The Spoilers Puzzle

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Abstract

Spoilers provide advance knowledge of crucial facts about how a work of fiction unfolds or ends. This is often the reason given for our dislike of spoilers. I begin by showing that on generally-accepted philosophical accounts of fiction and imagination, the phenomenon of spoilers is puzzling, and the lay explanation of our dislike of spoilers is inadequate. To resolve the puzzle, I first argue that imaginings are inherently constrained, or norm-governed. In imagining, we take on a (fictional) doxastic role: our aim is to imagine that which a work of fiction presents as true at each stage of its unfolding. Then, distinguishing between two ways in which we can follow norms or rules, I show that although spoilers do not completely thwart our experience of fiction, they can significantly diminish the degree to which we are engrossed in fiction, hence we dislike them.

Keywords: spoilers, imagination, simulation, fiction, fictional truth, norms

1. Spoilers: the puzzle

A spoiler discloses crucial information about a work of fiction's plot, or how it ends. As Van Leeuwen puts it:

> A spoiler gives you *beliefs* about crucial story events before you're ready. … when you encounter a spoiler, you form beliefs about crucial story events without having been led by the generating representations of the fiction through all the details that lead up [to] those events. (Van Leeuwen 2021, 658-659)

For example, disclosures that, according to a work of fiction (henceforth: FW) we're planning to read, the protagonist John is a swindler (despite his impeccable dealings, described in the FW's early chapters), or a spaceship will not explode (despite the FW's initial depiction of it as about to explode), are considered spoilers. Upon encountering such disclosures, we often conclude that our experience of the FW won't be as fulfilling as it would have been had we not been apprised of these fictional facts before engaging with the work. (Henceforth I will use 'f-' for 'fictional,' 'fictionally,' etc.).

Let me first explain why the phenomenon of spoilers is puzzling. The puzzle ensues from two widely-accepted theses about experiencing fiction. Taken together, they imply that spoilers need not affect our experience of fiction at all, let alone mar it or displease us. Yet spoilers often do affect our experience of fiction,[1] and we are usually displeased about having encountered them.

Thesis 1 is that ordinarily, our experience of an FW—specifically, our emotional responses to it—ensues from *imagining* the FW's content. It is widely accepted that we respond to reading

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[1] See, e.g., Maxwell (2022); cf. Johnson and Rosenbaum (2018).

(watching, etc.) FWs by imagining their content; moreover, many theories define FWs as works that direct readers to imagine their content.[2] It is likewise accepted that the kind of imagining that arises in response to fiction is belief-like in certain respects.[3] First, imagining mirrors the inferential patterns of belief[4]; second, imaginings are functionally related to certain kinds of mental states much as beliefs are related to those states or similar ones. Specifically, imaginings can generate emotions similar to those generated by beliefs with the same content. In short, imagining *simulates* believing in various functional respects, and since imagining is our typical (cognitive) response to fiction, the overall experience we have in response to fiction ensues from imagining the FW's content.

This 'simulationist' account of imagining applies not only to our experience of fiction, but also to spontaneous imagining, daydreaming, pretending, etc. Vis-à-vis fiction, it is invoked to resolve two paradoxes. The first paradox is the well-known 'paradox of fiction,' i.e., the question of how our emotional responses to fiction can be explained, or whether they are rational, given that we know that the recounted events aren't real. The simulationist answer is straightforward: imagining, like believing, can elicit emotion. Since we respond to an FW by imagining the

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[2] See, e.g., Currie (1990; 2020); Kind (2016); Langland-Hassan (2020); Stock (2017); Walton (1990). Friend (2012) adduces several counterexamples, but accepts that imagining is the standard response to fiction (188); cf. Matravers (2014, 21ff).

[3] See, e.g., Arcangeli (2019), Chasid (2021a); Currie and Ravenscroft (2002); Doggett and Egan (2012); Kind (2013); Liao and Doggett (2014); Meskin and Weinberg (2003); Nichols (2004); Walton (1990).

[4] See Arcangeli (2019, §4.3).

recounted events, we are moved by it.[5] The simulationist thesis likewise resolves the 'paradox of suspense,' i.e., the question of why we can feel suspense in *re*-engaging with an FW, given that suspense requires uncertainty, and the knowledge we acquired from our first engagement with the FW precludes uncertainty (Smuts 2021). The answer is that the assumption that suspense requires (real-world) uncertainty is false: we can also feel suspense when imagining content that typically engenders uncertainty. Since the cognitive state that generates suspense is not belief, but (belief-like) imagining, to feel suspense we need only *imagine* that, e.g., the spaceship is going to explode, though we know that, in the FW, the spaceship will not explode.

Moving on to thesis 2, it asserts that imaginings, in themselves, are largely unconstrained. Specifically, unlike beliefs, imaginings are not truth-committed (Kind 2016, 3ff). Of course, if imaginings arise for a particular purpose, they *are* constrained by the purpose they are intended to serve. Thus in engaging with fiction, our imaginings must represent that which the FW invites us to imagine at each stage of its unfolding. However, such constraints are not intrinsic to imagining, and hence do not undermine the claim that imagination is inherently unbounded. Indeed, we have recourse to imagining for diverse purposes precisely *because* it is inherently unbounded. Granted, imaginings sometimes do seem to be inherently constrained: most philosophers deny that we can imagine overt contradictions, i.e., imagine *p* and *not-p* (Kind 2013, 151), and some deny that we can imagine morally-deviant content (Tuna 2020). But these impossibilities call for explanation, given our conviction that we are free to imagine whatever we want.

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[5] See Liao and Gendler (2020, §2.1).

It follows from theses 1 and 2 that spoilers need not influence our experience of fiction at all. For since our overall experience of fiction is generated by imagining (thesis 1), and given that, our imaginings being generally unconstrained, we are free to imagine that which an FW invites us to imagine as it unfolds (thesis 2), what difference can spoilers make? The lay explanation of our dislike of spoilers, namely, that knowing crucial f-facts in advance can ruin our experience, is straightforwardly incompatible with the picture painted by theses 1 and 2. For on this picture, nothing we learn from a spoiler lessens our freedom to imagine the content presented early in the FW: we can readily imagine this content simply by following the FW's early directives.

Van Leeuwen (2021, 659ff) explains the adverse effect of spoilers by rejecting thesis 1. He accepts that we can readily imagine the FW's content (thesis 2), but argues that imagining an FW's content is insufficient to generate emotion. That is, on Van Leeuwen's view, despite imagining the *same* content in the *same* order, our experience of fiction is ruined by our knowing what happens in the FW.

Yet Van Leeuwen's account leaves this very fact unexplained: it does not explain why, although we imagine the same content in the same order, *beliefs* about what will (fictionally) happen subsequently can affect our emotional responses to the initially-recounted content. It remains mysterious why knowledge of the story's later events affects our emotional responses to our initial imaginings, especially if what we imagine is precisely what the FW is asking us to imagine.

Granted, knowledge gained through spoilers can affect our experience of fiction. But I will show that such knowledge influences our experience *indirectly*: beliefs acquired through spoilers affect our experience of fiction by impeding our imaginings.

Moreover, Van Leeuwen's account does not recognize the fact that sometimes, despite exposure to a spoiler, we do enjoy the FW and respond to it emotionally. We may, e.g., feel fear or suspense in imagining the impending disaster described in an FW's early chapters, even if we know, from a spoiler, that the f-disaster is ultimately averted. Furthermore, we sometimes *intentionally* re-engage with an FW in order to feel that suspense and relief yet again, as assumed by the paradox of suspense. Van Leeuwen's approach does not explain why we often feel suspense despite knowing that the fraught situation depicted initially will be defused.

Resolving the puzzle by rejecting thesis 1 is thus unsatisfactory. I propose, instead, to resolve it by rejecting thesis 2: we aren't always free to imagine that which the FW invites us to imagine. More specifically, imaginings, being governed by a norm (which will be spelled out below), are inherently constrained. In the case of fiction, spoilers can impede our ability to follow this norm, making it difficult for us to imagine that which the FW invites us to imagine initially.

2. Spoilers: resolving the puzzle

2.1 Prompts?

A suggested solution might invoke the fact that imaginings sometimes arise uncontrolledly, hence in this sense, what we imagine isn't always something we wanted to imagine. That is, we are sometimes prompted to imagine something despite our having no intention to do so or rationale for doing so, and indeed, despite intending *not* to imagine it. In the context of spoilers, knowing, from a spoiler, that, e.g., the f-spaceship won't explode, this knowledge may prompt us, when we read that the spaceship is about to explode, to 'automatically' imagine that it won't

explode. Since it is impossible to imagine the overt contradiction that the spaceship is about to explode (as per the FW's current directive) and that it isn't about to explode (as per the prompt), our imagining is thwarted, marring our overall experience of the FW. This, purportedly, explains why spoilers ruin our experience of fiction.

This explanation is problematic. First, although spoilers may prompt us, in reading the early chapters, to recall the spoilers' content, it doesn't follow that we are also prompted to *imagine* this content. Moreover, even if spoilers prompt us to imagine later f-events early on in our reading of an FW, and do so regularly enough to justify our dislike of spoilers generally, this calls for explanation: why would advance knowledge of still-unrecounted f-events routinely induce us to imagine these f-events early on?

Secondly, being prompted early on to imagine later f-events does not entail that we must imagine a contradiction (e.g., that spaceship is, and is not, about to explode). For although it is impossible to imagine that *p*-and-not-*p*, it is possible to imagine that *p*, and subsequently, to imagine that not-*p*. Reading the initial description of the spaceship as about to explode, and being prompted to imagine that it won't explode (as per the spoiler), leaves us free to proceed to imagine that it *is* about to explode, as per the FW's current directive.

Granted, spoilers can impede our imaginings. But given our general dislike of spoilers, the prompt-based approach to the puzzle is inadequate—at least if our responses to 'prompts' are understood as merely automatic. To impede imaginings, the effect of spoilers must be rational: spoilers must interfere with the process by which imaginings are *supposed to* arise. As I will now argue, spoilers impede imaginings by interfering with a norm that governs imagining.

2.2. A normative account of spoilers

Since spoilers are disclosures of pivotal f-facts, the norm in question must be associated with the notion of f-truth.[6] As a first-pass account, the norm of imagining can simply be identified with f-truth. This account might adduce remarks made by Kendall Walton: "imagining aims at the fictional [truth] as belief aims at the true. What is true is to be believed; what is fictional is to be imagined" (41); similarly: "fictional worlds, like reality, are 'out there,' to be investigated and explored" (42). The idea is that imaginative practices are like epistemic practices in being norm-governed: much as believing commits us to tracking real-world truth, imagining commits us to tracking f-truth. This norm of imagining does not ensue from any intention to imagine f-truth or ad hoc guidance to do so. It governs imagining inherently: in any imaginative project, certain propositions are posited to be 'truths' (i.e., f-truths), generating a commitment to imagine them, and to avoid imagining f-falsehoods. Vis-à-vis FWs, the invitation to imagine f-content is tendered *indirectly*: an FW stipulates certain f-truths, rendering them, by virtue of the general norm of imagining, to-be-imagined.

This account appears to explain spoilers. Acquiring knowledge of f-truths straightforwardly induces us to imagine them, and to resist imagining f-falsehoods—including f-falsehoods that the FW initially presents as true. Since we are (rationally) disposed, on the strength of the general norm of imagining, to imagine f-truths, we resist imagining that which we know (from the spoiler) to be f-false (e.g., that John is honest—we know he's a swindler!). We dislike spoilers because they thwart our ability to imagine crucial parts of the FW.

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[6] As my argument is general, the term 'f-truth' refers not only to that which is true in an FW, but to 'truth' in any kind of imaginative project, e.g., daydreams, pretending, etc.

But this first-pass account is problematic. In many cases, no norm is violated in imagining f-falsehoods, since we are induced to imagine, and indeed *must* imagine, f-falsehoods. Imagining f-falsehoods that are initially presented by an FW as true (e.g., that John is honest) is necessary for proper engagement with the FW, hence there is nothing amiss in imagining them. Moreover, as noted above, in re-engaging with an FW, nothing keeps us from imagining that which we know to be f-false; in imagining that which we know to be f-false, we can even feel, e.g., suspense, despite knowing how the suspense is resolved. Were we induced to imagine f-truths as we are induced to believe real-world truths, in re-engaging with the FW, our imaginings could scarcely arise. Furthermore, since the norm in question applies to all imaginings, that includes unintended, spontaneous imaginings, hence f-truths must be posited in spontaneous imaginative projects too. Yet it is unclear how spontaneous projects could make such stipulations (see Chasid 2021c).

Despite these problems, the first-pass account can be revised. The point in need of refinement is the normative similarity between imaginative practices and epistemic practices. To see this, consider how f-false propositions are rendered 'to-be-imagined.' Evidently, when an FW invites us to imagine an f-falsehood, it *presents* that f-falsehood as true. To be 'presented as true' is to be depicted as credible, i.e., as convincing from a doxastic perspective, or more precisely, to be depicted as—for someone with an f-world doxastic perspective—to-be-believed.

Obviously, qua imaginers, we maintain our real-world doxastic perspective: we are not induced to believe the propositions in question. Yet to imagine appositely, we take on this f-doxastic role. Taking on the fictional role of believing, we grasp the to-be-believed propositions and straightaway imagine them. For instance, to induce us to imagine the f-falsehood that the spaceship is about to explode, the FW initially depicts it as such: it asks us to imagine various

propositions that, overall, would 'convince' an f-believer—someone with an f-world doxastic perspective—to accept that the spaceship is about to explode. In this sense, it 'presents' that f-falsehood as true, rendering it to-be-imagined.

This normativity characterizes imagining in general. Suppose that, pondering what it would be like to discover that your trustworthy neighbor, John, is actually a swindler, you 'simulate' this discovery by shifting from imagining that John is honest to imagining that he is deceitful. Neither of these imaginings arises singly.[7] The imagining that John is honest is accompanied by additional imaginings and mental images that (epistemically) support the proposition that John is honest; as the project unfolds, you invoke imaginings and images whose content casts doubt on John's trustworthiness, showing that he's a crook. Such an imaginative project can also arise spontaneously. No f-truths need be stipulated in such cases: imaginings are governed, not by the norm that f-truth is to be imagined, but by the norm that that which is presented (i.e., through additional imaginings and mental images) as f-true is to be imagined. Were there no such norm, the 'project' would amount to no more than merely entertaining suppositions or passing thoughts.

In short, on this second-pass account, imaginings are governed, not by f-truth, but by that which is presented as convincing to an f-believer at each stage in the imaginative project. When imaginative projects are established by external guidance, as in the case of FWs, following the

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[7] As Arcangeli (2019) explains, imaginings, but not suppositions, "show a holistic dynamics . . . [imagining] does not come in isolation, but as a piece of an *imaginative project*" (42). See also Liao and Gendler (2020, §2.5); Nicols and Stich (2003, §2.3). Of course, an imaginative project can, perhaps must, *start* with a single thought (ibid, §2.3.1).

norm of imagining may raise complications. One complication arises upon encountering a spoiler. When we know the f-truth from a spoiler, identifying that which is presented as convincing to an f-believer may not be easy: being aware of pivotal f-truths, we often cannot straightforwardly play our role as f-believers, since this requires that we distinguish between f-truths and that which the FW is (currently) presenting as true. If we fail to distinguish between f-truths and presented-as-true f-falsehoods, we can readily be induced to imagine the wrong f-content, ruining our experience of the FW.

The normative aspect of imagining explains the various ways in which spoilers affect our experience. Consider a distinction that applies to norm-governed activities in general. Ordinarily, when we follow a norm or rule, we do so effortlessly, i.e., without recourse to explicit beliefs about how to follow it. Sometimes, however, we do, or even must, have such beliefs, and occurrently think about how to follow the pertinent norm/rule. Consider, e.g., linguistic activities. To compose a sentence, speakers usually do not occurrently think about the grammatical role played by each word they use, or deliberate over the correct word order: they build up sentences without recourse to explicit beliefs about how to do so. In this sense, for fluent speakers of a language, the pertinent rules are 'transparent.' Sometimes, however, even fluent speakers of a language invoke explicit beliefs about how to speak. Indeed, intentionally or not, speakers sometimes consciously deliberate over the correct word as they speak, thinking about how the pertinent rules apply to what they're saying.

The distinction between following norms/rules with, and without, deliberation over how to do so applies to all norm-/rule-governed activities. This distinction merits further discussion,[8] but

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[8] See Frankish (2016).

what is crucial for my argument is its relevance to imagining. Following the norm of imagining need not be, but may be, accompanied by deliberation over which propositions are to-be-imagined. More precisely, we can, and ordinarily do, carry out our f-doxastic role with fluency. We grasp the presented-as-true propositions at each stage of the FW's unfolding, and straightforwardly imagine them. Our imaginings may well arise without the mediation of explicit beliefs—e.g., beliefs of the form '*p* is being presented by the FW as true or sufficiently convincing,' or 'since the FW is structured in such-and-such a way, *p* is more convincing than *q*, hence *p*, and not *q*, is to-be-imagined,' etc.

Sometimes, however, we must invoke explicit beliefs: we must carefully consider which propositions the FW is presenting as true, i.e., as convincing from the perspective of an f-believer. This may be because we are unsure where the FW is leading us, which implied propositions are essential to the plot, etc. Typically, explicit beliefs arise after exposure to spoilers. In all such cases, we 'step outside' our imaginative project, think about how our imaginings are supposed to unfold, and only then proceed with imagining. In these cases, the flow of our imaginings is disrupted. Our engagement with the FW is less pleasurable, since we seek to ensure that our imaginings comply with the norm. The intermittent acquisition of occurrent, explicit beliefs about how our imaginings are to unfold weakens their impact: going back and forth from (occurrently) *thinking about* the FW to (occurrently) *imagining* either the correct, or sometimes—due to misidentifying the presented-as-true propositions—incorrect f-content, we cannot fully enjoy the experience that imaginings alone typically generate. On certain interpretations of imaginative immersion, such disruption of our imaginings renders us less immersed in the FW. That is, to the extent that we need to deliberate over how our

imaginings are supposed to unfold, we are less engrossed, less absorbed, in the FW (Liao, unpublished; Chasid 2020).

The various ways in which spoilers affect us adversely can be explained accordingly. Exposure to spoilers makes it harder to grasp that which is being presented by the FW as true, i.e., credible from an f-doxastic perspective. We must distinguish meticulously between the f-truths we know from the spoiler, and the merely-presented-as-true propositions that can be grasped solely from what the work is currently recounting. Moreover, if, knowing the f-truth, we fail to fully distinguish between it and the currently-presented-as-true f-falsehoods, we will be readily induced, by the general norm of imagining, to (mistakenly) imagine either propositions that are close to the f-truth, or even the f-truth itself, and thus to respond emotionally in a manner other than that suggested by the FW. Of course, upon adequate examination of the narrative, we may successfully imagine the correct f-content. But overall, our experience in such cases will be unsatisfying.

Consider the aforementioned examples. Though an FW initially describes John's actions as aboveboard, we may wonder, since we know from the spoiler that (fictionally) he's a swindler, whether we should imagine certain acts he carries out as indeed harmless, or imagine them as deceitful, in line with John's true identity. Similarly, to imagine that a spaceship is about to explode, while knowing from spoilers that it will not explode, we must assess the weight that should be given to various ominous developments recounted thus far, so that the likelihood of the spaceship's explosion is not downplayed, and proceed to imagine that the explosion is imminent only after this assessment. Such deliberation about which propositions are presented as f-true *can* be carried out: spoilers do not completely thwart imagining. But since they give rise to explicit,

occurrent thought, and are apt to induce incorrect imaginings, they interrupt the flow of our imaginings, and our experience is 'spoiled.'

Lastly, the normative account of spoilers explains why, in intentionally re-engaging with an FW, we sometimes do feel, e.g., suspense, despite our knowledge of pivotal f-truths, and we sometimes do enjoy the FW. First, as noted above, imaginings can arise without the mediation of explicit beliefs even if we know crucial f-truths in advance. We might conclude, on the basis of our first reading of the FW, that it presents the to-be-imagined propositions—and specifically, the *f-false* to-be-imagined propositions—in an extraordinarily convincing way, and hence have confidence that we'll also find it absorbing the second time around. Second, we may assume that we won't be as absorbed in the FW when we re-read it, but decide to re-engage with it nonetheless in order to have the rather unique experience of feeling suspense while remembering, from our first reading, how the tension will be resolved. In such cases, we can imagine the FW's content: as imaginers, we *can* feasibly carry out our f-doxastic role. But to imagine appositely, we may frequently need to step outside this role, then back inside it, shifting from imagining the f-content to thinking about the differences between the f-truths we know from our first reading of the FW, and the propositions currently being presented as credible to an f-believer. This experience, though fairly different from our first experience, might nonetheless be somewhat fulfilling.

Granted, certain FWs, mainly whodunits, do not often invite re-engagement. Although we can re-imagine the correct f-content, we may see no point in doing so just to re-experience the final 'revelation.' The proposed account details the considerable cognitive effort that we must invest to carry out our f-doxastic role appositely, thereby explaining why re-engaging with such FWs is often unappealing.

When we've been exposed to a spoiler, we cannot predict how we'll respond to the FW's early depictions of the characters and incidents, and whether we'll become sufficiently engrossed in the tale to have a satisfying (first-time) experience. Since it is likely the spoiler will lessen our absorption, making it difficult for us to follow the norm of imagining, our dislike of spoilers is justified.

The proposed normative account suggests a more general conclusion: in a certain sense, imaginings are never fully 'off-the-cuff.' As a holistic mental activity, imagining presupposes an f-doxastic perspective that imaginers must take on. Ordinarily we carry out our role as f-believers effortlessly, but sometimes we fail at it, often after exposure to spoilers. In such cases, we either imagine the wrong content, inadvertently shift between different imaginative projects, or stop imagining and wind up merely entertaining propositions in thought.[9]

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