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**"It's About Power": Spoilers and Fan Hierarchy**  
**in On-Line *Buffy* Fandom**



Within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power.

Henry Jenkins, 1995:59

"It's not about right, not about wrong ... it's about power"  
The First Evil, "Lessons," 7001

[1] One of the most prevalent issues within the narrative of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) is the idea of what it means to be a Slayer and, inextricably linked to this, is the notion of power. This theme is present throughout as the characters jostle for power with their parents, other authority figures, and the various 'Big Bads' that pass through Sunnydale. Moreover, there is an under-lying theme of how power needs to be managed and controlled, and how abuse of power can lead to negative consequences, such as jail in the case of rogue slayer Faith or for Principal Snyder, a gruesome demise within the jaws of a giant snake. Tensions between those with power and those without it are constantly negotiated throughout the narrative. In 'Checkpoint' (5012) Buffy argues "I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I finally figured out why. Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them". Indeed, if Season Seven could be encapsulated in a single phrase it would be the line, "It's about power", uttered by the First Evil in 'Lessons' (7001) and referred to throughout the season.

[2] In a series so pre-occupied with ideas of power and hierarchy, it is interesting to observe how this theme may have carried over into the fandom that surrounds the show. Zweerink and Gatson (2002) have noted how fans were initially drawn to the on-line fan community of the BtVS message board The Bronze. However, "with that community [...] came the very class structure [of High School] Whedon sought to satirise" (2002:242), and a similar hierarchy of power and prestige then manifested itself within that on-line community. It is worth considering if, and how, the themes of power and hierarchy so prevalent within the text have enmeshed themselves within the accompanying on-line spoiler community of BtVS fandom.

### **"I've got a theory!" Theoretical Background**

[3] Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work 'Distinction' (1984) critics such as Thornton (1995) have used cultural and social capital to examine fandoms such as cult media, or in Thornton's study, dance music. Thornton uses the term 'subcultural capital' and concludes that 'subcultural capital' "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (1995:11). Similarly, it has been noted that "'subcultural capital' [...] is also useful in the discussion of fan cultures generally, since it implies an assertion of difference and status which would not be recognized by the wider society, given the generally low cultural prestige of fan cultures" (Thomas, 2002:10). The links between cultural and social capital, identified by Bourdieu as "the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...] which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital"

(1986:51),

are made clear in much research, and it is uncontroversial to suggest that, within fandoms, subcultural capital can foster fan social capital. Nancy Baym notes "that knowledge of the events that happened on the soaps are a form of cultural capital because it enables participation in the social groups that form around soap" (1998:118). Subcultural capital enables fans to participate in fan discussion, and accrue fan social capital but despite this, the notion of social capital has been sidelined in much academic work such as that of John Fiske (1992) and Sarah Thornton (1995). Bourdieu himself emphasizes cultural and economic capital, and although he "repeatedly places social capital close to the heart of his analysis as one of the three fundamental species of capital [...] it remains curiously under-developed" (Schuller, 2000:5). It is my intention in this research to redress this balance, by studying fan subcultural and fan social capital in equal depth through examination of a specific on-line BtVS fan community; the community of spoiler sources and spoiler whores.

[4] It has been argued that "communities emerge in cyberspace when a number of users create avatars that return again and again to the same informational space" (Jordan, 1999:100), and "an on-line community is a community if participants imagine themselves as a community"(Bell, 2001:102). It is this definition that I am using in my research. The on-line groups of BtVS fans I am investigating form communities by virtue of their shared laws, rules, and codes of practice and interpretation. Community members may not be geographically close, but they are in the same virtual 'place' when they are posting and engaging in, what is often, real-time discussion. Critics have argued that the term 'community' suggests an overly positive view of on-line groups. However, I would counter that 'real-life' communities are not homogenous either, and are stratified by class and other factors and, although the Internet does not simply reflect off-line activities or act as "a perfectly transparent form of mediation" (Hills, 2002:175), such stratification is visible in the hierarchies created in many on-line communities. Furthermore, fans have been a typically marginalised group, perceived as a "scandalous category" (Jenkins, 1992:16). However, fans can also marginalise and 'other' within a particular fan culture. Therefore, fandoms can no longer be seen as utopian, as was the trend with early academic work, such as Camille Bacon-Smith's assertion that "the media fan community has no established hierarchy" (1992:41), but rather should be viewed as "a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status" (Hills, 2002:46). Hierarchies can be observed on-line through fan activity on websites, message boards and news groups. Kirsten Pullen has argued that the Internet has not eradicated fan conflicts over differing interpretations of their chosen fan texts as "despite the aggressive, sustained fan activity visible on the Web, the Internet should not be assumed to have created utopian fan communities [...] [the Internet] has not necessarily created a single, unified fan position or practice" (2000:60).

[5] MacDonald's 1998 study of on-line Quantum Leap fans does not rigorously critique fan hierarchies but provides clear definitions of five different types of hierarchy, which are hierarchy of knowledge, fandom level or quality, access, leaders and venue. She notes that "hierarchies exist along multiple dimensions" (1998:136) and argues that fans who are at the top of all five of these hierarchies are 'executive fans'. It is my intention to examine where the fan practice of 'spoiling' places fans within these hierarchies, and whether they contribute to fans' subcultural and fan social capital, and to the discursive power that they possess.

[6] Discussions of power within this research refer to the notion of 'discursive power', as considered by Tulloch (1995) who notes that most senior and powerful fans "have discursive power in establishing the 'informed' exegesis for their subculture of fans. Thus they establish and control an important reading formation" (1995:150). Fan cultural and discursive power comes from having intimate and detailed knowledge of a show's history and being able to control the ways in which fellow fans read and interpret the text. Fans are generally unable to exercise institutional power over producers and have instead been perceived as "a powerless elite [...] experts who have little control over either the conditions of production or reception of 'their' show [...] their power is the power to gloss, and to write the aesthetic history of the show [...] thus they establish an officially constituted reading formation which supervises reading of the show" (1995:145). The way in which fans can enforce a specific 'reading formation' around the text has become more apparent with the proliferation of Internet fandom. Fan on-line postings comprise a fan "shadow- text" (Hills, 2002:176) which has been described as a "serialisation of

the fan audience itself" (Hills, 2002:177). By examining these postings, one is able to discern key topics and areas of fan discussion and examine the ways in which executive fans (such as those who run their own websites) are able to control topics of discussion and maintain their own high level of discursive power. Accordingly, spoilers enable fans to accrue discursive fan power, as this practice is linked to knowledge and to enforcing fan discussions and ways of reading the text. Spoilers allow fans to sustain a reading formation based on narrative speculation and trusted sources and enforce this via exclusion of the unspoiled from discussions and through the amount of knowledge that spoiler sources permit fans to have.

## **Methodology**

[7] To solicit respondents to complete questionnaires via email I posted on the Buffy Cross and Stake (<http://www.voy.com/13746>), the Tabula Rasa (<http://www.btvS-tabularasa.net>) and Bloody Awful Poet Society (<http://bloodyawfulpoet.com>) Yahoo e-mail lists, the Ducks Babble Board (<http://clik.to/buffyrant>), and the Shippers United (<http://shippersunited.com/archive/main.html>) board. I was contacted by twenty people, and e-mailed them the appropriate questionnaires. Of these, I received back eighteen questionnaires from spoiled fans and two from unspoiled fans.

[8] My decision to solicit answers to questions rather than analysing on-line postings means that respondents may not always be entirely truthful in their responses as on the Internet "people can and do, present and explore multiple personae. This clearly limits the explanatory value both of the basic information provided and of any inferences about the respondents" (Bruhn Jensen, 2000:183). In responses to questionnaires, fans can be explicitly untruthful about their identities, particularly in relation to more generic demographic data such as age, location, occupation, sexuality and gender and can also covertly present a version of themselves that is not entirely truthful, and one must always be wary of this. Fans cannot fail to be aware of the ethnographic interest in them and, in a study of on-line X-Philes Matt Hills (2002) notes that "over the period of study, academic surveillance of the newsgroup itself constituted an insistent newsgroup presence, soliciting fan testimony as ethnographic data. As such, those posting to the newsgroup could not fail to be aware of their status as an 'object of study', or as a resource in the production of academic work" (Hills, 200:173). Accordingly, fans attempt to create an impression of both themselves and their particular interpretive communities through the responses they give to solicited research and "what people say or write about their experiences, preferences, habits etc cannot be taken entirely at face value...[reactions] must be regarded as texts, as discourses people produce when they want to express, or have to account for their own preference" (Ang, 1982:11). It is safe to assume that, aware that their words are being analyzed, fans may attempt to write seemingly informed intelligent and 'academic' responses to research questions. However, my status as both a researcher and a fan may have encouraged fans to give more honest responses to my questions and it is worth questioning "What happens when the research is also part of the audience being researched, and when the power differential and the dynamic between researcher and researched are transformed by this shared belonging? How are the research context and the data generated changed by the researchers' dual, or split, role – partly objective observer, partly member of the group, sharing anecdotes and experiences?" (Thomas, 2002:11).

[9] Furthermore, Nancy Baym has critiqued the way that "it is easy to select only cases that confirm researcher beliefs, creating a reflection of researcher assumptions rather than a valid (if necessarily incomplete) story of an [on-line] community" (Baym, 2000:25). However, my research is by no means exhaustive and I am not claiming that my small sample is representative of all on-line fans as it is limited, due to constraints of time and space, to just five on-line message boards or groups, and due to the nature of the research these are from a very narrow faction of the BtVS fandom.

[10] To solicit 'executive fans' as respondents I e-mailed seven of the most prominent spoiler sources who were named by the respondents to my research on spoiled fans. These were Tensai at Spoiler Slayer (<http://www.spoilerslayer.com>); Hercules at Ain't-It-Cool-News (<http://www.aintitcool.com>), AngelX at Buffy Cross and Stake (<http://www.angelicslayer.com>), Wendy at Tabula Rasa Spoiler Zone (<http://www.btvS-tabularasa.net/spoilerzone>) and independent spoiler sources The Partyman, William the Poet and DrLloyd11. Although this method of recruiting respondents is not representative, there are actually very few spoiler sources within the on-line community, and these seven sources were the ones

most often cited by my respondents, and the ones I was aware of due to my own experiences within the BtVS spoiler community. Of these only The Partyman and another anonymous source completed the questions I e-mailed to them. Perhaps the reluctance of spoiler sources to comment on their fan practices is due the very nature of that activity. Many such sources work within the industry that produces and promotes BtVS and to be 'outed' as such a source would invariably compromise their position. Indeed, paranoia regarding detection of one's identity is not uncommon among spoiler sources, as one commented to me, "there may be things you may want to know that I might be uncomfortable discussing through traceable email. (As you can imagine, there's sometimes an awful lot that goes on in the spoiler community that people generally don't know about). Not that I'm paranoid or untrusting, but a certain amount of cloak and dagger goes with the territory".

## Studying Spoilers

[11] Spoilers are pieces of information regarding an upcoming plot or character development on a television show that is revealed to fans before the relevant episode airs. It is worth noting the derogatory connotations of the term itself which, according to its dictionary definition, means to "make or become useless or unsatisfactory; ruin character of by indulgence; decay, go bad" (The Little Oxford Dictionary Sixth Edition, page 536). This devaluing suggests that spoilers are 'bad' and insinuates that fans that choose to be spoiled are indulgent, greedy and should feel guilty about this fan practice.

[12] For the purposes of this research the term 'spoiler' applies only to information which is made available before an episode airs in the United States. Once an event occurs on-screen, it ceases to be a spoiler, although "the UK [BtVS] scheduling situation [...] is highly complex. The freshest news undoubtedly will be a spoiler to all UK viewers" (Hill and Calcutt, 2001). This US/UK divide goes some way to explaining the allure of spoilers for fans who reside outside the US, contributing to the development of what has been called "'just-in-time' fandom" (Hills, 2002:178).

[13] The different types of spoiler that have been identified through my research are episode titles, information on writers and directors, basic plot outlines, information on guest stars (and possible returning characters), information on character deaths, information on romantic developments, information on locations used, extracts from shooting scripts and wildfeeds (special transmissions of a show that networks use to transmit to local television stations). These spoiler types can be gleaned from a variety of resources, including industry sources (where the majority of spoilers originate), convention reports, location shoot reports and interviews with cast and production staff. These spoiler types and sources vary in their reliability and also in their 'intensity'. For instance, a fan knowing the title of an upcoming episode is less 'intense' a spoiler than having read the wildfeed and knowing exactly what, and how, something will happen before the episode airs. Spoilers are not a new phenomenon, but it is only with the advent of the Internet that they have become so widely and easily available. However, despite the recent deluge of research into on-line fandom, studies have tended to disavow or simply ignore the importance of this phenomenon.

[14] Henry Jenkins' 1995 work on the alt.tv.twinpeaks group acknowledges the metaphorical currency that spoilers have, as "within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power"(1995:59). He also discusses the netiquette of posting spoiler warnings, thus "allowing viewers to make a rational choice between their desire for mastery over the program universe and the immediacy of a first viewing"(1995:59). However, he does not elaborate on the possible fan divide and conflict that could occur between spoiled and unspoiled fans. Arguably, this omission is due to Jenkins' study of the Twin Peaks group as a particular interpretative community and his focus on the groups' "reading practices and strategies" (1995:53). Jenkins' primary concern is the ways in which this community makes the same interpretations based on the same available information. To address the possibility that some fans may not be spoiled would indicate that they were not in possession of the same amount of knowledge as spoiled fans, and Jenkins would have to concede that the alt.tv.twinpeaks community was, in some way, split. This would undermine his otherwise consistent and convincing narrative of this particular interpretative community.

[15] Nancy Baym (2000) devotes just two pages to spoilers in her study of the conduct "interpersonal relationships" (2000:32) in an online community of soap fans. Her focus on the affective ties of the

community means that she is rarely critical of online relationships and interactions. Baym emphasises the more utopian view of this particular fan community, and according to her portrayal of the r.a.t.s newsgroup as a community, spoilers act only as a means for igniting discussion, prompting responses that are "highly evaluative, voicing opinions on whether or not the events described are desirable, and how they are likely to unfold" (2000:87). Although Baym concedes that many fans prefer to remain unspoiled, her description of how fans use spoiler warnings is again part of her attempt to accentuate the positive aspects of on-line community. For Baym this spoiled-unspoiled divide is just another way in which the r.a.t.s community works to avoid conflict and maintain its harmoniousness, and the possibility of discontent between the two groups, and issues of fan hierarchy and power struggles are therefore ignored.

[16] It can be argued that spoiled and unspoiled fans occupy a hierarchy of power; with spoiler sources positioned as dominant, followed by spoiled on-line fans and then unspoiled on-line fans. Also, these fans will be in possession of the greatest levels of fan 'discursive power', as they are able to control the flow of spoilers to fans and to set the agenda of fan discussion through the revelation or concealment of specific spoilers. It is also my supposition that the majority of spoiler sources, or executive fans will be male, for the following reason.

[17] In a study of on-line soap fans, Harrington and Bielby refer to spoilers as 'fan gossip'. Gossip is widely regarded as being "predominantly a female genre of talk" (Guendouzi, 2001:32), concerned with the silly and the trivial. For example, John Fiske notes that "the word gossip is clearly from a phallogocentric discourse; its connotations are of triviality and femininity, and it is opposed, by implication, to serious male talk" (1987:77). The proposition that spoilers are gossip can explain why they have been devalued and seen as unworthy of serious academic scrutiny. "Specifically feminine cultural tastes [can be placed] alongside other culturally disparaged forms" (Thomas, 2002:175) as the feminine has long been seen as inferior to those cultural phenomenon which are coded as masculine. However, I wish to suggest that the phenomenon of the on-line spoiler is more complex than the traditional 'masculine = valued' and 'feminine = devalued' binary opposition would suggest. It is my argument that we can separate the notion of a spoiler into two separate parts; the initial spoiler itself, and the fan speculation that follows. The spoiler itself (if it comes from a reliable spoiler source) can usually be regarded as fact, (as Baym notes, "in contrast to updates, credibility is an important issue underlying spoilers" (2000: 87)) whereas the speculation is, if not entirely fictitious, certainly more imaginative. The spoiler signifies knowledge (a spoiler has to be verified by a number of sources before it can be regarded as reliable), whereas the speculation implies assumption. Furthermore, the spoiler can be seen as being objective (it is taken as fact, as being an accurate statement about what is going to happen on a show) whereas, according to the binary opposition I have set up, speculation is subjective (as it is merely a fan's opinion about what will, or should, happen). [See Figure 1].

Figure 1

SPOILER	SPOILER RELATED SPECULATION
Masculine	Feminine
Fact	Fiction/imagination
Knowledge	Assumption
Reliable	Unreliable
Serious	Silly/fantastical
Substantiated	Unsubstantiated

Objective	Subjective
Talk	Gossip

[18] From these oppositions I am suggesting that the spoiler may be coded as masculine, and that it is the speculation (hence, the 'gossip') that can be coded as feminine. Therefore, I would argue that spoiler sources occupy a dominant and culturally masculinised position. This is potentially indicative of a gender-related power divide within this fan community, according male fans occupying masculinised roles the power to grant knowledge to the primarily female on-line speculators.

[19] In MacDonald's (1998) work on hierarchies of fandom although she gives an in-depth analysis of the five types of hierarchy and fan on-line activities, at no point does MacDonald use the term 'spoiler'. This omission is striking because spoilers can be seen as evidence of all five of the hierarchy types that MacDonald identifies. Furthermore, she describes how fans post location shoot reports and up-coming episode titles, and these are two of the most common types of spoiler that I have identified. Perhaps MacDonald disavows the term 'spoiler' to try to avoid the negative associations that it could connote through its association with fan gossip? MacDonald focuses on how a small group of female Quantum Leap fans formed their own newsgroups to avoid on-line harassment from male fans "for being what one fan called 'too silly'" (1998:146) and for indulging in gossip about "Scott Bakula's cute butt or [...] character relationships" (1998:148). If spoilers do signify gossip and therefore connote the trivial, any reference to them by MacDonald could confirm the assumption about the female fans' concern with the 'silly'. This would therefore undermine her constructed narrative of the female fans' topics of conversation as equally valid as those of the male Quantum Leap fans.

### **Pleasures of Spoilers: Rationality and Irrationality**

[20] It is worth considering the pleasures of being spoiled and how this relates to the ways in which fans defend and justify this fan practice and attempt to negotiate their bids for forms of capital and power. One of the greatest pleasures of being spoiled is the thrill of trying to solve the mystery of what will happen in the series' narrative, and this is usually coded as a 'rational' fan activity. Spoilers usually give only the basic outline of future events, and the fun for fans is to be found in collectively examining evidence and discussing narrative possibilities. For example, Jenkins (1995) emphasised the pleasures that Twin Peaks fans got from sifting through textual and extra-textual information, 'cracking the code' and figuring out how the narrative would unfold. Indeed many of my respondents defined the pleasures of spoilers in these terms, commenting "I like the opportunity to speculate [...] It's fun to piece an episode together from a few bits of information that you can get from sources. It's exciting" (Foggi). Another rational explanation for reading spoilers is impatience. Spoilers have been perceived as characteristic of the "'I want it now' generation [who say] to hell with trailers and PR releases. They want to sample the goods" (Sutherland, 2002). In this view fans are making a rational, logical decision to read spoilers and are motivated by impatience rather than by an emotional need to know what happens. However, problems arise when one queries how rational the concept of impatience actually is, or considers the implications when a fan's 'rational' impatience is motivated by their 'irrational' emotional desire to find out what happens as soon as possible. For instance, one respondent commented that "I love, care and worry about these characters. Yes, I intellectually understand that they are fictional, but that does not stop me from being emotionally attached to them. So, I have to know what is going to happen to them ASAP" (Gwynevere1).

[21] Another rational reason is the conscious desire for knowledge to enable fans' greater participation, and often status, with fan peers. The prevalence of the previously mentioned phenomenon of 'just-in-time fandom' has certainly contributed to the increase in spoilers. If fans discuss and communicate immediately after (or even during) the airing of a show, then "falling out of step with this spatio-temporal rhythm means falling out of the newsgroups' mutually reinforcing sphere of anticipation and speculation, or indeed revealing a geographical difference which marks the poster as inevitable and informationally 'alien' to the group's US-based composition" (Hills, 2002:176). The fan is therefore "subordinated within the hierarchy of the group" (Hills, 2002:177) and has less subcultural and fan

social capital than other fans. This problem is one that must be continually negotiated by fans torn between wanting to sustain an element of suspense when watching the shows, and being involved in the most up-to-date gossip with other fans. Indeed, "living in the UK it is pretty hard not to be spoiled to some extent, because the shows are shown in the US months ahead of their UK showing" (Anon.). Fans who are spoiled are privileged, as "people who read the wildfeeds and stuff discuss the eppie [episode] generally earlier [...] than the unspoiled ones so the latter are a bit 'late' then and a lot of discussion has already taken place" (Frances).

[22] In contrast are the more personal, emotional and 'irrational' reasons why fans read spoilers. In their study of soap fans, Harrington and Bielby (1995) noted that "narrative speculation provides so much pleasure that viewers wrestle with whether or not" (1995:129) to be spoiled. This characterises the fan as self-absent, fighting the uncontrollable urge to be spoiled. This irrationality contributes to the common analogy of spoilers as a drug, with fans consuming them obsessively, almost against their will. Indeed, this addiction metaphor can be seen in much of the writing on the spoiler phenomenon. One article laments the fact that "it's a shame that no support group exists for this addiction" (Erenburg, 2003) and Emily Nussbaum confesses her 'spoiler whore' status, saying, "I know too much. Each Tuesday night [...] I carry more information that could possibly be good for me. I know the title of the episode to come, the name of the writer, often the basic plot. Occasionally if I really can't resist, I've already read the 'wildfeed' [...] And while I try to avoid the spoilers - plot revelations that ruin surprise twists -its hard!" (2002).

[23] Many fans acknowledge the seeming irrationality of their practices, often through the use of "defensive qualifiers ...[such as] 'it's sad but...'" (Barker and Brooks, 1998:273). Fans can avoid the stigma of 'sadness' "by self-ironising [...] by acknowledging the obsessiveness, [one can] save [oneself] from the charge" (Barker and Brooks, 1998:273), and this is a route of self-deprecation fans utilise, alluding to themselves as 'sad' or 'geeky'. Respondents comment that "This will sound really lame. The show is my life...[I'm] in need of serious help" (Sharon C.) and "What's wrong with me?" (Rachel), using humour to avoid any derogatory assumptions that could be made about them. Similarly many evoke the drug metaphor that I have discussed above, commenting that "it's a shameless, shameless addiction." (Rachel). They also use their emotional investments in the characters to explain their need to be spoiled. They comment that "its crazy, but lots of things happen when you are so attached to characters. You need to know beforehand to be able to handle it" (Foggi). The examples most often cited in this context were the controversial Spike-Buffy 'attempted rape' scene and Tara's death in 'Seeing Red' (6019).

[24] However, not all fans find it easy to distinguish between logical and illogical reasons for their desire to be spoiled. The two became blurred together in some responses, such as "[I read spoilers because] Australia is so far behind [...] but now it is something akin to an addiction" (Debbi), or that "at first it was just because I knew there would be a year and a half gap between seasons for me, being in England and having no access to Sky [...] Now I'm just addicted to speculation and posting on the boards"(Adam). This illustrates the ways that rationally motivated fans can, over time, become 'addicted' to spoilers. Arguably, this could be due to fans' desire to obtain high levels of subcultural and fan social capital as a result of their spoiled status. However, as discussed below, fans are uncomfortable with those who overtly express this desire and could prefer to code themselves as 'addicted' and therefore helpless and passive, thus avoiding the potential fan stigma which could occur if one explicitly declared their longing for greater levels of capital and subcultural power.

### **Spoilers, Fan Knowledge and Subcultural Capital**

[25] It is uncontroversial to suggest that fan subcultural capital is dependent on the amount of knowledge of the fan object that the fan possesses. In his examination of websites devoted to The Exorcist, Julian Hoxter concluded that "the acquisition of fan knowledge is about learning, certainly, but [also] signifies an overwhelming need for security" (2000:179). For Hoxter the collection of knowledge is a way for fans to form affective links to one another through shared information and viewing experiences. He does not, however, consider the ways in which this eagerness to collect and display this knowledge acts as a way for the fan to display their subcultural capital and to accrue power over less educated fans. Obtaining information about the object of fandom is crucial in gaining status and prestige

within the fan community as to have little basic knowledge would immediately mark a fan as inferior and would lead to them being dismissed as a "know-nothing dilettante" (Kermode, 1997:58). Indeed, John Fiske has noted how fan knowledge "serves to distinguish within the fan community. The experts – those who have accumulated the most knowledge – gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power" (1992:43).

[26] My results show that it is widely perceived by fans that the spoiled are more knowledgeable than the unspoiled. Fans commented that spoiled fans are "More genuine? No. More knowledgeable? Yes" (Jenny) and "I guess they are more genuine fans because they are so involved with the show that actually seeing it is less important than knowing what is about to happen" (Kate). However, again this is a complex issue with fans often making value judgements about spoiled or unspoiled fans. For example, one respondent stated that "I know we're equal but I think I was a better fan when spoiled" (Anon), whilst another argued that "I tend to think that it's the more obsessive fan that is spoiled, because they need to know everything about the show, past and future" (Adam). However, whilst most spoiled respondents were keen to assert that they did not consider themselves to be 'better' or more 'genuine' fans than the unspoiled, the fact that they persist with this fan practice despite it often reducing their enjoyment of the show is telling. They commented that; "I didn't enjoy the show as much if I knew everything that was going to happen" (Ayleen) and "I do believe it detracts from the viewing experience because you're not surprised" (Sharon C.). Fans also explained their need for spoilers through their love of the fan debate that accompanies them, with one male respondent admitting that "While I think the show would be more satisfying to me without spoilers, I can't do without the discussion" (Adam), and another stating "the pleasure I get from the spoilers more than balances out the loss of pleasure from watching the show" (Anon).

[27] So why, then, do fans read spoilers even when such a practice detracts from the enjoyment of the BtVS text itself? I posit that it is their need to be 'in the know', to have information before other fans and thus covertly cement their subcultural capital through the acquisition of knowledge or to increase fan social capital through discussion of spoilers.

### **Spoilers and Fan Social Capital**

[28] It has long been argued that talk can be used to gain power and to assume authority over others, and it has been "seen as both a means of reinforcing group membership, and as a means of social control" (Guendouzi, 2001:33). Indeed, it has been suggested that "gossip has a transactional function and may be used as a form of social exchange, items of gossip being exchanged in order to gain [...] symbolic capital"(Guendouzi, 2001:33). If spoilers are gossip, they can be used by fans to exercise control over others, and the exchange of fan gossip in the form of 'spoilers' can increase fan social capital. Many fans felt that their status as 'spoiler-whores' had allowed them to participate in a unique on-line community and befriend fellow fans. Fans "talk with the people at BC&S almost every day and I feel like I know them as friends" (Gwynevere1) and "there's a distinct community on the boards, especially the Cross and Stake [...] a real camaraderie between posters, and friendships made. And quite a lot of posts are not about the show" (Adam). These on-line friendships tended to be based on affective ties, as "[On Tabula Rasa] they chat on-line, and support each other as friends etc during any trying times in their real life, and I believe they feel part of a select community" (Debbi). Friendships are also based on the shared norms of a particular interpretative community because "the spoiled have so much creative room to spout theories or speculations (based on the spoilers) that the community is immensely entertaining" (Rachel). These friendships are a way for fans to cultivate fan social capital by getting to know other fans. This automatically privileges the spoiled fans as they have a common ground on which to base their relationships whereas the unspoiled are deprived of activities centred on the decoding of spoilers and predicting story lines. Spoiled fans have greater social capital as "it's more difficult to make friends if you're unspoiled because you can't get involved in half the discussion. So you're left out a bit [...] I haven't really come across any specifically unspoiled boards or communities" (Kate). However, spoiled fans can attempt to gain further fan social capital through their on-line participation with the ultimate goal being to attain discursive power and achieve the position of being able to control fan discussion to enforce their own interpretations through their subcultural capital. As one respondent commented, "when you befriend certain 'sources' you get more involved in the initial breaking of spoilers where not many people are involved [...] so yes it's a little clique-y" (Foggi). Those



fans that are spoiler sources have greater knowledge of upcoming narrative events and therefore greater subcultural capital. As these fans tend to be the most dominant, it seems that the more privileged fans become, the fewer of them there are.

### **The Spoiler Hierarchy - Executive Fans, Spoiler Whores and the 'Innocent' Unspoiled**

[29] The fans who are positioned as dominant within the BtVS spoiler subculture are 'executive fans', a phenomenon into which there has been little prior research. MacDonald observes that "hierarchy is important on many levels [...] outsiders to fan discourse (such as journalists and academics) will usually be directed either by fans or production people to fans who have achieved a certain level of recognition or authority. The community's determination of who is an authority coincides with the authority's position within various fan hierarchies" (1998:139). However although she critiques executive fans' "ability to determine who is and is not worthy of participation" (1998:139), MacDonald does not scrutinize the ways they can exercise power over other fans through control of knowledge (subcultural capital) and social constraints (social capital). I am narrowing this concept of the executive fan to spoiler sources, those fans that post spoiler information on-line and often act as the conduit between fans and the industry that produces BtVS.

[30] There are many examples of the executive fan within the BtVS online fan communities I examined. As noted by MacDonald (1998) control over venue is important to establishing oneself at the top of the fan hierarchy, and it is the case within BtVS fandom that those spoiler sources who run Websites and/or message boards can exercise control over those fans who frequent them. As well as rules on flaming and netiquette, one prolific BtVS spoiler board, The Buffy Cross and Stake has a stringent list of banned topics, including discussion of character sexuality, the issue of Spike's redemption and the Buffy/Spike relationship (<http://www.angelicsunset.com/faq.html>). Although space prohibits a comprehensive citation of the various rules and regulations, this is a practise undertaken by the majority of fan sites I researched. Through such rules, the executive fans who run these sites can strictly govern topics of conversation and control debate through these "benign dictatorships" (Smith and Kollock, 1999:5) which allow the owners to exercise control but with the informed consent of other fans. This ultimately leads me to question the ways the executive fans can stifle some aspects of fan discussion and this works to contradict views of fandom as interpretative communities "where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated" (Jenkins, 1992:86). The presence of executive fans leads one to ask how this can be true if fans cannot debate issues such as Spike's soul, and other diegetic events that are crucial to the unfolding BtVS narrative?

[31] Spoiler sources themselves are keen to perpetuate the typical notion of fandom as egalitarian and non-hierarchical, commenting that spoiled and unspoiled fans are equal because "its all a matter of personal choice. Some people cannot enjoy a show if they are spoiled. I just want them to enjoy the show" (Kelly). This performed altruism however, seems at odds with the levels of power and control that this source possesses through her ability to stifle and control fan discussions through the suppression of particular spoilers. In addition to withholding spoilers "at the request of my sources", Kelly also attests that "during Season Seven I have deliberately withheld spoilers by my own choice [...] I have been doing this either when there is a major plot point that will be a huge surprise or narrative twist". However, this begs the question, who gives her, and other spoiler sources, the legitimacy to control fan knowledge, interpretation and discussion in this way?

[32] As previously discussed fan power is "discursive rather than institutional" (Tulloch, 1995:149) and is dependent on the ways in which fans can control textual interpretation and perform "an important agenda-setting function" (Tulloch, 1995:150) by deciding what is and is not a valid topic for discussion. Executive fans are responsible for enforcing and controlling appropriate fan interpretations, what Jenkins (1992) refers to as 'the right way' of reading a text. He notes the importance of "a certain common ground, a set of shared assumptions, interpretations and rhetorical strategies, inferential moves, semantic fields and metaphors [...] as preconditions for meaningful debate over specific interpretations" (1992:89). My research seems to have substantiated my earlier postulation that spoiler sources would possess the greatest levels of power, due to their ability to control the flow of spoiler information to other fans and to stimulate or stifle fan discussion regarding particular upcoming narrative developments.

[33] As "control of knowledge is a major form of social power" (Brown, 1994:132), the possession and distribution of spoilers imbue the spoiler source with knowledge and therefore subcultural capital. Not only did they obtain the information but also they got it first, giving them a distinct advantage over the majority of BtVS fans. Accordingly they achieve prestige and status and are usually respected and admired by other fans. Jenkins (1995) has acknowledged that "knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net, and so there is a compulsion to be the first to circulate new information and to be among the first to possess it" (1995:59). However, the two spoiler sources that responded to my questionnaires were keen to emphasise their passivity and stress that they didn't actively seek out the spoilers or intentionally aim to increase their power and capital. The Partyman says that he started posting spoilers "when I started getting hold of them! [...] I'm just a fan who got so addicted that spoilers started finding their way to me!". Another source, Kelly, also frames her involvement with spoilers in a passive way, stating that she was "taken in by so many foilers, I thought if I could just track who said what, I could figure out who had a reputation for accuracy. Later, people started sending me information, so I posted it".

[34] These responses and attitudes negate the possibility of executive fan power. The Partyman responded to the question of whether he sees himself as being in a powerful position saying "No. But I am aware that some folk do see me that way. Spoilers are addictive. It's maybe like being a drug dealer. Spoiler addicts need their fix, I supply". Evoking this common drug analogy is rather negative, and again alludes to the fact that the spoiler source merely serves the needs of the spoiler whores, and does not seek status or prestige, but rather, performs a necessary service. As previously discussed, this analogy also devalues the spoiled fans by positioning them as uncontrollable addicts, who demand fresh spoilers. Similarly, the discourse of professionalism that spoiled fans alluded to in their discussion of spoiler sources seems to be taken quite seriously by the executive fans themselves. They comment on themselves as having "quite a responsibility" (The Partyman) and also adhere to self-enforced professional codes of conduct. They retain some spoilers at the request of the original source, frowning upon those sources that flout this unspoken rule. The Partyman comments that "if one doesn't post, its because a promise has been made not to, and we take things like that very seriously. (Well, most of us do)". Situated within this discourse of professionalism, are values such as "the responsibility to be as accurate as possible so people are not misled" (Kelly) and accuracy and credibility, as "folk look to people like myself to confirm or debunk the alleged spoilage" (The Partyman).

[35] However, despite his protestations that he does not actively seek power and capital, he admitted that "Sometimes I've chosen to be cryptic [...] often it's just a case of wanting to spread things out a bit. Why post a whole script summary when you can drip the information out over a week or two?" Kelly, whilst dismissing the notion of herself as 'powerful' because "my power is only that which others give me. On a realistic level, I have no power. The writers are the ones who tell the stories", concedes that "there is [...] ego involved".

[36] Spoiler sources are likely to have the highest levels of fan social capital, through their contact with other fans and industry sources. By the very virtue of what they do, they are popular with other fans as they provide information which fans want, or need to know, and can provide links between fans and producers. Therefore, it is crucial for online fans to try to 'know' the spoiler sources (although it is open to debate how much one can really 'know' another on-line persona) and to win their favour. This is attempted through a mix of friendliness, gratitude, flattery (often bordering on obsequiousness), regular posting and sometimes personal E-mail communication. Indeed, Reid (1999) has commented that executive fans such as Gods and Wizards in MUD's "may often be the subject of respect and even fawning as users attempt to curry favour and gain privileges, but the atmosphere of respect which often surrounds them can lead to favour users who are prepared to offer adulation, and to pass over those who are not" (1999:120). Fans attempt to avoid disagreement or dispute with these executive fans as they control knowledge and the fans' future social capital. A fan banned from a message board quickly loses his social standing within the fan community and may find himself ostracised from numerous other sites. However, being a well-know spoiler source is not always a positive experience. Some other fans can be dismissive and resentful, and seek to undermine the spoiler sources' legitimacy and authority, particularly when those sources have news concerning fans' favourite characters and storylines. The Partyman mentions how "Spuffy (Spike/Buffy) fans wanted to hunt me down and kill me after my

infamous 'Fish and Ships' post (claiming there would be less emphasis on relationships) pre Season 7". Kelly also states that she "reported that a character would die on a board devoted to that character, and the board members took it badly and attacked me [...] it can hurt when you pass on news and people either refuse to take you seriously or ignore you". However, it is likely that such incidents are disliked by sources, not for their personal impact upon the individual, but for the aspersions they cast over the credibility and respect of that source. Indeed, this is often the case in a variety of fandoms when certain fans become executive fans or 'net celebrities'. In a study of online Xena fans, Debbie Casetta has noted how jealousy and bitterness can cause rifts in fandoms as "conflict and criticism all too often will result when someone makes a name for her or himself within fandom. Often she or he found themselves as a target from other fans with an axe to grind [...] these fans tend to be judged quite harshly by other fans [...] resentment is very much a part of what goes on" (Casetta, 2000). Tensions also run high between the various spoiler sources and The Partyman notes how "A certain spoiler queen wanted to hunt me down and kill me due to her frustration and jealousy that I seemingly had information she did not". Therefore, although spoiler sources seem to have the most power in a spoiler hierarchy, they continually jostle between themselves for higher levels of legitimacy, power and subcultural and fan social capital.

[37] Bourdieu has noted that those with high social capital "are sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known [...] they do not need to 'make the acquaintance' of all their 'acquaintances'; they are known to more people than they know" (Bourdieu, 1986:52). More fans know of spoiler sources than that source knows of fans and this cements the fan social capital of the source. Their name is bandied around countless websites, boards and lists, and they are quickly conferred status and prestige by other fans and spoiler sources. Thus a network of executive fans exists within the on-line BtVS community, working to privilege some fans over others, and ensuring that these fans are accorded the appropriate levels of power and continue to occupy dominant positions in the fan hierarchy. Along with subcultural and fan social capital, this prestige imbues the executive fan with symbolic capital, a form of capital which is "both a form of recognition (fame, accumulated prestige) and the specific legitimation of other conjunctions of capitals" (Hills, 2002:57). This form of capital allows spoiler sources to continue to use their discursive power by controlling fan knowledge, and relying on their high fan social capital leading to recognition and respect.

[38] Spoiler sources, then, are positioned as dominant due to their greater subcultural and fan social capital and their discursive power. In my research, a number of spoiler sources were named most frequently. Take for instance the example of Tensai (<http://www.spoilerslayer.com>), about whom the following are just a fraction of the comments made: "If Tensai [...] has mentioned whoever it is, they usually become a known source" (Nina), "Usually if Tensai has confirmed them. Once he does I know they can be reliable" (Gwynevere1) and "Tensai says this person is reliable. I trust Tensai" (Rachel). These comments seem to back up my supposition that there is a network of executive fans on-line working to consolidate the position of other fans.

[39] Unsurprisingly, most respondents praised spoiler sources, according them respect and admiration and situating them within a discourse of professionalism. One respondent specifically described them as "very professional" (Rachel) and others were equally effusive. However, a few respondents expressed concern for sources, making comments such as "I sometimes worry that they might get into trouble with Mutant Enemy, especially if they work for them" (Anon). Interestingly, fans are less enthusiastic about sources they deem to be too cryptic and therefore too ostentatious. One source was criticised for this a number of times, with respondents deriding them for "trying too hard to be mysterious" (Paula) and thus giving "the impression...[of] questionable information" (Ariana). Others bemoaned this source as "the only one I can't stand...he never tells us anything directly and is so impressed with himself that he has info and you don't. Get over yourself" (Gwynevere1). Others lamented anonymous sources who are "too obsessed over getting credit for their spoilers" (Bailey) or commented that it's "nice that they share their knowledge. But I hate it if they say 'sorry, cannot say more blabla' [...] boasting much? ;-)" (Susanne). Many fans are uncomfortable with spoiler sources explicitly flaunting their knowledge and subcultural capital, preferring them to act 'professionally' (as discussed above). Arguably, this can be linked to fans' discomfort with declaring their own interest in the acquisition of capital, evidenced in the respondents who declared equality among spoiled and unspoiled fans and then made covert value judgements about the quality and dedication of the unspoiled.

[40] Although the unspoiled possess less subcultural and fan social capital, have less discursive power, and therefore are less able to occupy dominant positions within the fan culture, they were praised and described by spoiler whores as more "restrained" (Beth), with greater "fortitude" (Debbi) and "will power" (Anon). In contrast the spoiled self-identify as 'sad' and "decadent. And in need of serious help" (Sharon C.). Many spoiled fans express positive opinions of the unspoiled, conceding "I greatly admire unspoiled fans ability to remain strong, and enjoy the show as it plays out with no prior knowledge" (Isabelle). They praise (even envy?) their decision to be spoiler-free, conceding that "They're strong. I'm not" (Jenny), lamenting "I wish I had the strength to stay unspoiled!" (Abby) and expressing bewilderment at their choice; "I don't know how they do it though" (Foggi). One of the most incongruous comments made regarding the unspoiled was that "they are innocent and they need to be protected" (Sharon C.). This is intriguing as it suggests that being spoiled is a guilty pleasure, which can harm and damage those fans that participate in such activity. This statement connotes that the spoiled are in some way reprehensible and that the unspoiled are innocent of such 'sinful' indulgence and decadence. It therefore assumes a negative stance towards spoilers, devaluing the spoiled fans and simultaneously privileging the unspoiled as stronger and more restrained, whilst also patronisingly labelling them as naïve and helpless. This statement directly contradicts the view of another fan who lamented the fact that "[people] feel they should feel guilty about reading spoilers" (Gwynevere1). Indeed, only one respondent explicitly said they thought the spoiled were 'better', commenting "Yes, I'd say so. Just because that section of fandom is so huge for Buffy, it's hard to be part of the community without it" (Foggi), again consolidating the link between subcultural capital gained by spoilers and fan social capital garnered from discussing them.

## Conclusions

[41] It is worth noting that the majority of my respondents were female (only two were male) and this could be because BtVS has a large female fanbase, and a large female on-line presence. Also the sites I posted at requesting respondents consisted of two general boards, two Spike oriented lists and one Angel oriented list. Arguably, these characters, acting as the main attraction for the female spectator are going to have large female fan bases and possibly, posting at a Buffy or Faith specific board would have yielded a greater number of male respondents. However, BtVS on-line fandom is highly fragmented and general boards are uncommon. The fan practise of 'shipping' (of supporting particular on-screen romantic relationships) has caused the fandom to split into smaller communities, and it is difficult to find 'neutral' boards which tolerate all shipper groups. I had also hypothesised that the majority of spoiler sources and therefore executive fans would be male and that this would show a power imbalance in favour of the male fans. However, of the seven most commonly named sources, four were female and three were male. This contradicts my earlier supposition that male sources can exert power over female fans, and continue their dominance at the top of the spoiler hierarchy. Instead, it appears that female fans assume the mantle of spoiler sources and are able to exert their own authority and dominance in the typically male-oriented space of the Internet.

[42] In conclusion, whilst this study is only a snapshot of a small corner of on-line BtVS fandom, some conclusions can be drawn and questions raised for possible future research. It seems clear that whilst the majority of fans openly express the egalitarianism and equality of spoiled and unspoiled fan factions, there are differences in the forms of capital that each group possesses. The spoiled have greater subcultural and, in particular, fan social capital and therefore occupy the more dominant position in the fandom, dominating the fandom with their fan knowledge, textual interpretations and discursive power. The discursive power of being able to "call up series history in their quest for meaning" (Tulloch, 1995:149) also ensures that the spoiled possess the greatest levels of power, as they are able to use previous plot twists and character developments to decode spoilers and predict narrative occurrences. However, this is done in a surprisingly restrained manner with little explicit criticism of the unspoiled from these fans. Rather, their praise of the unspoiled is indicative of both their own desires to retain an untarnished enjoyment of the show, their discomfort with overt declarations of their own capital and a general desire to perpetuate the idea that fandom remains egalitarian and non-hierarchical. Although this research is not representative of BtVS fandom as a whole and it cannot be used to make sweeping generalisations about the BtVS fan community as a whole, further enquiry could consider the responses of a greater number of male fans by soliciting responses from different fan factions. Furthermore, this

research is obviously restricted by the employment of only one empirical method, and a parallel discourse analysis of on-line postings would either substantiate or contradict the findings from the respondents. This would highlight whether the comments that fans post on-line belie their performance as egalitarian and non-hierarchical and undermines the answers they give when presenting themselves and their fandoms to a researcher. Finally, now that BtVS itself has come to an end, critical analysis of the ways in which fan hierarchy and power have been affected by fans' move into Angel fandom could provide further insights into issues of fan community, power and hierarchy.

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