

Squid Game 3: Ending not with a bang, but a bleak (and lucrative) whimper

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The South Korean survival drama *Squid Game*, created, directed and written by Hwang Dong-hyuk, returned to Netflix for its third and, ostensibly, final installment this past summer.

What began in the first season at least in part as a “depiction of desperate individuals put in desperate situations, the consequences of a society riven by social inequality” ended, sadly, in a display of bleakness that expressed more than anything else the creators’ own confusion and lack of perspective.

As a result, *Squid Game* ended somewhat ingloriously as an invaluable financial asset for Netflix and not that much more. The giant media firm benefited from another round of cross-promotional campaigns in video games and merchandise, alongside a recent nomination for Outstanding Stunt Ensemble in a Television Series at the 32nd Annual Screen Actors Guild Awards and generally uncritical acclaim.

The third season continued to garner attention and viewership. In its first week, *Squid Game 3* became Netflix’s most-streamed series in its non-English language category, a position it maintained for over a month, accruing well over 130 million views. Additionally, the continued hype and success of the series as a whole, with its undeniably “eye-catching” setting and format, have further cemented the first and second seasons’ positions as the first and second most-watched non-English seasons of a show on Netflix.

As we stated in our review of *Squid Game 2*:

In 2021, *Squid Game*’s international success caught Netflix off guard, leaving it scrambling to capitalize on its newfound cash cow. Since then, the streaming giant has worked overtime producing merchandise and so forth.

Unfortunately, the series that gained international attention for its cutting portrayal of the capitalist system as a rigged game show employing violence and social manipulation to prey upon the poor has been, to a considerable extent, remolded into its opposite.

Gone are the depictions of exploited immigrant workers and

the brutal suppression of striking autoworkers, now replaced with the various one-dimensional character tropes associated with upper-middle-class cult leaders, drug-addicted pop stars and crypto scammers who dominate much of the cast from the second season onward. The juvenile nature of the deadly “games” and the show’s cotton-candy color scheme, while coming across as a sardonic jab at capitalism’s mantra of meritocracy and entrepreneurship in the first season, ended little more than a recognizable fad reproduced in profitable merchandise. To a certain extent, frankly, the makers of the series exhausted their reserves of understanding and were left by the end of the third season without a great deal to say, at least of an insightful or helpful character.

In the first season, the voluntary nature of the Squid Games, the players’ ability to vote after each game and decide “democratically” whether to end or continue the murderous competition, appears to be a confused attempt to portray the conditions of capitalism as so hopelessly harsh that the majority of workers would voluntarily return to deadly games.

This sort of view can be developed in one of two directions: as a criticism of a system that offers no political and social alternatives to its people, i.e., a criticism of the conditions of capitalist life—or as a reproach of the population itself, a disparagement that ends up with, “Well, they more or less deserve what they get!” The increasingly prosperous makers of *Squid Game* would not be the first radical commentators who ended up adopting such a self-serving stance.

This cynical view of humanity and the working class in particular takes on a much sharper form in the second and third seasons. Turning away from the picture of the existing social order as a violent system whose leaders take pleasure in the demise of those it exploits, *Squid Game 2* and *3* imply or assert that the profit system emerges from innate human greed.

During a bizarre sequence in the second season’s premier episode, the game recruiter, responsible for luring contestants to the games, offers a group of homeless men and women in a public park the choice between a bun to eat or a scratch-off lottery ticket. Almost unanimously, the starving homeless group chooses to take the lottery ticket.

Opening with the bloody aftermath of Seong Gi-hun’s (Lee Jung-jae) failed revolt against the Squid Game’s armed

overseers, *Squid Game 3* is drenched in fatigue and aimlessness. As with season two, *Squid Game 3* follows three plot lines. Within the games, Gi-hun and other contestants face escalating odds as the Game's billionaire VIPs arrive. Behind the scenes, Kang No-eul (Park Gyu-young), one of the Game's gun-clad guards and a North Korean defector, conspires to save Player 246, Park Gyeong-seok (Lee Jin-wook), by any means necessary. Meanwhile, Gi-hun's allies are working outside the Game to find his location, but find themselves ensnared in a deadly ruse orchestrated by one of the Squid Game's goons.

Despite being the shortest installment, with only six episodes, the third season feels dragged out, with most of its run-time devoted to killing off the expansive cast. It's worth mentioning some of the more notable examples to give a picture of the rapid and tasteless slaughter.

Cho Hyun-Ju (Park Sung-hoon), a transgender woman and former South Korean special forces member, dies suddenly during a deadly game of hide-and-seek; Jang Geum-ja (Kang Ae-shim), the elderly mother of Yong-sik (Yang Dong-geun), kills her son to save Se-mi (Won Ji-an) and then herself after providing her final words of wisdom to Gi-hun, urging him not to give up after his failed rebellion.

Se-mi, having given birth during the games, kills herself after passing the fate of her child onto Gi-hun, with her child becoming her replacement in the games. Lee Myun-gi (Yim Si-wan), the father of Se-mi's child and her estranged lover, develops into a despondent sociopath willing to sacrifice his newborn child during the final game to acquire the ₩45.6 billion (\$31.8 million USD) prize. Gi-hun, after killing Myun-gi, sacrifices himself, leaving Se-mi's child the winner of the Squid Games.

And what was the outcome of all this carnage and a failed attempt to overthrow the games?

A young baby survives with a fortune, and though the Squid Games' base of operations is destroyed, the obnoxiously rich VIP viewers of the games and the game overseers escape unscathed. An international counterpart to the Squid Games based in the United States is even teased, opening the door for a lucrative sequel series.

A *Variety* review of *Squid Game 3* summed up the series' retrograde conclusions, although approvingly:

The world is cruel, unfair and full of horrors, many of which will grow increasingly grotesque in our lifetimes. ... Yet, even amid this dark and twisted final scene, creator Hwang has offered a path forward. Individually, we don't have the power to fix everything. Yet, if we do our part in changing and affecting one thing, just like Gi-hun, Jun-ho and No-eul, it will add up to so much more.

The combination of nihilism and unconvincing hints at bright spots in the darkness is thoroughly inadequate for making sense of today's convulsive realities.

Lead actor Lee Jung-jae advanced something similar in an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*:

What I hoped the audience would feel through watching Gi-hun—a character driven truly to rock bottom and the most intense darkness—is how he still struggles to find hope and to live a meaningful life. What I hope people take away is that we all get hurt and betrayed by others, which can lead to hatred, but we still have to carry on and live together in society. We have to try to understand each other, to keep our dignity and work towards harmony. If we can do that—work together with others, no matter what we've been through—we may see a future with less division and conflict. That's where hope lies.

The performers and creators are no doubt perfectly sincere in their beliefs, but this is little more than warmed-over liberalism, with large doses of wishful thinking. These problems of artistic and social perspective aren't solely Hwang's or Lee's, but reflect objective difficulties among artists, in South Korea and elsewhere, even among those who are beginning to set their sights critically on the world around them.

The reemergence of mass working-class struggle internationally and the fever pitch of the capitalist crisis will do much of the heavy lifting in sharpening the artistic focus of a new generation of creatives.



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