

'Westworld,' 'Black Mirror' and other tech-driven shows delve into what it means to be human



Anthony Hopkins, left, and Jeffrey Wright star in HBO's "Westworld," one of several current television shows that tackle issues of humanity. (John P. Johnson / HBO)

By **Randee Dawn**

MAY 25, 2017, 4:45 AM

On AMC's "Humans," Niska is a self-aware "synth," or man-made being. She passes the Turing test, in which, based on her answers, she is indistinguishable from a human. She can have a relationship with a person who never suspects her mechanical nature, and she can submit to an examination that will determine whether or not she's sentient enough to deserve rights.

But as audiences discover during that examination, humans are using the wrong yardstick. Why would a synth respond like a human? Synths respond ... like synths. And should a creature that is determined to be self-aware and conscious — but not human — have equal rights?

Sticky big-picture questions like that are meat and potatoes this season for such series as "Humans," HBO's "Westworld," USA's "Mr. Robot" and Netflix's "Black Mirror." At first glance, these shows may seem to be

about subservient robots, murderous mechanical bees or modern-day computer hackers who aspire to change the world with their code, but dismiss them as "mere" science fiction at your peril. They feature some of the most philosophically complex, thoughtful storytelling on TV, and even though they take place in alternative future universes, they are relevant to today's tech-obsessed world.

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The technology presented in these series is really a means to an end for their showrunners, who across the board see our wariness of new gadgets and advances as the perfect metaphor for the human condition.

"We're holding up this global mirror and looking into it, and I'm not sure we're loving what we're seeing," says "Mr. Robot" creator-showrunner Sam Esmail. "Technology exposes humanity in a deeper way, and that's the scary part."

"We use technology in the same way that 'The Twilight Zone' used the supernatural," notes "Black Mirror" creator Charlie Brooker. "So much technology is indistinguishable from magic — which is something [author] Arthur C. Clarke said. Technology has given us, like, superpowers. The theme uniting all the stories on 'Black Mirror,' if you boil it down, is it's all about what is an authentic experience. What is authentic emotion?"

That interest in emotions — who has them, what are they and are they real — is a running theme. While humans are finding themselves isolated and lonely on "Mirror" and "Robot" (Esmail suggests our social media interactions with friends are merely the "Cliffs Notes versions of relationships"), the artificial intelligence on "Humans" and "Westworld" is learning to be more connected and awake.

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"Our show is more anthro-phobic than technophobic," says "Westworld" co-developer (with Lisa Joy) Jonathan Nolan. "We go through the looking glass and consider this question from the perspective of the [robot] 'hosts.' It says as much about us as it does about the world of technology — perhaps more so."

"What it means to be human is effectively changing," says "Humans" writer Sam Vincent. "It's been changing for hundreds and thousands of years, but this is the first time that we can have a hand in our own evolution. There seems to be little doubt that we are going to join the machines; in some ways we already are cyborgs — we have outsourced so many things to a piece of technology that's always in our hands or pocket or bag."

All of this is fodder for the stories these shows are telling, and that's part of what makes them so relatable

and intriguing, even for viewers who might not consider themselves fans of science fiction. And the writers and showrunners hope that audiences are coming away from the various intrigues, romances, shoot'em-ups, deaths and plot twists ready to discuss these larger questions about where tech is taking us, and how we should handle it.

Someone needs to be, because, as Nolan notes, the real-world designers of this technology are certainly not exploring the bigger picture.

"We have some of the world's most talented engineers at some of the world's most valuable companies trying to build machines that can read people's minds," he says. "But engineers aren't interested in the question of consciousness; they just want to know how the AI is interacting with people. But we have, to a degree, failed to anticipate how this will play out. Think about how Facebook is maybe *too* effective at reinforcing everyone's view of the world around them."

The singularity — the notion that artificial super intelligence will disrupt human civilization — probably won't happen all at once, he adds, and that might be more unnerving than any of the plots these series dream up.

"It's going to happen in subtle ways," says Nolan. "The tech will continue to be good enough to alter the world — but not good enough to take responsibility for the alterations it's making to us. They're smart enough to manipulate us, but not smart enough to be responsible."

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