their experience of Pandora in an interactive way. In a sense, playing the video game is similar to Jake Sully interacting with the world of Pandora through his Na'vi avatar. The production of the video game is also emblematic of the cinema of interactions in that the cinematic medium is increasingly influencing and being influenced by other media on the levels of production, distribution and consumption. This is illustrated by the close collaboration between the visual effects teams of the film and the video game. The fact that CGI objects were shared between the film and video game also indicates again that the special effect as digital attraction is not bound to a specific medium.

The strong reliance on 3D, CGI and motion capturing in the production of *Avatar* already suggested a framing of the film as a spectacular technological attraction. This is reflected in the marketing of the film, although the ability to watch the film in 3D is not emphasized in most promotional materials. The marketing mainly appeals to the consumer's desire for highly realistic CGI creatures and immersive fantasy worlds by emphasizing these elements in the posters and trailers. The viewing experience is not framed as a traditional viewing experience because the focus does not lie on the film's narrative and there are no star actors. The marketing is targeted at medium-sensitive viewers who want to experience the latest technological novelties the cinematic medium has to offer. By strongly emphasizing the film's most impressive digital attractions (the immersive planet and the realistic Na'vi) the viewing experience of *Avatar* is framed as a
medium experience: A film that viewers should primarily watch because of its highly realistic blend of CGI and live-action footage and the immersive experience it provides, which is even more enhanced by stereoscopic 3D.

3.4. Reception analysis of the effects of new technologies on the viewing experience

This analysis takes a similar approach to the reception analysis of The Hobbit. The source material for the reception analysis consists of written accounts of both professional film critics and non-professional filmgoers. Again, the professional reviews are sourced from well-known and reputable American and British newspapers and film magazines while the non-professional accounts were collected from the IMDB user review section for Avatar. This section contains almost 3000 user reviews. A selection of 30 reviews was taken from this, all written in the first couple of weeks after the theatrical release of the film. These early accounts should provide some of the freshest reactions to the film’s technology and they are all unquestionably based on the theatrical experience because the home release was not yet available. The professional accounts were gathered from the popular film review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes. A selection of 24 reviews was made from a total of 292 reviews. For a further justification of these sources and some side notes on the validity of this data see the introduction to the reception analysis of The Hobbit at chapter 2.4.

Up to this point this case has shown that Avatar was strongly produced and marketed as a medium experience with a heavy focus on digital attractions in the form of the impressively realistic Na’vi, the vast and believable world of Pandora and the immersive experience of that world in three dimensions. With the help of the latest advancements in computer animation and motion capturing it was possible for James Cameron to create grotesque creatures and sublime landscapes that function as digital attractions by creating moments of awe and wonder as well as horror. This reception analysis will try

199 “Avatar Reviews & Ratings,” IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/reviews> (Last accessed 18 June 2014). There are almost 3000 user reviews on IMDB. Because they are anonymous and all collected on the same page the quotes from IMDB users will not be references individually.
to answer the question if the audience of Avatar did indeed experience the film mainly as a medium experience instead of a traditional cinema experience. An analysis of the viewers’ reactions to Avatar’s technological components should provide insights about the medium sensitivity of the viewers and about whether their viewing experiences can be described as a medium experience. The analysis will not only target the positive and negative reactions about the quality of the CGI and the stereoscopic 3D effect. It will also look at how the viewers formulate their viewing experience in terms of technology. Some may see the added 3D effect as an added value and a reason to watch the film in an IMAX theatre while others may dismiss it as a mere gimmick. A preliminary look at the written accounts suggests that immersion is an important descriptor used by the reviewers to describe the effect of 3D as well as the seamless blend of CGI and live-action footage. The reception analysis will be divided in positive experiences and negative experiences. Almost all of the written accounts were positive about the quality of the CGI and the implementation of 3D, which will be reflected in the length of that paragraph. Most of the negative criticism is targeted at the film’s narrative-spectacle ratio of which spectacle is commonly favored by Hollywood blockbusters. This paragraph about the negative experiences will mainly focus on viewers who criticize Avatar for relying too much on CGI spectacle\textsuperscript{201} instead of on more traditional film elements such as story, dialogue and acting to entertain the viewer.

\subsection*{3.4.1. Positive experiences}

With the re-introduction of stereoscopic 3D in 2009-2010 the discourse surrounding it was predominantly negative, both in the circles of film critics and film theorists. It was variously described as a gimmick, a hype and a new attraction that adds nothing to the viewing experience, introduced by Hollywood to raise ticket prices and compete with

\footnote{Note that I use the term CGI spectacle instead of action spectacle. In The Hobbit (and most blockbusters in general) spectacle is mainly formed by the inclusion of a plethora of lengthy spectacular action sequences that do not further the narrative. They are often but not necessarily created with the help of CGI. For Avatar spectacle seems to be created by CGI itself. This may be reflected in hectic action sequences but spectacle can just as easily be found in quiet romantic scenes or other plot-furthering scenes.}
rival media. Illustrative of that negative discourse is Roger Ebert's essay Why I Hate 3-D (And You Should Too) in which he states:

"3-D is a waste of a perfectly good dimension. Hollywood's current crazy stampede toward it is suicidal. It adds nothing essential to the moviegoing experience. For some, it is an annoying distraction. For others, it creates nausea and headaches. It is driven largely to sell expensive projection equipment and add a $5 to $7.50 surcharge on already expensive movie tickets. Its image is noticeably darker than standard 2-D. It is unsuitable for grown-up films of any seriousness. It limits the freedom of directors to make films as they choose."

Avatar seems to be an exception to the rule with regards to the use of 3D as a useless gimmick. Ebert's own review of Avatar stands in stark contrast to his general opinion on 3D:

"Cameron promised he'd unveil the next generation of 3-D in "Avatar." I'm a notorious skeptic about this process, a needless distraction from the perfect realism of movies in 2-D. Cameron's iteration is the best I've seen -- and more importantly, one of the most carefully-employed. The film never uses 3-D simply because it has it, and doesn't promiscuously violate the fourth wall. He also seems quite aware of 3-D's weakness for dimming the picture, and even with a film set largely in interiors and a rain forest, there's sufficient light."

Most of the professional critics echo Ebert's opinion. Of the 30 IMDB user reviews only one reviewer was negative about the use of 3D. This ratio was somewhat higher with the professional reviewers where seven of the 24 reviews either wholly or partly dismissed the effects of 3D. Todd McCarthy finds that 3D "functions as an enhancement, not a raison d'etre" and describes it as “agreeably unemphatic, drawing the viewer into the

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action without calling attention to itself.” 205 3D is not experienced as a technological attraction because it does not emphasize itself so heavily during the viewing experience. Instead of demonstrating its novelty to the viewer with gimmicky shots of objects flying out of the screen, in Avatar 3D serves to enhance the traditional cinema dispositif by making the viewing experience more immersive. The technology seems to have the same immersion-enhancing capabilities as the darkness of the theatre, its large screen and surround sound. Immersion seems to be the keyword used by many reviewers to describe the effect of 3D. One critic wrote that watching Avatar was a substantially different experience than watching a regular 2D film, describing the effects as “immersive,” “legitimately special” and as being in an “alternate reality, not unlike what Jake must experience when inhabiting his body.” 206

The discussion of 3D took up only a relatively small part of most reviews, which may be attributed to the fact that the technology was used mainly in unobtrusive ways to enhance the cinematography of the film. Both the professional and amateur reviewers were more vocal about the high quality of motion capturing and CGI. Many were impressed by the imperceptible mixture of CGI and live-action footage:

“On this fundamental level, the picture is a triumph; it's all of a piece, in no way looking like a vague mish-mash of live-action, CGI backdrops, animation, performance capture and post-production effects.” 207

J. Hoberman from The Village Voice described the film as “essentially a non-participatory computer game” because “Avatar seamlessly synthesizes live action, animation, performance-capture, and CGI.” 208 This reference to the medium of video games is illustrative of most reviewers’ experience of Avatar. The film’s strong reliance on CGI is similar to video games’ all-digital nature. One of the biggest attractions of most video games is the player’s enjoyment in exploring and marveling at the computer-generated


207 McCarthy, “Review: 'Avatar'.

fantasy world. It conveys a feeling of being there, of living and breathing in the virtual world. While viewers of *Avatar* may not be able to interact with the digital world of Pandora they can derive great pleasure from their awe and amazement at the realistic and immersive planet. One anonymous IMDB user describes it as follows:

"Avatar brings us as close as cinema ever has to actually visiting an alien world. The beautiful environs, the exotic creatures and incredibly lifelike natives of Pandora arrest the senses, visually, aurally and emotionally. The world in Avatar is the true star of the show. The amount of detail and work that has gone into bringing this new world alive is seriously impressive, and it will be a while before we see anything that overtakes it in scope and quality."\(^{209}\)

Another user wrote that although the world is entirely computer-generated “many shots would make the viewer wonder where they shot the film on location,” while a third IMDB reviewer stated: “You really feel like you’re there and forget that this is a movie.” The ability of the viewer to get immersed in the world is not necessarily related to the quality of the story:

“Like Peter Jackson’s adaptation of Lord of the Rings, it’s a conventional adventure story, but one that’s set in a world so richly and specifically imagined that it’s thrilling just to dwell inside it.”\(^{210}\)

The ability to get lost in the immersive and realistic computer-generated world seems to be an attraction in itself. Richard Corliss from *Time Magazine* praises *Avatar* as “the most vivid and convincing creation of a fantasy world ever seen in the history of moving pictures” and as a “total sensory, sensuous, sensual experience.”\(^{211}\) Here it again becomes evident that *Avatar* relies more specifically on CGI spectacle than on action spectacle to attract its audience. Many reviewers use terms familiar from the cinema of attractions such as “awe,” “wonder,” “astonishment” and “amazement” to describe their

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\(^{210}\) Stevens, “Cat Power: Avatar is the first broadband blockbuster.”

viewing experience. These descriptors refer to both the impressive quality of CGI and motion capturing as technological attractions and to the grotesque or sublime creatures and landscapes that were created by these technologies. Many reviewers were impressed by the realism of the strange looking Na’vi and the empathy they felt for their suffering. Both Roger Ebert and Todd McCarthy admit to finding the female Na’vi Neytiri “sexy,” directly after describing her grotesque features such as the blue skin color, her tail and yellow eyes. Kenneth Turan from the LA Times found the Na’vi to “appear as completely real as the film’s human characters.” An IMDB user even went as far as saying that “they feel more real than their real life counterparts!” thereby probably referring to Sam Worthington and Sigourney Weaver who portray both human protagonist and their Na’vi avatar counterparts. James Berardinelli compares the Na’vi to the much beloved CGI creature Gollum from The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit:

“Like Gollum, they transcend their pixel-based conception. We believe them. We accept them. We care about them. That’s the key to Avatar being more than a hollow spectacle.”

The written accounts show that Avatar provides a new, somewhat alienating viewing experience that is different from the traditional cinema experience. Viewers seem acutely aware that they are watching an almost completely computer-generated film that is also presented in 3D. This awareness is no doubt shaped by the 3D glasses resting on the viewers’ heads and by the strong focus in the marketing on the film’s state of the art CGI and motion-capturing technology. But at the same time the viewers state that they were more immersed than ever and that they experienced the CGI world and creatures as just as real (if not even more real) as traditional live-action films. Neither the narrative quality nor a ton of spectacular actions scenes, but the wonder at the combination of realistic CGI and immersive 3D seems to be the main attraction for Avatar’s audience. The viewers’ awareness of and sensitivity to the destabilizing effects of the medium’s novel technologies is strong. This is reflected in their descriptions of the


film as a unique experience that should be seen in IMAX theatres. Some reviewers even state that *Avatar* warrants multiple viewings in order to fully appreciate its highly detailed CGI world. Roger Ebert writes that *Avatar* “contains such visual detailing that it would reward repeat viewings.” Limara Salt states: “With such painstakingly intricate detail, it will no doubt take a few viewings to catch everything” and “Even with 3D home entertainment on its way, the film’s sole merits lie in the technology harnessed to bring it to life – graphics that are simply better suited to IMAX-sized screens.” The film is variously described as unique, a true cinematic event and a film that you must experience to keep up with the conversation. Scott Foundas from *L.A. Weekly* eloquently puts into words why *Avatar* is a medium experience by comparing it to other revolutionary technological attractions from cinema history:

“But you don’t come to a James Cameron movie for the subtlety. You come instead for the new-fashioned version of the old-fashioned spectacle, to marvel at things that have truly never been seen on a motion-picture screen before. You come to feel the way movie audiences a century ago felt upon seeing the Lumière Brothers’ Train Arriving at Ciotat Station, certain that the mighty locomotive was going to plow through the screen and into the cinema; and the way moviegoers of later generations felt at seeing the parting of the Red Sea in Cecil B. DeMille’s The Ten Commandments, or upon watching a determined T-1000 terminator effortlessly morph its way through a set of prison bars. Cameron is firmly descended from that line of cine-innovators and, before them, the conjurers and carnival barkers who beckoned to audiences with top hat in hand, promising them the greatest show on Earth.”

This quote perfectly summarizes *Avatar’s* medium-sensitive viewers who first and foremost come to the theatre for a medium experience, to wonder and marvel at the spectacle of technological novelty, which was so characteristic of the cinema of attractions during cinema history’s earliest period.

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214 Ebert, "Avatar Review."


3.4.2. Negative experiences

Although the written accounts were predominantly positive there were some negative criticisms leveled at the 3D effect and narrative-spectacle ratio of Avatar. Six of the 24 professional critics and three of the 30 IMDB reviewers raised some concerns about the effect of 3D on the viewing experience. More viewers were vocal about Cameron’s preference for spectacle over narrative quality. Seven professional reviews and six amateur reviews criticized the film’s oversimplified story and overreliance on CGI spectacle. Note that reviewers mainly criticize Avatar for CGI or technological spectacle and not action spectacle, which is a more common complaint about Hollywood blockbusters that also surfaced in the case study on The Hobbit.

The complaints about the 3D technology were both brought about by its negative effect on the visuals and on the unpleasant physical effects on the viewers themselves. One IMDB user found it “strenuous to watch a movie with 3D glasses” because “some details are blurry and it feels likewise when the camera makes swift lateral movements” while another user stated: “The 3D is distracting at times and I had a headache before the movie was over.”

Daniel Engber from Slate Magazine, while overall impressed by the 3D effects, complained about a “dollhouse effect” where “real-life sets and human actors appeared weirdly small” when compared to the computer-generated scenes.

Moira McDonald raised similar concerns: “It's interesting that state-of-the-art live-action 3D has the strange effect of making things look less realistic, not more.” Other critics dismissed the 3D technology as a novelty that quickly wears off or as a “gilded-lily enhancement” that adds nothing important to the viewing experience. These accounts indicate that for some viewers the 3D technology works against the film’s immersive power. At times the cinematic illusion is disrupted by blurry visuals and viewers are

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217 Note that these complaints about 3D distorting the picture (especially during fast camera movement) were one of Peter Jackson’s primary reasons for filming The Hobbit in a higher framerate.
220 Hoberman, “Avatar’s Sticker Shock (and Awe).”
constantly reminded of the medium’s existence, either because of uncomfortable 3D glasses or because of nausea and headaches. This is medium sensitivity and medium awareness in a more literal and negative context: not the viewer’s desire to be amazed by the medium’s technological novelty but the technology’s unwanted visibility and disruptive impact on the viewing experience.

The largest part of the negative accounts was targeted at *Avatar’s* narrative-spectacle ratio, which is a common point of criticism for most Hollywood blockbusters. Similar to *The Hobbit* many viewers found that the film relied too much on spectacle at the expense of narrative quality. As already mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph spectacle in the case of *Avatar* mainly means an overreliance on CGI, not spectacular action scenes. For some viewers the visual flair wore off after a while, leaving them with a shallow story:

“You put your glasses on and you’re in. A feast for the eyes at least for the first hour. The brain, however, remains asleep. How strange that such an ambitious enterprise could ignore its most important aspect, the story.”

Another IMDB user sees this preference for stimulating the eyes instead of the brain as indicative of contemporary Hollywood films:

“Unfortunately, over the last few years the Hollywood industry has moved from entertaining your brains to entertaining your eyes. So now zillions of dollars are spent on beautiful 3D visuals with 1D characters inhabiting them.”

Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* questions if *Avatar* will retain its status of one of the best Hollywood spectacle films in the coming years when the technologies have progressed further and the audience’s de-familiarization has changed to familiarization with *Avatar’s* outdated CGI and 3D novelties:

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223 Ibid.
“The effects of Avatar are certainly something to see, especially on an Imax screen the size of an upended football field. But it's difficult to tell if the game has really been changed or not. How we all goggled at the detail and definition of the images in Shrek in 2001 – a film now admired for the quality of the script and characterisation.”

These criticisms are primarily leveled at Avatar's nature as a spectacle-driven Hollywood blockbuster or event film and could be applied to most blockbusters. These viewers may be regarded as being less sensitive to the medium’s technological novelties, desiring traditional cinema experiences instead of the medium experience that Avatar provides. This group of less medium-sensitive filmgoers seems to be in the minority though as is reflected in the overly positive reactions to the film’s visual spectacle. Some professional critics, therefore, label Avatar not as a modern classic in cinema history but as a film that specifically and very skillfully caters to contemporary medium-sensitive viewers:

“In Avatar, his 3-D alien-jungle virtual-reality action-adventure epic, Cameron has the effects-driven visual awe part down, but this time he gives the heart short shrift. The result is less a movie for the ages than a quintessential movie of its time: dazzling and immersive, a ravishing techno-dream for the senses, but one that's likely to leave audiences simultaneously amazed and unmoved. Then again, for a great many moviegoers these days, that may be enough.”

The huge box-office success of Avatar seems to confirm Owen Gleiberman's suspicion that today's medium-sensitive audiences are so amazed and thrilled by technological spectacle that they do not notice or miss a lack of narrative quality. One IMDB user thinks that Avatar relies so much on technological spectacle because most contemporary filmgoers do not care about anything else:

“He (James Cameron) knows that today's multiplex bred filmgoers just don't seem to care so he takes the easy way out and gives us an FX movie that is

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225 Gleiberman, “Avatar review.”
just overkill. It is all style, no substance and leaves you with a cold and empty feeling.”

Armond White from the New York Press is most outspoken about Avatar’s destructive influence on the younger generation of medium-sensitive filmgoers, claiming that “only children – including adult children – will see Avatar as simply an adventure film; their own love of technology has co-opted their ability to comprehend narrative detail” and that “Avatar’s going-native F/X fantasy infantilizes Cameron’s technology-infatuated audience” before concluding with the statement that Avatar is the “easiest, dumbest escapism imaginable.” These statements echo Raymond Bellour’s writing about the emergence of a new kind of spectatorship that is formed by the information revolution and the logics of the digital image from the end of the 20th century onwards. He defines the dominant form of contemporary cinema as “a globally dominant, commercial cinema that is ruled by its own by-products, a falsely spectacular art still supposed to attract a large audience – above all those young spectators enamored of technological mutations, especially the video games with which film must compete: a cinema based on a degraded aesthetic of stereotypical shock and the unspecific violence of images.” Avatar seems to be a product of its time, a Hollywood blockbuster that specifically caters to the youngest generation of medium-sensitive filmgoers who grew up with CGI- and action-heavy spectacle films as well as with other new forms of entertainment media that heavily focus on technological novelty, such as increasingly detailed and realistic video games.

3.4.3. Conclusion

The reception analysis of Avatar was based on professional as well as non-professional reviews. The aim of this analysis was to answer the third sub-question, namely what effects the heavy use of new technology as digital attractions has on the viewing experience of Avatar. Therefore the emphasis in the written accounts laid on the

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viewer's positive or negative experiences with *Avatar*'s digital attractions. In this case the main topics of positive and negative criticism were the immersive effect of 3D on the viewing experience, the use of CGI and motion capturing to create a fictional world and the film's main protagonists, as well as the (over-)reliance on CGI as spectacular digital attractions.

Most of the reviews were predominantly positive about *Avatar*. The added 3D effect was generally regarded as a useful technology because it enhances the viewer's immersion into the world of Pandora. This was mainly attributed to James Cameron's expert use of 3D cinematography. Instead of using 3D as a gimmick to show off the technology to his audience, for example by letting objects and characters fly out of the screen toward the spectator, the director chose for the opposite effect: to draw viewers into the action on the screen instead of projecting the action out of the screen into the theatre. 3D in *Avatar* is not experienced as an obtrusive, visible technology but more as an invisible technology that enhances the viewing experience through greater immersion. Although 3D is promoted as a sensation and an attraction it is not explicitly experienced as such by most viewers. According to Thomas Elsaesser one should not necessarily think of 3D as part of a cinema of attractions, “not as startling you or throwing things at you from the depth of space, but as the vanguard of a new cinema of narrative integration, introducing the malleability, scalability, fluidity, or curvature of digital images into audiovisual space.”

Viewers seem to agree with Elsaesser's statement. 3D should not be presented and experienced as a sensational attraction but as a technology that enhances cinema's inherent drive toward realism and immersion. Akira Lippit states:

"The technical advances that characterized the evolution of cinema during the twentieth century seems to destine cinema toward a fantastic state of total representation, a phenomenography of life. To accomplish this, cinema needed to surpass, at some moment, the limitations of the basic apparatus – screen and projection – and provide a synthetic experience of the world, not just its reproduction.”

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Therefore he argues: “The impulse toward stereoscopic cinema is sustained by a fundamental cinematic desire to eliminate the last vestige of the apparatus from the field of representation, the film screen...”231 His thoughts correspond with the viewers’ appraisal of 3D technology as making the experience more realistic and immersive. Similar to other past technological innovations of the cinema dispositif such as color, widescreen and surround sound, 3D aims for a closer representation of reality. Surround sound already provided the cinema with a new spatial depth and dimension starting in the 1970’s. It could be argued that with 3D the cinematic medium is just now catching up visually with three-dimensional sound.232

The same praise was given to the high quality of CGI and motion capturing and the reasons for it were similar to those given for 3D. The high quality of CGI and motion capturing technology allowed Cameron to create a very realistic fantasy world. The quality of the CGI was so high that users could not distinguish the live-action footage from the computer-generated footage. Together with a motion-capturing technology that enabled the Na’vi to move and act just as naturally as any human being, this resulted in a realistic and immersive world that the viewer could believe in and be a part of. The sublime landscapes and grotesque creatures of Pandora are at some times foreign and at other times familiar, but the quality with which they are created is always so high that the viewer feels he can believe in the film’s fictive universe. The added 3D effect strengthens the immersion, which led some reviewers to describe the experience as something new and unique. Some described it as an out of body experience or a total body experience, others as a total sensory, sensuous and sensual experience. Viewers do not experience Avatar as a traditional cinematic experience that relies mainly on a strong narrative. They also do not experience Avatar as a typical Hollywood blockbuster with spectacular action scenes, which was a common description of the experience of The Hobbit. Instead of an action spectacle, Avatar provides a CGI spectacle or more broadly a technological spectacle. Reviewers used words familiar from early cinema studies, such as awe, wonder and amazement, to describe the attractive powers of the film’s visuals. Both a marveling at the computer-generated world and creatures and a new immersive, bodily sensitization seem to be the two main attractions of Avatar. This

231 Ibid., 213.
indicates that the viewing experience can be described as a medium experience. The reception analysis revealed that for many viewers the unique and novel viewing experience provided the main attraction. 3D, CGI and motion capturing functioned as digital attractions to sensitize audiences and appeal to their desire for technological novelty. According to some critics and theorists this medium-aware and medium-sensitive audience primarily consists of a younger generation of filmgoers who grew up with other new digital media such as video games and increasingly spectacular CGI blockbusters from the 1990's onwards. This has led to a preference for technological spectacle over narrative quality. Consequently, this is reflected in the narrative-spectacle continuum from the cinema dispositif of Hollywood blockbusters, which seems to be increasingly shifting toward the spectacle side, be it action spectacle in The Hobbit or CGI spectacle in Avatar.
4. Conclusion

The subject of this thesis was born out of some personal observations about my changing viewing habits. I was increasingly making a distinction between films that I could watch at home and films that I had to see in the theatre. It became quickly evident that these latter films were almost always Hollywood blockbusters that promised action and technological spectacle. I also began to demand higher standards from theatres. Wanting to experience a film in the best way possible, I started to research when and where films were projected in 3D, which theatre provided the biggest screen, the best surround sound and the clearest picture. At least for Hollywood blockbusters, the cinema dispositif and the way in which it enhances the action and technological spectacle became more important to me than the blockbuster’s narrative. This led to the main research question, which asked if the cinema experience of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters could be described as a medium experience.

By combining theories from early cinema studies and new media studies, such as the cinema of attractions and the cinema of interactions, the concept of medium experience was defined to include the function of new technologies as digital attractions to sensitize and attract the contemporary medium-sensitive and medium-aware viewer as well as the current trend of stretching the viewing experience beyond the theatre across various (new) media platforms. Case studies of The Hobbit and Avatar, two recent commercially successful and technologically advanced Hollywood blockbusters, provided a sound basis for analyzing which technologies were used as digital attractions, if and how the films were promoted as a medium experience and whether the films were indeed perceived as a medium experience by its viewers.

The analysis of the use of new technology as digital attractions in the production of the films resulted in interesting insights into the different ways in which technology can be used to generate or enhance spectacle. Both The Hobbit and Avatar make heavy use of CGI. In the production of The Hobbit CGI was primarily used to create spectacular action scenes that would not be possible or too costly otherwise. The director shot the film in a higher frame rate to alleviate some of the technical problems of stereoscopic 3D and to make the fast-paced action scenes appear as clear as possible. Together with a digital
projection in a 5K resolution the technologies mainly serve to present *The Hobbit’s* action scenes in the most spectacular, clearest and smoothest way possible. James Cameron took a more ambitious approach by producing a film that exists mainly of CGI instead of live-action footage. Here, new technologies are not just implemented to improve spectacular action scenes. They are used to create a realistic, believable fantasy world with sublime landscapes and grotesque creatures. The technology itself forms the spectacle and is regarded as *Avatar’s* main attraction. Whereas *The Hobbit* was produced as a traditional action spectacle film in which technology is used to enhance the action, *Avatar* could be regarded as a CGI spectacle where the digital attraction is stretched to the feature length of the film.

The marketing strategies for *The Hobbit* and *Avatar* showed some interesting differences. The marketing for *The Hobbit* can be regarded as fairly traditional with a focus more on star actors and a reliance on the popularity of the previous *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The trailers and posters did not mention the film’s novel higher frame rate, a decision that may be explained by the early negative reactions to 48 FPS. Interestingly, *Avatar* takes the opposite approach by dismissing a star actor approach and instead focusing on the motion-captured Na’vi and the computer-generated planet Pandora as the main attractions. It also follows a star director strategy by referring to James Cameron’s history as a director of technologically impressive Hollywood blockbuster films. Both films are strongly promoted as a technological attraction through the official homepages and DVD/Blu-ray releases by the inclusion of dozens of video extras that explain and praise the films’ technologies. *Avatar*, and to a much lesser extent also *The Hobbit*, extends the viewing experience beyond a visit to the theatre by stretching the experience across different media through transmedia storytelling. The Pandorapedia and *Avatar: The Game* enable fans to further explore the world of Pandora and even interact with it. Furthermore, the production of the video game illustrates how the cinematic medium is simultaneously influencing and being influenced by other media in the production, distribution as well as consumption of content. Many of the computer-generated elements are shared between the film and the video game, indicating that digital attractions are not bound to one medium but that they can function across different media, as is characteristic of the cinema of interactions. It became evident from the analysis of the marketing that film studios do indeed recognize their audience as
medium aware and medium sensitive and that they base their decision to promote and frame their films as a medium experience accordingly. When the initial buzz around a new technology is negative (as was the case with *The Hobbit* and 48 FPS) the studio may choose to downplay it as an attraction and instead frame the experience more as a traditional cinema experience by emphasizing the story, its protagonists and star actors. This indicates that studios are acutely aware of viewers’ medium sensitivity and the possible consequences of negativity surrounding a new technology.

The reception analysis revealed that many viewers are medium aware and medium sensitive and did indeed experience *The Hobbit* and *Avatar* as medium experiences. Viewers expressed that they were sensitized by the experience of new technologies. In the case of *The Hobbit’s* higher frame rate the reactions were mostly negative while many viewers were impressed by *Avatar’s* use of stereoscopic 3D and CGI. The viewing experiences were variously described with words such as unique, unsettling, amazing and as a bodily sensation. These words are reminiscent of early cinema studies where awe, wonder and amazement at technological novelty are characteristic of the cinema of attractions. Some of the words also refer to the disruptive and disorienting powers of technology, leading to a de-familiarization with the cinematic medium and a sensitization of the viewer’s desire for technological novelty. Many of the written accounts also explicitly defined *The Hobbit* and *Avatar* as medium experiences by stating that both films are worth seeing solely for their technological novelty. If one should watch these films despite their straightforward, ordinary story, they should at least view them in the best way possible: on the biggest IMAX screen, in 3D and projected in a high resolution and high frame rate. Statements such as these indicate that viewers categorize blockbuster films as leaning to one or the other side of the narrative-spectacle continuum, identifying films as either traditional cinema experiences with a strong focus on narrative or as a medium experience in which the technological attraction is more important than the narrative quality. Another interesting finding from the reception analysis is that some, presumably older, critics ascribe the success and popularity of *Avatar* and *The Hobbit* to a younger, more medium-sensitive generation of filmgoers who grew up during the emergence of CGI blockbusters in the nineties and with new entertainment media such as video games. This indicates that there may be a historical development in which viewers become increasingly medium sensitive and
medium aware, with cinema experiences turning into medium experiences accordingly. Another interesting finding from The Hobbit case study that points to the medium awareness of viewers is the fact that many written accounts compared the viewing experience to other types of media usage or consumption. The novel experience of watching The Hobbit in 3D and 48 FPS was varyingly likened to television, home videos, theatre, documentaries, theme park attractions and especially video games. This reveals that viewers not only frame their viewing experience as a medium experience by describing and analyzing their individual experiences in terms of technology, but that they are also able to make interesting and well-argued comparisons to other types of media, indicating a strong awareness of medium-specific influences on viewing experiences.

This thesis aimed to provide a better understanding of our changing viewing experiences of Hollywood blockbuster films. The two case studies revealed interesting differences and similarities in the production, marketing and reception of The Hobbit and Avatar as medium experiences. It should be stressed that these two films are examples of true event films, films that have the necessary huge budget to shift the technological boundaries of the cinematic medium. Therefore, the findings of this research are not intended to be generalized across the whole spectrum of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters. Instead, they should be regarded as an indication of the increasing development of blockbuster production and marketing toward providing medium experiences, as well as the viewers’ growing demand for them through greater awareness of and sensitivity to medium experiences. Further research could provide better insights into the workings of this trend toward medium experiences. It will be interesting to find out if film studios and viewers mutually reinforce the creation of medium experiences or whether one of either group exerts a stronger influence. Viewers may become more medium sensitive and aware as a result of Hollywood’s growing production and marketing of medium experiences or Hollywood produces their films as medium experiences to appeal to the increasing desire for technological spectacle from medium-sensitive viewers. For theatre owners it may be useful to do additional research on the positive and negative effects of technologies on the viewing experience. With the slow decline of 3D films and the still uncertain future of 48 FPS, concrete empirical data on viewers’ opinions about said technologies will be helpful in making strategic
decisions about whether to project films exclusively in 3D and 48 FPS or to provide the option to watch films in both 2D/24 FPS and 3D/48 FPS, thereby catering to different audiences but sacrificing precious theatre rooms and time slots. With regards to both film studies and the still young but blossoming game studies the concept of the cinema of interactions provides an interesting starting point for further research. It will be interesting to analyze how both media are increasingly influencing each other aesthetically, technologically and culturally. While video games are striving for cinema's narrative quality and visual realism, cinema is increasingly attempting to provide immersive and interactive experiences that are characteristic of video games. Maybe in the future the two entertainment media will have merged to such an extent that we will not speak of them in terms of cinema experiences and game experiences but as a medium experience in general. Avatar's dominance of CGI footage over live-action footage is already indicative of a growing development toward the fully digital nature of the medium of video games. Viewers experienced a physical sense of being there and a need to interact and discover the world of Pandora. For film viewers this is still a dream but for video game players this is already a reality. The future may bring us new entertainment experiences that offer both cinema’s narrative quality and realism as well as video games’ immersion and interactivity.
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Appendix 1: Images and stills

Fig. A: General and simplified visualization of narrative development and spectacular impact for classic Hollywood cinema, depicting a rising curve.

Fig. B: General and simplified visualization of narrative development and spectacular impact for contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, depicting a ‘rollercoaster ride’ progression.
Fig. 1-3: The dark goblin city held together by rickety ropes and bridges, filled with hundreds of computer-generated goblins and the grotesque goblin king.
Fig. 4 and 5: The main promotional posters of *An Unexpected Journey* and *The Desolation of Smaug*.

Fig. 6: "The Spiders of Mirkwood" browser game.
Fig. 7: “Barrel Escape” browser game.

Fig. 8: The Google Chrome web experiment “A Journey Through Middle-Earth.”
Fig. 9: The faces of the Na’vi showing pointed ears, yellow cat-like eyes and broad, flat noses.

Fig. 10: A full shot of a Na’vi showing their blue skin color, long legs and tail.
Fig. 11: The black, six-legged Viperwolf with iridescent vermilion accents.

Fig. 12: The six-legged Hammerhead Titanotherium, a cross between a hammerhead shark and a prehistoric rhinoceros.
Fig. 13: Daytime Pandora’s jungle and waterfalls.

Fig. 14: Pandora’s bioluminescent flora and fauna during the night.
Fig. 15: Pandora’s floating Hallelujah Mountains, inspired by the quartz-sandstone pillars in Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, China.

Fig. 16: The main film poster of Avatar.
Fig. 17: Augmented reality in the Coca-Cola Zero AVTR commercial.
Appendix 2: Glossary of technical terms

The following definitions of technical terms are primarily taken from glossaries of books on film technology and from professional computer animation and film technology websites. Definitions that are directly quoted contain references to the original source.

2D: Two-dimensional. An image or object with only two dimensions, such as width and height, but no depth.

3D: Having or appearing to have width, height, and depth (three-dimensional). Accepts and/or produces uncompressed video signals which convey 3D.

24 frames per second: Refers to the standard frame rate or film speed - the number of frames or images that are projected or displayed per second; in the silent era before a standard was set, many films were projected at 16 or 18 frames per second, but that rate proved to be too slow when attempting to record optical film sound tracks. Also written as 24 FPS or 24p. See also frame rate.

48 frames per second: Also written as 48 FPS and 48p. This is double the industry standard frame rate of 24 FPS. A doubling of the frame rate attempts to reduce motion blur and flickering, especially in stereoscopic 3D films. The first film to be shot in 48 frames per second was The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey. See also frame rate.

4K: 4K is considered a high-resolution format. A 4K image contains approximately 4,000 pixels in the width. The exact resolution of a 4K image is 4,096 pixels in width x 3,112 pixels in height. The resolution of the 4K standard is approximately four times that of the 2k standard.233

CGI: See computer-generated imagery.

**Computer-generated imagery (CGI):** The process by which film scenes are partially or entirely generated in the digital domain with 3D computer graphics.\(^{234}\)

**Crosstalk:** Incomplete isolation of the left and right image channels so that one leaks (leakage) or bleeds into the other. Looks like a double exposure. Crosstalk is a physical entity and can be objectively measured, whereas ghosting is a subjective term. See ghosting

**Data:** Digital information. Data has the advantage of being able to be copied or transmitted over a digital network any number of times without adversely affecting quality. In digital cinema, instead of the moving images and sound being stored on celluloid film, they are stored as digital data in a file, typically on a hard disk.

**Digital cinema:** Also known as D-Cinema. A term that can refer to films produced using digital cameras, shows through digital projection, enhanced through digital effects or distributed via the Internet.\(^{235}\)

**Digital distribution:** The delivery of media content, such as films, music, software and video games consisting, via online delivery platforms without the help of physical media. Examples for digital film distribution are Netflix, Hulu, iTunes Video and Youtube. See also digital cinema.

**Digital projection:** In digital cinema films are projected with a digital projector that accepts non-physical digital films on hard disks, optical discs such as Blu-ray, or downloaded via the Internet or dedicated satellite links. This is different from the older analog projectors that projected physical celluloid film.

**Digital technologies:** Refers to any system for recording and reading information - images, sounds - in computer-based numerical codes rather than in the older 'analogue' systems where information is directly stored on film or tape, and copies are of lower quality.

\(^{234}\) Ibid.
\(^{235}\) Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 319-335.
quality than originals. Besides being easier to access, manipulate and store than analogue copies, digital versions of texts are all of equal quality.

**Display:** An electronic device that presents information in visual form, that is, produces an electronic image—such as CRTs, LCDs, plasma displays, electroluminescent displays, field emission displays, etc. Also known as a 'sink' that renders an image.

**Flickering:** Any regular or irregular temporal variation in luminance of an object or scene.

**FPS:** See frames per second

**Frame rate:** The number of complete unique images (called frames) produced by an imaging machine and delivered to the eye each second. The amount of frames is generally described as frames per second or FPS but in some cases as hertz (Hz).

**Frames per second (FPS):** See frame rate.

**Franchising:** The coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content within the context of media conglomeration.\(^{236}\)

**Ghosting:** The perception of crosstalk is called ghosting. A condition that occurs when the right eye sees a portion of the left image or vice versa causing a faint double image to appear on the screen.

**HFR:** Stands for Higher Frame Rate and is used in motion picture technology to indicate frame rates that are higher than conventional prior practice, both in film and video. For film 24 frames per second is the industry standard, which makes 48 frames per second fall under HFR. See also 24 FPS, 48 FPS, frame rate and frames per second.

**High definition (HD):** HD indicates today a standard with a resolution of 1920 horizontal x 1080 vertical pixels and finds its origin in television. HD is also often used

\(^{236}\) Ibid.
to indicate films shot with professional digital cameras opposed to film or video shot in DV.

**HD:** See high definition.

**IMAX:** A film format that uses a giant negative (many times the size of 35mm and even 70mm) to project images of far greater sharpness and definition than can be shown in conventional cinemas, usually on a gigantic screen several storeys high. The format was invented in 1969, but only really took off in the 1990s. Partly because the format lends itself better to spectacular location shots than conventional dramatic editing, and partly because many IMAX cinemas can be found in or alongside museums, the vast majority of IMAX films are documentaries.

**Immersive:** A term used to describe a system that is designed to envelop the participant in a virtual world or experience. The amount of immersion the participant feels depends on a number of factors. Visual immersion is the most common goal. This can be done effectively using a large screen or a head-mounted display.

**Interactivity:** The potential of a new media technology (or of texts produced within that medium) to respond to consumer feedback. The technological determinants of interactivity (which is most often pre-structured or at east enabled by the designer) contrasts with the social and cultural determinants of participation (which is more open ended and more fully shaped by consumer choices).\textsuperscript{237}

**Motion artifact:** A visible defect invoked by motion. Blur, smearing, streaking, stutter, and object jumping are examples.

**Motion blur:** Loss of sharpness of moving details as a result of camera exposure or noise filtering during post-processing or compression. May also be caused by slow display response dynamics.

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid.
Participatory culture: Culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.\textsuperscript{238}

Pixel: Picture element; a pixel is the smallest display element that makes up the images you see on a computer monitor or television. A typical image contains millions of pixels, which is why pixel output is often defined in megapixels. The more pixels an image contains, the higher its resolution.

Resolution: The capacity of a means of reproduction to describe detail, which can be quantified by defining the smallest distinguishable elements in the image. These elements are grain in photography and film, and pixels in digital imagery. The higher the number of grains or pixels per frame, the better is the capacity to describe detail and, therefore, the resolution.\textsuperscript{239}

Stereo: Having depth, or three-dimensional: used as a prefix to describe, or as a contraction to refer to, various stereographic or stereoscopic artifacts or phenomena. Stereo comes from the Greek stereos for hard, firm or solid and it means combining form, solid, three-dimensional. Two inputs combine to create one unified perception of three-dimensional space.

Stereoscopic 3D: Two photographs taken from slightly different angles that appear three-dimensional when viewed together.

Transmedia storytelling: Stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products.\textsuperscript{240}

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{239} Fossati, \textit{From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition}, 285-289.
\textsuperscript{240} Jenkins, \textit{Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide}, 319-335.