

It's impossible for me to talk about "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" without first discussing the delivery mechanism. Over the past few months there has been much back and forth over the fact that director Peter Jackson planned to show the film in 48 frames per second, instead of the traditional 24. I've got to say, I don't like it too much. The images do have a stunning clarity to them. In close up shots you can practically count each and every pore on an actor's face. And it does seem to alleviate some of the eyestrain that pops up with 3D.

Those are the good points, but the bad so much outweighs the positives that I have to recommend trying to find a screening at 24fps. The biggest issue is going to be the motion sickness. Seriously, you might want to take a Dramamine. Every camera movement, every sweeping pan, every epic helicopter shot—and there's a crap ton of all of them—is enough to make you nauseous. Even more low-key shots, like tracking around Bilbo's hobbit hole, elicit the same response. Especially disorienting in moments of hectic action—something else "The Hobbit" has a great deal of—you feel like you're being whipped around by a roller coaster, and not in a fun way. Talking to people, some warm up to this feeling over the course of the film, but I never did.

The overall effect makes "The Hobbit" come across like a videogame, and the characters look like they're pieces in an elaborate fantasy RPG. An increased frame rate also means that the digital effects don't mesh as well with the organic images. In Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" films, the VFX blended in seamlessly, but that is definitely not the case here. At times the effects just look cheesy and bad, and resemble old movies where characters run in place in front of a rear projection screen, or drive a stationary car while film of a street plays behind them. There are moments that are almost comical.

It isn't all bad, however. The Goblin King looks pretty damn awesome. He's suitably grotesque, covered in welts, open sores, and nasty boils. And he looks like he has balls dangling from his chin, so there's that. There's also one massive, badass brawl between stone giants that's pretty spectacular, and all of scenes of the underground realms are damn nice to gawk at.

While the presentation of "The Hobbit" is huge, huge distraction, the rest of the movie is also something of a letdown. We've all heard jokes about how the "Lord of the Rings" is mostly walking, but even as much time as those movies take, there is

always forward movement. “The Hobbit” on the other hand, is full of places where the pace just stops dead in its tracks like it slammed into a wall. An extended prologue sets up the story: Bilbo (Martin Freeman) is convinced to go on an epic quest to help a group of dwarves, led by Rob Zombie lookalike Thorin Oakenshield (Richard Armitage), to reclaim their former kingdom, which has been taken over by a gold-hoarding dragon.

Even by the weirdly skewed standards by which we judge a Peter Jackson adaptation of a beloved J.R.R. Tolkien novel, “The Hobbit” drags. The introductory dinner scene, where Bilbo meets his cave-dwelling companions, is the first instance where the film goes on too long, meandering on well after the point has been made and beaten like the proverbial dead horse.

Abandoning his comfort zone, the reluctant little adventurer accompanies his stubborn, volatile, head-butting companions. From his sleepy small town home, they travel into the great wilderness of Middle Earth. On the road they encounter all manner of creatures, dangers, and hazards; there are wizards, orcs, elves, and, of course, Gollum, to contend with.

Over the course of their journey, the company engages in many an epic battle. This is another area where “The Hobbit” pales in comparison to the “Lord of the Rings”. While the earlier films were full of grim, dirty combat, the fourth film in the cannon relies on gimmicks and lame tricks. Every time the crew gets down to fighting, you get the impression that they’re trying so hard to make the battles feel different, that they’re just throwing things in at random. Instead of badass swordplay and limb hacking, you get attempts to be clever that only succeed pulling you out of the moment. One particular action sequence takes place on a series of wood and rope bridges that are apparently so fragile a hobbit can barely walk on them. Until a piece of bridge falls off and the company goes sledding down thousands of feet into a cavern. When that happens it holds up shockingly well. Jackson and friends try to be too clever when what they need is more straight up violence.

“The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey” isn’t terrible, in fact it is fine, but it could be so much better. It should be great, but the overuse of CGI, a questionable choice in presentation, and serious pacing issues derail the true potential. In the end you’re left wondering how it went that way, and how in the hell are they going to squeeze two more movies out of this?