

Spoilers can't ruin true enjoyment of your favorite book series, TV show or sports team—here's why

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As I write this, my wife is desperately trying to avoid spoilers for the latest episode of *Strictly Come Dancing*. Having missed the original broadcast, she has been frantically logging out of all forms of social

media, lest a stray Facebook status or retweet give the game away. Add to this the possibility of a friend innocently revealing what happens, and it's clear just how difficult it is to live spoiler-free.

And it's not just difficult for those watching television. For followers of sports, too, there is a [longstanding problem](#) of avoiding the final score before being able to watch the game.

Popular book series also face the problem of key twists being revealed too early. When J.K. Rowling's novel *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* was released in 2005, a banner was [hung over a bridge](#) over the A442 in Shropshire revealing an important character's death.

Council officials swiftly removed the banner—although possibly because it was likely to fall, rather than out of fear of ruining people's enjoyment.

No hiding place

Spoilers, then, seem to be everywhere—and the general view is that they are bad. In its extreme form, ["toxic" spoilers](#) arise from both the pleasure some take in spoiling others' surprise and the use of plot ruining as a form of vengeance.

This ire can be aimed at specific people or the series itself. The latter happened with the *Star Wars* prequel films, as some fans spoiled the endings for those who hadn't seen it yet ["immunization against disappointment"](#).

Spoilers can be weaponized in this way because of some of our assumptions about them. Most fundamentally, that they ruin enjoyment. But is it that simple? In a series of psychological experiments published in 2011, [researchers in California found](#) that knowing the end of a story

did not diminish readers' enjoyment. In fact, readers preferred the stories where they had the ending revealed to them beforehand.

The researchers theorized that we think of spoilers negatively because we are unable to compare spoiled and unspoiled experiences and therefore assume that the unspoiled is better. [They argued](#) that: "It is possible that spoilers enhance enjoyment by actually increasing tension. Knowing the ending of Oedipus Rex may heighten the pleasurable tension caused by the disparity in knowledge between the omniscient reader and the character marching to his doom."

These experiments focused on classical literature, which often requires some kind of explanation in order to follow the plot at all. The spoilers in this [research](#) were therefore arguably able to complement the plot, at least for a contemporary readership unfamiliar with the complexities of ancient Greek tragedy.

Perhaps the experiments may have reached different conclusions if they had used, say, screenings of the Succession finale.

Traveling at the speed of spoilers

Also, because the research involved texts that were all written a long time ago, their experiments removed the issue of the timeline of when [information](#) does and does not count as a spoiler.

These boundaries are debatable. In 2008, Vulture, an entertainment news website, published a satirical "[statute of limitations](#)" on spoiler reveals. They ranged from "as soon as the episode finished" for reality TV to 100 years after its debut performance for operas.

The speed of the spoiler is significant because it is inherently linked to the [digital platforms](#) that carry them to both willing and unwilling

readers. In other words, finding out things too soon raises more fundamental questions about how we engage with the [rapid availability of information](#) across digital media today.

Consider the controversy when a Wikipedia article on Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* was created. According to Wikipedia guidelines, a summary of the plot was required. But the question was whether the twist of who the murderer is should be revealed in this summary, given that theater audiences are historically sworn to secrecy at the end of each show.

It was agreed, in the end, that users of Wikipedia should [expect this information to be revealed](#). We do not need to be Poirot to deduce from this that our expectation of information being easily and readily available creates the conditions for a constant threat of spoilers.

This points to the real problem with spoilers. Whether they ruin plot twists or not depends on the idea that presenting reductive summaries—pure information—somehow replaces or equates to an understanding of the film, show, or story.

In his book "[Spoiler Alert](#)," literary theorist Aaron Jaffe argues that the threat of the spoiler hinges on the idea that everything can be translated into information and that information can be found everywhere. But this is—he clarifies with a spoiler alert—a myth. In truth, information is rarely fully accessible or complete, due to the different ways it is stored and connected.

It may seem obvious to say that should I accidentally discover the score of a football game before I get to watch it, it would spoil my entertainment. But the score would not tell me if my team deserved to lose, if they were robbed by a referee's decision, if my favorite player had improved, and so on. In short, the spoiler does not allow me to

interpret the meaning of the game.

So while spoilers seem to require us to log out of X or avoid low bridges on the A442, there is still a part of our enjoyment that blunt information cannot remove.

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