

The Mandalorian is better the less like Star Wars it gets

If you're looking for some of the wider implications of *The Mandalorian's* first season in the new premiere, now streaming on Disney Plus, you'll probably be disappointed. You're not going to learn anything about the "darksaber" wielded by Moff Gideon (Giancarlo Esposito) or any more about Din Djarin, the eponymous Mandalorian (Pedro Pascal) than you already do. His goal this season is straightforward: bring The Child ("Baby Yoda" to everyone online) to its people. And in order to find The Child's home, Djarin needs to find other Mandalorians.

Which is to say that *The Mandalorian's* second season begins similarly to its first: a masked man comes to town, searching for someone. Instead of his quarry, he finds trouble, which is a huge headache for him but tremendous fun for us. It is, in other words, still a Western with landspeeders instead of horses. And while it has the potential to be a lot more than that, making that shift would be a mistake because *The Mandalorian* is best when it leans away from *Star Wars*.

Even so, Djarin's journey brings him to a familiar place: Tatooine, *Star Wars'* most famous planet. There, Djarin doesn't find another Mandalorian but someone named Cobb Vanth. Vanth is notable for two reasons: first, because he's wearing Boba Fett's armor, and second, because he's played by Timothy Olyphant, a man that seems too handsome for *Star Wars*. I realize that *Star Wars* has also featured Harrison Ford and Oscar Isaac, men that are technically too handsome to exist, but this feels true to me. (Perhaps it's simply because Olyphant smiles so much. This is not a complaint.)

Naturally, our Mandalorian wants answers from Cobb Vanth –

about the armor, not about being handsome – and Vanth is willing to give him some, on the condition that he helps with something called The Great Dragon. The sequence is quite unlike anything I've seen in *Star Wars* before, and it rules.

So yeah, that's essentially the premiere: short on lore and big on dragon hunting. It's a nice clean opening that reminds you what the show is good at – keeping things small – but it's one that also plays with expectations, which is something every show has to contend with at the start of a second season. And *The Mandalorian* has to struggle with it more than most, because *Star Wars* is code for nostalgia.

With the sequel trilogy finished and no new *Star Wars* movies on the map, the show *is Star Wars*. It's the only new filmed property in production. Because of this, the show has to balance the natural desire to go bigger in a second season with a huge fandom's expectations for what a new *Star Wars* should have.

On top of that, it's still the biggest reason to sign up for Disney Plus, which means it has to stay buzzworthy until other shows arrive to share that weight. There are indications that *The Mandalorian* might satisfy all of those desires in the coming weeks, but I'm not sure that would make for a better show. Nothing about the nine episodes that have aired point to it becoming a carefully constructed *Game of Thrones*-esque epic where a lot hinges on the finale – which, to be clear, is a good thing. It's just a show that, right now, seems built to stride into the horizon indefinitely. One day it might fade from view, but that day isn't today.

The tension between *The Mandalorian's* desire to be a Western and the burden of its *Star Wars* pedigree is one of the most interesting things about it – specifically the way it refuses to cater to its family's tropes. The spare dialogue and absence of space dogfights and Jedi are hallmarks of the show and are what make it fun to watch and perennially accessible.

It's one of the few bits of event television that delights in episodic storytelling.

In 2020, this is the most surprising thing about *The Mandalorian*: it's not yet interested in hyping up a spinoff series, in furthering the complex mythology of *Star Wars* with plot twists and supplementary materials. That'll change, and probably soon. But right now, it's just a collection of stories about the time a Mandalorian came to town, and for as long as it is, it will feel strange and new.

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