

The Four Types of Restricted Content

An Essay by Blue-Maned_Hawk

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Warning: This essay discusses sexual content, unethical sexual behavior, graphic content, minor trauma, and the concept of serious topics. Note that while this essay will discuss the *concept* of spoilers, no actual spoilers for anything will be present in this essay.

Introduction

[Note: I couldn't figure out how to get this first paragraph to be interesting enough, so i'm instead inserting a plea here that you at least read to the third paragraph before deciding to quit this essay.]

The four types of content that i seek to discuss in this essay are sexual content, graphic content, spoilers, and heavy content. "Restricted content" is a bad way to phrase the type of content i'm talking about in this essay; i used it in the title only as an attention-grabber, because it's a phrase that's closest to accurate both in terms of its strict definition and in terms of how people will percieve it. A better term would really have been "potentially-discomforting content", but that's quite a mouthful—and besides, it wouldn't have grabbed you by your eyeballs nearly as well, would it've?

Some people may use the phrase "mature content" (or something along those lines) for what i'm talking about. This is definitely how many people seem to percieve these types of content, as if they're somethings that children are too immature or too innocent or too stupid to understand. I *really* hate this terminology, because it talks down to children and betrays to me a worldview that views children as less intelligent than they actually are, and that sees this type of content as being something to be kept from their knowledge until they're "ready". This is a bad idea; ignorance is dangerous, and since children are naturally curious, there's a very significant risk that they would come across this type of content outside of a safe environment, and take away a perception that is too limited and will lead them to doing dangerous things. Children need to be educated about these things even if they're discomforting, because they will be worse off if they aren't.

...good gravy, where was i? Ah, right. Nomenclature.

This leads me to say that throughout the rest of this essay, i will be referring to these types of stuff as "potentially-discomforting content"—it's kind of a mouthful, yeah, but now that i'm no longer typing the title of this essay i don't need to worry about space considerations quite as much. I use this phrasing because it is, to me, the most useful way to describe this type of content, because all of these types of content have something in common: they're the type of stuff that people will have a warning for. If a website contains sexual content, it will always have an "Are you sure you want to see this?" warning in front of it; if a movie has a scene of graphic violence, the rating agencies will mandate that it be marked; if a thread on a gaming forum has spoilers for whatever the latest hit is, the moderators will require that it be marked in the title; and many kind people will give a warning before talking about deeply serious topics.

Now, with an outline of the things i'll be talking about and the rationale for unifying them into one essay, let us now analyze each of these things in more detail.

Sexual Content

This one is kind of the odd one out, because it is perhaps *the* single most restricted type of potentially discomforting content. This is the kinda stuff where if you don't mark it, you not only risk getting people pissed at you, you risk getting your account on whatever in serious trouble. Some places completely prohibit this kind of stuff altogether, an honor rarely afforded to the other types of content. When there are rules in place to restrict this type of stuff, they're often much more strict and enforced much more firmly than for other types of content.

There are some problems with this, because the definition of "sexual content" has multiple different definitions in use., and not all of them are very good. You could say that sexual content is just anything that has nudity, but then what about artistic depictions of nudity? or what about images that fetishize something that isn't genitalia? or what about an edge case image that's an image of someone ejaculating where the penis has been cropped out, but the semen hasn't? So okay, you could just say that it's anything that depicts sexual activities, which is a pretty frequent definition...but that's just a tautology, as if just saying that sexual content is sexual content. It certainly doesn't help that anything can be fetishized, so it seems like any fully fleshed-out definition of sexual content would need to have hundreds of different edge cases and intricacies and *still* need to rely on some amount of things just being "intuitively sexual".

Now, i can't talk about the definition of sexual content without bringing up perhaps the stupidest element that i see consistently within many definitions: BOOBS. Any definition that says or implies that bare feminine breasts are sexual by default is inherently asinine. Breasts are not a genital; they are a feeding organ. Breastfeeding is a fundamental part of rearing a child; it should be obvious that it is definitely not sexual. Sure, breasts can be *sexualised*, but like. so can feet.

Right, sorry about that. I got a little angry there. Where were we?

It's become more and more clear to the general public in recent times that sexual content is not inherently bad. It can be uncomfortable for many people and in many different situations, which is why it's still important to mark it, but it's not fundamentally evil. But that's definitely not to say that sexual content *can't* be morally reprehensible or anything like that, because it definitely can! There are certain fetishes that people can have that are inherently morally wrongful, such as zoophilia, necrophilia, rape kinks, violence kinks, the fetishization of specific individual fictional characters not created for the express purpose of pornography (which unfortunately doesn't have a compact phrase to describe it—maybe i should loan one into English from lthkuil), incest fetishism, pedophilia, and oh goodness me this is getting kinda depressing and i think that maybe we should just move on before i get kicked off GitHub.

Anyway, the reason that sexual content depicting unethical acts is harmful is because a) if it's photographic, it requires unethical sexual acts to actually be performed, and ② it's been shown that if this type of content is used as pornography, it acts as an insidious, slow-acting intrusion into the sensibilities of the user, rendering them more likely to commit the sexual immoralities portrayed in whatever it is. Obviously, this is not something that a reasonable society should want to happen to its citizens.

However, i'd argue that trying to fight against the distribution of unethical sexual content is a bad idea. If the content is photographic, then trying to fight its distribution distracts us from fighting its production, which i think is much more

important to fight against. If the content is fictional, then it's extremely difficult to restrict it, because nothing can be proven in the realm of fiction, so all judgements would need to be made based upon individual interpretation instead of a definitive truth, a terrible idea for regulating something.

Graphic Content

This one is kinda the odd one out, because for much of human history, violence was a much more normal thing to be exposed to than it is now. Really, it goes back much further than that—deeper than history, before humanity even existed, when survival of the fittest good enough meant that violence was the only way to survive. This is a bad thing, obviously: it's better for everybody when people operate cooperatively instead of competitively, and while we're getting there, we've still got a long battle ahead of us.

I don't have very much to say about this, oddly enough. I guess the one thing i have to say on the matter is that things don't need to be bloody for them to be graphic—after all, there's a reason the ESRB have a separate rating criterion for *cartoon* violence. That being said, even bloodless fistfights can be disturbing in other ways, such as if they're a result of domestic abuse—but the discomfort that results from that is more in the realm of serious content than graphic content.

Sometimes, this type of content is called "not safe for life", in reference to sexual content being called "not safe for work". I'm not entirely sure why this is, but i presume it's because graphic content can often be more *distressing* to view, as opposed to sexual content's tendency to simply *discomfort* people.

Spoilers

[Caution: This section may be somewhat biased.]

This one is kinda the odd one out, and for a couple of different reasons. First off, unlike with other types of content, it's not really possible to "see it all" in terms of spoilers, because as more and more stories are being written, the world has more and more things to be spoiled. Secondly, the harm that spoilers can cause is often much more instantaneous than with other types of content, because the nature of spoilers is that they're a particular piece of information that is harmful to know. What's worse is that, as indicated in Plato's allegory of the cave, it's completely impossible for a person to go back to before they knew the spoilers once they've learned them, permanently making it impossible for them to experience the work that the spoilers pertain to in the same "first time" as everyone else did. This is, obviously, horrifying.

There are two types of spoilers: minor spoilers and MASSIVE spoilers. There is no clear defining line between the two, and most people simply operate on intuition to determine which is which. I don't have much to say about this, because i can't think of a good way to divide them either.

Spoilers can have some fascinatingly weird properties about them. Consider, for instance, how some works mandate blindness, leading to damn near everything being a MASSIVE spoiler—while this usually leads to a work that isn't very good because it's strongly reliant on shock value, this isn't always the case (although they can, of course, be bad for other reasons, like if they convey a message that promotes an unethical worldview). As an aside, i know of one instance of a series of works where only the first work mandates blindness like this, leading to a peculiar situation where the information about the later works is massively spoilerous for the first work, but once one has experienced the first work then the later works *don't* mandate blindness. Bizarre.

An important property of spoilers is they do not become less harmful over time; a massive spoiler for a work that's millenia old is just as painful as a spoiler for a work that came out a few years ago. But spoilers *can* change over time in a couple of ways that can sometimes be misinterpreted as them fading in power.

One of the ways this change can happen is if the work itself changes. The clearest instance where this happens is with updates to video games, which can bring changes from the benign to the buck-wild. These changes can influence the way people percieve the spoilers; for instance, in the Dwarf Fortress community, the feature commonly referred to by the euphemism "cotton candy" used to be (as far as i can tell, anyway—I wasn't in the community at this time, so i can't speak from personal experience) considered a MASSIVE spoiler, likely in part because the game itself was somewhat more linear. However, as the game got updated, it changed over time to being merely a minor spoiler, potentially in part because the introduction of fun stuff that was even more hidden caused the community to change their scales for what was massive and what was minor. (Nowadays, i've seen even more radical claims from people who insist that it isn't a spoiler nowadays, or even that Dwarf Fortress no longer has spoilers. However, as i write this, the wiki still considers it to be a minor spoiler.) But this isn't limited to video games—a plot point in a piece of serialized literature, for instance, could be considered a MASSIVE spoiler when the latest chapter was number 4, but only a minor spoiler, if a spoiler at all, when the latest chapter is number 9.

The other way in which a particular spoiler can change is if the readers's/viewers's/players's/whatevers's perceptions of the work change. Death of the author means that the author(s)'s interpretation of their work doesn't matter any more than everyone elses, and this extends to determining what is and isn't spoilers. For example, the big reveal at the end of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* was (from what i've heard from people who saw it when it first came out) a truly MASSIVE spoiler at the time; however, as time has gone on, it's become absorbed into popular culture to such a degree that if someone were to complain about it nowadays, they'd confuse the gonads out of everybody around them. This has occurred in multiple works to varying degrees.

Some works have absolutely no spoilers at all. However, this is rare.

Serious content

This one is kind of the odd one out, because it encompasses an absolute shitload of wildly different things, all of which are only loosely unified under the umbrella of "a serious topic". Some examples of things that can count:

- Politics!
- World events!
- Major personal events!
- Religion!
- Extreme tragedies!
- Non-graphical death!
- Topics that are exceptionally controversial within only a small community!
- Child abuse!
- Other bullshit i haven't thought of!

This means that i unfortunately don't have anything to say anything about it, because the definition is so broad. What an boring way to end this essay.

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