Part 3:
Games

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Spoil the Game, Shatter the World: Spoilers in Games and Play

In *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), your companion Aeris dies midway through the story. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), your unfriendly companion Solas is actually an old elven god and possibly responsible for the apocalypse. In *Metroid* (1986), the tough bounty hunter Samus is a woman. In *Heavy Rain* (2010), your character Scott Shelby is the serial killer you have been searching for the whole time. In *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), you are the Sith Darth Revan. You do not have free will, but are conditioned to do the bidding of Andrew Ryan in *BioShock* (2007). The cake is a lie in *Portal* (2007). Your wife in *Silent Hill 2* (2001) did not die from a chronic illness: you euthanized her, and/or the figure behind all the strange events is a dog.

These are just some of the biggest spoilers in video game history (Van Allen). All the examples are narrative spoilers and plot twists as we know them from other media, especially films. And as with films—maybe even more so—spoiling games is absolutely condemned in game culture. The debate about spoilers is thus an inherent part of this culture. Spoilers seem to endanger games even more than other media because of the specificity of the gaming experience: to find out what happens, you have to invest nontrivial effort (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1), you have to play the game and work for it, which might take up to hundreds of hours of playtime. But are narrative elements all that can be spoiled about a game? Can you also spoil its puzzles? Its mechanics? Since there is a whole category of paratexts dedicated to give away the game, so to speak—namely, walkthroughs and Let's Plays—this seems possible. Interestingly though, while walkthroughs spoil elements of games, they are widely accepted and thus not considered spoilers. Apart from these points, the connection between games, play, and spoilers might go even deeper. In the words of cultural historian Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo Ludens* is among the most influential books on games and play, spoiling a game can shatter the world of the game and the play.

There has not been much research into the connection between spoilers and games, at least, not from a cultural studies perspective, and even less on the connection between spoilers and play. My aim in this chapter is to explore these connections. I will start with the spoiler discourse in video game culture and game studies, looking specifically at the role of walkthroughs and Let's

Plays. Next, I will focus on the way games can be spoiled and how this relates to their media specificity. Finally, I will widen my perspective to think about the role of spoilers and spoiling in play at large.

Origins and electronic/digital culture

It is hard to discern how long the concept of spoilers has been part of games discourse. Like with film, the concept might be older than the term. But as most twentieth-century game culture was either shared orally or through the early internet and its forgotten precursors, it is hard to pin down when the term "spoiler" first appeared in relation to video games. Games magazines have not been systematically digitized yet, so they do not provide conclusive sources for the use of the term. Findings in already-digitized media only offer circumstantial evidence or possible traces. If, for instance, the 1994 publication *Net Games: Your Guide to the Games People Play on the Electronic Highway* uses the term "Spoiler FAQ" (Maloni et al. 110) without further explanation, we can conclude that the term was already in circulation at that point. Anecdotal evidence points toward an even earlier use in electronic media, as "the 'SF-Lovers' mailing list hosted by the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory" started using spoiler warnings in late 1979 (Zimmer). From then on, spoiler warnings became part of netiquette, as Ben Zimmer notes:

> I first encountered spoiler alerts when I delved into Usenet newsgroups in the late '80s. Spoiler alerts were particularly common on newsgroups devoted to puzzles (such as *rec.puzzles*, which took over from the earlier *net.puzzle*). A post revealing the solution to a puzzle would require "SPOILER" in all caps. Netiquette also dictated the use of "spoiler space" (a screenful of blank lines after the spoiler warning) or some other method of concealing or encrypting the answer, such as ROT13 (shifting letters 13 places in the alphabet).

Although puzzles and games, especially video games, are not identical, they are related. It is a small step from using spoiler warnings or tags for puzzles to using them for video games. A cursory search of the Usenet Archives shows that the term spoiler was self-explanatory by 1989 at the latest (Littau). Going back to 1982, the concept of game spoilers still had to be explained:

> I have an idea. Some people think that figuring things out about the game is part of the fun and don't appreciate having answers thrown into their lap, while others enjoy sharing information with everyone. So, when you're giving hints that require lots of playing experience, like when monters [sic] appear/disappear, and how to use a specific item, why not let everyone know up front that's what your're [sic] doing

> by including the word "spoiler" in the title? Like, for example
> Subject: monster info (SPOILER)
> Wouldn't that be nice? (Ken)

Ken's idea, posted in the group for the game *Rogue* (1980), caught on.[1] This might not be the first use of spoiler warnings in relation to video games, but it shows that in electronic/digital culture, the two have been linked for quite some time. A 1999 guide for the creation of computer networks seems to confirm this as it explains the ROT13 encryption:

> ROT13 is used in many situations where the recipient will want to avoid seeing the plaintext until later: mainly, puzzle answers and movie or video game "spoilers." Most newsreaders and many e-mail clients have ROT13 built in (in Netscape Messenger, this feature is under View > Unscramble). (Parnel 323)

Therefore, even though the term "spoiler" probably originated in the context of film, it was widely used in digital culture even before the advent of the World Wide Web. This is also evident in the fact that markup languages or newsreaders did and do have a specific spoiler function, which allows hiding text from sight until a user clicks a button or scrolls down (Ihnatko 45).[2] It seems that because computer-based discussions are—or were—inherently text-based, warnings on the content of a message are/were especially important. This indicates that not just the content but even the structure and form of digital media, in the broadest sense, are inherently connected to popular culture and its discursive practices; how popular culture deals with spoilers directly feeds back into digital forms of mediation. In other words, the importance of spoilers for game culture and the debates about them have their origins not just in the medium itself but also in its primary discussion space: the internet.

Spoilers and game culture

Debates and fears about spoilers are rampant and ingrained in video game culture. This is evident from the abundance of articles, posts, discussions, and so on about spoilers. It is an ongoing and iterative debate. Spoiling is not merely considered a faux pas; it is a violation of the rules of games discourse. Research findings indicating that spoilers might make media con-

1 I searched the Usenet-Group, and following Ken's post, it seems spoiler warnings were added to posts; see "empty scroll"; "hints (?) for Rogue"; "Hints from a Total Winner".

2 See also Simon Spiegel's chapter on this.

sumption more enjoyable (Yan and Tsang), or that deep discussions cannot be spoiler-free, seem of no concern to these discursive rules. Like any other community, game culture is not interested in facts but in complying with what Foucault calls the "requisites for the construction of new statements" (59). It is interested in delimiting and controlling its discourse; or rather, the frequently uttered aversion to and fear of spoilers is an essential part of that discourse. Spoiler warnings have thus become almost ritualistic utterances.

This applies not only to social media, forum debates, or other forms of communication between players. A cursory glance at recent headlines and articles from games journalism outlets also confirms that spoilers are a central topic (Polygon Staff; Grayson). This is probably one of the differences between film and games. While both seem to have a problem with spoilers, game discourse discusses the issue at length, which also has repercussions for games journalism. In this field, every article or essay—and not just reviews—is expected to include spoiler warnings. The same goes for video formats and podcasts. The in-depth discussion of a game in a podcast is even called a "spoilercast."

The fear of spoilers extends to previews, trailers, and other marketing materials, as well as possible leaks (the publication of information about a game without the approval of the designers/publishers). It even led Sony to introduce an anti-spoiler system for the PlayStation 5 (Wimmeroth). This is significant for two reasons: first, that companies are invested in this discussion, and second, that resources were poured into finding a technical solution. This shows how deeply the aversion to spoilers is ingrained in games culture. However, there are two forms of (possible) spoilers that seem to be acceptable in this culture: walkthroughs and Let's Plays.

Walkthroughs and Let's Plays

Walkthroughs—that is, game or strategy guides—have been around for decades in different forms and media. Mia Consalvo describes them as follows:

> Walkthroughs are detailed guides to how a player should play a game sequentially to find all of the hidden bonuses and surprises, how to avoid certain death, and how to advance past difficult puzzles or trouble spots to best play and win the game. ("Zelda" 327–28)

Sebastian Domsch calls walkthroughs one of "the various attempts to represent games in passive media like print or film" and "a fascinating new narrative genre in its own right" (49):

> They are in a sense a relinearization of video games, though they can themselves also be non-unilinear in structure. Interestingly, it is the older medium of print that is better capable of retaining something of the nodal and non-unilinear structure of video games, and thus of their architecture. Film, on the other hand, is able to provide an almost lossless representation of a video game's protocol. (49)

What Domsch means by protocol is that the linear medium of video can only show one way of playing and finishing a game, while a written walkthrough can accommodate several paths and solutions. The latter focuses more on the "game's architecture" instead of the "direct representation of the game's experiential level" (50). These paratexts can vary widely in their form. "Walkthroughs can be purely imperative, clearly prescribing the one correct option, or rather give a number of options" (51). While this shows how walkthroughs vary in their form or structure, it is also important to differentiate between fan-made examples, those published by media outlets, and officially published walkthroughs. The latter are often called game or strategy guides. There are also websites that collect walkthroughs, like *GameFAQ*, which has been around since 1995. All in all, walkthroughs are a well-established form of paratext for video games and one that is accepted as a helpful tool—especially for games researchers (Fernández-Vara 34). Interestingly, they are not widely associated with spoilers or are regarded as acceptable or necessary types of spoilers (Consalvo, *Cheating* 179)—with the caveat that using walkthroughs is sometimes understood as a form of cheating (Newman 409; Consalvo, *Cheating* 88–90) and thus diminishing one's "gaming capital" (4).[3] Reading or viewing a walkthrough is not something that happens without purpose. The goal is to help a player successfully play a game; thus, a walkthrough must share information about the game and its different paths, and so on. As the purpose of these paratexts is clearly indicated, they might be understood as spoiler territory even though they still try to focus on gameplay and to omit narrative consequences of players' actions (Domsch 51).

The case of Let's Plays seems to be a bit more complex. While videos of people playing games might have started out as video walkthroughs, Let's

3 Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola regard the use of walkthroughs for single player games as a form of internal rules (80), "subjective constraints and goals that players adopt as guidelines they follow as they play." But even if the use of walkthroughs might be an individual decision, the influence of game culture and discourse on these decisions should not be ignored.

Plays have become a media format in its own right, though one that is notoriously hard to define:

> Let's Plays are distinguished from other gameplay videos due to the commentary provided by the person playing the video game. It's best described as being similar to going to a friend's house and watching them play through a video game, combined with watching a DVD with director's commentary of a movie made by a person who did not actually make the movie. The purpose of a Let's Play is to have a new experience with a video game even if the observer does not have enough time to fully play through the game. (Taylor 251–52)

On platforms like *YouTube* and especially *Twitch*, live-streamed footage of games has become an extension of the media environment and economy of games (Johnson and Woodcock). Similarly to walkthroughs, the act of watching a Let's Play means accepting possible spoilers, especially if it is live-streamed (678). In contrast to walkthroughs, the purpose of Let's Plays is not that clear-cut. They can be used to get helpful information, but they are mostly watched for pure enjoyment. On the one hand, some companies have worried "that the game exposure created by the streamers to the game community, including revealing plot twists, characters, and possible gameplay actions may hurt in-house marketing and community-building efforts" (Poretski et al. 1). On the other hand, Let's Plays are seen as "a great contributor to fostering public's interest in the game by increasing awareness of the community and contributing to the decision to buy the game," thus acting more as "a preview of the game that serves the public by informing it about the product" (4). Therefore, the fear of spoilers in relation to Let's Plays comes less from potential players, who can easily avoid watching them, and more from game companies who adhere to the logic that Let's Plays potentially spoil games and thus hurt sale numbers. It is worth noting though that most game companies have started using Let's Plays themselves; many use streaming as (often free) advertisement for upcoming games. However, it is telling that not only players or the game community discuss spoilers, but game companies, too. This leads to my next question: How does the field of game studies handle spoilers?

Spoilers in Game Studies

In the case of games, the fear of spoilers even extends to academia. Game studies publications regularly include spoiler warnings (Grampp; Shaw). Clara Fernández-Vara calls them "part of the etiquette of writing about games" (54). This may have to do with the overlap between researchers and fans, known as aca-fans (Deterding 525), but it is probably also due to how

much game studies and game culture are intertwined in a more abstract way: while their discourses generally follow different rules, there is still a significant overlap (Gekker 76; Unterhuber, "Metagame" 48). Of course, adhering to the avoidance of spoilers makes analyzing and interpreting games rather difficult.

What is more, avoiding spoilers is diametrically opposed to the "transparency and clarity" (Holmes 5) research needs and even to the discursive discipline of most academic fields. Clara Fernández-Vara states:

> In the case of humanistic writing, it seems that the no-spoilers policy goes against the writing tradition of the field, because the assumption is that the reader is familiar with the text/game, and if not, the writing has to provide enough information to understand it. Spoiling the game is part of being able to discuss it in depth, so it is important to be able to talk about it without constraints, and not spoiling the readers' experience should not be one of them. (54)

But some researchers not only avoid spoilers, they even let the fear of spoilers inform the structure of game studies as a discipline. For instance, José P. Zagal argues against a game canon for game studies: not because canons as such are highly problematic, or because it is impossible to come up with a meaningful canon (Unterhuber, "Kanones"), but rather, he opposes a canon primarily because of its potential for spoilers:

> There are also social reasons to avoid popular, significant, or otherwise notable games. For instance, the aversion to "spoilers", surprises in a game's narrative or gameplay, means that it's socially problematic to discuss popular games in depth. People often don't want to know the ending or the surprises along the way because they harbor the hope of someday playing the game (even if they may never). (Zagal 671)

Another example of games researchers' problems with spoilers can be found in Espen Aarseth's exploration of different possible approaches to game analysis. While his research leads him to the conclusion that cheats and walkthroughs might be helpful tools for game analysis even though they take away the researcher's "free enjoyment" and "the game's challenges" ("Playing research" 5), he starts out from a very different position:

> This brings another style of play to our attention: the *cheater*. This lowly creature [...] can often be spotted far into the ranks of game scholars as well as among the average players. It is with great and increasing regret that one reads papers on game analysis where the author unashamedly admits that yes, I used a cheat code, or yes, I consulted a walk-through. [...] While it is understandable that academics with not too much time on their hands find it difficult to spend the hundreds of hours necessary to master a game, [...] it is hard to imagine excellence of research arising from such practices. Where is the respect for the game? And, more importantly, how is the flavor of the game kept intact? (4)

Aarseth's aversion towards the use of cheats and walkthroughs has nothing to do with the "excellence of research" and all to do with the adherence to gamer capital, the ideology of merit (Paul 2) and thus the discursive rules of game culture. Aarseth's claim that he "was no longer in love with the game" (5) after using a walkthrough underlines this point, as the love for a medium might be the basis for fandom but not for academic research (Jahraus 15).

I agree with Fernández-Vara that these approaches conflict with how we normally think of academic research. As in literary or film studies, "spoilers are part of the job" in game studies (Fernández-Vara 54). While the concept of spoilers is largely unknown or seen as insignificant in literary studies (perhaps because of the field's long history) and is seen more as a research subject in film studies (as this publication shows), it is rather remarkable that game studies are so concerned with them. This leads to my next questions: Why are spoilers especially feared in relation to games? And, more fundamentally, what can even be spoiled in a game?

Types of spoilers

What can be spoiled about a film or book might seem like a banal question (though, as this volume shows, it probably is not). With video games, the question becomes much more complex. While games as a narrative medium can have their story spoiled—especially the ending, the fate of characters, and so on—there are other types of spoilers as well. A game spoiler could reveal:

- The ending
- The way
- The rules
- The world

Therefore, a preliminary typology of game spoilers would include:

- Narrative spoilers
- Solution spoilers
- Mechanical spoilers
- Worldbuilding/lore spoilers

Narrative spoilers seem to be media-independent, and their subtypes might be identical across media. Especially because of the connection between narrative media and ever-present forms of remediation (Bolter and Grusin), plot twists, for instance, are as pertinent in games as in other media. The examples

mentioned in the first paragraph of this essay demonstrate this. Obviously, narrative spoilers are only important in narrative games. Spoiling the end of *Tetris* (1984), if there is one, might also be possible but can hardly be considered a narrative one. Solution spoilers as well as mechanical spoilers might be specific, not only to video games, but to games in general. Telling someone the solution to a riddle, puzzle, or other task in a game or telling someone how the games' mechanics work, how to use or exploit them effectively, also count as spoilers. Solution spoilers—solutions to riddles, puzzles, and so on—deprive players of the opportunity to figure out a solution for themselves. Starting with arcade games, this might be the oldest type of game spoiler. Mechanical spoilers are found especially in games following an occult and esoteric game design, in games like *Dark Souls* (2011) and its descendants (Sigl), which intentionally obfuscate the game's mechanics. Worldbuilding/lore spoilers, by contrast, might again be media-independent, as they are concerned not so much with the specific plot of a game but with knowledge about the story or game world. This can include the location of specific places, or the history of the world or specific characters: that is, the building blocks of possible narratives, or a backstory which is not necessarily contained in the plot of the game itself.[4]

As mentioned, this typology is a preliminary attempt. There are probably other types of spoilers. But even this attempt already shows that there might be more ways to spoil a game than to spoil other media. This could also be a reason why the spoiler discussion is so prevalent in game culture.

Game spoilers

What makes games special in relation to spoilers, or what differentiates video game spoilers from other media spoilers? The immersive quality of the medium might offer an explanation:

> I experience games. […] When I'm invested in something, I try to block out the real world and fall into the fantasy so hard that it becomes real. As the characters interact and learn about the world, so do I. This connection I form with things makes the experience all the more impactful. Perhaps that is why I am so against spoilers. Knowing the twists, knowing turns, knowing who lives and who dies, makes it impossible for me to fall in. I stay one level removed, watching not as a participant

4 In Pen & Paper RPGs information about the game world is differently distributed between game masters and players. Thus, since the 1980s, texts in publication are often marked with descriptions like "game master information" or "for game masters only."

> anymore but as an outsider. I distance myself from the events and wait for the moment that I was told about. (Boyne)

Immersion is a concept that has been used to describe video games at least since the 1990s (Murray 123–53), but we can even go back to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which describes the importance of immersing oneself in a game (11). However, the concept has come under criticism in games research for several reasons (Nieser). Firstly, games are far from the only medium with an immersive quality: you can get lost in a film, a book, and so on. Secondly, if all attention is on immersion, other aspects that are constitutive of the act of playing—which might even counter the feeling of immersion, for example, a critical perspective—are lost or become invisible. Immersion also focuses exclusively on a subjective experience, which contradicts the distanced perspective of games research:

> In its worse incarnation, the resistance to spoil a game may derive from an extreme personal attachment to games, where some people find it impossible to put any distance between the game as the text being analyzed and themselves. (Fernández-Vara 53)

While this emotional entanglement is a problem for game studies, it is vital for game design, as it keeps people playing. To describe this, Britta Neitzel uses the term "involvement strategies." She thereby shifts the perspective from the player's experience to the game, looking at how it deploys strategies to keep players invested, be it through actional, senso-motoric, audiovisual, spatial, narrative, temporal, social, or emotional means (219–34). But again, most other media can use the same or at least similar strategies. The main difference, which is part of the specific quality of games, is that their recipients need to be more active. This active form of consumption or reception is often called interactivity or agency. But why is this important for spoilers? Espen Aarseth—with hypertexts as well as video games in mind—describes media that require an active role of the reader/player as "ergodic literature" (*Cybertext* 1). They require a "nontrivial effort […] to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). This means that you have to play to find out what a game is about, and that playing means putting in an effort—be it cognitive, physical, mental, and so on—and investing time. The length of a game can range from several minutes to hundreds of hours, making the act of playing a nontrivial effort simply because of its sheer duration. Greater length also raises the stakes for the impact of spoilers.[5]

5 There might also be a difference between spoiling a feature film and spoiling a series.

The term "ergodic," derived from the Greek words for "work" and "path," indicates that players have to put in work to follow the paths of the text/game. From pushing buttons to solving puzzles to understanding and interpreting the narrative, players are involved in the game. And because they put in effort, reaching goals—whether beating the game or finding out how the story ends—is considered a reward. Spoilers come into play at the intersection of work and rewards. Spoiling a game renders the work a player has invested meaningless and the reward shallow, as it was not properly earned. Video games generate a subjectivity that focuses on agency, personal responsibility, individuality, and success. The achievements and successes of individual players by their own merit are core ideas perpetuated by video games. Therefore, and because of games' origin in the military-industrial complex and their rise in a political climate of increasing economization, this subjectivity is closely linked to neoliberalism and hyper-capitalism (Baerg; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter; Unterhuber, "All work, all Play"). This ideological framing exacerbates the problem of spoilers. But the role of spoilers in relation to games possibly reaches even farther: to the phenomenon of play itself.

Spoilers in play

While the idea of spoilers in games has been around at least since the 1980s, the idea of spoilers in relation to play is even older. Johan Huizinga's 1938 study of play elements in culture, *Homo Ludens*, builds on the thesis that culture springs from play, as play is a universal phenomenon among all living creatures. In his idealized definition of game and play, Huizinga points out several features. I will concern myself with only three of them: 1) that play is different from ordinary life, while 2) "absorbing the player intensely and utterly," (Huizinga 13) and 3) that it creates its own order through the absolute nature of its rules:

> Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game", robs it of its character and makes it worthless. (10)

Rules are thus not only a social construct surrounding play: they define and create play as "[t]hey determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow

no doubt" (11). Huizinga defines two types of players who come into conflict with the rules:

> The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a "spoil-sport". The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. (11)

Perhaps surprisingly, Huizinga sees the spoil-sport as more problematic than the cheat, even though the latter robs other players of their possible win. But for Huizinga, it is more important that the cheat at least accepts the premise of play, while the spoil-sport denies it wholesale and thus makes play precarious:

> It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*—a pregnant word which means literally "in-play" (from inlusio, illudere or inludere). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. (11)

Huizinga puts it even more drastically: "The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected" (11–12). Even though Huizinga's theory of play might be more of an ideal than a description of actual play, and even though video games might only partly match his definition, Huizinga's point is more fundamental than a first glance reveals. What he describes also applies to other aesthetic experience besides games and play. If we think of film, literature, and other media as a form of play on a higher level—whether because of the role of creativity and playfulness in their production and consumption, or because storytelling can be described as play (Koschorke 12) or a game of make-believe (Molinari)—Huizinga can help us understand why spoilers are seen as so threatening. It is not just that spoilers rob us of moments of suspense. They threaten the game world and thus the very idea of these experiences.[6] Therefore, spoiling a movie, a game, a book, and so on does not only spoil the specific media experience. It threatens the concept of experiencing media itself. And if the world is only perceivable through media, one might rightfully call this world-shattering.

6 Moving this concept to a metalevel, the reaction of game culture to feminist positions on games reveals that game culture understands them as intrusions that threaten its homosocial and thus its "magic circle" (Boluk and Lemieux; Unterhuber, "Metagame").

Conclusion

This journey from the precursors of the World Wide Web to the role of spoilers in game culture and game studies to the world-shattering impact of spoiling play shows that the connection between game, play, and spoilers must be explored further. This preliminary survey has only offered first glances, yet it is not free of spoilers. But, as Fernández-Vara writes, it cannot be the goal of academic work to be completely spoiler-free. Research as a method of revealing, if not truths, then at least new understandings and perspectives, cannot be concerned about spoilers in its own practice. But as a research object, spoilers are more than compelling: perhaps precisely because they are diametrically opposed to our own approach as researchers.

Ludography

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