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From Stage to Cyberspace: Intermediality and Performativity in Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*

Sahneden Siberuzam'a: Jennifer Haley'in *The Nether* Oyununda Medyalararasılık ve Edimsellik

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ABSTRACT
Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* premiered in 2013 at the Kirk Douglas Theater. It is an interplay between stage and virtual reality (VR), also known as, cyberspace. This quality makes the play an example of "intermedial" theater, which links digital media elements to the performance on stage indissolubly. The play not only provides a rich exploration of intermediality that reshapes traditional notions of character and acting, but also the characters in the play are presented as having avatars in VR, which ultimately highlights the fluidity of roles based on identity. Applying Judith Butler's theory of performative construction of identity and gender to analyze the characters, who are portrayed as having double identities and fulfilling fluid gender roles, is highly relevant in a play that uniquely blends dramatic performance with digital media to create a complex narrative landscape. By analyzing key scenes and particularly focusing on three major characters in the play, Sims, Doyle, and Morris, it is aimed in this study to see how performativity, as theorized by Butler, is redefined in virtual environments, as characters navigate identities mediated through digital avatars. The interaction between media both enhances the narrative but also prompts audiences to reflect on the significance of repetitive performance in gender and identity formation; therefore, this study also highlights the play's innovative approach to media interaction and contributes to contemporary discussions on the relationship between theatre, digital technology, space, and gender studies.

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Introduction

On May 13th 2024, the leading artificial intelligence (AI) platform, OpenAI released ChatGPT 4.o, the most significant update in the platform's history. With this update, ChatGPT can now simultaneously process voice, text, and visual data, interpret these inputs logically, and respond to users synchronously in a human-like manner. The bot's responses sound so natural and fluid that it sometimes becomes easy to forget the fact that the user is interacting with an AI. This illusion is a great milestone in the history of human and technology, specifically human and AI interaction. Unlike earlier versions of AI platforms, which were only able to respond via typing, ChatGPT 4.o can now interact directly with the user, and with the help of a camera, it can communicate by interpreting visual inputs. For instance, it can comment on your outfit, say hi to your friends, talk with them on various topics including, politics or sports. The significance of the "o" in ChatGPT 4.o stands for "omni," a Latin prefix meaning "all" or "everything," and 'in all ways or places', or 'of all things' as seen in words like "omnipotent" (all-powerful), "omniscient" (all-knowing), and

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"omnipresent" (present everywhere) (*OED*). OpenAI uses "omni" to highlight the update's capacity to perform almost everything a human can in daily interactions. It can react to visual, textual, and vocal data much like a human, with laughter, jokes, stammering, hesitating, smirking, complimenting, suggesting, and using natural sentence stress and intonation. This enhanced virtual reality allows users to immerse themselves in the AI's realm more intensely since it is highly easy and possible for users to lose their real-world selves and become absorbed in the AI's world.

A breakthrough AI development as it is, yet a frightening one definitely because the imaginary dystopian environment as envisioned in Isaac Asimov's pioneering novel, *I, Robot* (1950) and W. Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), or perhaps as in *R.U.R*. (1920) by Karel Čapek who coined the word "robot" in the play, and some other recent TV series such as *Black Mirror* (2011) or *Westworld* (2016) or the 2013 film *HER* (2013), might soon be inevitable for humanity.

The word cyberspace is used to mean the virtual environment created at a digital space and it is a term coined by the American novelist William Gibson in *Omni* magazine in 1982, and it has gained popularity after Gibson's repeated reference in his cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*. Cyberspace is used to refer to a "chaotic system" in which it is also often the case that some of the peculiarities related to what makes us human are irreversibly lost (Lévy 91), or alternatively, other non-human forms and entities have gained the capacity and capability to act like human beings (*OED*). In cyberspaces, the nuanced art of human conversation, with its subtle pauses, spontaneous humor, and emotional undertones, has almost become indistinguishable from AI-generated interactions. The unique capacity for empathy, where humans connect deeply through shared experiences and emotions, are diluted as AI and VR begin to replicate these interactions flawlessly. People gradually become less in need of physical human presence in a world where digital interactions become increasingly immersive and realistic with VR. The spontaneity and unpredictability of human behavior, which often lead to innovation and unexpected discoveries, are overshadowed by AI's calculated and optimized responses. The sense of personal identity and individuality are also at risk because people have become more engaged with their AI companions in VR realms. As a result, these technologies are, and will definitely continue to be, blurring the lines between reality and virtual experiences, possibly leading to a loss of the quintessential defining values of our humanity in the near future.

Virtual Reality and Performance

The advancement in VR and AI have not gone unnoticed in the realm of contemporary theater since the 1990s. Playwrights and directors are increasingly incorporating themes related to these technologies into their works, and they explore the implications of these advancements on human identity and social dynamics. As Kattenbelt points out, contemporary theater thus becomes a space where the interplay between human experience and technological innovations is depicted and critically examined (21). Through these artistic explorations, theater can provide a unique lens to consider the profound changes brought about by technological advancements and invite the audience to contemplate the future of human interaction in an increasingly digital world.

After Lehmann coined the term "post-dramatic theater," the integration of films, videos, and other digital media sources in performances gained momentum. A number of influential researchers drew attention to the increasing effects of new technologies on stage productions. Chapple and Kattenbelt notes that a defining feature of contemporary theatre has been integrating digital technology and incorporating various media within theatre productions (11). As a result of this trend, "during the last decade of the twentieth century, computer technologies played a dynamic and increasingly important role in live theater, dance, and performance; and new dramatic forms and performance genres emerged in interactive installations and on the Internet" (Dixon 1). Chapple and Kattenbelt also emphasize that contemporary theatre heavily relies on merging genre

boundaries, creating "crossover and hybrid performances, intertextuality, hypermediality," and a self-aware reflexivity that highlights the techniques of performance within the performance itself (11).

In the aftermath of post-dramatic theater, there is a definitive challenge to the domination of plot and dramatic illusion in contemporary theater. Performance, visuality, improvisation, and interaction between various media are emphasized. The emphasis on the performer, their acting performances, and their influence on the audience are major concerns. As Antonin Artaud prophetically announced in 1958,

> An actor who has passionately launched into their work needs infinitely more control to stop themselves committing a crime than a murderer actually needs to achieve theirs. And it is here, in this state of abandon, that the presentation of an emotion in the theatre comes across as something infinitely more valid that an actual real-life emotion. (41)

The reality represented on stage has often been compared to the reality outside the dramatic environment, with the former being seen as "more valid" than the latter. One interpretation of Artaud's words is that the performed reality on stage functions as a defamiliarization of what has become familiar and banal, which most people tend to ignore. Once defamiliarized on stage, it prompts people to reconsider those familiar and often ignored concerns and values. The power of the illusion in a stage performance and its influence on the audience has been a central concern of experimental theater, including Brecht's epic theater, Artaud's theater of cruelty, 90s "in-yer-face" theater, and Lehmann's "postdramatic" theater. Notoriously for example, Brechtian epic theater problematizes the notion of alienation and employs techniques such as the "V-effect," with 'V' standing for "Verfremdung" in German, meaning estrangement or distancing effect (Bradley 7); and "montage," which involves juxtaposing "interruptive, defamiliarizing inserts" (Mumford 31), such as independent images and scenes in a performance. Both techniques aim to disrupt the illusory reality constructed on stage by breaking the fourth wall and challenging the conventions of Aristotelian drama. These efforts echo later in in-yer-face theater and postdramatic theater which also problematize the notions of reality and illusion.

Accordingly, in recent productions, the incorporation of films, VR and AI visions, and other sorts of media in theatre has been tagged with various names. Rosemary Klich uses the term "multimediality" to refer to performances which interact with a variety of media with a purpose to "re-awaken the old art forms of world performance with the new tools of the digital age" (10). Dixon uses the term "digital performances" to describe "all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms" (3). Playwright Annie Dorsen employs "algorithmic theater" to refer to a sort of theater that "challenges conventions of theatrical presence, action, consciousness, and ephemerality, among others" (Felton-Dansky, 68). Woycicki refers to the phenomenon as "post-cinematic theatre" which specifically uses film segments on stage with "a heightened awareness of cinematic modes of operation […] through its deconstructive intermedial strategies" (2). For Woycicki, rather than randomly inserting images, films, or videos, the purpose of incorporating these elements is to draw attention to the artificially constructed nature of the illusionary dramatic effect, akin to Brechtian montage techniques. This incorporation adds a metafictional layer, ultimately fostering awareness among the audience. Focusing on the use of film and video in performance, Giesekam employs the term "intermedial productions," to denote a

> more extensive interaction between the performers and various media, reshaping notions of character and acting, where neither the live material nor the recorded material would make much sense without the other, and where often the interaction between the media substantially modifies how the respective media conventionally function and invites

> reflection upon their nature and methods. (8)

For Giesekam and Woycicki, the interaction between performance and other media forms should not merely serve to vary the mode of performance; to be considered truly intermedial or post-cinematic, there must be a deeper, more integrated interaction between the media and the performance. Also, Woycicki considers "intermedial theatre" as fundamentally a hybrid art form that integrates elements of theatre, film, live performance, computer-generated virtual realities, and communication technologies (1). Chapple and Kattenbelt view this transgression of generic boundaries in contemporary theatre as a fruitful and enriching progress since it enables "new modes of representation; new dramaturgical strategies; new ways of structuring and staging words, images and sounds; new ways of positioning bodies in time and space; new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations" (Chapple and Kattenbelt 11). As these critics highlight, this hybridity and intermediality is used to increase the impact of plays on the audience in our changing world.

Among such transgression is the trend that incorporates VR in theatrical performance. VR, as a term entered our lives in 1979, refers to "a computer-generated simulation of a lifelike environment that can be interacted with in a seemingly real or physical way by a person, esp. by means of responsive hardware such as a visor with screen or gloves with sensors; such environments or the associated technology as a medium of activity or field of study" (*OED*). It is also almost synonymous to William Gibson's cyberspace defined above. Be it VR or cyberspace, digital versions of physical reality have impacted humanity's capacity to understand their environments profoundly around the turn of the millennium when computer technology gained momentum. The technological shift has also led to a process of reconsideration of long-established human values. In a rapidly digitalizing world, with platforms like "Metaverse," "Second Life," and "Fortnite," and the recent "head-mounted displays" (HMDs), such as "Google Glass," "Meta Quest," or "Apple Vision," it has become possible for people—or should we say "users"—to interact with each other and the digital world through avatars and immersive experiences. In line with this development, the experimentation with VR technology in theatrical performance has been popular among contemporary playwrights and stage designers, such as Jennifer Haley, Simon McBurney, Annie Dorsen, who have composed scripts that explicitly draw on immersive VR technologies. Numerous plays including *Eurydice* by Sarah Ruhl, Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree* or Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* have been adapted by stage designers to incorporate VR devices tackling the challenging scenes of the scripts. However, there are those who consider the interaction of VR with theatre dating to something as ancient as humanity, to the classical Greek and Roman drama, and the use of VR on stage is an extension of this ancient tradition. As Dixon notes, one of the pioneering stage designers who utilizes VR technology in theatrical performance, Mark Reaney, considers theater to be "the original virtual reality machine," with deus-ex-machina or other mechanisms used in Greek and Roman plays to create images distorting the integrity of physical reality; and for Oliver Grau, VR is just a new computer-aided illusionary alternative that enables artists to examine "the relationship of humans to images" problematizing reality, imitation, manipulation and performance (Dixon 364).

With the help of VR, traditional physical restraints for the playwrights, stage designers and performers are overcome. With VR, projection of parallel worlds challenging the one-dimensional representation of a particular reality or a better glimpse into the inner worlds of the characters suffering on stage deepens the experience that audience enjoys in theatres. As Reaney notes, "virtual reality can unlock many scripts, realizing potentials that have been thwarted by production techniques that, being bound by muslin, wood and steel, cannot keep pace with the imagination of playwrights. [With VR] Furniture can float, walls can spin, the audience can look down from the ceiling, dancers can fly and people can walk through walls. (1996 41-42) Reaney

prefers to use "virtual scenography" or "virtual theatricality" to refer to the performance that incorporates VR (1996 41); Gabriella Giannachi opts out simply with "virtual theatre" (2004). Reaney and Giannachi use these terms to describe the use of VR devices to enhance the audience experience and break through the traditional confines of the stage in theater.

Jennifer Haley's The Nether as an Example of Intermedial Theater

The play analyzed in this paper, Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* premiered in the US in 2013 and in Europe 2014. Because of its projection of more than one realm, one real life and one alternative reality where characters are transferred into avatar forms, *The Nether* is an example of intermedial theater even though the performed versions of the play in the US or England do not necessarily incorporate VR devices despite the projection of virtual and physical realities side by side. Intermedial theater, as termed by Giesekam and Woycicki, denotes the interaction of theater with other forms of media in an inseparable manner, often with a subversive purpose. In this sense, with the projection of the real and the virtual side by side interacting with one another, the play is highly relevant to intermedial theater as described by Giesekam and Woycicki.

Kattenbelt also points at intermediality in theater essentially "refer[ring] to the co-relation of media in the sense of mutual influences between media" whereas "'multimediality' refers to the occurrence where there are many media in one and the same object and 'transmediality' to the transfer from one medium to another medium (media change) (21). Accordingly, intermediality is used in this study as a reference to an inextricable and mutual interaction between theater and VR. In addition, the use of VR devices to augment the theatrical experience is not among the concerns of this paper. Instead, the focus is on the projection of two forms of reality in *The Nether*: one where actors perform within the traditional theater setting, and another where characters in VR assume new identities, thereby problematizing their former ones. Hence, as Kattenbelt counted as one of the functions of intermediality *The Nether* is a play that feeds on intermedial performance and "leads to a refreshed perception" for viewers (26).

The play is set in a near future labelled as "soon" where technological advancements have transformed the Internet into the Nether (Haley 2). The word, Nether means "designating the lower or bottom part (section, component, segment, etc.) of a person or thing" in old English (*OED*), yet it is defined at the beginning of the play by Haley as such:

> *Nether Realm*
> 1. Another world for mythical creatures
> 2. Demon world
> 3. A dimension of Evil or Imagination (Haley 3)

Accordingly, the Nether realm in the play offers its users countless VR sub-realms for work, education, entertainment as well as various experiences including dark and illegal fantasies. One of these realms, "The Hideaway," is under police investigation at the beginning of the play. The Hideaway is highlighted for its advanced sensory experiences and for allowing individuals with pedophiliac tendencies to act their fantasies out. Haley's work explores the ethical implications of virtual reality and examines how technology affects human relationships, identity, gender roles, and desire. As a VR environment for pedophiles and sadists, the Hideaway in the Nether offers a community where moral and social values are trespassed. The allure of the Hideaway is twofold: It attracts users with its sense of belonging and its picturesque setting which envisions a Victorian nostalgia starkly in contrast with the bleak and barren real world which is a dystopian post-cataclysmic environment where "real grass," "snap peas," "swiss chard," "cotton," "brown stone" are all luxury (Haley 12). Stage design also highlights this contrast: the simple, cold interrogation room representing the barren real world, and the vibrant, detailed Hideaway offering desirable living conditions. The scene frequently shifts between "The interrogation room" and "The

Hideaway Foyer, The Nether." The detective Morris, who was introduced as "an in-world representative" investigating the case of the Hideaway realm, draws attention to the potential risks involved in creating a digital realm like the Hideaway where participants will easily lose their real selves and become "shades," that are digital entities without bodies in the Nether realm. A highly charming realm as the Hideaway is, it offers the participants simple joys of the ancient world, such as trees with leaves "flickering light and soft sound as they sway in the sun and wind [that] is almost overwhelming […] surround[ing] a beautifully rendered 1880s Gothic Revival [house] with a squeak in the top porch step" (Haley 7-8). Participants of the Hideaway are in search of authenticity in a dystopian world where everything including education and parenting have become digitalized, yet ironically, they try to get this still via further digitalization, in the Hideaway, a cyberspace that stages the most extreme sensory experience for the participants. Upon ringing the doorbell to enter for the first time into the Hideaway, detective Morris notices the extremely heightened or enhanced virtual reality there and reports "I can actually feel my hand sweat, clutching my carpetbag. I peek through a window and spy figures in the foyer — an impeccably dressed man stroking the face of one of the children, a little girl" (Haley 7). These contrasting settings amplify the tension audience might feel upon realizing the pedophiliac undercurrents of the play. On the one hand, there is the unfertile, dark real-world environment, and on the other, the heavenly digital realm inhabited by avatars enjoying sunshine, greenery, or wind, yet abusing young kids who are designed to never age. However, in both realms, avatars and real-world characters are portrayed on stage by the same actors, and hence, what is presented on stage whether be in the Hideaway or in the interrogation room resembles nothing but a distorted and dystopian version of actuality because of its pedophiliac, sadist, and gory details. In this way, the play problematizes the concept of the offence of "imaginative agency" and questions whether it is detrimental when the damage they cause exists only in thought or in an imaginary realm.

Furthermore, the Hideaway in the Nether offers limitless possibilities for identity transformation since the users can adopt avatars that would allow them to be of any gender, age, race, or appearance. For instance, Doyle, a childhood-traumatized "middle-aged science teacher" becomes an eight-year-old girl named Iris in the Nether realm; and the creator of the realm, Sims, prefers to be referred as "papa" both by the kids and the users of the Hideaway and acts as the father, owner, and controller of the girls in the realm; Morris, described as "a young female detective," chooses to be represented as an older man with "a fresh-face" at the Hideaway, as Mr. Woodnut (Haley 2). Although there are set options for avatars, the variety is extensive enough to cater to diverse preferences. These avatars conceal participants' true identities while expanding their sense of self. Although the characters in the Hideaway are still rooted in physical characteristics such as age and gender, the digital personas in the VR are disconnected from these physical constraints and external influences. The vivid sensations experienced by characters through avatars highlight the stability and influence of the physical body despite the digital transformation because the material body remains the ultimate recipient of these sensory experiences. This refers to a connection between "disembodiment" and "re-embodiment," and although the sensations experienced do not change, the reactions of the characters in disguise might. Consequently, characters' reactions to these sensory experiences result from an amalgamation of feelings at both the physical body level and the virtual reality level via digital avatars. The interplay between physical and digital identities with the sensory experiences associated with them is what *The Nether* problematizes perhaps the most as an unconventional play. Accordingly, psychological and ethical implications of such a problematization of identity remind Judith Butler's framework of performativity. The virtual world in *The Nether*, distinct from our tangible reality, provides a stage where individuals can explore and perform identities that deviate from their real-life personas. The play presents a dualistic view of identity: one adhering to societal norms and the other lurking within virtual spaces, which may more closely align with the individual's unmanifested desires and aspects of

selfhood, hence *The Nether* is a challenge to our understanding of identity and the self.

Double Identities and Performativity

Judith Butler argues that gender is not an innate quality but rather a performance enacted through repeated behaviors, gestures, and speech that align with socially established norms (Butler 179). This performativity creates the illusion of a stable identity, reinforcing the societal expectations around gender and selfhood. Butler posits that these repetitive performances construct and maintain the identities people present to the world. Individuals act in ways that reflect their internalization of social norms, perpetuating the belief that these norms represent a "true" identity, but they are indeed "performative" in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are "fabrications" manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler 173). This process applies not only to gender but also to all facets of identity formation, including social, professional, and cultural roles. In *The Nether*, this repetitive performativity becomes evident in the characters' real-world and virtual identities. In the real world, performers assume identities and genders either to continue the oft-repeated roles within the society they live in, or to be aware of the performative repetitive nature of these roles they try to pose or perform new ones that would best describe or suit them. In the virtual world of *The Nether*, characters explore roles that differ significantly from those they fulfill in the real world, and their avatars become an expression of selves unconstrained by societal norms.

At this point, there appears a dichotomy between the roles assumed in society and the ones that human beings refrain to reveal in the public, and a quest in deciding which of these social roles or identities can be truly associated with the individual or the agent performing a harmful or beneficial action. In *The Nether*, the infrastructure of the Hideaway, a virtual world designed by a software developer, facilitates this identity exploration by creating an environment that feels real and emotionally engaging, encouraging participants to shed their real-world constraints and experiment with new personas. In line with this, technology is reflected not simply as a tool or background element; it plays a pivotal role in mediating the characters' identities and creating the immersive environment where these identities are explored and contested, thus making the play an example of intermedial theater. The design of the Hideaway enables participants to fully immerse themselves in a virtual reality which secures anonymity and freedom from societal and legal restrictions. Characters have the ability to transcend their physical attributes, age, and societal roles. They are free to choose avatars that allow them to embody new selves and interact with other participants under the control of the creator of the Hideaway, that is Sims who is known as Papa by others and evocatively named after one of the best-selling life simulation video games, "The Sims" introduced in 2000.

The Hideaway's integration of immersive virtual reality and carefully curated design enhances the authenticity of the experience. As a result of this, the lines demarcating the virtual from the real interactions are blurred. This careful design allows characters to act out their deepest desires without fear of judgment or repercussion and reinforces their attachment to the personas they adopt in this digital realm. By providing a convincing simulation of reality, the Hideaway becomes a space where participants can shape their understanding of self and the world around them, which, as a result, makes them entities independent from their physical bodies. Doyle highlights the transformation within a digitalizing world with "Single School Act," and poignantly refers to how educational methods in the Nether have transitioned entirely to game-based learning (p. 22). He further states:

> Our bodies are ninety-nine percent space. Physical sensation is inconsequential. […]
> But there are no longer physical barriers to that contact. Now we may communicate with anyone, through any form we choose. And this communication – this experience of each

> other – is the root of consciousness. It is the universe wanting to know itself. Can't you see what a wonder it is that we may interact outside our bodies? It's as revolutionary as – discovering fire! (Haley 22-23)

Hence, without any physical contact, participants value a Baudrillardian hyperreality over the authentic truth because what hyperreality provides for them is designed in line with their true desires and selves.

As a result of this, within the virtual environment of the Hideaway, characters such as Sims, a.k.a. Papa, Morris, a.k.a. Woodnut, and Doyle, a.k.a. Iris, adopt identities that reveal darker, more complex desires. Sims carefully curates the environment to reflect a Victorian-style aesthetic to allow the participants and himself, to feel a sense of nostalgia, safety, and naivety in a space where they can act without fear of social or legal repercussions. Under interrogation, Sims reacts to Morris's claims of the Hideaway as an unreal world, a world of "shade," by remarking, "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real" (Haley 13). Perhaps in a Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* way, he refers to the value or truth behind experience or feelings lying not in the tangibility or the observability of the experience but in how human beings are involved in it in their minds. Therefore, the physical body that matters in the physical world and limits beings into its entity becomes insignificant with the VR. Sims's avatar, Papa, embodies his pedophilia and his desire for control and freedom. It enables him to exert influence over the virtual world in a way that his real-world identity cannot. He spends "an average of sixteen hours a day in the Nether" because he believes that Papa in the VR is his true self, not Sims in physicality (Haley 12). He knows that he is not welcome in the physical world as he is, and cries to Morris:

> Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioral therapy or relapse determent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I loved him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this, I see this – not all of us see this – but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor's children and my brother's children and the children I won't allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be my fucking self! (Haley 15)

In a highly manipulative manner, Sims excuses himself, claiming that the Hideaway functions as a stress reliever for the tension arising from his undesirable tendencies in society. He alleviates his guilty conscience by noting that he would otherwise be detrimental to society, its values, and even his loved ones. His true self, which clearly does not align with the ethical values and norms of society, is freely expressed in the Hideaway realm through his performance. The dualistic performativity of his character suggests that social roles are not predetermined; human beings are defined by what they perform and create, not by roles assigned to them. Thus, whom he pretends to be in the real world is just as illusory as the persona he crafts in the VR realm since both are constructed through his performed roles.

In particular, Cedric Doyle, with the avatar of Iris, illustrates this conflict further. He is a college professor who "won a Distinguished Teaching Award in Science" in real life, yet in the Hideaway, he is transformed into a young girl who embodies his desires for innocence, youth, and taboo relationships (Haley 9). This avatar allows Doyle to engage with other participants in ways that would be legally and ethically impermissible outside the virtual realm. The performance of this identity showcases how virtual worlds offer individuals the opportunity to transcend societal limitations and construct selves that align more closely with their hidden inclinations. The capabilities and design of the Nether as a digital platform directly influence how characters navigate their identities. By allowing Doyle to adopt an avatar like Iris and explore elaborate,

immersive environments in the Hideaway, the platform creates a unique space for Doyle to reach his innermost obsessions. The anonymity afforded by his avatar enables him to transcend his physical appearance, age, and social status, and his disembodiment from Doyle into his re-embodiment as Iris is because of his need to form an identity not bound by the limitations of the tangible world. Doyle plans to leave his physical body in this world and to "cross over" into the Hideaway realm completely to become a "shade" there in the form of Iris (Haley 23). In response, Doyle merely asks, 'May I keep her?' referring to his cyberspace character, Iris (Haley 10). However, this would be impossible due to legal constraints concerning the Hideaway world. Disheartened by this reality, Doyle withdraws completely from Morris's interrogation, lamenting, "I have nothing to say" (Haley 10).

Doyle prefers to remain as a shade with his avatar, Iris. His choice highlights the conflict in his mind between societal expectations and personal desires. The immersive technology of the Nether allows Doyle, like many others, to not only create but fully embody an identity that deviates significantly from his real-world persona. This duality between his prestigious real-life role and his virtual identity reflects a broader commentary on the nature of self and the boundaries of ethical behavior. Doyle's choice, opting out to exist solely in the virtual world, is an example that shows how technology can facilitate the exploration of self in ways that are otherwise constrained by real-world moral and legal frameworks. His decision to forgo a potential real-world fulfillment for his virtual existence is not just a form escape, but it is a profound transformation that questions the very essence of identity and morality in the digital age.

Likewise, Morris's transformation into Woodnut also demonstrates the use of technology to explore various aspects of identity that would be restricted in the real world. In the Hideaway, Woodnut is free to engage in behaviors that contradict Morris's socially compliant persona as an investigator in the real world. A female detective in real life and acting as a male participant in the Hideaway, Morris is implied to have been involved in pedophilic activities and as having sadist tendencies towards the immersive virtual reality experience in *The Nether*. When Iris is described as suddenly "lift[ing] her dress over her head and stand[ing] in her knickers," Scene 6 is cut, and the next scene begins with Morris's reading from the investigation report (Haley 28-29):

> I approach the little girl and fold her into my arms. Her skin is covered in goosebumps, which quickly fade into my embrace. [*Looking up*] The next section of the report is classified, but our agent did collect the evidence we needed to pursue this case. He confessed to me in person this experience left him traumatized. (Haley 29)

In these remarks, Woodnut is clearly seen as absorbed in the world of the Hideaway, but what goes unexplained in the text is also the aftermath of Iris's undressing, and Morris, not revealing to Sims that she was Woodnut indeed, reads this excerpt above from his report. This dichotomy between Morris as a female detective, and Woodnut as a male delinquent, demonstrates the performative nature of identity, highlighting how virtual platforms offer the opportunity for individuals to take up alternative selves. Morris becomes immersed in the realm too much and is traumatized due to her complicity within the Nether for the sake of continuing the investigation. Papa, seeing that Woodnut and Iris got too close to one another, makes Woodnut use an axe to kill Iris dismembering her into pieces. Morris, as Woodnut in the Hideaway, is in shock with the smell of blood on his hands and the gore around after killing Iris with an axe. He writes in the report, "A giggle at the door, and she reappears, coming toward me with her arms open – and I lift the axe and do it again. And I do it again. And I do it again. I want her to stop coming so I know I've done something. But she keeps coming, and now it's not just my hands covered in blood, it's my face, it's my body, I can taste it in my mouth, it's so exquisite I am crying, I have never felt so much with every nerve, felt so much, felt so much … feeling" (Haley 58). As is clear in his words, Morris is awestruck and simultaneously in hatred as a result of Iris's reappearance. He wants Iris to stop coming to see the

result of his actions in cyberspace. However, he is disheartened to realize that not only his distasteful activities like attacking Iris with an axe, but also all his previous precious moments with her are nothing but illusions. Although his feelings are intact in this cyberspace, and he can feel pain, love, hatred, disgust, and even the sweat on his body and the smell of gore, they have never existed in reality, and all are presented to him as experiences merely felt in his brain. Hence, Morris/Woodnut laments, "But if there has been no consequence, there has been no meaning – no meaning between her and myself, between myself and myself – and if there has been meaning, then I am a monster" (Haley 58). Morris cannot find the meaning he craves in cyberspace, and his search for substance in there leads him into an existential crisis.

Morris asks herself repeatedly whether all these events mean anything. Initially dismissing them as unreal, she later reveals to Cedric Doyle that he is her "first love" (Haley 61). This confession clearly shows that the events occurred in the Hideaway meant a lot for her traumatizing her deeply. In the play, there is a recurring, suspicious mention of an axe, and Papa frequently asks Iris whether Woodnut has ever used the axe, and upon realizing that he has not, he manipulates Iris to force Woodnut to use it. This axe, designed by Papa, is meant to prevent participants from becoming fully immersed in the Hideaway and losing touch with the real world, which could endanger both themselves and the virtual realm. To maintain control, Papa also removes "naughty" girl avatars by sending them "to boarding school," a phrase steeped in Victorian tradition (Haley 39-40). We are also informed that before Iris, there were Barnaby, Donald, Antonia, all of whom, Morris writes in the report, are designed as inspired "from an era associated with … innocence" (Haley 6).

Even though Morris is a detective trying to put things right and as a member of law enforcement, to penalize offenders and pedophiles like Sims and Doyle, she reveals at one point in the play that, she has also suffered from parental abuses when she was a kid, and the identity and social and professional roles she is in is not what she desires. She quotes a passage from the American poet, Theodore Roethke:

> Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
> My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
> Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
> A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
> The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
> And one is One, free in the tearing wind. (Haley 52)

She finds her personal dilemma reflected in her father's highlighted passage cited above from his copy of Roethke's book of poems. Roethke's poem, as referenced by Detective Morris in the play, mirrors her internal conflict related to her self-perception and identity. In essence, she is caught between two identities: Morris as a female detective abused by her parents when she was a child and Woodnut as a male pedophile. Once a victim of abuse and trauma in reality, she becomes an abuser and traumatizer in cyberspace. In the context of the play, Morris identifies with this poem, seeing her own life's turmoil reflected in the chaotic imagery. Despite her role as law enforcement officer, her internal conflicts and unresolved trauma from childhood abuses make her sympathize with the complexities of human desires and identities, just as the speaker in Roethke's poem, or as the characters, Doyle or Sims who are all portrayed in *The Nether* as grappling with their inner selves.

The ethical and psychological implications explored in *The Nether* extend beyond the characters themselves, and there are reflections on broader societal concerns about identity formation in the age of VRs. In real life recently, as the number of people engaging with digital platforms is definitely on the rise, and hence, the divide between virtual and real identities has become increasingly

porous, each one of us questions how these dual lives impact certain moral frameworks and our personal well-being. Apart from the issues mentioned above, Haley's play envisions the inherent risks of exploring identity in virtual spaces where anonymity can lead to behaviors that contradict real-world norms. The play's depiction of characters preferring avatars over their real selves, reveal their hidden desire to challenge traditional perceptions. This is an inversion of reality where virtuality becomes a more accurate reflection of self than everyday life. In *The Nether*, Papa notes, the virtual reality he created, is "nothing but images. And there is no consequence," to which Morris responds, "Images – ideas – create reality. Everything around us – our houses, our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties – began as figments in someone's mind before becoming a physical or social fact" (Haley 30). With these remarks, the play provokes a critical examination of how we navigate the complexities of identity in a digitized world. Moreover, it urges the audience of this theatrical performance or the reader of the playscript to reconsider the ethical dimensions of their virtual engagements and the implications for their real-world behaviors and beliefs. At the final scene of the play, which is titled as "Epilogue," the audience witness a rerun of a previous scene that has taken place between Papa and Iris in the Hideaway realm. In the rerun, they go up to the stage not in disguise of their avatars but as Sims and Doyle celebrating Iris's birthday and the intimacy between Iris and Papa with pedophilic undertones are reperformed between Sims and Doyle in the same pattern:

> DOYLE: And there's another sound. The sound of tiny dwarves who live in snowy mountains singing falsetto. Can you hear it?
> SIMS: No. It must be only for children to hear.
> DOYLE: Is that why you don't want me to grow up? Because I'll no longer hear the singing?
> SIMS: Because I don't want to lose you.
> DOYLE: It wouldn't be good for business.
> SIMS: That's not why. You know why. Don't you?
> DOYLE: I feel it, but … I do sometimes wonder if it's real. […]
> DOYLE: I love you.
> *Sims hesitates.*
> SIMS: You cannot know how much I love you. (Haley 70-71)

With this tension, the audience is irritated to the extreme as the play further tests their ethical boundaries with the sexual nature of this interaction at this scene's re-enacted version, this time between two older men. The intensity of a highly irksome moment is amplified and transformed into a scene that would function as catalyst to evoke a visceral reaction from the audience. This scene suggests that through VR both Doyle and Sims can now act on their taboo urges and that Nether provided an outlet for these taboo desires to grow in to real life. This deliberate provocation serves as a potent reminder of the disturbing potentials within virtual spaces and their capacity to blur moral boundaries. Moreover, this scene highlights the performative nature of gender identity and sexuality as these men continue their role-play now in real life. Layered with ethical ambiguity and psychological tension, the epilogue forces the audience to confront the uncomfortable truths about the human psyche's adaptability to different moral landscapes.

Conclusion

Jennifer Haley's play, *The Nether*, is a definitive example of intermedial theater due to its intensive and interactive integration of theatrical performance with virtual reality. The characters' performed behaviors, particularly their avatars in the Hideaway realm represent extensions of their socially influenced identities shaped by technology. The ethical ambiguity and psychological tension arising from this fluid identity exploration underscore the impossibility of maintaining stable personas across digital and real realms and emphasize the complexities and irregularities in identity and gender performances. With the technological infrastructure of the Hideaway,

power dynamics and control issues that influence participants' identities and actions are laid bare in *The Nether*. Theorists and authors who explore themes of monstrosity, plurality, cyborgs, and the blending of human, animal, and technological entities, have celebrated multiplicity, nontraditional alternatives, third spaces across their works. Eminently, Donna Haraway celebrates the multiplicity and plurality of modern human beings transforming into cyborgs, moving away from stable, concrete forms of existence in a digitized world. She describes how perceptions of machines have shifted from paranoid to a recognition of their lively presence, contrasting our own frightening inertia since machines are "self-moving, self-designing, autonomous" and "achieving man's dreams" (106). Furthering Haraway's celebration, recently, with our smartphones, smart assistants, smart devices, VR, AI, and technology enhanced software and tools in particular, human beings have been reduced into a position of abstraction, a lesser being than a cyborg in a state of incorporeality, a trend that could intensify unless checked. Therefore, *The Nether* stages the persistent anxiety and fear about lacking corporeality, authenticity, or meaning in a rapidly digitalizing world.

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