SPOIL THE STORY, SPOIL IT NOT
Spoilers’ Effect on Player Choice in Branching Storyline Games

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Abstract
Spoilers are in everyday life often seen as something to be strictly avoided. Nonetheless, earlier studies researching short stories found that spoilers can enhance the enjoyment of a story, rather than destroying it. At the same time, there are studies that have reached opposite results, but the placement and style of the spoiler may affect how it is received. When it comes to games there are no, or only a few, studies on the subject. When unspoiled, players generally choose non-aggressive options, but they are also strongly influenced by what role the character they play has in the narrative. The spoiler can upset this. By knowing what may happen players act differently, as well as thinking about the story in other ways than unspoiled players do.

Keywords: [spoilers, choice, roles, character roles, branching storyline, narrative games]
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1 Introduction

Spoilers are more often than not seen as something to be avoided. This can be seen on the website Reddit, where commenters, in general, agree that spoilers are undesirable, and can make people quit indulging in a piece of media that got spoiled (Stormzone13, 2017). However, revealing the twist of a story may make readers like it more (Christenfeld and Leavitt, 2011). At the same time, it may be the other way around and spoilers actually do worsen the experience and for example make the story less thought-provoking (Johnson and Rosenbaum, 2015). Moreover, when a spoiler is introduced may affect its impact (Levine et al., 2016). While there are several studies covering the subject, they revolve around traditional media, like literature, and in particular short stories. There are little to none exploring the question from the perspective of video games. Is it worse to get a game spoiled since you have to actively go through the rest of the story yourself?

In other words, how do spoilers affect player choice in a branching storyline game?

To answer this, a qualitative method will be used. Eight people will play a game revolving around choice. Half of the group will play the game unspoiled, while the other half will have been spoiled beforehand. The participants will be given questions both before and after the gaming session.

The term ‘spoiler’ will refer to the definition given by the Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary (1996):

Information about the plot of a book, movie, or television show that spoils the surprise or suspense for a reader or viewer
2 Background

There are conflicting studies and results on whether spoilers actually enhance the enjoyment or not. One study says they increase tension, while a second says it is the other way around, and a spoiler may actually spoil more than just the enjoyment. At the same time, the nature of the spoiler may be what gave the contrasting results in the first place.

When players play through a game unspoiled, they will often relate the choices they make to how they would behave themselves. The role which they play also affects their in-game decisions. Still, they will often not engage in unmoral behaviors, barely even when unmoral behavior is justified.

Furthermore, players want to feel in control and to have power over certain events, for example, if they want to be aggressive or not. Agency allows them just that, which is a big difference compared to traditional media, where the creator decides what happens without any input from the reader or viewer.

2.1 Spoilers and Enjoyment

Spoiling the ending of a story, even if it is a twist, can make readers like it more. This may be because of an increase in tension, or because the reader is already familiar with the ending. When reading a story, with the reader already knowledgeable of the plot, the reader can then pay more attention to how earlier events connect to future events (Christenfeld and Leavitt, 2013).

There is evidence of spoilers spoiling stories, too. Benjamin Johnson and Judith Rosenbaum (2015) found that when unspoiled, stories are both more moving and more thought-provoking. Spoiled stories do not transport readers as deep into the imaginative element. This does not mean unspoiled stories leave longer-lasting impressions on readers than spoiled stories; Johnson and Rosenbaum found no evidence to support either side. Nevertheless, they did find two pieces of information that are in direct contrast to Christenfeld and Leavitt (2013). According to their results, spoilers make stories less suspenseful and less fun to experience. They further suggest that a reader, if they have been spoiled about the ending, can come to craft the end of a story on their own, thus seeing their own version as ‘complete’, and may end up disappointed.

When the spoiler is introduced, however, is also important. It can reduce enjoyment if it is presented to the reader before the story, but has no apparent effect if it is presented in the middle of said story (Levin, Bexnner, & Autry, 2016). This contrasting result may have been discovered because of methodological differences, Levine, Bextner, and Autry propose. Between the three studies mentioned above, the biggest difference is the content of the spoilers. Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) and Levine, Bexner, and Autry (2016) used short ones that focused on the very endings and twists of the stories. Christenfeld and Leavitt’s study (2011), on the other hand, provided an overview of the theme of the stories as well as their endings. Therefore, the thematic information Christenfeld and Leavitt (2011) provided in their spoilers may be critical in explaining why their results showed enhanced enjoyment while the other two did not (Levine et al., 2016).
2.2 Player Choice in Branching Storyline Games

In order to look at how in-game decisions are changed because of spoilers, it is important to know how players make choices in games, in general. When players play a game completely unspoiled, they often want to keep the suspense of disbelief in order to be able to engage in the narrative and identify with the characters. They tend to make decisions based on what they themselves would choose in real life. Often, the majority of players choose to not engage in an antisocial or violent behavior. Furthermore, a large majority do not behave aggressively if unprovoked, even though the choice is available to them. If the reason for said aggression is justifiable, then just over half of the players do engage in the non-aggressive line of choice (Lewis and Weaver, 2012).

This sense, that the player bases their character's choices on themselves, means that the player is, and at the same time is not, their character, which is a central part of their experiencing of the game (Burn, 2006.) The role the player is playing will strongly affect their choices. Although, this effect is slightly stronger if the player was able to choose the role themselves than if it was assigned to them. This difference could be attributed to how players identify more with the character or role they choose themselves (Cardona-Rivera, Domínguez, Roberts, & Vance, 2016).

Another contributing factor as to why players seldom engage in an antisocial or violent behavior is their view of in-game characters. In general, players tend to see video game characters as individuals experiencing emotions in the same way “real people” experience them. When players do behave more antisocially, they feel more guilt compared to the players who behaved morally. This does not mean they enjoyed the game any less, however (Lewis and Weaver, 2012).

2.3 Differences between interactive and traditional media

Games are often seen to possess an element that traditional media lacks – interactivity. The writer of a book or screenplay is creating a linear experience. What happens, happens, and they invite the reader or viewer be a part of it. The relationship between these two factors is fairly direct. The designer of a game, on the other hand, gives the player a lot of control over the pacing of the game and its sequence of events. This makes it harder to determine how a player will experience it, and the relationship between the two factors is no longer as direct (Schell, 2015).

2.3.1 Agency in Games

In games, players can feel that they have power over the game world and can decide what happens. While players engage in activity when they play, how much agency do they possess? Or in other words, how much power to control and determine the meanings and enjoyments they experience do the players truly have? Do they actually have a lot of power and influence over the events in the game (Schott, 2006)? The players themselves want to feel like it, at least (Murray, 2000, see Schott, 2006).

Agency is about purposefully intervening in events, in order to get a desired outcome. Games want the player to act on, and with, the game world's content, to explore, and provoke a chain of events to unfold. Actions are executed with the intention of leading the events to desirable
outcomes, but they can also lead to outcomes the player did not want (Schott, 2006). Such endings can, of course, be disappointing or upsetting. If the player was spoiled about the ending, as was earlier discussed, another layer is added. The player may imagine an ending of their own with the knowledge they have and see that version as ‘complete’ (Johnson and Rosenbaum, 2015).

Another way games exercise agency, is how they let players explore the world, and learn from and about it on their own. They can, therefore, discover details that can make them gain a different perspective of that world. If the player had not explored with the intention of finding something, they would not have known that piece of information (Schott, 2006). In fights, the player can experiment with strategies before, for example, an infiltration mission. Even deciding if they will use stealth or ignore it. In a way, the player determines if particular events take place or not, as well how they will happen (Carr, 2006).

One example is during a quest in Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014). The player is at one point in an old temple, where the player and the enemy want the same artifact that the temple holds. Their enemies are running ahead by blasting a hole in the temple, but the player can decide if they want to follow that same path or take another where they respect the temple and its old rituals. If they choose to adhere to the rituals, the player can ally with the ancient inhabitants of the temple, and thus avoid a big fight. The player will get to play through puzzles, too, and discover more about how the temple works. If the player chose to ignore the rituals, they will not be able to enter the alliance and will fight the inhabitants. If this had happened in a traditional piece of media, only one of the outcomes would have taken place – and it would not be up to the reader or viewer to choose which one.
3 Research Question

With the discovery of the different studies concerning spoilers’ effect on traditional media, and seeing their contrasting result, the following question was created:

how do spoilers affect player choice in a branching storyline game?

While the studies are all interesting, none of them are looking at it from a game perspective. Although, one could imagine that the results would apply, at least somewhat, to games that have fairly linear narratives.

If the narrative in question is not linear, but branching, will spoilers affect how players play it? For example, if a player gets spoiled about the death of one of the characters, but finds out that the outcome is player determined, will they change how they play the game in order to get their desired outcome? How do they think while possibly doing so?

The study will primarily be based on Christenfeld and Leavitt’s (2011) study regarding spoilers and enjoyment but focusing on choice rather than enjoyment. Levine, Betxner, and Autry (2016) was influential when determining the spoiler, however.

3.1 Method

Eight participants took part in this study but were divided into two groups with four people in each. One group played through the game spoiled and the other group played through it unspoiled and took the role of a control group. Afterwards they partaked in an interview where they were asked about their in-game decisions. The spoiler gave away one of the possible endings. The game itself have branching storylines where choices have consequences, and players could choose what the point of view character should do and say, to a certain degree.

3.1.1 The Participants

Most of the eight participants were found at the University of Skövde and were game developers themselves. To get different perspectives, others were from other places in Sweden and a few who barely played digital games. They were all over 20 years old.

On the other hand this could prove to work against the study. The perspective risk becoming too broad. To get a more specific result in this situation, it could have been beneficial to restrict the age group. Then the results could say, for example, how the ages 18 to 25 react to spoilers in this scenario, compared to how 18 more or less randomly selected people would.

At the same time, this could have proven restrictive for this particular study where age was not such an important factor. Here, age was meant to be more of a comparative element, but to use a restricted age group could be explored by further studies. Additionally, the low number of participants will not be able to give this study the width of views like that of, for example, Christenfeld and Leavitt (2011) who had 819 people partaking.

Finally, it was preferable that the participants were used to gaming played or were interested in story-driven games resembling, for example, Telltale’s The Walking Dead (2012). Otherwise, they could have been bored and simply try to get through the game as fast as possible, in a worst case scenario. Of course, this particular risk would always exist no matter who the participant is, since the game simply may not have been for them, just like a lover of drama movies does not enjoy every drama movie.
3.1.2 The Interview

The participants were asked before joining the study if they agreed with being recorded orally. In order to be able to have the same opportunity to capture information from all participants, this was a requirement for them to join. Notes were taken during their playtime, as well. The interview itself was semi-structural (Østbye et al., 2003, p. 103), for their thoughts and perspectives to truly come forward. Before they began playing the game, both groups were encouraged to speak the thoughts they had while making the in-game decisions out loud.

After having finished playing through the artifact, the groups were asked what they found interesting about the game and their decisions regarding an important choice at the end. At first, these questions were supposed to be asked through an anonymous questionnaire to let the participants feel like they could speak their minds without fear. However, discussing the questions had the possibility to lead to follow-up questions, which could deepen the understanding of their playthrough. They were also be asked about their gaming habits, to see if these variables may have been contributing factors to any eventual change in their in-game behavior. The other questions, for example, revolved around the character Eurig and if they experienced that they changed their in-game behavior in accordance to the spoiler. The groups’ results were then compared with each other.

Since this was done right after they had finished, they might later have thought of things that could prove important. Unfortunately, there was no time for follow-up interviews and therefore some perspectives may have been lost.

3.1.3 The Spoiler

Looking back at what earlier studies revealed, it was important not only to decide what to spoil but also how to spoil it (Levine et al., 2016). In their study, they showed their spoiler for the story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1890):

The protagonist, Peyton, fantasizes of escaping right before he is executed.

(Levine et al., 2016, p. 14)

They shared this story with Christenfeld and Leavitt (2011) who wrote their spoiler for it in the following way:

The experience of time is one of life’s mysteries. Years may pass in a rush, or a moment stretch interminably. A whole lifetime may flash through the mind in the moment before death. But in the case of Peyton Farquhar, the man to be hanged on the bridge, it is not a rush of memories that comes to the fore. Instead, new experiences—vivid fantasies of escape—inhabit his last moments, calling into question whether it is real time or the experience of time that truly matters.

(Levine et al., 2016, p. 14-15)

Since Christenfeld and Leavitt break the pattern most commonly found in the collected research, it would be interesting to see the results if the same way of writing the spoiler was used for this study, too. Before the pilot study the spoiler looked similar to theirs. However, afterwards it was clear it needed to change, which is discussed further down. The spoiler used in the study itself was a more concise version resembling the style of Levine, Betxner, and Autry:
The spoiler was introduced in the beginning, following Christenfeld and Leavitt's example. An important distinction between the two is that instead of revealing the definite ending the above spoiler revealed a branch leading up to the it, but it still followed the definition made by Merriam-Webster – it spoiled the surprise or suspense the incident could bring. The reason it did not spoil the ending itself was also because the spoiler needed to reveal something the player would be able to change, in order to see how, and if, their behavior is affected. It gave them more agency. Also, spoilers in games arguably work differently than those of other traditional media. There are more things, in games, that have the possibility to happen and spoiling those scenarios is still spoiling the game depending on the nature of the spoiler.

3.2 Discussion
The term ‘spoiler’ has been around since 1971 when it first appeared in the April issue of National Lampoon in the article Spoilers by Doug Kenney. Now, there are several studies researching spoilers’ role in literature, television, and film. There are few to none regarding games. It would be interesting to see how a more interactive piece of media is affected by spoilers.

From personal experience, spoilers can at times be instrumental in getting someone to want to look into a book or a game. They can show or tell people what the work contains, and if it is something one would want to put their time in. This would especially be true for games. Many are at least 30 hours long, and even games that are seen as short can contain ten hours of gameplay. This is something other pieces of media, other than television series, rarely do. Exactly as one would not like to spend two hours watching a film they end up wishing they had never seen, few want to buy a game and put in five hours only to realize it contains parts they do not want. One can at least let a television series run in the background.

The results Lewis and Weaver (2012) got show how players seldom engage in an antisocial or violent behavior. If a spoiler reveals the twist that Character A ends up betraying the player, will the percentage of players who engage in violent behaviors increase, in regard to Character A? In traditional media, such as books, people do not get that opportunity. If a game designer creates that option for the player – will they take it, knowing Character A may not hurt the player’s character until the end? Will players do it even though they might not have done it in real life themselves?

Moreover, if the avatar has a certain role, or a certain personality, that the game says is compassionate and do not wish to engage in violence acts, and players’ in-game choices, in general, are affected by their in-game role (Cardona-Rivera et al., 2016), players may depart from this pattern if they themselves are hurt by a character’s betrayal. This atypical behavior may make itself known through role-breaking by forcing the character to commit out-of-character decisions, such as behaving antisocially toward the eventual betrayer. On the other hand, the player may treat the character as any other. A spoiled player may not feel the same emotional impact as the unspoiled player during the betrayal, however. Although this does not mean there will no emotional impact at all, it may simply be different.
4 Pilot Study

Two participants took part in the pilot study. It was supposed to be only one, but the results from the first created the need for a second. The first participant went through the game in the same manner the other participants went through the study itself, but the test contained different questions that were then changed. The participant was given the spoiler in the beginning but it was different, as well:

300 years of war exhausts any nation. They run out of money, support, and cause. The peace between the Seven Isles and Glannoweth were a sign of hope for a future where past hurts were forgiven - forged with a marriage. Soon, however, some of the Isles’ inhabitants learn the peace is but a farce, and when the Glannish bride-to-be Gwyneira is murdered in her castle chambers, accusations are thrown from both sides, guiding the two nations into their biggest war yet.

The main elements observed and inspired by Christenfeld and Leavitt’s (2011) spoiler is the overreaching intro, the plain statement of the character’s death and the sentences following that wraps around the spoiler. Although their’s tell of the moments before the end and not of the consequences that ensue. The participant in the pilot study did not remember it and if they cannot remember it their choices are not affected by it. They may have forgotten it because of the multitude of names introduced in the spoiler and early on in the artifact. This was a problem in and of its own and several names of unimportant characters were removed. Even though that changes were made, it was necessary to have a spoiler that was easier to remember, and it needed to be tested to make sure it functioned the way it was supposed to. The spoiler was changed to match Levine, Betxner, and Autry’s (2016):

Lord Eurig will kill Gwyneira

The second participant read it and was extremely aware of it over the course of the story. They cared for Gwyneira and wanted her to survive. This led them to think through each possible choice thoroughly as if every choice mattered. They said themselves they knew that could not be the case but, at the same time, they could not afford to not consider the possibility. When it came to the question of whether or not they should invite Eurig they immediately went for “ask him to leave.” They also said they thought the incident was inevitable no matter what they chose, but they wanted to stop it nonetheless.

This spoiler was too direct. The players should not feel like they cannot do anything to stop the incident from taking place. The whole point of the branching storyline system was that they would be able to stop it, therefore they should also feel like they can. The spoiler went through a third iteration to instead become:

Lord Eurig may kill Gwyneira

Even though it has been proven to decrease enjoyment (Levine et al., 2016), it is shorter and therefore easier to remember. It would be harder to research how spoilers affect anything if the spoiler itself is not remembered, and seeing how the interview will not ask questions about enjoyment, the research question itself was prioritized.
5 Implementation

The artifact’s name is *The Ascended Kingdom*. It takes place on the Seven Isles, an island nation floating in the sky. The story centers around four different people in royal castle with their own point of views: a guard, a physician’s assistant, a spy, and the noblewoman betrothed to the Seven Isles’ King. The story presents the country as being at war with the Kingdom of Glannoweth, but they are currently entering an alliance forged with the marriage. The problem is that the Glannish are planning on breaking the alliance in order to conquer the Seven Isles once and for all.

However, it is part of a longer story. At the time of the study it has two chapters and an epilogue to let the players know how their choices affected the characters. Before, the plan was to have three chapters, as well as let the characters have stats that changed with certain choices. Why these elements were never incorporated will be discussed further down.

The characters’ stories are tightly interwoven with each other. For example, several non-playable characters appear in some of the main characters’ individual stories and the same events are discussed. The game is a branching storyline made with the program *Twine* (2009) and it is text-based. It resembles Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* (2012) in the way that the choices the player makes affect later choices as well as later paths. One such choice revolves around the spoiler and the two characters Eurig and Gwyneira. It is toward the end of the story and Eurig has still not made an attempt on her life. The player has to choose between letting him into her chambers or not.

The reason the story follows several characters is because the artifact was made together with another student, Siri Åhman, who is researching how players identify to several playable characters. The writing was divided equally by giving each of us two characters to manage, but I also wrote epilogues that relates to my question. The plot was discussed together, the writing was done apart but then that, too, was discussed jointly to make sure there are no continuity errors. This includes the epilogues to a certain degree. The story works for this study, too. The length may arguably help the players relate to the world since they spend a longer time with it. The branching storyline and different endings also serve to give the player a chance to make sure the event the spoiler describes does not happen.

5.1 The Story

The artifact is a branching storyline game and not, for example, a linear type of story like *The Last of Us* (2013) because of the possibility of narrative choice the branching storyline brings. While a game like *The Last of Us* does contain choices, they are usually strategies for fighting and do not involve the narrative in the same way. If the plot was spoiled for the player in a linear story, they would not be able to change the narrative outcome at all since the game does not have such choices. If the player follows a story with multiple possible scenarios where they can indeed change the outcome, their behavior and thoughts surrounding the game may be affected in a different way.

Nonetheless, if this study had used a linear storyline instead, the results could have been more closely compared with the studies of Christenfeld and Leavitt (2011) and Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015), since the short stories they studied are also linear. However, due to the nature of the research question a non-linear storyline was used.
The program *Twine* (2009) was used to build the story because it makes it easy to keep the different paths of the story apart, while at the same time being easy to learn and use. While *Twine* makes it possible to implement pictures and music, there are no such elements to enhance the story. This was not an aesthetic choice, but rather because of the limited timeframe.

5.1.1 Chapter Summary

The first chapter introduces the four characters, along with the Glannish ambassador Lord Eurig, and the conflict between the two countries the Seven Isles and Glannoweth. The biggest and most influential event is Gwyneira arriving to meet her future husband - the King of the Isles.

The second chapter is about twice as long and focuses on deepening the players’ understanding of the conflict as well as fleshing out the characters even more. An important event here is when Lord Eurig accidentally reveals to Gwyneira about the Glannish plot of taking over the Isles’. At the end of the chapter he comes to her chambers and says he has more information. The player can choose to let him in or refuse him. If he is let in he will offer Gwyneira poisoned wine, but the player do not need to take it. As such, her death is player-determined. Afterward, there is an epilogue that shows the outcome of the player’s choices.

At first, there was a third chapter and a different ending to chapter two but this was changed due to the limited timeframe. Another character was supposed to make an attempt on her life but would always fail to kill her. Chapter three was also about a welcoming ball for Gwyneira, which all characters introduced so far would be involved in. Lord Eurig was to be found dead, but there was a discussion if it should be player-determined or not. However, even though there was little time to finish the long *Twine*-project the assassination scene needed to be included.

The choice to invite Eurig into the chambers or not is the game’s most influential choice. In order for the research question to have anything concrete to base its testing on the choice needed to exist. It creates several endings, which make it possible to spoil a path. Since it has several paths the player can change the ending. Also, their choices can be affected by a spoiler that shows and undesired outcome that they could and possibly may attempt to change.

One problem that arose with the change was how the earlier chapters were written with the third chapter in mind. Some choices build the character’s statistics, which will be discussed further below, but are now simply flavor as the following image exemplifies.
“Welcome, Lady Gwyneira of Glannoweth,” the King gives her a reassuring smile. “It’s an honor to have you here.”

It’s an empty honor. The only thing they wish from her presence is the well-needed, lasting peace; not a beloved queen. Gwyneira is a pawn. Her own wishes mean nothing in this regard. The people won’t forget their nation’s history, either. They have all the right not to.

Thank him graciously.
Thank him simply.
Thank him mockingly.

**Figure 1** Example of flavor choice

The above image shows a piece from Gwyneira’s first part where she meets the King and the player will choose how to behave. The choice would be remarked upon in chapter three as well as affecting her relationship with the King, but with the chapter removed the choices provide no consequences.

### 5.1.2 Character Design

Placing the characters in different parts of the castle, as well as in different social groups, gives the player different ways to interact with the environment and gather information. The characters’ names and roles are the following:

- **Cassian the Guard** - a guard is an in-between figure. They do not associate much with either the lower class or the nobles, while at the same time being aware of what happens. For example, when patrolling they can find people talking at places they thought were hidden.
- **Gwyneira the Noblewoman** - a noble reaches a social circle other social roles have a hard time to enter. They can become privy to whispers and rumors containing more information than the giver realizes.
- **Felix the Physician’s Assistant** - someone who treats wounds and illnesses can not only get in contact with people from all social classes, they can also get to places they should not be by checking up on patients or “checking up on patients”. The clinic is also a place where everyone can go without it seeming too suspicious which is an advantage when, for example, one wants to distribute messages to other resistance members.
- **The Fifth Spy** - one of the jobs for a spy is information gathering. They get information which they use to find out more information. They also have the skills to get into locked rooms and to eavesdrop easier than the others have.

Since I wrote Cassian and Gwyneira while Åhman wrote Felix and The Fifth Spy the latter two will not be discussed in greater detail.

The different point-of-views also aid the research question and the spoiler. If the characters can influence what happens to the other characters’ stories the spoiled players may be able to make other characters help Gwyneira who they know may die. There are certain scenes where the Spy character has to make a decision that will affect Gwyneira’s meeting with the man who may murder her. Regrettably, the choice does not affect the story as much as the players are led to believe. There was not enough time to make it influence the story.
5.1.2.1 Cassian

Cassian was always a guard, but the griffin part came later together with speculations regarding which creatures might inhabit the world. This was at a time in development when Glannoweth was searching for a treasure hidden on the Isles, and when it was discovered how griffins guard treasure (Friar, 1987, p.173) griffins seemed like a good choice. Since the Seven Isles are also floating in the sky, if they are supposed to have fought with Glannoweth - how did they fight? If they rode on griffins like one would ride a horse in a cavalry they would gain an immense advantage, and thus the Griffin Guard was created. Cassian was moved from being an ordinary castle guard to enter the more prestigious Griffin Guard.

Cassian rides a griffin named Splendor. To make the player connect more with Cassian they were supposed to be able to name the griffin themselves, but since this idea came in the middle of writing the story there was too little time to change all instances of the griffin’s name into variables.

5.1.2.2 Gwyneira

Gwyneira was not always a noblewoman from Glannoweth. In fact, she was supposed to be from an influential mage family in the Seven Isles who betrays their country for Glannoweth. When her role began to feel wrong, and her motives and goals did not fit together with the rest of the cast, she was instead made a daughter from an influential family in Glannoweth. This made her marriage to the King fit the story better, too.

The magic changed to a rune-magic that anyone could learn. The crafter crafts a rune into an object and the nature of the rune can, for example, make the object levitate or catch fire. Gwyneira is supposed to be strong in rune crafting, but it is not shown in the chapters. The original ending of the second chapter and a part of the third chapter would explore it more and allow her to use it, but with those parts changed and removed so was her rune crafting abilities.

The spoiler revolves around her because she is part of the section of the story that the spoiler references. Her development as a character was not related to the spoiler, either, but

5.1.3 Character Goals

The four characters all have similar goals. Although, the Fifth Spy does work against the others in some capacity. While she does not stop any plans she does not work for the best interest of the Seven Isles. Gwyneira is also not entirely loyal to the Isles until the end when she reveals her homeland’s plans, but these elements would have been developed further in the third chapter.

If the story took place within a book, the characters could have had different goals and worked against each other, since the reader simply follow along in the story. However, since the player will control all four of them, they would thus have had to work against themselves. For example, the player controls character A, who is on the ‘good’ side, and character B, who is on the ‘bad’ side. Character A creates a strategy to fulfill a goal, which character B will destroy. The player will thus thwart their own plans they had carefully built up.
5.2 The Epilogues

To show players what happens after the end of the second chapter, where Gwyneira might die and also what the spoiler spoils, there will be epilogues. Åhman’s version will not use them, since it is not vital to her research question. It is important to the question for this study because it will show players that their choices actually had an effect on the world. The image below shows the story’s final choice. Gwyneira survived the assassination attempt by Lord Eurig and the player will now choose what to do with him.

```
[[Put him on trial.->GwyneiraEl.6.1.1]]
[[Let him go.->GwyneiraEl.6.1.2]]
(if: $Elaelisleaves is 0) [[Ask Aelia to kill him.->GwyneiraEl.6.1.3]]
[[Make him drink the wine.->GwyneiraEl.6.1.4]]
```

**Figure 2** Example of choice that affects the epilogue

If the player can choose to kill a character, but is not be able to see what happens afterward, the choice will not carry much weight. Up until this point, the player has gotten to know Lord Eurig as a character. They have seen him hit a servant, they have treated the servant, and they have had a conversation with him. The narrative paints the lord as an unkind man.

According to Lewis and Weaver’s research (2012), only about half of the players will choose the aggressive option if it feels justifiable to them. At the same time, they are playing a role. It will affect their choices even though they did not choose the role themselves (Cardona-Rivera, Domínguez, Roberts, & Vance, 2016). Will it look good if Gwyneira lets him die? Furthermore, the group of players who will be spoiled will know Lord Eurig is after Gwyneira’s life, and so, one can speculate that killing him may feel more justifiable to them.

5.3 Agency

Even though the world is developed with seven different isles and countries below, everything takes place at a castle on one single island. The players do not have the option to go outside its bounds because it connects the point of views more. In this regard, their agency is low. On the other hand, there are plenty of choices to make within its walls all from dialogue options to choices that will make the player not receive information.

```
Invite him in.
Ask him to leave.
```

**Figure 3** Example of choice with a lot of agency
For example, the image above shows how the player can invite Lord Eurig into Gwyneira’s chambers or not. If they do they will receive more information regarding Glannoweth’s plot, as well as being able to steer the course of the ending. The game immediately takes the player to the epilogue if they refuse to invite him in. Schott (2006) mentions how a player’s actions are made with the intention of leading events to desirable outcomes. A spoiled player will know that Lord Eurig will kill Gwyneira in her chambers, and this is the first and only time he can enter the chambers. By not letting him in the player guarantees that she lives, while an unspoiled player might only judge the two choices they deem the most interesting. The spoiled player can of course still do the same.
6 Evaluation

The results were not in line with the expectations. Most of the spoiled participants did not think much about the spoiler, but the characters’ different roles influenced which choices the participants made across both groups. In general, the two groups’ result was fairly similar, but there are several instances where one can see distinct differences. The research question was answered with “yes, spoilers affect player choice in branching storyline games.”

6.1 The Study

In order to answer the question “How do spoilers affect player choice in a branching storyline game?” eight people were interviewed after having played a game with branching storylines and four main characters. The participants had different backgrounds. Some were studying game development themselves, others simply liked to play games, while a couple more barley having played any kinds of games at all.

The participants were placed into two groups at random, with the exception of two who early on said that they do not play a lot of games. They were not placed in the same group to get a non-gamer perspective from both sides. The participants were then interviewed separately over the course of a few weeks. Both groups were given a short explanation of how they would play four different characters and the choices they made would matter. If they were in the half that was supposed to be spoiled, this is when they were told. All of them gave their consent to being recorded during their playtime.

It is important to note that the information received from the respondents varied greatly. One respondent did not voice their thoughts at all until the interview itself, while another respondent talked about almost every single choice in great detail. Furthermore, the handwritten notes that were taken while the participants were playing also varied. Although the notes aimed to give equal information regarding the respondents’ playthroughs, the notes are still unequal in that sense. For example, later playthroughs contain a much more detailed description of the players’ choices and also which were picked.

When they finished playing the game the interview began. It was held in Swedish since it is the native language of all the participants and myself. All quotations made by a respondent is translated by me. Both groups were asked the same questions that touched upon their gaming habits and more notably upon a choice at the end of the game that is one of the few that drastically changes the player’s experience. The spoiled group was also asked if their choices were affected by the spoiler they had received.

6.2 Results and Analysis

In general, the spoiled participants said the spoiler did not affect their choices much, or only a little. The results hint otherwise. There are several instances where the spoiled group’s choices align perfectly with each other while at the same time choosing the opposite of what the unspoiled participants did. For example, the spoiled participants were in general more polite and careful. They also acted differently toward the character Eurig, which might be because they know from the beginning that he will plan or is planning something. One example of this is in the beginning. Eurig asks the character Gwyneira is she is nervous and the player can lie or tell the truth. Three out of four spoiled players chose to lie, while three out of four unspoiled players chose to tell the truth. This does not mean that the unspoiled participants liked Eurig more, however, which is evident in the artifact’s most impactful choice.
When Eurig comes to Gwyneira’s chambers late one evening after he has accidentally revealed information he shouldn’t, he comes to apologize and offer her more information on the subject. Up until this point, the players have not gotten a favorable view of him and can ask him to leave or to invite him in. The expectation was that the spoiled players would to a greater degree ask him to leave since they know Gwyneira might die. In turn, the unspoiled participants were expected to invite him in.

However, three out of four of the unspoiled participants asked Eurig to leave. They thought him vile and creepy and expressed more dislike for him than the members of the spoiled group did. They completely refused to let Eurig enter the chambers. Out of the spoiled participants, Three out of the four invited him in. One of them actively made a choice they knew would kill them out of curiosity. Based on their answers in the interviews, it is concluded that the spoiled players knew something potentially interesting awaited them if the invited Eurig in. Letting the potential assassin inside was the most interesting option for them, and they also wanted to know how, why, and when they might potentially die. The unspoiled players did now know what would happen, and sp their dislike won over what curiosity they might have had.

If this had been a game the participants had been more invested in, played, and enjoyed on their free time they might have chosen to let him in to a higher degree in order to see what would happen.

The two participants that did not play games often made decisions the majority of their groups did not make. For example, regarding the Eurig-Chambers-situation they were both the fourth person in their respective group who did not choose like the others. The non-gaming participant of the spoiled group did invite Eurig in because they wanted to go against what was expected of them. However, they did also think Eurig unpleasant and, the respondent said, hesitated to let him in because from a woman’s perspective in the story’s presumed time period coupled with the state of Eurig did not speak in favor of letting him in. Another respondent, also a woman, had a similar reaction. She had also been presented with the spoiler but let him in in order to not escalate the situation and risk making Eurig act violently. Many respondents thus projected their own opinions, feelings, and today’s societal fears onto this decision, the role of the character they were playing did not always dictate what they were going to choose.

One question during the interview asked what the respondents felt about Eurig. This was to see if the spoiled participants would dislike or distrust him more, but the artifact framed him in a way that may have colored their view of him because every participant had a negative view of him. The artifact thus worked against itself and should have given him more positive traits as well as fewer scenes where he behaved unpleasantly.

Participants were asked what they found interesting. Their answers were in line with how Christenfeld and Leavitt (2013) mentioned that spoilers can deepen the appreciation of a story, since someone who has gotten spoiled can connect mysterious clues that lead up to the spoiled event. This was seen with how unspoiled players mentioned the characters far more often than the spoiled group did. The spoiled participants talked more about the intrigue and the story itself. It does not necessarily mean that the unspoiled players did not like the intrigue or that the spoiled players found the characters uninteresting, however, this question was not followed by a follow-up question and thus it is only possible to imagine why they answered like they did.

One thought can indeed be that by getting a piece of the story spoiled made the spoiled participants more aware and interested in the story itself because they wondered how, when, and where they might get murdered as Christenfeld and Leavitt observed. The participants might also have played more attention to the plot to find out how the spoiler and the story
related to each other as well as trying to prevent it from happening to a certain degree considering they were, after all, more polite to NPCs.

Even though the spoiler affected the participants’ choices, it did not affect the players as much as anticipated. This could be for a number of reasons. Personality, investment in the story and the characters as well as the spoiler itself to name a few. A bigger study would definitely be needed to give a more absolute answer.

Furthermore, the spoiler did not seem to ruin the ending as Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) found. The only disappointment the participants expressed was how abruptly it ended, and how they did not know if and which of their choices mattered and affected the epilogue. It could be discussed that this is largely the fault of the artifact, since many of the choices do not, in fact, matter.

### 6.2.1 Character Roles

Something the research question does not ask about but turned out to be an interesting result that both groups had in common was how they adhered to the characters’ different roles. This is in accordance with the Mimesis Effect – the way the narrative role of a character strongly influences the player’s decisions in-game (Cardona-Rivera, Domínguez, Roberts, & Vance, 2016). For example, the story’s first choice lets the players decide how they want Cassian to answer his superior. There are three options that are fairly similar. Several of the respondents who thought out loud asked themselves how they wanted the character to be. This was seen with the other characters as well. There were respondents who made Gwyneira act confident during certain scenes and then let her be truer to her more worrisome self in others. During one choice with the character Felix, the player can focus on helping the wounded man in front of them, or ask the woman who brought him to the clinic for her name. There were participants who thought him inquisitive and therefore chose to ask about her name, while others wanted him to focus more on the wounded man as that is Felix’s job and what they thought he would do.

The unspoiled, non-gaming respondent, as well as one of the spoiled respondents who let Eurig in, killed him, which could be seen as justified violence (Lewis and Weaver, 2012). It was possible to kill him in two ways. One had the woman who figured both as Gwyneira’s bodyguard and maid kill him, or to let him drink poisoned wine - the same with which he aimed to kill Gwyneira herself. The two other spoiled players who let him in made an active choice to kill themselves while the other let Eurig go, but thought the choice would entail him working for Gwyneira and not simply being shown the mercy to flee.

The participants who did not invite Eurig in based their decisions more about themselves than on their character role, however. Gwyneira would benefit from inviting him inside, since he promises to give her information she wants. The participants did not invite him in because they themselves found him repulsive, or because they themselves feared the violence he may have committed against them, or against Gwyneira. They effectively based her choices on themselves, even though they had adhered to her role earlier in the story, hinting that larger and more meaningful decisions make players leave character roles behind. This indicates that the engagement to Gwyneira’s character role shifts to sense of real-time conflict for the player where they shift the focus to themselves (Burn, 2006).

### 6.3 Conclusions

The number of participants is not enough to fully declare an answer, but results show a pattern supporting it. Spoilers do indeed effect player choice by making the players act on the spoiler’s information. In this case they acted more politely toward NPCs and were more
careful overall. They also find different things interesting. While the spoiled participants talked more about the plot and the intrigue to be interesting highlights, the unspoiled players instead mentioned the characters. This goes in line with what previous studies found about how spoilers can make people focus more on the story itself (Christenfeld and Levitt, 2013).

Interactive stories are not therefore exempt from these earlier results concerning short stories. Although, there is still a difference between the mediums. Players have a chance to act on the spoiler, which readers do not. In this case, the spoiler made the players aware that a choice that could lead to their deaths would probably be more interesting than a choice just making the problem go away. They saw the story differently than unspoiled players, who made the problem go away instead of exploring it because they did not know at all what the other choice would have contained.

Be that as it may, the spoiler did not affect the players’ choices to a great extent. The characters’ different roles affected the participants’ decision making more. The reason the spoiler was as ineffective as it was could be because the participants were not sufficiently invested in the characters or knew anything about the world. It was also a short spoiler. As Levine, Betxner, and Autry (2016) mentioned the length and content of the spoiler, as well as when it is introduced, may have influenced the effect it had.

The participants who had not played a lot of, if any, digital games, chose differently from the participants used to gaming, but it, along with the other participants’ choices, could be attributed to personality and level of interest. Nevertheless, the roles of the different characters matter and shape the participants’ decisions whether they were spoiled or not. However, when faced with an important decision that role was left behind and the participants’ own views came forward and they shifted their engagement from the character to themselves.
7 Concluding Remarks

7.1 Summary

Earlier research about spoilers look at traditional media instead of at digital games. The findings of several studies oppose each other but the reason for this might be the nature of the spoiler itself. When it comes to games, there is research that shows that players strongly adhere to the roles of their given character. This was also proved in this study.

Eight participants were divided into two groups – one group received a short spoiler prior to playing the game while the other did not. The artifact focused on four main characters in a branching storyline game. Although it could have been shorter it gave valuable information. For example, while the spoiled group knew the antagonist was going to kill one of the main characters their dislike for the character was on a similar level to the participants in the unspoiled group. The dislike the unspoiled group felt was made apparent when they at one point refused to communicate with the antagonist even though he could provide more information about the plot. The spoiled participants may not have liked him, either, but they invited him still.

The participants said the spoiler did not play as big a part as expected in their decision making, but the results show it may have influenced them still. A bigger factor for their choices were the different roles the characters had. The participants often made decisions according to what they believed the character would choose. Be that as it may, there is still evidence that that spoilers indeed do affect player choice in a branching storyline game. There were instances when the spoiled group’s decision deviated from the control group’s in significant ways.

Spoilers do affect player choice. They do not only change how the player views the story, but how they act within it. Since they are more aware of what might happen they act nicer from the beginning and seemed more careful in their character interactions. Certainly, this might not be because of the spoiler itself, but because the spoiled player sees the story differently and may understand elements of it early on that the unspoiled player does not see until later.

7.2 Discussion

The low number of participants do not work to this study’s advantage. More participants would have created a more trustworthy result, but results as they are nevertheless viable, as they still adhere to the studies explored in the background and there are visible patterns to be seen. The fact that four participants in the same group, even if the number of participants is indeed low, choose similarly still points to something. That spoiled players were, in general, more polite and careful when communicating with the non-playable characters show that the spoiler had some effect nonetheless. The problem is that the patterns are not as clear as they would likely have been if more people had been interviewed.

By acting more careful the players may have believed they had more agency then they had. In truth, each character only had one choice that made a difference to the epilogue and the physician’s assistant character had none. The end scene with Gwyneira and Eurig was also a determining factor regarding the outcome of the epilogues. The interview itself never asked about the respondents’ enjoyment of the piece, but the disappointment a few felt regarding the ending was brought up. Players want to feel like they are in control of what is happening in the story (Murray, 2000, see Schott, 2006) but they did not feel that and neither did they...
know what choices they made to reach the ending they got. This was the most visible with participants in the unspoiled group.

The spoiled participants may not have felt it as strongly as they saw the artifact in a different way. They were somewhat aware of what was going to happen and chose accordingly to get their desired outcome. That outcome may not have been especially clear considering they were not too invested in the story or its characters, but they might have felt a greater sense of agency than the unspoiled players did. Those presented with the spoiler knew beforehand that their choices mattered and by inviting Eurig inside the chambers they got to the experience the branch of the story that gave them the most agency. Gameplay requires positive feelings of agency (Schott, 2006) and by inviting Eurig inside players truly get the chance to customize their experience and eventually receive one out of six possible endings. On the other hand, the players, mostly unspoiled participants, who did not invite Eurig in did not get to experience the agency the artifact had to offer and were given the one ending their choice had. The feeling of not being in control might have been different if asking Eurig to leave had included another deterrent within it that could give the player one of at least two epilogues.

The results could be used to understand spoilers’ role from the perspective of digital games and how it affects interactive media. Eventually, it could be used in marketing. If a type of spoiler that enhances the enjoyment of a game is found it could make players enjoy the game more when they play it, instead of feeling like the experience was destroyed. It could also be used to find out what a spoiled player finds interesting compared with an unspoiled player. The information could then be used in the very design of the game where the designers adapt to it.

It could also prove that some spoilers are better for certain target audiences. Looking back at the Reddit-post (Stormzone13, 2017) mentioned in the introduction, it is clear people have different opinions regarding spoilers. Cultural and social factors such as age, gender, and from where in the world someone comes from may play a part. One genre may be impacted differently than another, investment into a game may also be an important factor to consider. There are studies showing personality is another variable to be taken into account. Some people may enjoy to reflect and solve the intricate parts of an intrigue by themselves, and such a desire would not be compatible with a spoiler (Johnson and Rosenbaum, 2017).

Simply getting a game perspective compared with a short story perspective is important. With games being as new a medium as it is all new research is valuable. Studies have researched, for example, novels for many years and discovered interesting things like that of Christenfeld and Leavitt (2011) who found spoilers can enhance enjoyment and then inspired several more studies like those of Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) and Levine, Betxner, and Autry (2016). By researching more about games, the more we will come to understand them. Furthermore, by gaining further understanding within academia the further designers can apply those findings and ideas onto their games to create new experiences.

### 7.3 Future Work

Adjusting the spoiler by writing it differently or presenting it later on in the story could heavily impact the results. For example, if the spoiler was introduced after the first chapter, as was earlier suggested, instead of in the beginning the participants may have cared more about the information it gave. Replicating the experiments used in Christenfeld and Leavitt's (2011) study could also prove interesting. They used three experiments where they split the participants into groups and made each group read the same short story with different amount of spoilers. Letting participants in different groups read the same story with the spoiler placed either in the beginning or in the middle would also be a way to see how its placement affects the story from a game perspective.
Looking more into what spoilers affect factors such as age, gender, and culture could probably prove interesting, as well. Extending on Johnson and Rosenbaum’s (2017) research regarding a person’s personality’s role when it comes to the effect spoilers can have would most likely also prove beneficial. Spoilers affect on role immersion and role breaking could be dwelled deeper into as the results point to a certain amount of role breaking, especially when it comes to more impactful choices. This could be done through a longer interview with carefully planned follow-up questions to get as many details as possible explaining the players’ behaviors and thought processes.

Another way to continue with the work is changing the artifact. Additional larger, impactful choices could be added to see the relationship between role immersion and what the player themselves want to do. However, deepening the players’ connection to the characters and the story could prove to be the most giving change. Several participants mentioned how the fate of the characters did not really matter to them, but if they did matter chances are spoiled participants might try harder to get a desirable outcome. This could be achieved by writing fanfiction of a work and bring in fans of said work. The participants would then already have a connection to the characters. Shortening the artifact down and relying on two point-of-view characters at most might also increase player connection to the characters, as there are then fewer details to keep in mind.
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Appendix – Interview Questions

- How many hours a week do you spend playing video games?
- What games do you usually play?
- What did you find interesting with the piece you played through?
- Did you notice why Eurig wanted to kill Gwyneira?
- How was your thought process regarding whether to invite Eurig in or not?
- How do you feel about Eurig?

A question only asked to the spoiled group:

- Was there one or several choices you thought more about, or chose differently for because of the information you received earlier?