Squid Game’s uneven season 3 leaves the door wide open

The third and final season of the industry-defining *Squid Game* confidently delivers each new round of the deathly games with spectacularly brutal aplomb — but its attempts at worldbuilding are disappointingly tired and uneven.

Some of *Squid Game*’s most interesting dynamics from the first two seasons — the politics among the masked guards, the organ-harvesting operation, the relationship between Front Man/In-ho (played by Lee Byung-hun) and brother Jun-ho (Wi Ha-jun), the crew of burly men led by Jun-ho trying to uncover and infiltrate the island hosting the games — screech to frustratingly lackluster conclusions, without enlarging the world beyond what we have already seen so far.

A new season of any show should always aim to ask new questions. For *Squid Game*, there are plenty to choose from. What is the selection process like for guards, and how do they get promoted up the hierarchy into the “triangle” sergeants or, eventually, the “square” leaders? What are their inner politics like? What other things happened between brothers In-ho and Jun-ho before In-ho joined the games? If Jun-ho’s crew manages to infiltrate the island, will the games be stopped? How will that happen? Who are these English-speaking VIPs, really? Have there been occasions in the past where the games were nearly publicly exposed?

However, the third season’s worldbuilding efforts remain frustratingly unimaginative for the most part, although the season’s final 10 minutes deliver some of its most glorious moments that take place outside the games. They’re so intriguing that it makes you wonder why we didn’t just start there.

Image: Netflix

The third season picks up several threads from where the previous left off (season 3 functions more as a second part to season 2 than a standalone season). Jun-ho and his crew remain adamant about finding the island, while loyal helper Woo-seok (Jun Suk-ho) claims a stake in one of the show's more exciting scenes when trying to uncover the boat captain's past. There is one plotline between North Korea-born guard No-eul (Park Gyu-young) and another trooper, with the game's top-ranking guard getting pulled into the scuffles. Yet, these endeavors are unevenly fleshed out and don't enlarge the *Squid Game* universe much.

Squid Game creator Hwang Dong-hyuk seems to be at his best when directing the action-filled contests, which feature children's games like Jump Rope and Hide and Seek in this season. From the vertigo-inducing, towering game of Jump Rope to long shots down Hide and Seek's labyrinthian corridors of seemingly endless doors and rooms in arresting colors, Hwang is a magician of fear, suspense, and relief. In the throes of the games' battleground, the alchemy of circumstantial trust, forged and broken alliances, and flashes of humanity reminds viewers of all the elements that made *Squid Game* such a global hit when it first premiered in 2021.

The very best part of *Squid Game* also grows into its biggest curse: it is a show that just *works so well* with an ensemble cast. Beyond headliner Gi-hun/Player 456 (Lee Jung-jae), other characters — like the cold, calculative crypto bro Myung-gi (Yim Si-wan), strong-willed and heavily pregnant Jun-hee (Jo Yu-ri), eager but self-doubting Dae-ho (Kang Ha-neul), former marine Hyun-ju (Park Sung-hoon), unpredictable but captivating Nam-gyu (Roh Jae-won), and mother-son duo Geum-ja (Kang Ae-sim) and Yong-sik (Yang Dong-geun) — all pull their weight.

Part of the third season’s unsteady steps can be pardoned on the basis that some of the characters that audiences are most invested in just… die, due to the nature of the show as a survival game. This is amplified particularly in this season, as more than three quarters of the players have already been eliminated. The spectacle and extravaganza of *Squid Game* thrives on the cacophony of 456 desperate but complex humans decked out in their blocky green tracksuits taking on their lives’ biggest chance at redemption in the games arena. It is the brilliant clash of gallows humor, personalities big and small, and a hundred different value systems that has propelled much of the show’s momentum.

Image: Netflix

As the players are killed off, the dormitory empties out and the show needs to turn elsewhere to find its verve and momentum. While this presents an opportunity for the story to become more intimate, fleshing the remaining characters out with greater depth, *Squid Game* suddenly becomes uncharacteristically too timid to tread these waters.

The third episode, titled “It’s Not Your Fault,” is the show’s most affecting one, and perhaps its strongest. The boisterous arena of games gives way to sincere emotional exchange. As the games claim their victims, some of the surviving characters utter the phrase “it’s my fault” in their despair. They grapple with an overbearing guilt that their personal survival has come at such great cost, and also blame their own missteps and shortcomings that brought them to the games in the first place.

Yet, amid all the pain and hurt, the episode makes way for expressions of profound grace and wisdom. While Gi-hun has turned nearly mute, burning with unspeakable rage and guilt

after an unsuccessful and expensive rebellion (which we saw in season 2), it is in this episode that he speaks the most, in trying to find connection and catharsis. One sagely character muses to Gi-hun, “No matter how you look at it, life just is unfair. Bad people do bad things, but they blame others and go on to live in peace. Good people, on the other hand, beat themselves up about the smallest things.”

Contextualized in the show’s wider critiques of unchecked capitalism and inequality, this episode brings the question of guilt into sharp relief. As much as the game fashions its own heroes and losers, victors and victims, everyone who is a participant here is ultimately a casualty of society in the “real world” outside the games. Some are born into poverty or into broken families. Others cannot find help for their drug or gambling addiction. Some just never had the best cards to start life with. Who is really at fault?

While the third episode flows smoothly in its plot and character development, the same cannot be said for many other parts of the season. Some of the season’s plot twists will also prove divisive among audiences — for example, a new player is unceremoniously introduced into the games without being able to give their consent, or even participate in each round of voting. This introduces a remarkably new dynamic among the players, although the player’s participation may make for uncomfortable viewing at times.

The show changes gears in its final minutes, when it picks up the pace dramatically. It also ends in a way that opens up many new directions for future *Squid Game* spinoffs, which feel like an inevitability at this point. With such a big prize to be won, it’s hard to imagine Netflix staying away from one of its most lucrative series for long.

Squid Game *season 3 is streaming on Netflix now.*

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