

Spoilers and Cheaters:

Narrative Closure and the Cultural Dimensions of Alternate Reading Practices

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Rosebud is the sleigh.

¹ Consumers of popular culture texts -- films, popular fiction, games -- have an enormous emotional investment in the narrative details of the texts they consume. Particularly, readers invest strongly in the accumulation of plot and development of narrative that produces the end of a text. In other words, that which gives the text closure.

Darth Vader is really Luke's father.

² One only needs to look to the popular culture-oriented newsgroups (see for example [rec.arts.movies.misc](#), [aus.films](#), [rec.arts.sf.written](#)) on Usenet to see the extent of this investment. In the terminology of the participants of these discussions, plot details of the texts under discussion are "spoilers" -- revealing them will "spoil" the text. Participants contrive elaborate mechanisms to avoid spoilers. Large amounts of blank space in the body of a message is required, to act as a kind of radiation shield against the unwary accidentally coming across the potent data. Social sanctions against revealing spoilers are severe -- even the inadvertent mention of plot data by an inexperienced poster will attract tremendous opprobrium. There is something of a hierarchy of spoilers, and the biggest, most potent ones are always the ones that revolve around the conclusion of the text. And it's not just the new texts that require spoiler "warnings" and "protection" -- there's always someone who hasn't seen [The Crying Game](#).

She is actually he.

³ What I want to address here is this emotional investment in the end, by analysing it as a set of distinct cultural practices that organises and defines a range of relationships and identities with the act of consuming highly narratively driven popular cultural texts. First, to come to greater theoretical grips with what a spoiler is, in a structural sense, I'll use a bit of early [Barthes](#), from "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives". The spoiler is a unit of plot data of the type that Barthes refers to as a "cardinal function". A cardinal function is a narrative node point that, in conjunction with other such points, maps out the basic network of the narrative (93). However, what makes the spoiler a particularly potent cardinal function of narrative is that has a certain diachronic effectivity -- its proximity to the moment (or defining sequence) of narrative closure ensures that it has explanatory power over the entire text. Thus, a regulatory practice effected when discussing the text in a group context (in which one assumes differing levels of knowledge about the text at hand) is to carefully quarantine the spoiler, in case it does in fact "spoil" the enjoyment of the text for the uninitiated.

[Soylent Green](#) is people.

⁴ I want to introduce here another mode of textual consumption that will mirror the spoiler. This particular mode is applicable to interactive multimedia texts, i.e. games, which structurally incorporate both linear and non-linear narrative mechanisms. I am talking, of course, of the cheat mode. Cheat modes enable the player to intervene in the gameplay "reading" process much more directly than is allowed by conventional modes. They are activated by a special code (the knowledge of which is a highly valued piece of cultural capital, that circulates through game player cultural networks) that releases the player's on-screen character from the typical game restrictions. For instance, in a "shooter" style game, the player may have access to all the weapons in the game, unlimited ammunition and health. This divorces the gameplay from the linear structure imposed by the game's designers, and allows the player to wander freely, and indeed to reach the end of the level of the game with little effort. In some games, the cheat mode is implemented in such a way as to allow the player to reach the end instantaneously, or to drop dead at once. Instant closure.

We never find out who killed Ari.

⁵ Although cheat codes, as mentioned above, have a strong cultural value (indeed, whole Websites and game magazines are devoted to listings of cheats for various games), the player who cheats, like the reader who skips to the last page or the viewer who reads the spoilers before seeing the film, is constructed by other readers as being at the bottom of a hierarchy of textual competence. Those at the top acquire their mastery of the text through firm resolve and hard work. Spoilers can therefore be seen as a form of subversion of this arrangement, by allowing anyone with access to them to play the game just as effectively as those hardened textual masters. This hierarchy has a moral/ethical dimension as well. Cheaters and spoiler lovers are seen by the "legitimate" players and readers as being weaker, lacking in resolve, and will probably go blind from their activities.

Neo is the One.

6 But isn't this quite appropriate? Aren't players who cheat and readers who appraise the spoilers destroying all the fun of the game/narrative? Perhaps. But on the other hand, film and book narratives that rely on certain information being withheld from the audience to produce suspense effects, and that focus all their textual energies on this payoff, aren't often texts that invite a revisit. And, I would argue, it's those texts that reward re-reading, even when all the overt plot cues are revealed, that are the ones that produce the most readerly pleasure.

Being Earnest really is important after all.

7 In any case, no reading of a text is produced in a vacuum. We always apply the resources of previous readings of other texts to interpret the one at hand, especially when reading, viewing, or playing extensively in a particular genre. The ending of a particular book may be quite obvious from the familiar narrative patterns it employs. Every seasoned player of scrolling-shoot-em-ups knows that the boss alien on the last level has some kind of fatal flaw that can be exploited to achieve victory.

It was a dream all along.

8 Cheating/spoiling as a textual practice seems to me to be an intensely analytical one, through the way it divorces considerations of authorial intention utterly from the reading practice. The player/readers make their own way through the text, and in doing so, learn about how the text produces its effects. It offers pleasures that are quite different from those produced through the slow accretion of knowledge that typifies the standard reading experience. These pleasures involve circumventing the structures that order a linear reading of texts. In a game, the player who cheats becomes much more aware of, and can manipulate the highly constrained parameters of the game environment. A reader of a book that has had its contents spoiled in advance has a much greater degree of awareness of the techniques that orchestrate emotional responses. The end may indeed lose its impact, but a greater appreciation of the textual resources that produced it may be obtained.

The butler did it.

9 Of course, up until now, I've played it safe by only revealing spoilers from older films and novels. Perhaps the final test for my readers will be if they can look at the spoiler for one much more recent film:

The kid's psychologist was a [ghost](#) the whole time...

References

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