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The coronavirus is all reality, no show. That's why Trump's diagnosis is so nerve-racking

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No matter how seriously you take President Trump's covid-19 — and I do, having been through this with my father — it was inevitable that the “plot twist!” jokes would start circulating on Twitter as soon as the news broke. Critiquing reality as if it were a scripted drama has been a running gag for years about almost every major news development. And thus, my friend Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute reacted to news of the Trump diagnosis with: “Huh. It's the obvious twist, but I would've saved it for the season finale.” To which columnist for the Week Damon Linker responded, “Too obvious. That's what makes me nervous.”

Truly, never have I been so nervous. Nor so willing to believe that we are all living in a simulation, providing live entertainment for some incomprehensibly advanced civilization. The past four years have proceeded eerily as if they were being scripted by an HBO showrunner, complete with an antihero protagonist, and a deus-ex-machina pandemic, and the obligatory helicopter flight over the darkening D.C. skyline, all seemingly designed to revive fan excitement after viewers became jaded by the vulgar antics of the first few seasons.

Or maybe this — all of this — is just what you get when you elect a reality television star to the presidency. Two things are true about Donald Trump: He has a keen showman's instinct for what makes good television drama, and he thinks of little else. Unfortunately, as we keep discovering under this president, while drama in controlled doses is an essential break from the humdrum, it's no fun when it's your whole life.

Lawmakers, pundits react to President Trump's positive coronavirus test

Lawmakers and pundits reacted to President Trump and first lady Melania Trump's positive coronavirus tests on Oct. 2 (Adriana Usero/The Washington Post)

Trump was elected, of course, precisely because he blurs those lines — hell, he erases them. At least one study has suggested that many voters originally liked him because of the role they'd seen him play on television. Certainly, the media covered him because of it, both because he was already famous and because at any given juncture, he reliably did whatever was most likely to amp up the drama and keep him at the center of our screens.

If you talked to his fans, you heard that they liked his willingness to say the attention-getting things most politicians would shy away from. Whatever else he was, he was never boring. Even many of his enemies seemed (let's be honest) to enjoy the fantasy of themselves as budding resistance fighters against a dictatorship that has not, as yet, materialized — though Trump has certainly savagely eroded essential civic norms, most lately about losers ceding elections.

But even some who thought him brash-but-harmless also found it exhausting to have a president who never, even for a moment, did anything boringly, unremarkably sane. For 3½ years, you could not get away from him; if the public's attention flagged, he immediately embarked upon new outrages, until he'd once again provoked people into responding. And then came covid-19, and the entertainer-in-chief taught us how to *really* hate being an extra in someone else's spectacle.

From the first, Trump never seemed to grasp that the coronavirus was going to be all reality, no show. Obsessed with optics, and a reelection bid he thought rested on a booming economy, Trump denied and mismanaged the pandemic, and made safety measures into a political statement rather than a bipartisan civic duty. Which helped America's first wave of infections continue on slow simmer all summer, rather than burning out like Europe's.

The defiant disdain for distancing and masks that Trump has nurtured in his supporters, combined with our elevated background level of disease, certainly increased the risk that the president himself would eventually catch it. That he finally did, at what might well prove the most inconvenient possible time for his campaign, also seems like a plot point in a script, though maybe a little too obvious; you can imagine pausing to tell your spouse, "Things are never that neat in real life."

That doesn't mean he deserved to catch covid-19. Fictional characters may "deserve" a virus or similar catastrophe to requite their hubris, but a real human being never does. Rather, it's just one more way that Trump has shown us how little any of us actually wants to live in a television series.

High drama makes a swell break from ordinary lives that can be, by turns, dull, frustrating or bleak. But an hour a week is enough. And Trump has never gotten the concept of "enough."

What Trump deserves for that failure is not viral payback, but exactly what he appeared to be getting before he caught covid-19: voted out of office. Until the president is well, I will be praying for him to return to good health as quickly as possible . . . in time to be canceled by a frazzled electorate who finally seem tired of staring at the man on the screen.