

بناء الهوية وإعادة تشكيلها في الحياة الافتراضية: الهوية الرقمية على خشبة المسرح في مسرحية "العالم السفلي" لجينيفر هايلي

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The Construction and Recreation of Identity in Virtual Life: Digital Identity on Stage in Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*

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Abstract

With the continuous advances in internet, social media, artificial intelligence, and technology in general, people started to spend more time online than they do in real physical world. Allowing users to have anonymous identity while giving them access to endless sites and sources means that people will create a different identity than they have in the real life, since they will not have to remain obedient to the same social rules of the real world. Digital identity is not always deviant from real one of the user, yet it can be sometimes drastically different due to the anonymity and freedom of the Internet. In *The Nether*, Jennifer Haley discusses the possibility of creating a violent and abusive virtual space on the internet. In this space, people use avatars that enact their desires crimes and offences with no moral or legal judgement. This paper attempts to discuss the duality of identities of such users and the shedding of moral rules in digital spaces. The study concludes that the play has successfully shed the light on the necessity of creating and following virtual ethics in digital world instead of giving total liberty to intent users

الخلاصة

مع التطورات المتواصلة في الإنترنت ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي والذكاء الاصطناعي والتكنولوجيا عموماً، بدأ الناس يقضون وقتاً أطول على الإنترنت مقارنةً بالوقت الذي يقضونه في العالم الواقعي. إن السماح للمستخدمين بهوية مجهولة مع منحهم إمكانية الوصول إلى مواقع ومصادر لا حصر لها يعني أنهم سيخلقون هوية مختلفة عن هويتهم في الحياة الواقعية، إذ لن يكونوا ملزمين بالنقيد بالقواعد الاجتماعية نفسها في العالم الحقيقي. لا تنحرف الهوية الرقمية دائماً عن هوية المستخدم الحقيقية، لكنها قد

تختلف اختلافاً جذرياً في بعض الأحيان بسبب إخفاء الهوية والحرية التي يوفرها الإنترنت. في مسرحية "العالم السفلي" ، تناقش جينيفر هايلى إمكانية إنشاء فضاء افتراضي عنيف ومسيء على الإنترنت. في هذا الفضاء، يستخدم الناس صوراً رمزية تُجسد رغباتهم وجرائمهم ومخالفاتهم دون أي اعتبار أخلاقي أو قانوني. تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية ازدواجية هويات هؤلاء المستخدمين وتلاشي القواعد الأخلاقية في الفضاءات الرقمية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن المسرحية قد نجحت في تسليط الضوء على ضرورة وضع أخلاقيات افتراضية والالتزام بها في العالم الرقمي بدلاً من منح المستخدمين حرية مطلقة.

1.1. Internet and Digital Crimes

At the social level, the Internet and its related inventions, like digital connections and social media platforms, have greatly changed how people communicate and how society itself functions. This transformation has reshaped human relationships and the social structure. In what is called the "Network Society," networks are now the core of modern life. Social systems work to link people socially in a virtual world. This change has led to a rise in social connection through the internet and the creation of online relationships that differ from older ones like families or local communities. Thus, today's society is built around networks formed by shared interests, values, and activities that exist beyond physical distance. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p. 17).

Sherry Turkle (1995), has noticed the changes in people's behavior in online communities and how it differs from their real life interactions. Her *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* elaborately comments on such altering of behavior. Identity is not constructed of one defining feature or one predominating quality. The self is a construct of different aspects and while the physical life forces some of these aspects into appearance, online communication can reveal a completely different set:

Internet experiences help us to develop models of psychological well-being that are in a meaningful sense postmodern: They admit multiplicity and flexibility. They acknowledge the constructed nature of reality, self, and other. The Internet is not alone in encouraging such models. There are many places within our culture that do so. What they have in common is that they all suggest the value of approaching one's "story" in several ways and with fluid access to one's different aspects (Turkle, 1995, p. 263).

What Turkle discusses is the impact of internet communities on the hidden aspects of a person's life. The internet is a world with no restrictions. In which, the individual's identity can be fully expressed. According to Rafael Capurro, Michael Eldred, and Daniel Nage (2013) Each culture provides a set of rules and customs to the shaping of private and public practices where individuals need to reveal or conceal parts of who they are. Public life of individuals is not always consistent with their private one. In fact, the public life is dominated by the necessity to please the social standards of politeness, appropriation, prestige, etiquette, dressing codes, costumes and social norms, etc. which makes individuals appease these aspects even if they do not believe in them. The private life of people, on the other hand, is marked by the absence of the social observer that monitors individuals' lives (p. 9).





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The liberty that comes from not being watched enables people to abandon or even disdain social norms without being afraid of the society's reaction. With the advance of internet, people could express their true identities and private selves while hiding behind fake names and anonymous accounts. Such digital freedom, even though positive in itself, brings a lot of dangers with it. According to Faizur Rashid and Sadaf Rashid (2023),

Digital technology and digital media are tools that can be employed both constructively and destructively. How the user uses this tool for his or her own needs entirely depends on the user. We all know that technology is improving to help us or give us a better future, but some people utilize it in very risky ways to commit crimes. Therefore, it should be the duty of the users, parents, and teachers to enact tough regulations against them and to educate the users in the positive and negative sides of these advanced technologies. (Rashid & Rashid, 2023, no p.)

The freedom of the digital reality can be used as escape in bleak and restrictive places where people can show hidden sides of their lives. But it can also be used as a tool for prohibited and harmful desires, even criminal ones. Internet can recreate each aspect of the identity in its extreme form. Romantic people can express their longing without fear or reservation, haters can utter words and expressions that fully explain their attitude and harm the receivers, and the same goes for legal forces, criminals, educated people, the ignorant, misogynists, pedophiles, imposters, racists, humanitarians, feminists, etc. each one of them enjoys the same level of freedom and chances for full self-presentation and identity construction. This notion is tackled by Turkle (1995) as she expresses "[t]he Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (p. 180).

One group of people that can be extremely targeted and damaged by digital crimes are minors below 18 years old. The digital space can reconstruct adult and minor identities by making adults show their hidden criminal orientations and children show their vulnerable receptive nature (Lievens, 2010, p. 1). In public everyday life, crime faces the social constraints against it. But in the digital space, where limits and laws can be much less effective, these crimes can easily occur and target them. Thus, while the digital life of an individual may give them all the liberty they need, it can also transform or show suppressed sides of their personality that can cause them or other people harm.

Haley's *The Nether* shows that cyberspace mirrors the real world. It represents a desired space that fills the emptiness of real life. This idea reflects not only a sense of exile but also the duplication of home and the need to cross the limits of society. Her characters exist in a space between two worlds. They cannot fully belong to one and refuse to separate the real from the digital. At the same time, they look for a sense of home within a free world. The play also raises questions about whether virtual life can be effectively controlled or not.

1.2. Literature review

Jennifer Haley is well-known American playwright and her plays have been tackled from different angles. One of the important articles on her play is "Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*: Transhumanism in the Post-Internet World" by Yasser Fouad Selim (2022). This article discusses how the play presents a techno-futuristic vision of life. It shows human beings as they become more absorbed in the virtual world after the Internet evolves into an advanced digital realm. It suggests that *The Nether* crosses the line between what is real and what is digital. The article contributes to the transhumanist debate by examining the ethical and moral issues tied to surpassing human limitations in a post-Internet era. Thus, it analyzes Haley's use of realistic virtuality to portray transhuman experiences on stage.

Also, there is Bishnu Pada Roy's "Crossing Over the (Blurred) Lines among Reality, Virtuality, and Theatricality: A Cyberpsychoanalytical Study of *the Nether* by Jennifer Haley." This study analyzes how the rise of the internet has changed human life and psychology. Jennifer Haley's play *The Nether* focuses on the influence of the virtual world on physical existence. The play constructs and connects three realms (the real, the virtual, and the theatrical) and suggests that their boundaries mix together. The paper argues that the characters of the play move beyond the usual limits of reality and performance. To support its claims, the paper uses an interdisciplinary approach of cyberpsychoanalytic theory, which combines psychoanalysis and literary study.

Another important article is "The Nether Worlds of Jennifer Haley—A Case Study of Virtuality Theatre" by Michelle Yeadon (2018). The article focuses on Jennifer Haley's knowledge of both playwriting and coding. This knowledge places her in two closely connected worlds. It allows her to create a strong link between theatre and virtual reality. At the center of today's technological age lies a new form of writing and media as Haley's work reflects that. Theatre has long explored the virtual imagination to express it on stage. Both theatre and digital media rely on action and offer deep simulations. Haley's plays go beyond simply showing technology as a spectacle; they bring digital life into the core of her storytelling. She writes about the shared qualities between theatre and virtual realities by borrowing techniques from other media and put them in a theatrical work.

Finally, Michael Hooper discusses the ethical side of the play in his article, "Playing House: Spatiality, Home, and Privacy in the Theatre of Jennifer Haley" (2023). Jennifer Haley's plays are often evaluated for the ethical issues they explore. This essay argues that the idea of space is essential to people to understand themselves as they move fast towards a digital life. *The Nether* (2013) reflects Una Chaudhuri's concept of geopathology, or the struggle with place, which still shapes modern drama. This play reveals isolation and victimhood. It shows that the hope for a more connected society can disappear as the notion of nationhood continues to fade.





Based on the literature that is reviewed here, the researcher concludes that this study is unique in that it studies the shifting and change of identities and collapse of moral-ethical values depending on whether the individual is inside or outside the virtual realms.

1.3. Digital identity in the nether

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary (2025), the word nether means "situated down or below: lower [..or] situated beneath the earth's surface." Jennifer Haley uses this word to name an online space with criminal activities. She defines this virtual world, or cyberspace, as follows :

Nether Realm

1. Another world for mythical creatures
2. Demon world
3. A dimension of Evil or Imagination (Haley, 2015, p. 3)

In a near future setting, the play visualizes a world where virtual reality has become so convincing and realistic that people start to replace their real life with it. The dominating virtual reality of the play is called the Nether, which provides opportunities, activities, spaces such as clubs, sports, mansions, etc. and allows users to use them and abuse them however they desire as they plunge into this world through VR glasses. The novel starts with detective Morris as she discovers an illegal space in the Nether which is called "The Hideaway."

The Hideaway is a virtual space designed for pedophiles, sadists, masochists, and violence offenders who can exercise their illegal activities and perhaps even crimes against avatars that look like minors and children in the Hideaway. This space is considered attractive to wealthy people because it turns their fantasies into real action, and because it is designed as a lavish Victorian setting that contrasts the bleak modern world. Outside the Nether, life is described as a dystopian environment where simple things like grass, peas, swiss chard, cotton, and stones are considered rare things (Haley, 2015, p. 12).

The Hideaway gives users the freedom to build completely new identities. There are no limits on who someone can become. They can choose the look of their avatar concerning its gender, age, race, or appearance. When Detective Morris starts investigating the Hideaway, she realizes that the customers of this space is mostly men and she chooses the avatar of a man named Woodnut. Users can select from a list of available appearances that are varied enough to fulfill the desires of all customers. Avatars serve both to hide users' real identities and to allow them the freedom to show the sides that are hidden of their identities. In fact, Avatars create multiple versions of who they are. At first, the avatars in the Hideaway seem completely free from the body and from the social or physical limits that define real life yet as the investigation begins it appears that virtual life impacts real life greatly (Pham, 2018, p. 6).

The play follows the technique of Reverse chronology where the story starts at the end and gradually reveals what happened until readers reach the beginning. Thus, the play opens with Detective Morris is in a cold interrogation room



asking the owner of the Hideaway questions about his space. When Morris arrests Sims, she is surprised to find that he is a refined old man who resists her accusations of being a criminal. Sims runs The Hideaway as a profitable business that has no limits or restraints. The hideaway is where people that lead normal lives in the real world engage in violent and abusive activities with avatars that resemble minors and children. The customers of Hideaway appear there as digital representations of real users that remain anonymous. Sims denies Morris's charge that the abuses he enables in this virtual realm cause real harm yet Morris insists:

You have a beautiful home, Mr Sims. Victorian. Set back from a country lane. Children on the front porch [...] Barnaby. Donald. Antonia. Iris. Such quaint names. From an era associated with ... innocence. [...] *Morris consults a report.* [...] Solicitation. Rape. Sodomy. Murder. These are heavy charges, Mr Sims. (Haley, 2015, p. 6)

Morris's interrogation brings out a conflict to the surface at the start of the play. Sims says he wants to go home, yet Morris replies "Which home?" (p. 11). Despite having a beautiful real house and wife, and looking stable and respectable, in the online life that he leads, he is an abuser. Morris' question exposes his divided nature and his desire to escape reality. Sims has separated his identity into two figures (Sims and Papa). He leads double lives in double homes. As Morris notes, he spends most of his time in the Nether, not in the physical world. "But really, Mr. Sims, an average of fourteen hours a day in the Nether? What can be gained by spending so much time in something that isn't real" (Haley, 2015, p. 12).

The play shows how the virtual life can be addictive and corruptive of human life. Despite having families and houses of their own, the internet allows its users to rebuild their lives and identities and gives them multiple chances to corrupt themselves. By allowing the users to carry out their abusive violent and sexual activities against avatars, The Hideaway d of controlling them. Morris builds the case that even when it comes to games and fantasies, human beings should not be allowed ultimate freedom. A notion that Sims strongly disagrees with "It's not the same way of being! It's imagination! People should be free in their own imagination! That is one place, at least, where they should have total privacy!" (Haley, 2015, p. 31). Sim's point of argument is constantly brought in debates around virtual ethics and whether it is right or wrong to train people on crimes in games and virtual simulations only because they are not 'real' crimes. In his widely cited article "Is it wrong to play violent video games," Matt McCormick (2001), explain that

By participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent, and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character. [...] The utilitarian might argue that by indulging in holo-crimes, one makes it more like that you will commit real crimes. You lower your inhibitions, desensitize yourself to suffering, and make it easier to do actual harm to real people (p. 285).



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Thus, the danger of constructing a violent identity online cannot be erased by having a stable identity in real life. What happens in digital world can easily be absorbed into a person's real identity to be gradually corrupted by that. Especially that the design of the Hideaway in the play makes it even more alluring, it is "designed as an 1880s Gothic Revival house surrounded by trees, is both alluring and deceitful. [...it is] Victorian purity mixed with the symbolic presence of modern and historical child abuse" (Hooper, 2023, p. 111).

Sims designs the Hideaway with a carefully constructed Victorian atmosphere to give users a feeling of comfort and nostalgia to carry out their violent and pedophilic tendencies freely without fear of judgment. During his questioning, he tells Morris that the Hideaway is not only a world of shadows, "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real" (Haley, 2015, p. 13). For Sims, reality is defined by the mind and emotions, not the physical body. In the virtual world, the body loses its importance and identity becomes something that can exist purely through thought and feeling.

Sim's avatar, Papa reflects his urges for liberation. Through Papa, Sims can rule and shape the virtual world in ways his real-life self cannot. He spends about sixteen hours a day inside the Nether, convinced that Papa is his real identity while Sims, his physical form, is just a shell (Gunes, 2024, pp. 217–18). Sims understands that he does not belong in the physical world, and in his despair, he tells Morris with deep emotion:

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 deterrent or even chemical castration will sway me [...]. I I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. [...] and the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be [...my self] (Haley, 2015, p. 15)

The play demonstrates a contrast between real world identity and digital one. Cedric Doyle is another character that shows this contrast. He takes on the avatar of a little girl who undergoes violence, pain, and bullying in the virtual reality. Doyle is a respected college professor In the real world who received an Award in Science, but in the Hideaway he becomes a young girl symbolizing innocence and experiences a violent childhood at the hands of other users (Haley, 2015, p. 9). Doyle's hate for his real personality, job, house, gender, life makes him seek a drastically different life and body in the Hideaway. He demonstrates a masochistic tendency as he allows other users to hurt and bully his avatar, Iris. According to Turkle (1995) "We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine... We are learning to live in virtual worlds" (p. 10). The anonymity that comes with avatars helps users to escape the boundaries of the physical form, age, and social position. Doyle expresses a desire to leave his real body behind and permanently live in the Hideaway:

DOYLE. 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? (Haley, 2015, pp. 22-23)

The Hideaway redirects the users urges from being physically banned to being emotionally allowed. Not only the avatars are an alternative identity builders but they are also attached to the senses of their users. They can feel the grass and sun rays of the Nether as if it is real world. Having the scenes shifting between memories of the Nether and interrogation room helps the audience to see the alluring energy of the Nether. Sims insists that in order to keep his customers interested, he has to provide them with whatever they require besides the anonymity and protection.

SIMS: People come to my realm of their own free will.

MORRIS: They're enticed by its beauty. By sensations they can no longer experience in the real world.

SIMS: Is it my problem the real world no longer measures up? (Haley, 2015, p. 29).

The urge to hoard and succeed financially has turned the real world of the play into a polluted, neglected, ugly, and miserable one. The ugliness of the real world has led people to take refuge in the virtual reality. The Hideaway is a space with moral greyness where the darkest of desires can be acted without fearing jail or penalty. Yet, Morris' appearance and her arrest of Doyle and Sims change that. she shows them that the digital realms are to be judged with the same rules of the real world.

Sims and Doyle are struggling with repression and regret. Both want to lead different life in the Hideaway yet they are incapable of that. "We offer a place where you may dismantle everything the world has told you about right and wrong and discover pure relationship" (Haley, 2015, p. 55). They are haunted by their disdain of their reality and their desire to escape their bodies and worlds. The fact that people change and shift ideas according to their use of internet is supported by Turkle (1995) who states that "The essence of this self is not unitary, nor are its parts stable entities. It is easy to cycle through its aspects and these are themselves changing through constant communication with each other" (p. 261).

Through Sims and Doyle's conversations with Morris, she discovers that even she wants to discover what it is like to live in another body. This shows that virtual world is desired even by those who appear to be reserved about it (Roy, 2017, p. 50).. While a person's life is defined by a family, body, age, and gender that they did not choose, in virtual reality they can choose all that and more to redefine who they are. Morris reveals at one point in the play that she has suffered from parental abuses when she was a kid, and her identity and profession are not what she wants. 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,





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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, 2015, p. 52)

Morris is trapped between two identities: her life as a female detective abused by her parents when she was a child, and the identity of the abusive male that she chooses to enter the Hideaway. She moves freely between her two identities, the real abused victim and the digital abuser, as she enters and leaves the Nether every day (Gunes, 2024, P. 220). Morris identifies with the human dilemma of this poem. Despite being part of law enforcement, she finds herself struggling with her trauma. Adapting herself into the virtual identity of Woodnut can be seen as an attempt to understand why her father abused her emotionally and physically as a child. She steps into the Hideaway as an old man who is both abusive and violent. By fluctuating between trauma and abuse she can understand and sympathize with the complicated and disturbed people she is investigating:

DOYLE. Our bodies are ninety-nine percent space. **Physical sensation is inconsequential.**

MORRIS. As a scientist, how can you say that? Sensation is our gateway. [...]

DOYLE. The world we walk upon. But what about the world of our imagination? (Haley, 2015, pp. 22-23)

In the play's world, many people decide to become 'shades.' They abandon real world by leaving their physical bodies alive through life support machine while they live in virtual reality. When she starts, Morris's investigation appears driven by a sense of moral duty, but she later reveals that her father has become a shade as well. She can no longer contact him without entering the Nether. Morris's confusion over her past is increased as her father, the last of her family members, leaves her in an empty and disappointing world. Her grabble to stop the Hideaway becomes personal as she wants to stop more people from abandoning reality to live there. Sims tells her that no matter how hard she tries she cannot do that because the Nether is more tempting than reality:

Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real. Eighty percent of the population works in office realms; children attend school in educational realms. There's a realm for anything you want to do or think you might want to try. As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being, don't you think it's a bit out of date to say it isn't real? (Haley, 2015, p.13)

In *The Nether*, an avatar cannot exist on its own but is always tied to a living person, even in the case of a "shade". The intense sensations experienced by avatars in the Hideaway do not prove that the mind and body are truly separate. Instead, "it accentuates the persistent significance of the body through a process of disembodiment and re-embodiment" (Pham, 2018, p. 6). Although the digital self interacts and feels within the virtual space, the physical body still serves as the ultimate receiver of those sensations which is why binding virtual life with the same ethics of real world is important.



The play concludes with Doyle's suicide and Sims receiving punishment according to the laws of the Nether, which is treated as a separate world from reality. However, it remains unclear whether true justice is achieved because there is no clear law for handling both digital and physical beings in a shared world (Pham, 2018, p. 6). The ending of the play shows the need to move beyond seeing cyberworlds as independent systems and instead develop a legal structure that can address the complicated relationship between the digital and physical realms.

Conclusion

The social life of an individual can be restrictive and lacking the liberty someone might need. Yet, in the play this restriction is shown as positive as it prevents people from following their destructive tendencies. Each of the main characters live in double identity, one in real life and another digital one of their choosing. The virtual life that they live with no laws or morals has led to their depression and regression of their true selves until Doyle commits suicide only because he cannot enter the Hideaway again. The playwright has shown the need for cyber laws and virtual ethics that guide virtual life as well as physical one.

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