

[siren]

SPOILER WARNING: As promised, this is your spoiler warning for this episode. In the podcast, we talk about Avatar the Last Airbender, Dexter, and Game of Thrones. But we really only get into the finer plot points of Avatar the Last Airbender and Dexter.

Check the podcast description for the timestamps of those discussions if you don't want to get spoiled. Now, onto the show!

[static ends]

Part of the reason I settled on the topic of endings for season two of the podcast, was that I felt like I had a pretty natural thesis going into it. Based on my time in the Supernatural fandom, it was clear that even with a few years of distance from the finale, fans were still fighting over it.

[friends to read some of the reactions here, music in the background]

### **Voice 1**

Threw entire characterization of dean of 15 years in the dustbin. Hated it is putting it lightly.

### **Bea Dean's Girl**

The ending was heartbreakingly perfect. Sam was much better equipped to live without Dean, thanks, in large part, to all the things Dean did over their lives together to make sure that Sam would thrive.

### **Voice 2**

Burn that trash finale. Dean was not supposed to die the writing sucked ass.

### **Winchestergirl927**

It was a bittersweet but fitting ending and brought the brothers journey full circle. I appreciate the narrative symmetry of it and found it heartbreakingly beautiful.

### **Voice 3**

It removed the character development of dean, made him die on a useless hunt when just one episode prior he defeated God. Dean shouldn't have died period. Sam should have got a happy ending with eileen the pair's story was built the entirety of season 15. The finale just forgot about eileen. Castiel who is the main character should never been erased he should have been rescued from the empty and should have been shown reuniting with Jack, Sam and Dean.

### **Cris, aka quickreaver**

The SPN finale was very polarizing in fandom, no question. There was so much discussion as to how they'd wrap, and this varied wildly between certain fandom camps. I was Team Butch-and-Sundance (for Sam and Dean), as were many, but I was pretty sure we wouldn't get this, mostly because we wanted it, lol!

[waterfall ends]

Unless you have a memory for old pop culture references like Dean, you might have missed that last one. The 1969 movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* ends with the two main characters going out together in a blaze of glory, which was the preferred ending of *Supernatural* for at least some fans.

This is only a *tiny* selection of the thoughts and opinions I have gathered so far with my survey. [whisper: if you want to give me your two cents, the survey is still up and I'll include it in the episode description]

So why are people still mad? On both sides? And is that why we still have such an active fan base, despite no new spinoffs or short series on the horizon?

I eventually came to a theory that I used as my central thesis for what was going on here. The argument goes something like this:

Really excellent shows with satisfying endings are remembered fondly by their fandoms, but fade because the story feels complete. Great shows with terrible endings also disappear from the cultural zeitgeist, but for the exact opposite reason. Fans are so mad or embarrassed by the ending of their show that they drop it like a hot potato.

But a great show with a divisive ending? Well, that just means that there's something to still argue about. Or try to correct with fan fiction written under the fix it tab. Or go to fan conventions and try to see if the actors have any interest in reviving the show to "correct the ending."

And that's where I thought *Supernatural* sat in this spectrum.

But, well, this is a strong argument to make and I should do my due diligence and actually show you the evidence. Let's take a look at some actual evidence to see if I'm right.

[music]

First up? The good show with a good ending.

When I first realized I had unwittingly formulated this little theory, I started poking around twitter - No, I won't call it X because that is dumb - and asking folks what tv shows they thought nailed the ending.

A few of the shows that came up time and time again were: The Good Place, Black Sails, Buffy, Battlestar Galactica, New Girl, Six Feet Under, Schitt's Creek, The Americans....

Look, I could list these out forever, but let's just look at one or two examples.

### **Casey Mendoza**

I only have two shows that I say have perfect endings based off of like, or you know, are perfect shows in general, like, perfectly land like the beginning, middle and end everything ties up well.

This is my friend and entertainment reporter, Casey Mendoza! She works at the tv news outlet Scripps

### **Casey Mendoza**

Oh, and also silly little magazine, I founded that. It's about fandom. So that's, that's relevant.

Anyway here's Casey's two perfect shows

### **Casey Mendoza**

The show that I grew up watching. So I watched it live when it came out and kind of experienced the whole like, week by week traditional TV structure and watched it over years was Avatar The Last Airbender, that to me, is a perfect ending.

If you haven't seen Avatar - the cartoon, not the James Cameron movie with blue people - The basic plot is about a world where people can use powers based on the four elements of wind, water, fire, and earth. The story begins with the Fire Nation who has begun to wage an imperialist war, a war they have been slowly winning.

The world's only hope is the Avatar, the only one who can master all four elements. Except, the avatar is just a young Airbender named Aang, who doesn't want to be a part of the bloodshed, even though he knows he must stop the fire nation.

### **Casey Mendoza**

What's really fascinating about like, my relationship to Avatar, The Last Airbender, and I feel like it might be similar for other people, is that I, when that show first started coming out. I didn't really have internet, so I wasn't on like internet spaces. And it was a kid show, right? So there probably was, and I joined it later in life like a Reddit subreddit dedicated to the show, but I wasn't on Reddit until I was in college. But still, I felt a sense of like fandom with avatar because a lot of my friends in middle school and high school watched it together. It was a fun little like equalizer almost between like the anime kids and everybody. And then it was on Nickelodeon. It was easy to watch. And it was just also very good.

A lot of people, it seems, agree with Casey here. The animated series won 9 awards, including a 2007 Emmy award and 2009 Peabody award. And like Simone Biles, the show stuck the landing.

### **Casey Mendoza**

With avatar, it's so easy to go to the ending where, Aang defeats the Fire Lord, not by killing him. But by taking away his bending as like a reflection of the way he had been diplomatic, the entire series, how he was always preaching non violence. And like there are so many like deep layers into the way his character progress and the other characters progress that like I still think about it as an adult.

I definitely agree with this. Avatar is one of those shows that knew its tone and core themes and honored those at the end of the series. As a viewer, you were expecting a big climatic battle, and you got one! But instead of killing the big bad, Aang stayed true to his core character and found a way to end the conflict without death.

This fits the first part of my initial thesis: Great show, great ending, fondly remembered by basically everyone I know who watched the show.

The fandom, while historically quite active, seemed to be mostly dormant until the pandemic when the show came to streaming and Netflix realized the golden goose they had licensed.

### **Casey Mendoza**

one of the things that I loved during the pandemic was when Avatar :The Last Airbender, went on Netflix, and everybody who didn't grow up on it finally watched it. And like Netflix's little data algorithm says, like, wow, people loved this!

And now Netflix has created a live action remake of the original cartoon. So, maybe the fandom is more active now that there's quote-unquote 'new content' for fans to engage with?

But going back to the original series, I still think this fits with my original thesis.

The second show Casey mentioned as a perfect show with a perfect ending was FullMetal Alchemist: Brotherhood.

And look, I could talk all day about FMA (as us fans call it), both the original series and the more manga-accurate Brotherhood series. And I do agree that it's a series that has an ending that just fits.

But it doesn't fit my pattern of tv shows that have ended well but don't have active fanbases. FullMetal Alchemist still maintains a strong, active fandom. Just last year I went to San Diego Comic Con and I saw at least two FullMetal Alchemist cosplayers!

That show ended in 2018! Or, really it ended in 2004 but that was the Japanese original version and not the English dub...

And the original manga, or comics, started even longer ago in 2001 and ended in 2010!

But there are still plenty of fans who create videos and write fanfiction about both iterations of FMA.

[music cue]

So my first theory, that strong endings put fandoms to rest, didn't quite hold.

What about great shows with terrible endings — are they erased from our cultural memories?

My personal example of this would have to be Dexter. It was a clever Showtime show about a serial killer who only ever killed other murderers and worked in the crime lab for Miami PD. It had quippy writing, dark undertones, and a fantastic cast.

But..... the last season just felt like a garbage fire! When the plot led to the inevitable discovery by Dexter's sister of his secret hobby, I didn't think that they were going to kill her off! Or send him literally into a hurricane, presumably a Miami-style suicide, just to reveal he had secretly become a lumberjack in the pacific northwest. [huffs a sigh]

Yeah, I'm still mad. And from what I remember, the fandom for that show just vanished, as if everyone else was as annoyed as I was. Even when they tried to reboot the show for an additional season, friends I knew who watched the original agreed that the show had lost its good will and they weren't interested any longer.

But I think the real big cultural touchstone would have to be Game of Thrones. The fantasy epic about the political machinations and all-out war for control of the country of Westeros amassed a huge viewership.

According to the website Statista, season 7, the penultimate season, regularly had over 10 million viewers. In 2019, over 30% of Americans counted themselves at least casual fans of the show.

But that popularity didn't hold with the 8th and final season. Over a third of viewers stated that they did not like the series finale, and that's putting it mildly in my opinion. Most former fans mentioned "poor writing" as one of the major reasons for their disappointment.

Fansplaining's Elizabeth Minkel, who you heard last episode, summed it up neatly.

### **Elizabeth Minkel**

Something like the Game of Thrones ending. I think everyone agreed, like, I didn't see anyone defending that from any corner of that fandom.

Weirdly, even though it was previously a vibrant fandom, the final season caused that to evaporate into negative memes about how the plot made no sense and characters were acting, well out-of-character.

Despite all that, HBO greenlit a prequel spinoff series called House of the Dragon not long after.

I was in the big Hall H ballroom at ComicCon when the show premiered its early footage, and Matt Smith, of Dr Who-fame, got up on stage to talk about the world of Westeros. But most of the people in that room were just camping out for the Star Trek and Marvel panels planned for later in the day. The final season of Game of Thrones was the end of fans' caring about the franchise.

### **Rebecca Williams**

I don't see the same kind of fandom coalescing around House of Dragon in the same way that it did with Game of Thrones. And I wonder whether that's people just being like, No, I'm not sure I want to invest in this because it didn't end so well last time. So I'm not really sure if I trust you ~~know~~, maybe you don't trust that kind of world anymore because you know that you got burned once before and you don't want to go through it again.

This is Rebecca Williams, from the University of South Wales.

### **Rebecca Williams**

my job title is associate professor in media audiences and participatory cultures.

We'll hear more from Rebecca later on, but I thought she was right on the money about how the creators of fandom - the fanfiction writers and artists and video makers - how they seem to have abandoned the world of Westeros altogether.

Williams' academic word for this content-generating type of fan community is the "productive fandom."

### **Rebecca Williams**

once you've lost sort of trust, and once you've lost that sort of belief that you kind of put your trust in those people to make it good and make it what you want. Once that's gone, and why would you spend your time writing fanfiction? You know, if you really, really can't engage that. So yeah, be really interesting with Game of Thrones, actually, if people have gone back and tried to make it better, or just say just quit, walked away.

I guess someone has to be watching House of the Dragon, because a second season is slated for release in June 2024. I just don't know who that audience is!

So Game of Thrones seems to fit into the category of "great show + bad ending = fans drop it like Bran dropped from the tower in Winterfell"

But wait, there's more. When I asked the same question to those who work in the television industry, the response wasn't what I expected.

### **Jeff Hersh**

For example, like, I know, a lot of people had issues with Game of Thrones ending. And that's a very, like, I mean, it's just the ones these are the ones that are just kind of out there in the ether and every knows about. It's like, but I also know people who really

enjoyed the last season of Game of Thrones, but I feel like sometimes ~~the-the-the~~ voices of dissent, and anger and frustration are a little louder, especially when they're, whether they're on Reddit or Twitter or whatever. ~~Like, you know,~~ the complaining gets a little louder than the people who are like, actually, that really worked for me and I like this.

Jeff Hersh, a screenwriter and co-producer for the tv series The Flash, was much kinder to tv endings that fans had very visceral, negative reactions to.

### **Jeff Hersh**

I've always been very, like accepting of what, what, what the, what the creators are presenting to me, like, very rarely do I have a very, like, I can't believe they did that.

And I did wonder if having come from a creator's experience, he was more likely to be forgiving of endings that don't quite work.

Rob Benedict, who played Chuck Shurley on Supernatural, seemed to share that more forgiving attitude.

### **Rob Benedict**

I didn't hate Game of Thrones. I didn't hate in the moment people you know, people have a real problem with that Game of Thrones final season. And I didn't I like really appreciated it for what it was at the time. I really wanted it to be great for that shows. Interesting. I watched it. I had never watched that show. And I kind of caught up on it before the final season so that I watched the final season in real time. So for me, that was really exciting to see in real time. So I was sort of going like, okay, yeah, that's the ending and that's what it is, you know, and I'm also not, I'm not a big critic of things. So I appreciate it. Now looking back, I'm like, Okay, people have said things and I'm like, Yeah, I get that I can see that. It could have been better could have been that but it is what it was and then you're like, Okay, that's what it is.

We'll hear more from Rob in later episodes. But for now, it definitely seems that the folks I spoke with who have experience working in tv were more forgiving about show endings.

In fact, I emailed a fellow podcaster and radio host, Greta Johnsen, who had hosted a show recapping each Game of Thrones episode as they came out. Today, she's cohost for the official HBO podcast covering House of the Dragon. She didn't have time to talk, but said that from her vantage, the fandom is thriving. She thinks GoT is more a story



about the perils of adapting an unfinished series than it is a Show that Botched the Ending.

And even outside the Game of Thrones example, shows like BBC's Sherlock which had an absolutely MESS of a last season, still seem to have an active fanbase.

### **Elizabeth Minkel**

I have a lot of Sherlock Mutual's because that was when I was first on Tumblr. And I have all those terms muted. And I see them posting about them every day. And they're not angry posts. They're like, sometimes I'll click on them out of curiosity, and they'll be like, a picture of Benedict Cumberbatch, and they're like, "pretty guy." And I'm like, still? Alright, I guess...

So even a show with a bad ending doesn't disappear from fan spaces completely - as I had expected. And maybe there isn't really a clean line between good and bad endings...

[music break]

I guess I'm comfortable with saying there's no show that had an ending which made everyone who watched it happy. Just like there's not an ending that I can find that everyone truly hated. So..... *every ending is divisive?*

Jeff Hersh thinks that might be the case:

### **Jeff Hersh**

Because we're all coming in here with our own, with our own expectations. And we're all focused on different parts of the story. I mean, Flash is a great example there, there are fans who are there for the comic book superhero villain material. And then there are fans there who are there for the relationships. And that's the beautiful thing of that show that showed us both. So you can have these two different groups and they're looking for different things in their, in their interest in the show.

Are we... are we not all watching the same thing? Elizabeth doesn't think so either.

### **Elizabeth Minkel**

I think one thing that a lot of fans, and whatever, I think audiences in general have a hard time wrapping their heads around the idea that like the show you think you're watching me and that the the show they're making, you know, and the show you think you're watching probably isn't the show that the the guy in the next apartment is also

watching it thinks he's watching. Right, you know, like, I think it's very easy in fan circles, to hear a lot of other people are on the same page and believe that you all are interpreting the same way. And you know, like seeing the same thing

Look, we've all heard about echo chambers on social media and how it's making us all self-segregate into "bubbles." But these bubbles are usually describing political affiliations, not television fandoms!

Yet, the principle remains the same. DePaul University researcher Paul Booth, who you heard in the previous episode, views it through the eyes of community dynamics.

### **Paul Booth**

this notion that there's something that you're looking for out of the show is going to be guided by the community that you're part of, and that's going to be guided by the types of the type of texts that you're a fan of.

Who are our favorite characters? Do we support a particular relationship within the show? What do we consider to be the core themes or thesis of the show?

Basically, when we sit down in front of the tv - why are we watching?

### **Paul Booth**

people watch for different reasons. And people see different things in it. But I think about your supernatural example. Right? Is, are people wishing it had ended earlier, like one episode earlier, right or two episodes earlier? Because that is where their particular favorite character had their conclusion. Versus the full kind of arc of the whole story coming together? Or is it because what ended up happening at the end? wasn't what they wanted, or wasn't what they expected?

Don't worry, we're going to get into the data of the last few episodes of Supernatural.

But I want to focus in on something Paul just brought up. He compared why people might view the "real ending" as being when a favorite character completed their character arc, and not necessarily when the plot ended.

### **Paul Booth**

people have been writing about endings and narratives for hundreds and hundreds of years. I think most fans, like endings, that this is gonna sound silly, but that conclude, you know, that have something that the character arc has been concluded. So there's two: there's there are story arcs, narrative arcs. And then there are kind of plot like

character arcs. And story arcs are like what's happening in the world of the stories and character arcs or the, what, how the character has changed. And we care more about character arcs just generally as readers, and as viewers.

So for example in Supernatural, a character arc would be what happens to Jack, while a story arc would be whether the world ended.

### **Paul Booth**

when character arcs are satisfied, that feels like a good ending. But I don't feel like we need narrative closure as much. This may just be me. And again, I liked the ending of last. So take this with an enormous grain of salt, a salt lick. But I think about something like the sopranos right, talk about a divisive ending. There's no story ending, right, we have no idea what happens to most of the plotlines. But we actually kind of have a little bit of a character ending for almost every character except for Tony. And that's only because they're very deliberately leaving that out and leaving it for us to discuss. So to me, that's a really satisfying ending, because it feels like it's whatever happened, we know where the characters are.

Ok So we all agree that endings are important. But we still aren't very good at defining a good one from a bad one, or why some still maintain an active fandom while others fade.

[music cue here]

I know I used this last time, but I love the way Richard Speight Jr succinctly told me:

### **Richard Speight Jr**

Again, what are you going to do? What would have made people happy? Nothing, because nobody wants to go away. Some people would have been more satisfied by something maybe, but not everybody. You know, whoever was satisfied by something would have left other people feeling cheated. So, you know, it's an unsolvable crime and unwinnable war. It's a, you know, fool's errand to blah, blah, blah. All the cliches I can think of, it's impossible to get it right. And that, in itself, is what makes it interesting.

[let music play for a bit here]

It may be an unsolvable crime, but we can still try to put this question to the test: WITH DATA!

Next time on In Defense of Fandom, let's play scientist with some real data...

See you in two weeks!

[music]

Editorial support was provided by Dr. Anna Funk.

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Thanks to my friends, who voiced some of the fans who responded to my survey. I'll include their names in the show notes.

*In Defense of Fandom* was made possible through an unhealthy obsession, and your support via ko-fi. Thanks especially to Meg B and Catalanta, who are the first supporters of this season of the pod! If you're not already supporting the show and you'd like to, you can find a link in the show notes to our ko-fi.

A one-time donation of any amount will get you access to behind-the-scenes content, including the audio of my full conversation with Richard Speight Jr and other guests you'll be hearing from across the season.

Your support is deeply appreciated.