

The thesis of *Squid Game 2*: Capitalism is a hell of our own making

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Following three years of media hype, Netflix's international streaming sensation, *Squid Game*, created by South Korean filmmaker Hwang Dong-hyuk, returned with its second season [*Squid Game 2*] in December. Within 11 days, *Squid Game 2* reached 126.2 million views, setting the record for the fastest-growing viewer count in Netflix's history and positioning it as the third most-watched series on the platform.

Writer-director Hwang filmed *Squid Game 2* concurrently with the series' third and final season, set to release in 2025.

Squid Game 2 opens with our main character and winner of the first season's games, Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), foregoing a comfortable life and the reunion with his estranged wife and child in order to try and end the games. Utilizing the 45.6 billion won [\$US 32 million] rewarded to him for surviving the first round of games, Gi-hun sets out over the next two years to build a personal militia capable of confronting the game and its operators.

Following a botched attempt to eliminate the game's masked frontman, which Gi-hun believed would somehow end the brutal survival contest, Gi-hun re-enters the deadly arena to destroy the games from within. From there, the games commence once more, now with twice the gore, backstabbing and tension as the last round.

Squid Game is not by any means the originator of the "survival drama" genre, which the WSWs previously examined. Unlike many of its predecessors, however, the series attempts to some degree to provide social and psychological depth to its characters and their relationship to the larger social picture.

As the WSWs explained in its review of the first season, among the many factors that contributed to its international success,

the central one is clear—its [*Squid Game*'s] depiction of desperate individuals put in desperate situations, the consequences of a society riven by social inequality, the greed and criminality of the rich, and associated themes.

As far as the incoming contestants are aware, they are merely

going to be playing innocent pastimes from childhood (traditional Korean *ddakji*, top spinning, red light-green light, etc.) in hope of winning the billions of South Korean won.

In reality, in the course of six thoroughly deadly versions of the various "games," 456 increasingly desperate contestants compete for their survival and provide amusement for the games' billionaire overseers. The value of each contestant's life is 100,000,000 won (\$68,610). When contestants lose a particular game, masked game employees kill them on the spot. The monetary value of their lives is then added to the pool of cash available for the remaining contestants, collected in a giant, transparent piggy bank hanging overhead.

This valuation of human life speaks strongly to capitalist reality, where workers are treated as replaceable components. Take the case of Steven Dierkes, who was just nine days into his new job at Caterpillar on June 2, 2022, when he fell into a vat of molten iron, incinerating him instantly. In that case, the cost of a worker's life for the global heavy equipment maker was a mere \$145,027, less than .003 percent of the company's \$4.5 billion operating profit in 2021.

Even while the first season of *Squid Game* was steering in a generally positive direction, as part of a wave of films and shows responding to a society rife with social decay and inequality, it suffered from numerous limitations and weaknesses. In our review of the first season, we explained its penchant for violence was

both a concession to the bloody mayhem pervading current global filmmaking and an indication of a demoralized view of humanity. It also serves as a distraction from genuine dramatic lapses and failings.

Squid Game 2, for these same reasons, relies even more heavily on brutal violence and mayhem.

The new cast of competitors and game operators provides something of an expansion in relation to the prior season. There's former social media personality and cryptocurrency investor Myun-gi (Yim Si-wan), the washed-up, erratic, drug-fueled rapper Thanos (played by real-life K-pop artist, Choi

Seung-Hyun), the shaman Seon Nyeo (Chang Kook-hee) and a host of former military operatives.

But the progress and “opening up” of the series prove largely illusory. Whereas the first season’s cast featured personalities whose quandaries served to reveal the realities of capitalist society—like Abdul Ali (played by Anupam Tripathi), an industrial worker from Pakistan compelled to join the games after his employer steals his wages, and Gi-hun himself, a laid-off autoworker and survivor of a brutal police raid on his striking plant—season two’s cast, from that point of view, comes across as largely underdeveloped.

There are intriguing performances and the beginnings of promising narratives, such as Jun-hee, a young woman compelled to enter the games after Myun-gi, her former partner, abandoned her, leaving her in debt and pregnant with his child. Hyun-Ju, a former special forces soldier and transgender woman, gives an honest portrayal of some of the social and financial hurdles someone in sexual transition would confront in East Asia.

Unfortunately, these flowers largely die on the vine, with most characters serving an obvious plot purpose before, more often than not, meeting an untimely end. With bloodshed taking center stage in *Squid Game 2*, most of the deaths seem pointless and the individual dramas vacuous.

One of the most glaring problems built into *Squid Game*’s first season is the “voluntary” nature of the contest. In that season, following the first round, which results in the brutal deaths of hundreds, the participants vote to end the games—only for most of them to return later of their own accord. The second season pushes this absurdity even further, amending the rules to allow contestants to take the current prize pool if they vote to leave.

In its first episode, *Squid Game 2* reveals the thinking behind these plot developments in the starkest fashion. In a bizarre sequence, 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.

Following this offer, the recruiter berates the crowd of homeless, stomping the buns underfoot while claiming they made a choice and willingly chose to gamble.

As we wrote previously:

This is a fable, not a naturalistic work, but still some accordance with psychological and social reality is called for. To suggest that men and women, even those financially stressed, would willingly submit to having their fellow creatures massacred is something of a libel against mankind, and provides a glimpse of the misanthropic *Lord of the Flies* strand in the filmmakers’ thinking.

In season two, this “strand” becomes a central thesis.

When confronting the game frontman, for example, Gi-hun challenges the assertion that the game contestants *chose* to risk their lives for a minuscule chance to escape poverty, arguing the game took advantage of their misfortune and manipulated them into playing. In response, the frontman insists that only a change in society, which currently produces the endless “human trash” supplying the games with willing contestants, can end the games.

However, it would seem by “society” *Squid Game* refers to humanity in general and “our” supposedly innate tendency toward greed. The games, so to speak, are only what the population deserves (and perhaps secretly desires). A *truly* radical and oppositional perspective, which would aim at the dismantling of the entire set-up, is nowhere to be found here.

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. For the second season, Netflix released a free-to-play online multiplayer game, *Squid Game: Unleashed*. Puma has released a series of shoes, shirts and tracksuits themed around the series, while McDonald’s Australia created a *Squid Game*-themed happy meal for children.

In 2023, Netflix released a British live-action game show, *Squid Game: The Challenge*, with a prize of \$4.56 million.

It would be too simple to argue that the *Squid Game*’s financial success is the sole engine driving the failure of the second season. Many of *Squid Game 2*’s misanthropic tendencies were “pre-existing” in the first season. But, as noted, these now have largely taken over. Ideological shortcomings, lack of perspective, skepticism, along with the series’ massive success and commercialization, allowed *Squid Game*’s weaknesses to expand and widen, assigning it the fate of a house built on a cracked foundation.



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