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The Real Spoilers Puzzle

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ABSTRACT
Spoilers consist in the revelation of major plot points of fictions prior to the time at which we're intended to discover them. The small literature on spoilers argues that we dislike them because they have a negative effect on story enjoyment. I argue that our dislike of spoilers is wildly disproportionate to their actual effects on story enjoyment. The real puzzle of spoilers is why we dislike them, given their small and inconsistent effects on story enjoyment. I argue that the dislike of spoilers arises from a desire not to be subject to other agents in how we come to acquire certain kinds of knowledge about fictions.

KEYWORDS Spoilers; fiction; experience; epistemic autonomy; Alon Chasid; Neil Van Leeuwen

> Stress and nervous tension are now serious social problems in all parts of the Galaxy, and it is in order that this situation should not be in any way exacerbated that the following facts will now be revealed in advance … The deadly missile attack shortly to be launched by an ancient automatic defence system will result merely in the breakage of three coffee cups and a mouse cage, the bruising of somebody's upper arm, and the untimely creation and sudden demise of a bowl of petunias and an innocent sperm whale. In order that some sense of mystery should still be preserved, no revelation will yet be made concerning whose upper arm sustains the bruise. This fact may safely be made the subject of suspense since it is of no significance whatsoever.
>
> Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

1. Introduction

Spoilers consist in the revelation of important details of the plot, or of plot-relevant circumstances and facts, of some narrative fiction before the point in the unfolding of the narrative at which consumers are intended to discover

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them.[1] Alon Chasid (2024) argues that spoilers are puzzling. It's puzzling, in particular, why we would dislike them, since widely accepted claims about fiction seem to entail that they shouldn't spoil anything.

As Chasid construes it, the puzzle concerns the effects that spoilers have on our *experience* of fiction. I'm going to argue that spoilers are puzzling for a very different reason. The real puzzle concerns not how they can spoil our experience of fiction, but why we dislike them. This is puzzling because as a matter of fact, I will claim, they negatively impact (spoil) our experience of fiction to a degree that is too small to explain our dislike of them.

For Chasid, the puzzle of spoilers arises in the following way. It is widely accepted (1) that our emotional responses to fictions arise from imagining their contents and (2) that our imaginings are (more or less) unconstrained. Taken together, these theses render our dislike of spoilers puzzling. Why should they affect our experience of fiction at all? His solution to the puzzle rejects thesis (2): as a matter of fact, there are constraints on the imaginings that arise when we consume fictions. I will examine his solution soon. First, I want to motivate what I take the real puzzle of spoilers to be.

The puzzle arises from the apparent inconsistency of two claims. First, people strongly dislike spoilers. This claim needs little defence. Media discussions of fictions often contain a spoiler alert, and it's a familiar fact that people complain if they are exposed to spoilers without an alert. Spoilers are so predictably disliked that it's a common tactic of internet trolls to give spoilers: they know that many people will be upset by them.

Second, though, there's extensive evidence that spoilers reduce the enjoyment of fiction much less than we might expect given how strongly people appear to dislike them. As a matter of fact, we very often consume fictions despite being able to predict central points of their plot with a high degree of confidence. Quite often, we know the plot in detail. Some examples: a large proportion of the audience seeing a Shakespeare play will have seen it before (and of course the plays are often based on stories that were familiar even to their original audiences). Greek playwrights, too, typically used myths familiar to their audience for their stories, and Icelandic sagas often recounted ancient myths. The reuse of familiar tales is by no means confined to what we might now think of as high culture. Fairy tales are typically already familiar to their audience, including all but the youngest children, and notoriously contemporary Hollywood loves to remake older films and to transfer well-loved books to the screen.

Further, genre conventions allow us to predict the same sorts of major plot points that might be the subject of spoiler alerts. For example, James

[1]This definition is intended only to fix the reference of the term. It is an open question whether it ought to be revised in the face of possible counterexamples. For example, the definition entails that fictions cannot themselves contain spoilers (so the passage in the epigraph doesn't count as a spoiler because the reader is intended to encounter it at the point they do). We don't seem to need a more precise definition to address the puzzles under consideration here.

Bond films repeatedly place the hero in situations where he seems to have little chance of escape ("No Mr Bond, I expect you to die"). But no one in the audience is surprised by his escape. As early as the 1910s, cliffhangers became a staple of serials like *The Perils of Pauline*. This format was and remains immensely successful, though the audience always knew the titular heroine would escape. It's also a familiar fact that people reread books they've read before and rewatch films they know well. Nabokov famously wrote that "one cannot read a book; one can only reread it." Whatever the truth of that claim, rereading is extremely common.

Finally, the psychological literature on spoilers reveals inconsistent—but consistently small—effects of spoilers on story enjoyment, appreciation, and absorption. While Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) and Levine, Betzner, and Autry (2016) found that spoilers somewhat reduced story enjoyment, Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) and Ellithorpe and Brookes (2018) found a small but significant *increase* in enjoyment of spoiled stories. Much of this literature is limited in its ecological validity (i.e., the degree to which it is representative of the real world) by the use of very short written stories, because such brevity may entail limited opportunity for consumers to become absorbed in the story (Maxwell 2022). But the leaking of the first four episodes of *Game of Thrones* provided an opportunity to test the effects of spoilers on people invested in the show. Johnson and Rosenbaum (2018) found that neither involvement nor enjoyment were significantly influenced by spoiler exposure. Taken together, the literature offers no support for the claim that spoilers have a significant effect on our enjoyment of stories.

This psychological evidence shouldn't be surprising to those who have thought about the paradox of suspense (Smuts 2021). Suspense seems to require, and perhaps entail, uncertainty about outcomes. But audiences apparently continue to experience suspense even when they know that the hero will escape from danger and even if they've the read the book or seen the film before. Admittedly, some philosophers have denied that we can feel true suspense when we're not uncertain of the outcome (Yanal 1996), and there's little doubt that agents can mistake one emotion for another. But the claim that careful and reflective observers routinely make this mistake, and continue to do so even after having been warned they may be mistaken in identifying their emotions, faces a heavy burden of proof: an *a priori* commitment to the theory that suspense requires uncertainty carries less weight here than careful attention to phenomenology. Again, the evidence suggests that spoilers spoil less, and less often, than is often thought.[2]

[2]Accepting Yanal's account does not entail that spoilers spoil. The account entails that our experience is changed, such that we no longer feel suspense. But we continue to feel emotions we mistake for suspense: these emotions might be just as satisfying as genuine suspense. Yanal's account entails that spoilers spoil only if we supplement it with the claim that people are mistaken not only about which emotions they experience, but also about the hedonic role of these emotions.

The existence of a paradox of suspense doesn't entail a correlative paradox of spoilers. The paradox of suspense arises because the existence of suspense seems to require uncertainty; the fact (if it is a fact) that we can feel suspense while knowing how the plot will unfold does not entail that the experience isn't spoiled for us; the suspense might be significantly attenuated. But suspense is so central to our experience of so many fictions that the evidence that spoilers rarely significantly reduce our enjoyment of fictions suggests that even suspense is usually not spoiled. Indeed, while suspense *can* be reduced (though rarely eliminated) by foreknowledge, it can also be *increased*: knowledge of what will happen can transform an innocent-seeming exchange into an intimation of horror (Smuts 2008).

Spoilers genuinely spoil—significantly reduce our enjoyment, in central respects—with regard to two kinds of fictions. First, spoilers may spoil *twist fictions*: fictions where a twist leads the consumer to recast everything that precedes it in a new light (think *The Usual Suspects* or *The Sixth Sense*). The experience of revelation depends on us not knowing the twist beforehand. Second, spoilers may spoil *puzzle fictions*: ones that set us a puzzle that we want to have the pleasure of solving, or trying to solve. The whodunnit is the classic example here. If I know the murderer is the butler, then I cannot try to solve it for myself. But most fictions are neither twist fictions nor puzzle fictions, and many that belong to these genres don't depend on these features for their enjoyment. Lanchester (2018) argues that whodunnit really doesn't matter to the enjoyment of Agatha Christie, and the small literature on the effects of spoilers on the enjoyment of 'ironic twist' stories finds very small effects (Johnson and Rosenbaum 2015), and sometimes these effects are *positive* (Leavitt and Christenfeld 2011). Even in these cases, the effects rarely amount to spoiling the experience.

Foreknowledge surely does change our experience of a fiction, even if it doesn't affect either enjoyment or involvement; in this light out dislike of spoilers might arise from our placing special value on our first experience of a fiction. If spoilers don't reduce enjoyment, however, it's mysterious *why* we would place special value on the naïve experience. If knowledge of spoilable plot points changes the experience without decreasing our enjoyment, we might equally value the 'spoiled' experience. That the first experience is *different* does not explain why we have a norm against spoiling, given that it's not *better*. Of course, in some cases people might want both experiences, but cases in which people plan to consume a fiction more than once are not the norm (and if people value a variety of experiences, they should prefer the very different experience of a different fiction, rather than the somewhat different experience of a second viewing).

2. Extant Accounts: Van Leeuwen and Chasid

Extant accounts in the tiny literature on spoilers turn on their supposed propensity to attenuate the experiences generated by a story. Neil Van Leeuwen argues that while our imaginings are prompted by a story's content, the beliefs we have about it have an independent effect on the emotions we feel. Premature beliefs "deprive our imaginings of their characteristic emotional power" (Leeuwen 2021: 659). We dislike spoilers because they attenuate our emotional responses (Leeuwen 2021: 658-9).

Chasid, too, holds that our dislike of spoilers stems from how they negatively affect—"thwart" (Chasid 2024: 8)—our imaginings, contrary to what we should expect given imagining is, more or less, cognitively impenetrable.[3] The fact that I know full well that I get puffed jogging 100 metres is no barrier to my imagining that I am a superhero possessed of superspeed and superstamina. Why, then, should knowledge of what will happen subsequently spoil (or even change) the experience? He argues that Van Leeuwen's solution leaves unexplained why beliefs would attenuate our emotions, if they do not affect our imaginings. He suggests, rather, that beliefs thwart story absorption *by* affecting our imaginings.

He argues that our imaginings as we consume a fiction are governed by a norm: we ought to imagine what is presented as true from what he calls a f-world ('f' for 'fictional') doxastic perspective. We take on the role of the f-world believer, and imagine what is presented by the story as convincing to that believer at each stage of the unfolding narrative. This is typically effortless: as we consume the story, we automatically adopt the appropriate perspective. Spoilers disrupt this process: they require effort of us. They make it more difficult to grasp what the fiction renders as to-be-imagined. The effort required renders our engagement with the fiction less pleasurable and less absorbing.

Engagement with fiction *always* involves a gap between how things are presented as being in the fiction and how they actually are. Knowing that Hitler didn't win the war doesn't interfere with our ability to engage with *The Man in the High Castle*. Why does the spoiler introduce friction when the gap between fiction and the actual world does not?

One possible response to this question might turn on cognitive load. I might be able to operate two maps simultaneously—as when I represent the world of *Hamlet* and the theatre at the same time—but spoilers call upon me to represent *three* (the f-world as it is represented as being; the

[3]While it is widely recognized that imagination is not entirely cognitively impenetrable, the fact that certain kinds of real world information interfere with imagining is seen as a puzzle in need of special explanation. That puzzle has come to be called the puzzle of *imaginative resistance* (Gendler 2000; Weatherson 2004; Brock 2012); why is imagining constrained by moral knowledge, when it is unconstrained by so many other kinds of belief?

f-world as the spoiler reveals it to be; the world as it actually is). The extra load makes imagination effortful. Second, the worry might turn on the difference between operating *within* world maps, rather than *between* world maps. Our system for entertaining fictional worlds might be designed automatically (and therefore effortlessly) to track the difference across worlds, but it is asking it to do extra work to track differences *within* worlds.

Even if one or both of these claims were true, they still wouldn't explain our dislike of our spoilers. Even if it is true, for one or both of these reasons, that knowing that things are not really (in the story) the way they are presented as being makes it effortful to adopt the appropriate doxastic perspective, most spoilers do not indicate that things are not the way they seem. *That James Bond will escape the villain* doesn't indicate that he is not in the villain's clutches right now. Knowing how things *will* go in the future shouldn't interfere with our capacity to imagine that things are, in the story, the way they are presented as being. I am sceptical, moreover, that either claim is true.

I'm sceptical that the cognitive load required to represent multiple distinct maps explains dislike of spoilers, because fictions themselves often ask us to generate multiple maps without thereby decreasing enjoyment or absorption. Think of time travel stories, and the particular pleasure that arises from seeing that they are consistent (that the events that have already been described in the story are consistent with, and even explained by, the events that occur when the protagonists travel back in time). Awareness of such consistency, or inconsistency, requires that we track multiple f-worlds at the same time. Such mapping is well within the capacities of children: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is one of many children's fictions that feature time travel as a plot device. The need to generate multiple within-world maps does not detract from enjoyment or make imagining effortful; not in a way that disrupts absorption, at any rate.

I'm also sceptical that the need to represent within-world differences is especially demanding. It's very plausible that the capacity for fiction evolved for the simulation of counterfactuals, and is designed effortlessly to track cross-world differences (Corballis 2019; Suddendorf, Addis, and Corballis 2009). But we also have systems designed to track *within* world differences; differences between how things are and how they are taken to be. Social cognition is centrally concerned with tracking the gap between how things are and how they are taken to be. Children have long been known to pass the false belief task—which requires tracking the difference between how things are and how a third-party takes them to be—around the age of four, but emerging evidence now indicates that the capacity may emerge very much earlier (Scott and Baillargeon 2017). Tracking cross-world differences is well within the capacity of young children, even infants: we therefore shouldn't expect spoilers to introduce significant friction into fictions.

Of course, there's a difference between representing *that the fiction represents p as to-be-imagined but not-p (within the fiction)* and representing *that the agent believes that p but not-p*. The fact that we effortlessly represent the latter is compatible with Chasid's claim that we cannot "straightforwardly play our role as f-believers" (Chasid 2024: 7) when spoilers are introduced. But the fact that we can represent within-world differences between how things are and how they are taken to be without effort or disruption both provides a reason to think that the representational demands imposed by spoilers are not taxing and a mechanism for effortless representation: the same machinery that allows us to represent an agent as falsely believing that *p* can be deployed to represent *ourselves* as falsely believing that *p* is true in the f-world. At the very least, Chasid owes us an explanation as to why this kind of representation introduces friction when the first doesn't, as well as an explanation for why this friction spoils, given that it doesn't impact enjoyment of the fiction.[4]

3. The Real Puzzle – Solved

Van Leeuwen and Chasid both maintain that spoilers attenuate our experience; for Van Leeuwen, it's emotion that is blunted, whereas for Chasid it's our imaginings. The evidence that spoilers rarely have a negative impact on either involvement or on enjoyment is, at least *prima facie*, a problem for both views. If either view were correct, we ought to expect the resulting change in our experience to be, at least typically, negative.

Chasid and Van Leeuwen ask *how do spoilers thwart or attenuate imaginings or emotions*? In the light of the apparent fact that spoilers do not significantly impact our enjoyment or absorption, there's a deeper puzzle to confront: *why do people so dislike spoilers, given that they rarely spoil?*

To get to grips with this puzzle, I suggest, we need to distinguish (1) *a story's being spoiled*, understood as having unsought information about the plot thrust on us, from (2) *our coming to have foreknowledge of a story's content*. Chasid and Van Leeuwen both assume that (2) entails (1). I think that's false.

Here are two ways in which a consumer of a fiction might come to hold a premature belief about the unfolding of a story. First, they might encounter a spoiler: perhaps their jerk cousin saw the movie last night and delights in texting them a revelation, or they read a review that gives away an important plot point. Second, they might generate it themselves: perhaps it occurs to them as a really satisfying way for the story to go. My intuition is that

[4]Further, there's evidence that in those cases where spoilers have a negative effect on experience, it isn't by interfering with imagination. Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) found no effect of spoilers on transportation generally, and specifically on the imagery dimension of transportation.

while the person might be pissed off in the first case, their response in the second case won't be negative in any respect.[5] Neither their imaginings nor their emotional responses will be attenuated, and (at least typically) they will enjoy the story just as much as if they did not know how the plot would unfold.[6]

If that's right, then our dislike of spoilers can't arise from foreknowledge of how the plot will unfold.

Part of the explanation might be that we overgeneralise a genuine phenomenon. There are some cases in which spoilers might interfere with story enjoyment (in some twist and puzzle stories).[7] We might dislike spoilers because we mistakenly take this phenomenon to be more general than it really is (perhaps encouraged by the fact that we don't always know *whether* a story belongs to one of these genres). I suspect, though, the thought experiment points to a different explanation; one that explains our dislike of spoilers more generally.

The thought experiment suggests that it's not our *having the belief that p* that we dislike; rather, it's others thrusting that belief on us without our consent. Our dislike of spoilers arises from being subject to someone else's epistemic choices. We dislike spoilers because we want to retain a kind of epistemic autonomy over the manner in which we come to have the relevant beliefs.

There's little doubt, after all, that people *do* value epistemic autonomy. It is widely held that the fact that some piece of knowledge might make our lives go better isn't sufficient to justify infringements on our epistemic autonomy except in those cases in which we have a duty to others to possess that knowledge (Bullock 2018; Pritchard 2013; Jackson 2021). The value of sovereignty over our minds is sufficient to render paternalistic interventions suspect even when they're in our interests. When agents make the decision to avoid acquiring knowledge about a certain topic, they impose a defeasible obligation on others to respect that decision. When agents make the decision to avoid knowing how the plot of a fiction unfolds beforehand, we violate their epistemic autonomy if we provide such knowledge (assuming we can

[5]Perhaps anticipating this sort of case, Van Leeuwen (2021: 659, n. 32) notes that guesses are compatible with suspense, because guessing that *p* doesn't entail believing that *p*. That is of course true, but we can come to have beliefs about story content via all sorts of routes. Indeed, I can be much more confident in my self-generated belief about how the story will end than I am in the reliability of a spoiler. So our different responses in the imagined cases can't arise from the difference between guesses and beliefs. Nor can it always arise from a satisfaction with my cleverness at anticipating the ending. I might take such satisfaction in working out who the murderer is in some cases, but in others the ending might just occur to me.

[6]As a review for this journal points out, there are cases in which divining how the plot will unfold prompts disappointment or annoyance: when it is too predictable. I think this is not prompted by *foreknowledge* specifically, but rather by defects of the story: we would feel the same annoyance were we to fail to guess it beforehand (added to an extra annoyance at ourselves for failing to see it coming).

[7]For the record, however, I am somewhat sceptical that self-generated foreknowledge would spoil even these kinds of fictions.

easily avoid doing so and the topic is one concerning which agents may reasonably decide to avoid acquiring knowledge).

If something like this suggestion is on the right track, the obligation to avoid spoiling fictions is grounded on nothing more than a preference that might easily have been different, and which has no essential link to fiction or the imagination. There's no significant difference between the annoyance we feel when someone spoils a story for us and the annoyance we would feel were we to set ourselves to solve a mathematical puzzle only for someone to come along and give us the solution just as we were getting into it: in neither case does our annoyance arise from the effect of foreknowledge on our imagination.[8] We ought to avoid spoiling because most of us prefer to avoid spoilers.

Obviously, this explanation is incomplete; a fuller explanation will ask just *why* most of us prefer to avoid such knowledge. I speculate that the answer to that question will turn on social facts concerning the role that fictional entertainment plays in contemporary society and its coming to serve as a focus of a great deal of social exchange. We might have lived in a world in which people are indifferent to, or seek out, spoilers—no one complained that the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* gave away the ending. In this world, we've made the collective decision to postpone knowledge of the story until the narrative itself reveals how events unfold.

If this account is correct—if we dislike spoilers only because we've made the decision to avoid premature knowledge but at the same time it's true that premature knowledge does not spoil our experience—our dislike of spoilers is grounded on a social norm and nothing more. We dislike spoilers and those who spoil because they violate the norm, not because they spoil. Spoilers rarely spoil, but I don't want others to force them on me.[9]

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[8] I thank a reviewer for this journal for this example.

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