

# Analyzing Science Fiction Plot and Setting in *Stranger Things* Season 1

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## ABSTRACT

This study utilizes Joyce G. Sarick's theory to examine the plot and setting of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* season 1. The objective of this study is to identify the science fiction genre element in the Netflix series *Stranger Things* season 1. The analysis employs a qualitative methods, with primary data sourced from the Netflix series *Stranger Things* season 1, which was aired on Netflix in 2016. The researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection and categorization, while secondary data is derived from *Stranger Things* season 1 episodes. This analysis demonstrates that the plot and setting of *Stranger Things* Season 1 on Netflix align with the criteria associated with the science fiction genre. The incorporation of key science fiction elements in the series constitutes a pivotal aspect of its storytelling structure.

## I. Introduction

Literature is understood as the work of an art form that combines expression and creation [1]. One of the works of art that was created to be enjoyed by a large audience is a movie [2]. Film is one of the works of popular culture where it became part of popular literature. Basically, movies have similarities with literature. "Film and literature inspire and enrich each others. They also ennoble human mind through action, images, words and replicating life of human beings [3]". However, the movie format is not just a moving picture. Movies also have narrative elements that are the components that form the story. Setting in a movie can be divided into neutral settings like setting of place, time, and environment, and can construct the plot into various types like exposition, complication, climax, and resolution [4].

Genre plays an important role in the description, navigation, and discovery of movies, but it is rarely studied at large scale using quantitative methods[5]. Genre had a lengthy pedigree in literary criticism long before the advent of the cinema. The literature abounds with references to the western, the gangster movie, or the horror film, all of which are loosely thought of as genres [6]. In the present era, the genre of science fiction as one of the popular culture is regarded by critics as a significant and influential form of contemporary literature.

This research is situated within a broader field of study, with several previous studies having been conducted in this area. This research is part of an expanded field of study, with several previous studies having been conducted in this area. Firstly, Sobchack's (2004) seminal work, "Screening Space: American Science Fiction Films" examines the formation of meaning in science fiction films using visual and narrative elements [7]. The results of his study demonstrate that science fiction films employ specific conventions, including futuristic settings, technological themes, and speculative scenarios. These elements are utilized to generate diverse narrative experiences. This study establishes a theoretical framework to comprehend how science fiction functions as a genre across diverse media formats.

Secondly, the research by [8] entitled "Genre Theory and *Stranger Things*: Breaking Boundaries, Nostalgia, and Pop Culture Influences" published in *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film and Visual*

Narration. This analysis explores the manner in which *Stranger Things* integrates conventions characteristic of the horror genre with 1980s rural nostalgia, with an emphasis on physical monsters and demonic villains as foundational elements of the horror tradition. As demonstrated by the present study, the series under consideration disrupts conventional genre distinctions by integrating numerous components within the context of a nostalgic environment. Notwithstanding the extensive coverage of horror and nostalgic aspects in this research, a comprehensive analysis of the science fiction elements central to the series' narrative structure remains lacking. The present study does not examine the function of science fiction conventions within the development of Season 1's plot and the construction of its setting. Furthermore, it does not employ Saricks' readers' advisory approach.

Another research by Mutiara Fauzatul Azizah (2021), from UIN Sunan Gunung Djati, conducted an analysis of a thesis entitled "Science fiction in Marvel's The Amazing Spiderman comics #521, #522, #523." [9] This research project deals with a detailed examination of the characteristics of science fiction, plot, and setting, with the aim of determining their suitability to the genre. In order to achieve this goal, this research utilizes a qualitative descriptive method. Similarities between this research project and the subsequent analysis to be conducted by the researcher include the identification of science fiction settings, research methods and Sarick's theories.

This study will analyze television series Netflix belonging to the science fiction genre. Netflix is a global streaming platform for the production and distribution of media content which it belongs to the "new" media industry created on the basis of the development of digital technology [10]. The existence of Netflix as a streaming media makes it easier for science fiction fans to access science fiction movies or television series.

As is the case with other forms of literature, popular literature is divided into distinct genres. This classification is based on the characteristics inherent to the literary work. To examine and investigate genres within the context of popular literature, researchers will employ the theoretical framework proposed by Joyce G. Saricks. In his book, Saricks categorises this genre into four distinct sections [11]. The first is the adrenaline genre, which encompasses adventure, romantic suspense, suspense, thriller. The second category is that of the emotional genre, which encompasses a variety of literary forms, including works of a sentimental or emotional nature, horror fiction, romantic narratives, and literature pertaining to the experiences of women. The third category is that of the landscape, which encompasses fantasy, historical fiction, and westerns. The fourth category is that of the intellectual genre, which encompasses fiction, mystery, psychological suspense, and science fiction.

*Stranger Things* is a Netflix series that focuses on wonder, excitement, and imaginative play in a world where the suburban home and the intense bonds of preteen friendship offer physical and emotional security against encroaching darkness [12]. The first season of *Stranger Things* was selected as the primary subject of this study due to several compelling factors that render it an exemplary case study for the analysis of science fiction genre. A close examination of *Stranger Things* Season 1 reveals a sophisticated blend of several science fiction subgenres within a single narrative framework. The series seamlessly interweaves elements of supernatural horror, parallel dimension theory, government conspiracy, and teen drama, all underpinned by rigorous scientific concepts such as sensory deprivation experiments, electromagnetic field manipulation, and inter-dimensional physics. This inherent complexity positions the work as a suitable subject for application of Saricks' theoretical framework, as it encompasses components of setting, characterization, pacing, and plot that are amenable to systematic analysis.

Moreover the cultural impact and positive recognition of the series substantiates its significance as a contemporary work of science fiction that merits academic study. The first season of *Stranger Things* has been lauded for its contributions to the revitalization of the science fiction genre on television. The program has effectively engaged younger demographics with conventional science fiction tropes while concurrently maintaining a narrative complexity that resonates with mature audiences. The success of the series demonstrates the continued relevance and evolution of science fiction as a popular culture phenomenon.

## II. Method

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative method for the purpose of analysing and describing the setting and plot of science fiction in the *Stranger Things* season 1. This research utilizes

Joyce G. Saricks's genre theory framework from "*The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*" (2009), which introduces four critical factors in identifying genre fiction: plot, characterization, and frame (i.e., setting and tone) [11]. In the analysis of science fiction, Saricks posits that the genre is distinguished by its propensity to engage in speculation, incorporating futuristic and alternative settings, technological themes, and the exploration of the impact of scientific concepts on both society at large and the individual.

The structure of this study utilizes Saricks' approach as follows: The initial step in the analysis of science fiction literature entails a close examination of the setting, encompassing the elements of place, event, and circumstance that collectively construct the science fiction environment. The subsequent step involves a thorough analysis of the plot structure, with an emphasis on identifying and examining the patterns of story progression, conflict development, and resolution that are characteristic of science fiction narratives. Finally, the analysis extends to the realm of pacing and atmosphere, with the objective being to assess how elements of suspense and mystery contribute to the genre's distinctive atmosphere.

The selection of scenes was determined by three factors: the presence of prominent science fiction elements, such as supernatural phenomena, parallel dimensions, and scientific experiments; key narrative moments that propel the main plot; and scenes that establish or develop the science fiction characteristics of the setting. This analysis entailed the evaluation of each scene based on Saricks' appeal factors, with the objective of assessing genre compliance and effectiveness.

As Denzin and Lincoln said in Creswell & Poth that "qualitative is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world [13]. The concept comprises a series of interpretations and material practices that render the world visible." Through these practices, the world undergoes transformation, becoming constituted as a series of representations. This encompasses a broad array of materials including but not limited to photographs, conversation, field notes, recorded audio, interview and memos written for one's own reference.

Furthermore, qualitative research is predicated on a number of fundamental assumptions, including the notion of world perspectives and the potential use of theoretical lenses. Additionally, it entails the examination of research problems that investigate the meaning ascribed by individuals or groups to social or human problems. Denzin and Lincoln stated that "to study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes [13]."

Qualitative may also be defined as a method of analysis, description, and conclusion regarding a range of potential conditions and circumstances, derived from data obtained from a variety of sources. These may include interviews or observations conducted on the field. The objective is to provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The structural approach also prioritises an analysis of the structural elements of literary works. Consequently, the literary work is regarded as a structural entity, comprising elements that perform crucial functional roles. Teeuw, stated that structural analysis also tries to describe the relationship and function of each element of the literary work as a structural unit that together produces a holistic meaning, this approach focuses on the elements called the intrinsic elements [14].

The methodology employed herein serves as a point of reference for the author in elucidating the research topic. In employing data analysis techniques, this research adheres to descriptive qualitative methods and structural approaches. The data set is derived from original sources and encompasses material from the television series *Stranger Things* Seasons 1. The objective is to examine the plot and setting of science fiction.

### III. Results and Discussion

In this study, the author employs Saricks's science fiction genre theory to analyze the presence of science fiction elements in the first season of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* season 1. Following a systematic examination of all eight episodes, 15 key scenes were identified by the author as demonstrating science fiction characteristics in accordance with Saricks' theoretical framework. An analysis of the data reveals that the science fiction

elements are comprised of two distinct components: setting components, which include a laboratory setting (3 scenes or 20%) and an alternative world setting (3 scenes or 20%), and plot components, which encompass action-driven sequences (2 scenes or 13.3%), "what if" suspicion elements (3 scenes or 20%), and upbeat ending resolution (4 scenes or 30%).

Table 1. Setting

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**Setting of Science Fiction**  
***LABOLATORIUM***

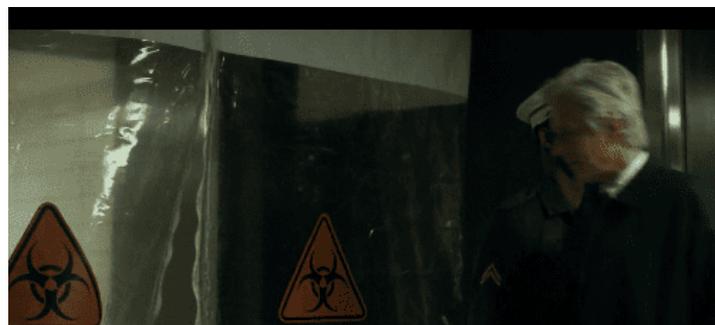
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*Fig. 1 Ep 1 00:28*

*(Source: Stranger Things, 2016)*

In Fig.1 episode 1 minute 00:28, it gives a description that the place is Hawkins National Laboratory[15]. A multi-story building with several satellites and transmitters installed on it is one of the characteristics that can be described by a scientific research site that requires high technology.



*Fig. 2 Ep 1 19:16*

*(Source: Stranger Things, 2016)*

In the Fig.2 at episode 1 minute 19:16 shows a tarpaulin with a biological hazard symbol [15]. This can assume that there are activities being carried out in the area that are not possible in an ordinary room. The laboratory is often a place to conduct dangerous experiments because there are materials or things that can harm people around.



*Fig. 3 Ep 3 14:28*  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig.3 episode 3 minute 14:28 , Eleven is seen using a series of cables attached to her head, there are several people wearing white coats that are identical to the clothes or uniforms of the laboratory and are blocked by thick white walls with glass as a barrier for research security [15]. There is a camera on the side of the room indicating that it was recorded as documentation. This activity is carried out only in certain rooms which are certainly not in ordinary homes. The usual thing to do in the Laboratory when testing something that is considered dangerous because it Muses a special protocol and documentation is made.

#### **ALTERNATIVE WORLD**



*Fig. 4 episode 8 09:33*  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig.4 episode 8 minute 09:33 shows a mysterious hole with slimy, pulsating black roots indicating alien life in the area inside the hole [15]. In the center of the passage to enter the hole, there is a red glow and a spider web-like network, but it is wet and sticky, giving a chilling impression. The hole to the Upside-down shows the unusual things that happen in the human world, another world with mysterious and dangerous things.



*Fig. 5 episode 6 00:57*  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig.5 episode 6 minute 00:57 shows that the Upside-down is so dark that there is no sunlight [15]. The world is shown as a cold place with no human life. There is a monster with long fingers and

a slimy body. The lighting is minimal and foggy, giving a tense and dangerous impression. The monster in the Upside-down world reinforces that this parallel world is a dangerous place.



Fig. 6 episode 8 38:46  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig.6 episode 8 minute 38:46 shows Jim, Joyce and Will in the Upside-down with a background full of slimy black roots and air full of strange dust [15]. Will, who looks so pale and dying, shows that the Upside-down is life-threatening for humans, this is reinforced by the protective clothing used by Joyce and Jim because they are worried that the Upside-down conditions could endanger them.

Based on the data in table 1, the setting of *Stranger Things* season 1 is in a Hawkins national laboratory where dangerous experiments take place. In accordance with Sarick's statement regarding the setting displayed in the science fiction genre. The laboratory becomes a scientific detail as a form of dangerous scientific experimentation and becomes an important part of the *Stranger Things* season 1 storyline. *Technical and scientific details form an important part of the story [11].*

In addition to the laboratory as a scientific detail, the setting in science fiction will usually look unusual if it exists in human life. *Setting is crucial and invokes otherness of time, place, or reality[11].* This strangeness is shown by the existence of the Upside-down as another world inhabited by a number of dangerous monsters. *In Science Fiction authors create and populate new and alternative worlds, and they have to be able to describe the alien nature of the worlds they create and the beings that inhabit them to place us there [11].* This setting is in line with what Sarick has explained in his book about the science fiction genre.

Table 2. Plot

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**Plot of Science Fiction**  
**AMOUNT OF ACTION**

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Fig. 7 Ep 1 45:38  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig. 7 episode 1 minute 45.38, Mike, Lucas, Dustin are seen in the forest looking for Will[15]. In episode 1 Will mysteriously disappeared after going to play from Mike's house. Will's disappearance made Mike, Lucas and Dustin rush to look for him even without parental supervision. The action taken by the three was spontaneous because it was done immediately after they found out that Will had disappeared last night.

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### Plot of Science Fiction

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*Fig. 8 Ep 8 21:16*  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig. 8 episode 8 minute 21.16 Nancy, Jonathan and Steve are on guard from the Demogorgon monster [15]. Will's disappearance leads to another dimension called Upside-down. The Upside-down is in another world that has an unexpected entrance that can appear at any time, Nancy and Jonathan feel that they must prepare themselves in the real world for the arrival of Demogorgon monsters that can come at any time, while Jim and Joyce try to enter the Upside-down they defeat Demogorgon who entered the real world through the Upside-down portal that opened suddenly.



*Fig. 9 Ep 8 28:41*  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig. 9 episode 8 minute 28.41 Joyce and Jim go to the Upside-down to immediately search for Will's missing whereabouts [15]. After Will's search which eventually leads them to a secret experiment belonging to the CIA, they finally reveal the existence of the Upside-down. The actions taken by Joyce and Jim are dangerous because the Upside-down is not a safe place inhabited by many monsters.

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### *SUSPICION*

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*Fig. 10 Ep 1 1:47*  
(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

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### Plot of Science Fiction

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Mike: "Something's coming, something hungry for blood. A shadow grows on the wall behind you, swallowing you in darkness. It is almost here"

Will: "What is it?"

Dustin: "What if it's Demogorgon?"

In the Fig. 10 found in episode 1 minute 1.47 Will, Mike, Lucas and Dustin are playing a game of fighting against monsters [15]. The monster named Demogorgon comes from another world. The game is one of the characteristics of the science fiction genre according to Sarick. The question "what if?" that becomes something real. What if the demogorgon monster becomes something real that comes from the darkness in a real way?. This question then becomes the plot where the problem arises.



*Fig. 11 Ep 3 26:26*

*(Source: Stranger Things, 2016)*

In the Fig. 11 episode 3 minute 26.26 Jim begins to find out about cases of missing children in order to collect clues about Will's disappearance [15]. Jim began looking for the case in the Hawkins library where many documents were stored there and found that there were odd things at the Hawkins National Laboratory. There were many articles about the abuse of experiments that coincided with the number of missing children at the time. This led to the premise of "what if the government is responsible for the disappearance of children and abuses experiments that have fatal consequences?". The question that arises then becomes the truth that really happened.

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### UPBEAT ENDING

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*Fig. 12 Ep 8 41:34*

*(Source: Stranger Things, 2016)*

In the Fig. 12 minutes 41.34 Will can finally be saved and returned to the real world [15]. Demogorgon was finally killed and the experiments carried out by scientists at Hawkins National Laboratory were stopped.

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### Plot of Science Fiction

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Fig. 13 Ep 8 44:57

(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig. 13 episode 8 minute 44.57 after Will is finally found and rescued from Upside-down [15]. Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin finally returned to the game they often do and managed to win the game they played.



Fig. 14 Ep 8 48:26

(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig. 14 episode 8 minute 48.26 the newspaper publishes about Will's return [15]. This news is so exciting that a piece of this news is even cut and pasted on the mading of the police department where Jim works.



Fig. 15 Ep 8 50:45

(Source: *Stranger Things*, 2016)

In the Fig. 15 episode 8 minute 50.45, Will's family is seen having a dinner [15]. Everyone celebrates with happiness because Will is back with them. This shows the relief and celebration of the victory over the Upside-down monster and Hawkins' scientists.

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According to Sarick's theory, *Pacing is usually determined by the amount of action* [11]. In the first season of *Stranger Things*, this theoretical concept is exemplified through the utilization of specific narrative techniques that expedite the progression of the plot. As illustrated in Table 2, the series employs Saricks' pacing framework through three distinct mechanisms.

Initially, the focus is on physical action sequences. The scene under scrutiny herein lends substantiation to Saricks' theoretical postulate that "*pacing is determined by the amount of action*"[11]

through the medium of action sequences of a spontaneous nature. The boys' immediate forest search serves as an exemplification of Saricks' principle that science fiction relies on "*The action is physical and moves the plot.*" [11]. The scene's function, as Saricks identifies, is to serve as "*Adventure elements also figure prominently in these stories and that also speeds the pacing.*" [11] The absence of adult supervision and the urgency of their search serve to eliminate exposition-heavy dialogue, thus replacing it with movement-driven narrative momentum. Saricks' assertion that effective science fiction pacing prioritizes immediate physical response over deliberative conversation is directly supported by the spontaneous nature of the action. This spontaneous nature, in turn, creates what she terms "forward narrative drive."

The collaborative effort between Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve exemplifies Saricks' notion of "*action that maintains tension.*" This scene serves to operationalize her theory that the pacing of science fiction functions through anticipatory action, whereby characters prepare for unknown threats. The theoretical significance of this defensive positioning is evident in the manner in which it exemplifies "*sustained action sequences,*" a term coined by Saricks to describe the maintenance of narrative momentum even during moments that appear static. The strategic positioning and weapon preparation of the characters in question can be seen as an embodiment of the principle that effective science fiction action does not require constant movement but rather purposeful activity that advances both plot and genre expectations.

The Upside-Down entry, submitted by Joyce and Jim, epitomizes the pinnacle of Saricks' tenet regarding "*physical action that moves the plot.*" [11]. This scene is an exemplar of the author's theoretical framework, wherein climactic action sequences are characterized by the direct resolution of narrative tension through character movement. The perilous nature of their entry serves to illustrate what Saricks identifies as a predominant reliance within science fiction on "adventure elements," which integrate the combination of physical risk with speculative exploration. In principle, this scene validates her claim that science fiction action must serve dual purposes: advancing plot resolution while exploring the genre's speculative premises.

Dustin's inquiry, "What if it's Demogorgon?" serves as a prime illustration of Saricks' conceptualization of science fiction as "*Science fiction has been labeled a fiction of questions: What if...? If only...? If this goes on...?*" [11]. However, the theoretical significance of this phenomenon extends beyond mere interrogation. The present scenario exemplifies what Saricks terms "speculative foreshadowing," wherein hypothetical scenarios introduced at the narrative's inception ultimately manifest as authentic plot elements. In the context of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the game functions as what she identifies as a "speculative playground," a term used to denote a space within science fiction where fictional possibilities are explored prior to their actualization as narrative reality. The scene elucidates her theory that science fiction that is effective employs character-driven speculation in order to establish credibility and anticipation within the genre and narrative.

James's document research employs the "*What if?*" framework developed by Saricks, utilizing a systematic inquiry approach. His investigation exemplifies the principle that science fiction inquiries must be "grounded in logical progression." Each discovered document builds toward speculative outcomes concerning government experimentation. In principle, this scene exemplifies what Saricks identifies as science fiction's "evidence-based speculation," wherein characters employ extant information to construct hypothetical scenarios that propel plot development. Jim's questioning method corroborates this claim, as it effectively utilizes speculative possibilities in a systematic manner to drive narrative momentum, thus aligning with the assertion that effective science fiction can transform character curiosity into narrative progression.

Will's rescue is a direct implementation of Saricks' principle that science fiction endings are "*The ending is generally upbeat, optimistic.*" [11]. Nevertheless, the theoretical significance of the aforementioned resolution is demonstrated by its illustration of what she has termed "restored equilibrium," that is to say, the tendency in science fiction narratives to resolve speculative disruptions through positive outcomes. This scene serves as a prime illustration of the assertion put forth by the author, which posits that effective science fiction is characterized by the maintenance of hope despite the exploration of dismal possibilities. This assertion is further substantiated by the author's identification of a "worldview" that is ultimately affirmative for the genre.

The games the boys are playing, the news coverage, and the dinner scenes illustrate Saricks' principle that optimistic endings in science fiction must demonstrate societal validation of the characters' speculative journeys. These scenes substantiate the argument that upbeat conclusions necessitate "community acknowledgment" of the protagonists' heroic actions. From a theoretical

standpoint, these moments serve the "social integration function" identified by Saricks in science fiction. This outcome confirms the genre's fundamentally optimistic worldview concerning humanity's capacity to overcome unknown challenge

#### IV. Conclusion

In each episode of the first season of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, the plot and setting are interrelated in shaping the science fiction genre, according to plot and setting by Sarick's theory. In the context of science fiction analysis, Saricks proposes that the distinguishing characteristic of this genre is its tendency to engage in speculative thought, incorporating futuristic and alternative settings, and technological themes.

The setting, characterized by a dark background and dim lighting, fosters an atmosphere of peril and tension. The action-oriented narrative, a hallmark of the science fiction genre, is further accentuated by the setting, which contributes to the mounting tension and excitement of the plot. The laboratory thus functions as a setting that frequently manifests as a form of scientific activity, thereby substantiating the "what if?" plot premise. A multitude of possibilities that are not possible in the real world finally come to fruition as a result of the abuse of dangerous experiments carried out at the Hawkins National Laboratory. The setting that serves as the backdrop for the unfolding plot aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Sarick.

The plot and setting of *Stranger Things*, Season 1, are conducive to the development of the science fiction genre. According to Sarick's theory, the first season of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* season 1 can be classified as a work of science fiction. This determination is based on a thorough examination of the plot and setting presented in each episode.

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