What If…? season 2 doesn't get good until it really lets loose



Even though the most interesting thing about Disney Plus' *What If…?* series is the way it's positioned to showcase the expansiveness of Marvel's multiverse, in its first season, the show felt like it was playing things safe by focusing mainly on a handful of slightly remixed characters and stories we'd already been introduced to on the big screen. To a certain extent, the same goes for *What If…?*'s newly-released second season, whose nine episodes have been dropping daily in the buildup to a December 30th finale. But about halfway through, *What If…?* season two really starts knocking it out of the park by putting the spotlight on a new Indigenous character and her fight against settler colonialism.

With most of Marvel's movies and shows now focusing on how the multiverse is falling apart, it seemed a little passé to see the first few episodes of *What If…?* season two pondering questions like "what if Nebula (Karen Gillan) joined the Nova

Corps” and “what if Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau) saved Christmas by becoming a Hulk?” Pitting a teenaged Peter Quill (Mace Montgomery Miskel) against a team of Avengers from the ’80s made for some clever action sequences, as did Iron Man’s (Mick Wingert) encounter with the Grandmaster (Jeff Goldblum) on Sakaar. Those episodes were action-packed, but each of them felt like the kind of story that might have packed more of a narrative punch back when Tony Stark or the original Thanos (Josh Brolin) were still alive.

In those first few episodes, *What If…?* also feels stuck in the MCU’s past, like it’s trying to save all of the fascinating multiversal experimentation for Marvel’s live-action projects. But that all starts to change once Captain Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) shows up and one of the Infinity Stones finds a new home in pre-colonial North America.

a:hover]:text-gray-63 [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63 dark:[&>a]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray”>Marvel Studios / Disney Plus
Despite *What If…?* being an anthology series and the Watcher (Jeffrey Wright) insisting that he isn’t a fan of sequels, season two does eventually shift its focus back to a couple of figures from season one, like Captain Carter and a warped version of Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) in ways that cement the show as being more than just a vehicle to rehash old MCU stories.

Though Captain Carter’s jump to the big screen in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* was an early sign of how much Marvel Studios’ animated and live-action projects could intersect with one another, her death in the film made it seem like Atwell’s cameo might have been a one-time stunt meant to get people into theaters. The episode “What If… Captain Carter Fought the Hydra Stomper?” doesn’t bring *Multiverse of Madness*’ Captain Carter back to life. But it does reinforce

the idea that she – a version of Peggy Carter who becomes a super soldier instead of Steve Rogers (Josh Keaton) – is a character Marvel wants to exist as a big part of the MCU's brand identity.

"What If… Captain Carter Fought the Hydra Stomper?" borrows beats from films like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Black Widow* as it pairs Captain Carter and a Black Widow (Lake Bell) variant together to take on the Red Room's deadliest brainwashed assassin. Rather than the Winter Soldier, it's a long-lost, brainwashed Steve Rogers piloting the Hydra Stomper armor sent on covert missions by the Red Room to eliminate targets like Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan). Though Peggy's more than capable of going toe-to-toe with Steve in battle, the episode makes clear that their love keeps them from wanting to outright kill each other and that there is more to these variants' stories to be explored

But just when it seems like *What If…?* has found a new chapter of Captain Carter's life worth taking more time to dig into, the series shifts gears by plucking her out of the "Hydra Stomper" reality and turning its focus to one of this season's more inspired new faces.

a:hover]:text-gray-63 [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63 dark:[&>a]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray">Marvel Studios / Disney Plus
Similar to the way that *What If…?*'s very first episode immediately got to the business of reframing Peggy Carter as *the* hero and face of her story (rather than a heroic, supporting love interest), "What If… Kahhori Reshaped the World?" establishes a young Mohawk woman named Kahhori (Devery Jacobs) as one of the most powerful people in any reality.

After the Tesseract crash-lands in pre-colonial America and transforms an ordinary lake into a kind of portal that's seen

by locals as cursed, Kahhori is one of the few people in her village brave and curious enough to wander near the glowing water. When Spanish Conquistadors searching for the Fountain of Youth arrive with guns and plans to raze the Earth until they find the famed wonder, Kahhori and her brother Wahta (Kiawentiio) are forced to run for their lives, with the chase culminating in Kahhori being shot and falling into the lake.

Most of *What If…?*'s episodes have blended major elements from one or two of Marvel's older projects into something that only wound up feeling slightly different. But the way "What If… Kahhori Reshaped the World?" reworks threads from *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and *Thor: Ragnarok* and turns them into something that feels genuinely distinct is impressive. "What If… Kahhori Reshaped the World?" — whose Indigenous characters speak almost entirely in the Mohawk language — frames Western colonialism as a kind of Ragnarok for Kahhori's people.

The episode highlights how Spain's conquest of North America was underpinned by a racist belief in the inherent inferiority of Indigenous people and how poisoned that ideology is. But Kahhori's origin story is also a celebration of Iroquois culture, and it's very explicit about how justified Indigenous peoples' violent resistance to settler colonialism in all of its forms is. A number of Marvel's movies have touched on similar ideas in the past. But even in the wake of the *Black Panther* films, it's still somewhat surprising to see a Disney-branded narrative be so direct in its condemnation of Western colonialism given how studio head Bob Iger has recently indicated his desire to shift away from "messaging"-focused projects.

a:hover]:text-gray-63 [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63 dark:[&>a]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray">Marvel Studios / Disney Plus

But the most promising thing about Kahhori's debut is how she, like Captain Carter, seems poised to become something of a fixture within the MCU, at least over on the Disney Plus side of things.

The way that "What If… Kahhori Reshaped the World?" specifically features some of *What If…?*'s more inspired set pieces and ends with her leaving her home reality with Doctor Strange are interesting in and of themselves. But what's most intriguing about *What If…?* at this point is how it seems to be using each season to cultivate central characters well-positioned to exist in the new multiverse that shows like *Loki* have been building to. It has been hard to suss out how Marvel plans to keep MCU feeling fresh, exciting, and cohesive after that's defined its pivot to multiversal storytelling, but in characters like Captain Carter and Kahhori, you can see part of a path forward.

With only three episodes left, there's only so much more screen time Kahhori's going to get in *What If…?* this season. But with her now on the playing board, and there being more than a few surprising guest stars coming back to reprise big roles, *What If…?*'s season two finale feels like it might be something special and worth keeping an eye on as it draws closer.

https://www.theverge.com/24015321/marvel-what-if-season-2-kahhori-captain-carter