Tales from the Loop review: small-town America goes sci-fi

Tales from the Loop is so pretty it breaks your heart. Based on the work of Swedish artist Simon Stålenhag, famous for his scenes of pastoral tranquility draped around uncanny sci-fi sights, Amazon's newest drama is a collection of eight short stories where everyday rural life is tinged with the supernatural. But unlike, say, *Stranger Things*, where the otherworldly takes center stage, *Tales from the Loop* uses it as an excuse to dig deeper into the people who must continue to live mundane lives, even as the extraordinary looms just inches away.

While *Tales from the Loop* features a recurring cast of characters and overlapping plots, each episode functions as a standalone short story. Since critics were sent three out-of-order episodes for review, it's safe to assume that continuity isn't really a concern for the show; just consider it *The Twilight Zone* with every episode set in the same town.

And what a town it is! The series takes place in a fictional Ohio neighborhood built above The Loop, a machine built to "explore the mysteries of the universe." The Loop is massive, and, while it employs most of the residents who live above it, few know the full extent of what goes on within its confines. All they know is that the work done there has changed the texture of their lives. Some of these changes are overt and intentional, like advances in technology that make robotic limbs, hovering tractors, and walking mechs commonplace.

Other phenomena are less intentional: strange, inexplicable sightings; objects that appear out of thin air; fluctuations in space and time. In the ecosystem of this small Midwestern

town, The Loop is an invasive exotic, reshaping the balance of life and nature around it. And everyone there has to just roll with it because they have no choice. Besides, sometimes The Loop has its benefits.



Photo: Amazon Studios

In the episodes provided in advance, a girl's mother disappears and leaves behind a strange artifact in "Loop," a boy hears voices coming from a strange globe in "Echo Sphere," and in "Parallel," a man stumbles into another universe. What follows each is a tender drama that feels like a play, each devoted mostly to loneliness.

Each character, at least in the episodes screened, yearns for connection. While "Loop" is set in motion by a disappearance, it's really about distance, as the girl's search for her missing parent serves as a window into how they became strangers to each other. "Parallel" shows a man meeting himself in another universe, but it chooses character drama over genre thrills as the two versions of the same man attempt to befriend one another. Over and over, *Tales from the Loop* gestures at some inarticulate sadness and shows its characters trying to work through it.

It's not that big of a stretch from Stålenhag's art, which is overwhelmingly melancholic in the way it juxtaposes the mundane and the fantastic. Transposed from its original Swedish context to an American one, that sorrow takes on new wrinkles. The Loop puts boundless potential literally within

arm’s length of small-town Ohio, and yet, its denizens lead more or less the same lives they’d live without it. People still work in what seem like dead-end jobs, they have trouble tilling their fields, they don’t see their families enough. Through the eyes of a set of acclaimed directors — Ti West, Charlie McDowell, So Yong Kim, and Mark Romanek each helm an episode — every moment feels delicate and human, and despair never overwhelms wonder.

Tales from the Loop is an understated work in a time when more muted stories are easily swallowed up in the wealth of available options. It’s worth making the time for, though. These are slow stories about how technology was never going to fix us no matter how promising it seems. We still have to go the slow route and try to fill the void in ourselves by reaching out to others.

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