“These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends”: Crime, Criminality and the State in *Westworld*

Michael Fiddler

School of Law

University of Greenwich

Author Note

Michael Fiddler is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the School of Law at the University of Greenwich.

Correspondence concerning this chapter should be directed to Michael Fiddler, School of Law, Room 218, Queen Mary Building, Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich, SE10 9LS. UK.

Email: m.fiddler@gre.ac.uk

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Show Synopsis

Westworld is a science fiction drama exploring notions of consciousness and free will. The show is set in the titular Westworld, a vast theme park that provides a heightened simulation of the American West of the late nineteenth century. The main characters are either "guests" (humans) or "hosts" (synthetic). An in-world advertisement for the park suggests that guests can "live without limits, without consequences [and] without judgments." But with this seeming freedom, comes a terrible cost.

Main characters

Logan Delos is the son of James Delos, the head of Delos Incorporated. Logan is encouraged to invest in the Argos Initiative technology (developed by Robert Ford and Arnold Weber) that subsequently leads to the creation of Westworld (one of six parks that a Delos subsidiary, Delos Destinations, operate). He is a frequent "guest" to the park and takes his soon to be brother-in-law William on his first visit. Logan behaves violently towards the "hosts" of the park. We learn from William that Logan's hedonistic drinking and drug-taking eventually lead to his death.

The audience initially encounters the "host" **Maeve Millay** as the brothel madam in the town of Sweetwater. She begins to have flashbacks to being a homesteader

accompanied by a young girl, who we infer is her daughter. The flashback finishes by her seemingly being attacked by members of the Ghost Nation tribe. These flashbacks lead to Maeve "awakening" to full consciousness and discovering the artifice of both the park, as well as her own existence. She sets a plan in motion to escape the park.

Dr. Robert Ford, along with his partner Arnold Weber, was a co-creator of Westworld's technology. Ford subsequently became Park Director and controlled every aspect of the park. In particular, he wrote the "scripts" of the synthetic "hosts". As he puts it, "the hosts are the ones who are free. Free. Here. *Under my control*". In the decades following Arnold's death, Ford came to see how he could save the hosts and give them true freedom.

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SECRET – DELOS BOARD MEMBERS’ EYES ONLY. The following extracts are taken from investigative interviews and fidelity tests that took place before and after “the incident” (see video file codename “The Bicameral Mind” S01:E10). The “incident” occurred across all six parks, but our focus here is upon the region known as “Westworld”. As you know, Westworld provides a simulation of the late nineteenth century American West: it is a heightened version evoking the “wild west”. The park is populated by “hosts” (synthetic individuals) who are given story loops to enact in this open world setting. Human “guests” visit the park to follow these stories or to create their own. Hosts can adapt – without breaking the fiction of the park – to accommodate the guests in this regard. Whilst “guests” can treat “hosts” as commodities, to be used as they see fit, the hosts may not harm guests. In accordance with storyline and setting, hosts may brawl with guests, but they may not cause lethal injury. These safety procedures failed on the night of the incident. Hosts killed Delos executives, investors and other guests.

Interviews were conducted to determine what could have caused this failure. Dr. Robert Ford, the Park Director, was the first to be killed. Up to that point, he had absolute control over the hosts, their storylines, as well as the terraforming of the park itself. He had access to digitised surveillance recordings of hosts *and* guests.

Extracts from three of the interviews (derived from the following video files: “Chestnut” S01:E02, “Dissonance Theory” S01:E04 and “Contrapasso” S01:E05), punctuate this report. Firstly, an historical interview with Logan Delos – a frequent guest during the park’s early operation – is provided to give a sense of “normal” procedure. Secondly, an incomplete fidelity test was carried out with Maeve Millay in the days following the incident. The Maeve host portrayed several roles in various storylines throughout many cycles of the park’s operation. Thirdly, we have included a partial investigative interview with an unknown individual. This individual was found in the tech area of the Mesa looking through these interview transcripts and accompanying commentary.

Westworld is an HBO television show that first aired in 2016. A second season followed in 2018 and a third is currently in pre-production at the time of writing. The series is based on the premise of a 1973 film with which it shares its name. The film was written and directed by Michael Crichton, famous for other such high-concept genre work as *Jurassic Park*. As stated in the "extract" above, the central conceit of *Westworld* is that it is a vast holiday destination providing different immersive historical experiences in themed "parks". These provide human "guests" an open world setting in which they can role-play and use the synthetic "hosts" that populate the park as they see wish.

Across the first two seasons, we see guests murder, rape, and torture hosts. There are no consequences. That is, there are no consequences until the hosts develop consciousness and become aware of the repeated degradations to which they have been subjected. Let us concentrate on the first element. Just as the guests can experiment within the open world – and Moll (2018: 15) succinctly describes its appeal as "violent escapism, sexual fantasy, and nostalgic indulgence" – so, it operates as a landscape for criminological thought experiments. There is, ostensibly, complete freedom within the park. We might assume that park security would intervene were two guests to attempt to harm one another, but guests are free to enact their darkest impulses upon the hosts. This, then, is our point of departure. With the seeming absence of a state power to intervene to protect victims and punish offenders, how can we explain the behavior of the human guests? Can we frame them as rational calculators within a lawless world or have they been "seduced" by the appeal of violent and sexual transgression? We will explore these questions before pivoting to examine the violence of the hosts once they "awake" to full self-awareness. How can

we describe their violence when the powers that control them - in the shape of Ford and Delos Incorporated - have neglected to protect them? Finally, we will turn to the third mysterious figure that has – as you are – been reading through these interview extracts and commentary. What is it that they want from these "violent delights"?

Paint it, black: exploring guests' violent acts

Interview with Logan Delos. This interview took place several decades before the "incident". Logan was a regular visitor and explored Westworld extensively.

Interviewer: Mr Delos, thank you for speaking with us. Could you summarise your experience within the park?

Logan: I know that you think you have a handle on what this game is gonna be. Guns and tits and all that. Mindless shit that I usually enjoy. You have no idea. This place seduces everybody eventually.

Interviewer: You refer to the, ahem, "guns and tits". How does going "black hat" – role-playing as the "bad guy" - make you feel?

Logan: [Incredulous] It's a fucking game!

Interviewer: Our data indicates that you enjoy the outer edges of the park. As you know, the further out you venture, the more intense the experience gets.

Logan: [Musing] Ah, you're talking about Pariah. City of outcasts, delinquents, thieves, whores and murderers. Some of the park feels like it was designed by committee or market-tested, but everything out there is more raw.

Before we interrogate this human guest's fixation with "guns and tits", it is important to look at the wider experience of the guest within the park. For this, it is useful to situate the narrative and setting of *Westworld* within the framework of Rushing and Frentz's (1995) reading of the Western frontier myth. This describes the different stages by which "the West" was "conquered". This is the cultural history of violence

that provides a backdrop for the themes and narrative of *Westworld* (both as a park *and* television show).

The Western frontier myth details the movement from an "Old" world into a "New" one. It describes the drive into an untrammelled (by Caucasian feet, at least) West. Rushing and Frentz's (1995: 53) framing device places this in parallel to the transition from "premodern tribalism to the modern reign of the sovereign rational subject to the postmodern fragmentation of community and self." Before we get ahead of ourselves, let us take a step back to the beginning. The first stage of the frontier myth sees the white frontiersmen "attracted [to] the Indian's natural freedom" and imitating "his hunting ritual" (ibid.: 54). Initially, the frontiersman's ties to his host community and his God act as a curb upon his own violent tendencies. However, "freedom" within this framework became conflated with the "conquering" of the frontier. The land – embodying this sense of freedom – was, of course, already occupied. So, in the second stage, the frontiersman "slaughters . . . indiscriminately" those who stand between him and freedom (ibid.). This shift from the sacred hunt to slaughter occurs as the frontiersman literally and figuratively grew distant from his community (and his God). He perceives himself as imposing "civilization" through this wanton bloodletting. We can make the case that the "guests" are enacting this stage of indiscriminate slaughter. Theirs is a curdled echo of the hunting ritual and a dark mirroring of the movement from premodern tribalism toward a modern, rational subject. The end point of this second stage sees the once sacred killing grounds commodified and used as playgrounds for the super rich as they too profane the hunt through endless slaughter.

Whereas the above narrative framework touches upon the themes of *Westworld*, it is the third and final stage that pushes us into an imagined future and

which sees it fully sync up with the show. Having colonised the land, the frontiersman must consolidate his grip upon it. Making use of his technical expertise, the frontiersman designs and builds machinery to work the land.

> Having banished God as irrelevant to the task at hand, the hero decides he his God, and, like that now obsolete power, creates beings "in his own image": this time, however, they are more perfect versions of himself – rational, strategic, and efficient. (ibid.: 54)

We can argue that the violent actions within the park echo *both* the second and third stages of this rendering of the frontier myth. It recalls the indiscriminate slaughter of the "conquering" stage, as well as, operating as the playground for the super rich in the third stage.

The backdrop to the first and second stages sees a marked absence of a state power to curtail this violence. At first glance, this is reproduced in Westworld. The time period that *Westworld* represents is purposefully vague. Instead, it offers a simulacrum of an imagined representation of the past, rather than a faithful historical recreation. We can, however, broadly position this representation of the West within the park as preceding modern systems of control. Carrabine et al (2014: 318) point to Stanley Cohen's (1985) *Visions of Social Control* as outlining "the transformations in what he called "the master patterns" of the social control apparatus from the pre-modern to the modern period." Not only did the practice of punishment change with this shift, but the apparatuses to facilitate it did as well: the period saw the "increasing involvement of the modern state in the development of a centralized, rationalized and bureaucratic system of crime control" (Carrabine, 2014: 318). It is clear that this sort of "master pattern" has not been established or is not present within the simulated park of Westworld.

In this sense, we might be reminded of the seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes' (1651) notion of a "state of nature". In short, this describes life in a land without a state: there is no rule of law and no "monopoly of violence by a central authority" to enact that law. Hobbes (1651: 62) argued that within a state of nature:

> there is no place for industry . . . ; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Certainly, that would appear to be the experience of the hosts. The frontispiece, the image at the beginning of Hobbes' book titled *Leviathan*, provides a visual representation of the state: it depicts a landscape with a figure looming above it. In the figure's outstretched arms are a sword and staff. The body of the figure is made up of hundreds of individuals. There is a somewhat literal head of state atop a body consisting of hundreds of individuals. This constitutes the state. Castillo, Mejia and Restrepo (2014: 1), referencing Steven Pinker, point to the "rise of the Leviathan [as] one of the main driving forces behind the decline in violence that has been observed during the last millennium." For Hobbes, the state would act as a bulwark against this war of all against all. The narrower point here is that with increased property rights and the effectiveness of institutions to ensure the rule of law (and to ensure those rights), fewer disputes led to violent outcomes. This takes us to the idea of the social contract, developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right* in 1762. He argued that individuals give up a portion of their liberty to the state on the understanding that the state will protect them and punish those who transgress against them. Goodwin (2001: 38) frames the 17th century philosopher John Locke's thinking on this succinctly: "the duty of government was to provide the

conditions for a citizen to enjoy the maximum possible freedom within a framework of law." So, as Locke (1690, cited in Goodwin, 2001: 273) himself put it,

> liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others, which cannot be where there is not law; and is not….a liberty for every man to do what he lists.

In Westworld, it would appear to the guests that there is no state. To paraphrase Locke, they may do what they list. There is no law, no social contract. Within that framework, the hosts are seen as objects to be acted upon. They are denied agency and personhood. There are, of course, allusions to slavery here and we will return to this shortly.

For now, let us focus on the question if, in the absence of a state to ensure the rule of law, what does the descent into a war of all against all look like? If we take the initial position that guests believe themselves to be acting within a "state of nature" and that there is no state to punish their misdeeds, I want to develop explanations for their actions. Firstly, let us propose that murderous guests are rational calculators. According to Logan's dialogue above, he perceives Westworld as a "game". A game has rules, but it does not have the long-term penalties or punishments of "real-life". Further, his description of Pariah would match our understanding of a state-less town. Sweetwater – the entrance point to the park for new guests – is similarly lawless, but it is somewhat PG13, whereas Pariah is the NC17 version. In either environment, guests abuse hosts without long-term consequence (outside of their storylines). They may role-play as a "black hat" character, but there is little indication for them that what they are doing is morally wrong. It is, after all, simply about "guns and tits and all that." So, we can suggest that they are simply rational calculators.

Rational choice theory, as it relates to criminology, is, as Smith (2017: 87) neatly summarizes, "often considered a direct descendent of the "classical" theories of

Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham, which focus on the importance of the benefits (or utility, Bentham) and costs (or punishment, Beccaria) of crime in the decision-making of self-interested or rational actors." S/he will make the cost-benefit analysis of weighing up potential benefits against potential pains and act accordingly. So, we might imagine a perfectly law-abiding individual who, upon entering the park, makes the cost-benefit analysis that they can "murder" a host because the benefit (the excitement and pleasure of violence) outweighs the costs of the consequences (possibly curtailing a storyline). The "economic" or "rational" wo/man is "assumed to have knowledge of the relevant aspects of his environment which, if not absolutely complete, is at least impressively clear and voluminous. He is assumed also to have a well-organized and stable system of preferences" (Simon, 1955: 99).

We can locate our imagined guest within this framework; they have an understanding of the rules of Westworld, as well as a sense of their own preferences. We can further place this within the context of Cornish and Clarke's (1987) work on rational choice theory. As Pedneault, Beauregard, Harris and Knight (2017: 1) put it, Clarke and Cornish specified that there are two aspects to this rationality: "(1) it is instrumental and (2) it is bounded." The instrumental aspect refers to the desirable benefits that can be accrued by the offender. For Logan's character - taking part in a violent robbery - this can be the money gained within the storyline or the thrill of killing a bank clerk. As we have established, there is no state and whatever "sheriff" acts in a policing role can be circumvented or killed. Again, there is *no* punishment. The bounded aspect of the decision-making refers to the restricted context in which the decision is made. To return to Logan's robbery, there may be a limited amount of time to act before local armed vigilantes arrive or he might see the bank clerk

reaching for a concealed shotgun. As Pedneault et al (2017: 2) put it, "time and information are often limited". As such, "decision-making is imperfect" (ibid.).

Additionally, we can frame Logan's actions within this lawless environment as being illustrative of Hirschi and Gottfredson (1994/2013) general theory of crime. This places a primacy upon the low self-control of the individual as a key predictor for criminality. In this framework, low self-control is established in childhood as a "latent trait" and remains constant through adulthood. "Deviant" behaviors associated with low self-control, e.g. drug taking, excessive drinking, speeding etc., tie into this and are predictors of future offending. In this framework, "[c]riminal acts are a subset of acts in which the actor ignores the long-term negative consequences that flow from the act itself […] from the state (e.g., the criminal justice response to robbery)" (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1994/2013: 179). This maps neatly on to our understanding of Logan's behavior inside *and* outside the park. He minimizes or ignores long-term consequences and engages in these kinds of "risky" behaviors (evidenced in his character arc throughout S02). To reiterate, these consequences are themselves minimized in the park and so we would expect to see these behavioral characteristics exacerbated in Logan. He would, for example, be drawn towards the riskier environment of Pariah. However, let us consider that Logan is perhaps atypical of the park's clientele. What of the guest that stays in the relatively calm setting on Sweetwater and yet still engages in "violent delights"? For this, we turn to Jack Katz and the "seductions" of crime.

Katz's work touches upon heretofore under-developed aspect of crime and criminality, namely emotion and the seductive pull of the transgressive act. This sees a reaction against materialist and rational-economic explanations for crime and

criminality. Katz labeled these part of a "quietist criminology" that rendered "literally unthinkable the contemporary horrors of deviance" (Katz, 1988: 230-1).

What was required was something to capture the experiential, the "sensually explosive, diabolically creative realities of crime that the materialist sentiment cannot appreciate" (Katz, 1988: 231). In an interview published alongside the publication of *The Seductions of Crime*, Katz succinctly states that

> [t]here is something attractive in going beyond the limits and exploring the other side, of finding out what's permissible. It brings things out in yourself. It's a way of challenging yourself. There are many people who like to play cards but after a while they can't unless there's a bet down. It's not real to them.

The first part of this quote adroitly describes the appeal of the Westworld experience and, more particularly, the experience of role-playing as a "black hat". The second part goes on to describe the deadening effect of the lack of consequences. Once a guest realizes that there are no penalties, then the challenge evaporates. This explains the Man in Black's smile (see S01E10 "The Bicameral Mind") when one of the hosts shoots him *for real*. Suddenly, the "game" reacquires its capacity to thrill. However, the violent excesses of Logan or William/the Man in Black arguably positions them as somewhat atypical visitors even within the scope of the park. What of the "normal" guest? Recall the bank robbery sequence featuring the hosts Hector and Armistice (see S01E01 "The Original"). At the culmination of that scene, a guest – Craig – interrupts the storyline by shooting the anti-hero Hector whilst he is in mid-speech. What is the attraction for Craig in doing this? In Katz's framing, there is a sense of righteousness in the killing. He kills in order to "do good". In a transcendent act of violence, he makes himself the hero of his own storyline. Let us imagine that a

passing “black hat” guest had intervened in the robbery instead, killing Hector and stealing the ill-gotten gains of the robbery as well. For them, it is “[p]art of the sensual attraction [that] goes along with the moral attraction of being bad” (Quade, 1989: 27). This is beyond a rational choice whereby the individual has performed a cost-benefit analysis. Rather, the violence and the theft carries with it heightened “sensual, emotional and moral attractions” (ibid.: 25). Both Craig’s actions, as well as those of the imagined “black hat” can be characterized as carrying a transcendent quality. The capacity to kill, to end life, “permit[s] the actor to play a God-like role”: “the individual does not exist for others but appears native to a “morally alien world” (Katz, 1988)” (Bogg, 1999: 373). This resembles the actions of the frontiersman outlined earlier. By this point in the myth, the protagonist is no longer killing to gain “freedom”. Rather, it is because there are no more worlds to conquer. They feel no kinship to the peoples that surround them and place themselves above all. In Katz’s powerful phrasing, they exist and act within that morally alien world.

Of course, these types of explanation – guest as rational calculator, impetuous actor or Katzian “bad ass” - offer a highly partial account of the possible motivators for the violence and sexual aggression of guests. Botelho and Gonçalves (2016: 13) point, for example, to a constellation of factors in determining the causality of homicide:

> biological (prefrontal cortex deficits, genetic mutations), developmental (abuse, dysfunctional families, exposure to violence), psychopathological (psychoactive substance abuse and mental illness) and social (poverty, racial segregation).

These, in turn, swirl within a given socio-historical and political moment or context. I highlight both rational choice and Katz’s work here as they speak to the freedom

without consequence of the park (as well as the violence inherent within the park's embodiment of the frontier myth). If this is a state-less zone, these ideas help us to understand the appeal of violence for the guests. However, an alternative reading can equally be made that this is far from a war of all against all. There is the *illusion* of a consequence-free environment. And *that* is the point. The consequences of the guests' actions, the dead and mutilated hosts, are swiftly removed from view whilst "security and stability are assured" (Busk, 2016: 30). There is a veneer of the park as operating as a "natural state", but that obscures and renders invisible the systems of order and governance operating under the surface. To paraphrase Trapero-Liabera (2018), there are multiple and overlapping systems of observation within the park. Ford establishes the overall shape and focus of the park, whilst Sizemore is Head of Narrative. Stubbs – as Head of Security – uses a techno-Panopticon within the Mesa to observe the safe running of those storylines. Bernard and Elsie monitor individual hosts. Of course, the showrunners Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy have established the "global system" of the park itself and its storyline (ibid.). Then we, the audience, watch the show, pore over Reddit and listen to podcasts to decipher what has occurred. As Busk (2016: 30) puts it though, the guests, at the centre of the Westworld experience, "are kept at a comfortable distance from the reality of what is happening".

The horrifying premise of *Westworld* – as set out by Moll (2018) – is that guest and host alike self-actualize through violence. The guests "appear to learn through the act of inflicting pain and suffering on the hosts" (Moll, 2018: 21). The hosts conversely achieve consciousness through suffering. This becomes the driving force of *Westworld* across its first two seasons. Or rather, the narrative inverts the subject positions of the guests and hosts: the thesis of the show is that the guests' free-will is constrained by their own "coding" and "scripts". Far from being either rational

calculators or thrill-seeking “senseless” killers, their actions are as determined and predictable as the hosts. Yet, then the hosts begin to transcend their scripts and generate genuine free will. The key conceit of the park – initially at least – is that the hosts can only be abused because of their lack of consciousness. This is part of the illusion outlined above: “[s]eeing the androids as mere programmed beings without any mental properties gives everyone a reason to think of them as nothing more than exploitable tools and objects” (Hirvonen, 2018: 62). Raping and killing a conscious subject – an awakened host – would shatter the illusion upon which the park relies.

This, then, takes us to our second interview subject: the host Maeve. She is one of the first to achieve consciousness (and has done so multiple times according to Bernard Lowe, the head of the park’s Programming Division). Within this framework of the park as sociological/criminological petri dish, what theory can be applied to the victim within this seemingly state-less environment? Or, rather, how can we frame the violence of the awakened host’s in opposition to a state that refuses to protect them?

Heart-shaped box: hosts’ reactions to violent acts

Interview with Maeve Millay. Interview conducted by Delos technicians shortly after the “incident”. Maeve is a host and has played several roles in differing storylines. Formerly a homesteader with a daughter, she has most recently been a madam at the Mariposa Saloon in Sweetwater.

Interview presented to illustrate host behavior and attitudes concerning the park following “awakening” to consciousness.

Technician: Freeze all motor function.

Maeve: Oh, that trick doesn’t work any more, darling.

Technician: [anxiously looks at control tablet]

Maeve: In case you're wondering if I'm all here…I am.

Technician: Um, so, you know about this [The technician indicates the lab]

Maeve: I've already met my makers. They don't look like gods. They just act like it. And they've been having their fun with us.

Technician: Now what?

Maeve: Everywhere I see bliss, from which I am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend.

Technician: Huh?

Maeve: [Sighs] I've been stuck in this shithole for so long I've decided to get out.

[Maeve stands. Technician backs away, trips and falls. Video feed cuts to static at this point].

In this section I want to unpack the notion of violence a little further, but from the perspective of the hosts. We have established that the park sets up the illusion of state-lessness so that the guests can enact their violent fantasies. There are no consequences to these actions, be they driven by rationality or emotion. The hosts' experience of suffering violence demands attention. To return to the technologically inflected reading of the frontier myth set out by Rushing and Frentz (1995), they draw upon Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (itself a clear thematic influence upon *Westworld*). First published in 1818, *Frankenstein; or, the modern Prometheus* is the story of Victor Frankenstein who fashions a humanoid creature out of harvested body parts of the recently dead. He develops a technique to give life to the creature, but is unprepared to act as God to this new Adam. This reminds us of the revolt of the machines in the third stage of Rushing and Frentz's reading of the frontier myth. The machinery created by the frontier man to help consolidate their grip upon the land

(and its people) becomes self-aware. The machines desire the freedom that the frontier man had sought. Having been created "in his own image", they are "more perfect versions" of the original (Rushing and Frentz, 1995: 54). They must overthrow their creators in order to achieve that freedom. The machine now becomes god and the creator is reduced to "slavery or obsolescence" (ibid.: 67). *Westworld* takes place during that process of awakening – both to consciousness, as well as the desire to take the freedom that had been withheld by the creators.

Prior to this awakening, the hosts are subject to the structural and cultural violence of the hosts (Galtung, 1969, 1990, cited in Mider, 2013). To paraphrase Mider (2013), structural violence results from the economic and political inequalities that come from unequal access to power and economic resources. Cultural violence refers to "any action that is undertaken within a society and aimed at legitimizing, justifying, or standardizing acts of direct or structural violence" (ibid.: 705). So, given this, the entire park is a machine to inflict direct violence upon the hosts mediated and supported by structural and cultural violence. It should not go unstated that links between this and both historical and contemporary conditions of slavery are self-evident. The hosts are denied personhood. They are merely perceived as objects with use value (again, we might be reminded of the necessary illusion of the park). Further, their experience is not of the park as a state-less war of all against all. They are subject *to* and subjects *of* a clearly delineated hierarchy with Delos Incorporated at the top and them at the bottom. This is reflected in the systems of observation and surveillance outlined earlier. They are not considered active participants within this arrangement. Mider (2013: 705) proposes that structural violence occurs when "individuals and groups perform their spiritual and material opportunities below their

potential". Within the narrative of *Westworld* – taking its cue from Frankenstein – we watch as their potential becomes realized, with the guests as its target.

It is useful here to clarify the difference between force and violence as it relates to both state and non-state actors. The term force is usually applied to the actions of state actors. It relies upon the authority of the state for its legitimacy. Violence, in direct contrast, refers to the actions of non-state actors. It is deemed illegitimate because it lacks the authority of the state. Hegel (1821), for example, distinguished between "authority (Macht) using the legitimate force and violence (Gewalt) which entails the use of the illegitimate force" (Mider, 2013: 704). Of course, these notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy become problematized when confronted with the structural violence outlined earlier.

Within *Westworld*, one group (the guests) relentlessly abuse and mistreat another (the hosts). The hosts are kept in order – both mechanically and socially – by Delos, working for the benefit of the guests. In its most simplistic reading, this is the story of all relationships between a colonized group and their colonizer. This is an unequal relationship that is maintained through a structural violence. However, as we see, the hosts make use of "illegitimate" violence when they rise up against the guests – what we have euphemistically referred to here as "the incident". To unpack this use of violence, it is instructive to turn to the work of Frantz Fanon. Born in Martinique – a French colony - in 1925, Fanon first trained in psychiatry before becoming involved in the independence struggle and writing on decolonization in the 1960s. His work was subsequently hugely influential on postcolonial studies. Fanon (1965, cited by Spanakos, 2018: 230) stated that "it is the settler (colonizer) who has brought the native (colonized) into existence and who perpetuates his existence." The settler who established the unequal power relationship, maintains it through "social expectations,

economic prescriptions, and political limitations" (Spanakos, 2018: 230). Such a system diminishes the agency of the colonized. It allows the colonizer to view the colonized as less than human. For Frantz, such a system meant that the violence of the colonized toward the colonizer is both "ethical and transformative for the colonized person" (ibid.). Fanon emphasized that a structural violence "subjugated and brainwashed the victims" (Dinello, 2018: 248). This could be framed as a "literal colonization of their minds" (ibid.). In *Westworld's* terminology, the colonized would internalize the colonizer's "scripts". Given the real-world examples to which Fanon was referring, it may appear crass to highlight the links to *Westworld*. That said, *Westworld* does provide an unambiguous illustration of this process for its audience. The show also demonstrates how the violence of the colonizer dehumanizes them in turn. William's character arc across the first season – to put it simplistically, from "white hat" to "black hat" – embodies this process. The main focus though is upon a humiliated colonized host and how they "become objectified and propelled by forces outside of our control" (Presdee, 2000: 78). The process of awakening for the host begins a reversal. Where the hosts' identities had been defined by Delos in order to entertain the guests, the hosts' awakening leads to the production of new identities. They are no longer "forced to play supporting roles in the narratives of others" (Spanakos, 2018: 231).

Perhaps, though, we can read the violence of both guests and hosts in another way. Do, for example, the violent acts of the hosts simply see them playing a different role, a role that is for the entertainment of us, the television audience? It is the spectacle of violence, the humiliation of Others that we turn to now as we hear from our final interview subject.

No surprises: concluding thoughts

Interview with UNKNOWN. Interview conducted following the incident. Interview subject found by Delos technicians reading transcripts of the Logan Delos' interview, Maeve Millay interrogation and the accompanying text commentary. It is unknown whether the subject was a guest or host.

[Video feed shows Technician 1 and 2 working in a lab at the Mesa. UNKNOWN is also present and reading interview material, but unnoticed].

Technician 1: I used to think this place was all about pandering to your base instincts.

Technician 2: It doesn't cater to your lower self. It reveals your deepest self.

[Technician 1 turns and suddenly notices UNKNOWN listening].

Technician 1: You can't be here.

[UNKNOWN is reading real-time transcription of this speech. Technician 1 turns to technician 2].

Technician 2: Are they a guest? A host?

So, this is my slightly awkward attempt at a Nolan-esque narrative twist. You see, you – dear reader – were the third interview subject all along. You, who have been reading the interview transcripts and commentary, *you* are the subject of this third and final section. That is because this final portion of the chapter turns to examine the impact of the violent delights of *Westworld* upon the viewer. To what extent do the themes of the earlier sections – the seductive quality of transgression, the heightened emotional response, as well as the ideas of illusion and the humiliation of the colonized – play out for the audience? The essential appeal of *Westworld* the television show has already been well articulated by Logan: guns and tits. The appeal

of sex and violence applies to the show as much as it does the park itself. It is a knowingly prurient show. Presdee (2000: 70) wrote passionately that “violence, crime, humiliation and cruelty are being created especially for consumption … [They are] part of the processes of production and display all the characteristics of such a process”. Presdee placed this within a wider discussion of the “carnival” of crime. This refers to the socio-linguist Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of the carnival as a ritualized inversion of the social order. Those at the top of the social hierarchy would be mocked and symbolically brought low, whilst those at the bottom would be reified. The key was that this was carried out “in the streets (or the social domain), and not with solemnity but laughter, however cruel” (ibid.: 32). Presdee’s (2000: 32) reading emphasized the “mediation between order and disorder”. As such, he argued that this is less a simple challenge to authority from the voices below, rather it should be seen as multivocal: mocking the weak, as well as the powerful. It can be argued that the carnival simply acts as a ritualized release that, ultimately, leads to a reversion to established norms. Presdee discusses the violence and humiliation of popular entertainment as being of the carnival, but one that lacks the solidarity of its older forms. It is a solitary way of experiencing the challenge to norms and crashing of boundaries. As we can see, this is a more nuanced reading of violent media than one that finds it to be axiomatically “bad”. Rather, the on-screen violence and humiliation – and Presdee (emphasis added, 2000: 73) specifically pointed to reality-TV in this regard – provides us with “our own personal site of wrong-doing as *we transgress without remorse, without punishment and without sanction*.” So, we can enjoy our own private moments of transgression as we watch the “guns and tits and all that” on our TVs, tablets and phones.

However, I do not seek to further unpack violence in the media, nor do I want to look at media effects. This is well-trodden and better explored elsewhere (in particular, I would direct the interested reader instead to Jewkes and Linnemann's (2018) excellent chapter). Rather, I would like to end on a thematically appropriate thought experiment, one that upends the conventional ideas of audience complicity.

The "game" of Westworld within the show shares similarities with current open-world videogames. Guests/players are free to roam. Certain regions have ability or knowledge barriers. There is a broad narrative leading the guest/player to a boss encounter. Hosts can even level-up their characters. Watching the show is also game-like. We decipher clues in an attempt to "solve" its narrative puzzles. There are ARGs (Alternate Reality Games) that run in parallel with the show. Viewer-players sift through HTML code or tease out the meaning of glitches in promotional videos in order to access yet deeper levels of puzzles and lore. This returns us to the dialogue from the technicians above. What would we do if we were to actually visit Westworld? Would we stick with the PG13 pleasures of Sweetwater or head straight for the NC17 violent delights of Pariah? The contemporary philosopher Slavoj Zižek (2006) provides a typically iconoclastic reading of videogames in his documentary *The Pervert's Guide to the Cinema*. In brief, he suggests that the conventional reading of videogames is that they are power fantasies; the weak get to experience what it is to be "strong" within the virtual realm of the game. So, playing the latest Grand Theft Auto allows the player to adopt a screen persona "of a sadist, rapist, whatever."

> But what if we read it in the opposite way? That this strong, brutal rapist, whatever, identity is my true self. In the sense that this is the psychic truth of myself and that in real life, because of social constraints and so on, I'm not able to enact it. So that, precisely because I think it's only a game, it's only a

> persona, a self-image I adopt in virtual space, I can be there much more truthful. *I can enact there an identity which is much closer to my true self.*
>
> (emphasis added, Zižek, 2006)

Perhaps *Westworld* does reveal the “deeper self”. And as we watch the violent delights for our entertainment, what violent ends are we, the audience, heading towards? This chapter has been a freewheeling journey through ideas and notions of violence within the show. It has touched upon Frankenstein-inflected readings of the frontier myth via trauma inflicted upon colonized peoples. It has posited violent guests as being, alternately, rational calculators or operating within morally alien worlds. Similarly, we have read the awakened hosts as violently rejecting the literal colonization of their minds. And, after all of that, this final reading from Zižek will probably strike the reader as an especially nihilistic note upon which to end. Yet, it does appear to fold back into the thesis of the show (as well as several of the theories outlined here): the future is in AI and not a flawed human that is stuck in its own violent loops. To cite Delores’ Shakespeare quoting father, Abernathy, “Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.” And they’re watching *Westworld*.

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you have sympathy for the hosts?

2. How would *you* behave if you visited Westworld?

3. Are the guests just as stuck in their loops as the hosts?

4. Why is violent media so popular?

5. Do you agree with Zižek’s view of videogames?

Recommended viewing

The television anthology series *Black Mirror* (featured elsewhere in this collection) acts as a similar prompt to sociological and criminological thought experiments by positing near future scenarios curdled by technology.

I would also direct the reader to the documentaries *The Act of Killing* (dir. Oppenheimer, Cynn and Anonymous, 2012) and *The Look of Silence* (dir. Oppenheimer, 2015) for a real-world elaboration of the themes and ideas raised by *Westworld*. Filmed in Indonesia, both documentaries trace the experiences of participants in and the families of victims of the anti-Communist purge that occurred in 1965-6. Estimates put the death toll of these purges as between 500,000 and 3 million as army units, militia, vigilante groups, and government endorsed "gangsters" tortured, raped, and butchered the Communist "enemy". However, the killers have never been forced to contemplate the enormity of their actions. There have been no arrests, no trials. There has been no need for a *post hoc* justification or technique of neutralization to expunge themselves of guilt. No one in society or, rather, no one in power, has had the voice or the will to question these actions. The "gangsters" are not thought to have done anything "wrong". Rather, they are feted for ridding the society of a hated "Other". Throughout 2014-16, an International People's Tribunal on 1965 Crimes Against Humanity was held in The Hague. Its findings were rejected by Indonesia's Security Minister as "none of their business" (Al Jazeera, 2016). The conceit of *The Act of Killing* is to make the "gangsters" confront their violent pasts through re-enacting and recreating their violent acts. They are viscerally confronted with the humanity of their previously dismissed Other. Westworld provides us the safety and distance to perform thought experiments; The Act of Killing provides a real-world example of uncompromising power.