

Spoiling *Survivor*

Audrey (Vanderford) Watters
Comparative Literature, University of Oregon
Western States Folklore Society Meeting, 2005

The hierarchy of taste locates reality TV among the basest forms of entertainment. Indeed, if the Frankfurt School approach to culture is alive and well today, it thrives in critics who see reality TV as dangerous trash, duping viewers into believing in these “real people” and “real situations” and promulgating hegemonic values such as the “survival of the fittest,” the pleasures of surveillance, and of course, big cash prizes. (see Sardar). This paper, however, examines one aspect of fan culture surrounding the reality TV show *Survivor* that counters this notion of the “duped” and passive viewer. It argues that rather than reveling in “the real,” many fans enjoy this television show for its very constructed-ness; these fans pay close attention to techniques of editing, narrative and character formation and participate in online communities dedicated to “spoiling” *Survivor*. For fans, “spoiling” *Survivor* is an attempt to ascertain the outcome of the season, but this activity is not a ruining for them, but “an enhancement” of the show.¹ “Spoilers” are a blend of gossip, news-leaks, and fan theorization, and in their circulation and discussion, these online community members perform close readings of *Survivor*, creating elaborate methods, narratives, and analyses that speculate who will “Outwit, Outplay, Outlast.” Drawing on the work of Henry Jenkins, this paper demonstrates fans’ sophisticated engagement with the narrative and editing techniques of reality TV.

While many reality TV shows try to suggest they are “real” and “live,” *Survivor* is in fact filmed months before it is shown on television. For example, the version that is currently airing, *Survivor: Palau*, was filmed five months ago. This time lapse allows producers of *Survivor* to enter the editing booth with all the knowledge and all the footage of how the “game” was played;

¹ KeithFan. “(Not Krautboy’s) Confession Analysis.” *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 3, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 9, 2005.

from this, they construct a particular story told over the course of thirteen episodes. This story has setting—some distant, exotic land; it has conflict—warring tribes and the struggle for survival; and it has characters—“the strong man,” “the underdog,” “the bombshell,” “the liar.” For fans of “spoiling” the show, the process of “reading” *Survivor* is akin to “reading” a mystery novel. As one fan writes, “...I am drawn to any mystery that requires some good detective work, logic and luck.”² In other words, to spoil *Survivor* one must locate the clues to “who done it.”³ And these clues are discussed and debated vociferously on hundreds of internet message boards.

The phrase “hundreds of internet message boards,” of course, implies a large fan culture operating around *Survivor*. In a genre that is flooded almost monthly with new manifestations—*My Big Fat Obnoxious* (Fill in the Blank)—*Survivor* does remain one of the most popular and longest running reality TV shows in the US. On the internet, however, there are message boards even for the most marginal and short-lived show, suggesting a broad level of viewer interest in talking about reality TV, something perhaps fostered by the genre’s promise of interactivity. “You vote.” “You decide.” Reality TV may then provide a challenge to a simple distinction between the “active” and the “passive” viewer. And contrary to the negative connotations of reality TV viewers as mere “dupes” or “voyeurs,” the genre may actually be an interesting site where the complexities of the relationship between the production and consumption of media can be examined.

Media theorist Henry Jenkins contends that fan culture in general “pose[s] important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meanings” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 23). Although Jenkins’s seminal work on fan culture, *Textual Poachers*, predates the reality TV craze, I believe that some of his analysis is applicable

² Flowerpower. “(Not Krautboy’s) Confession Analysis.” *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 5, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 8, 2005.

³ VerucaSalt. “(Not Krautboy’s) Confession Analysis.” *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 5, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 8, 2005.

to the work of *Survivor* spoilers. At its core, those in the spoiling community are engaged in a rigorous analysis and criticism of the *Survivor* texts, and they turn this analysis into detailed narratives similar to the fan fiction and criticism Jenkins discusses. He contends,

Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 86).

Along these lines, internet message boards provide the very “space” for the production of “theory and criticism” useful in spoiling *Survivor*.

Like fan fiction, those who “spoil” the show appropriate the details and characters from *Survivor* and then construct their own elaborate analysis speculating for example who will win the reward and immunity challenges and who will be voted out of the tribe. Fans pay close attention not only to each week’s episode, but a variety of other “texts” surrounding the show. These include “official” sources—CBS press releases, promos, and *Survivor* website—“semi-official” ones—*TV Guide* and *Entertainment Tonight*-type updates and exposés and appearances from contestants and host Jeff Probst on other programs —and “unofficial” texts—the ubiquitous internet rumor-mill and fan websites. A few of the best-known “spoiler” sites include “Survivor Blows,” “Survivor Fever,” “Survivor Sucks,” “True Dork Times,” “ACME Braintrust,” and “Survivor News Network.”

The latter is better known as “Snewser” and is one of the most respected (read: most accurate) spoilers of the show. Snewser posts cryptic messages on his own and other websites hinting at the outcome of the season, oftentimes before the cast is even “officially” announced. *[Snewser site]* And each Thursday afternoon, around three pm EST, Snewser posts his prediction of who’ll be “booted.” 95% of the time, he’s right. Many fans believe he has “inside information” and see their own involvement in analyzing and discussing the show—in the production of spoiling theory and criticism—as being different than Snewser’s self-assured knowledge. One fan writes,

If all I cared about was [ruining] the show, I'd just wait till Thursday and read Snewser. But, I can count on 1 hand the number of times I've been to Snewsers site. I don't see Snewser as really having much in common with what's done on [the Survivor Blows website]. IE. Snewser has an insider who feeds him info - no real intellectual excercise required other than toying with us. In contrast, I stand in awe of the abilities of [posters at Survivor Blows] and others who I consider true sluthes.⁴

Nevertheless, for all those who try to solve the “mystery” of *Survivor*, leaks from “insiders” doled out by Snewser and others are important clues. *Survivor* producers do require staff and contestants sign rigorous anti-disclosure contracts. Despite this, rumors abound on the internet, and members of the spoiling community try to piece together these tidbits.

As with urban legends, some information comes from those who maintain that they were told things by a “friend of a friend,” or more likely in this case, “a friend of a cameraman.” For instance, someone contending to be the nephew of a cameraman, as well as someone with the screen-name “CBSHascrappybenefits” were among those claiming to have “the boot list,” the order in which contestants were voted out of the tribe, for the second season of *Survivor*.⁵

While some people claim to have inside information from an affiliation with CBS, others allege to have gleaned facts from hotel or airline staff. Others find themselves—intentionally or accidentally—at the same location as the *Survivor* cast and crew. “ChillOne,” for example, was vacationing at the Arian Amazon Towers Hotel shortly after the filming of *Survivor: Amazon* and was able to learn about the male-female tribal split and the inclusion of a deaf contestant.

In addition to those who allege to have information about the production of the show, some spoilers claim to know a contestant or live in a contestant’s hometown (or, of course, have a “friend of a friend” who lives in a contestant’s hometown). Many of these spoilers involve the physical appearance of contestants upon their return from filming. Due to the difficult conditions of the show—the lack of food, the physical exertion, the constant exposure to sun—to come

⁴ Mavsfan. “(Not Krautboy’s) Confession Analysis.” *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 3, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 7, 2005.

⁵ Thefunnystone. “The History of Survivor Spoilers.” *Survivor Sucks*. Posted February 20, 2005. Available at <http://p085.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm17.showMessage?topicID=5408.topic>. Accessed April 12, 2005.

home skinny and suntanned is often interpreted as a sign of success on the show. During *Survivor: Amazon* in particular, these “weight loss spoilers” tended to be quite accurate. One poster at the Survivor Sucks message boards claimed that Deena “was gone from work for like 7 weeks & came back all tanned & 30 lbs lighter.”⁶ (In fact, she made the Jury.) A holiday photograph of a very gaunt looking Rob C was offered as proof that he did well (He made it to the Final 3.) Hometown spoilers are not always reliable however. Another fan at Survivor Sucks named Orangeena tracked down Darrah, a contestant from *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, and claimed that because she’d quit her job, bought a Hummer, and was hiding from the public, she must be the winner. (She was eliminated at the Final 4.)

Most *Survivor* fans do not have access to this type of first-hand information and, as they participate in discussions about the possible directions for the storyline, must weigh whether or not to believe in those who claim to. Instead, most fans must base their speculations on not just the accidental but on the intentional texts—CBS’s promotional materials and the show itself. Fans pour over video captured from TV and the internet, examining individual shots and the editing as a whole for both content and form. Who is in the shot? Where was it shot? When was it shot? Why is it featured? These are all questions fan weigh as they analyze footage. According to Krautboy, a well-respected poster at the Survivor Blows forum, “The vidcaps and editing analysis is probably the purest spoiling we do, but the process of sorting out spoilers from hoaxes, weight loss reports from misdirection [... t]he unspoken battle we fight each week against CBS, is all part of the spoiling process now.”⁷

After ten seasons of *Survivor*, fans believe that producer Mark Burnett has a distinctive style; in his reality TV shows are recognizable motifs and patterns that fans can “read” in order to deduce the direction of the show. This can be as simple as a symbolic analysis. For

⁶ Thefunnystone. “The History of Survivor Spoilers.” Survivor Sucks. Posted February 20, 2005. Available at <http://p085.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm17.showMessage?topicID=5408.topic>. Accessed April 7, 2005.

⁷ Krautboy. “(Not Krautboy’s) Confession Analysis.” Survivor Blows. Posted April 3, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 8, 2005.

example, when a certain contestant is intercut with a rat or snake, fans interpret this as a sign of impending betrayal. Some of the other editing and narrative patterns that fans propose exist in *Survivor* are:

- the “Key Quote Confessional”—the idea that Burnett includes very early in the season a prophetic comment by a contestant, one that reveals the “sole survivor.” For example, in the very first *Survivor* episode ever, the eventual winner, Richard Hatch, asserted in that they might as well just write him the million-dollar check.
- [Another one:] “Strategies Revealed Never Succeed”—if footage is included where contestants describe alliances and narrate *their* plans for making it to the end, those alliances are bound to fail and their predictions will be wrong. Last week, for example, Tom told Ian that the Final Four for this season would be Tom, Ian, Katie, and Stephanie. Fans are now certain that the Final Four for this season are *not* Tom, Ian, Katie, and Stephanie.
- CBS (or “SeeBS”) Misdirection—promos aim to garner viewers and often create dramatic tension where none exists. When CBS entices viewers with a voiceover asking, “One castaway encourages the tribe to throw the immunity challenge. The question is, will they?” members of the spoiling community feel confident in answering, “No.”
- The Eyemail Theory—the person who will be booted may not be *featured* in CBS’s weekly email or “eye-mail” promo, but frequently appears, however briefly, in the text or the background of the photo.
- The Confessional Count—the longevity of a character can be determined by monitoring the number of times per episode she or he has a “confessional,” a technique that is a staple of the reality TV genre, where individual cast members directly address the camera and discuss their experiences in and assessments of the game. According to

Krautboy, who posts a “confessional analysis” on the Survivor Sucks forum after most episodes, counting confessionals allows fans to see who is a consistent narrator for the tribe (and who by extension will probably do well in the game) and who has a sudden jump in “face time” (and who by extension will probably be gone shortly). Another fan who goes by the screen-name Corvis has elaborated Krautboy’s system, not only recording the number of confessionals but categorizing their content—whether their confessionals describe interpersonal or simply personal dynamics. According to Corvis, his system has accurately predicted each boot thus far this season. [As is to be expected, one’s status as a spoiler moves up and down depending on the quality of one’s information and/or one’s analysis]

In addition to creating specific theories and methods that attempt to document the patterns in Mark Burnett’s *oeuvre* [oo-vre], if you will, fans monitor the individual contestant—their psychological motivations and strategies in the game, as well as the character that Burnett et al shaped when they edited the game. Fans scrutinize the development of characters, assessing for example whether or not someone is being given the “winner’s edit” or whether or not someone’s story arc is coming to completion. One of the discussions on the Survivor Sucks board that elicits the lengthiest and most in-depth posts monitors “the players, the game, the editing.” The following post, made after the second episode of *Survivor: Palau*, is exemplary of this type of fan observation:

KOROR--the tribe will have an edge at merge time...

I agree Ian and Tom are in it for the long haul... Ian could be another Ethan-a winner that everyone likes but not a "player" like Hatch or Chris. Dolphin boy will be an asset in fishing and anything water related. He is definitely someone we are supposed to like and I do!! He will not be too full of himself as Rupert became and that will let him slide by to the finals, imo. Tom is most likely going to go down ala Sarge/Rupert as being too strong, too well liked...he may win some II to stay in it longer ... but eventually someone (I think Katie) will be the architect of his boot.

Coby--I said it, he's Rob C with Hatch thrown in but I agree he is too "vocal" about his scheming....he will continue to narrate imo ... but will not be the winner.

Katie..she will def. outlast her nemesis Caryn...again like you said last week, Katie is the mother of this tribe, not Caryn

Caryn...her or Willard will be the first to go...⁸

It is noteworthy—and a testament perhaps to the accuracy of spoilers' critical insights—that this fan's predictions have proven to be thus far correct—seven episodes later, Koror entered the merge the strongest tribe in *Survivor* history, having lost only one player (Willard, as she surmises here). This fan's commentary also demonstrates the breadth of knowledge about *Survivor* "lore" that spoilers utilize in their analyses. Here, she references contestants from five previous seasons (Richard, *Survivor: Borneo*; Ethan, *Survivor: Africa*; Rob C, *Survivor: Amazon*; Rupert, *Survivor: Pearl Islands*; and Chris and Sarge, *Survivor: Vanuatu*) in helping to make her argument about the characters' potential in the current season.

The arsenal from which spoilers can draw then is quite large—ten seasons of the show and all the official and unofficial materials that have been produced around it. Although fans have always been renowned for their detailed knowledge of their favorite program, the advent of the internet and digital technologies has greatly facilitated the level of fan involvement and has furthered their ability to generate and scrutinize media texts. [*Flowerpower's SOS*] For Henry Jenkins, fandom today is a "cultural convergence," an idea that "describes new ways audiences are relating to media content, their increased skills at reading across different media and their desires for a more participatory and complex media culture" (Jenkins, "The Poachers and the Stormtroopers" 2). Certainly those engaged in the spoiling community demonstrate a high level of critical understand and engagement with the reality TV genre.

These fans do see themselves as doing something "special" and "different" than other TV viewers. As one fan puts it,

Spoiling adds greatly to the enjoyment of the show, because we know much more about the cast than the average viewer. We study the people, the place, the history. We know what is going on behind the scenes, in the editing room, and even in the minds of [Mark Burnett] and [Jeff Probst]. The viewing experience is greatly enhanced because we notice the subtle nuances that most people don't catch. It's also satisfying to know that as part of the spoiling

⁸ Emydi. "The Players, The Game, The Editing - Palau." *Survivor Blows*. Posted February 25, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5676.shtml#72>. Accessed April 9, 2005.

community, we are part of an elite group that know so much more about the show than the 20 million people who watch each week. We are probably *Survivor* snobs, but the time and effort we put into predicting the outcome makes us unique. That's kind of cool....⁹

It is "kind of cool," and perhaps even empowering, to know as you sit down to watch *Survivor* each Thursday night that you've already got it "figured out." But before sliding into overzealous praise of this "cultural convergence" around *Survivor* fandom, it is worth pointing out that for many in the spoiling community, their interest in close reading lies less in some "semiotic resistance" to the Burnett industry and more along the lines of one of the hegemonic principles of the show: competition. When I interviewed fans for this paper, quite a few of them remarked that they stumbled across the spoilers when looking for clues on the internet as to which contestant to bet on in office pools and in online games—miniature versions, perhaps, of the ideologies of "survival of the fittest" and "big cash prizes" that *Survivor* rests on.¹⁰ Furthermore, when I asked fans if the close attention given to the details of *Survivor* had changed the way they watched media, several replied that it "primed [them] for *Lost*"—a "convergence," to use Jenkins's terminology, that might not be to a grassroots culture but to the media's very savvy cultivation and appropriation of *Survivor* fandom.¹¹

Works Cited

- Jenkins, Henry. "The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Cultural Convergence in the Digital Age." 1998. Available:
http://www.strangelove.com/slideshows/articles/The_Poachers_and_the_Stormtroopers.htm.
 Accessed on 5 April 2005.
- . *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Sardar, Ziauddin. "The Rise of the Voyeur." *New Statesman* November 6 2000: 25-27.

⁹ Krautboy. "(Not Krautboy's) Confession Analysis." *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 3, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 12, 2005.

¹⁰ Flowerpower. "(Not Krautboy's) Confession Analysis." *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 5, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 12, 2005.

¹¹ Volsfan. "(Not Krautboy's) Confession Analysis." *Survivor Blows*. Posted April 3, 2005. Available at <http://community.realitytvworld.com/boards/DCForumID2/5849.shtml>. Accessed April 12, 2005.