Stranger Things without Spoiler Things: It’s dark, different, and still delightful



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The latest trailer for *Stranger Things S3*
When Netflix’s *Stranger Things* initially burst onto the scene in 2016, the surprise summer hit struck a national nerve. There was, however, one small, repeated bit of pushback: *Haven’t we done this before?*

The bikes. The supernatural. The kids saving the world with Walkie Talkies in hand. And if nostalgia indulgence, built upon allusions and influences from King and Spielberg,

initially turned off some viewers, season two may have turned the repellent up to Eleven (ahem) by doing the sequel thing. The series' second run had the same primary victim, another D&D-inspired type of lurking evil, and one more kids-save-their-friend-after-a-science-lesson bit.

Now two years and a *Thrones*-ian amount of anticipation later, the *Stranger Things 3* premiere arrives in mere days (July 4). Netflix has already shared the season with some TV critics alongside an extensive list of 17 embargoed facts (that an editor graciously read through so I could stay as ignorant as Hawkins adults while a dark plague sneaks up on their small town). After previewing the first two episodes this weekend, there's at least one specific that needs to be shared right now: any fears of a stale sequel can be put to bed. It's a strange new world in Hawkins.

- Dustin's friends welcome him home.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Chief Jim Hopper just wants everyone to be safe.
  YouTube/Netflix
- We are here for Steve (Joe Kerry) bonding with Dustin.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Nancy (Natalia Dyer) and Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) are troublemakers. In a good way.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Mayor Kline (Cary Elwes) is proud of the new supermall he's brought to Hawkins.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Eleven and Max glam it up.
  YouTube/Netflix
- A supernatural harbinger.
  YouTube/Netflix

Hawkins: The teen years

First and foremost, Will Byers (played by Noah Schnapp) may soon relinquish his place within TV's "most tortured character" pantheon (have fun leading the way, *Chernobyl-Mad Men-The Terror's* Jared Harris and everyone on *The Handmaid's Tale)*. As trailers have indicated, Will finally seems to avoid the attention of the supernatural (at least initially) as the Upside Down powers-that-be ponder grander ambitions. It can feel like a small thing, but such a tweak could lead to drastic change in terms of scale. Compared to the relatively small tasks at hand in S1 and S2 ("Save Will; have Eleven close the portal"), new targets could mean more danger, which could provide a problem (or problems) a handful of kids genuinely can't solve alone.

Schnapp, however, doesn't necessarily get a whole new range of character to play with in S3. Without getting into spoiler territory about the plot, Will assumes the role of "teen boy who isn't ready to move forward into teen stuff" among the group, and constant cries of "Can we just play D&D now?" may feel a bit one-note over time. Early on, Eleven (Millie Bobbie Brown) also seems a bit stilted by her character's past, as her attempts to live teen girl life (mall time, disputes with parents, etc.) can be hampered by the fact she's still very much learning the English language after a childhood spent in the lab. But past season favorite pairings like Hopper (David Harbour) and Joyce (Winona Ryder) or Steve (Joe Keery) and Dustin (Gaten Matazarro) still delight, and previously underutilized folks like the Wheeler parents (led by Cara Buono) or singularly-jerky brother Billy (Dacre Montgomery) have more to do.

Beyond any singular character, *Stranger Things* regains a bit of its edge, that twinge of darkness ultimately putting it in TV-14 territory per Netflix ratings. Through two seasons, I'd argue the scariest sequence the show ever aired remains the

opening from S1E1, when an unknown entity picked off anonymous lab employees in a dimly lit corridor. Within the first two episodes of S3, *Stranger Things* offers bits of action that'll cause many to recoil.

This probably stems from a natural evolution: the cast has aged (on screen and off), and the show needs to keep up. On the lighter end, this means more nods to Good Ol' Fashioned Suburban Youth™ (hanging at the mall, neighborhood pool time, fumbling through teen romantic relationships, puberty). On the darker end, it means more real-world truths seep into idyllic Hawkins like Demogorgons have previously. It's not just schoolyard bullying this time. S3 incorporates themes like sexism, small town America's economic decline, and teen rebellion.

- From left to right in 2016: Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), and Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo).
  Anna Armatis / Netflix
- Bloodied but unbowed for S3.
  YouTube/Netflix

Luckily, just because the show appears to be growing up doesn't mean all the youthful fun has been abandoned. Our heroes hang at the mall, ham radios are deployed, and Jim Croce blares. S U R V I V E's Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein maintain the series signature sound while creating a few earworm-y variations on old themes. And the show's knack for visual sequences (shown off in things like Eleven's pseudo-Western showdown with Mike's bullies in S1) appears intact; growing into Netflix's perhaps most important / popular series may have increased the VFX budget, too.

Perhaps best of all, *Stranger Things* seems a little more kinetic this go-round. Yes, the first episode includes some necessary table setting just like its S1 and S2 predecessors,

but S3’s happenings get put into motion *fast.* A slightly condensed episode count overall (back down to eight episodes after nine in S2) hints at the action around Hawkins coming fast and furious this time.

Based off the strength of *Stranger Things* early season, all the tie-in novels and real-life carnival takeovers feel warranted. The most fun show of 2017 is a threat to do the same in 2019. Our heroes likely have some growing pains ahead, but this series has matured smoothly.

Editor’s Note: Look for full reviews of Stranger Things 3 on Ars over the next few weeks.

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