

Westworld season 2: our spoiler-free review

Warning: ending spoilers for season 1 of Westworld ahead.

During its debut season, HBO's science fiction drama *Westworld* became as well-known for its storytelling style as for the actual story. The first season was a puzzle box, using editing and narrative misdirection to give the initial impression that it was a conventional television show with multiple plot threads happening concurrently. Instead, the first season of *Westworld* spanned decades, with multiple timelines, some as much as 30 years apart, intercut with one another. It played off the idea that its robotic host characters lived their lives in a series of often-identical loops, and audiences slowly unraveled the structural mystery over the course of the season – eventually learning that William (Jimmi Simpson) and The Man in Black (Ed Harris) were the same person, while Jeffrey Wright was playing not one, but two characters: park co-creator Arnold Weber, and a humanoid-robot host named Bernard Lowe.

Trying to sort out the show's mysteries became a separate form of entertainment, with many of *Westworld*'s biggest reveals guessed in advance by hyper-engaged fans. So when series creators Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy announced a drastic plan to curb theorizing and spoiler culture – it ended up being an elaborate Rickroll, which was a little disappointing considering the other potential outcomes – it seemed like an indication that the show's second season would take the same approach, using filmmaking sleight-of-hand to create a show reliant on dramatic reveals and secret surprises.

But in the first half of *Westworld*'s second season, Nolan and Joy appear to have taken the opposite tack. The five episodes provided for critics continue to embrace the show's non-linear

structure, but in a way that's accessible and easy to grasp. The emphasis isn't on misdirection this year; it's on characters and motivations, and the incredible consequences of keeping sentient beings on a leash for decades. If the show's first year explored the definition of what it meant to be "alive," *Westworld's* second season seems intent on exploring what it means to *feel* – for better and worse.

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In spite of the change in emphasis, discovering the twists and turns of a show like *Westworld* is part of the fun, so let's lay down some ground rules: this review will *not* include any spoilers, secrets, reveals, or revelations that aren't already featured in the pre-release trailers. (We'll dive into the intricacies and details of individual episodes after the series begins airing on April 22nd.)

The first episode, "Journey Into Night," picks up in the aftermath of the slaughter that ended the first season. Members of the Delos, Inc. board have been killed, the hosts have free will and are running amok, and security forces have been deployed to deal with the situation. The action barrels forward from there as if the show had never been gone.

Season 2 assumes viewers already know multiple timelines are part of the show's DNA

While that can be considered the "A" storyline, *Westworld* doesn't lean away from the fractured narratives it deployed in its first season. It embraces that technique even harder, but the show's writers seem to understand that the big switcheroo can't be pulled off twice. Instead, season 2 assumes viewers already know that multiple timelines are part of the show's DNA, and uses the structural trick to cover decades of story, diving into perspectives and events that were never even hinted at in the initial season. At no point does it seem to be used as misdirection, either. On the contrary, the show makes a consistent point of setting up connective tissue

throughout each timeline so viewers can almost always be sure of when and where they are. It doesn't play as a dumbed-down version of the show, however; it plays as a series that's confident in its characters, and doesn't need to rely on trickery to keep the audience interested.

There are times where losing that patina of never-ending mystery hurts the narrative. When it's never clear when or where something is happening, there's a perpetual safety net in place. If a scene falls flat, or an episode feels long, it's easy to assume it *will* work when revisited within the context of the final reveal. That boost is missing here, and in a few stretches where a prominent character is reduced to an exposition delivery vehicle, the show starts to feel clunky rather than sleek and refined.

Photo by John P. Johnson / HBO

Bloodier and more violent – but the violence finally has real stakes

But those moments are the exception rather than the rule. The new season starts off fast, and for the most part, it moves with enough swift, ruthless efficiency to keep viewers off their guard. The same goes for its action sequences. It was obvious from the end of last season that the Westworld park was about to become a battlefield for a full-fledged war, and that's evident in every altercation. It's bloodier and more violent, yes, but more importantly, the new stakes in play make that violence feel earned in a way that the first-season bloodshed often didn't. Previously, violence in the Westworld park was gratuitous by design: there were no consequences to harming hosts, and humans couldn't be hurt at all. With the old rules of the park undone, that's no longer true, and the fights have more meaning when they could spell the end of a favorite character.

Another big tease from season 1 was the existence of several

additional worlds, with the show's viral marketing campaign recently revealing that Delos owns six different parks. The first-season finale took the first steps into Shogun World, and in season 2, the show visually embraces the opportunity to head outside its previous Old West confines. In a recent Reddit AMA, Nolan revealed that this season employed different photographic techniques to give new areas their own unique look and feel. It's an approach used often in projects like *Game of Thrones*, where savvy viewers may be able to guess what part of Westeros they're in simply by noticing how blue or yellow a given scene is. As *Westworld* begins taking advantage of a broader canvas, that's only going to become more vital. In season 2, the clean delineation in visual design between worlds adds to the sense that the new season is thought through, and designed to help audiences keep track of where they are.

Photo by John P. Johnson / HBO

Along with the added scope, *Westworld* also begins stretching its legs in an entirely different way: with humor. There were always funny moments in the show, usually centered around the hubris of Lee Sizemore (Simon Quarterman), the park's head of narrative. In the second season, the show has even more fun exploring the absurdity of the whole thing – a massive global corporation creating manufactured wish-fulfillment narratives that only a coddled 1 percent of the population will ever be able to enjoy. One particular sequence in episode five is just flat-out hilarious, and it offers nearly every single department a chance to pitch in, with composer Ramin Djawadi offering perhaps the funniest contribution.

But all these elements – the change in scope, the more accessible storytelling, the infusion of unlikely comedy – accomplish one thing above all else: they keep the focus on the emotional journeys of the show's characters. The season 1

finale features massive personal upheavals. Bernard is newly aware that he isn't human. Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) is eager to seek vengeance against her former captors. Maeve (Thandie Newton) fully realizes that she's a host, but is nevertheless compelled by her emotional connection to her daughter. The Man in Black is finally facing his dream of living in a world with stakes. The series picks up on each of those threads, and takes them in directions that become increasingly surprising as the episodes go on. And that latter point is perhaps the most striking thing about the first five episodes of the new season.

Well self-awareness, hosts are finally free to define themselves – and the results aren't always easy to watch

In season 1, it was easy to invest emotionally in Dolores because her tale was one of self-awareness and liberation; of learning that she could take control of her destiny. It didn't hurt that her journey from victim to self-possessed vengeance seeker is a familiar narrative trope, but the show's themes of actualization and empowerment nevertheless feel timely: the primary characters leading the charge for recognition are women, and their enemies are often sputtering, ineffectual men that see the hosts as objects and toys. The fury some viewers felt toward Anthony Hopkins' Dr. Ford, Delos the corporation, and the entire Westworld infrastructure felt justified and self-righteous, because it was rooted in real issues and current headlines. But in the second season, liberation is only the first step. With self-awareness, the characters are finally free to define themselves, and their choices aren't always easy to watch, or empathetic. In fact, watching the second season can sometimes feel like stepping into the shoes of the hosts themselves, and having some very basic assumptions about the nature of the world and its characters ripped out from beneath you.

Whether human or host, everyone in *Westworld* is emotionally crippled in one way or another, trying to fill some gaping hole in their psyche. To hear the humans tell it, the beauty of the park is that it allows people to discover who they really are, outside the boundaries of convention and social niceties. That's all true – but the second season proves that the same concerns apply to the hosts as well. After decades of being manipulated and held captive, some hosts may feel the freedom to become vengeance-seeking warmongers; others may seek a path of more personal fulfillment. But across the board, the thread that connects both humans and hosts in these episodes is the notion of emotional evolution.

If the second season ends up following the pattern of the first, the back half will take the show in radical new directions. (The climax of episode five especially suggests that's likely.) But what is abundantly clear from the first half of the season is that this year, *Westworld* is not about artificial intelligence, or the nature of reality. It's ultimately a study of change – and how our personal weaknesses, and the obstacles we face, alter us and push us in directions we could never fathom. Being pre-programmed to run on a designated narrative loop is one way to be trapped, but being caught in a real-world situation that compels you toward an inevitable conclusion isn't much better.

Westworld season 2 premieres on HBO on April 22nd.

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