

Cast of dystopian series Westworld takes to heart warning about AI

[Alison De Souza](#)

LOS ANGELES - With researchers in Tokyo recently announcing that they have developed a robotic finger covered in living human skin - able to bend and even heal - the series Westworld (2016 to present) is starting to look a lot less like science fiction.

And the show's creators and cast get chills down their spines whenever they hear of yet another development narrowing the gap between reality and their Emmy-winning show, which imagines a future where androids have become sentient and can pass for human beings.

The series is back for a fourth season on HBO (StarHub TV Channel 601 and Singtel TV Channel 420) and HBO Go, with new episodes on Mondays at 9am.

At a virtual press day, creator Lisa Joy and actors Evan Rachel Wood, Luke Hemsworth and Jeffrey Wright tell The Straits Times that working on the show has amplified their concerns about the future of artificial intelligence (AI) and the sobering implications for mankind.

Joy, 45 - who co-created the series with husband Jonathan Nolan, 46 - turns to Wood, who plays one of the robots, and says half-seriously: "Evan, are you a robot? Is that actually your skin or synthetic skin? Sometimes, I don't know."

Wood - whose character Dolores escaped from the amusement park known as Westworld, where androids were subject to every human whim - replies: "Honestly, after working on this show, I ask myself this question sometimes."

The actress says the series - which won an acting Emmy for star Thandiwe Newton, along with eight awards for technical achievements - has altered her relationship with everyday technologies.

"I don't have Alexa in my house," says the 34-year-old, referring to Amazon's virtual assistant. "I do have a self-driving car, but I don't like things listening to me.

"And social media is something I look at very differently now after working on the show - where my data is going and what it's being used for," adds the star, who earned her first Emmy nomination for the drama *Mildred Pierce* (2011) and two more for *Westworld*.

Joy acknowledges that AI will "allow for so many great advances in terms of prosthetic limbs", but also believes there is potential for abuse.

"During the coronavirus pandemic, people have been locked up at home and have been on social media a lot. And social media is an AI. It's an algorithm that can control and hack into our brains, infiltrate our psyches and fundamentally change our psychology, especially for younger kids.

"That's a theme we explore through metaphor this season," the writer-producer says.

For Hemsworth - who plays Stubbs, *Westworld*'s head of security - the "biggest thing the show makes me think about is the omnipresent threat of artificial intelligence and where we're headed in that respect".

The 41-year-old - who has made appearances in the *Thor* films (2013 to 2022) starring his brother Chris Hemsworth - points to recent claims by a Google engineer that the AI it uses for its language model has a soul.

The man was reported to have been put on administrative leave "for claiming that the programme had become a sentient being".

Hemsworth says: "We've had this narrative for a long time, about the threat of robots taking over the world, and as technology

becomes more and more a part of our lives, it's not a big stretch to see that this is part of our future.

"They are already autonomous beings and, from that, it's not a stretch to extrapolate that there may be some conflict (with humans) - physical, mental and fiscal," he says, referring to worries over AI including the fear of robots stealing jobs. "That's what scares me."

Wright - who plays another android, Bernard - has long been suspicious of corporate surveillance "and the ways our lives were being observed continuously by these entities with a pure profit imperative".

"But what the show has done for me is shine a light on just how profoundly we are all being manipulated," says the 56-year-old, who won an Emmy for the Aids drama *Angels In America* (2003). "It has helped me understand the ways in which we are increasingly becoming slaves to our own data, which is being extracted from us like a natural resource."

The actor adds that it has also helped him see how "we're being used as commodities - not necessarily in our best interests - but we're doing so willingly".