

Buzz Killer No More

When early **spoiler Web sites** first revealed plotlines of America's favorite TV shows, Hollywood balked. Now some producers see the sites as more friend than foe

The Gossip Girl fans who gathered at the shoot in front of New York's Plaza Hotel couldn't have been watching more intently. When the cameras rolled, after all, a kiss bestowed on the Plaza steps would answer a question that had kept viewers of the CW's hit teen drama up at night: Would the love-lorn Blair Waldorf reconcile with wanton soul mate Chuck Bass or settle for erstwhile boyfriend Nate Archibald?

Show runners Stephanie Savage and Joshua Safran knew they had a problem. Given the all-too-visible location and the immediacy of social networking, the moment actress Leighton Meester put one or the other of her character's paramours in a lip lock, the whole world would know whom she'd chosen (ending the suspense a full nine weeks before the episode would air). So they decided to shoot the scene twice—once with Meester kissing Nate (Chace Crawford) and again with her embracing Chuck (Ed Westwick).

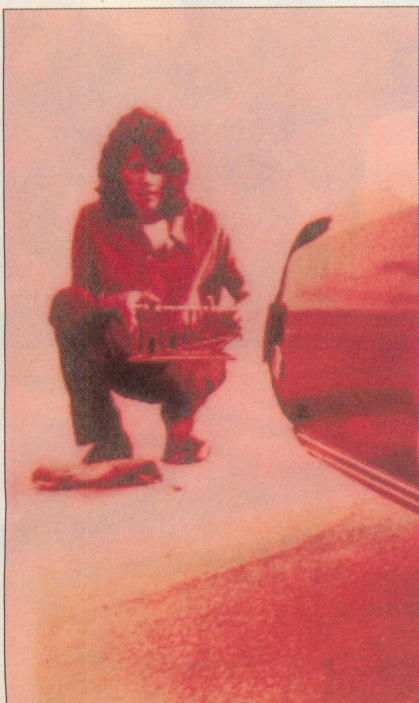
"The audience actually clapped when they realized they were being played," recalls Safran, adding that in



the age of Twitter and texting, "spoiler management" is part of his job.

Time was, spoilers—reports that give away key plot points—were seen as nothing more than a surefire way to send TV ratings plummeting. But as the Internet has created an unending news cycle and as spoiler Web sites like TVLine and E! Online have flourished, Hollywood has had to adjust. While it's still hard to find creators of episodic television who embrace spoilers wholeheartedly, many have begun to accept how—if spoilers can't be avoided—they can be used to gin up publicity.

"As a writer, I hate it," says David Shore, creator of *House*, Fox's long-running medical show. "I have this naive desire that people should experience the story as it unfolds, exactly as I intended." He's taken steps to ensure that they do, launching an internal investigation at one point to plug multiple leaks (several people were



Ricardo Valverde (Los Angeles, 1945-1998) (Seated, 1974, detail) Götting silver print with rose tint. Esperanza Valverde Collection, Los Angeles, CA. Ricardo Valverde Digital Collection, University of California Los Angeles Chicano Studies Research Center

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fired) that ruined two high-profile plotlines: actress Jennifer Morrison's unexpected exit and House's budding relationship with boss Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein).

As a producer, Shore sees things differently. "I think, 'We've got this great act three twist—we should get it out there and get people to watch it.'" Though he's never initiated the early release of information ("Anything I say or do is reactive," he says), Shore understands that spoilers play a role. "You're building a community that's collectively watching and talking about the show, creating more pressure to watch every week, making people curious, and drawing them in," he says. "It's the Internet version of the watercooler."



If the watercooler was the traditional place to discuss what *had* happened on TV the night before, fans now gather at spoiler sites to speculate about what *will* happen. Spoilers generate anticipation and intrigue for existing and would-be viewers. They also keep the audience engaged at all times, even when a series is on hiatus. More and more, a show's presence (or lack thereof) on a spoiler site is an indicator of whether it has heat.

"We take our cues from our readers," says Michael Ausiello, founder and editor-in-chief of TVLine. "Their comments and questions provide a wealth of information about what's popular—which shows are clicking, which plotlines are working."

Ausiello and E! Online's Kristin Dos Santos are the de facto leaders of the spoiler-media industry; both have been in the business since the late '90s. (Ausiello, who launched his own site in January, is considered the architect of the spoiler culture. He started out interviewing soap opera stars, then headed to TVGuide.com. There he established his spoiler-centric column, The Ausiello Files, which he took with him when he moved to *Entertainment Weekly*.) A variety of niche entertainment sites, from *New York* magazine's *Vulture* to AOL TV to Zap2it, also compete for scoops.

These sites do more than reveal secrets. They have also become tastemakers, providing a potential lifeline to critical favorites with small audiences. "If there is a show we believe in and we want to do well, it becomes a labor of love," says Ausiello. "Even if it's not generating blockbuster [Web site] traffic, chances are fans will catch on." *Friday Night Lights*, the small-town high school football drama that premiered on NBC but was picked up by DirecTV after the network

threatened to cancel it, recently wrapped for good, but Ausiello still receives e-mails from fans thanking him for turning them on to it. "That was just near and dear to my heart," he says.

The ongoing chatter can be a boon for freshman efforts, too. "With a new show you have to wave your arms and say, 'Look at me!' and release balloons and confetti," says Graham Yost, creator of *Justified*, FX's modern-day western that recently finished shooting its second season. For Yost that meant giving a spoiler-heavy EW.com interview to coincide with this season's ninth episode. Among other tidbits he disclosed that the show's protagonist would tell his ex-wife he was in love with her.

"It was a bargaining chip. You give them a scoop so that they'll do the story," says Yost, who in retrospect wonders if he said too much. "The FX publicist should have been slapping me. I would've made a horrible, horrible spy. Give me Krispy Kremes, and I'll divulge all the secrets."

Yet he is quick to add that he didn't give away any major developments or ruin any big surprises. "I don't feel like I destroyed the experience of watching it. Fans have a rooting interest in the romance. If someone had leaked that Ross and Rachel were getting together at the end of *Friends*, everyone still would have watched."

Striking that balance between revealing enough to get fans' attention without eroding the viewing experience is something Yost continues to try to master. "It's like a magician," he says. "If you know the secret behind his trick, it lessens the watching." He knows from his own obsession with Showtime's *Dexter* just how damaging a spoiler can be. Halfway through the first season, which focused primarily on the unknown identity of the Ice Truck Killer, somebody offhandedly said to Yost (spoiler alert!), "Crazy that the Ice Truck Killer was Dexter's sister's boyfriend." Yost's reaction? "I never finished watching."



This spring, when an extra from Fox's high school musical *Glee* tweeted about whom she thought the prom king and queen would be, cocreator Brad Falchuk went ballistic. "Who are you to spoil something talented people have spent months to create?" he posted on Twitter, inadvertently confirming the spoiler. "Hope you're qualified to do something besides work in entertainment."

Falchuk's anger is a reminder that some TV series' appeal is so tied to secrecy that for them spoilers have no upside. Reality

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shows especially are vulnerable, as when the Drudge Report announced in May—several hours before the finale of *American Idol* aired—that Scotty McCreery had beaten Lauren Alaina by almost two to one. To be sure, making a fuss about the importance of not spoiling the outcomes garners a certain amount of publicity of its own—witness what happened in the case of ABC's *Lost*.

For most scripted series, though, show runners say there are ways to placate those in the spoiler-media business without giving away the farm. *House*'s Shore recommends postmortem interviews after episodes have aired. "It keeps the spoiler sites happy," he says, "so hopefully they won't piss you off in return." Ausiello, for his part, says these interviews deliver all the advantages of spoiling without spoiling anything. "Fans engage even more," he says. "They want to share their views, get their thoughts out there. It helps to get a producer's perspective."

Another strategy is to beat the spoiler sites at their own game. *Gossip Girl*'s Savage and Safran, fed up this winter with story lines leaking, started handing out scripts to the cast members that could not be copied, with all but their own lines crossed out. Within weeks news of the top-secret scripts swept the blogosphere, on news and entertainment sites. *New York* magazine and E! Online interviewed the casts about the script kerfuffle.

But there's only so much one can control, especially with a program centered on a Web site that spills secrets about New York City socialites. Savage and Safran's attempts at spoiler management are always complicated by the fact that they shoot so much on location, though sometimes that highly visible habit won't fly. "With a new character or romance, we'll often make a conscious decision to keep them on the stages," says Safran. "Otherwise photos show up online months in advance."

For example, when Blair (yes, the same character who planted one on both Nate and Chuck at the Plaza) and a third character kissed this season, filming on location wasn't even considered. Fans continued to speculate about photos that caught the two characters simply walking around the city together, but the alleged romance was not exposed before the episode aired. The trick, Safran says, is to not let such fan-based scrutiny crimp the style of the show. "At a certain point we do decide that a kiss should happen in Central Park—we can't just change it to protect the fans from spoilers. We have to serve the story."

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