

On the path to sentience – post-digital narratives in “Westworld”*

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Conceived as a sequel loosely based on the 1973 feature film *Westworld*, the 2016 television series of the same title has become an immensely popular, as well as academically intriguing, work of artistic entertainment. Drawing on the original idea of the movie, creators Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy have created a fictional world presented to viewers using a very complex narrative form – so complex, in fact, that fan forums have provided explanations of the multiple chronological layers of the story and attempted to illuminate the fragmented plot.

“Westworld” is a theme park presented in the series through a number of narratives: the parallel stories of several characters, as well as the history of the futuristic amusement park itself, owned and operated by the Delos Corporation. The interaction of the visitors, or guests (all paying enormous amounts of money for the experience), with the park’s permanent inhabitants/employees, referred to as “hosts”, who are highly developed androids, is based on the concept of immersive experience between the two above-mentioned groups. The hosts are mass produced and programmed to offer the guests a fully realistic and gratifying experience including sex, violence and execution of power. Total immersion is guaranteed by partly pre-defined and partly improvised narratives created by the corporation. The storylines in *Westworld* reflect the park’s predominant theme – the Wild West – but are invented and applied using highly advanced technology which elevates traditional storytelling to the level of being part of (almost) actual reality.

Part of this reality also includes the hosts’ progression into a state of consciousness, which has been a recurring theme in numerous literary and cinematic works, most notably Philip K. Dick’s 1968 story *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, made into the popular movie *Blade Runner* (1982), Steven Spielberg’s *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) based on Brian Aldiss’s *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* from 1969, or most recently *Ex Machina* (2015) written and directed by novelist Alex Garland. In most stories, including the three ones selected above, the creators hardly address the process through which the androids become sentient. *Westworld* is rather special in this regard because it operates with several suggestions about how consciousness

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might be achieved by machines. At the same time, it is obvious that much of the discussion about the consciousness of androids in *Westworld* is primarily a metaphorical account of the role of human consciousness and self-awareness in the 21st century.

This study seeks to analyse the role of narratives, or simply the power of storytelling, in what might be, perhaps awkwardly, termed the post-digital environment of *Westworld*. Drawing on the frequently discussed themes of robots craving humanity and humans deprived of their humanity in the face of rapid technological advancement, I would like to argue that *Westworld* relies on a paradoxical extension of Jean Baudrillard's succession of simulacra and presents a hyperreal world that merges coded reality with the improvisation abilities of the robotic hosts. I base my analysis on Marie-Laure Ryan's claim that "the choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they are told" (2014, 25). It is the combined application of pre-defined and invariable determinants, and of unexpected variables in the hosts' software that catalyses new narratives – both in the theme park's provision to its clients and in the hosts' behaviour.

I also deem it essential to methodologically come to terms with what "post-digital" means here. According to Florian Cramer, while "digital" refers to anything that might be relatable to using countable units, a kind of almost unnatural cleanness and sterility, "post-digital" introduces a "revival of 'old' media", however, used in an environment dominated by computing and new media (2014). In other words, Cramer claims that post-digital refers to a rejection of digital binaries and the simplified, trash-like production of art or experience. The fictional domain of *Westworld* presents a social and cultural paradigm in which the hosts are created at such a high level of technological competence that, although they are evidently digitally conceived and manufactured, the Delos Corporation uses them in a post-digital milieu – that of the *Westworld* theme park which aims to provide a realistic and naturalistic experience for visitors. But the hosts – aided by their creators – go beyond the roles coded into their narratives and defy the post-digital presentation of the park by progressing into a state that is closest to Kim Cascone's perception of glitch-motivated post-digitality (2000).

The methodological framework of my scrutiny of hyperreality, post-digitality and narratology in *Westworld* relies on the shift from the traditional understanding of a game-world (in literature or visual art), defined by Marie-Laure Ryan "not as the sum of imagined objects but in a non-figurative sense, as the delimited space and time in which the game takes place" (2015, 122), to an immersive experience which transcends this space and time. If Ryan suggests that full immersion may also involve virtual bodies to guarantee experiential participation and interactivity (2015, 229), *Westworld* develops this idea in the other direction – it includes real people in the game and shows androids on the edge of sentience.

Using the above-mentioned propositions I would like to examine in detail the narrative scheme in *Westworld*, supporting my conjectures with further theoretical concepts in narratology, semiotics and new media.

The plot of *Westworld* revolves around the stories of: Dolores Abernathy, a young woman (host) living on a ranch; Maeve Millay who is programmed to act as the madam of a brothel; the Man in Black (guest) who is searching for hidden meaning in the park's themes; Arnold Weber, one of the creators of the hosts and the park; and finally, Robert Ford, the mastermind behind the narratives, and creator of "Westworld". The individual stories are intricately intertwined in a set of storylines going back and forth in time, and tackling the difficult issue of how the hosts attain free will and become aware of themselves and their consciousness. The fact that the hosts are indistinguishable from the guests shifts the narrative onto a level where the dawning of the hosts' consciousness and the psychology behind the guests' interaction with them become almost identical. When William, a guest, asks a host "Are you real?", he receives this response: "Well, if you can't tell, does it matter?" (Ep. 2). The reproduction of the original in the park is so high-end that it deems Walter Benjamin's worries about the fading aura of objects and works of art obsolete (2013, 221). What matters much more is the purpose for which they are used.

To present the process of emerging consciousness in androids, the series develops the ideas of popular psychologist Julian Jaynes, whose 1976 book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* proposed the concept of a two-chambered mind that led ancient people to believe that conscious thoughts were the voice of gods who told people what to do, very much like hallucinations. Jaynes claims, quite boldly, that "[t]he Trojan War was directed by hallucinations. And the soldiers who were so directed were not at all like us. They were noble automatons who knew not what they did" (2000, 75). The idea of the bicameral mind, used as a fundamental principle in *Westworld*, suggests exactly what Jaynes posits, namely that one chamber of the mind listens to the commanding voice of the creator and executes the orders, while the other is used for communication with others. Though this theory has become more popular than it is universally valid, it draws on the broad discourse about automated behaviour in humans, be it in the well-known metaphor of Plato's cave, or in William James's essential late 19th-century treatise *The Principles of Psychology* in which James rejects the so-called "conscious automaton theory" (2007, 128–44).

Nonetheless, in *Westworld*, bicameralism is the starting point for both Ford and Weber to create hosts that will gradually become sentient. Ford explains this to his assistant Bernard when he says that Weber envisioned the path to consciousness as having the form of a pyramid built from "memory, improvisation, self-interest. And at the top? Never got there" (Ep. 3). Even though Bernard claims that the bicameral mind theory has long been debunked, the four-stage process is embedded in some of the hosts' code in order to catalyse the dawning of their consciousness.

At the end of each day in *Westworld*, the hosts' memory is wiped to make them enact their looped stories either fully anew, or with the programmers' adjustments, if necessary. For example, Dolores's loop starts with her waking up, musing about the importance of beauty in the world, stating her belief in a given order of things and then venturing to the town where she interacts – according to specific algorithms – either with other hosts, or with guests. Initially, Dolores's actions every day are rem-

iniscient of the cruel, mentally devastating rerun of people's lives in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Timequake* in which "everybody and everything [had to] do exactly what they'd done during a past decade, for good or ill, a second time. It was déjà vu that wouldn't quit for ten long years" (1998, 10–11). While Vonnegut uses this absurd situation to talk about how people are either unaware of their free will, or seem to be losing it in the face of millennial intricacies, for the hosts in *Westworld* it becomes a path to self-awareness.

Because of sub-routines in the hosts' programming that endow them with so-called "reveries" (to make them more realistic), the hosts retain some of their memories despite the regular erasure. Another part of the code gives them options to improvise within their templates and loops. And when they are coded to enact also their self-interest, there is only one step which both Ford and Weber believed distinguished them from creatures with full consciousness – pain and suffering. The hosts' scripted behaviour can from then on develop into fully conscious and potentially independent action and it is this very development that bears the traces of a literary narrative – a quest for consciousness. In *Westworld*, this quest is represented by a maze which is a metaphor for the hosts', particularly Dolores's, search for identity and which functions as a method for narrative development in much the same way as discussed by Marie-Laure Ryan in her treatise on immersive literary approaches (2015, 170).

While presenting the idea that storytelling is vital to our consciousness and humanity, *Westworld* makes allusions to a number of typical narratives, literary classics and cultural phenomena. For example, the stories of Dolores and Maeve, who defy not only their creators' will, but also their scripted sub-routines (Maeve's decision not to continue with "Mainland Infiltration" that Ford coded into her programme, but to return to *Westworld*), echo the biblical story of Genesis where Adam and Eve defied God who, however, was well aware that they would defy him. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton highlighted the fact that the human competence for writing or telling stories gives us divine status because we are creators, authors of the work (Kim 2016). In another example, providing a framework for the role of violence in *Westworld*, the quote from *Romeo and Juliet* "[t]hese violent delights have violent ends" (Shakespeare 1993, 78) is used to serve as a trigger for Dolores to use her free will to enact Ford's and Weber's plans, but also acts as a warning against the misuse of the technology for instant, and mostly violent, gratification of the park's guests.

There are multiple layers of the stories offered to the guests in *Westworld* that operate between the creators of the park and the hosts, and that also help the authors of the TV show narrate the story and reveal the plot. All these layers work as part of a complex, organic and ultimately post-digital whole – literally on the level of the park's action, and metaphorically as a social reflection of a society struggling hard to come to terms with consumerism, identity and violence under constant and accelerated technological advancement. Social and anthropological theories of the second half of the 20th century resonate in the park's social scheme and behavioural patterns. Most notably they are the liminality concept by Victor Turner and the notion of hyperreality introduced by Jean Baudrillard.

The former theory presents the idea that in ritualized initiation, similar to how the hosts are initiated by their creators, there is a transitory period that Turner describes as a liminal, or “in-between” state that precedes the final state of being and mind (1981, 159). It is a kind of no man’s land, a preliminary zone, in which those who undergo a ritual hover before they are transformed. For the hosts in *Westworld* this is akin to the limbo before the androids achieve a state of consciousness, in Turner’s words, a state in which they feel “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (1974, 232). Turner’s ideas, applicable particularly to rites of passage, are thus a relevant instrument to gauge how the hosts are manipulated into becoming conscious by Robert Ford who owns and controls them. The hosts can thus be considered what Turner refers to as “initiators” who are “submitted to ordeal by initiated seniors or elders” (1981, 154). Most importantly, the newly gained independence, resulting from the hosts’ self-awareness – documented when Dolores says “I think when I discover who I am, I’ll be free” (Ep. 3) – provides the hosts with what Turner considers to be a valuable chance “to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men” (1974, 242). Turner’s notion of liminality also leads to a reversal in the social and cultural hierarchy because the initiators/hosts and elders/creators are dislodged from their “everyday structural positions” (1974, 242) – a concept that is fully employed in *Westworld* because the hosts are prepared to take control. “This world doesn’t belong to them”, Dolores says at the end of Episode 10 and adds: “It belongs to us”, providing sinister foreshadowing to the violent events that follow.

The initiation-like transformation of the hosts in *Westworld* into sentient beings is set against the backdrop of a place that shares many features of the hyperreal spaces discussed by Baudrillard, e.g. Disneyland, which he calls “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra” and “a play of illusions and phantasms” while being, at the same time, a kind of “miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys” (2014, 12). However, the order of simulacra, as envisioned by Baudrillard – from mirroring “profound” reality, through covering up for the missing reality, all the way to becoming “pure simulacrum” of itself – is turned upside down in *Westworld* because the hosts’ initial state is that they are pure simulacra and they gradually develop into what one day might become a “profound reality” (2014, 6). In other words, the theme park is a space where what is conceived as hyperreal gradually becomes real, so Baudrillard’s sequence is reversed and “miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control” aid in reproducing the hosts’ physical features as well as their programming, and ultimately also catalyse the emergence of their consciousness (2014, 2).

Baudrillard’s argument, of course, highlights the commercial and consumerist aspects of “*Westworld*” and underlines the similarity between the artificial and hyperreal world of the park and the real world. The Man in Black puts this succinctly: “[T]his world is just like the one outside – a game” (Ep. 10). It is a world whose focus on entertainment is dominant, echoing Erick Felinto’s argument that “[i]nstead of focusing on the production of information and meaning, we’re moving towards a culture of entertainment. We want to experience sensations, to have fun, to be excited.

If silence is becoming impossible, meaning also seems to be in short supply these days” (116). Felinto relates this to the opposition of the culture of meaning versus the culture of presence, a notion introduced by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2007, 17). Presence thus emphasizes “cultural practices connected with the body, materiality and sensation” which become more important and take over “(immaterial) meaning and interpretation” (116).

In *Westworld*, the majority of guests and hosts follow the above mentioned pattern, however, there are some who defy the prominence of presence and who are driven to search for meaning. For example, the Man in Black, a guest who has spent a long time as a client (and now even as a shareholder) of “Westworld”, is certain that “there’s a deeper level to this game” and that there is a maze that will let him understand the hidden narratives that are kept out of sight in the park (Ep. 1). He has grown bored and weary of the regular narratives and wants to find a new level of the game where he would not be invulnerable to the hosts’ violence: “The game’s not worth playing if your opponent’s programmed to lose”, he says, adding “I wanted them to be free, free to fight back” (Ep. 10). On another occasion he confides in a host, saying “In Ford’s game, even if I go to the outer edges [of the park], you can’t kill me. You can’t even leave a lasting mark. But there’s a deeper game here, Teddy. Arnold’s game. And that game cuts deep” (Ep. 8).

Of course, Arnold Weber’s game is the expression of his aspiration to give the hosts sentience and free will. This is represented by the yearning and quest of some hosts, most significantly Dolores and Maeve, to find who they are and how they can deal with their self-awareness. The intricate plot gradually reveals that the maze the Man in Black came to associate with Weber’s semiotic game was in fact a device intended for the hosts to attain consciousness and not at all an instrument to take him to a deeper level of the game (deeper in this sense would mean part of the post-digital world of the park, but beyond its hyperrealism). So, Weber and Ford lull the Man in Black into believing the maze actually exists and is the key to another section of the park where there are different rules. But as Dolores says to him “[t]he maze wasn’t meant for you” (Ep. 10), the plot reveals that the maze only represents the symbolic and metaphorical search through her own “mind” before she can achieve a conscious state.

Consequentially, the Man in Black and some of the hosts are influenced by the simulation and mediatized content that affects “consciousness indirectly through habits and attitudes absorbed from the use of artefacts/symbols”, while it also digs deep into the sensory layers of how they perceive the narratives that are presented to them (Harris – Taylor 2005, 12). The mediatized world which Baudrillard argues is responsible for the changing nature of social narratives, plays an important role in how the programmers in *Westworld* sway the hosts’ operating routines to make them aware of their “selves”. When Bernard asks Dolores if she has ever “questioned the nature of [her] reality”, her response is a solid “no” (Ep. 1). But in time, the reveries (referred to as mistakes, or glitches in the hosts’ programming) and the ensuing traces of memories, presented as flashbacks and voices, throw Dolores (and Maeve) into a state in which they can only follow one route – that towards their becoming

conscious. Narratization, again, plays an important role here, when Maeve says “[It’s] time to write my own fucking story” (Ep. 8) and when Dolores learns from Weber that “[c]onsciousness isn’t a journey upward, but a journey inward. Not a pyramid, but a maze” (Ep. 10).

But despite this, the series does not fully reject the pyramidal structure of the path towards sentience, or at least a sequential path, because once memory, improvisation and self-interest are established, the final step to consciousness, “the thing that led the hosts to their awakening [is] suffering. The pain that the world is not as you want it to be” (Ep. 10). This is reiterated also by the Man in Black when he makes a remark about how advanced and realistic the hosts are because when they suffer “that’s when [they are] most real” (Ep. 2). In fact, the pain and suffering the hosts are exposed to and have to experience over and over again has been likened by some reviewers to the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Nussbaum 2016; Kim 2016). The flashes of memory, inability to make sense of what they mean and the continuing violence and brutality around them – this all makes the hosts subject to ordeals that, in Ford’s and Weber’s view, push them closer to humanity.

Suffering and pain, in a Jaynesian sense, may create a space, a temporary void that can be filled with realization and awareness – a space somewhere inside, in our head (Jaynes 2000, 44), or, as Dolores affirms “I feel spaces opening up inside of me like a building with rooms I’ve never explored” (Ep. 4). But real consciousness comes when the hosts are not able to go into a state of rational analysis (one of their primary functions) and explain their behaviour or response. When Dolores says, in Episode Three, that she will be free once she discovers who she is, she is urged to analyse her response and state reasons why she said it. But her response is only “I don’t know” (Ep. 3). In another example, Teddy, the host who is part of Dolores’s narrative commits a brutal act of violence only to comment on it as follows: “Something’s gone wrong, Dolores. How could I have done this? I can’t” (Ep. 10). It is this disconnection from binary, rational analysis that denotes Dolores’s and Teddy’s progress on their way to sentience.

All three men who are in control of the hosts, Weber, Ford and the Man in Black, want the hosts to start listening to their own (inner) voice – “Do you understand now, Dolores, what the centre [of the maze] represents? Whose voice I’ve been wanting you to hear?” (Ep. 10) – in order to gain full consciousness, to become free, to realize their full potential. For the Man in Black, it is important to see the hosts as dangerous, possibly even *murderous, in order to take his game to a higher level. The game does indeed become murderous when Dolores realizes that the voice Weber wanted her to listen to is her own and when Ford introduces his new narrative in the beginning of which the Man in Black is shot and wounded by a host – and the taboo that the hosts can never harm the guests is broken.*

For the Man in Black, this is an expression of the post-digital attitude – his weariness with the pre-programmed hosts results in his desire to search for a narrative that goes beyond the coded boundaries of Westworld. Similarly, for Dolores and Maeve, it is the domain beyond their code, their full consciousness of “[a] world out there” that beckons to them “whispering, “There’s something more”” (Ep. 3). But these rejections of the binary world of the hosts and the programmed narratives the Man in Black

holds in contempt want to bring about a shift in the system of the park – something that is impossible to do without the code and the digital element within it. In fact, the code is a prerequisite not only for every narrative, but also for the sentient hosts who ultimately deviate from it.

Season 1 of *Westworld* ends on a note that suggests that it has been Ford's plan to make some of the hosts sentient and to prepare the ground for the hosts to take over – the park and, ultimately, the world. "In a way, their existence is purer than ours," Ford claims, "freed of the burden of self-doubt" (Ep. 7) and speculates that the human race's days have been numbered because we believe that "there's something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices" (Ep. 8).

The hosts' sentience and the post-digital nature of *Westworld* promise a new sequence of narratives and identity quests. What these will be remains to be seen, but even the first season of the series has proved the significance of the shift in how technology and new media will transform human (and non-human) perception of society and the relationships within it. This shift has already been pointed out and discussed by a number of scholars – Bogumiła Suwara, for example, posits that we will witness rapid changes in "the practices people use to tell stories as well as in the modes of their narration" (2012, 201). The by now seminal discourse about transparency and hypermediacy (Bolter – Grusin 2002) is taken to further heights by scholars such as Ganaele Langlois who claims that, e.g. online software is becoming a participatory communication tool by means of "[being elevated] to a cultural actor on par with human users" (2012, 95). This all reflects the highly advanced participation of the hosts in *Westworld* who not only participate but also co-create the narratives and who are at least equal to the human guests in terms of their social behaviour, language and perception.

And yet, the shifted social communication and omnipresence of technology in *Westworld*, which requires a different narratorial approach and form, is nothing new in performative art. Postdramatic theatre in the second half of the 20th century sought to respond to new circumstances in a similar manner – the rise of the media, the dramatized society (Williams 1975), or new political and social conditions. The natural response was expressiveness that aspired to reflect, among other things, the shifted "social communication under the conditions of generalized information technologies" (Lehmann 2010, 23). The underlying principle, however, remains unchanged – stories are the core of human existence and storytelling is the essence of the human capacity for rational thinking, emotional involvement and structural imagination and perception. The only aspect that changes is the form of storytelling – for the post-digital environment of *Westworld*, the narration is what Brian Richardson refers to as "a protean, dynamic process, with multiple sources of narrative development" (2008, 177). This dynamism allows the hosts, guests and the park's management to become carriers of stories and information, to act as media that can – developing the ideas of Bolter and Grusin further – not only refer to each other's role and action, but that can also "reproduce and substitute one another" (Tomašovičová 2016, 29).

On a broader scale, however, the future implications of the hosts' stories in *Westworld* will be specifically about the interaction between humans and non-humans. In other words, and the story of the Man in Black shows this very clearly, the question is whether humans will be able to relate to androids in a meaningful way, that is, in any way other than violence, brutality, abuse, superiority and total control. The Man in Black's initial good-heartedness, sense of justice, and love (?) towards Dolores transform into outbursts of violence, egotism and yearning for gratification reminiscent of addiction to open world games (just like the experience of "Westworld"). Therefore, it seems justified that the future discourse should not be about "whether relational artifacts really have intelligence or emotions but about what they evoke in their users" (Turkle 2005, 294), because, as David Herman contemplates, "[a] narrative also constitutes a logic in its own right, providing human beings with one of their primary resources for comprehending experience and organizing interaction" (2004, 50).

And this is, it seems, the strongest message in *Westworld* – namely, that violent delights will have violent ends, and not only in the finale of Season 1, but also in a universal sense. There is an infinite variety of possible shifts in the guests' reaction to the park's "attractions" because, as Ford says "[t]he guests aren't looking for a story that tells them who they are. They already *know* who they are. They're here because they want a glimpse of who they could be" (Ep. 2). And this is exactly both the power and danger in this kind of role-play, particularly because of its post-digital character. The guests imagine themselves in roles different from those in the real world, roles that might be idealized, exaggerated, therapeutic or scandalously evil – at any rate, though, they are roles that reflect "a social reality mirrored in commercial and entertainment culture" and thus become a source of identity that is merely external and has little to do with self-awareness (Morrison 2016, 253). In addition to the hosts, the guests engage in a process of writing their "selves", shaping their virtual and real relationships similar to that of online social communities (Debnár 2016, 122).

The amusement park, quite evidently, provides compensation for things the guests lack in the real world. In this sense, the narratives in *Westworld* bear all the characteristics of literary narratives, providing the clients with glimpses of stories they wish to experience but cannot. "[The] place feels more real than the real world," (Ep. 10) says the Man in Black, arguing that it does so because the "[r]eal world is just chaos [...] an accident. But in here, every detail adds up to something" (Ep. 2). But within that seeming order, echoed by Dolores at each beginning of her loop, right after her memory is wiped to grant her the kind of "eternal sunshine of the spotless mind" that Alexander Pope famously wrote about in his 1717 poem *Eloisa to Abelard* (1903), there are layers over layers of old code written by Arnold Weber which the hosts are trying to access to override their memory loss. The reveries and scraps of the old code intended to make them sentient are "a glitch" and a kind of aesthetic failure, as Kim Cascone notably suggested in his discussion of computer music (2000). This glitch becomes an evolutionary mistake, a Darwinian aberration that accelerates the hosts' awakening.

Westworld presents a shift also when compared with the original 1973 movie in which the character known as the Gunslinger – also owing to a glitch in technol-

ogy – runs amok and acts against his code, which prohibited him from shooting at humans. His reincarnation in the 2016 series – the Man in Black – also transfigures into a merciless and violent player, but with the sinister pretext of his quest for a deeper meaning of the hyperreal and simulated world of the park. For him, the deeper meaning should be something true, not a masquerade of simulacra, but the real thing, with real pain, real suffering, perhaps even death. Or, in the words of Robert Ford, the founder and mastermind of Westworld, the deeper meaning is simply in the power of good stories, stories that might help us “to ennoble ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the people we dreamed of being,” stories that might tell lies, but these are lies that tell “a deeper truth” (Ep. 10).

Ultimately, *Westworld* is a cinematic experience that presents the allure of immersive experience using high-tech equipment as a problematic step in civilizational development. While highlighting the importance of story-telling and the (so far exclusively) human imagination, it also raises a warning finger at the potentially dehumanizing effect of digital and post-digital technology. At the same time, the show presents the infinitely complex process of androids achieving sentience and the human element within it – an element capable of developing highly advanced technology to elevate machines into conscious beings, while degrading itself to a hedonistic, animalistic and violent creature.

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On the path to sentience – post-digital narratives in "Westworld"

Hyperreality. Immersive experience. Narrative. Post-digital. Sentience in androids. "Westworld".

The paper endeavours to analyse the structure and role of narratives in HBO's 2016 series *Westworld* from the perspective of their post-digital character and purpose not only for the story, plot and characterization, but also for the cultural and social appeal of the series. The interaction of the clients of Westworld (guests) with the highly developed androids (hosts) is based on the concept of fully immersive experience created using partly pre-programmed and partly improvised narratives written by the corporation running the park.

Westworld is a high-end theme park where the visitors can enjoy realistic experiences through guided interaction with the hosts. The park thus becomes a place that, according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, becomes an intersection of the culture of presence and the culture

of meaning. The immersive experience is so strong that meaning is secondary, reflecting Erick Felinto's premise that the human quest for experience, excitement and emotions is a consequence of the diminishing need for information and meaning. In *Westworld*, it is not only the androids who go on a journey of self-awareness, looking to understand and eliminate who defines them, but also some of the guests for whom the (mostly) predictable virtual world becomes a chance to seek unexpected and new experience – physical pain, or even death.

The Baudrillardian hyperreality and the multiplication of simulacra in *Westworld* reveal how human consciousness (and ultimately perhaps also the consciousness of androids) is affected and determined by the use of devices, artefacts and systems that create their reality. In the fictional world of *Westworld*, the most defining factor is interaction based on immersion into a narrative experience which, consequently, aids the development and awakening of androids and contributes to the dehumanization of people.

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