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Playing with the Plot Twist: Perspectives on Spoilers in Games

A well-known British nobleman, Mr. Boddy, has been murdered in his country house. There are six suspects who represent enduring archetypes of crime fiction: a mysterious femme fatale, a grumpy-looking military officer, an elderly housekeeper, an obscure businessman, a scholar, and a widowed socialite. The alleged murder weapons, among them a candlestick, a rope, a revolver, a lead pipe, a wrench, and a dagger, are as generic as the suspects and the scene of the crime. If you are familiar with the tropes of a classic whodunit, it will come as no surprise that there are secret passages in the library, the conservatory, the lounge, and the kitchen of the remote villa owned by the victim.

This scenario could be straight out of an Agatha Christie novel featuring Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple. It provides the setting for the board game *Clue* (1949)[1]. Of course, it would be a narrative spoiler to reveal the identity of the murderer. But in contrast to traditional murder mysteries in literature or film, spoiling this setup in a board game like *Clue* works quite differently, since the murderer changes with every new game. You would not spoil the enjoyment a narrative provides, but by giving away the murderer you would spoil the game, just as if you had manipuled the dice in a game of chance. The solution depends on which cards are drawn and placed in an envelope in the center of the game board at each new session. So, there are no narrative plot points to spoil. We can only violate the rules of the game by looking at the three hidden cards that determine murderer, murder weapon, and crime scene.

Clue was devised by Anthony E. Pratt in 1943. He took inspiration for the game from British crime novels that are based on the structure of a typical murder mystery. In recent decades, *Clue* has become the prototype for board games based on traditional crime fiction. Pratt turned the scenario and the cast of a prototypical detective story into an abstract system of rules and game mechanics. Instead of one fixed solution, there are different options determined by chance, but unlike recent crime card games with a narrative solution, these variations lack any narrative motivation and background story. Psychological profiling which would offer possible reasons for the crime and

1 The game called *Clue* in the United States originated as *Cluedo* in the UK and Europe.

the backstory wounds that motivate the suspects in a crime novel, are not relevant to a game of *Clue*. The game cannot be spoiled by giving away the motives of the murderer, since there are only statistics and no psychological explanations.

Nevertheless, in recent years, narrative spoiler warnings have become central to gaming culture.[2] This article will trace the roots of this paradigm shift in analogue pen-and-paper role-playing games (RPGs). The hybrid nature of current video games will be discussed by applying ludic and narrative lenses to the medieval adventure game *Pentiment* (2022). This story-driven game was inspired by game mechanics taken from board games such as *Clue* as well as successful novels such as the medieval murder mystery novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) by Umberto Eco.

The classic board game structure of *Clue* has given way to complex story-based games such as adventure and role-playing games which can be spoiled both on a ludic level of gameplay by breaking the rules, and on a narrative level by giving away plot points.

First, I consider how spoilers got into games and why they are closely related to genre rules. Second, I look at the media-specific rules of spoilers and their transformations across media in relation to current adaptation theory. According to literary theorists like Linda Hutcheon, adaptation as a transmedia process no longer focuses on fidelity to a supposed urtext (6–22), but rather on the dynamic transfer of motives, stories, scenes, and characters across media.

The complex interactions of adaptations as open-ended processes that can be influenced by authors and designers as well as players and participatory fan cultures is also discussed by Paul Booth in his two seminal studies *Game Play* (2015) and *Board Games as Media* (2020). The phenomena discussed in adaptation theory provide very prolific intersections with current developments in game studies, especially in the emerging field of board game studies, which has inspired numerous conferences, special issues, and journals in recent years.

The issue of adaptation is of particular interest to the study of spoilers, since games can be spoiled in a number of ways on the ludic level, either by poor balance in the construction of the game system, or by players cheating and ignoring the rules of the game. That a game can be spoiled in the same way as a mystery novel or a psychological thriller—by giving away the

2 See also Tobias Unterhuber's chapter.

ending—is a fairly recent development that concerns narrative architecture rather than game mechanics.

Over the past three decades, board games have increasingly incorporated narrative forms, largely inspired by the design of role-playing games (RPGs). RPGs offer experiences that go beyond the conventional tie-in board games associated with franchises such as James Bond in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Game Play,* Booth discusses instructive examples of board games that are part of larger transmedia ecosystems as well as segments of larger story worlds. The case studies featured in his analysis range from the Lovecraft-inspired *Arkham Horror* board game series (since 1987) and cooperative games based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth to board games based on television series such as the Battlestar Galactica reboot (US 2003–2009, Creator: Ronald D. Moore), Star Trek and The Walking Dead (US 2010–2022, Creator: Frank Darabont). Booth argues that it is important to understand these examples from both a ludic and a media studies perspective. In *Board Games as Media,* he therefore suggests a multi-method approach to the analysis of games—drawing on the one hand on elements from textual analysis, performance studies, media studies, and ludic design, and on the other hand on ethnographic studies of gaming cultures and autoethnographic playing sessions.

Adaptations of source material taken from literature, film, and television such as the board games discussed by Booth have parlayed the transformation of plot twists into game mechanics by also referring to the narrative structure of the source material, rather than being reduced to the merely decorative function of iconography. In narrative board games such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2008), the plot twist that several members of the crew are treacherous cyborg creatures becomes part of the game mechanics. Several players may learn about their true identities halfway through the game and have to cheat the other players, which goes against the conventions of traditional board games, but is in keeping with the narrative structure of the television series.

Remediations between games and narrative media result in hybrid combinations of storytelling and ludic challenges in digital video games as well as analog board and role-playing games. Sometimes the goals and challenges in a game are created by narrative plot twists that influence the progress of the game. Plot twists can be used to move the narrative in a different direction than expected, similar to the second act of a film adding further obstacles that keep the protagonists from reaching their goals. Often, the narrative suspense associated with these plot twists is combined with procedures and actions that interrupt the flow of the game mechanics and might be considered to spoil

the experience in a traditional board game. Cheating your team or destroying a token in a board game would be considered foul play in most traditional games. In a narrative board game that adapts the paranoia of a conspiracy thriller, it provides an interesting surprise for the players.

The issue of spoilers in a game of *Clue* seems to support the position of orthodox ludologists who think that games are better off without narratives (e.g. Eskelinen). The not so mysterious murder mystery in *Clue* employs stock characters and a generic setting, which allows for immediate familiarity with the situation and lets players know what to do in it. In this setup, interrogating suspects controlled by the other players and investigating potential crime scenes is more important than the story implied by the game, which does not develop at all. Even the player controlling the murderer does not know about the avatar's crime. You cannot really spoil the narrative of *Clue*, and it is probably even an exaggeration to call the tokens representing the six stock characters avatars. But you can spoil the game by breaking the rules.[3]

Clue operates according to the definition that ludologist Jesper Juul introduced in his classic game model in 2005. He identifies six elements that make up the core of traditional games. These are fixed rules, variable outcomes, valorizations of the outcome, player efforts, negotiable consequences, and a certain attachment the players feel to the outcome (44).

> As an *activity*, a game is a system that changes state according to a set of rules that are implemented by humans, computers, or natural laws. The game is such that its outcome is undetermined, variable, and quantifiable. The players are aware that some outcomes are more desirable than others. The players are able to exert effort in order to influence the outcome. The players feel attached to the eventual outcome. Finally, the consequences of the game *have been* negotiated, ideally before the beginning of the game. (45)

In addition to traditional games as described by Juul, there are also borderline cases that employ ludic forms but are not conventional board or card games. These include games of pure chance, skill-based and chance-based gambling, open-ended simulations, and pen and paper RPGs. The idea of pure games based on Juul's six core elements has been increasingly undermined by the emergence of new game types created by combining genres. The genre of RPGs reintroduces all sorts of backstory wounds, traumas, and other motivations for potential murders into a whodunit that *Clue* omitted from its rather abstract rules. An RPG version of *Clue* could also continue after the murderer

3 On the spoilsport, see also Tobias Unterhuber's chapter.

has been revealed by having the player whose character has committed the crime escape from the other players in an additional round.

In genres such as RPGs and adventure games with narrative elements (both analog and digital), a game can be spoiled by giving away the murderer, just like in a film or a novel, because these game genres construct ludic fictions that offer interactive story worlds and genre settings based on stock scenes and character prototypes adapted from film and literature. This background knowledge offers an entry point into the game system and its mechanics. Since players are vaguely familiar with the behavior of pirates or secret agents, the dangers lurking in the dark corners of a haunted house, and the investigations of a private detective, they can navigate games that refer to these genre tropes and traditions more intuitively, without consulting the game rules after each turn (Rauscher).

Adventure and role-playing games combine beats—which screenwriting consultant Robert McKee defines as "the smallest element of structure [...] an exchange of behavior in action/reaction" (37)—with the consequences of game rules. Narrative information is therefore turned into a gaming resource, and decisions about the state of a game system can have narrative implications. In digital adventure games and in analog choose-your-own-adventure books, the description of a scene is followed by the question of what the avatar will do next. The player can influence the protagonist's actions by choosing the next narrative beat. The different storylines are organized in branching paths that meet at several decisive plot points.

Game scholar Espen Aarseth calls ludic story systems *cybertexts* or *ergodic texts*, derived from the Greek words "ergon" and "hodos" for work and path (1). Advancing within their structure can depend on elements of chance such as rolling dice. But moving ahead can also require intellectual or physical skills, such as applying logical thinking or hitting a control button to a given rhythmic pattern. This more or less "non-trivial effort is required to traverse the text" (1).

As a consequence of this development, a multitude of potential spoilers have become available. Revealing the solution to a puzzle in a game is quite different from distracting someone who is trying to pass a so-called quick time event, which requires the player to repeat a sequence of buttons displayed on the screen at the right time on the controller. The integration of narrative elements into games also makes it possible to spoil the ending, since many games can only be played once, just like a puzzle can only be solved once, and a linear story usually has one ending. The genre of escape room games that became popular in the 2010s is a key example of this phenomenon:

you can spoil an escape room game extra-diegetically by giving away the solution at the beginning or diegetically by acting out your role in a way that does not contribute to finding the way out.

The emergence of story games in the 1970s and their game mechanics also affected board and video games. The mixture of strategy games, improvisational theater, games of chance, and collaborative story mapping brought about different forms of RPGs, from *Dungeons and Dragons* (since 1974) to modern video game franchises like *The Elder Scrolls* series (since 1994) and *The Witcher* (since 2007). Even crime board games have left Mr. Boddy's mansion and started including narratives. But instead of charting new territories, they often revisit settings familiar from Agatha Christie or Arthur Conan Doyle. Regarding these predecessors in crime fiction, recent adaptation theory offers a helpful framework for understanding the ludification of the mystery novel and other genre structures as well as their attractions and associated spoilers.

Adapting Spoilers and the Ludification of Genre Tropes

Since its first release, the game *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* (1981), which combines gamebook and board game, has seen several reissues and expansion packs with new mysteries. The cases to be solved are included in a gamebook that is similar to campaign books for RPGs, with descriptions of the setting and events as building blocks for the plot to be hosted by a game master. The *Sherlock Holmes* game box includes a map of London, a phone directory, and a newspaper providing hints about several actions, descriptions of places, and clues. The hints in the newspaper and the assumptions based on studying the surroundings of the crime scene lead to certain paragraphs in the gamebook. As in a choose-your-own-adventure book, the navigation between several scenes and encounters described in non-linear paragraphs allows players to select a path of action around London. The game consists of ten cases, each providing a scenario for one session. According to the ludification of narrative elements that synchronizes story beats with game moves, players earn points by finding the correct answers to their investigations. But they also lose points for having to return to a location after missing a clue on their first visit. In contrast to a film organized by editing or a video adventure game structured along cut scenes and other pre-scripted interludes, players must figure out for themselves when and how to move ahead in solving the case.

There are two very different kinds of spoilers for this type of game design which seem to be symptomatic of the challenges of balancing the players' experience between fun and frustration in both analog and digital games. A certain friction is created by using the idea of a spoiler in a very narrow sense, in terms of narrative information given in advance, and in a very broad sense, as a ludic experience that can be spoiled by interrupting the flow of the game or by deviating from established rules.

If the answers to the questions concerning the crime can be found too easily, we are disappointed, much like when we recognize the murderer in a whodunit a few minutes into the film or after the first chapter of a book. Conversely, and perhaps even more frustratingly, the game comes to a standstill if no player is able to combine the clues and discover the next step towards the solution. I have experienced this situation myself during a failed attempt to play *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* with a group of board game aficionados whose patience was tried by the detailed examination of clues.

In addition to revealing plot twists in advance or infringing the rules of the game, a spoiled experience can also result from an imbalance between individual skills and the demands of the game. This kind of spoiler experience can be discussed in the terms of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow", which "describes a state of concentration and satisfaction that a person experiences when performing an activity" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 149). Csikszentmihalyi

> suggests that a person establishes her own rules, objectives, and rewards, and lets herself be absorbed by a powerful goal. But this goal will only work if it is balanced with the person's abilities: the task should not be too difficult or we will experience anxiety, nor too easy because we will then get bored. (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 150)

The tension between the game as a designed artifact and the subjective experience of the player who sets the game system in motion is also crucial for Booth, who divides his study *Board Games as Media* into two parts; one focusing on the game as an object of textual analysis, and one on the ethnographic study of the players and their cultural practices of experiencing the game.

The danger of getting stuck in the plot of a game raises the stakes for achieving a well-balanced game design. On the one hand, games like *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* offer a higher degree of immersion with role-playing elements like studying the newspaper or the map of Victorian London. On the other hand, the game can reach a dead end and become frustrating in ways that a linear narrative or a replayable game like *Clue* would not.

Game researcher Marco Arnaudo discusses the influence of *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* in his study on *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game*: "The arrangement made it possible to mislead the players in a certain direction to spring a major surprise on them later, thereby giving them the pleasure of being intelligently fooled that is typical of fiction" (180). Story games take design elements that would spoil a traditional game—such as suddenly changing the rules of the game by introducing special rules, e.g. for dealing with the traitor in the *Battlestar Galactica* board game mentioned above—and turn them into enjoyable twists that affect both the plot structures and the gameplay concepts. This effect is achieved by turning actions that would be considered cheating or breaking the rules in Juul's classic game model into narrative developments that introduce a different mode of play. Turning against your team would be considered foul play in any traditional team sport. In a story game about a haunted house that suddenly takes possession of a player character, such as the board game *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* (2004), it is in keeping with the narrative tropes of gothic horror stories.

The game mechanics and procedures of *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* are part of a larger process found in many board and video games that integrate narrative structures and elements. Stock scenes, character types, and narrative tropes known from popular genres are adapted for game scenarios and systems. The cues associated with their iconography and settings create expectations that inform the actions on a ludic level as well as the expectations on a narrative level.

In her *Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon discusses different modes of engagement. In contrast to more traditional approaches to the relation between adaptations and their source texts, she considers adaptation to be an ongoing process. Adaptations can create chains of meaning that do not originate from a single source text but rather process multiple variations of a story, character, trope, or setting across media:

> [T]he idea of "fidelity" to that prior text is often what drives any directly comparative method of study. Instead [...] there are many and varied motives behind adaptation and few involve faithfulness. Other earlier adaptations may, in fact, be just as important as contexts for some adaptations as any "original". (xiii)

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes are an important influence on different forms of analog and digital gaming. An ongoing adventure video game series, which even features crossover encounters with Arsène Lupin and H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, and continuing additions to the board game discussed above demonstrate the enduring relevance of Doyle's detective for game de-

sign. It is not surprising that the successful modernization of the character and his cases in the BBC series Sherlock (UK 2010– , Creator: Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat) are strongly influenced by game aesthetics. The detective's point-of-view scanning his surroundings is reminiscent of the interface in an adventure video game (**fig. 1a–b**).

Fig. 1a–b: The protagonist of Sherlock is scanning his mind

The process of ludification not only affects the semantics of the adaptation, but also the syntactic structure of the series.[4] When Sherlock Holmes falls to his supposed death at the end of the episode The Reichenbach Fall (S02E03, UK 2012, Director: Toby Haynes), the final shot already hints at his return. Unlike in the original story published in 1893, the potential narrative spoiler of Holmes' survival no longer concerns the audience. The serial format and common knowledge of the lore surrounding the character and his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, have already preconfigured the adaptation. The time between two seasons was used for a kind of alternate reality game inviting fans to speculate about how Sherlock Holmes has staged his death. The first episode of season 3 presented several theories about Holmes's return depicted as short interludes within the larger episode. This kind of adaptation process across media integrates different forms of common knowledge created by cultural practices.

Hutcheon also notes that understanding adaptation as a process requires taking into account various media beyond the usual suspects on the page, onscreen, or onstage: "Videogames, theme park rides, Web sites, graphic novels, song covers, operas, musicals, ballets, and radio and stage plays are thus as important to this theorizing as are the more commonly discussed movies and novels" (XVI). Ludifications adapt narratives, characters, and settings to game structures and systems across media. This process can expand subplots and background stories from other media. It can also condense a narrative into a compact set of game mechanics and rules. Examples for this kind of adaptation are found in board games based on modern film classics, offering a nexus of ludic and cinematic genre forms. The board game based on The Shining (US/UK 1980), Stanley Kubrick's idiosyncratic adaptation of Stephen King's novel, informs the players from the beginning that one of them will take the part of Jack Nicholson's groundskeeper at the Overlook Hotel. He or she will go insane during the lonesome winter nights spent in the isolation of the uncanny Rocky Mountains resort. Like the return of Sherlock Holmes after being thrown down the Reichenbach Falls, the image of Jack Nicholson's crazed stare from The Shining had become common pop culture knowledge long before the rise of internet memes. The game design is no longer concerned with the narrative plot twist that someone will succumb to the evil hidden in the Overlook Hotel. The character development has turned into a game mechanism, and the question is which player will go mad and secretly

4 For a detailed discussion of the semantics and syntax of genre, see Altman.

try to sabotage the cooperative game. The process of ludification in adapting The Shining to a board game translates the plot into a rule system and game mechanism. The original spoiler revealing who will go insane and who will survive is remediated; as a result, every player can take on the part of Jack Nicholson's protagonist. It no longer affects the development of the plot. In contrast to Stephen King's novel, blowing up the hotel is no option in the game.

Similar patterns for turning plot twists into game mechanisms are also found in the belated board game adaptations ludifying Jaws (US 1976) by Steven Spielberg and the first film in the Alien series by Ridley Scott (UK/US 1979). Hunting the shark controlled by one player, who fights against the others in the 2019 board game, is reminiscent of a game of *Battleship* expanded by analogue algorithms orchestrating additional events. The thriller elements of Spielberg's film—for instance, the first-person camera and the memorable score by John Williams—make way for the abstract experience of a strategy game. The cooperative 2021 board game *Alien – Fate of the Nostromo* confronts the players with the full-grown creature from the beginning. In contrast to the game, the advertising campaign for the film's release in 1979 kept the look of the Xenomorph designed by H. R. Giger secret until it was unleashed onscreen, becoming a pop culture icon. Later spin-offs like the *Aliens vs. Predator* comic book, which has been adapted as a tabletop and video game series as well as a film by game adaptation auteur Paul W. S. Anderson, treated the Alien as one of two extraterrestrial stars of the franchise crossover.

If the genre rules of a diegetic system are not considered by a game, the ludic experience can be spoiled. The players expect to have a certain agency implied by the character of Sherlock Holmes or by the Alien films. If Sherlock Holmes were not able to interpret the clues found, or if the Alien did not follow the life cycle created by H. R. Giger and Ridley Scott, the ludic experience would deviate from the players' expectations. The situation is comparable to a game master in a RPG who is not familiar with the lore of the universe it is set in. At the same time, a sudden rule change that follows the code of the genre setting can provide an enjoyable plot twist. From a strictly ludic perspective, we could speak of a spoiled game when your cowboy avatar in the video game *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) is caught cheating during a card game in the saloon. Without warning, you are challenged to a duel on the Western town's main street. Within a few seconds, the gameplay switches from a poker simulation, including the option to cheat at your own risk, to a gunfight. The controls in the two mini-games are quite different, and the duel situation is not explicitly mentioned in the rules. From a ludic perspective, this is a

spoiler ruining the game flow because the game design did not inform players about the consequences of cheating in the saloon. But from the perspective of the Western genre, it is evident that cheating in a card game would not be condoned by the outlaws gathered at the poker table. Instead of being shot on the spot by your opponent or other dead ends that would have been examples of bad game design, you are allowed to defend yourself with quick reactions, demonstrating your skills in the gunfight mini-game.

In another part of the game, the task is to save a friend from the gallows by shooting the noose. Anyone vaguely familiar with the films of "Spaghetti Western" maestro Sergio Leone will recognize this as a reference to his influential classic The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (IT 1966), starring Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach, and Lee Van Cleef. The setup inspired by Leone remediates and expands the well-known scenario of Eastwood's nameless stranger saving the likeable rogue Tuco, played by Wallach, from execution, and raising the bounty on him by allowing him to escape. If you didn't have the option of freeing your companion by shooting the noose, even though the game clearly references the scenario from Leone's film, it would spoil the gaming experience by breaking with the ludic expectations created by the narrative.

Hutcheon discusses three different types of adaptation that are helpful for understanding scenes like those from *Red Dead Redemption*:

1. Adaptations that work as "a formal entity or product, [...] an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" and "can involve a shift of medium" (7). This category concerns the games based on The Shining, Jaws, Alien, and other films as well as video games based upon well-known literary and/or cinematic predecessors.
2. Seen as "a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation, this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective" (8). The obvious reference to The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly in *Red Dead Redemption* falls into this category. Games can even give additional meaning to the story worlds inspired by a film or franchise. The games in the Star Wars franchise, for example, have been moving increasingly further away from the films for several decades, creating their own settings and storylines within the galaxy far, far away. The role-playing game *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) riffed on rather well-known narrative twists from the original films. Narrative twists that would have triggered a spoiler warning had they existed in 1980 are turned into ludic moves. The main character's dark secret allows the player to decide whether to join the forces of evil

or reject the temptation of the dark side, as Luke Skywalker does during an unexpected family reunion in Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back (US 1980, Director: Irvin Kershner).

3. Finally, "seen from the process of its reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations […] as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (8).

The third category is especially interesting for game studies as well as game design, since the ludic process depends on feedback created by the reception, that is, the players' reaction to the situation imposed upon them by the game.

In this context, the remediation of plot twists concerns not just their adaptation from narrative structures into game rules and systems. They can also be used as a device in game design, contributing to the dramatic buildup and intensifying the players' experience. This recent phenomenon, which entered gaming culture with the introduction of narrative elements and story-world settings, lends itself to the ludic transformation of narrative spoiler material, as I discuss in the next section.

Remediating Narrative Spoilers for Ludic Dramatization

The reason that narrative plot twists became part of game design—rather than optional game board adornments—is related to the above-mentioned paradigm shift initiated by role-playing and adventure games. The consequences Juul discusses in his classic game model are not always negotiable. In games with storytelling structures, the result of a ludic phase can also introduce the next chapter of the story. The remediation from linear narratives to more open forms in games can turn ludic tasks into building blocks of a larger chain of events and the diegetic economy of the plot and the depicted story world.

Like the game based on The Shining, the popular horror-themed board game *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* uses plot twists as a crucial element. In the game's first phase, which is similar to the setup of a traditional haunted house story, three to six players explore a run-down mansion together. The map of the building is rearranged with every new game by drawing and combining cards from a pile. After the countdown to the haunting—represented by a movable token on a scale—ends, another phase of the game begins, and the hitherto cooperative players are betrayed by one player. The traitor learns about a new goal from a gamebook that features fifty different cases.

The new goal remains unknown to the rest of the group, who instead receive information on how to defeat the traitor. In *Betrayal at the House on the Hill*, spoilers concern both the narrative and the ludic level. There is a background story that affects the behavior of the player character who becomes a traitor. If every player knew the background story and its effect on the gameplay in advance, the game would be spoiled on a narrative level in the same way that a novel or film is spoiled by revealing a crucial plot twist. At the ludic level, actions that would make the traitor a spoilsport according to the classic game model are justified by adapting the rules of the game according to the narrative twist.

The game design of *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* is a significant example of hybrids resulting from the combination of ludic storytelling in role-playing games and traditional board game elements. It represents the shorter form of scenarios found in so-called long-form games. Within a larger role-playing campaign, a game like *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* would comprise the events of a single gaming session played in one evening. Game scholar Amy Green defines long-form games in her book *Storytelling in Video Games* as

> those that require at least 40 hours to complete. Although the designation is somewhat arbitrary, its purpose is to establish a demarcation between shorter and longer stories, in much the same way that literature is categorized into the short story and the novel. This designation implies no inherent degree of value, [...] but rather it denotes scale. (66)

So-called *Legacy* games like *Risk Legacy* (2011) and *Pandemic Legacy* (2015) adapt the long-form principle into a structure consisting of twelve sessions. In contrast to traditional board games, these twelve sessions can be played only once, since there are changes to the game board over the course of the game, and components like cards and tokens can even be destroyed. The aspect of repeatability, one of the defining characteristics of conventional games, has been replaced by a ludic point of no return. It would definitely be a spoiler to reveal what happens around the midpoint of the twelve sessions in a *Legacy* board game. Having experienced two board games in the *Pandemic Legacy* series, appropriately labeled "seasons" like in a TV or streaming series, I can confirm that the plot twists made the original goals appear in a different light. Actions pursued with the best intentions turned out to have fatal consequences, and supposed achievements proved to be deceitful. Arnaudo summarizes the consequences of this development in recent game design:

> The convention that a game always starts in the same way, with no influence from previous game sessions, has been replaced with arcs of interlinked scenarios that

> emulate the breadth and architecture of fiction [...] There is nevertheless an element of fiction that board games have struggled to capture until very recently, as to do so would have meant to attack one of the holiest pillars of conventional gaming. This narrative element is the plot twist, and the pillar it threatens is replayability. It is an accepted fact that a mystery novel or movie will be fully enjoyable only once, but millennia of game design have led us to expect that we should be entertained a large number of times by a game. (179)

The process of hybridization in games like the *Legacy* series indicates that the transfer of forms does not move exclusively from analogue to digital games, but that the algorithms of video games also create feedback loops into board game design.

The narrative structure of the *Pandemic Legacy* games uses the design of the original *Pandemic* board game created by Matt Leacock in 2008 as a starting point. Like in the stand-alone, replayable board game, the players try to find a cure against a dangerous virus spreading across the globe. But as if in anticipation of the 2020 Covid crisis, the lockdown imposed upon certain areas has unexpected consequences, and the virus mutates. Instead of the game restarting from scratch, everything that happened in the first round remains relevant in subsequent rounds—even as the situation deteriorates, with the military and scientists pursuing opposite plans. With every new round, additional tokens, cards, and goals are added. Opening the boxes containing these new elements is reminiscent of opening an advent calendar. We would spoil the game by opening the additional boxes in advance, just like a game of *Clue* would be ruined by peeking at the three hidden cards. The spoilers contained in the game's story structure—for instance, unexpected rule changes, the introduction of new tokens, or the irredeemable loss of characters—add to the intensity of the experience. Like in the examples discussed before, going against established game conventions by featuring plot twists affecting the rules must no longer be considered to be an act of spoiling the game. It becomes a valuable tool for the design of engaging long-form games. Within the context of a game narrative that takes ten hours or more, turns calling for a spoiler warning can be used not only as plot twists, but also to create thematic undertones. They can reflect and question game tropes and genre conventions through reinterpretation and intertextuality as discussed by Hutcheon in her theory of adaptation:

> For audiences, such adaptations are obviously "multilaminated"; they are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity. (21)

The medieval crime adventure video game *Pentiment* created by Josh Sawyer, Hannah Kennedy, Matthew Loyola, and their co-workers at Obsidian Entertainment is clearly inspired by Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980). The game's save function even references the palimpsest of a text being overwritten by new events. In the early 16th century, a young painter from Nuremberg, Andreas Maler, becomes involved in a series of murders at an abbey in Upper Bavaria. As in Eco's novel and its film adaptation by Jean-Jacques Annaud (IT/DE/FR 1986), the setting of the abbey and its neighboring village serves as a backdrop for the historical conflicts surrounding the plot. The game adopts the strategy used by Eco in his novel of combining the traditional genre pattern of a mystery story with philosophical reflections on the Middle Ages and with an elaborate setting that includes an isolated monastery and a labyrinth hiding arcane books. In his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose,* Eco points out the importance and momentum of the world-building for his novel. In story-oriented video games, the world-building becomes even more important because it presents players with different options. They must choose sides in the conflicts surrounding a series of murders in a monastery, and they must decide which one of different narrative branches they want to follow.

In *Pentiment,* the rise of Protestantism, the uprising of German peasants against their oppressors, and the conflict between Enlightenment and pagan traditions are interwoven with the investigations. Many of the situations that Andreas Maler encounters are inspired by similar scenes in *The Name of the Rose*: There is a secluded library holding mysterious books about the early days of the nearby village before the Romans arrived, as well as the threat of inquisitors arriving at the crime scene, and the conflicts between clergy and peasants. Compared to *The Name of Rose*, the story of *Pentiment* unfolds in a less Aristotelian way. It does not feature the missing second book of the Greek philosopher's *Poetics*, and it is less concerned with the unity of place, time, and action. After the investigation of the first murder comes to an ambiguous end, the story turns epic. It jumps ahead several years for the second act, which deals with a similar murder case. The third act shifts the perspective to another protagonist and offers a resolution two decades later, while the theme of the relationship between art and reality becomes as important as the protracted murder case.

Pentiment offers a perfect example of Hutcheon's view of adaptation as reinterpretation and intertextuality. The process of adaptation is even taken a step further, creating a feeling of helplessness and desperation reminiscent of noir fiction. The element of spoiling the game by not being able to find

a completely convincing solution to the murder case becomes an important device for evoking the feeling of being lost in a labyrinth and unable to find satisfying answers. At the beginning of the second act, the avatar must come to terms with the revelation that he has failed to identify the true villain responsible for the murder. This could be considered a breach of contract under traditional game rules. Just imagine finding out at the end of *Clue* that you had identified the murderer, but that he or she was just a pawn to distract you from the real opponent.

Fig. 2: The ending of *Pentiment*

The trope of a mental labyrinth is introduced at the beginning, with the protagonist visiting his mind palace for discussions with various representations of his subconscious. The gradual destruction of the mind palace suggests that relying on the strengths of reason and logical thinking alone will not bring the investigations to a satisfying conclusion (**fig. 2**). The plot in this adventure with a traditional point-and-click-interface follows the structure of a classic whodunit. But the investigation is spoiled by the subversion of expectations, both on a ludic and a narrative level. Players always run out of time to gather evidence, and the murder mystery cannot be satisfactorily solved in the first two acts, as there are always hints of a larger conspiracy yet to be uncovered. However, the narrative does not allow the avatar to investigate further. When the Archdeacon arrives at the end of the first act, the player is forced to name a suspect to be executed for the murder of an intellectual nobleman, without

having all the clues to the solution of the crime. The execution is shown in a sequence that reduces the player to the status of a helpless observer.

No matter which suspect we name, we're always left feeling like we did not get the complete picture. In addition, there are spoilers on a ludic level, where half-baked pieces of evidence have deadly consequences for the suspect, and some surefire clues are overshadowed by doubt and moral ambivalence. The murdered nobleman who initially seemed like an open-minded intellectual and renaissance man turns out to have had a violent side. A nun who was molested by him is thus much more understandable in her actions than the quirky whodunit stereotypes in *Clue,* as she is provided with a relatable backstory wound. In the second act, when a smart representative of the peasants' uprising against the church is killed, we discover evidence that one of the farmers is not who he claims to be. The references to the film Le Retour de Martin Guerre (The Return of Martin Guerre, FR 1982, Director: Danile Vigne) and its American remake Sommersby (US/FR 1993, Director: Jon Amiel) provide more than an intertextual framework. They undermine the progression of the game by creating a guilty conscience and a moral dilemma for players familiar with the historical drama of an impostor posing as a deceased man. Unlike the peasants who hang the wrong man for a crime he did not commit, in the game the decision to accuse him is left to the player. Morally, he or she should expose the con man, but knowing that the accused will be convicted of the wrong crime creates a sense of unease. In *Pentiment*, intertextuality and reinterpretation are used in combination with spoiling the genre conventions of a traditional whodunit crime game. The emotional effect of this experience adds to the characterization of the avatar and the overall ambivalence of the story development. The interruption of the ludic flow creates situations enabling the players to reflect on the situation and the consequences of their actions. Adventures like *Pentiment* reintegrate psychological perspectives and deep characters into the game. The introduction of narrative elements into games has not only remediated traditional plot twists, resulting in spoiler warnings for game narratives. The open processes of adaptation led to a hybridization of ludic forms. They turned the act of spoiling a game into a dramatic device, creating a diverse and complex ludic and narrative experience in both board and video games. Actions that would have been considered a breach of contract in terms of traditional game definitions, such as playing against your own team in a cooperative game, can provide a satisfying payoff on a narrative level. The spoilsport becomes an element of the game mechanics and is motivated by the narrative structure. In contrast to a traditional party of *Clue,* being forbidden to achieve the

original goal of the game becomes a meaningful experience on a narrative level. Breaking with the expectations created by the rules corresponds to plot twists that are defining for narrative structures, but not for traditional games. Since the introduction of storytelling elements into games in the 1970s with tabletop games and RPGs, revealing information about the plot of a game can be considered a spoiler, just as it is in films, books and other narrative media. The balance between spoiling a game on a ludic and a narrative level for creative purposes and a deeper experience for the players could be another instructive building block in discussing transmedia aesthetics and dramaturgy from a ludic point of view.

Filmography

Alien. Director: Ridley Scott. UK/US 1979.

Aliens vs. Predator. Director: Paul W. S. Anderson. US 2004.

Battlestar Galactica. Creator: Ronald D. Moore. US 2003–2009.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Director: Sergio Leone. IT 1966.

Jaws. Director: Steven Spielberg. US 1976.

The Name of the Rose. Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud. IT/DE/FR 1986.

Le Retour de Martin Guerre (The Return of Martin Guerre). Director: Danile Vigne. FR 1982.

Sherlock. Creator: Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. UK 2010– .

Sherlock. S02E03: The Reichenbach Fall. Director: Toby Haynes. UK 2012.

The Shining. Director: Stanley Kubrick. US/UK 1980.

Sommersby. Director: Jon Amiel. US/FR 1993.

Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back. Director: Irvin Kershner. US 1980.

The Walking Dead. Creator: Frank Darabont. US 2010–2022.

Ludography

Alien – Fate of the Nostromo. Ravensburger, 2021.

Arkham Horror. Chaosium, 1987–

Battlestar Galactica. The Board Game. Fantasy Flight Games, 2008.

Betrayal at the House on the Hill. Avalon Hill, 2004.

Clue. Parker Brothers, 1949.

Dungeons and Dragons. TSR, 1974–1997. Wizards of the Coast, 1997– .

The Elder Scrolls. Bethesda, 1994– .

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Pandemic Legacy Season 01. Z-Man Games, 2015.

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Red Dead Redemption. Rockstar Games, 2010.
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