

I'm Going to Spoil Your Favorite TV Show

Anna-Lisa Cohen :: 5/8/2023



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In this divisive era, when there are so few things we all still agree on, one point of basic civility stands unchallenged: You don't mention the ending of a television show or movie if the person you're talking with hasn't seen it yet. It's just basic human decency. Premature plot revelations are so far out of bounds that their name alone stands as a warning: spoilers. (On that note and before we go any further: Spoilers ahead.)

In the past few weeks, a dramatic revelation in "Succession" reignited the debate over how long spoilers should be suppressed on social media — and whether having advance knowledge of a momentous plot development (in this case: Logan Roy dies) ruins our enjoyment of a story. Recently, my colleagues and I conducted research to address this very question.

Spoiler alert: It doesn't.

In a study published in [Applied Cognitive Psychology](#), my co-authors and I had people watch a suspenseful 30-minute TV episode directed by Alfred Hitchcock titled "Bang! You're Dead." Our purpose was to determine the extent to which knowing the outcome of a dramatic scenario would affect a viewer's ability to be drawn in by it. We showed our participants this short episode, in which a young boy finds a loaded gun

and mistakes it for a toy. The boy grabs it and walks around his small town pointing it and shooting at people yelling “Bang! You’re dead!” oblivious to the fact that there is a bullet in the chamber.

We told participants — a sample of undergraduate students — to raise their hand every time any character said the word “gun.” In the control group, participants knew nothing about how the story would end. As the suspense mounted midway through the show, they were so immersed in the events onscreen that they forgot all about their assignment.

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In a different group, we told participants how the program would end. We predicted that knowing the ending would lower their engagement — and allow them to better remember to respond to the word “gun.”

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We were wrong.

At the exact same point in the show participants neglected their assignment in a similar manner as those in the control group. In other words, they were just as immersed even though they knew the outcome. In follow-up questionnaires, they also reported the same levels of engagement and enjoyment as those who didn’t know the ending.

The truth is, we are just as likely to get caught up in a story even when we know what is coming — perhaps because more significant factors determine our enjoyment of narratives rather than simply waiting to learn or guess their resolution. Humans are hard-wired not just to absorb facts but also to lose themselves in stories and attune themselves to the characters and plots unfolding on the screen.

Consider the 2019 movie “Parasite.” Everyone watching it knows it’s fictional, but we nonetheless feel our pulse start to race as the man hiding in the basement suddenly emerges with a knife. In an effort to self-soothe, we might try to remind ourselves that it’s only a movie, but it’s no use. We are terrified.

In 1993, the psychology professor Richard Gerrig put a name to this common experience of being completely pulled away from the present and immersed in the alternate world of a fictional story. He called it “narrative transportation,” because it feels as if we have been transported into the alternate world.

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One of the defining characteristics of narrative transportation is that we become so immersed that our attitudes and intentions change to reflect those of the story. This explains why we cry when a beloved protagonist dies or scream in terror as an ax-wielding psychopath closes in on his victim. As it turns out, our sense of narrative transportation has very little to do with whether we know how the story is going to end.

The opening sequence of another thriller, “Cliffhanger,” directed by Renny Harlin and starring Sylvester Stallone, is arguably one of the most gut-wrenching four minutes in film. Mr. Stallone plays a mountain

ranger who helps a couple who become stranded on a mountain peak in the Colorado Rockies. The director sets up a suspenseful scene in which a female character, played by Michelle Joyner, is crossing a crevice thousands of feet above the ground when her harness breaks. For several agonizing seconds, while she dangles precariously, Ms. Joyner’s hand begins to slip out of Mr. Stallone’s. The camera focuses tightly on her face. Then she falls. I have used this sequence in my classes on many occasions to illustrate the power of film, but I always give students warning before playing the clip.

In a [2015 study](#), the cognitive psychologist Matt Bezdek and colleagues scanned participants’ brains using functional magnetic resonance imaging while they watched the opening scene of “Cliffhanger,” as well as clips of a number of other highly suspenseful films. The clips were presented in the center of the screen while continuously flashing checkerboards appeared in the periphery.

When the clips reached their most suspenseful moments, participants’ attention was focused on the center of the screen like a spotlight, suppressing attention to the periphery, so that they weren’t aware of the flashing checkerboards. In moments of low suspense, the spotlight of attention broadened, and participants were more likely to notice the checkerboards. This study provided the first neural evidence that suspense narrows attentional focus — and it helped explain why the participants in our Hitchcock study forgot their task.

If we feel empathy and identify with characters, we become mentally attuned to the goals and intentions of those characters. Therefore, if a protagonist has a goal to find his or her child to prevent a death (as happens in the case of the Hitchcock story), it becomes our goal, too.

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So, if watching a Hitchcock story makes us feel that we are living in that story, then knowing the ending doesn’t affect us, because the characters in the story don’t know the ending and, for that moment, we have hitched our mental state to theirs.

So don’t worry if someone “spoiled” the latest episode of “Succession” for you. The research suggests you will still enjoy it, even if you decide to watch it for a second time.

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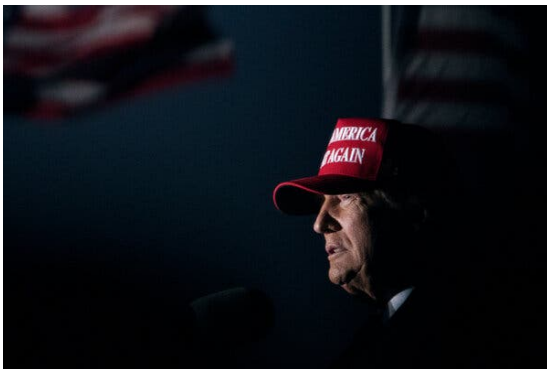
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