

studio180theatre

STUDY GUIDE
OCTOBER 2018

The Nether
by Jennifer Haley

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A. Content Warnings and Fostering a Safer Space

CONTENT: We recommend *The Nether* for grade 11 & 12 high school students only. There is some very strong language in the play (the word “fuck” is spoken several times and the word “cock” is spoken once), and the content is mature, featuring provocative and taboo topics such as child sexual abuse, pedophilia and suicide. These topics are addressed by inference and within dialogue. No sexual contact is depicted on stage and there is no nudity.

If you have questions or concerns about the content of the play, or wish to receive an electronic reading copy, please do not hesitate to contact us at education@studio180theatre.com or **416-962-1800**.

SUPPORT & RESOURCES: Prior to commencing classroom work and attending *The Nether*, acquaint yourself with the support services available at your school. Please also make sure you are aware of your school’s protocols with regard to talking about suicide and supporting student disclosure of suicidal thoughts or abuse.

We also recommend that you make the following resources available to **all students** prior to introducing *The Nether* to your class:

Toronto Distress Line

416-408-4357

<https://www.torontodistresscentre.com/>

Brampton & Mississauga Spectra Helpline

905-459-7777

<http://www.spectrahelpline.org>

Good2Talk Confidential Teen Helpline

1-866-925-5454

<https://good2talk.ca/>

LGBT Youth Line

647-694-4275 | 1-800-268-9688

<http://www.youthline.ca/>

‘What’s Up’ Walk-in Clinic

1200 Markham Road, Suite 200 (*Corner of Markham and Ellesmere*): 416-438-3697

1871 Danforth Ave., 1st Floor: 416-690-1888

<http://emys.on.ca/getting-help/walk-in-clinic/>

The Gatehouse: support for people who have experienced childhood sexual abuse

416-255-5900

<http://thegatehouse.org/>

NeedHelpNow Sexual Photo & Video Removal and Support

<https://needhelpnow.ca/app/en/>

B. Guidelines for Brave Classroom Discussion

Thank you for bringing your class to *The Nether*. We hope your students will have the most positive and engaging theatre experience possible. To that end, we have created this **Study Guide** to support your pre-show preparation and post-show follow-up in the classroom.

For the most robust exploration of the characters and themes of *The Nether*, we recommend booking a [Studio 180 IN CLASS](#) workshop led by our experienced Artist Educators. We use drama-based activities to promote empathy and inspire critical thinking in three immersive sessions, delving into the big questions of the play. Please contact [Jessica Greenberg](#) to learn more or book a workshop.

Studio 180 is known for provocative shows that tackle potentially sensitive, personal and controversial topics. *The Nether* contains several highly provocative and taboo themes, including sexual violence and abuse, pedophilia and suicide. As educators we know that we can never responsibly guarantee that all participants will feel 100% safe; however, we have developed the following guidelines to promote a safer space and help you lead brave and productive pre- and post-show sessions aimed at empowering **all students to feel valued, respected and able to contribute openly and honestly to the discussion.**

- Class members should make a commitment to respecting one another. Invite suggestions from students as to what **“respect”** means to them. Some of these guidelines may include commitments to confidentiality, avoiding side chatter, and never ridiculing or putting down participants or their ideas.
- Your class may include students from a wide variety of cultural, racial, religious and national backgrounds, as well as students whose gender and sexual identities range across a broad and diverse spectrum. **Teachers and students must resist the urge to place individuals in the spotlight based on their perceived identity, history or point of view.** Students will engage in the conversation as they feel comfortable.
- Family diversity is important to keep in mind for both teachers and students to **avoid generalizations and assumptions** that could isolate or alienate individuals. Frequent reminders that there will often be as many different perspectives as there are people in the room are useful and help reinforce the value of a multiplicity of ideas and points of view.
- It is the moderator’s role to establish a space of respect and inclusion, and they must take special care to **ensure that students holding a majority opinion do not vilify those “on the other side” who hold a minority view.** The moderator should also pose questions to the class to help keep the conversation on track.
- The point of a classroom discussion about *The Nether* should not be to reach a class consensus. The goal should be to **establish a forum for a free and respectful exchange of ideas.**

D. Introduction to Studio 180 Theatre

Inspired by the belief that people can engage more fully in the world through the experience of live performance, Studio 180 Theatre produces socially relevant theatre that provokes public discourse and promotes community engagement. In 2017/18 we celebrated 15 years of bringing Toronto audiences compelling, high quality theatre that inspires us to ask big questions about our world and ourselves. 2018/19 is our sixteenth season.

Our inaugural production of *The Laramie Project* played to sold-out houses at Artword Theatre in Toronto in 2003. Its success led to a 2004 remount at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, which earned two Dora Award nominations. Since then, Studio 180 has continued to stage acclaimed productions of plays that tackle difficult issues and generate powerful audience and community responses. These are often Toronto, Canadian and/or North American premieres of large ensemble pieces that are contemporary, internationally renowned, and unlikely to be produced elsewhere.

As an independent theatre company, we are a nomadic group of artists. We create and produce our work in various spaces and venues across Toronto and we frequently partner with other companies in order to stage our plays. Past partnerships have included collaborations with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Canadian Stage, The Musical Stage Company (formerly Acting Up Stage), Mirvish Productions, The Theatre Centre, Tarragon Theatre and The Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company. *The Nether* marks our first co-production with Coal Mine Theatre.

In addition to our producing partners, we have a proud history of collaborating with community and advocacy organizations to raise funds and awareness around issues, causes and communities. Through special events, art exhibits in our theatre lobbies, pre- and post-show conversations, and panel discussions, we work together with artists, community leaders and subject matter experts to bring conversations ignited by our plays [Beyond the Stage](#). Community partners have included Supporting Our Youth, The Triangle Program, Givat Haviva, Palestine House, Democrats Abroad, The 519, AIDS ACTION NOW!, AIDS Committee of Toronto, Toronto People With AIDS Foundation, Positive Youth Outreach, Peace Now, The Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada, Women in Capital Markets, Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, CATIE, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, the Cities Centre at U of T, Feminist Art Conference, Shameless Magazine and the Dotsa Bitove Wellness Academy.

Outreach to high school audiences has always been a crucial component of our work. In 2010 we launched [Studio 180 IN CLASS](#), an innovative workshop model that fosters productive dialogue, encourages critical thinking, and promotes empathy by exploring the uniquely humanizing capacity of live theatre. Over the years, our Studio 180 IN CLASS program has grown to reach hundreds of high school students across the GTA each year. We are proud education partners of the Toronto District School Board.

We love plays that provoke big questions about our communities and our world, and we have introduced Toronto audiences to a significant number of socially relevant plays from international stages. In 2015, inspired by our eagerness to investigate more locally rooted questions, we launched [Studio 180 IN DEVELOPMENT](#), one of Toronto's newest theatre creation initiatives. Working with both established and emerging playwrights and creators, we provide financial and artistic resources to a broad range of issue-based works at various stages of development. We then invite student and public audiences to hear the work and contribute to the development process.

Studio 180 Theatre's Production History

- 2003** *The Laramie Project*, Artword Theatre
- 2004** *The Laramie Project*, at and in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre
The Passion of the Chris, Toronto Fringe Festival
- 2006** *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook*, Berkeley Street Theatre Upstairs
- 2007** *Offensive Shadows*, SummerWorks Festival
- 2008** *Stuff Happens*, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs
- 2008/09** *Offensive Shadows*, Tarragon Theatre Extra Space
Blackbird, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2009/10** *Stuff Happens*, Royal Alexandra Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
The Overwhelming, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2010/11** *Parade*, Berkeley Street Theatre Upstairs, in association with Acting Up Stage
Our Class, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2011/12** *The Normal Heart*, at and in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre
Clybourne Park, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2012/13** *The Normal Heart*, at and in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre
Clybourne Park, Panasonic Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
The Laramie Project 10th Anniversary Reading (featuring 50-member ensemble), Panasonic Theatre
- 2013/14** *God of Carnage*, Panasonic Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
Cock, The Theatre Centre
- 2014/15** *NSFW*, The Theatre Centre
Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish, Fleck Dance Theatre, co-presented with PANAMANIA presented by CIBC ; in association with IFOA
- 2015/16** *You Will Remember Me*, at and in co-production with Tarragon Theatre
- 2016/17** *My Night With Reg*, Panasonic Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
- 2017/18** *My Name is Asher Lev*, Greenwin Theatre at Toronto Centre for the Arts, in co-production with the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company
King Charles III, CAA Theatre (formerly the Panasonic), presented by David Mirvish
- 2018/19** *The Nether*, at and in co-production with Coal Mine Theatre
Oslo, CAA Theatre, presented by David Mirvish

E. Introduction to Coal Mine Theatre

The Coal Mine is an independent theatre in Toronto's east end, founded by Chief Engineers Diana Bentley and Ted Dykstra in 2014. As our first four seasons demonstrated we are determined to present superbly written, richly thoughtful, and fearlessly challenging plays produced, directed and acted at the highest possible level. With only 80 seats a night, The Coal Mine is inspired by the intimacy and excitement of the Off-Off-Broadway experience. We just wrapped our fourth season—a season of two Canadian premieres, including a commissioned translation, one Toronto premiere, and the world premiere of an iconic album in concert.

The creation of The Coal Mine began in the basement of a pizza parlour, with the acclaimed production of Stephen Adly Guirgis' *The Motherfucker With The Hat*. Two productions followed in that first season, and it was clear that there was a real thirst for high caliber proven scripts in Toronto's East End. The following year the theatre lost its basement home. Undaunted, and having already announced a second season, they presented the first show of that season in a "pop up" storefront space on The Danforth, and then found a more permanent home just in time for the second show of that season, *The Winter's Tale* (a co-production with Groundling Theatre) which began a stunning succession of virtually completely sold-out shows that has continued to this day.

Ted and Diana oversaw the complete renovation of this space, adding a lobby, a bar, and a basement green room, all solely done with donations from their audience.

The Coal Mine operates on a show-by-show basis, meaning that every production has its own team of producers, designers, actors and stage management. This means more opportunities for more artists in the Toronto community. But the Chief Engineers have a strong foundation of artistic associates with them who are unchanging and represent the stable core of the company.

The Coal Mine has produced shows every season that have received Dora Nominations, for a total of 10 nominations in four short seasons. They have won three Dora Awards – all for Male Performance – for *The Aliens*, *Superior Donuts* and *The Motherfucker with the Hat*. The Coal Mine is also the recipient of three Toronto Theatre Critics awards for *The Aliens* (2017) for best supporting actor and *The Motherfucker with the Hat* (2014) for best supporting actor and best new international play.

Entering its fifth season, The Coal Mine produces four productions a season between September and May. They have amassed over 700 subscribers and last year sold to 95% houses, with three of the shows completely selling out before they opened.

The Coal Mine is carefully nurturing itself, wishing to grow only when that growth is clearly sustainable. It wishes to remain a vital part of Toronto's culture, and to continue to listen to its audience, who are King.

Coal Mine Theatre's Production History

Season One: 2014-15

The Motherfucker with the Hat

Bull

Creditors

Season Two: 2015-16

The River

The Winter's Tale, co-produced with Groundling Theatre

Killer Joe

Instructions to Any Future Socialist Government Wishing to Abolish Christmas

Season Three: 2016-17

Breathing Corpses

A Coal Mine Christmas: A Child's Christmas in Wales by Dylan Thomas

Superior Donuts

Orphans

Season Four: 2017-18

The Aliens

Poison

A Coal Mine Concert: Rumours by Fleetwood Mac

Category E

Season Five: 2018-19

The Nether, co-produced with Studio 180 Theatre

The Wonder Pageant

The Father

Hand to God

F. Introduction to the Play and the Playwright

The Play – The Nether

Part police procedural, part sci-fi thriller, *The Nether* prompts important conversations about technology, virtual reality and the impacts of the internet. Jennifer Haley's 2013 drama imagines a dystopian future in which social and professional activity has migrated predominantly online, environmental degradation has alienated us from the natural world, and human beings are increasingly disconnected from one another.

This sets the stage for "Sims" to create an online environment that recreates the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of an innocent time gone by. However, this virtual "Hideaway" conceals some very dark secrets. Not only does it offer the experience of tending a garden or sipping fine cognac – it provides a virtual opportunity for people to have sex with and murder children. A rookie detective leads an investigative team and must navigate the physical and moral space between in-world and virtual reality, as she interrogates Sims and tries to bring him down.

This riveting 90-minute thriller is sure to provoke big questions about our selves and our society. What are the social ramifications of environmental devastation? Is there a universal need for human connection? Are there legal and moral limits to online interaction? Are there differences between real life and virtual relationships? Does the internet expand or restrict our privacy and freedom? And ultimately, can and should there be such a thing as a "life outside of consequence?"

The Nether premiered in 2013 in Los Angeles at Center Theatre Group's Kirk Douglas Theatre. The following year it received its UK premiere at the Royal Court with a wildly successful production that transferred to London's West End in 2015. That same year, MCC produced *The Nether* Off-Broadway at New York's Lucille Lortel Theatre. It has since enjoyed numerous productions across the US and internationally. Canadian productions have included Hamilton's Theatre Aquarius in 2016 followed by Vancouver's Firehall Arts Centre in 2017. Studio 180 and Coal Mine are excited to be introducing this poignant play to Toronto audiences for the first time.

The Nether offers an exciting and engaging theatre education opportunity for senior high school students with curriculum connections to Drama, English, Media Studies, Communications & Technology, Law, and Social Science.

CONTENT: We recommend *The Nether* for grade 11 & 12 high school students only. There is some very strong language in the play and the content is mature, featuring provocative and taboo topics such as child sexual abuse, pedophilia and suicide. These topics are addressed by inference and within dialogue. No sexual contact, sexual or physical violence is depicted on stage and there is no nudity.

If you have questions or concerns about the content of the play, or wish to receive an electronic reading copy, please do not hesitate to contact us at education@studio180theatre.com or **416-962-1800**.

The Playwright – Jennifer Haley

Jennifer Haley is an LA-based writer whose plays include *Neighborhood 3*, *Sustainable Living*, *Breadcrumbs*, *Froggy* and *The Nether*, which earned her the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. She also writes for television, including the Netflix shows *Hemlock Grove* and *Mindhunter*.

Haley grew up in San Antonio, Texas and attended the University of Texas at Austin where she studied acting as an undergraduate student. She continued her studies, receiving an MFA in playwriting from Brown University in 2005, under the mentorship of renowned playwright Paula Vogel. Haley is the founder of LA's Playwrights Union.

To read more about Jennifer Haley and the inspiration for *The Nether* and other writing, check out the article from American Theatre Magazine, included in **Section I** of this Study Guide. Links to online video interviews with Haley can also be found in this Study Guide's Recommended Resources **Section J**.

G. Attending the Play

Prior to the performance, please ensure that your students are well prepared. The better prepared they are, the more they will gain from the experience. The following guidelines should help you and your students get the most out of attending *The Nether*:

- **Please arrive early.** When travelling in the city, whether by school bus or TTC, it is always best to leave extra time in case of traffic or transit delays. **Weekday matinées begin promptly at 1:30PM.** To avoid disruption, **LATECOMERS may not be admitted.**
- **All photography and recording of the performance is strictly prohibited.**
- Please impress upon your students the importance of **turning off all cell phones** and electronic devices. If students understand *why* it is important to refrain from using electronics, they will be more likely to adhere to this etiquette. The Coal Mine Theatre is a very intimate “black box” space with only 80 seats. **Remind students that they will be seeing people performing live** and, as a rule, if you can see and hear the actors, the actors can see and hear you. Even text messaging – with its distracting, glowing light – is extremely disruptive in the theatre. **Please be courteous.**
- **Outside food and beverages are not permitted in the theatre.** Spills are messy and noisy snacks and bottles can be disruptive for performers and patrons alike. Please ensure that students have the opportunity to eat lunch prior to attending the performance. The play is performed in one act with no intermission. There are many affordable food options in the immediate vicinity if students wish to arrive early and purchase lunch before the show.
- **We encourage student responses and feedback.** After all weekday matinée performances, we offer a talkback (Q&A) session. We are interested in hearing what our audiences have to say and engaging in a dialogue inspired by the play. If students are aware of the post-show talkback, they will be better prepared to formulate questions during the performance – and they will remember to remain in their seats following curtain call! After the show, kindly take the time to complete our online [Teacher/Student Response Form \(studio180theatre.com/education-feedback\)](http://studio180theatre.com/education-feedback), or use the forms included in this guide in **Section C**, and ask your students to do the same. Your feedback is extremely valuable to us!

H. Characters, Major Themes & Discussion Questions

1. SIMS/PAPA: Online ethics, anonymity and consequences

Sims is an in-world businessman and his avatar is Papa – the proprietor of “The Hideaway” in the Nether. Sims recognizes that he is a pedophile and, in an attempt to control his desires and protect children from harm, he establishes a virtual reality business where “guests” can live out their sexual and violent fantasies on child avatars. He promotes his enterprise as:

“An opportunity to live outside of consequence.”

- What is appealing about a consequence-free existence?
- What are the potential dangers to promoting a life free of consequence?
- Think about the ways you and your friends engage in technology – do any media or digital communication platforms provide a degree of freedom from consequence? Think of your experiences with video games and/or social media. How does Sims’ notion resonate for you?
- What is the relationship between **anonymity** and freedom from consequence? How does *The Nether* explore this relationship and what do you think the playwright is saying about the benefits and/or dangers of anonymity? Considering the ways you and your peers interact online, **what are the benefits and dangers of anonymity?**

“Just because it’s virtual doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

- What does Sims mean when he defends Nether experiences to Morris in this way? What do you think it means to be **real**? Does this sentiment strengthen or weaken his position when it comes to arguing for his innocence in providing a consequence-free experience for his customers?
- **Consider the ways you and your peers use digital technology – how does Sims’ sentiment resonate?** Are there experiences and/or relationships that are virtual and yet “real”? Why or why not?
- Do you think Sims/Papa is helping people or harming them? Consider this question in relation to all the characters in the play. Would your answer be different if the play were set in the real world rather than a virtual one?

“You want my code. You want to sell it to Disney. Use it to create some insipid realm where you can brainwash users into buying crap they don’t need. You track them like bloodhounds. Now you want to tell them what to do. Or rather, what not to do. What not to think. What not to feel.”

- What is Sims accusing Morris and her colleagues of doing?
- How does Sims’ accusation resonate in our own world? What connections can you make to the ways in which our own media and telecommunications companies operate?
- Are you concerned about issues such as **personal data collection, privacy and targeted advertising online**? Why or why not?

2. IRIS: Consent, image & the impact of environmental degradation

Iris is a pre-pubescent girl avatar in *The Hideaway*. She encourages Papa's "guests" to have sex with her and then kill her with an axe. During her first encounter with Woodnut she says:

"It's okay to do that here, Mr. Woodnut. It's okay to forget who you think you are. And discover who you might be."

- How does Iris's invitation resonate beyond *The Hideaway* and speak to the **permission granted by online anonymity**? Can you think of real world examples?
- How do we reinvent ourselves online? Are our Facebook profiles and Instagram stories accurate representations of our selves and our lives? Why or why not? And does this matter? **What are the benefits of reinvention? What are the hazards?** Consider the consequences both for the person who is posting and the people who are engaging with their posts.
- How does the play investigate the concept of **consent**? From Iris's above quotation one could infer that the character is consenting to sex with Woodnut. However, we know that children are incapable of consenting to sex with adults by virtue of their age and the inherent power imbalance between children and adults. When it comes to *virtual sex*, do our standards for consent shift? Why is it okay to rape a child in a video game or virtual reality experience if we agree that it is not okay in real life? And further, if we think it's okay to rape a child in a video game or virtual experience, does that shed light on our actual views about the importance of consent? Does it change if the avatar is an adult? Discuss.

"I miss the trees."

- Iris is one of several characters expressing a longing for a natural world she can no longer access. How many characters and instances in the play provide clues about the physical world people inhabit in this future society? What do you imagine the physical/natural world of *The Nether* is like and why? Do you think this is a far distant future or a time close to our own?
- What do you think the playwright is saying about the potential impact of environmental degradation on human relationships, social interactions and our very identities?
- The playwright could have written Iris as an adult sex worker in *The Hideaway*. Why do you think she decided to write Iris as a young girl? Are there parallels to be drawn between a child's innocence/purity and the innocence/purity of nature? Why is it necessary to invoke the taboo of child sexual abuse in *The Nether*? How does it serve the playwright's thought experiment in ways that a more fluid or nuanced moral question would not?

3. MORRIS: Permission, censorship and freedom of speech

Morris is a young detective investigating Sims and his Nether Hideaway. She presents a counter argument to Sims' promotion of a consequence-free virtual existence. In speaking about The Hideaway and the violent and pedophilic acts encouraged there she says:

"You foster a culture of legitimization, telling them their desires are not only acceptable, but commendable."

- Which argument resonates for you – that of Morris or Sims? Is time spent in the Nether, no matter how taboo or immoral the virtual activity, a harmless exercise of the imagination? Does it provide a safe, harm-free outlet for participants' desires and fantasies? Or does it promote dangerous desires leading to real life harm?
- Can you think of examples of how social media and online forums have been said to **legitimize or promote hate** in our own communities? Examples include Gamergate, White Supremacist and Incel movements. Does digital technology grant permission for these movements to thrive? Why or why not?

"Images – ideas – create reality."

- Why does Morris want to shut down The Hideaway? Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
- Do you think that images (digital or otherwise) are the same as "reality?" What are the implications of this sentiment when it comes to questions of **freedom of speech** and **censorship**? Should violent stories, music, or paintings be censored, banned or otherwise regulated? What about pornography? What about video games and virtual reality? When it comes to the impact on the audience/player, is there a difference between a painting and a video game?

4. WOODNUT: Relationships, disconnection & alienation

Woodnut is an avatar guest at The Hideaway. He spends time with Papa and develops a relationship with Iris. He is one of the characters who illuminates the play's themes of **disconnection** and **alienation** and provokes big questions about the impact of online usage on our interpersonal relationships. In the second half of the play he reveals to Sims that his father was a "shade" – someone who ultimately crossed over into life exclusively in the virtual Nether realm. For Woodnut the consequences were severe and he says:

"He never looked at me when I was a child. He never touched me. He never took me outside."

- How can Woodnut's experience be seen as **allegorical**? What do you think the playwright is saying about human relationships (including parent-child relationships) in the digital age?
- **Do you think technology brings us closer together or alienates us from one another?** In the digital age are we more or less connected to one another? Why or why not? Come up with examples on all sides. How do you think Jennifer Haley would answer this question? Would you agree with her?
- How can Woodnut's father's obsession with the Nether be viewed as an **addiction**? Can people be addicted to technology just as they can be to alcohol or gambling? Discuss.

"I personally like to have these – materials – to hold onto. Something tangible. I don't know what happens when the music plays, but I like being able to touch the grooves."

- Use this speech to initiate a class discussion. Why do you think Haley included the scene between Woodnut and Iris where they enjoy the old fashioned gramophone? In an age where most music we consume comes to us through electronic files, why is the gramophone significant?
- Why do you think Sims/Papa created his virtual Hideaway in an old fashioned Victorian style? What is he appealing to in his customers? What is the playwright illuminating by including this detail in the play?

5. DOYLE: Freedom, addiction & mental health

Cedric Doyle is a 65-year-old middle school science teacher. In-world, he has a wife and adult daughter, but he spends a great deal of time in the Nether at the Hideaway, as his avatar Iris – a pre-pubescent girl. Morris interrogates Doyle as a key part of her investigation and convinces him to obtain crucial information from Sims/Papa. After Doyle betrays Papa and jeopardizes the Hideaway, Doyle hangs himself in real life.

“Your agent listed facts in his report. But the next time you have a chat by the water cooler, don’t ask him, What did you see? What did you do? Ask him, How free did you feel?”

- What does **freedom** mean to you? What do you need to feel free? Why is freedom important? Are there freedoms that are dangerous or harmful? **Does digital technology and social media enhance or restrict our freedom?**
- Why do you think Doyle chooses Iris as his avatar? How does this plot twist illuminate questions of **identity**?
- Why do you think Doyle spends so much time in the Nether at the Hideaway? Why does he want to “cross over” and leave his in-world life behind? What is he **escaping** or **seeking**? What do you think people in our own world are escaping or seeking when they spend most of their time in virtual realities?
- Morris accuses Doyle of being depressed and mentions treatment including suicide prevention. Do you think Doyle is struggling with mental illness? What do you think the playwright is saying about the effects of technology on our **mental health**?
- What is Doyle’s **relationship** to Papa? How does the final scene of the play make you feel and what does it illuminate about the characters in the play and their relationships? What do you think the playwright is saying about human relationships in general?

I. Interview with the Playwright

In the Uncanny Valley With Jennifer Haley

To explore the effects of technology, 'The Nether' playwright creates worlds that are frighteningly familiar.

BY DIEP TRAN

American Theatre Magazine

November 17, 2015

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/11/17/in-the-uncanny-valley-with-jennifer-haley/>

Park across the street from the building. It's 100 degrees out, so be sure to crack your window. Go up the stairs and knock on the first door on your right. Say hi, quietly, to playwright Jennifer Haley, who is on the phone when she answers the door. Take a seat on her couch while she finishes her call in the kitchen. Notice the Willem de Kooning print on the wall, situated conveniently across from her desktop computer. (That's what she received for winning the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *The Nether*, her Olivier Award–nominated play.)

"Nice to meet you," Haley will say to you when she gets off the phone, giving you a hug. "I just got back in town yesterday and I don't have any food." The rapport is instantly familiar. Haley invites you out to lunch, but you have to drive. You happily accept, if she agrees to give directions and coach you through parallel parking. Off you go.

After seeing Haley's mind-bending plays—not just the creepy cyber-procedural of *The Nether* but also the role-playing game gone wrong of *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* or the fractured fairy tale of *Breadcrumbs*—you might have a tendency to process reality, and the tiny everyday choices and exchanges that make it up, from a slightly skewed angle, as if you are a player in a choose-your-own adventure game. But those works—suspenseful, cerebral, dystopian—stand in stark contrast to Haley's personality, which is warm, inviting, entirely genuine; there's nothing virtual about it.

If Haley could stand behind a computer screen and watch herself, she might be surprised at how fast she's leveled up. After its world premiere at Los Angeles's Center Theatre Group in 2013, where it won seven Ovation Awards, *The Nether* played last spring at London's Royal Court Theatre while simultaneously receiving a thrice-extended run at MCC Theater in New York City. And this season it will be produced all over the country, from Houston's Alley Theatre to Philadelphia's InterAct Theatre Company, at San Francisco Playhouse, the Village Repertory Company in Charleston, S.C., and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. It's also receiving productions in Istanbul, Munich, and Madrid.

The play's popularity might partly be explained by its familiar setup: It opens up in an interrogation room (Haley admits she was partly inspired by "C.S.I.") where a female detective is questioning a middle-aged man about his involvement in the *Hideaway*, a virtual Victorian-era world in which pedophiles can have sex with avatars of pre-pubescent girls. Though the play's

most graphic scene involves little more than a child actress taking off a dress to expose frilly undergarments, it's a dark, twisted, get-under-your-skin kind of play.

Admits Haley with a laugh, "If a man had written *The Nether*—if I were, like, Joe Haley, everyone would think I was a big freakin' perv. I feel like *The Nether* could have only been written by a woman."

But hot topics aren't the only reason Haley's work seems to be catching on. All of Haley's plays hone in on the moral quandaries raised by technology, role-playing games, and the seduction of virtual worlds, while making audiences question the little ways in which technology has infiltrated our lives 24/7. In *Neighborhood 3*, teenagers addicted to a video game start to live in it for real; the play had its world premiere at the 2008 Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville and is currently running through Dec. 20 at New York's Flea Theatre, directed by Joel Schumacher (*Flatliners*, *The Lost Boys*). *Breadcrumbs*, which premiered at the Contemporary American Theater Festival in 2010, borrows fairy-tale iconography to explore human connection and Alzheimer's.

These last two plays have been produced by a number of midsize and small theatres around the country, and for much the same reason *The Nether* seems to have struck a chord: because younger theatremakers and their audiences are primed to see stories told through the lens of genre.

"My stuff is narrative, but I don't feel like I'm spoon-feeding people," says Haley. "I draw them in using genre—in *Breadcrumbs*, using the essence of a fairy tale; in *Neighborhood*, using a video game; in *The Nether*, using television procedurals. These genres provide a great sense of shorthand. If I want to sound evil and crafty, you just sort of lull people in." She finishes with a chuckle.

This kind of work may be familiar to many audiences, but it still stands out from the fare that crosses most artistic directors' desks.

"I remember reading [*Neighborhood 3*] and just going: Oh, this is really cool and really different," recalls Marc Masterson, who was artistic director of Actors Theatre when it produced *Neighborhood 3*. He now leads California's South Coast Repertory, which has commissioned a new play from Haley. "It wasn't just the science-fiction aspect of it," says Masterson. "It was also kind of scary; you don't read a lot of plays that are frightening. When you read something that just comes at storytelling from a very different perspective than 95 percent of the plays that you'd been reading, it kind of makes you want to do it."

Haley's road to playwriting was a long one. In a sense, it's a third career for the 44-year-old writer. Raised in San Antonio, Texas, she started acting in high school in plays like *The Elephant Man* and *The Miracle Worker*. She was especially enthusiastic about the latter.

"I love that play," Haley says. "I thought I was going to be cast as Helen, but [the director] cast me as Annie Sullivan. I was so shrimpy, but there was actually a shrimpier girl than me." She went on to pursue a liberal arts and theatre double major at the University of Texas at Austin,

and it was there that she wrote her first play, though she'd never taken a playwriting class.

"So many of the roles were just dopey stuff," she says over salads at Four Cafe near her apartment in Eagle Rock. "So the first play I wrote, I just wrote something with a great role for myself." The piece in question was a magical-realist two-hander called *Sabbath Days in a Hot Pickup*, about a woman preparing lunch for guests while her abusive husband is passed out on the kitchen table. She admits that it was inspired by Sam Shepard's work.

"That's where the magical realism comes in: She keeps trying to get him off the table, she's preparing lunch on his back, and finally she throws a tablecloth over him."

After graduating, she worked as a company member of a commedia dell'arte performance group called Troupe Texas, which performed in nursing homes and housing projects. In the late '90s, she moved to Seattle and became a web designer. Though that was just her day job—she was writing plays at night—the two worlds started to merge in her mind.

"As technological media was changing, I felt like I was in the thick of it," she recalls. "It was being a tech person and being in that world, it really started influencing my work."

In 2002, Haley says she made a promise to herself: "I'd give myself 10 years and really try to make it as a playwright. If at the end of 10 years I wasn't getting serious outside feedback that I could do this—I just didn't want to delude myself."

Just then entering her thirties, Haley applied, again, to graduate school in playwriting, having been rejected from every program she had applied to in her twenties. This time, she got accepted into Brown and studied under Paula Vogel. It was Vogel who gave Haley a pivotal note on an early draft of *Neighborhood 3*. "[Paula] said, 'You should consider using the organizing principle of a video game,'" recalls Haley.

In *Neighborhood 3*, there is a sense of a quest, with scenes of directions ("walk-throughs") alternating with character scenes. As the play's teenage characters fight their way through zombies to the final house on the block, the game takes on a life of its own and the online and real worlds start to blur together.

A typical excerpt from one of the walk-throughs, which is a kind of spoken narration, though it is not assigned to any one character:

when you exit the bedroom
and go back down the stairs
you will notice a pool of
blood on the carpet

you have just moved through
a secret wormhole
in the Neighborhood

As you can see, reading a Jennifer Haley script on the page asks a lot of the imagination; there is no sense of location or description of place. The delineation and/or integration of the real and the unreal in Haleyworld is the director's job.

"I was blown away by the challenge of that," recalls director Matt Morrow, who helmed a production of *Neighborhood 3* at Bricolage Production Company in Pittsburgh. He's currently developing Haley's newest play, the graphic novel-inspired *Froggy**. That play, too, mixes the virtual and the real world, and the past and the present.

"It's not clear how you're supposed to represent a Jen Haley show onstage," says Morrow. But that's a feature, not a bug, he adds: "That sort of challenge for me as a storyteller is really exciting. She's a true collaborator in that way. She's game to trust her collaborator and let them interpret her work."

She may deal with technology, but Haley's plays don't necessarily call for a lot of it to be used onstage; with the exception of *Froggy*, her work doesn't require projections or computers to pull off.

"It's one of the ways that, without using technology, she's making the plays feel technological," says Neel Keller, associate artistic director at CTG, who directed the world premiere of *The Nether*. "Life is not experienced narratively anymore, or in a straightforward way. I think that puzzlement of unthreading the narrative—even with *The Nether* it was confusing in rehearsal!"

And technology is only the frame; within that frame is a portrait of life as it's lived now. Much as *The Nether* is ultimately a play about relationships, *Neighborhood 3* is more than just a horror thriller; it's also a critique of the contemporary family in what Haley describes as "the underbelly of the suburbs," where planned communities and cookie-cutter homes encourage passive conformity, and where child-rearing and human connection have been replaced with video screens.

The play has a trace of the autobiographical. Haley recalls watching her two half-brothers grow up in a Houston suburb as teenagers, as the younger one disappeared into RPGs and the older acted out in typical teenage fashion. "My older brother was driving drunk through the neighborhood one night in this brand-new truck that my stepfather had bought him," Haley recounts. "And he drove through a house. Fortunately he didn't hurt anyone. Six months later, my stepdad bought him another truck!"

A similar scenario appears in *Neighborhood 3*, with the vehicle upgraded to a Hummer. Haley's real-life stepfather** and brother are even pictured on the cover of the Samuel French edition of *Neighborhood 3*, which Haley designed. Laughing, she says, "My parents know that I wrote it as an indictment of their behavior."

Her plays are never quite that direct. Haley's own father died of alcoholism five years ago, and *The Nether* can in part be read as a daughter's quest to understand addiction; it emerges that Morris, the detective, lost her father to his virtual-world obsession. In the chilling jargon of the play, he became a "shade."

"Of course I was never going to write a living-room play about a daughter dealing with an alcoholic father," says Haley, now back from lunch and reclining on her couch at home. "That doesn't interest me, because that's too nose-on. But addiction to the Nether is addiction to just about anything—alcohol, drugs."

So don't expect an O'Neill-esque family drama from Haley any time soon (though she says she's started writing a living-room play, just to see if she can pull it off). For her, the heightened genre and nonlinear form are what help her dig more deeply into the content she's most interested in.

"It's not really about technology," she explains of her work. "Ultimately I'm interested in technology because it's giving us a way to live alternate lives. I'm very interested in identity and how people perceive themselves. The technology for me is just an interesting way to examine these really limitless, long-standing, global questions of identity, and waking life versus dream life."

Indeed, part of what makes the worlds she conjures so eerily familiar is that they aren't that far removed from an age in which smartphones are practically human appendages and Internet celebrity is an actual paying job.

"During *The Nether*, we kept saying this is not the future, this is actually like eight years from now," says Anne Kauffman, who directed *The Nether* at MCC. "The future is now."

Haley's own future includes not only Froggy but also a deal to develop a TV version of *The Nether*, plus commissions from South Coast and CTG. And she's taking her technology/identity theme to the next level with a new play featuring robot actors, with no humans onstage.

"I want to take on the premise that an artificial intelligence would naturally develop the same sort of emotions that humans do, because I don't think that they would," Haley muses. "I think biological intelligence would be a different kind of intelligence than that which comes from technology. So that's the question I'm posing to myself: What's that difference? What would that look, feel, sound like? I don't really know yet."

When the play is ready, you will receive instructions where to go. Be there on time. Find an empty seat. Silence your phone. Off you go.

**An earlier version of this article said that Froggy is currently being developed for American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. The theatre is no longer a producing partner on the work.*

***It was originally reported that Haley's mother and brother is on the cover of Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom. It's actually her stepfather and brother.*

J. Recommended Resources

Check out **articles and reviews** of past productions of *The Nether* as well as published articles relating to the **themes of the play** at:

<http://www.thenetherplay.com/>

Anita Sarkeesian is a leading feminist and social critic whose work focuses on sexism and misogyny in the gaming world. Check out her website Feminist Frequency. For students attending *The Nether* we especially recommend the **"Women as Reward"** video, included in Sarkeesian's **"Tropes v Women in Video Games"** series:

<https://feministfrequency.com/video/women-as-reward/>

Watch her excellent and highly relevant **TED Talk** here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZAxwsg9J9Q>

Clive Thompson is a leading tech journalist and prominent proponent of the **benefits of digital media and technology**. Check out his website. For students attending *The Nether*, we especially recommend the interview clip from MSNBC's "The Cycle" (on the site's audio/video page), where he talks about **teen social media use and why parents are to blame**:

<http://smarterthanyouthink.net>

Tristan Harris is a former Google programmer turned activist, who warns of the **dangers of technology** and exploitation on the part of tech corporations. Check out his **Center for Humane Technology** here:

<http://humanetech.com/>

Watch his fascinating and highly relevant **TED Talk** here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/tristan_harris_the_manipulative_tricks_tech_companies_use_to_capture_your_attention

Life 2.0

Feature-length documentary film (1h40)

Directed by Jason Spingarn-Koff (2010)

This fascinating **documentary** provides a glimpse into the world of the online virtual experience **"Second Life."** With so many tie-ins to *The Nether*, it is highly relevant and sure to inspire discussions about the benefits, risks, morals and ethics of virtual gaming. It is available to view on Netflix:

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1518809/?ref_=nv_sr_3

Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network

PREVNet is Canada's leading bullying prevention organization and its website provides great resources for teachers which include tools for teaching safe and ethical internet use:

<https://www.prevnet.ca/resources>