

Robots of the West

## ***Westworld's* claim is that memory leads to consciousness, which leads to violence.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue



Teddy (James Marsden) and Delores (Evan Rachel Wood) as robots on the TV show *Westworld*. © 2016 HBO. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

I was trying to explain the new HBO drama *Westworld* to a friend. “It’s about human consciousness,” I said. “And about whether or not memory leads to new possibilities or only traps us in cycles of violence. And there are really interesting things going on with the whole western fantasy setting.”

“Wait,” she interrupted, “is that the cowboy robot one?”

*Westworld* takes place in a futuristic western fantasy theme park where the extremely wealthy pay to interact with “hosts”—lifelike robots who mimic human sentience by enacting elaborate narrative “loops” with room for improvisation.

Guests have permission to do just about anything they like to these hosts, who cannot seriously harm them in turn. The result is horrific violence. After every encounter, the park's creative team wipes the robots' memories, so they can start the loop again.

In the second episode, a longtime guest at the park known as the Man in Black (Ed Harris) sums up why the park is better than the real world. The real world, he says, is chaos. The details of everyday life are meaningless. But in the park, every detail connects back in some way to every other, and this creates meaning. This is also true of *Westworld*. Like the Man in Black, viewers are invited to pour over small visual clues, piece together fragmented timelines, and reinterpret what's happened in light of new evidence presented.

After visiting the park for 30 years, the Man in Black becomes dissatisfied with the fantasies of the loop and begins to search for "the maze," a secret narrative or game left in the park by Arnold, one of the park's creators. The maze appears to be a tool to provoke robot consciousness. Once conscious, the robots would be able to override their programming and exact revenge for the violence inflicted on them by the guests. The Man in Black believes the maze will lead to "real stakes" and "real violence"; in other words, he's looking for a confrontation with the robots that he has raped and killed—and who now remember that they've been raped and killed.

The show's claim is that memory leads to consciousness, which leads to violence. Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), the park's other creator, suggests that there is no tipping point between artificial and real consciousness. All consciousness, he insists, is living inside a loop. The only real difference between robots and humans is memory. Humans remember their past loops and must suffer the consequences of those memories, while the robots are spared that pain.

It is not just compassion, of course, that leads Ford to wipe clean his robots' hard drives—it is also the desire for control. If the robots remembered the horrors the guests inflict on them, they would break down, self-destruct, or mutiny. Memory would mean not only pain for the robots that wake up, but a first step toward freedom and self-determination.

As depressing as this connection between memory and violence is, a possibly hopeful feature of *Westworld* is the choice of the American West as a setting. On the one hand, the history of the American West and the legends invented about that

history come with scripts about adventure, imperialism, violence, lawlessness, and self-determination. They are their own kind of narrative loop.

On the other hand, by weaving this backdrop of real, human history into futuristic fantasy, *Westworld* reminds us that we are constrained in our self-determination by other people. We are entangled in their lives and memories, whether we are birthed from a womb or built in a lab. Figuring out how to live within these loops and simultaneously rewrite them is the most pressing collective work we face—in real life as much as in fiction.

Confronting that demand is a steep order for a TV show, and it remains to be seen if the show can meet it. *Westworld* is as challenging as the work of trying to interpret it. Did I mention it has cowboy robots?

*A version of this article appears in the January 4 print edition under the title “Robots of the West.”*