

Squid Game season 2 is a brutal remix of Netflix's biggest show

In the three years since *Squid Game* became Netflix's biggest property, it's been easy to forget just why it was so popular to begin with. The unflinching story of class conflict that combined iconic visuals, schoolyard games, and a nihilistic view of humanity, has largely been buried beneath ill-conceived reality shows, influencer knockoffs, cartoon-ish mobile games, and all manner of brand tie-ins. Just ahead of the show's return for season 2, Netflix outlined a staggering array of *Squid Game* collabs, covering everything from *Call of Duty* to Domino's to Crocs to Johnnie Walker. If you really want to, you can buy *Squid Game*-branded beef jerky.

Luckily, while Netflix seems to have forgotten what *Squid Game* is actually about – or, more likely, was simply blinded by dollar signs – series creator Hwang Dong-hyuk certainly hasn't. The second season doesn't explore a lot of new territory thematically but, instead, cleverly expands the *Squid Game* universe while offering up a thriller that plays out like an even more brutal remix of the original.

The new season picks up a few years after the events of the first, in which Seong Gi-hun, better known as player 456 (Lee Jung-jae, who followed *Squid Game* fame with a starring role in *Star Wars* and his directorial debut), won the initial games. That meant he earned a ₩45.6 billion prize but also had to live with being the only survivor from a group of 456 people.

Season 1 ended with Gi-hun not only getting rich but also learning that the elderly Oh Il-nam, player 001 (O Yeong-su),

was actually the creator of the games and that he and a group of fellow ultrarich individuals used the murder and mayhem purely as a way to relieve their boredom. In the last moments of the season, Gi-hun had a choice to make: get on a plane to reconnect with his estranged family, or stay and do something about the games. He does not get on the plane.

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That includes an expecting young mother looking to start a new life, a trans woman who needs money for gender-affirming care, and a mother and son who both signed up to pay off his gambling debts, tragically unaware the other had also joined the games. There are some great new villains as well, like a purple-haired rapper who is having the time of his life amid the bloodshed, and a cold-hearted crypto influencer who lost himself – and his viewers – all kinds of money. And once again, there's an undercover member of Squid Game management who is trying to manipulate the games from the inside.

The games feel different this time because of Gi-hun, who does everything he can to both save people while playing and convince them to leave after the match is over. After each game, all the surviving players can vote on whether to continue, and these moments of counting hundreds of X's and 0's are extremely tense. But greed pushes people to make the wrong choice over and over, and it's hard not to get disheartened alongside Gi-hun. But for many of the players, death in a schoolyard game is preferable to what awaits them on the outside. Gi-hun has his work cut out for him convincing the other contestants that their real enemy isn't each other but the system that put them here fighting over money. Things eventually culminate in a bloody massacre that pushes *Squid Game* further into horror than it's ever been.

From there, the show races to a conclusion that finally promises to shake up the games themselves – but it never actually reaches that big moment. Instead, it neatly sets up the third and final season that will hit Netflix in 2025. While the cliffhanger (and the subsequent wait) may be disappointing, it's a relief that, unlike seemingly everyone else, Hwang and his team haven't lost sight of what made *Squid Game* so special to begin with. Season 2 may not be the big surprise the original was, but it makes up for that with clever twists on the formula and storylines that hit even bloodier notes. Even better: the promise of a conclusion that knows where it's headed.

Squid Game season 2 starts streaming on Netflix on December 26th.

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