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Spoiler Definitions and Behaviors in the Post-Network Era

Lisa Glebatis Perks
Merrimack College, perksl@merrimack.edu

Noelle McElrath-Hart

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By Lisa G. Perks and Noelle McElrath-Hart

The spoiler layers run deep for the "Red Wedding," an infamous scene from Home Box Office's (HBO's) *Game of Thrones,* and the George R. R. Martin book series upon which the TV show is based. In 2000, the Red Wedding debuts in popular culture, published in Martin's book *A Storm of Swords.* On June 2, 2013, HBO airs an adaptation of the infamous scene, spurring extensive social media commentary. The next day, Mashable, io9, and other websites archive some of the most notable viewer tweets, including this one: "#SpoilerAlert Think my stomach is still up in my throat. To non-book readers: welcome to the #gameofthrones despair and hopelessness club" (cited in Bricken). On the June 5, 2013 episode of *Conan,* host Conan O'Brian shows George R. R. Martin a compilation video of television viewers reacting to the Red Wedding. The clip makes it to YouTube and garners over 4 million views by March of 2015 ("Team Coco" 2014). So where are the spoilers? Spoiler possibilities exist in all the spaces between: between when a reader or viewer *wanted* to find out about the Red Wedding and when he or she *did* find out that the narrative was about to take a terrible turn.

Though book readers and film viewers can be spoiled, our study focuses on television, a medium that has undergone tremendous adaptation. Lotz places the beginning of television's post-network era in the early 2000s. Starting with the early adoption of video on demand, digital video recorders, and other "digital devices that integrate Internet and television" television began to be easily uncoupled from its incipient medium (2014, p. 64). The post-network era is just one part of the convergence culture media revolution. Jenkins' (2006) convergence culture label refers to the widespread decentralization of media production and dissemination through

digitization. The post-network era of convergence culture is a space in which audiences increasingly engage with media channels and content at will, on their own terms.

Television time shifting—viewing a show after its air date—is a phrase that captures the "watch what you want, when you want" possibilities for convergence culture's migratory, agentic audiences. Television time shifting began with widespread use of VCRs to record and play back content (Lin, 1990). The time shifting arsenal has grown to include TV on DVD, Digital Video Recorders, subscription streaming services, and piracy (Perks, 2015). Time shifting devices are "control" technologies (Carlson, 2006, 103; Lotz, 2014) or "agencies of control" (Newman and Levine, 2012: 133) that allow viewers to untether themselves from a "paternalistic form of delivery" (Marshall, 2009: 44). When time shifting, television episodes are "decontextualized from the media landscape, but recontextualized to fit with the fabric of our lived existence[s]" (Perks, 2015: xxix). Post-network era time shifting technologies aid in "the deconstruction of temporal hegemony" (Moshe, 2012: 79). 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.

Carlson (2006) writes that the development and widespread adoption of "networked digital technologies" at the end of the 20th century have led to greater "personalization and

interconnectivity—the ability of media users to control and share their media experiences" (97-98). However, personalization and interconnectivity can be at odds, as we see in the case of spoilers. Gray (2010) forges a notable link between time shifting's personalized viewing schedules and spoiler tensions when he writes, "Given different audiences' uneven paces of progress through many ongoing narratives, spoilers have become an increasingly touchy subject in today's media environment" (146). Studies of online fan communication conclude that computer-mediated communication about television texts enhances viewing pleasure—by offering a variety of textual interpretations and deepening emotional investments in the stories (Baym, 2000; Costello and Moore, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Nee and Dozier, 2015). In the case of spoilers, one's pleasurable communication about a viewing experience can cause another potential viewer pain.

To better understand tensions inherent in evolving reception patterns and narrative pleasures we conducted a qualitative online survey of people who had television time shifted in the two years prior to the study. More specifically we asked, "In what ways are time shifting viewers uniquely engaging with communication about television to maximize narrative pleasures?" Various audience attitudes, behaviors, and norms will not evolve on the same trajectory, leading to growing pains surrounding a medium in transition. By capturing some of these growing pains, our study takes up Gray and Lotz's (2012) charge to explore what audiences *do not like* about their television experience.

A review of the limited research on spoilers reveals that power underlies spoiler attitudes and activities. However, many of these studies analyze fans, a group that Costello and Moore (2007) describe as acting "outside the common expectations for a member of the audience" (126). Because our study examines viewer engagement with a broad range of television texts, our

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findings offer a novel perspective on spoilers that is not narrative- or fan-specific.[1] Throughout this essay, we argue that spoiler avoiders embrace post-network era reception practices, but use network era norms to evaluate their own experience and regulate the television conversations around them. We see, however, an erosion of those network era norms in people who have either given up trying to control the television conversations around them or use spoilers to enhance their narrative pleasure. These findings suggest that television conversation norms and individual evaluations of narrative pleasures are slower to evolve than reception patterns.

Methodology

Our conclusions are based on responses we collected from 92 television time shifters through an open-ended online survey (using Qualtrics software) in fall 2014.[2] The research was approved by our institution's human subjects research committee. Participants were recruited through the researchers' social media and email contacts, with the incentive to be entered in a drawing for one of two US$25 Amazon gift cards. Participants had to have television time shifted in the two years prior to the study. After asking participants questions to ensure they met the study qualifications, we asked about their definition of spoilers, how they find out spoilers, their attitudes toward receiving and issuing spoilers, and their motivations to seek or avoid spoilers. Because of skip logic, the survey included either 16 questions for participants who knew a spoiler before watching their time shifted show or 13 for those who did not know a spoiler. We intentionally excluded shows that had all in-one-releases such as *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* because individual episodes had no benchmark air date. The time shifted shows earning the most mentions were *Breaking Bad* (N=16), *Game of Thrones* (N=12), *The Walking Dead* (N=11), *Dexter* (N=10), *How I Met Your Mother* (N=10), *Downton Abbey* (N=9), and *Supernatural* (N=9).

The study participants included 69 women and 23 men. They ranged in age from 18-71, with an average age of 36. The participants' racial and ethnic identifications were as follows: American Indian (N=2), Asian American (N=1), Caucasian (N=81), and Latina/o (N=3). Three people identified with multiple races and/or ethnicities. Two chose not to answer this question. The study participants skewed higher than the U.S. population in terms of educational attainment: high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (N=1), some college (N=8), Associate's degree (N=3), Bachelor's degree (N=29), and graduate degree (N=49). Two participants did not report their educational attainment.

The length of responses to individual questions ranged from a single word to six sentences, with the responses collectively taking up over 40 single-spaced pages. The authors began analyzing the responses by separately making notes of repeated themes. Next, we compared notes and mapped out common categories. Through our discussions, three themes emerged regarding spoiler definitions: spoiler quality, spoiler temporality, and viewer investment. When analyzing spoiler behaviors, two pairs of linked tensions emerged from the time shifter responses: committed vs. not committed to the show and curious about the show vs. preserving the show's surprise. The analysis was largely inductive but with a hint of deductive reasoning: we were "sensitized" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011: 247) to particular themes after reading other spoiler studies and deductively put our work in dialogue with findings from other studies where appropriate. The upcoming pages offer support for these themes along with a two-part literature review that addresses spoiler definitions first and behaviors second.

Evolving spoiler definitions

Contested definitions of "spoiler" are undoubtedly part of the touchy television climate Gray observed. Media studies scholars writing from a network era perspective often define

television spoilers in terms of a formal air date (Baym, 2000; Booth, 2010; Hills, 2012). This network era perspective accurately captures the production conditions, popular content delivery technologies, and viewing patterns characterizing the years in which the scholars were writing. Booth (2010) writes, "Spoilers attempt to reveal key pieces of information for a media object's narrative before the producers of that narrative release that information to the public" (109). Under this rubric, the Red Wedding could only be spoiled until HBO aired the scene.

Although spoiler temporality is rigidly defined in the network era, the content of the spoiler is not. Gray and Mittell (2007) put forth a perspectival take on spoilers in their study of *Lost* viewers: "The definition of 'spoiler' varies somewhat in the eyes of the beholder, as any revelation of yet-to-unfold narrative developments could be viewed as a spoiler by some [….]" Gray and Mittell move in a more audience-centered direction, but their use of the phrase "yet-to-unfold" still maintains a network era traditional temporal hinge, one dictated by the formal channels of production and dissemination, not on user choice of scheduling and engagement.

Just a few years after *Lost* concluded, users were increasingly exercising choice and engaging shows on their own schedule and pace. A 2014 Nielsen survey found that 50% of some networks' viewers in the 18-34 age group time shifted within seven days of an episode air date ("Building Time-Shifted Audiences"). A more recent scholarly definition captures the flexible temporal view predicated on this time shifting surge: Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) define a spoiler as "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (1069). "Premature" does not mean the information comes before an official release; instead, prematurity is defined by the one receiving the information. Although Johnson and Rosenbaum call a spoiler "undesired information," they state in a conclusion to a separate study "spoilers do not have a universally positive or negative impact on the audience's experience" (Rosenbaum

and Johnson, 2015). Gray and Mittell also found in their 2007 *Lost* study that spoilers are not universally hated. Just as a Valentine's Day conversation heart will command, "spoil me," television spoilers can indeed be a desirable indulgence. Drawing from previous research and our findings, we posit three key features of spoilers in the post-network environment that provide a foundation for our analysis: 1) spoilers can occur after a text has been officially released, 2) viewers have individual judgments about what information constitutes a spoiler, and 3) spoilers can evoke a range of positively- and negatively-valenced viewer reactions.

Time shifter spoiler definitions

Study participants were asked if they knew narrative information about one of their time shifted shows before viewing. Those who answered "yes" (N=43) were asked to answer additional questions about that experience. Three common types of "spoiled" information emerged from that group of answers: character death (N=20), romantic relationship change (N=8), and character survival (N=6). This information about what qualitatively constitutes a spoiler helps shed light on why dramas, with greater instances of character deaths or tenuous survivals, might trip viewers' spoiler radars. These plot twists can indelibly alter the narrative course, thus encouraging time shifters to recognize them as spoilers that could have a strong impact on a viewer's narrative experience.

All participants were prompted within the survey to respond to Wikipedia's definition of a media spoiler: "an element of a disseminated summary or description of any piece of fiction that reveals any plot elements which threaten to give away important details concerning the turn of events of a dramatic episode." Participants extended the definition by clarifying what it means to give away an "important detail." A detail was often deemed important because of the way the audience member reacted. Brooke (white female, 37) defines a television spoiler as "something

that gives away the good parts of the episode or series as a whole."[3] Although deaths were the most commonly cited spoiler type, even they can be seen as a "good part" of a series because they are often unusual, memorable, and have a long-term impact on the story line. Christopher (white male, 34) echoed points of Brooke's statement, but provided a wider range of examples: He wrote that "even expressions of whether an ending was good or disappointing, or whether it was incredibly exciting, may take away from my own experience." Knowledge of others' reactions colored Christopher's engagement with a narrative. He wanted his experience with the show to be unsullied.

Whereas Christopher sought control over a range of discourse surrounding his shows, other participants proposed limitations on spoilee's rights. From this perspective, a spoiler can lose its protection over time, making the plot information part of the public domain for people to talk about without discretion. Christina (white female, 31) wrote that spoilers have a shelf life, albeit an ambiguous one: "[A]fter a certain amount of time, you can't really call a spoiler alert. So when people today want to avoid a spoiler for, say, *Firefly*, then I call foul because it's been years since that has aired and is widely available for viewing." This definition also falls in line with what Adele (white female, 32) wrote about viewer responsibility: "A spoiler is information about a 'recently aired' TV show; nothing annoys me more than people who [complain] about 'spoilers' from shows that aired like 10 years ago." Both Christina and Adele pushed back against spoilees' assertions of temporal hegemony, putting responsibility back on the spoilees to have that pleasurable viewing experience or let the television conversation march on.

Jenkins writes that convergence is not simply a change in available media technologies: "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (2006: 3). Complaints about spoilers for shows a decade old illustrate a

psychological shift comprising convergence culture: all shows at my disposal are *potentially* pleasurable viewing experiences that I have a right to protect. These comments about temporal restrictions implicitly acknowledge the power of spoiler-avoiders to control (or try to control) television commentary by discursively disciplining those who speak about content. Both spoiling and restricting the discussion of spoilers can infringe upon individualized audience pleasures. James (white male, 40) offered one method to decide on whose television pleasure "rights" take precedence: "I would add to the end of the Wikipedia definition, '...presented to an individual or individuals who currently watch the show, have plans to continue watching the show, and could potentially have the experience of encountering the information in the natural course of watching the show chronologically impaired due to the spoiler.'" James' proposal restricts the policing activities of spoiler avoiders—they must first be invested in a show to have spoiler-restricting rights—thus carving out more space for television discussions.

Spoiler players, power and behaviors

Because of their ambiguous definition and varied effects, spoilers are a prime site for negotiating power dynamics. Gürsimsek and Drotner (2015) offer a fitting overview of the stakeholders involved, writing "spoilers reveal negotiations of power and authority amongst online audiences, bloggers and followers and between audiences and producers." The power dynamics reflect both deep-seated hierarchies, such as producer to audience (see, for example, Jenkins, 2006; Hills, 2012; Hills, 2015), and potentially horizontal power relations, such as viewer to viewer. The boundaries between stakeholders have not just blurred; the circumference around stakeholders has enlarged. Stakeholders with power in industry or power in the fan epistemological economy find themselves answering to fair weather fans and new viewers. The show is something not-yet-viewers *could* care about and thus the narrative information is a potential corrosive.

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Fans' and viewers' assertions of individual spoiler protections are often informed by an unwritten contract with the producers, suggesting that these two sets of discourses are mutualistic. Gray and Mittell (2007) affirm that, for many people, spoiler-seeking behavior "feels like it breaks the contract between audience and creator." As the upcoming analysis will show, there is a strong linear-viewing norm that shapes reception practices and bleeds into television discursive patterns. This norm is shaped in part by what viewers assume producers want from their audience.

Using spoilers to shape standards for narrative pleasure and establish terms for engagement among fans were central themes to an earlier Jenkins chapter on *Twin Peaks'* fan communities and an essay by Williams about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* online fan communication patterns. Analyzing electronic bulletin board participant practices, Jenkins observed, "Within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power" (1995, 59). Williams (2004) dug into the bases for the spoiler power dynamic in the *Buffy* fan community, linking the hierarchy to a chain of information revelation, noting that the most powerful members "are able to control the flow of spoilers to fans and to set the agenda of fan discussion through the revelation or concealment of specific spoilers." Based on this information = control = power equation, Williams (2004) posited, "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." Williams's text and her argument are very much rooted in the network-era of spoilers: the ability to give information and set a fan communication agenda is powerful.

While that latent power still exists, the post-network spoiler era focuses not just on information dissemination but on information insulation and related spoiler maintenance

behaviors: Can you find information you want? Alternately, can you avoid information you do not want? Jenkins offers a finer parsing of spoiler preferences within *Survivor's* knowledge community, considering "whether each community member should be able to set the terms of how much they want to know and when they want to know it" (2006: 54-55). Jenkins' discussion of individual rights gestures in a post-network spoiler direction, broadening the definition of spoilers to include already-aired content undermines traditional seats of power. Adding Jenkins' argument to our equation, we see that *information or information insulation* also = control = power in the post-network era.

Range of reactions

We found that all study participants' spoiler behaviors could be classified into one of four categories: avoid (N=47, 51%), seek (N=7, 8%), ambivalent (N=26, 28%), or disinterested (N=12, 13%). The percentages are used to present a picture of the nuanced relationships study participants had with spoilers and are not meant to generalize about the broader population. We unite the first three categories—avoid, seek, and ambivalent—under our label of "spoiler maintenance behaviors." These are the ways that viewers take an active role in regulating their exposure to spoilers. The final category, disinterested, refers to people who did not actively work to control their exposures to spoilers. The following pithy quotes capture a range of responses:

Jody (white female, 30): "I love it! I am a spoiler whore."

Carl (white male, 69): "If I hear one, I usually don't care."

Tate (American Indian male, 71): "I consider [television narrative content] all part of the conversation stream. Some things I know about; others, I don't."

Rosie (Latina, 54): I avoid them. I would rather find out organically, if possible.

Belinda (white female, 35): "I hate it!! It ruins the show!"

These brief responses offer an attitudinal snapshot. The upcoming pages explain *why* viewers react this way. The first section proposes a relationship between being invested in a show and avoiding spoilers. The latter sections offer sub-themes within the pro-spoiler, anti-spoiler, ambivalent-toward-spoiler camps.

Spoiler ambivalence: Hide and seek

When asked, "What motivates you to either seek out television spoilers or avoid them?" 28% of our participants acknowledged that they engage in various types of spoiler maintenance, depending on the viewing situation. These nuanced responses give us insight into some convergence culture tensions: narrative information is widely available on the internet, but under what conditions are time shifting viewers likely to seek it out to enhance their narrative pleasure? Jacob, Kay, and Debbie noted that curiosity might lead them to seek spoilers—but only if they were not fully committed to the show:

> Jacob (white male, 32): "If I'm really enjoying the show, I try to avoid them. If I'm not sure I want to continue watching it, I seek them out."
>
> Kay (American Indian female, 28): "I will seek out television spoilers if I have no intention of watching previous episodes, but want to begin watching a later season of the show."
>
> Louise (white female, 22): "I seek them out if I really am dying to know information, and I won't be able to watch the show for awhile. I avoid them if it's a current show I love."

These responses suggest that spoiler maintenance can be predicated on the (in)stability of a viewer's investment with a show. Engaging with spoilers offers a non-traditional, often non-linear journey through a narrative. Jacob uses spoilers almost like a *TV Guide* to decide if he wants to stay involved with a show. Kay uses spoilers as a form of CliffsNotes so she can move

onto more desirable parts of the narrative. Louise's phrase "dying to know" indicates that she rejects a producer's pacing and control if the story has suitably piqued her interest. In each case, spoilers were used much like time shifting: to maximize viewer convenience.

Clara's (white female, 28) detailed answer about her spoiler avoidance/seeking behaviors enhances the understanding gleaned from the quotes above. She noted that her spoiler behaviors are determined by "the amount of time and interest I have invested in a show," further explaining, "If I have watched 7 out of 9 seasons, I do not want to hear info. If I am new to a show, or I don't care as much about a show, I won't be upset if I get info early. Dramas tend to be ruined more than comedies, etc. for me because you are involved in these actors' lives for potentially months or years." Clara's explanation, including her genre-specific attitudes, reveals that she measures her television show investment not just in terms of time (7 out of 9 seasons) but also by emotional output. Dramas occupy five out of the six slots for most time-shifted shows from our study participants, and Clara offers a possible explanation for that result by noting that the shows invite you into the characters' long-term struggles.[4] After analyzing activity on the Television Without Pity site, Andrejevic (2008) put forward a consumptive metaphor of audience activity: "the effort they put into the shows they watch increases their own viewing pleasure" (2008: 30). While Andrejevic's (2008) article focuses on contributing to discourse about television as a form of pleasurable work, our findings extend the consumptive metaphor by noting that the *defense* of an investment is a form of labor that can enhance or at least preserve viewing pleasure.

The gamut of spoiler preferences described here contradicts the findings of Gray and Mittell's (2007) in-depth qualitative survey of *Lost* fans. The authors concluded that, for some, seeking spoilers was a practice borne out of affection for the show. Our discourse suggests a

clearer divergence: that investment in a show commonly relates to spoiler avoidance (the

protection of a long-term investment), but shallow interest in a show often relates to spoiler

seeking. A viewer's affection for a familiar, favored narrative can galvanize her or his assertions

of power over the discourse surrounding the text—power to seek, contribute to, or regulate the

discussion of spoilers. Those with shallow interest in a show may use spoilers to gradually

detach from a show or make decisions about further investments in the show.

Spoiler avoidance

Maintain surprise or suspense

The words suspense or surprise appeared in 26 responses to explain spoiler avoidance.

Within the surprise/suspense discourse, two sub-themes emerged: 1) suspense and surprise were

linked to enjoyment and 2) experiencing the surprise gave a sense of presentism in the unfolding

narrative. The link between suspense and enjoyment aligns with Johnson and Rosenbaum's

(2015) quantitative findings that unspoiled stories were "marginally more fun" and "significantly

more suspenseful" than spoiled stories (1079). The theme of presentism offers an additional

explanatory mechanism for the pleasure in suspense.

Several participants thought that the suspense was one of the most enjoyable parts of the

viewing experience, and that experience would be greatly diminished upon learning a spoiler.

Heather (white female, 35) linked the experience of television suspense to novelty: "I avoid - and

will not watch a show once I've been spoiled - because so little in television is not formulaic,

that I don't want to spoil those rare moments where something new or genuinely surprising

happens." Paul (white male, 30) explained his spoiler stance with a gift-receiving analogy: "I

avoid [spoilers] because learning what happens in a series before actually watching it and

enjoying it play out ruins the dramatic suspense, much like knowing what you are going to get

for your birthday or Christmas." Birthdays and Christmas are a break from the mundane, a somewhat novel occurrence. Spoiler avoiders want to preserve the unique experience they *might* miss if they knew important parts of a show before viewing.

Experiencing surprise or suspense offers a noticeable jolt in one's mindset: I've just learned information that changes my perception of the story. When that jolt occurs outside of the show's chronology (as would happen when learning a spoiler), several participants understandably felt that they lost some of the "present" feel of the narrative:

Kathy (white female, 35): "I don't ever want to know what happens [….] I enjoy being surprised and caught up in the present story."

Betty (white female, 34): "[B]eing spoiler-free allows me to form my own opinions based on what I'm seeing as it happens, and not by what I've read or heard from others."

Alexis (white female, 21): "I try to avoid spoilers because I like to be surprised. I also want the same experience as people who watched when the show originally aired, even though I'm watching a little later."

Time shifting creates a "viewer determined experience" that removes the show from the programming flow (Uricchio, 2004: 172). In addition, spoiler avoiders also want to isolate the show experience from the external flow of television discourses. Although time shifters disrupt the network model of television by dictating their own viewing schedule, many desire to maintain fidelity with the "live" TV experience. Alexis's quote provides the strongest support of this theme as she directly states that she wants "the same experience" as people who watched as the show first aired. The world of time shifting spoiler avoidance constructs a dual temporality in which the media time sphere is privatized (Moshe, 2012) but media discourses flow in their present state. It is when those two worlds collide, when we are in a post-network reception

environment with network era discursive practices, that time shifting spoiler avoiders face loss of agency.

Author intentions

Preserving surprise and having that "authentic" (network era) television experience was united with respecting authorial intentions in several respondents' comments. Jackson's (white male, 34) statement "I do my best to avoid [spoilers] in hopes of experiencing the work as the artist originally intended" illustrates this theme. Greg's (white male, 40) anti-spoiler attitude offers a more detailed description of his ideal television experience: "I'm a purist, so I like not knowing [. . . .] I want to see what the director was trying to do, or maybe what the writer or even the actor was bringing." The commitment to watching the show as the producers intended is inflected with auteurism, the idea of a "trusted Creator" (Hills, 2002: 131), thus illustrating the power of an unspoken contract between viewers and producers. Auteurism privileges a prescriptive mode of engagement that delegitimizes viewer opportunities for play, activity, and engagement through non-traditional means. What this purity thread also reveals is that contemporary attitudes toward textual integrity reside in self-contained narratives that are surprisingly divorced from evolving reception patterns.

One emergent thread from Gray and Mittell's (2007) study of *Lost* spoiler fans echoes this paternalistic model: some viewers disapproved of spoiler seekers because they lacked "the maturity and patience needed to follow a slowly-evolving show like *Lost* 'properly' as designed." The authors' abstract for the study describes "spoiler fans" as people "who seemingly short-circuit the program's narrative design," thus connoting ineffective functioning, or a disruption of true diegetic flow. Viewers who break those rules are judged to have violated the integrity of the experience because they miss out on delayed gratifications—namely, surprise,

suspense, and awe—that are laid out by producers. The integrity of the experience is still informed by network-era norms that are implicitly based on a linear viewing model and definitive spoiler temporality.

Karen (white female, 52) provided specific support for her anti-spoiler motivation, writing, "I avoided spoilers about the *How I Met Your Mother* series finale because I wanted to watch the show as it was intended to be seen, and to be surprised." Engaging in a "pure," author-created experience can be more important for a finale (compared to other episodes) because the finale constitutes an "extended ritual of farewell" that "give[s] audiences satisfying last moments with the characters" (Todd, 2011: 858). It is a crucial time to pay respect to the characters, story, producers, and fellow viewers. Finales are also one of the remaining vestiges of network era appointment television, eschewing convergence era convenience so that one may take part in the live viewing of a media event (Dayan and Katz, 2000) and feel like part of a community (Morreale, 2000; Todd, 2011). Karen time shifted the finale but created a pseudo-media event by watching under similar conditions as the live viewers.

Embracing spoilers

The next sections include discourse from the study participants who always or sometimes enjoyed spoilers. These participants were pleased with their television experiences. Compared to spoiler avoiders, they applied different criteria when assessing that pleasure. More specifically, they used spoilers to minimize their negative feelings when experiencing suspenseful content and they embraced an enjoyable holistic journey through the narrative rather than placing emphasis on plot twists.

Mood management

Johnson and Rosenbaum (2015) state that exposure to spoilers "appears to diminish the capability of media to induce positive emotions […] and would therefore hinder the ability to manage moods" (1084). 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). Women tend to have stronger self-reported fright reactions than men (Cantor, 2009: 299). 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. These findings resonate with Hills' (2012) argument that spoiler fans are "protecting their emotional attachments" (115) to shows and characters in an attempt to "contain ontological insecurity and process it back into a sense of security" (114). 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.

Isabelle (white female, 27) stated that "with more emotionally trying TV shows, I seek out spoilers to prepare myself so it doesn't trigger anxiety." Emotionally trying can refer to many different media experiences. Dolores (white female, 64) preferred the word "scary" to describe stories for which she does not "mind hearing about the events." Dolores focused on *The Walking Dead* in her response to one survey question, writing, "This is a violent show. Knowing sometimes that the character was just evil or good helped get through the creepy parts." Learning narrative or character information before viewing can be considered what Cantor (2009) identifies as a noncognitive desensitization strategy. Spoilers can help viewers deal with the narrative twist in a sensory-deprived way before witnessing the vivid, televised scene. In this

manner, learning about a spoiler is an active audience behavior that can prolong one's enjoyment with a show, enabling one to continue watching with pleasure preserved.

Linda (white female, 35) and Alexis (white female, 21) described scene-specific spoiler experiences. Linda mentioned the infamous Red Wedding scene, remembering, "[I]t sounded really disturbing, so I learned about it before watching it months later. I was glad that I did that because otherwise I think I would have been more upset about a TV show than I should have been!" Linda demonstrates how spoilers can also function as a noncognitive desensitization strategy (learning about it months before watching so it is no longer a surprise) *and* a cognitive coping strategy—the reminder that a TV show is not real and should not upset her. Alexis did not purposely seek a *Downton Abbey* spoiler, but she was thankful she stumbled upon one: "I think I'm glad to have rather known beforehand because [the character death] was so sudden and sad." Alexis was not disappointed upon hearing a spoiler but remained open-minded about the possible pleasures she could still find in the text. In all of the mood management examples, learning the spoilers gave the viewers additional time to emotionally prepare for the upcoming narrative events and to have a more favorable experience.

Curiosity

Other spoiler seekers were not using the gaps in the narrative experience to cope with televised hardships; they saw the gaps as a problem to be overcome by learning spoilers. Our findings here have points of resonance with Gray and Mittell's (2007) analysis that over half of pro-spoiler *Lost* fans "mentioned motives like 'impatience,' [and] 'curiosity.'" Felipe (Latino, 31) responded that he seeks spoilers "[I]f I cannot wait for the next episode or I am conflicted about the cliffhanger." Being conflicted about a cliffhanger suggests that he has taken the producer's bait, he is experiencing suspense, but Felipe used spoilers as a way to undermine that

producer control over his experience. Elaine (white female, 35) also implicitly articulated a continuum of suspense in her explanation of spoiler seeking. Just as Felipe did not always seek spoilers, Elaine would only seek spoilers "if I get super curious about something." This theme expands upon Gray and Mittell's findings by noting that spoilers are a "sometimes food" for those who experience overwhelming curiosity at a particular narrative point and opt to take a non-linear path through the narrative.

Enjoy the journey

Those who embrace spoilers, or at least have an ambivalent attitude toward them, often denounced spoiled content as a marginal part of a viewing experience. Although Rachel (white female, 20) opined that "[Y]ou do not get to be a part of the [narrative] journey if you know the ending of it," a critical mass of discourse from both study participants and television critics (e.g., Deggans, 2013; Petri, 2014) contradicts her idea. Todd VanDerWerff (2014) makes a lengthy appeal to "stop the anti-spoiler paranoia" in an *A.V. Club* article, writing, "Anti-spoiler zealots largely ignore craft, privileging plot above all else. But the plot is often the least interesting thing about a movie, TV show, or book."

In Leavitt and Christenfeld's (2013) second study affirming that spoilers enhance media enjoyment, the authors speculate that knowing the story outcome allows readers to "draw greater enjoyment from the aesthetic elements" (94) Despite being spoiled, Isabelle was able to forge a pleasurable journey through the *Arrow* narrative, explaining, "I'm more interested in how characters get to a certain plot point than the plot point itself. Sure, someone told me that Sara Lance comes back in *Arrow*, but I still didn't know how, and the how turned out to be more interesting." Engaging with an episode or season that leads up to the spoiler is the only way a viewer can gain a holistic view of the diegesis and all the pleasures contained therein. Naomi

(multiracial female, 50) offered a similar view of her experience with *Supernatural* after finding out a spoiler: "I anticipated what was going to happen but didn't know how the story would get there." Spoiled, from this perspective, is a misnomer.

Conclusions

Post-network era reception practices and network era discursive patterns make uneasy bedfellows. Convergence culture affords viewers many avenues of control over their television experience through the practice of time shifting. But by taking temporal power from broadcasters, time shifters have entered a new struggle with fellow viewers who are watching at a different pace. Our study analyzes television time shifters' spoiler attitudes and behaviors to better understand the convergence era exchange of control and loss, agency and passivity, pleasure and disappointment. In the post-network, convergence era, information about already-aired television can be a spoiler. Although individual differences make it difficult to pin down what a spoiler is and how it interacts with a viewing experience, our TV time shifter discourse offers several common themes. The first general principle is that viewers often avoid spoilers for shows in which they report having invested much time or emotion. Several study participants drew from different spoiler management techniques, depending on how deeply they cared for a show. Despite watching already-aired content, many time shifters sought to have a simulated "presentism" in the narrative, one that would preserve the novelty, surprise, and suspense of plot twists. Respect for artists' intentions links to this thread: several spoiler-averse participants wanted to experience the surprises that *producers* laid out for them. For various reasons, a "spoiled" viewing experience felt inauthentic and not as enjoyable.

Spoilers are not universally derided, however, with many participants taking pleasure from spoilers (even if they did not intentionally seek those spoilers). Some sought spoilers to

gratify curiosity. There was also a mood management dynamic to some of the pro-spoiler experiences in which knowing the spoilers cushioned the blow of painful narrative events and thus enhanced enjoyment. Several participants offered a connotative spoiler shift, arguing that knowing plot twists does not remove all viewing pleasures: The joy was in the journey, witnessing the unfolding of the narrative.

Exploring spoiler attitudes and behaviors forces questions about narrative pleasures and pains, discursive patterns, active audience behaviors and contested grounds of power to the surface. Thorburn and Jenkins (2003) write in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* that media change should be seen "as an accretive, gradual process" (2). In the case of television, viewers' attitudes about "proper" and pleasurable narrative experience have evolved more slowly than the reception practices, leading to tensions surrounding discussions of already-aired content. Now that spoilers have no clear temporal boundary, stakeholders must work to establish agreeable conditions for television communication. Thus far, no clear norms have emerged, but various power brokers are at the table. Studies examining how dyads, pre-existing face-to-face groups, and online communities of viewers negotiate their spoiler norms would shed more light on how power is asserted and legitimated or rejected in these discursive exchanges. Scholarly research should continue to examine the evolution of narrative pleasures and pains in convergence culture, and specifically consider how various active audience behaviors may be at odds with each other.

As spoiler norm negotiations continue, we would be wise to consider how our language clouds careful consideration of television pleasures. The labels "control" technologies or "agencies of control" obscure what control is lost—namely, the ability easily restrict what one hears or reads about an already-aired show. Additionally, the negative connotations of "spoiler"

obscure the potential pleasures narrative information contains. Instead of a rotten "spoiler," learning narrative information before viewing can be seen as a fermentation process—one that changes the taste and texture of an experience but does not diminish its deliciousness. Instead of being spoiled, rotten, or otherwise unfit for consumption, a fermented text exists to be enjoyed for a long period of time, available for new people to give it a try.

The fermentation metaphor allows pleasures to be found in the original, fresh product *and* the product that was modified by various reactions over time. Maybe the strong viewer reactions to the Red Wedding on *Conan* got others interested in *Game of Thrones*. Maybe it cushioned the blow for many who had not yet watched the emotional scenes. Maybe the compilation video of reactions undercut their pleasure and caused some *Game of Thrones* time shifters to go back to a fresh, appointment-viewing model. Those who watched *Game of Thrones* "live" likely gained much pleasure from discussing the scene in person and through social media. As time shifters get caught up, they might insulate themselves from narrative discussions or continue to take pleasure in the first-hand narrative experience even after knowing some plot information. And as viewers extend their enjoyment of the time shifted episode by conversing with others, maybe some will find it is easy to become what they feared: a spoiler.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

[1] Some of our study participants would likely identify as fans of their texts, but being a fan was not a criterion for participation.

[2] Please contact the first author for a full list of the online survey questions.

[3] All participants have been given pseudonyms. We also include their self-identified race/ethnicity, gender, and age to distill any patterns potentially related to subject position.

[4] *How I Met Your Mother* is the only comedy exception on this list. Our study was conducted just a few months after the series finale, thus suggesting that the program's timing, and not its genre, enticed time shifters and raised spoiler sensitivities.