

By Ed Power | February 21, 2022

# Netflix invented the ‘binge watch’ – now it must die

Netflix is making us wait for more Stranger Things, Ozark and Better Call Saul. If only the BBC would follow suit...



Forward looking: a scene from Stranger Things, season three. Netflix

The fourth season of Stranger Things is to be a blockbuster of two halves. The much anticipated, pandemic-waylaid Stranger Things 4 will arrive as a dastardly double whammy, with Volume One debuting May 27 and Volume 2 arriving an eternity (that is, five weeks) later on July 1, Netflix has announced.

According to the show’s sibling creators, Matt and Ross Duffer, the split is to accommodate

the unprecedented running time of the new episodes, which clock in at “almost twice the length of any previous season”. In other words, the supernatural adventures of Millie Bobby Brown’s Eleven really do go up to 11 this time.

But, while sprawling run times may indeed be a factor, it’s hard not to interpret the announcement as anything other than as a body blow against the cult of the binge-watch. Netflix pioneered the “watch in one go” method of viewing when it dropped the first season of House of Cards all at once in February 2013. And now, almost a decade later, it has arguably sounded the retreat by dividing its biggest franchise down the middle. The final season of [Ozark](#) has also been split into two manageable chunks, and the same approach is being taken to the ending of Better Call Saul. When even Netflix is stepping back from the bingeing brink, does the “b” word have a future?

Television creatives have long loathed bingeing, which they feel reduces audiences’ engagement with their work – a cruel disservice to shows typically years in the making. Viewers will guzzle an entire season in a single weekend and then forget it and move on to the next shiny bauble. In other words, bingeing kills buzz.

The latest prominent voice to take a stand against bingeing is Marvellous Mrs. Maisel creator Amy Sherman-Palladino who convinced Amazon Prime to stagger the rollout of the [period dramedy’s fourth season](#). “Our show is dense. There’s a lot of s\_\_\_ going on. And attention must be paid. We’re really happy that they are doing this,” she said.

Succession on HBO (and Sky Atlantic) was, she continued, the perfect example of TV that used a traditional weekly release schedule to gain a foothold in the cultural conversation. Would we have been so shocked by Tom’s 11th hour betrayal of Shiv had the entire third season been unleashed at once? Of course not. It was the slow-burn that made Succession unmissable.

“We had been talking to [Amazon] about it,” continued Sherman-Palladino. “There was a time

many years ago where people thought the weekly rollout thing was over because everyone wants to watch them all at once. But then shows like *Succession* are getting even bigger, with the conversation growing from week-to-week.”

The emerging consensus is that bingeing is bad if you want people talking, tweeting and writing about your hot new drama. “You spend all year making a show and it gets into the public consciousness for a week and then disappears,” commented James SA Corey, the pen name of sci-fi writing duo Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, whose novels have been adapted by Amazon into *The Expanse* – and released week-by-week.



One off? *Squid Game* was released all at once, and was a massive hit. Noh Juhan

Netflix might counter by pointing to [the success of \*Squid Game\*](#), which arrived all at once last September but nonetheless became a phenomenon, driven by word of mouth and, even more so, by word of TikTok. Of course, the case can be made that *Squid Game* was a fluke – a torture-horror one-off with few lessons applicable to the wider industry.

Certainly, a strange thing has happened on the way to Stranger Things series four. Having held out against staggered releases, Netflix has started to quietly pivot. One of the streamer's biggest hits last year, the steampunk animation Arcane, came out in three three-installment chunks, arriving a week apart in November. And if nowhere near as sensational as Squid Game, it was still massively popular. And clearly benefited from the sort of slow-building buzz that rarely happens with bingeing.

The data back up the theory that bingeing may have had its day and is falling from favour with subscribers. Of the 50 most popular TV shows released in the US last year, 62 per cent were on a weekly schedule according to Parrot Analytics, a research firm that evaluates viewer "demand" by measuring torrenting and social engagement. That represents a 30 per cent increase on 2020.



Hero or villain? WandaVision's weekly release format kept viewers guessing. Disney+

Nor can it be a coincidence that this backlash against bingeing comes amidst an alarming slowing in the rate at which Netflix is acquiring new subscribers. It missed its subscribers target

in the final quarter of 2021, adding just 8.3 million new viewers rather than the projected 8.5 million. And its growth rate for 2022 is already significantly behind the 2021 equivalent.

The benefits of weekly scheduling have already been recognised by Netflix’s mortal foe, Disney +. From the Mandalorian to WandaVision, all of its major tent-poles have built their audience episode by episode. In the case of WandaVision, the central mystery – was Wanda hero or villain? – benefited hugely from the slow boil. It gave viewers space to share theories and conspiracies – to create, in their heads, a show potentially more exciting than the one Disney had put on screen.

“There’s something fun to be able to follow along, to try to guess what happens next, to have a week speculating or re-watching and building that anticipation,” acknowledged Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios (which is owned by Disney).



Too much of a good thing: Ben Whishaw in BBC’s *This is Going to Hurt*. Anika Molnar

But if the message has finally reached the ears of Netflix executives ahead of *Stranger Things*, it is a lesson seemingly yet to resonate at the BBC. With many of its big new dramas continuing to arrive all at once on the iPlayer, the corporation is keeping faith with bingeing – despite the building evidence that the model actually hampers a programme’s appeal.

Take its new medical dark comedy, [This Is Going To Hurt](#). Bleak, scabrously funny and without much of a plot, here is TV that demands to be sampled in small doses. It’s grotesque to imagine sitting through the entire seven hours at once.

The gallows humour and spurting jugulars would quickly congeal into a soggy, unwatchable mess: you’d end up with the same thousand yard stare sported by Ben Whishaw’s overworked junior doctor, Adam. Here, if ever, is a show that would benefit from a weekly release. And with Netflix now leading the great retreat from bingeing, how long before the BBC follows suit?