



THE  TIMES

Gollum spearheads the Hollywood fan-film revolution

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The tributes are coming - clever production companies should harness the rising power of fan films rather than fear them

It is the end of the third age; Middle-earth lies under the shadow of Mordor and Sauron is seeking the ring of power. Several years ago an avid Tolkien fan and aspiring filmmaker set about recreating this period in Middle-earth's dark history. The man's name was not Peter Jackson, but Chris Bouchard, an unknown computer engineer, and the film was not *The Fellowship of the Ring* but a 40-minute "fan film" called *The Hunt for Gollum*. Since its internet release in May, *Gollum*, put together by a team of amateurs on a budget of just £3,000, has been seen by 3.5 million people. In May it was the fourth most watched release in the US in terms of viewing numbers.

This was not the first fan film — amateur, not-for-profit films inspired by movies, books and comics — to attract a huge audience. *Batman: Dead End*, a brilliantly imaginative short, also known as *Batman v Alien v Predator*, has been viewed 2.3 million times on YouTube alone since it was released in 2003 and millions more on other websites. The most successful film yet made in Finland is still arguably *Star Wreck: in the Pirkinning*, a feature-length spoof that has been downloaded more than 4 million times, released on DVD in several countries and has spawned fan films of its own.

By their very nature fan films, broadly distinguished from the millions of other YouTube posts by their use of real actors and fictional narrative, seek to appeal to an already dedicated fan base. There are thousands of unofficial *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *Spider-Man* spin-offs. Many, like *Gollum*, seek not to parody but to honour. "We didn't want to create a new world, we already loved Jackson's version," Bouchard says. "Jackson's film was an homage to Tolkien. And *Gollum* is our homage to Jackson."

So what makes one film successful among thousands? Clive Young, the author of *Homemade Hollywood: Fans Behind the Camera*, points out that *Gollum* had the novelty of being the first serious *Lord of the Rings* flick, which contributed to fans donating 20 per cent of production costs through the website. "And remember tripod, tripod, tripod. Fifty per cent of fan films will make you seasick within five minutes."

Fan films have been around for decades but have experienced a surge in popularity over the past decade, according to Young, who attributes this growth to the ease with which would-be directors can now use the internet to distribute the film quickly and cheaply, and also to contact production staff. More than 60 *Gollum* visual-effects engineers were working from computers all over the world. Without the internet, Bouchard says, he would never have been able to make it work. *Gollum* himself is a masterpiece, spending most of the film in a bag, before emerging for one brilliant shot that took months to create and looks almost as if it could have been stolen from the original.

The second reason is the past decade's love affair with Marvel and DC comics. Geek culture has become fashionable, intelligent even, and millions of "ordinary" cinemagoers now rush to see *Iron Man*. The fan film director is not just appealing to comic-book aficionados but to anyone who goes to the cinema, or uses the internet. Perhaps as a result, the average fan film is now much longer than ten years ago.

Occasionally the films are a stepping stone to greater things. The director of *Troops*, a *Star Wars* spoof that went viral in 1997, went on to write projects for George Lucas, and the maker of *Batman: Dead End* is putting the final touches to his feature debut. Eli Roth, who directed horror flicks such as *Hostel* and appeared recently in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, made *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* fan films as a teenager. He says they were never meant to be seen beyond his basement but were "a fun way of showing your love for something, the same as dressing up as a character on Hallowe'en".

Would he like it if someone did the same to him? "They have. I consider fan films the second-highest form of flattery. The highest of course, being the almighty porn parody." Even Tarantino, he says, upon hearing about the fan films that have sprung up around *Basterds*, "loved that it inspired such creativity".

But many of the studios are less benign. Tolkien Enterprises did allow *Gollum* to be streamed though not downloaded, and Lucasfilm offered an olive branch in 2002 with an annual fan-film contest now called the Star Wars Fan Movie Challenge. However, *Damnatus*, an ambitious 110-minute homage to the computer game *Warhammer 40,000*, was four years in the making when it was blocked by German copyright law in 2007, and a year later the maker of a Max Payne blockbuster stopped a fan film before distribution. Henry Jenkins, a media expert, has commented: "This is likely to be a decade-long war over intellectual property, a war that will determine not simply the direction of digital cinema, but the nature of creative expression in the 21st century."

Young believes that clever production companies should harness the rising power of fan films rather than fear them, using

them to test the potential success of a franchise. For example, *Doctor Who*, previously unheard of in the US, has finally made its way to American television thanks to the popularity of internet spin-offs. “The double-edged sword of any fan film is that although it has a built-in audience, any success will be attributed to the franchise’s popularity rather than any skill as a filmmaker. So really the studios don’t have much to fear at all.”

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