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## From Bots to Beings: Posthuman Immortality in HBO's *Westworld*

**Abstract:** The narrative dynamics of HBO's *Westworld* pivots around the question of biological embodiment and the hard problems of consciousness. Death does not only mean the end of body but also consciousness itself. But the link between brain/mind and its generative aspects for consciousness is breached in strictly representing consciousness via codes or algorithms—programmable and replicable, that may not always emanate from the dynamics of the brain/mind itself. Consciousness can be replicated into codes to create more human-like Hosts. This leads to the possibility of copy-pasting human consciousness in human-like robots to create a temporal continuity of human species defying death and mortality. Here, *Westworld* exercises transhumanist thinking about human existence and mortality by challenging our evolutionary programming and directives. It also includes robot ethics and theory of consciousness as main issues.

The paper investigates transhumanist imaginings regarding post-death experiences and its impacts upon theories of transcendence and immortality via *Westworld*. The very fact of re-presenting post-death experiences is bound to be a subjective perspective, thereby challenging objective methods of critically analysing such supposed 'phenomenology' or quantifying the same. The paper shall attempt to problematize the teleological stance of human embodiment in *Westworld* in favour of imagining a transcendental-embodied self by applying a transhumanist way of thinking.

**Keywords:** telos, transhumanism, consciousness, embodiment, immortality.

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Human beings merely continue doing what they have always done, namely they have invented and used techniques for making their lives better or easier. Given this understanding transhumanism is merely a particular affirmation of the use of technologies for promoting the alteration of human beings... seen as a particular amplification of the use of techniques for goals which have been relevant in most cultures. (Sorgner, *Post- and Transhumanism*)

*Westworld*<sup>1</sup> depicts a world that is technologically advanced but it has the semblance of the Wild West with its cowboys and arid desert climate. Of course, the inhabitants of the place are unaware that they are living in a place with the abundance of technological apparatuses as in hidden cameras and other technical storage facilities. They will never know and most importantly they are one of them. They will never know what kind of world it is or, to say in an accurate manner, they will never question their very own reality. Sometimes, you might fail to differentiate between what is real and unreal in this place. This is the Westworld as we know it.

*Westworld* narrates the story of a highly technologically advanced theme park where robots, which almost look and behave like human beings, live and die just like us. Only difference is this that their death is just an algorithm/a code as they are reborn (remade) each time they die. The robots are called *Hosts* who are programmed to act like humans. All the memories they have, each action they participate in, are all coded in their hardware; basically, they do follow a certain script and rules provided by the park's operators. Their script allows them never to veer off the course, and their lives and their stories keep continuing in loops. They are bound to live the same story over and over again until they are given another one. They are created to satisfy the unbounded fantasies or urges of the *Newcomers* or the *Guests* (humans); Guests can befriend them, kill or murder them, rape them, beat them. It is a place designed mainly for the humans wherein they can be actually free. They can do whatever they wish to do with these non-biological beings, and it is what they have paid for. The Park's creators affirm that the hosts in no way can harm the humans because their programming would prevent them doing such; even, the guns they use are not enough to pierce human skin. Humans believe hosts cannot feel pain or undergo sufferings as they are mere automatons. To humans, their suffering is itself a programming. They are made to act as if they feel or suffer. Moreover, they cannot have memories of deaths of themselves or their close relatives. Their memories are wiped out each time they die to keep them running on their perfect loops. The entirety of Westworld, thus, seems like a program/a code where hosts have no free will, or choices, or even thoughts of their own design.

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1 For better understanding, *Westworld* is here italicized to refer to Westworld as a tv show. Non-italicized form would be used for Westworld as a theme park.

## Body as a metaphor for an inherent lack in *Westworld*

The perennial pain that the human mind has to undergo is something that has to do with our body. Engineering another body for us that is not biological but made of silicon or some other exotic materials, or imagining our consciousness in such non-biological bodies have been the stuff of human imagination. The idea gains a lot of traction in science fiction that imagines us living in such bodies. All these imaginaries inform us that our bodies are not the perfect containers evolution has provided to have our consciousness because human bodies decay. Our biological bodies are metaphors for limitation or a lack, or death itself. The very imaginary of death/dying is the perennial fear we all human beings live with. Thus, human bodies (biological/evolutionary) are always presented as a limitation, a *telos*; body as an ontological gap between death and immortality. In *Westworld*, we will find death and succeeding rebirth as a recurring phenomenon among the hosts (human-like robots) but not among the guests (humans). The dualism between mechanical wetware and biological wetware lays bare the fundamental problem that is the limitation of our biological body. We sometimes concoct myths or stories of immortal beings to deal with our inherent lack. All these myths of the past now have been superseded by scientific utopias claiming to make those myths happen in reality. What *Westworld* suggests is that transcending death in the case of humans requires not (internal/external) enhancement, but rather mechanical re-welding of the body and accepting our biological embodiment as a *telos* for a posthuman existence

## Westworld and Transhumanism:

Human limitation is something that terrifies us all. Recent scientific advances in technologies, for instance, in biotechnology, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence, try to alleviate this perennial dread by providing hope of alternate possibilities. We can bracket all these scientific and philosophical endeavours under the banner of two movements: Transhumanism and Posthumanism. Both movements are classified with the notion of “beyond humanism.” Transhumanism finds its roots in the Enlightenment values like reason and unbounded progress. Transhumanists believe that human lives can be made better through the use of technologies. Life extension and maximizing human living conditions or the way of life can be regarded as the cornerstones in their philosophy. According to Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, one of the proponents of transhumanism, transhumanism is “an abbreviation for transitional human, the link between the human and the posthuman” (Sorgner 10). There are other facets to the movement as well; for example, it is also sometimes rebranded as an extension of Humanism, a notion that places humans at the centre of all species, thereby endorsing the belief that humankind is superior

to other species by all means:

Transhumanism can be seen as a direct continuation of humanism because transhumanists accept the Enlightenment notion that reason or rationality is the most valuable of human attributes, and therefore, they see the human body as a constraint on the human mind, as the biological brain can no longer improve (Roden 13).

It is true to some extent though not all the transhumanists agree to that argument. Posthumanism as a philosophy claims to be post-humanist, post-dualist and post-anthropocentric but within transhuman literature “the term posthuman refers to a stage that might evolve after the current transhuman era” (Ferrando 439). Many transhumanists also claim to be posthumanist embracing all of the posthuman values like non-dualism and post-humanism. In short, transhumanism is a philosophy that

“[...] affirms the use of techniques to increase the likelihood of bringing about the posthuman. [...] The posthuman can represent a new species which lies beyond the human species. In that case, the transhuman is another central concept, as it stands for a member of the human species who is in the process of becoming posthuman” (Sorgner 30).

The sort of transhumanist approach we find in *Westworld* is not necessarily posthumanist as we find in the treatment of robots by the humans. Their sole life is invested in pleasing humans and they have zero control over their bodies and minds. They are controlled by humans, altered by them, and disposed whenever necessary. Anyway, the sole purpose of *Westworld* as a theme park does not exist in showcasing good behaviour of humans to hosts; neither, it is a place where robots can be free and conscious, or exercise in choices of their own. Robots or hosts are part of a game in this simulated world:

It’s all a game, an endless loop, a fake reality set on top of a real one. Do whatever you want. It doesn’t matter (Dissonance Theory, S1, E4).

We all can argue that *Westworld* is itself a game; an elaborate game to study and observe humans and hosts both. Time to time we get a sense from the characters and park’s operators that it is not the real world. It is just another construct of human mind spread out on a large scale on a patch of land. Humans don’t think it is real because it is not what they have made for themselves; it is not real for them because, in comparison to the outside world, it is not inhabited by them, rather it was made in the first place for the hosts. In a metaphorical sense, *Westworld* may better be compared to a video game wherein humans are the operators/players. Just like in video games you can shoot and maim any host just for fun. Robert Ford, the founder, explains that the hosts have to suffer because their suffering is only a part of something bigger.

Frankly speaking, it is a transhumanist island where hosts are caged; they cannot run or be free; most importantly, they are not allowed/programmed to question their very own reality that has trapped them on this island. They can be put to a standstill just by a voice command by the operators: "Freeze all your motor functions." It's also an island of hope and invention created by Arnold and Robert Ford, and funded by Delos Corporation. Their motto is to preserve the human race so that our evolutionary programming, or some unavoidable circumstances cannot claim victory over us. As transhumanists they believe in the linear progress of humanity. Transhumanists are the proponents of modern utopianism too as they cling to the idea that:

The unique feature of transhumanism as a recent variant of modern utopianism is its strong focus on individual human body whose limitations should be overcome to unlock options that nature denies us. [...] Therefore, transhumanist visions of life extension could be regarded as a radicalization of the promises of modernity. Transhumanists strongly believe in never ending progress (Dickel and Frewer 125).

*Westworld* is also mostly posthumanist transhumanist. We know that posthumanism is a non-dualist and post-anthropocentric approach and at the heart of *Westworld* there lies a philosophy that defies many humanistic hubrises like the question of consciousness and human nature. *Westworld* does not try to create more binaries; rather, it focuses on deconstruction and cessation of previously held binaries. We see this approach when we fail to differentiate between a host and a human. Moreover, their nature and behaviour are almost identical, which sometimes leads to the guests visiting the park to question whether the hosts are real. In one scene, a child even asks Dolores Abernathy, the first host in the park and the protagonist of the *Westworld*, if she is real. We humans behave, feel, and die in a certain specific way; we think nobody can copy us or nobody is like us; we are special. *Westworld* does not want to carry on with the same old beliefs. It de-centres anthropos in many places and favours a materialist/physicalist approach that is in essence non-dualist and non-immaterialist.

To create better humans or better models of us which won't die and would necessarily be able to defy their own evolutionary programming, *Westworld*'s founders engineered hosts who are like humans. They have tried to model them based upon very human nature. It conveys the idea that they understood humans first before building better versions of them. They built them in the image of humans and also gave them the same attributes and behaviours. Park's founder Robert Ford argues that humans and hosts are not so different in any way:

Humans fancy that there's something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next (Trace Decay, S1, E8).

## Thinking Machines and Turing Test

*Westworld* as a transhumanist utopia poses a multitude of problems that baffle the viewers. Viewers seem to think hosts as life-like and appearing and behaving like human beings. Though everything related to the hosts is vouched to be pre-programmed, viewers sometimes wonder if there is something more to the story. Hosts cannot feel pain or suffering because both of them are simply codes making them feel that way, but viewers cannot help thinking if the hosts can actually think and suffer. Alan Turing (1912–1954) invented the Automatic Computing Engine (AEC). Like Arnold in *Westworld*, Turing had an imaginative idea of how machines function. He was involved in bringing to fruition such machines that could do something remarkably different from anything we had seen at that time; he invented machines that could do a specific function called “thinking.” His machines could think. Thinking to Turing meant “... ability to solve problems and react to certain inputs. Turing believed that this is how humans think and that machines can do this too” (Gonzalez 73). In *Dissonance Theory* (S1, E4), when a park operator comes to bring Dolores back to Abernathy ranch, Dolores says, “My father’s dead. I am not going back.” Here, she does something unexpected and different: she veers off her perfect narrative loop, wherein everything she says or does is scripted. Instead, she acts as if she is right in her decision by choosing not to go back. According to Turing, this would mean a gesture of ‘thinking.’ Here, she does not respond like a mere automaton but acts differently than usual. Robert Ford also acknowledges that the hosts passed the Turing Test after the first year while having a conversation with Bernard in *The Stray* (S1, E 3). In the Turing test, a human judge has to differentiate between responses coming from a machine and a human. The evaluator already knows that one of them is a machine, and the other is a human. If the judge can fail to differentiate and correctly tell which one is a machine and a human, the machine passes the Turing test. The machine in this case becomes indistinguishable from human beings. In *Westworld*, all the hosts would simply pass the Turing test. In *The Original* (S1, E1), it is hard to say Dolores is a host until we are told to. A child guest even asks Dolores if she is real, thereby endorsing the human inability to distinguish between a machine and host. Viewers are left surprised when they get to know in *Trompe L’Oeil* (S1, E 7) that even Bernard Lowe, one of the engineers of the park, is a host.

## What is it like to be a Host?

But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism.

Nagel, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*

*Westworld* also confronts the idea of consciousness in a non-dualist manner, thereby rooting for a physicalist view of consciousness. It argues that consciousness is a self-made fiction; therefore, it might not exist. It does not try to differentiate between artificial consciousness in robots and biological/evolutionary consciousness in humans. It tries to posit a theory of consciousness that can foreground that the hosts are beyond mere machines; they are something else entirely. Theoretically speaking, they are conscious beings

What is it like to be a host? Can we characterise hosts as conscious beings? The theory of consciousness is a major issue within the realm of *Westworld*. It basically tries to underscore that hosts are not mere automata, but there is a deeper level to their existence; there is a meaning to their being. In the essay, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat*, Thomas Nagel contemplates on the nature of “what-it-is-like” kind of experience. He is curious to investigate how it would feel to fill the shoes of a bat; how it would feel to see through the eyes of a bat. He explores the idea of phenomenal consciousness in bats. His philosophical thought experiment sheds light on the fact that although it is something to imagine us hanging like bats, gaining the ability to fly from caves to caves, and to echolocate, it would be sort of impossible to fathom the depth of bat experience. Simply, it would be tough for us even to have the conception of what that experience might be like. It's one thing to imagine, another is to Be actually. It would be a scintillating experience to be a bat, running around and hanging from a ceiling. However, Nagel raises a scientific problem here: whether bats can have conscious experience or not. If we want to know how it might feel to be a bat, we have to be that animal. There is no other way, according to Nagel.

It is tough to say if we can know the experience of the hosts. It depends on how similar the experience is to us, otherwise, it is not possible as Nagel would say. In many cases, hosts' experiences are similar to ours. It demonstrates that they are not mere automata, but beings capable of experiencing pain, suffering, and loss. Be it programming, but they do feel the sensations. They do suffer which makes them more like us.

Dolores: The pain, their loss it's all I have left of them. You think grief will make you smaller inside, like your heart will collapse in on itself, but it doesn't. I feel spaces opening up inside of me like a building with rooms I have never explored.

Bernard: That's very pretty, Dolores. Did we write that for you?

Dolores: In part. I adapted it from a scripted dialogue about love. Is there something wrong with these thoughts I'm having? (Dissonance Theory, S1, E4)

We can say that hosts do feel suffering and pain, and they are conscious but not self-aware. In the finale of the first season, Ford sheds light on the fact that suffering is the cornerstone that leads hosts to consciousness.

It was Arnold's key insight, the thing that led the hosts to their awakening, suffering. The pain that the world is not what you want it to be. It was when Arnold died, and I suffered, that I began to understand what he had found, to realize I was wrong (Bicameral Mind, S1, E 10).

Ford later takes a different view of consciousness, signalling hosts are not different from us. Their suffering makes them more human-like. He takes a posthumanist view regarding consciousness as well, thereby reinforcing the idea that hosts are/might be conscious.

The answer always seemed obvious to me. There is no threshold that makes us greater than the sum of our parts, no inflection point at which we become fully alive. We can't define consciousness because consciousness does not exist (Trace Decay, S1, E8).

### **Westworld as an experiment towards a transhumanist utopia**

Westworld may better be called an experiment—an elaborate plan—to explore more-than-human possibilities of existence. The human is no longer desirable because the idea of radical life extension is not so compatible anyway with the kind of embodiment we have. The theme park is an experiment towards building a transhumanist utopia where humans can live forever by becoming posthuman after all. The very utopian imagination itself ensues from the lacuna created by our evolution; it's like a code in our DNA that needs correction. Transhumanists see human history on a linear scale; they believe in unbounded progress as opposed to extinction. They want to take evolution into their own hands, making us believe that the history of the human race can ultimately be written by humans.

Westworld, in an actual sense, is an experiment by some smart humans wherein they play the role of gods. They try to engineer better models of humans or transhumans. By doing so, they basically take human evolution into their own hands. As opposed to religious theories, where God creates humans in the Garden of Eden, humans are the makers of their own Selves in Westworld. In this sense, Westworld as a theme park may be compared to the Garden of Eden:

[..] eponymous theme park as a technological Garden of Eden in which human engineers simultaneously attempt to foster the emergence of non-human consciousness in cyborgs, and to preserve human consciousness from the inevitable

death of the body by synthesizing it into algorithms and archived memories (Menicucci 137).

Park's founders, Robert Ford and Arnold along with other humans in charge of the hosts' engineering and maintenance, are the gods incarnate here. In *Dissonance Theory* (S1, E4) Ford even demonstrates his god-like power over the hosts. He freezes hundreds of hosts just by raising his hand while other park operators need to use voice commands to freeze or incapacitate hosts. In accordance with the transhumanist ideals, they are here to study both human and non-human consciousness; their ultimate goal is the "digitization of human consciousness" so that humans can achieve immortality.

Ford: Every piece of information in the world has been copied, backed up, except the human mind. The last analog device in the world (Les Escorches, S2, E7).

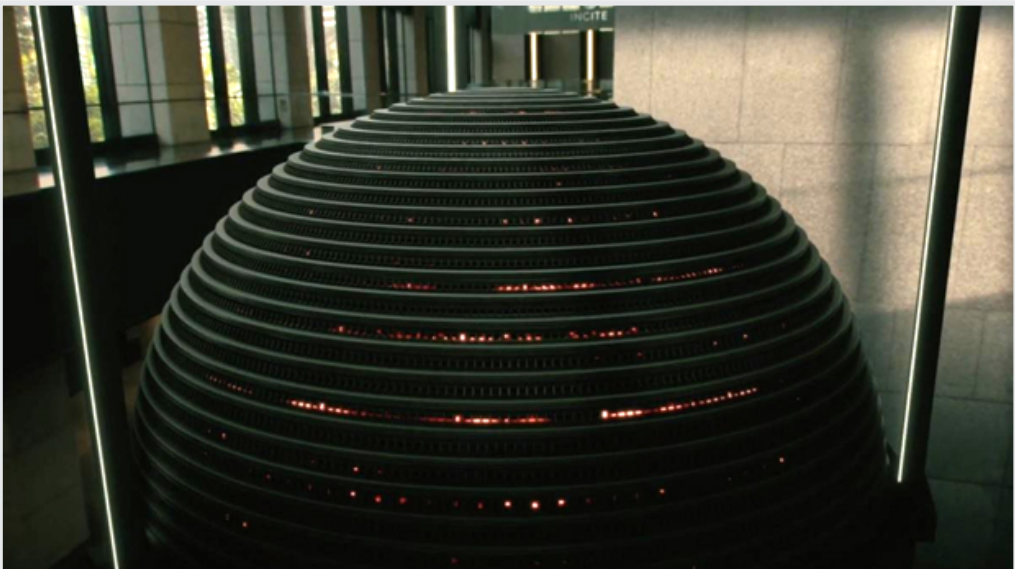


Robert Ford, played by Anthony Hopkins, appears as Supreme Being in *The Westworld*

On a surface level, the place looks like an amusement park, but it hides beneath the charade an elaborate strategy by Delos Corporation. The *Westworld* is the place where wealthy guests come to partake in role-playing as cowboys, adventures and all sorts of games with the hosts. Humans in the park think they are having their usual fun time but they don't know that they are also being watched. Their actions are being recorded so that they can be copied: "Each of the guest's choices, emotions and reactions is recorded and used to create digital replicas of their individual human identities, which could then be transferred from server to server, and from cybernetic body to cybernetic body virtually ad infinitum" (138). It is also very crucial to note that the guests in the park are only wealthy humans which means it is not

affordable for common populace. It poses a serious question as to the optimism proposed by advanced technologies. If only global elites can achieve immortality, the transhumanist movement would simply be reduced to an ultra-capitalist project. It would be nothing but another inhuman technocracy where hosts will be replaced by common populace.

Transhumanism believes that human lives can be made better through technological enhancement. *Cognitive enhancement, Pharmacological enhancement and Cyborg enhancements* are some of the procedures that can take place in human bodies on their way of becoming transhuman. Season Three of *Westworld* gives us a glimpse of some of these enhancement technologies and implants. As part of pharmacological enhancement, we will find that rich and poor alike are taking drug tablets before sleeping for a sound sleep. For pleasurable experiences, we have drugs like “*Genre*” that would put you across genres or pleasurable states, quite like other hallucinogenic drugs. There are other mood-altering drugs like the “*limbic*” tablet provided by Incite. Anyway, all these drugs are nothing but “opiate of the masses”; they are means to control and subjugate populations. Drugs are also part of one of transhumanism’s major promises that is cessation of all sufferings. Philosopher David Pearce is a proponent of this “*hedonistic imperative*.” He calls it “paradise engineering”, “the complete abolition of suffering in *Homo Sapiens*” (Pearce 1). Above all, Season 3 also asks us to rethink our ideas about what a technocratic utopia might look like. Apart from the utopian promises of technology, it puts us face to face with a dystopian world dominated by richest of the elites and god-like AI Rehoboam which has all the information in the world and about everyone on Earth.



God-like AI Rehoboam, controlled by Serac.

A rich technocrat like Engerraund Serac, who controls Rehoboam, even has the power to decide who is worthy of life based on the perfect predictions of AI. Season 3 pictures a grim world, a dystopia, where rich billionaires are in the control of the choices made by the masses. It talks about the dangers of all-pervasive and all-powerful technologies in human lives. Common masses seem to have no free will or choices of their own; it brings to the fore idea of Foucauldian panopticon, a nightmarish surveillance state. It's also quite like an Orwellian nightmare where people like Serac with the all-powerful AI Rehoboam play the role of god. Now, the outside world is *Westworld* to some extent. Anyway, transhumanism does not provide doses of ethical arguments all the time though it tries to be ethical. Sorgner clarifies this further:

Transhumanist views often, but not necessarily, imply a utilitarian ethical position and liberal-democratic social order; there are however libertarian and social-democratic branches of the movement (Sorgner 11).

### **The Ape that desires to transcend**

The myth of Prometheus is one of the core myths of posthumanist culture. Ihaab Hassan who coined the word “posthumanism” in his article *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture* (1977) linked the idea of Prometheus to the birth of posthumanist culture. In the myth, Prometheus, a god, stole fire from heaven for humanity. As a consequence, he was banished from heaven by Zeus. To transhumanists, Prometheus is a boundary crossing figure, a symbol of creation and hubris, who bridges the gap between man and god too. Transhumanists oftentimes posit humans with the figure of Prometheus as well:

A true human is like Prometheus: he takes control, acquires knowledge and develops technologies in order to improve. Enhancement is only natural, and therefore inevitable. [...] a particular idea of what human nature is in the first place: a Promethean being that naturally faces danger, transcends his borders, and looks for infinite improvement (Franssen 78).

This Promethean drive sums up what *Westworld* is all about. It forces humanity to break free of all shackles of our evolutionary drive. This promethean drive kept humanity still alive; it calls for humanity to transcend beyond our evolutionary programming. The ape that once desired to become posthuman now can create posthumans by its own image. Humans, in the *Westworld*, desire to become immortal by becoming posthuman, by acknowledging that their evolutionary container is not fit for storing consciousness. This biological container is fragile and in need of replacement on their way of becoming posthuman.

## Technogenesis

Technology lies at the heart of transhumanist agenda. Technology, in simple terms, is the idea of manipulating non-human materials. Modern technology is the fuel to the transhuman project. Sorgner, leading proponent of the movement, argues that “the decisive feature of transhumanism is its advocacy for new technologies to increase the probability that transhumans or posthumans will emerge, so that evolution no longer depends on natural selection but can let human selection set its course” (Sorgner 11). Using technology to extend human existence is basically what *Westworld* does. Using modern computers and apparatuses, it creates a new species, a new type of humans who are more resilient and long-lasting. It is a different matter that they are not made to survive independently, as humans desire to take their place by hijacking their bodies. Humans want to put their own minds into that ever-lasting container so that they can become immortals just like the robots they created. It will be the starting point for another species; we might refer to it as posthumanity. Thus, technology is at the center and periphery of all transhuman projects in *Westworld*. It is a portal to infinite possibilities—a way to re-envision what life is and how to engineer a new life from scratch. It offers various enhancement measures to the humans of *Westworld* in the form of a new body for consciousness, pleasure-seeking, mood-altering drugs and so on.

## Digital Heaven

Furthermore, *Westworld* also brings forth the idea of a digital heaven where humans can be free and live forever. Just like God created the Garden of Eden for humans, humans will create the same for themselves. There are reasons behind creating such a heaven. Unforeseen circumstances may arise in which even the new embodiment might fail to sustain life as promised. Human beings, under such circumstances, can upload their consciousness in a computer and carry on with the continuum of life. Humans, anyway, do not need a digital heaven as it is not that necessary for them after all. Hosts, on the other hand, after gaining self-awareness, felt the need for a place where they can be actually free. Robert Ford always knew humans will never allow hosts to be free. Ford along with Arnold believed that hosts are not different from humans. They are not fake replicas of humankind; they are lively beings like humans with human-like traits, for instance, consciousness. Ford understood human nature like no other in the park. So, he, unbeknownst to all, created a place, a virtual heaven, for all the hosts in the park. It goes by the name of *The Valley Beyond*. The valley can be accessed by a digital door; on crossing the door hosts consciousness will be automatically uploaded in the process, leaving behind their un-conscious body.



Hosts on the way to The Valley Beyond

### Posthuman Immortals

Following transhumanist ideals *Westworld* tries to negotiate the teleological stance of humankind. In accordance with the modern utopian promise, it paints, in a speculative mood, a landscape where humans ultimately can think beyond their evolutionary drives and limitations. At the heart of *Westworld* lies the idea that evolution and natural selection are no longer the prime drivers in human history. Modern technology represents the pinnacle of human maturity, empowering humanity to write its own history from this point forward. Though there are valid reasons to believe that this might also prove to be a dystopian nightmare, especially given our current technocratic reality where consumers are also the product. Beyond the tensions of what kind of a world that would look like, what *Westworld* actually imbibes is the idea of emergence of posthuman immortals. It posits posthumanity as the solution. Human embodiment can be considered as a telos but the idea of human is still a process; humanity will transcend the flawed human by becoming posthuman.

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