

Research Article

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Spoilers as (Un)Wanted Information: How Reader's Engagement with Paratextual Material Affects Wellbeing

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Abstract: Engaging with a text allows one to enter a flow state through the actions or reading/viewing a narrative or event. Spoilers, which provide information about the text but bypassing the intended reading path as set out by the author, can serve to interrupt a state of flow, dissuade one from even attempting to interact with the text at hand, or catch one's eye to an interesting aspect that would normally be hidden. In this study, I classify spoilers through Genette's concept of paratexts and how they affect one's wellbeing through the notions of Seligman's PERMA theory (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments, with specific focus on aspects of engagement. Throughout this work, I denote different aspects of spoilers as found in examples of popular culture to establish how these paratexts can hinder or help in one's engagement with a potential text and how these can affect one's wellbeing. In order to help readers avoid unwanted spoilers. I also include how different elements of digital media can be adapted in order that one obtain such information only if one desires it to make an informed decision as to whether or not engage with a specific text.

Keywords: Spoilers; Paratexts; PERMA Theory; Engagement; Textual Engagement.

With greater accessibility to technology and information, those on the advantageous side of the digital divide can seek information almost instantaneously. However, the counterpoint to this ease comes with the difficulty of wishing to avoid particular aspects of data that one does not wish to be revealed, at least not yet. A great example of this can be found in the series *How I Met Your Mother*, particularly in the 14th episode of the 2nd season titled Monday Night Football (Bays and Thomas 2007). To sum up, the protagonists have a tradition of watching the Superbowl together but are unable to do so due to a funeral. They decide to record the sporting event to watch it together the next day and promise each other not to learn the outcome of the game until then. What ensues are hilarious hijinks as the characters go out of their way to not hear about the Superbowl, save for one who made a bet on the game and actually can't find information about who won. In this example, we see how information is available but there are those who actively do not want to engage with it for fear of losing out on the experience of obtaining said information in an intended way, e.g. watching the game, reading the book, etc. These data points for those who not desire them are generally known as "spoilers." Throughout this study, I analyze various dimensions of spoilers and how they can positively and negatively affect people through the lens of Seligman's PERMA theory (2011), specifically towards the notion of "Engagement" both with texts and with other readers.

As Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) explain, "[s]poilers give away endings before they begin and may thereby diminish suspense and impair enjoyment; indeed, as the term suggests, readers go to considerable lengths to avoid prematurely discovering endings. (1152)" This providing of undesired information effectively strips away the twists and turns of the narrative journey, thus affecting one's engagement with the text at hand. However, it is important to the "may" in that

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definition since spoilers can alternatively provide a greater form of engagement beyond the one intended by the author. For the sake of this paper, engagement refers to the act of interacting the text regardless of the medium in which it is published (e.g. books, movies, television programs, music, etc.). Furthermore, engagement is part of the mnemonic for Seligman's PERMA theory, which encompasses: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement. "PERMA is explicitly about wellbeing, rather than happiness, with no one element taking priority. In effect, PERMA is also a 'list theory'—though not an exhaustive one—of the most important components of wellbeing." (Moore 2019, 85). While each element of PERMA denotes aspects of wellbeing and can be applied to the practice of interacting with texts and other readers, I focus on engagement because it is an active part of an individual's actions. "Engagement is about flow; being one with the music, time-stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity.... In flow we merge with the object" (Seligman 2011, 10). This merging through engagement with a text is intended to be done through reading/viewing of the events that transpire in the order that the author has aligned for the reader. However, spoilers have the potential to remove oneself from a state of flow and thus harming one's engagement and thus one's wellbeing.

The connection between texts and spoilers is greatly covered by Gray (2010) where he explains how these bits of information act as paratexts. The term is coined by Genette (1997) where he establishes how a paratext, "constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but of transaction" (2). The transitional/transactional nature that Genette describes is further developed by Gray when he establishes how, "paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us "into" the text, and they provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption" (26). Hence, paratexts serve to attract readers through additional aspects of information that can in turn create expectations (and even provide spoilers for the text itself) in order to draw engagement. As such, I posit that such paratexts have a magnetic nature towards potential readers in that they can both attract or repel a particular reader. The way paratexts serve to persuade/dissuade readers coincides with Gray's characterization of them as analogous to advertisements (26). Thus, different elements including but not limited to reviews, suggestions from friends, commercials, merchandise, all serve as paratexts, though Gray further classifies them as epitexts for those that exist outside of the text (like the earlier examples) and peritexts which inhibit the text (like author commentary, blurbs on the back cover, etc.). Be it in epitext or peritexts, additional information encompasses the text in order to apprise potential readers though one needs to be wary that any of these paratexts can mitigate the narrative journey through the revelation of seemingly veiled content, i.e. spoilers.

Additionally, spoilers range beyond just the ending of a particular work or event as evident in a study by Perks and McElrath-Hart (2016) wherein they explain how:

Our work draws solely from the spirit of the nuisance rationale (and not its legal standing) as represented by the statement from the Supreme Court's *FCC v. Pacifica* decision that "words that are commonplace in one setting are shocking in another." Spoilers only spoil those who fear they will miss out on pleasurable suspense... (5582)

Spoilers (much like aspects of Seligman's Engagement) are incredibly subjective towards readers since lack of knowledge or interest in a story is instrumental in determining whether or not such information is a "nuisance" that can lead to disappointment/anger, or in just learning a factoid about a story you may or may not ever engage with. Because the determination of the reception of said information can be negative, neutral, or positive based on each individual's criteria, a good rule of thumb is to ask for someone's level of familiarity with the topic at hand as a common courtesy before one ends up revealing potential spoilers. For example, between April and May 2019, the *Avengers* film series and the *Game of Thrones* television program reached their narrative endpoints. If you were a fan of either or both works, then learning about how these stories would end via a random post on social networks rather than personally witnessing the installments meant that the experience of narrative realization was taken away from you. However, if you have no plans in the present or future to engage with these properties, then learning that important characters die is largely irrelevant. The experiences find a parallel with learning about the final score of a sports competition; if you are not a fan, then learning the outcome leaves you unaffected. If you had planned to view the game later on in its entirety, (like the above example from *How I Met Your Mother*) then you are effectively robbed of witnessing the events in the way that other viewers/fans did as it was occurring. Whether textual engagement occurs at the onset of publication or later, readers should have a chance to enjoy the text on their own terms without uninvited data spoiling the experience.

If Engagement, as per Perma Theory, directly contributes to a person's wellbeing, then the dissemination of spoilers inhibits one's freedom to interact with a text and hinders the ability to enjoy its value as an activity to help one's psychological welfare. And yet, as each individual reader engages with texts in their own way then the search and discussion of material that can be considered a spoiler serves as its own form of engagement. The distinction then lies within the conscious choice to pursue paratextual material that can fall under the category of spoilers rather than have such information be thrust upon oneself without their consent.

Some fans actively avoid certain paratexts in order to first engage with texts with minimal prior information to prejudge it; for example, not watching any trailers for a film prior to its viewing. However, there are other types of fans who vigorously hunt for such epitexts during the narrative production phase of the stories in order to appease their anticipation for the upcoming publication. Interviews with the author, snippets of the text that been published ahead of time (purposefully through the publisher or through leaks), and even paparazzi-style pictures during filming are often searched for as part of fan engagement and attempts to decipher what the story will consist of. This form of detective work leads to various attempts at speculation, which can lead to a type of self-spoiling for you and for others who believe your theory. As part of his qualitative and quantitative study, Völcker (2017) analyzed fan discourse within the fandom of *Star Wars* in Europe (though his overall findings apply to global fandoms) and surmised that spoilers are part of a greater practice within the entertainment industry:

As such, a (movie-) spoiler is information, an image, or a video clip that takes up and anticipates specific plot elements. Spoilers can also be differentiated in terms of their sources and the time they are made public. On the one hand, spoilers are distributed via publicly accessible media—usually on websites, in newspapers, magazines or also in film reviews—whereby hints or entire plots, such as already broadcast TV episodes or cinema films, can be revealed. (147)

Since the information is publicly distributed and available, fans will at some moment be provided with seemingly innocuous information which can be decrypted into a potential scoop about the ongoing production of a film, television series, etc. As this speculation practice can play with fans' expectations and ultimately serve as a potential spoiler, not all fans engage with this practice of observing paratexts¹. Still, even without reading the articles themselves which contain the information, the headlines which are distributed via social media platforms are so descriptive that one might not be able to avoid this data entirely. Take for example the trending topics section of social media platforms like Twitter which provide a name or a term and sometimes a small descriptor to contextualize why the topic is currently popular. The information provided is vague so as to avoid spoilers while also enticing potential readers to click with a new page with additional context and specific comments about said term, topic, name, etc. This minor form of contextualization serves the dual purpose of shielding viewers from data that can hurt future forms of reader engagement while also making the viewer go to a new page within the platform, which in turn adds to their potential ad revenue; a win-win situation for those who wish to engage with potential spoilers, those who don't, and the social media platform itself².

Digital spaces like social media platforms allow for readers to discuss the most recent events of a text or event as it occurs live. The practice of live tweeting for example becomes its own form of textual engagement done at the community level of the particular readership or fandom. While all users remain in synch with the viewing, it essentially becomes a moment of preaching to the proverbial choir. Benton and Hill (2012) highlighted how live viewing/tweeting is specifically done to avoid spoilers even as devices like DVRs are now more common and facilitate the viewers' ability to see shows at the time of their choosing. "It has been reported that people watch more live TV to both avoid spoilers and to communicate with other viewers. This is in contrast to the trend only a few years ago when people started using DVR machines to watch shows at their own pace" (2). This deferred viewing is often mandated through the staggering of starting times due to time zones. For example, West Coast viewers in the United States experience many forms of

1 On a personal note, I used to engage in speculative creative writing where I would attempt to determine what could happen in an upcoming film or television episode. My friends/readers found my musings to be entertaining though some insinuated that the end result was a depreciation of the final product since my idea had raised expectations for what the text could be but ultimately failed to reach.

2 This brings to mind an interesting moment during the serialization of the second season of *The Mandalorian* through the Disney + platform where names of different Star Wars characters would appear under trending topics with the descriptor that fans were discussing the most recent episode of the series. The contextualization did not include if the characters were actually present (such as Luke Skywalker in the season finale) or whether it was part of a speculative discourse (such as Ezra from the spinoff animated series *Star Wars Rebels*).

programming with a delay and thus cannot engage in practices like live tweeting since the events in question have already transpired. Benton and Hill go on to:

[H]ypothesize that west coast³ users are desensitized/spoiled by knowing that these mentions are first displayed on the east coast. There is no point in reacting to these messages, since they are old news. Total buzz is also much less than on the east coast (for example, during the finale [of *The Voice*] we captured approximately 20,000 *Voice*-related tweets for the west coast airing, whereas the east coast airing generated approximately 136,000), and they respond less to specific tweets. (11)

Here, we see how there is a limited temporal window which lasts from the onset of publication to about the time when the episode ends for such interactions, like live tweeting, to be relevant as part of a largescale engagement of a fanbase. However, the capacity to use social media as part of being an active fan is still available no matter how long after the installment was aired. The problem arises should one decide to follow the specific hashtag; then information that one is not privy to beforehand can be shared by someone who inhabits a more narratively advantageous geographic zone. Even if one is using sites like Twitter for only posting at this time, another user can reply to your posts or send a direct message with information that may require spoilers. This issue is further augmented by the possibility that a casual look at social media for this West Coast viewer could lead to the ending of the program being spoiled before it even starts for potential viewers. Hence, the only moments where you can receive information about a program without it being spoiled, as well as produce information on your own that could become a spoiler for others, is during the airing of the program/event itself.

These temporal issues constraining textual engagement were further magnified as on-demand viewing became prevalent through platforms like Netflix. Perks and McElrath-Hart (2018) in a subsequent study explored these aspects of time by positing that this technology allows users to see these programs at their own convenience rather than when the networks deem it appropriate. They refer to this practice as “time shifting” as one can choose the proper moment to watch an episode, event, or movie, but it still complicates the possibility of spoilers. They explain how:

When time shifting, viewers wrest temporal power away from television programmers, but, as we describe here, a new temporal hegemony has emerged between the already-viewed and the not-yet-viewed audience members—in the form of spoilers. A key component of this power struggle is that with the erosion of appointment television and the widespread availability of already-aired television content (in a way that is viewer-controlled and not a scatter-shot rerun schedule), any show can be on a person’s “will view” or “could view” list. Learning a spoiler can thus be viewed as a loss of opportunity—the opportunity to engage the television content with the same unsullied perspective as someone who viewed the first airing. (2)

Time shifting allows for readers/viewers to engage with a text outside the original/optimal/intended window of time through the use of on-demand streaming sites such as Hulu and Netflix allow in order to engage with movies and series⁴. However, this means practices of reader engagement are limited to those who are also actively time shifting with you and the potential for accidentally finding spoilers goes beyond the previously mentioned temporal window of a few hours between the coasts of the United States. For example, let’s say you have a subscription to the HBO channel and/or the HBO Max streaming service and you notice that you can now watch the critically acclaimed series *The Wire*. Through the paratexts of friendly recommendations, you decide to finally engage with said text through time shifting. The program aired from 2002 to 2008 so the probability of seeing a spoiler during one’s regular perusal of social media is minimal. However, any type of paratext related to the show would contain information on the series as a whole as it is assumed that people have already seen it. Now, multiply this possibility times every show and movie you have considered viewing after its original airing and one can see how this delayed form of textual engagement is one that needs to be limited should one wish to remain in blissful ignorance and attempt to experience the narrative with the same light as those who engaged with it at its intended time. Thus, in order to engage with texts without the chance of an errant spoiler appearing, one must actively disengage from paratexts and even other readers to retain one’s wellbeing until one has completed the narrative journey or if you choose to leave this proverbial path along the

³ Benton and Hill start their article by capitalizing East and West Coast as it is standard but refrain from doing so after the introduction segment for reasons that are not provided in their work.

⁴ The same practice can be done for sporting events through channels like ESPN Classic where old games are presented as if they were occurring live or through documentaries that revisit such moments with a magnitude of peritexts to provide additional forms of historical context.

way. In the case of films, the equipping of paratextual blinders lasts a few hours, but in the case of a long running series the process is so much longer.

In order to minimize the occurrence of spoilers, Castellano, Meimaridis, & Alvos dos Santos Jr. (2017) studied how such information can be provided properly by following temporal and/or spatial parameters:

Fans and critics who advocate the temporal perspective believe there’s a period of time considered ‘respectful’, during which no fan should produce spoilers, so as not to detract from the experience of other fans, who should have the opportunity to consume the narrative without having contact with important plot revelations. (80)

There is a large debate as to when exactly is the right time for spoilers to be absent regarding the description of the plot of an episode or movie. Kois (2008) declares in a tongue in cheek manner that *The Vulture* (the pop culture wing of *New York Magazine*) should declare the universal standards for the proper employment of potential spoiler information as stated in figure 1.1 below.

The Official Vulture Statutes of Limitations on Pop-Culture Spoilers

After all, *someone* needs to step up and answer these crucially important questions. Why not us? Let’s hope these will be ratified by the United Nations and adopted by media worldwide.

	Unmarked spoilers allowed in text of article	Spoilers allowed in article headlines or in non-show-specific articles
Reality-TV shows	As soon as the episode is over.	As soon as the episode is over.
Narrative TV shows	The day after the show runs in its normal time slot.	Three days after the show runs in its normal time slot.
Movies	The Monday after the movie opens.	One month after the movie opens.
Plays	One month after the play opens.	Three months after the play opens, or when it closes, whichever comes first.
Books	Three months after the book is published.	Six months after the book is published.
Operas	100 years after opera's premiere.	Never.

Learn it. Know it. Live it. And hurry up and watch the damn *Wire*!

Figure 1.1: Table by Kois (2018) suggesting statutes of limitations for spoiler reveals based on types of stories.

While the humorous attempt to standardize paratextual descriptions of stories is both interesting and coincides with common sense practices, there are those who believe that spoilers should not be an active part of said descriptions. Liebenson (2019) interviews various cinephiles on the subject of spoilers, particularly in regards to classic films. Among those profiled is Peter Bogdanovich who argues that spoilers should have no place in such discourses. He emphasizes the example of the film *Psycho* and the experience of one of the first film screenings for members of the press in 1960.

“We all thought it was a picture about a woman who steals some money.” Then Hitchcock pulled the rug out from the audience with a horrific, out-of-left-field plot twist. “I’ve never heard this before or since,” Bogdanovich continued. “The audience — a thousand paying customers — shrieked through the entire sequence.” The spoiler alert became part of the film’s ad campaign: “After you see the picture, please don’t give away the ending. It’s the only one we have.”

While the original intended form of textual engagement is nigh impossible to recreate, it is interesting how Bogdanovich distinguishes between works one has witnessed and those one hasn’t, regardless of the amount of time which has elapsed since its airing. If temporal windows for “proper” contextualization of stories remain under contention then perhaps it is better to focus not on the proper time for such revelations but rather a proper place for them.

Castellano, Meimaridis, & Alvós dos Santos Jr. (2017) also analyzed how specific areas for this information can be a more effective model for curtailing the spread of spoilers:

Fans and critics who claim there are ‘appropriate places’ for the production of spoilers use the spatial perspective. They contend that posting a spoiler on a Facebook group for *Game of Thrones* fans may be appropriate, but posting on Twitter, where anyone can have access to that content, is unacceptable. The proposal is to restrict these paratexts to certain spaces where fans have the option to consume them, thereby eliminating the risk of coming across them accidentally on social networks such as Facebook, Tumblr, or Twitter. The issue of the ‘free circulation’ of spoilers is so important that users often avoid social networks...” (80)

Having such spaces available for the spreading of spoilers effectively serves as a form of quarantine but only if they do not bleed out into more public forums. For example, users of Facebook who favor spatial parameters should use a private chat rather than a private group since posts from the group could manifest in another member’s general timeline and thus accidentally reveal information prior to one being ready to engage with it. While the notion of appropriate digital spaces may seem like the most proper practice to safeguard the potential engagement of others with a particular text, the reality is one where moments worth viewing are the ones worth sharing. The magnitude of such events like plot reveals, character deaths, and over the top finales beckon to be shared and discussed with others much in the same way that one disseminates breaking news of the personal, communal, and/or national level. Two aspects worth considering as to why such distinguished digital spaces are ignored in favor of general social media posting are that the latter is a far simpler form of engagement and that such designated areas can be intimidating for those who are not already members of said readership communities.

The distinctive strata of fans is explored by Williams (2004) as she distinguishes how the readership community of the hit series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is divided through levels of social capital⁵. Williams posits that, “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” (2). A large source of social and subcultural capital for this community stems from knowledge of the work itself and being up to date with it. Thus, spoilers can be seen as a form of power since they distinguish between those who know and those who don’t. “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” (5). The so-called dominance of these spoiler sources (either through intimate knowledge of the source material or through proximity to privileged paratexts) relies on the fact they can choose when and how to disseminate this information to other outside of their fandom caste. Hence, the desire for reaching and maintaining the levels of the upper echelons of this fandom required that one have information on upcoming narrative events upon their initial airing or even before that through speculation or investigation. In this manner, we witness a convoluted form of wellness wherein spoilers equal the cultural and social capital necessary to rise and retain one’s hierarchy within the fandom. Furthermore, the continued reception and communication between fans creates an environment of engagement that requires immediacy since delays in such interactions could spark a fear that, “falling out of step with this spatio-temporal rhythm means falling out of the newsgroups’ mutually reinforcing sphere of anticipation and speculation” (7). As the serialization of the *Buffy* series continued, the necessity of being caught up with its most recent events became a requirement to be in good standing within said fandom through the designated digital space of their online forums. Once the series ended, the power dynamics shifted as spoilers were no longer an imminent element for engaging with the text. Thus, this form of capital lost its value as the reader’s engagement with the show became more akin to surveying an archive rather than charting an unknown land. Knowledge of the narrative’s past continued to be a form of gatekeeping for this and other readership communities but spoilers as a form of soothsaying the series’ future no longer held standing once its conclusion became public.

The power of spoiler sources is one that is often denoted as one that can hurt a potential upcoming engagement with a text but selective information through paratexts can be beneficial to readers. The Motion Picture Association of America’s (MPAA) rating system outlines to viewers beforehand the intended age group for a particular film and provides the particular areas which can be offensive, e.g., language, violence, drug use, nudity, etc. Previews of episodes and movies serve to entice the viewer with general information about the upcoming feature and convince them to watch it. Trigger warnings serve similarly to rating systems in that caution signs outline what elements of a story could be distressing for certain readers. One particularly specific capacity for a spoiler that is used to curtail

⁵ Different forms of capital are outlined by Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal essay, “The Forms of Capital” (1985).

potential anxiety in readers/viewers can be found in the website *Does the Dog Die?* As the title suggests, one can visit this site prior to engaging with the text to ask the titular question in a yes or no format. However, the site has expanded to contain a plethora of different trigger warnings, though additional comments are present for some categories that can serve as more detailed spoilers. By knowing specifically whether or not such triggers take place prior to engaging with the text, readers restrict their concerns beforehand and avoid being caught by surprise. Perks and McElrath-Hart (2018), as part of their qualitative study on temporal issues in narrative viewing, found that some fans, particularly women, used spoilers to limit negative suspense. “Our discourse captured in this section suggests that spoilers may not induce positive emotions, but they can insulate viewers against negative emotions such as anxiety (the dark side of suspense)” (18). Here we see how spoilers serve as a form of protection to empower readers with the proper preparation prior to engaging with a text. However, Perks and McElrath-Hart did highlight that the revelation of these spoilers was more incidental rather than purposeful, at least within the context of their study:

Several of our study participants, all women, sought or accidentally found greater control over their negative emotions by finding out spoilers for particularly scary or sad shows. . . Most participants whose responses contributed to this thread noted that spoiler seeking to reduce anxiety was an infrequent, genre- or narrative-specific behavior for them—or they just stumbled onto the spoiler and had a favorable outcome. (18)

With this prior knowledge in mind, we see how spoilers can be used as an early warning system for readers at an emotional level as to better prepare them for texts they are about to engage with. Readers are better informed before choosing to interact with a text and can avoid being caught off guard by moments that that may stifle or even shock the reader out of their process of engagement.

Still, these types of spoilers do not encompass the general worries that are associated with them, i.e., learning about the ending prior to engaging with a text. Interestingly enough, a study by Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) suggested that the presence of spoilers in the context of short stories allows readers to be more attentive towards the process by which the characters arrive at the (spoiled) finale:

Reading a story with foreknowledge of its outcome may be analogous to perceptual fluency, in which perceived objects are processed with ease, an experience that is associated with aesthetic pleasure, positive affect, and story engagement. Schema discrepancy theory suggests that increased predictability can result in increased positivity of affective response, although this effect is dependent on initial level of uncertainty. (1152)

The study itself consisted of readers who were given three different stories to read. One would not be spoiled, another would be spoiled in an obvious manner, and the third would be spoiled but in a way that made it look as if it were the purposeful introduction of the story. Readers were asked which story they preferred, and many preferred those that had been spoiled for them. One interesting caveat to consider is the fact that readers had no prior knowledge about the stories, which brings to mind an earlier point of analysis as to readers who are fans of the particular story being the ones who cry foul over witnessing a spoiler. Another factor to consider is that of temporal investment towards these short stories. Daniel and Katz (2018) performed a similar study to Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011), but they exposed viewers to *Twilight Zone* episodes and found that their audience were not fans of it being spoiled. They foreground how extended factors of time may have contributed to the negative reception of spoilers. “For example, the longer video durations may require more investment, attentional, or emotional, from the audience to the media. This added investment may facilitate the spoiler effect often feared by television audiences” (10). A longer reading time appears to be a factor in determining whether a spoiler can be beneficial, neutral, or hurtful in the process of engaging with the text. Interestingly enough, the episodic structure of *Twilight Zone* installments makes them minor self-contained stories⁶; hence, they are akin in narrative structure to a short story. And yet possible familiarity with the series itself could form an emotional bond to make it part of the overall temporal investment to each short story.

⁶ One important caveat to the narrative structure of texts like *The Twilight Zone* is that they are famed for their twist endings. By knowing the twist beforehand, one can better engage with the text by being vigilant of the subtle cues of the upcoming surprise rather than being caught unaware by it. Ideally, I believe this engagement is best experienced through viewing the episode without any context to it and then engage in a repeat viewing with a more discerning eye, something that was not easily achievable during the initial airings of said program but can be done nowadays through streaming accessibility to said narratives.

Series that span years or even decades have their own fan base that has been present in the serialization process from its onset or further on. The emotional investment in such a story could be so strong that members of the fandom prefer to employ spoilers to completely ignore “bad” installments altogether. One such series is *Star Wars*, and its fandom is quite polarized as to which films are masterpieces and which ones are mediocre with minimal middle ground between these categories. Völcker’s (2017) study of *Star Wars* fans (as discussed earlier) highlighted how negative reviews of the “Prequel Trilogy” (consisting of Episodes 1, 2, and 3, which were made and released years after the original *Star Wars* trilogy) led to fans finding spoilers beforehand to avoid disappointment:

Further reasons were mentioned in addition to this, with which spoiler consumption was justified: for example, disappointment regarding the movies of the Prequel Trilogy. This disappointment resulted in a kind of drive for immunization, and ‘seduced’ fans into the regular reading of spoilers. With the related search for information, some fans are able to release themselves from emotional stress and to focus on the unfolding story. (157)

In a practice that seems antithetical towards the notion of fans, these groups would suspect that the installments would be bad, search for spoilers to confirm or deny this suspicion, and then actively ignore and dismiss said films. This tactic of using quality to determine if parts of the series can be disregarded transposes itself to long-running television series wherein fans would tell those who have just started engaging with the show to avoid certain episodes or to “power through” stretches where the plot is not up to the fandom’s standards. Thus, the power that spoiler sources, the highest hierarchy of fandoms as detailed by Williams (2014), is not used for gatekeeping against initiates to the fandom but rather as an attempt to ensure the wellbeing of new readers (regardless of their employment of significant spoilers or not) so that they can enjoy the engagement with this text as a whole in spite of negative moments they may find along the way.

While the positive aspects of spoilers can exist within specific contexts, these benefits are best appreciated when readers are the ones who actively seek them out. Accidentally obtaining unwanted information for a reader can stifle the original interest in engaging with said texts. Public spaces at both the real and digital settings are places of free discourse where most forms of speech can be emitted without being policed. However, as readers and viewers find themselves greatly limiting their social media time then perhaps the onus lies on these networks to make their users feel comfortable within these spaces. Social media networks have already implemented some features while others are still in development to limit unwanted information such as spoilers but can be applied to other forms of undesired content as well. One recent feature is that of a “snooze button” for Facebook wherein users can choose a specific term, profile or page they wish to be temporarily omitted from their timelines. “If you choose to ‘snooze’ a keyword, you won’t see posts in your News Feed containing that exact word or phrase from any person, Page, or Group for 30 days. In other words, fewer spoilers.” (Muraleedharan, 2018). While snoozing is an option, one can still choose to unfriend/unfollow/block specific users and group pages in order to no longer look at their content on one’s timeline. This puts the responsibility on the user, rather than the network, to identify and disassociate oneself from such improper content providers after the fact. Another feature on Facebook which shields users from unwanted information is one where pictures and videos that “may show violent or graphic content” are hidden from viewers, though they may wish to click on an “uncover” said media and witness it for themselves. This pre-censored information can be further removed via report options if users find it to be too offensive to exist on the website at all.

Another social media network which hides sensitive content from users and provides users with the ability to report malfeasant content is Twitter. Prior to its implementation, Jennifer Golbeck (2012) studied Twitter during its early years and posited that elements such as a mute button could help in users actively selecting the information that would appear on the timeline.

[W]e present a challenge for identifying and blocking every message about a specific topic posted on Twitter. This will prevent users from seeing content they find objectionable, such as spoilers for events like sports and television shows, while still retaining access to the rest of the information stream. (2758)

The mute button is now standard for Twitter and can be used to block out specific users and or terms from appearing in your timeline. However, the mute button works in regards to that particular term and can be subverted by using markers that obfuscate the spelling for the algorithms but are still relatively simple to read for users. For example, when *Star Wars Episode 9: Rise of Skywalker* was released on December 2019, one could mute *Star Wars* in order to avoid coming

across any spoilers in one's timeline during that time. And yet, other users could simply write "St.ar W'ars" or other such variants to bypass the mute feature and pass along unwanted information about the film. Hence, more nuanced approaches are necessary to properly detect and block spoilers in these digital avenues.

One such way to comb through the data of a particular website is through the use of artificial intelligence. Jeon, S, Kim, S, & Yu, H (2016) proposed that they could use AI in Twitter to have a program scan for spoiler material then divide content between spoiler and non-spoiler.

Our goal is to detect spoilers to allow people to avoid them when checking their SNSs to communicate with their friends. Specifically, we collected tweets related to the reality TV show *Dancing with the Stars* US Season 13 over a seven-week period. Using this data, we proposed distinct features to distinguish spoilers from non-spoilers by constructing a classification model for spoiler detection. (1)

While their proposed method was not infallible, it was able to properly classify spoilers and non-spoilers to further enhance the viewing experience of programming in this case *Dancing with the Stars*. Another form of AI which can be used as part of the deduction process is the one outlined by Boyd-Graber, J., Glasgow, K., and Sauter-Zajac, J. (2013). In their study, they took a linguistic approach to machine learning as they incorporated verb transitivity and recovering temporal relations to detect possible spoilers and filter them as such. However, the classification as the material as potentially a spoiler did not hide it from the user, rather it indicated that the upcoming post could contain such unwanted data. With this in mind, they wondered:

How aggressive should the algorithm be, and what are effective strategies for alerting users of potential spoilers and allowing them to continue to see the message once they understand the risk? Together with effective automatic classification techniques, these can make spoiler alerts more consistent and more effective as users obtain information from the web and social media. (8)

The categorization of spoilers with proper warnings allow for the common precaution of a "spoiler alert" to be issued even as other users do not provide such caution to curtail readers. The choice to continue to read the flagged information is now up to the user. However, much like the issue Jeon et al's use of AI, purposeful/accidental improper use of spelling and grammar can allow for such information to slip by.

Perhaps the aspect that can be better managed is not the language but rather the time of posting. This is particularly important for readers/viewers who engage with texts long after the onset of publication. Something as simple as wanting to know more about a certain character after the reading of the first book in a series prior to continuing with the emotional/economic investment in subsequent books can reveal spoilers fairly quickly about future events. Websites such as wikis, which provide a quick overview of all aspects of a character or story within the first paragraph, are particularly egregious when it comes to having potential spoilers out in the open. Shawn Jones as part of his Masters' Thesis (2015) explores how the main factor in parsing out the information between spoiler and non-spoiler is time. He examines how the Memento Online Archive, allows users to specify the parameters that they use to visit website, including date-times so that no information published after said moment in time can be visible.

Tim Berners-Lee, one of the architects of the World Wide Web, originally defined four dimensions in which a resource could generate different representations. They are target medium, content-type, language, and time. The first three of these evolved into four separate dimensions of HTTP content negotiation. Memento finally introduces time as a fifth dimension in which a user can request a specific representation of a resource. (20)

Hence, this technology provides users with greater control as to how they investigate a particular narrative topic without finding spoiler centered information about it. Users still require the specific date of publication for said story prior to the search and other key points in time as reading is continued⁷.

While there are multiple programs and options to help defend oneself from seeing spoilers, one should ask why this sense of responsibility belongs to readers who must stay vigilant, rather than the spoiler sources in the first place. Fans police and call out other users for their posting of spoilers in attempts to curtail such behavior. Celebrity actors join in such endeavors by asking fans to allow viewers to engage with the story for themselves firsthand. For example,

⁷ Author's note: in attempting to use the Memento Archives as part of my research, my antivirus software instantly flagged it as troublesome due to a "phishing issue". Please use caution when using this or any other website.

with the release of the *Avengers: Endgame* film, the star-studded casts' media tour included essentially a public service announcement calling on viewers to keep the main plot points to themselves with the motto: "Don't Spoil the Endgame". However, spoilers continued to permeate and turned social media spaces into narrative minefields as any scroll could reveal major plot twists and seemingly innocuous Gifs could reveal climactic scenes. While "fans" will also find ways to share elements of stories with others who are not ready to receive that information, at least more mainstream news outlets are more careful in providing overviews of narrative information with minimal spoilers. One such moment where a media entity overstepped its bounds and was immediately shunned by readers is outlined in a study by Gursimsek, Ö and Drotner, K. (2014). They focused on the third season finale for *Lost* and how reviews of the yet to be aired episode contained spoiler information beyond the usual type of data provided in such outlets.

[A] particular spoiler post by Darkufo constitutes such a key textual moment when blog readers evaluate his post and discuss its legitimacy, thus forming discourses that establish a textual practice, a social practice and an identification of the blog commentator. Spoilers which reveal significant information create a set of interactions in the form of comments and interventions posted by different people with different social identities who all contribute to a discursive engagement. (29)

These discursive engagements allow for readers/viewers to converse and analyze the specific moments of a story; however, they do so while alienating an audience without this knowledge from participating⁸. Furthermore, glimpses of this conversation in the form of spoilers can further dissuade potential fans from participating in this discourse or from even initially engaging with the text. In the case of reviews, such as the one highlighted by Gursimsek and Drotner (2014), the evaluator of the story should be able to analyze the story while skirting specific details of the story. Moments such as a character's death should not be present in this type of communication as the review should be used as a sneak peek to entice the readers to see it themselves while providing feedback about the elements of narrative production, rather than as an analysis of specific story elements (at least not without providing spoiler alert warnings for readers to choose to not read any further).

In conclusion, engagement with texts serve as a way to maintain one's wellbeing. Be it as a form of growth or distraction, textual engagement allows one to become immersed into an area outside of the stressors of everyday life. Paratexts surround these texts and permeate into our everyday communication and function as a form of contextualization for to help one choose whether or not to devote one's time and energy to prior to engaging with said narrative. Spoiler sources range from the innocuous (this movie is so good, it made me laugh so much), to the surprising reveal without context (I can't believe the protagonist was dead all along, what a twist), to the helpful (honestly, the first two seasons are boring but after that it gets really good, trust me). Each category can help and/or hurt in deciding the texts one will eventually engage with or disregard but only when readers choose to seek out these paratexts on their own accord, rather than finding them unannounced on one perceptive purview either in real life or in social media. While common practices like good manners and ever evolving AI can help in keeping physical and digital areas spoiler free, it is ultimately one's personal responsibility to actively avoid and demark spaces where such spoilers can surprise you. Still, having the knowledge of an ending does not necessarily invalidate the experience of one's engagement with the text. In my first example of avoiding and seeking spoilers for the Superbowl in the episode of *How I Met Your Mother*, all of the protagonists have the ending revealed prior to actually engaging with the game on their own terms but still decide to do so anyway. In the words of the narrator: "Because sometimes, even if you know how something is going to end, that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the ride" (00:23:35-00:23:42).

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⁸ One curious aspect is that this review helped distinguish between two sets of readers of *Lost* according to Gray and Mittell (2007): spoiler fans and actual fans. "Spoiler fans are seen as consuming, and interacting with, a text at its extra-textual margins, in order to avoid or actively reject its textual core; and they are contrasted with actual fans who consume *Lost's* narrative "correctly," following the designs of the show's creators." (3)

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