

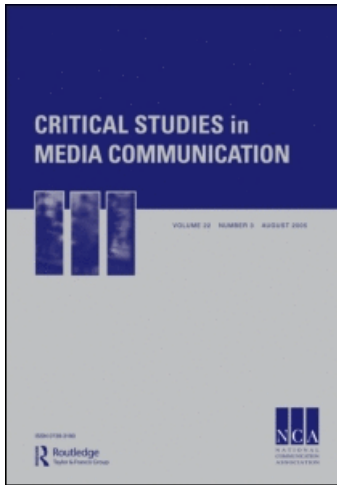
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### Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and participatory fandom: mapping new congruencies between the internet and media entertainment culture

Elana Shefrin

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# Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and Participatory Fandom: Mapping New Congruencies between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture

Elana Shefrin

*The culture of media entertainment, as exemplified in the Lord of the Rings and Star Wars film franchises, is being infused with new modes of authorship, production, marketing, and consumption that are characterized by Internet fan clubs, online producer-consumer affiliations, and real-world legal controversies over the proprietary ownership of digital bits of information. To analyze these new interactive patterns being employed by two competing media franchises, Bourdieu's theory of cultural production is supplemented with Jenkins's study of participatory fandom. Then, the contested nature of computer-mediated communication is explored using a model that brackets the opposing potentialities of Internet influence on offline society.*

Hollywood newcomer Peter Jackson and Hollywood legend George Lucas are both engaged in projects that are mapping out new congruencies between the Internet and media entertainment culture. Operating within the genre of science fiction/fantasy filmmaking, Jackson and Lucas share sophisticated abilities for combining technology and mythology in the creation of authentic, self-contained alternate universes. Both cinematic universes—Jackson's Middle-earth and Lucas's far-away galaxy—have generated immense fan bases that have swelled the ranks of loyal audiences and have ensured the commercial success of the two media franchises. Additionally, a growing number of “active” or “participatory” fans (Jenkins, 1992) are exhibiting a sense of ownership that includes an investment in the creative development of these

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Elana Shefrin is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at Georgia State University. Correspondence to: Department of Communication, Georgia State University, 1 Park Place South, 10th Floor, Atlanta, GA 30303, USA. Email: elanashEFRIN@att.net. The author would like to thank Ted Friedman, David Cheshier, Jack Boozer, Bonnie Dow, and two anonymous CSMC reviewers for comments on earlier versions of this manuscript, with special appreciation to M. Lane Bruner for his critical readings throughout the revision process. Portions of this paper were presented at the International Communication Association conference in May, 2003.

universes. Internet clubs and Web sites have provided venues for fans to maintain heightened connections to the two media producers and their evolving franchises through social gossip, artistic production, and political activism. The differing styles that Jackson and Lucas have adopted with their online fan bases, and the consequential effects on the production, circulation, and consumption of their commercial offerings, provide us with two divergent models of interaction between popular representatives of media entertainment culture and Internet fan culture.

Jackson's project as the screenwriter-director-producer of J.R.R. Tolkien's (1954/1986) *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has developed over the past six years, beginning with the first screenplay draft in 1997. In an unprecedented feat, Jackson filmed three feature-length installments during a 15-month period from 1999 to 2001. These films, fortuitously bolstered by high sales figures and continuous production revisions, have been meted out on a yearly basis: *The Fellowship of the Ring* in December 2001, *The Two Towers* in December 2002, and *The Return of the King* in December 2003. Lucas, conversely, has been developing his legendary Hollywood status over the past 30 years. As the *auteur* and part owner of the *Star Wars* franchise, his roles have been variously configured. He did the screenwriting and directing of the original *Star Wars* (1977) film, and then became the screenwriter-producer of the second and third installments of the trilogy: *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983). Most recently, he has mirrored Jackson's credentials as the screenwriter-director-producer of three prequels: *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Star Wars: Episode II – The Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Star Wars: Episode III*, now in production.

Although both filmmakers' releases in the year 2002—Jackson's *The Two Towers* and Lucas's *Attack of the Clones*—have been enjoying a commensurate economic popularity, their career trajectories over the past six years have not been similar. While Jackson has been consistently gaining prestige with critics and fans, Lucas has been buffeted by controversy, alternatively excoriated and praised. During that period of time, one of the major distinctions between the production styles of the two filmmakers has been in their relationships with online fan clubs and participatory fandom. *Lord of the Rings* fans have been actively courted by Jackson and New Line Cinema throughout all aspects of authoring, casting, filming, and marketing the trilogy. *Star Wars* fans, however, have been doubly offended by the actions of Lucas and Lucasfilm: on the one hand, their desires to be "consumer affiliates" in the cinematic production process have been generally ignored; on the other hand, their roles as "illegal pirates" of corporately-owned intellectual property have been overtly emphasized (Jenkins, 2003). Consequently, Jackson's and New Line Cinema's innovative strategies with online fans have been advantageous to Jackson's career, while causing raised expectations that have been detrimental to Lucas's career.

The two filmmakers' contrasting motivations, strategies, and trajectories can be effectively analyzed by applying Bourdieu's (1984, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1998) theory of cultural production, which employs a game-playing terminology to illuminate the interaction between three "fields of practice": the artistic field, the field of power, and the field of class relations (1993a, p. 38). Bourdieu develops a social construct that

is graphically illustrated as three co-existing, permeable fields. The artistic field is positioned within the larger field of power which, in turn, is positioned within the overarching field of class relations. To further substantiate the patterns of interaction among the three fields, Bourdieu places the artistic field at a *dominated* position within the field of power, but at a *dominant* position within the field of class relations. Clearly, with the advent of media entertainment conglomerates and the Internet, Bourdieu's fields of practice are becoming more permeable, with a two-way communicative flow between the dominant and dominated forces. Exemplifying a transmitting flow from the artistic field, cultural producers are gaining status in both personal and corporate fields of power. Exemplifying a receptive flow from the fields of power and class relations, media entertainment is splintered by social distinctions—from target audiences to niche markets—and hierarchized by economic potentials—from calculations of fan base spending power to predictions of worldwide market sales.

To some extent, the dominating effects of outside forces on a particular artistic field will depend upon the strategies employed and the alliances chosen by the cultural producers who are positioned within the field. Bourdieu's (1993a) construct can be augmented by Jenkins's (1992, 2003) ethnographic observations on the changing patterns of media entertainment culture, which present a cogent rationale for re-conceptualizing traditional producer-consumer alliances to include the participatory practices of active fans. This is particularly true within the cinematic field of Hollywood production, where "middle-brow art" carrying an aura of cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1993c) is peddled to mass audiences and emulated throughout the global marketplace.

In mapping the congruencies between the Internet and media entertainment culture, this essay will explore the communicative flows between Bourdieu's three fields of practice—artistic, power, and class relations—at four procedural stages: pre-production, production, circulation, and consumption. It will be argued that the advent of the Internet and online fandom has "out-moded" the previous nature of those communicative flows and now supplies a strong link between the three fields. In characterizing the Internet as the site of a political struggle between utopian visions of participatory democracy and prevailing hierarchies of economic power, Harrison and Falvey's (2001) thesis-counterthesis model will be presented and applied. These authors' "pro" and "con" evaluation of Internet culture will be charted along several dimensions of communicative access and democratic opportunity. Discursive methods employed by Jackson and Lucas throughout the four procedural stages will be scrutinized for indications of whether the two producers are attempting to promote democratic opportunities for online fans within the processes of media culture, or are seeking to manipulate the Internet to consolidate prevailing hierarchies of economic power across the three fields of practice.

### **Pre-Production: Positioning the Players on the Field**

During the early 1980s, as Lucas was being crowned the premiere Hollywood *auteur*

for the *Star Wars* trilogy, and Jackson was entering the cinematic production field with his first 10-minute film, Pierre Bourdieu was gaining American recognition with the English language publication of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984). Although the three authors were at different stages in their careers—Bourdieu was 14 years older than Lucas and 26 years older than Jackson—each was attracting a cult following within his respective field of practice. In an interesting parallel between the pre-eminent cultural critic and the fledgling cultural producer, Jackson's first feature-length film—a grotesque horror comedy featuring alien cannibals—was entitled *Bad Taste* (1987). At that time, while Bourdieu was theorizing connections between social class distinctions and aesthetic tastes, he might not have realized that many of the same student intellectuals who were aligned with the “bourgeois aesthetic” inherent in the dominant cultures of higher education and material wealth, were simultaneously immersed in the “popular aesthetic” inherent in the dominated cultures of mass communication and working class entertainment. They might have read Tolkien, watched *Star Wars* or *Bad Taste*, and debated the difference between individual and structural identities—all in one day. Bourdieu did, however, accord a primacy to youth in the field of cultural production. As early as 1971, with the French publication of *The Production of Belief*, Bourdieu (1993b) recognized an alignment between intellectual artists and middle-class youth that had begun during the social movements of the 1960s. Bourdieu explains that both intellectual artists and middle-class youth belonged to subcultures that were refusing to adopt the bourgeois worldview of power, money, tradition and a “spirit of seriousness” (1993b, p. 105). Those subcultures, based in “the eternal present,” established a tension between institutional, canonized structures and the introduction of new, youthful practices. Bourdieu then uses this dialectic to demonstrate that within the field of cultural production, the advent of an artistic work has the potential to out-mode or out-date a classic work, causing it to slip mechanically into the past:

On one side are the dominant figures, who want continuity, identity, reproduction; on the other, the newcomers, who seek discontinuity, rupture, difference, revolution. To “make one’s name” [*faire date*] means making one’s mark, achieving recognition (in both senses) of one’s difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; at the same time, it means creating a new position beyond the positions already occupied, ahead of them, in the *avant-garde*. (p. 106)

Bourdieu’s statements can clearly be applied to Jackson’s and Lucas’s respective positions in the field of media production at the time Jackson began working on the cinematic adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1954/1986) *The Lord of the Rings* in 1997. Lucas was one of the most financially successful Hollywood filmmakers and was highly esteemed as a leader in digital production advances and global marketing strategies. After a 19-year hiatus from working with the *Star Wars* narrative—during which time he was a screenwriter-executive producer for the Indiana Jones adventure trilogy *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989)—Lucas was beginning to film the first

of three prequel episodes, *The Phantom Menace* (1999). Conversely, Jackson's position was one of a Hollywood outsider, a youthful unknown who was aiming to achieve recognition and make his mark in the field. Thus, Lucas's main strategy would be to use his prestige and power to retain control of his dominant position, while Jackson's main strategy would be to create a new position as an *avant-garde* filmmaker. Similarly, Lucas's trajectory would be to adopt a holding pattern of practices designed to maintain the *status quo*, while Jackson's trajectory would be to gain a higher status through transformative practices that "succeed in overturning the hierarchy of the field without disturbing the principles upon which the field is based" (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 83). Although both directors ultimately had the same goal—to produce critically and commercially successful films—the differing amounts of "symbolic capital" and "economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1998) each held would have a direct effect on the defensive and offensive strategies he would choose to employ.

According to Bourdieu, cultural production is based upon power relations that are simultaneously economic and symbolic. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as "charisma," which is "a magical power" that is accumulated through recognition, prestige, and honor (1998, p. 102). Charisma is translatable into economic capital (as in a higher-paid position), but it is not reducible to monetary valuation. The distinction between symbolic and economic capital is most clearly seen within a dichotomy of high-brow art's restricted production and low-brow art's large-scale production. The former deals almost exclusively in symbolic capital (what Bourdieu calls "the winner loses" logic), whereas the latter is largely concerned with monetary profit. Lucas's and Jackson's particular field of practice—the Hollywood science fiction/fantasy film—can readily be seen as a middle-brow art, which Bourdieu defines as an "oscillation between plagiarism and parody" that is dictated by a "cynicism of submission to the market" and "creates the need for the widest possible public" (1993c, pp. 126, 128). Such films combine spectacle with originality and creative inspiration with *cliché*. As producers of middle-brow art, the game plan of both directors would be to gain symbolic power from intellectual sources and subjects, while securing economic power from commercial forces. However, the double disparity—both symbolic and economic—in their relative starting positions would dictate a series of moves that would lead to marked change in their symbolic status over the next six years. One of the determining factors in this change would be Jackson's innovative use of the Internet to court Tolkien fans.

### **Production: Using the Internet to Maximize Economic and Symbolic Profits**

When Peter Jackson and partner Fran Walsh began adapting Tolkien's novels into a screenplay, they faced three main challenges, two of which were considered to be standard hurdles in the filmmaking process: to secure the approval and financial backing of a Hollywood studio, and to produce a filmic adaptation that could be critically and commercially successful. The third challenge was somewhat unusual: to connect with 100 million loyal Tolkien fans and avoid alienating as many as possible.

Before Jackson could proceed past the first hurdle, he almost lost the project. After his team had been working on the screenplay for 18 months, Miramax studio asked Jackson to compress the three novels into one film. When Jackson refused, he was given four weeks to sell the project to another financial backer, or he would be forced to abandon his efforts. After a tense month of studio presentations, Jackson secured New Line Cinema's endorsement for the continuous filming of three feature-length movies, along with a budget of almost \$300 million (Collura, 2002a).

As Jackson was continuing to redraft the three scripts, formulate the hiring of cast and crew, and schedule the filming of the production, he made the first move to connect with Tolkien fans. Jackson asked media critic Harry Knowles, of Aint-it-Cool-News.com, to conduct an online interview that would be based on questions submitted to Knowles's Web site. Knowles agreed, and the first interview took place in August, 1998. Before answering the 20 questions that Knowles had compiled from over 14,000 submissions, Jackson thanked the fans, asserting, "A lot of the concerns you raise focus on the same areas that we are currently grappling with." The filmmaker emphasized the importance of his communication with the fans, pledging to conduct a second interview within a few months. He also acknowledged the Web as a communal meeting place: "Using Harry's site was the only way I could imagine reaching all of you in an efficient way" (Knowles, 1998).

The multi-layered questions, collated by Knowles, encompassed detailed aspects related to the ongoing decisions that were being made at that time by the screenwriting team. Jackson earnestly discussed the inadequacies of the fantasy film genre as a whole, the difficulty in the cinematic portrayal of Tolkien's intellectual vision, historical authority, and linguistic talents, the proposed departures of the filmic narrative from the literary texts, the literary depth and dramatic tension of the filmic texts, the extent to which the films would include Tolkien's songs, poetry, and lyrical style, the realistic scope of the battle scenes, and the actual titles of the three cinematic installments.

Four months later in January 1999, Jackson conducted the second interview with online fans. He reiterated that his writing team was "in the process of rethinking the structure and narrative, and making some quite substantial changes to what we had done before ... so please understand that while I will give you accurate information based on what I know today, things will continue to change and develop over the next few months" (Knowles, 1999). Answering the second set of 20 questions that Knowles had collated from online submissions, Jackson elaborated on the mechanics of screenwriting, including the use of flashbacks and non-linear storytelling, the difficulties inherent in multi-dimensional character portrayals, the intercutting between the various storylines and the sequencing of certain episodes, the reference to Tolkien's *Silmarillion* (1977/1985) as background for the scriptwriting, the intended pace of the action and the extent of narrative emphasis on thematic meanings, as well as plans for a prequel film adapted from *The Hobbit* (1937/1986).

Although Jackson was forthcoming in discussing the crafting of the screenplay for the three films, he was much less inclined to debate casting choices with the fans. When he originally laid the ground rules for the proposed interviews with Knowles,

he requested that casting issues be eliminated from the questions that would be compiled from the fans' submissions. While Knowles did attempt to avoid querying Jackson about the director's plans to hire specific actors, he nevertheless informed Jackson that casting questions dominated the 14,000 submissions. After declaring, "I'm going to try to weasel some info out of you," Knowles asked, "What is your casting philosophy going to be with this series of films?" He then proceeded to mention Elijah Woods's stated desire to be an actor in the production. Jackson, who later would cast Woods in the leading role of Frodo, replied:

The basic philosophy is to cast unknowns as the hobbits and use better known actors for the smaller roles ... We won't be able to afford huge stars. Sean Connery won't be Gandalf (one of the most enduring pieces of Net mythology) ... I like the Patrick McGooan idea somebody mentioned ... We have a couple of other strong ideas for Gandalf (I won't say who, but I've never seen their names on the Net) ... The idea of "stars" stepping forward and declaring themselves Tolkien fans is interesting ... let's see what happens. (Knowles, 1998, Question 8)

From this short exchange, and with the advantage of hindsight, it may be surmised that Jackson possessed a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 98), an intuitive understanding of how best to maximize his symbolic and economic profits. Both as an intuitive motivation and as a conscious strategy, he focused on Tolkien Web sites and alliance possibilities with online fans. Not only was Jackson apparently mentally cataloguing the casting suggestions that were being made by the fans, he was also intrigued by the idea of fannish actors, whose level of commitment in portraying Tolkien's characters would, presumably, be unusually high.

This high level commitment by fannish actors is illustrated in Flynn's (2001) interview with Ian McKellen, whom Jackson would subsequently cast as Gandalf. McKellen reveals that while he was memorizing the script, he engaged in a constant referencing of Tolkien's novels. If he discovered that Jackson had neglected to include what McKellen considered to be an essential narrative point from "the bible," he would telephone Jackson and pressure him to remedy the omission. McKellen, who maintains a *Lord of the Rings* page within his own personal Web site, would probably identify himself as a Purist, that class of Tolkienites who have vociferously demanded that the cinematic narrative remain true to the literary texts. In fall of 2000, after the TolkienOnline.com fan site had collected 16,000 virtual signatures petitioning Jackson "not to violate the integrity of Tolkien's work," Jackson made an official announcement stating that the filmic text would adhere more closely to the novels than had originally been planned (Davis, 2001, p. 127). With this victory, the Purists were somewhat mollified with the results from their monitoring of the film production. Nevertheless, throughout the production and subsequent distribution of the three films, all deviations from the novels would continue to be deplored on fan Web sites.

From a critical viewpoint, Jackson's online interviews with Tolkien fans can be seen as a strategic move to co-opt the overall import of fan opinion. By presenting himself as a Tolkien fan who is ideologically attracted to casting fannish actors, Jackson is reassuring the fans that their opinions have the "inside track" and are

being represented by the cast and crew. For example, actor McKellen highlights his alliance with fans in a *Newsweek* interview: “Although it’s not made exclusively for the fans, it’s made by fans. We’re all allies” (Giles, 2001, p. 4). Similarly, Jackson echoes this sentiment in an interview with Collura (2002a): “I really made the conscious attempt to make the film that I would like to see because, I mean, I read the book, I was a fan ... So I was really making the film for myself.” After declaring himself to be an admirer of the novels and expressing his solidarity with Tolkien fans, Jackson intends for his confession, that of making the film for himself, to carry a connotation of popular sovereignty and representative decision-making, rather than arrogant dismissal of fan opinion.

From a more utopian viewpoint, Jackson’s discourse with online fans can be seen as a technologically-inspired antidote to traditional demarcations between the production and consumption of cultural artifacts. Authorship has characteristically been a solitary endeavor, enacted in an environment that is isolated from the intended audience. By using the Internet for social communication while he is drafting the scripts, Jackson is able to be a “filter,” a “final arbiter for a lot of good ideas from a group of people” (Bauer, 2002, p. 8). Ideally, he draws inspiration from the fans’ thoughtful perspectives and studied observations on the proposed cinematic adaptations while he simultaneously increases his credibility with the future audience of the films. Such a utopian viewpoint is obviously not the norm for present-day media entertainment culture. However, this essay argues that the precedents set by Jackson, New Line Cinema, and online fans have provided an alternate model for envisioning future producer-consumer alliances in the field of media production.

Clearly, major changes in the processes of production and consumption must occur before the model could be applied widely. At the present time, Jenkins reports that the vast majority of cultural production by fans is occurring extemporaneously to, not collaboratively with, the “official” authorship of the narratives. Due to the nature of their sampling and appropriation practices, fans’ involvement in a chosen textual universe is likely to remain more evident throughout the processes of circulation and consumption, rather than within the originating processes of narrative creation. Even if commercial practices were to be drastically transformed to streamline consumer input, some texts will never be amenable to fandom co-production. As one anonymous reviewer has pointed out, those fan bases that have experienced a lengthy shared legacy and sense of inheritance will be the most inclined to desire roles in the co-production of artifacts that contribute to their narrative universe. Both *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* fans are vested with feelings of legacy and inheritance, while fans of *The Matrix* films (1999, 2003a, 2003b), for example, are not. Whether or not Jackson’s discourse with online fans heralds the democratizing of media entertainment by Internet culture, it is a potentially useful exercise to document his strategies with fans, to compare them with Lucas’s strategies, and to attempt to calculate how these strategies may be affecting their respective trajectories. To further characterize the participation of *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* fans in the practices of circulation and consumption, two types of comparisons will now be made—between fandom perception of Lucas’s and Jack-

son's symbolic capital, and between the Internet marketing strategies of Lucasfilm and New Line Cinema.

### **Circulation: Active Fans as "Agents of Consecration"**

With the advent of participatory fandom, a new class of consecrating agents has been introduced into Bourdieu's "circle of belief" (1993b, p. 77). Due to their close textual readings, their enthusiastic critical analyses, their extreme dedication, and their growing numbers, active fans are beginning to be recognized as important contributors to the formation of collective belief. As Bourdieu explains in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993a), every artistic field is characterized by opposing forces that are struggling to either transform or conserve the existing system's power to shape the larger social order. Cultural producers harness these forces by forming alliances with members of different social classes, or target audiences, in order to maximize their symbolic and economic profits. In the marketplace of symbolic goods, which Bourdieu situates within a larger field of power and a still larger field of class relations, the value of an artistic work is determined, in part, by the opinions of "agents of consecration" (1993c, p. 126). These agents—who may be critics, scholars, or professionals—possess special knowledge and are conversant in aesthetic codes that are endemic to a particular field of cultural production. Their pronouncements serve to form a respected consensus that, although based on "collective belief or, more precisely, collective misrecognition" (1993b, p. 81), preserves the consumers' faith in the game. Active fans form a hybrid class of consecrating agents—they may possess scholarly knowledge without being scholars, or they may possess a discriminating eye without being professional critics.

Jenkins (1992) has identified several levels of activity that are endemic to participatory fandom's engagement with the chosen narrative universes. The three practices that are most relevant to this discussion are: a tendency toward close textual readings that combine "emotional proximity and critical distance" (p. 277), the ongoing production of a "contemporary folk culture" through the sampling and appropriation of commercial texts, discourses, and images (p. 279), and the use of the Internet as a "base for consumer activism" such as speaking back to producers and media companies, or lobbying for alternative developments (p. 278). Each of these levels of activity, which range from highly individualized creative expressions to highly collectivized patterns of communication, provide opportunities for cultural producers to either "commodify" or "consecrate" fandom practices within the existing systems of circulation and consumption. Moreover, the strategies and trajectories adopted by each producer will depend upon both internal and external factors, including personal characteristics and ambitions, prior accumulation of economic and symbolic capital, and the respective positions of other producers within the field of practice. Therefore, how a relatively unknown director from New Zealand became a model for one of the most commercially successful American filmmakers can be explained by combining Bourdieu's and Jenkins's insights.

According to Bourdieu, consecrating agents not only contribute to the formation of collective belief surrounding the value of symbolic goods, but also to the evaluation of a cultural producer's symbolic capital. This evaluation is somewhat reliant on the "sincerity" of the producing agent, which is only achieved "when there is a perfect and immediate harmony between the expectations inscribed in the position occupied ... and the dispositions of the occupant" (1993b, p. 95). Under Bourdieu's analysis, Jackson's disposition has been generally acknowledged to be sincere and in harmony with his position, while Lucas's disposition has often been attacked as insincere and in disharmony with his position. At least one contributing factor to this discrepancy is that Jackson is perceived as an encourager of participatory fan practices, while Lucas is perceived as an inhibitor of those practices.

Unlike Jackson's fairly straight trajectory, Lucas has had a series of ups and downs with both critics and fans. To be fair, Lucas has been a major player in Hollywood for almost three times as long as Jackson and, in many instances, Lucas's phenomenal amounts of economic and symbolic capital have insulated him from his attackers. However, at certain tumultuous points in his career, he has been forced to confront accusations of both personal arrogance and over-commercialization of the *Star Wars* saga. After the 1999 release of *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, Brooker (2002, p. xvi) cites fans' grievances:

*Star Wars* fans feel that they should be the custodians, but are faced with a situation where someone else still owns the story, is pitching to a far wider audience than their dedicated group, cares not at all for their interpretation of the saga, and will attempt to shut down their sites forcibly if they contradict his version of the characters and plot.

Brooker's explanation correlates a "harsh voice of criticism" against Lucas personally as a writer/director who callously disregards fans' creative interpretations of the narrative, with a corresponding "general sense of distrust" in Lucas professionally as the owner of a media empire that seeks commercial profit at the expense of human relationship (2002, p. 90).

The largest decline in Lucas's symbolic capital occurred as the result of fans' tremendous disappointment in the *Phantom Menace* production. Many *Star Wars* fans, especially the older ones who had invested their childhoods and sometimes their careers in their relationships with the *Star Wars* narrative, were harshly critical of Lucas and the direction his franchise had taken. Webmaster Kolnack of the CloneWars unofficial fan site complains in an open letter to Lucas:

[M]uch of the movie was too influenced by marketing ... The movie should have had us, (the die-hard fans), in mind more than it did and we all know that. George Lucas should have consulted with us, the fans, as to what we think and what we'd be most excited to see in this film ... [We] hope he doesn't repeat the same mistakes twice. Make this one for us, George; after all, it's fans like us who've made you and your family millionaires many times over! (Kolnack, 2000, Section 8)

While Kolnack does not specifically contrast Lucas's conduct with Jackson's, other

*Star Wars* fans have been more explicit in their comparisons. A 2001 online petition, signed by over 7,000 fans, requested:

We, the undersigned, in the spirit of our raped childhoods, ask that George Lucas give over his reign as director and writer of *Episode III* to one Peter Jackson ... In light of recent George Lucas movies, more specifically *The Phantom Menace* and the soon-to-be released *Attack of the Clones*, we beg thee of *Star Wars* creation to pass all creative rights to Peter Jackson. (Petition, 2001)

Realistically, there has been no indication that Lucas has considered a bequest of his artistic creation to Jackson, and very little indication that Lucas has been swayed by Jackson's alliance with Tolkien fans. However, partially as a result of Jackson's example, Lucas was urged by Fox Studios to become more responsive to *Star Wars* fans after they "mercilessly attacked" Lucas for *The Phantom Menace's* weak narrative and shallow characters (Blumberg, 2002). Furthermore, there is some evidence that Lucas has developed a new paternal fondness for fan filmmakers who have been circulating their *Star Wars*-based digital shorts on the Internet over the past decade; he even recruited some of those grass-roots filmmakers to work on *Episode II* (Brooker, 2002).

Fortunately—whether or not due to fan recruitment or a new sense of responsibility to fans—Lucas regained much of his former glory with *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), delivering a second installment that pleased a large majority of the fans and ended the vociferous debates between the pro-Lucas "gushers" and the anti-Lucas "bashers" on the *Star Wars* fan Web sites (Brooker, 2002). However, in a 2002 interview with *Cinescape* after the successful release of *Episode II*, Lucas denied that he had changed his approach to suit older fans, claiming that all of the *Star Wars* films had always been, and always would be, targeted at a 12-year old audience. Then, he launched into a complicated and somewhat insulting explanation of how the "fans didn't want to hear about" and "weren't ready" for his artistic vision and "spiritual, symbolic idea" in *Phantom Menace*. Finally, he privileged his judgment over that of the fans, defending *Phantom Menace* as the most commercially successful of the four *Star Wars* films to that date, and as the second most successful film overall in worldwide sales (Blumberg, 2002).

Lucas's self-justifying attitude underlies a discursive strategy of "the best defense is a good offense." Whatever his motivations have been, he seems to be resolutely opposed to acknowledging the active fans as either Bourdieu's "agents of consecration" or as Jenkins's "consumer affiliates." Even though Lucas is disinclined to admit to following Jackson's strategies with fans, he has recently publicly aligned himself with Jackson and his films. In a 2003 interview with *Fox News* (Friedman, 2003), Lucas emphasizes the similarities between *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*, both in form and mythological content. Interviewer Friedman relates: "Lucas also told me that he and *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson have become good friends, commiserating with each other in Australia and New Zealand on their shoots about making their two series."

In a somewhat speculative deconstruction of Lucas's discursive motivations

during the *Fox News* interview, it might be suggested that Lucas is attempting to increase the appearance of his symbolic capital by aligning himself with Jackson's strategies of cultural production. Through emphasizing the similarities between the two producers and their respective narrative texts, Lucas seeks to decrease fans' and critics' perception of the directors' competitive discrepancies, while increasing favorable comparisons. Whatever discrepancy may exist in regard to symbolic capital, however, has not noticeably damaged Lucas's economic capital. Apparently, Lucas's commercial prestige as a Hollywood player has been largely built upon exceptional production skills, such as his breakneck editing pace, his incorporation of computer graphics and sophisticated soundtracks, and his pioneering work with special effects (Ankeny, 2003). Thus, the filmmaker's lengthy record of singular technological achievements, coupled with wise financial strategies, has led to an entrenched position of economic success that is not easily undermined.

Most recently, the economic popularity of Lucas's *Attack of the Clones* (2002) has been favorably tracking Jackson's *The Two Towers* (2002). As of July 2003, both films had earned more than \$300 million worldwide and were in competition for the second-place slot after *Titanic* (1997). However, in terms of symbolic capital, Lucas continues to be cast as a commercially-motivated mogul, while Jackson is affectionately dubbed "the Hobbit of Hollywood." Collura (2002b) proclaims: "*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King* are quickly taking their place as the *Star Wars* of the 21st century." In Bourdieu's terms, Jackson's new cultural product has out-moded Lucas's classic one. And even though *The Two Towers* (2002) filmic narrative contains the greatest departures from the Tolkien texts—including a controversial love scene between the Elf maiden Arwen and the human warrior Aragorn, viewed as heretical by Tolkien Purists—over 11,000 online fans have given the film an average rating of 4.5 out of a possible 5 (TheOneRing.net, 2003). This is the same average that over 14,000 fans had previously given for *Fellowship of the Rings* (2001). Apparently, Jackson is continuing to be well-respected by fans and critics for the quality of his adaptation; even in Lucas's eyes, Jackson has acquired enough symbolic and economic capital to compete with top Hollywood producers. Arguably, Jackson would not have attained these levels of success if he had not strategically aligned himself with Tolkien online fans as a primary order of business.

Based upon the personal experiences of Jackson and Lucas, it may be proposed that the nature of the relations that cultural producers choose to establish with any fan base that is attached to their particular artistic products will affect, to some extent, the accomplishment of the producers' desired outcomes. The scope of effect will be related to the longevity and intensity of the fans' engagement with a particular text or narrative, and will exist on a participatory continuum throughout the processes of production, circulation, and consumption. Logically, the types of fans who will seek the highest level of participation at all stages of those processes will be ones whose investments in the shared narratives have dramatically shaped their life worlds and life choices. In the case of both the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* film franchises, this type of fan is often the rule, rather than the exception. The

differing manners in which the official Web sites for *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* discursively interact with those fans along the participatory continuum can be revealed in a comparison of the corporate media marketing practices of Lucasfilm and New Line Cinema. According to Jenkins (2003), the “winners” in the “current media revolution” will be those cultural producers who attempt to offset polarizing issues over intellectual property rights by recognizing the economic and political imperative of collaboration with active fan consumers.

### Consumption: Online Fans and Participatory Media Culture

Jenkins (2003) describes active fans as a specific type of audience that can be substantially distinguished from the majority of media consumers. For such fans, the act of watching a particular film or playing a certain video game can comprise an experiential unit that is interconnected to an expansive multi-textual environment—one which may encompass magazines, books, collectibles, interactive media, online clubs, conferences, and role-playing events. As active participants, fans often appropriate corporate-generated imagery, and then embellish or transform it with personal artistic expressions such as poetry, songs, paintings, scholarly essays, creative fiction, photographs, digital films, collages, or clothing. Due to their personal identification with the texts, fans may also adopt attitudes, language, or behaviors that are an outgrowth of their “immersion in a special lexicon” (Harris, 1998, p. 8). Thus, participatory fandom is marked by a sustained emotional and physical engagement with a particular narrative universe—an engagement that visualizes a non-commercial, shared ownership with the media company that holds the commercial, legal property rights.

Paradoxically, the nature of media marketing culture ensures that participatory fandom can be both the overt strength for, and the covert weakness against, its success. On the one hand, media companies could not survive without loyal fan participation. Jenkins (2003, p. 284) points to the commercial promotions of the *Star Wars* franchise as an illustration of this point: “This new ‘franchise’ system actively encourages viewers to pursue their interests in media content across various transmission channels, to be alert to the potential for new experiences offered by these various tie-ins.” By definition, an active and loyal fan will constantly be on the alert for updated products and enhanced engagement with the lexicon. The size and dedication of a participatory fan base will affect both the perceived amount of commercial risk and the perceived likelihood of commercial success for a proposed franchise addition.

On the other hand, participatory fandom is the enemy of media companies. The battle-lines are drawn over the issues of copyright and intellectual property law (Lessig, 2001). Jenkins (2003, p. 289) proposes a fan manifesto that re-imagines an old media/mass culture as a new media/folk culture:

Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in

the creation and circulation of central cultural myths ... Fans also reject the studio's assumption that intellectual property is a "limited good," to be tightly controlled lest it dilute its value. Instead, they embrace an understanding of intellectual property as "shareware," something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternative meanings.

Within the world of the Internet and online fan clubs, corporate products are easily treated as abstract digital bits of information, or more concretely, as raw material for fans' creative re-interpretation. A basic disagreement over the nature and ownership of cultural texts results in a constant re-negotiation of relationship between media producers and active fans. At certain times, the media producers will court online fans as consumer affiliates; at other times, they will attack them as illegal pirates. This discursive tension is clearly exemplified in the differing, character-specific manners in which the official Web sites for the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises have maintained a balance between promotional strategies and protection of copyrighted assets.

New Line Cinema's official Web site, *LordoftheRings.net*, was launched in 1999, two and a half years prior to the scheduled release of the first film of the trilogy. As director of interactive marketing, Gordon Paddison maintains the Web site, networks with other Tolkien fan sites, handles all Internet publicity, and deals with online issues that arise in connection with New Line's legal rights to the *Lord of the Rings* intellectual property. Engaging in dual insider-outsider roles, Paddison maintains a delicate balance between his two identities as a Tolkien Web host and a film studio's marketing director. In his insider role, Paddison knows the most current product information, answers over 100 emails each day, gives away a plethora of computer-related *Lord of the Rings* merchandise, and provides the premier Web access to online film clips. In his outsider role, Paddison seeks to protect his company's copyrighted assets by preventing pirated images and videos from being displayed on any of the Tolkien Web sites, and by monitoring *Lord of the Rings* chat rooms and discussion boards (Davis, 2001).

By all accounts, Paddison's relationship with fans and unofficial fan sites has been largely respectful and accommodating; the fans have generally reciprocated with cooperative attitudes. Flynn (2001) reports, for example, that one fan called the police when *Lord of the Rings* production footage was being offered for sale on the Internet, prior to the release of the first film in the trilogy. The fan's information led to the arrest of three crew members and the return of the stolen footage. In another instance, New Line's altercation with a New Zealand resident, who had been taking photographs of the production site and posting them on an unofficial fan site, led to a camera-less conciliatory tour of the facilities.

In a 2001 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, New Line's executive producer Mark Ordesky exclaims, "Gordon is a genius! He's been brilliant at keeping an inclusionary vibe, and it's just such a contrast to other big-budget Hollywood movies where the fans and the Internet are seen as things to be kept away" (Flynn, 2001, p. 44). Interviewer Flynn retorts: "Paging Mr. Lucas!" Apparently, Lucas's reputation

has suffered from a long history of legal disputes over participatory fan practices, dating back 20 years and continuing to the present time. Jenkins charges: "Through the years, Lucasfilm has been one of the most aggressive corporate groups in trying to halt fan cultural production" (2003, p. 290). Finally, in the late 1990s, the StarWars.com official Web site began granting free Web space to fans who desired to post their creations, but only if their submissions would become the studio's intellectual property (see Lucas Online, 2003b). While some fans were appreciative, others have been highly critical of the policy, complaining that their creative designs are being co-opted by a corporate decision that violates fair use laws and compromises their personal chances of profiting from their artistic practices.

The StarWars.com Web site is currently undergoing a series of changes which may be interpreted as defensive responses to the successful strategies of Paddison's LordoftheRings.net. Fans are invited to enter a contest to win a trip to the Australian production site of *Episode III*, and they are urged to vote on four possible color designs for a new android character. However, even a cursory textual comparison reveals that the Star Wars.com Web site is more commercially oriented than its counterpart. The main thrust of the site's affiliation with fans is manifestly evident in a recent announcement of the new StarWars.com Hyperspace program, described as "an extensive subscription service that presents exclusive content, new features and a wealth of personalization options that are available only to subscribers" (2003a). Jim Ward, Vice President of Marketing for Lucasfilm Ltd. and head of Lucas Online, exclaims:

What we're premiering on June 10 is the ultimate *Star Wars* experience on the Web. We're using technology and innovation to bring fans closer to the *Star Wars* universe and—more importantly—to expand the definition of Internet entertainment. This is the content our biggest fans have been asking us for, and now we're able to provide it to them while maintaining an overall site that's accessible to all levels of *Star Wars* fans. (LucasOnline, 2003a)

As opposed to Paddison's "inclusionary vibe" (Flynn, 2001), Ward's basic message is exclusionary and anti-democratic. Not only does he use money as a measure of fandom (the biggest fans are the ones who are both willing and able to spend the most money to connect to their narrative universe), but he also creates a "have and have-not" divisiveness by hierarchizing the Web site itself. Furthermore, he plainly states that being a major player in Internet entertainment is more important to Lucas Online than connecting with fans. These discursive moves indicate that fans are a commodity to be commercially exploited, not a resource to be respectfully courted.

As Jackson's and New Line Cinema's strategies have shown, the active fan audience offers cultural producers the opportunity to forge strategic alliances that can democratically influence the power hierarchies in the artistic field and the larger field of class relations. The formation and character of these alliances depend upon the expectations of the fan base attached to a specific textual universe, and upon the pre-dispositions of the cultural producers, both personally and corporately. While

Lucas's and Lucasfilm's flagrant commodification of participatory fandom has not visibly eroded the general audience consumption of their franchise products, it has clearly resulted in a loss of symbolic prestige among media critics and *Star Wars* fans. If Bourdieu is correct when he identifies such agents of consecration as important contributors to the circle of belief, then Lucas's egregious attitude toward active fans will continue to erode his status in the artistic field of practice and in the overarching field of class relations. Whether this erosion will eventually extend to economic profits remains to be seen. In attempting to predict the future intersections of Internet practices with the field of power, the following section will interrogate the generalizability of online fandom's participatory role in cultural production through a thesis-counterthesis model of "pro" and "con" evaluations. The opposing arguments will serve to bracket the contested potentialities of computer-mediated communication as a democratizing or hierarchizing influence on the larger economic and political orders.

### **Online/Offline Communication between the Fields of Power and Media Production**

With the recent advent of media entertainment conglomerates, cultural producers are achieving dominant positions in both the economic and political aspects of the field of power. On the personal level, Hollywood actors are becoming prominent politicians; on the corporate level, the incomes of media companies are eclipsing the budgets of entire countries. This ascendancy of cultural producers in the field of power has intensified the corresponding "heteronomous" (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 40) hierarchy in the artistic field—the dominating influence of "cultural legitimacy" on the production and marketing of media products. As Gripsrud (2002) points out, those agents with the most economic and political power are strengthening their positions in the artistic field and are continuing to impose those norms and sanctions that best serve the preservation of the dominant power hierarchy. Within the mass production of Hollywood middle-brow culture, Bourdieu's system of class distinctions is maintained by media marketing practices that classify audiences based upon their spending power and choice of spending categories. Thus, Lucas Online can justify its exclusionary subscription service as a marketing-research tool for targeting a preferred audience—loyal, wealthy fans. However, Gripsrud also emphasizes the existence of "dialectical relations" between the intellectual and commercial poles in any artistic field of production. Tensions between "freedom and constraints, the individual and the collective, tradition and renewal" are actualized as struggles between young and old, liberal and conservative, dominated and dominant (2002, p. 294). Thus, New Line Cinema's liberal online marketing policies can reflect the cultivation of a youthful communitarian persona that promotes democratic access to both official and unofficial *Lord of the Rings* sites of cultural production.

Arguably, one of the major influences contributing to the increasing structural inter-reliance among Bourdieu's three fields of practice is computer-mediated communication. True to Gripsrud's (2002) model of "dialectical relations," the

**Table 1** Dual Potential for Computer Mediation of Media Entertainment

Dimensions	Pro	Con
Power access	The Internet decentralizes decision-making, taking it from the elite and giving it to the masses.	The Internet is used to perpetuate and consolidate centralized power hierarchies.
Information access	Information is widely disseminated and accessed on the Internet.	Information is manipulated and commodified on the Internet.
Deliberative democracy	The Internet is a new public sphere that promotes political dialogue, public good, and community life.	The Internet is a limited forum that mirrors, yet conceals, the perpetuation of society's existing norms.

Internet is a venue that epitomizes the political struggle between utopian visions of participatory democracy and prevailing hierarchies of economic power. The utopian viewpoint emphasizes the Internet's potential for positive social interaction and virtual community-building (Baym, 1995; Fernback, 1999; McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith, 1995; Meeks, 1997; Rheingold, 2000; Watson, 1997); the critical viewpoint characterizes the Internet as a "contested frontier" fraught with socially problematic hierarchies of access and discourse (Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997; Healy, 1997; Jenkins, 1992; MacDonald, 1998; Poster, 1995, 1997; Turkle, 1995). This foundational dialectical tension has led scholars Harrison and Falvey (2001) to propose a thesis-counterthesis model for a theoretical discussion of democracy and computer-mediated communication.

Reasoning that "democracy" is a contested term, Harrison and Falvey organize an analysis of Internet practices in terms of five root theses and countertheses: power access, information access, interactional access, opportunities for liberal democracy, and opportunities for deliberative democracy. They then evaluate each of those five dimensions within four main sites of deployment: interpersonal, communitarian, organizational, and governmental. Table 1 summarizes the relevant dimensions applicable to mapping congruencies between the Internet and media entertainment culture. In reading the table, it can be discerned that each of the three dimensions—power access, information access, and deliberative democracy—are inherently malleable. Therefore, at any given site of deployment, dual potentials exist for computer-mediated communication to become centralized, with restricted access, or to become decentralized, with open access. Consequently, as exemplified in the differing personal and corporate strategies of the producers of the *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* film franchises, democratic practices can become allied with, exploited by, or simply excluded from producers' chosen trajectories within the cultures of media entertainment and the Internet.

With both pro and con arguments being persuasively presented by scholars and political commentators, Harrison and Falvey (2001) decline to favor one articulation over another, stating that definitive answers will not be obtained during "this period

of intense social experimentation” (p. 32). They conclude, however, that “computer-mediated communication will play an important role in the evolution of democracy as the world transitions to network society” (p. 33). In correlating the authors’ thesis-counterthesis model with the Internet’s impact on Bourdieu’s three fields of practice, the most obvious conclusion is that the Internet can be used for either nefarious or noble purposes by agents in all three fields. If this conclusion is common knowledge, then forewarned is forearmed.

The most chilling, and potentially the most damaging, argument to the Internet’s impact on democratic practices, however, is that of Barber’s (1997) “concealed totalism.” He warns that “talk of diversity will come quickly to mask ‘a new form of totalism all the more dangerous because it boasts of choice and is sold in the language of freedom’” (p. 216, quoted in Harrison & Flavey, 2001, p. 19). Barber’s caveat originates in Marx’s theory of production and consumption, which Gripsrud (2002) succinctly applies to media culture:

The general point is, then, that *the audience can never choose something it has not been offered, and any specific programme or product offered is always one of several “imaginable” answers to a more general demand.* It is always producers or senders that decide what is offered, and how these offers are shaped; and these decisions are always made with a view to other factors than the demand of the audience—not least the desire for maximum profit. (p. 289)

Consumers may believe that they are operating with free choice when, in fact, they are generally unable to change any of the cultural products being offered—their only choices are acceptance or rejection.

While the concealed totalism argument propounded by Barber (1997), Bourdieu (1998), and Gripsrud (2002) is a powerful one, it is grounded in two contested theoretical perceptions—that media production is a structurally determined “system of domination” (Marcuse, 1989, p. 240) and that audience consumption operates as a form of “mass deception” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1989, p. 179). On at least three levels, this viewpoint can be viewed as overly pessimistic. First, it cedes an excessive amount of authority to the faceless institution, while minimizing the potential forces of individual social agency and political awareness. Second, it posits a relatively stable economic structure that is locked into a coercive cycle, while negating the capacity of that structure for dislocation and rupture (Laclau, 1990). Third, by focusing on one possible trajectory, it oversimplifies the complexity of the competing strategies involved in the politics of media entertainment culture. As one of those competing strategies, elite cultural producers will undoubtedly attempt to use the Internet to maximize profits and practice symbolic violence. However, their relative degrees of success will be conditioned by a complicated, changeable interplay with other cultural producers and an array of consecrating agents, including online fans promoting consumer activism and/or furthering communitarian ideals. At the very least, it should be acknowledged that the producer-consumer dialectic is not solely weighted toward one-sided manipulation, but presents a more nuanced set of interactions.

To predict the future extent of the Internet’s democratizing influence across

Bourdieu's three fields of practice is to expound upon the competing forces of symbolic, political, and economic capital that are openly and clandestinely struggling for legitimacy. What do Jackson's and New Line Cinema's strategies with online fans portend for the role of computer-mediated communication in cultural production processes? While it can be concluded that this particular combination of director, studio executives, and fans will never be duplicated in the future, it is clear that the *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon portends a paradigmatic shift in producer-consumer affiliations—one that is grounded in new technologies and new participatory practices by active audiences. Furthermore, the democratizing influence of computer-mediated communication on the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural artifacts has larger implications for the intersection of Internet practices with the economic and political fields of power. As an admittedly utopian vision that militates against countervailing forces of concealed manipulation, the alliance of cultural producers with online fans can be seen as mapping new articulations of participatory democracy within the fields of artistic production, power, and class relations.

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