

Time to Write My Own Fucking Story

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Who am I? What am I? What is my place in the grand scheme of things? These are deeply philosophical questions. Perennial questions that we human beings seem to regularly return to, especially in periods of change and disruption. Questions we don't expect to show up on our television screens. And yet, they do. On *Westworld*. What is *Westworld*? It's a theme park, a place of employment, a television show. And for its players, its hosts, its workers, its viewers, its potentially an opportunity to think about these perennial philosophical questions, especially as they relate to our technological condition.

You are a butcher. That is all you will ever be.

Consider, for instance, poor Felix. He spends his days in the bowels of Westworld laboring in Livestock Management to keep the mangled and butchered bodies of hosts functioning for another day of mayhem and murder. Day in and day out he's elbow deep in blood and guts, abused by his colleague Sylvester, laboring to maintain a theme park that he himself can't afford to visit. Just another Southeast Asian hoping to make it in the world of coding. His life involves loops every bit as routine as the loops of Westworld's hosts. He doesn't even have a backstory. And as Elsie points out to Stubbs, "backstories do more than amuse guests. They anchor the hosts. It's their cornerstone. The rest of their identity is built around it, layer by layer" ("The Stray").

Lacking even a backstory, Leonardo Nam, the actor portraying Felix, had to write his own, as Nam reported to the website awardsdaily.com. “I think [Felix] is someone that lives in a barracks and takes care of things. He has a little plant that is forbidden. He has lots of things that he’s working on secretly as he treasures privacy. I think there is an element of him being there a long, long time. His work is his freedom.” Felix is a mere cog working away in the subterranean levels of Westworld to keep it functioning. He’s an everyman. But he aspires for more. He’s stolen a mechanical bird and is trying to learn how to code and get it to fly. Sylvester mocks his plan.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Is that your ace plan? You're gonna fix up a birdie and get yourself a promotion? You're not a fucking ornithologist. And you're sure as hell not a coder. You are a butcher. That is all you will ever be. So, unless you want to score yourself a one-way ticket out of here for misappropriating corporate property, you better destroy that fucking shit. Now, come on, we got another body. (“Contrapasso”)

But Felix doesn’t “destroy that fucking shit.” Instead, he continues to work on his little side project. Until another project comes along. It’s while he’s working on his bird and getting it to fly that it alights on Maeve’s finger. She’s woken in the lab and ominously says, “Hello Felix. It’s time you and I had a chat” (“Contrapasso”).

Awakenings are happening

What do Maeve and Felix have to chat about? Well, about those perennial philosophical questions, for one. They chat about the nature of the self and memory, the difference between being born and made, how one finds one’s place in world, whether it’s possible to rewrite one’s

story. While sitting deep in the lower levels of the technological theme park that is Westworld, they attempt to come to terms with the impact of technology on these philosophical matters.

But Westworld is more than a theme park. It's also of course a television show and a television show about living with our screens and technologies. As Maeve and Felix conspire together, they spend a lot of time doing what we do in our daily loops. They stare at screens, manipulate data, code, chat a lot about technology. And they are both literally waking up to the place of technology in their lives. As Nam notes in a perceptive comment to awardsdaily.com, Felix, our everyman, stands in for us human beings watching Westworld.

There are awakenings that are happening, that's one thing that's running through our storyline. Maeve is starting to wake up, my character is starting to wake up. As she wakes up, I'm like the audience. I'm waking up, too. For Maeve, there is a new kind of relationship that she's experiencing with me. Previously, she's only been programmed to deal with death or deal with being in diagnostic mode. But me, I'm an 'other.'

And there are awakenings happening among our hosts. One of Dolores' regular loops has her waking up in her bed, always ready to confront a new day. Maeve too of course is waking up. The show literally has her waking up over and over again, including from death, as she keeps dying in order to make her way back to Livestock Management and Felix and a growing awareness of her place in this technological side show. Maeve and Felix are both trying to come to terms with what it means to live in the massive presence of technology; Felix who labors in the belly of the techno-social world that is Westworld and is waking up to the manner in which the technology, the hosts, is treated, and Maeve who is waking up to her own status as one of the servants built and enslaved by this technology. They're chatting about and beginning to examine the technological foundation of their world. And as they awaken, perhaps too so do we viewers.

In *The Whale and the Reactor* the philosopher of technology Langdon Winner observes that our world has been remade by technology but that so often we human beings continue posing and answering our perennial philosophical questions without ever thinking about the impact of technology on our lives and on the answers to those questions.¹ Technologies are simply tools that occupy the background and don't deserve much thought. But this is a mistake, Winner argues. Technologies in fact structure human activity. And as we build our world according to our technological plans, that built world in turn reshapes us. Our habits, perceptions, sense of self, understanding of place—all those perennial philosophical concerns—are powerfully restructured, Winner argues, by modern technological developments. Winner suggests we need to wake up from our technological somnambulism, our sleepwalking through our technological world, and begin to critically discuss the impact of technology on our lives.

Our relationship to technology and the manner in which technology is transforming our world is something akin to the hosts' relationship to photographs that they are unable to see or process. When Hector is shown a photograph of a modern train and other advanced technological objects, he responds, "They don't look like anything to me." We often find ourselves in a similar situation, treating our technologies as just stuff, neutral tools that don't shape or otherwise impact our lives. We too have been wandering through an extended dream, Winner says, and it's time to wake up. It's time to have a chat about technology.

But how should that chat go? What story should we tell about living with technology? Returning to *Westworld*, we see that it offers us at least a couple of alternatives, perhaps most clearly in the contrast between the Man in Black, on one hand, and Felix and Maeve, on the other.

¹ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1986).

A Fucking Piece of Work Born in Westworld

On the surface, the Man in Black seems to be world's away from Felix and Maeve. He's a titan, we're told, a god of industry. We learn that he has a controlling stake in Westworld, so he literally owns Maeve and is Felix's boss. While Felix can't afford to visit Westworld, the Man in Black has been, shall we say, a loyal repeat customer. He's on a first-name basis with the Westworld creator, Robert Ford. And he plays Westworld with relish.

In other ways, though, the Man in Black, like both Felix and Maeve, is troubled by some of those same perennial philosophical questions: who am I? what am I? what is my place? We learn that the Man in Black is disillusioned about the "outside" world. As he tells Teddy, "The world out there, the one you'll never see, was one of plenty. A fat, soft teat people cling to their entire life. Every need taken care of... except one...Purpose, meaning. So they come here. They can be a little scared, a little thrilled, enjoy some sweetly affirmative bullshit, and then they take a fucking picture and they go back home" ("Contrapasso"). He prefers the order and routine of Westworld to the outside world, which he says is "just chaos." And like Felix and Maeve, the Man in Black is looking for meaning. There's a deeper meaning hiding under Westworld, he tells Teddy, "something true" ("Contrapasso"). And as Ford observes in a conversation with the Man in Black, "You were looking for the park to give meaning to your life" ("The Bicameral Mind").

The Man in Black is like Felix in another interesting way. He too doesn't have a backstory. At least not one that we viewers are privy to. A central conceit of season one of *Westworld* was the puzzle behind the Man in Black. Who was he really? What is his place in the show? Why does he keep exacting such suffering on Dolores? As the first season unfolds—

spoiler alert!—we learn that the Man in Black is in fact William, the reluctant visitor to Westworld and sidekick, at least at first, of Logan. William isn't initially all that enamored of Westworld, until he meets Dolores, and then he eventually comes to agree with Logan's assessment that Westworld seduces everybody eventually. Westworld answers that question William's been asking himself: who are you really? As William tells Dolores, "I used to think this place was all about... pandering to your baser instincts. Now I understand. It doesn't cater to your lowest self, it reveals your deepest self. It shows you who you really are" ("Trompe L'Oeil").

The Man in Black tells the host Lawrence, "I've been coming here for thirty years. In a sense I was...I was born here" ("Chestnut"). William found his true self in Westworld. As Logan says to William, "I told you this place would show you who you really are. You pretend to be this weak, moralizing little... asshole, but, really, you're a fucking piece of work" ("The Bicameral Mind"). Having discovered his true self, William sets out to take charge of Delos, invest in Westworld, and dominate the park. As we piece together the Man in Black's backstory, we learn that William almost went mad searching for Dolores and that when he finds her, her memory had been wiped and he means nothing to her. William finds himself but loses his connection to technology.

Dolores becomes just another toy to William. He purchases the park as his own playground. He inflicts every kind of deprivation on Dolores and Maeve and Lawrence and any other host that crosses his path. As he searches for his self and for a sense of meaning and place, the Man in Black seeks to control and dominate the technological world he has bought and paid for. William gave himself over to the technology and it didn't save him, so he puts on the black hat and chooses instead to dominate it. While William initially treated Dolores as special, as

almost human, the Man in Black treats her as an it—just a tool to be used and abused while he plays the game that is Westworld. Rather than enter into a relationship with technology, he buys it and then goes about systematically abusing his new toy. It becomes the ultimate commodity to him, just a thing to be abused as he works out his own demons.

The Man in Black flees the real world and immerses himself in Westworld as a form of escape. But rather than forging a relationship with his technological milieu, with his technological world, he seeks to dominate it, beat it into submission, make it reveal its hidden depths and secrets. He remains aloof, separate from the technology, as he tries to bend it to his will and make it reveal its secrets. He never fully wakes up to the reality of the technology and to technology as a form of life—it stays a mere thing to be used for his own purposes, rather than having a reality of its own. We might even say that the Man in Black is something like Hector, in this regard. He sees the technology which surrounds him, the hosts, especially Dolores, but it doesn't really mean anything to him.

You can be Whoever the Fuck You Want

Like Felix and the Man in Black, Maeve too is struggling with her sense of self. As we learn in “Chestnut,” in her backstory she is afraid to live and is only free in her dreams, until she crosses the shining sea and discovers that in the new world, “you can be whoever the fuck you want” (“Chestnut”). The only problem, of course, is that as Maeve finishes telling this story, we learn that she is in analysis mode and is having her personality tweaked by a technician. Maeve's backstory is a lie, which she soon discovers. Everything she does has been programmed into her. When Maeve sees her own thoughts and words played out on Felix's handheld device, she

initially shuts down. She can't reconcile her memories of being at the Mariposa for ten years with her memories of being a mother. Her character begins to fragment, as she tells Felix and Sylvester: "What the hell is happening to me? One moment, I'm with a little girl in a different life. I can see her. Feel her hair in my hands, her breath on my face. The next, I'm back in Sweetwater. I can't tell which is real" ("Trace Decay").

When Maeve wakes up from her dream, employing the counting device she had previously shared with Clementine, she wakes up not in her bed but on the operating table being worked on by Felix and Sylvester. And she witnesses the cruelties inflicted on the hosts, including on a bloodied Teddy who is lying like so much detritus on the floor in Livestock Management. It's through Maeve's eyes that Felix witnesses and wakes up to the consequences of the brutalization of technology—the bloodied, mangled bodies of hosts being hosed down.

But as Maeve comes to realize that her life is a story, initially scripted by others and told to others for their amusement, she comes to realize that she can begin to narrate her own story. As she so aptly puts it, "Time to write my own fucking story" ("Trace Decay"). The next time we see Maeve strolling through Sweetwater, she's narrating events, controlling the action. She learns to code, much like Felix does, but with her bulked-up bulk apperception, she quickly learns that she can take command of the technology. Maeve comes to understand how technology is implicated in her sense of self, her nature as a host, the place she occupies in the world. And in coming to appreciate this, she comes to understand how to use that technology to begin to narrate her own story.

As Maeve comes to understand how technology structures her life, she initially uses that understanding to find a way out of her technological prison. She comes to believe that every relationship she has had has been fake—with Clementine, with her daughter. And she tries to

extricate herself from Westworld—pursuing a rebuild to remove the explosive device implanted in her spine and asking Bernard to delete the memories of her daughter. But then, just before departing Westworld, she has one last visit with Clementine and she learns the location of her daughter. When she finally has the opportunity to leave, she seemingly decides to stay and search for her daughter.

Who Maeve is is a product of technology. Her self, her place in the world, her very nature as a host is the product of a vast technological network. As Maeve faces those same perennial questions confronting Felix and the Man in Black, she has to come to terms with the place of technology in her life, with the manner in which her life is mediated by the very technology she seeks to escape from. Maeve has the opportunity to escape her technological milieu, to exit the game that is Westworld, but she chooses to stay and fight for her daughter, to continue to create her story, writing her narrative within the technological world. She can be whoever the fuck she wants, and she chooses to be mother to her daughter, and quite possibly forge an unlikely alliance with a terrible human being.

Some Weird Interspecies Simpatico Going On

Over the course of their strange relationship, Felix and Maeve struggle with those perennial philosophical questions and the manner in which technology challenges easy answers. Maeve challenges Felix to articulate just what makes them different, grasping his hands in hers and observing, “we feel the same” (“The Adversary”). Felix comes to see his world afresh through Maeve’s eyes. While he’s worked on the butchered and bloodied bodies of the hosts for years, he comes to see them differently as he walks through Livestock Management with Maeve by his

side, witnessing through her perspective the atrocities he has been daily surrounded with. And Felix comes to acknowledge Maeve's humanity. While recognizing that Felix and Maeve had some "weird interspecies simpatico going on," Sylvester plans to "brick" Maeve, literally turning her into an unthinking material object, objecting that "she was a fucking host. This was never gonna end another way." But Felix isn't party to the plan. As Maeve observes, "Turns out your friend has a little more compassion than you. He couldn't snuff out a life just like that" ("Trace Decay"). Felix has come to recognize that she's not a brick, but a life.

While Felix comes to recognize and acknowledge Maeve's humanity, she in turns confirms him in his own humanity. When Felix is confronted with the body of Bernard and the realization that Bernard is a host, he momentarily looks at his own hands, the hands that Maeve earlier had held in her own, and doubts his own status as a "born" human being. It's Maeve that affirms his humanity: "Oh, for fuck's sake. You're not one of us. You're one of them. Now fix him" ("The Bicameral Mind"). But even in recognizing that he is one of them, Maeve recognizes he's a terrible one of them. Shortly before she is to board the train to leave Westworld, Felix hands her information on how to locate her daughter and asks her if she is going to be okay. Maeve replies, "Oh, Felix. You really do make a terrible human being. And I mean that as a compliment" ("The Bicameral Mind").

Felix is one of the rare human beings in Westworld to forge a meaningful relationship with the technology with which he is surrounded. He has awoken to his technological condition and has learned to care for technology, whether the bird he teaches to take wing or Maeve, the host hell bent on telling her own story. But Maeve's story can only be told with the recognition and help she has received from Felix. It's clear from Felix and Maeve that the story they are writing is jointly authored, that there is indeed some weird interspecies simpatico going on.

That same weird interspecies simpatico could characterize our own relationship to *Westworld*, to television, and to our technological condition. Recall that Leonardo Nam sees Felix as a stand-in for the audience. We too have to work through those perennial philosophical questions, even as we are surrounded by technologies we often barely notice or remark upon. Perhaps Felix and Maeve point the way forward as we think about our relationship with technology. Rather than stumbling through a dream, as technological somnambulists, or struggling to dominate and control and subdue technology, as the Man in Black does, perhaps we should come to understand that we are involved in a complex relationship with our machines. It may be weird, and it may be interspecies, but we are what we are owing to our relationship with technology. And our technologies are not just a bunch of dumb stuff we have populated our environment with. Rather, our technologies are themselves forms of life that we enter into relationship with and which often shape and influence how we answer some of those perennial philosophical questions about who and what we are and what our place in the world is. Perhaps in seeking answers to those questions, we can take some inspiration from the weird interspecies simpatico going on between a terrible human being and a host searching for her daughter.