

Game Development: Linda Griffiths' *Games: Who Wants to Play?*

by Shelley Scott

In this essay, I will trace the development process behind Linda Griffiths' play *Games: Who Wants to Play?*, which was published in 2016. My first encounter with the work was in 2011 when Griffiths visited the University of Lethbridge with a script called *Games to Be Played With Caution*. Drawing on interviews with participants, I will describe the development project that took place in Lethbridge and then explore the changes that occurred between the earlier versions and the production at Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary in 2014. Finally, I will consider the play within the thematic context of Griffiths' career, highlighting her fascination with fantasy, group identity, and belonging. The play features another in Griffiths' series of complex female characters but, uniquely, the woman in question is the mother of a troubled teenage boy, and *Games: Who Wants to Play?* gives Griffiths an opportunity to engage with youth culture to an unusual and profound degree.

Because this project marks one of the last that Griffiths was able to complete, and because it incorporates so many of the techniques she was known for - from devising and using her visceral playwriting method with students, to producing at Alberta Theatre Projects with a strong creative team, to exploring female subjectivity - the process behind *Games: Who Wants to Play?* is a rich opportunity to appreciate Griffiths' contribution to Canadian theatre one more time. Griffiths' recurring themes, such as fantasy, sexuality and gender, and communal identity, are explored through an immersion in contemporary youth culture. While Griffiths was herself, sadly, at the end of her career, her final play gave her the opportunity to return to the concerns

of youth, to explore the alien world of a teenaged protagonist, and to delve into a culture of gaming she knew little about.

Game Over

From September 12 to 24 of 2011, Linda Griffiths spent two weeks as a visiting artist at the University of Lethbridge, working with students enrolled in instructor Gail Hanrahan's "Canadian Plays in Development" course. Griffiths brought a new two-act play, called *Games to be Played With Caution*, which the students first encountered with a read-through. The play has five roles (two female, three male) so the fourteen students took turns reading the parts. Griffiths was mainly interested in researching the experiences and attitudes of young people towards online gaming, a generation and a world with which she had little connection. She asked the students to come to class having interviewed someone about their relationship to gaming. The students returned and performed their characters - friends, relatives, or strangers - and from that material Griffiths began to shape what would become a brand new theatre piece, called *Game Over*.

One of the students, Lauren Hyattⁱ explained:

she wanted us to gather real stories. Ones that related to sexuality, pornography, video games - basically any theme contained within the play we read. We were then tasked with recreating these stories keeping as true to the person's use of physicality, language – in fact trying to keep it word for word. From these stories we chose a few scenes to incorporate into the final product that came out of this class: a physical, collectively-created cacophony based around first person shooter games and the famous role playing game:

World of Warcraft. (Hyatt) ⁱⁱ

What emerged was a show separate from, but parallel to, the world of *Games to be Played with Caution*. Student participant Erica Barr noted that, after the initial read-through, the class never returned to the original script, and Griffiths was far more interested in what the students created. Barr commented that the reaction of students, both participants and spectators, was one of tremendous excitement, as they saw a topic being addressed that they felt was relevant to their lives and their generation. Some of the people who had been interviewed by the students attended the performance, and again, were impressed with theatre that spoke to their own interests. Student Cameron Lomon recalled: "I remember a lot of students being excited, because it was not something they had seen. They had not seen devised theatre or a show about themselves before" (Lomon). Erica Barr observed that the young woman she interviewed "thought it was so cool that it was something she knew about." Barr commented that audiences really enjoyed "that it was a weird live action fantasy raid" and contained references to "things kids our age all know and think are funny" (Barr).

Lomon further recalled two things that struck him most vividly about Griffiths' working method. First, she would always direct the students to "come in full," meaning to come into the class period with raw material they were ready to work on, to be fully present and engaged. Second, Lomon noticed how observant Griffiths was, how she herself was always interested and responsive to what the students did, and how she would always pick up on some detail to develop further (Lomon). As Barr concluded, "I felt like I had a lot of ownership over the final performance" (Barr). Participant Sean Guist observed that online games are a kind of parallel universe to reality, and that the class creation, *Game Over*, was a kind of parallel universe to

Griffiths' play. The students took ideas, themes, and emotions from the reading of the play and created new scenes, with no expectation that they would return to the script (Guist).

Playwright Meg Braem had her play, *Exia*, developed by the same class later in the semester, and she was present for Linda Griffiths' visit. Braem agrees that Griffiths' method was not a traditional form of dramaturgy, but rather that she used her play as a "jumping-off point." Braem points out that *Game Over* was all student-generated work, describing it as a "cabaret surrounding this idea" of online gaming and noting that Griffiths would "illuminate" the connections between student-generated ideas. Braem observed that Griffiths was accustomed to leading a group and was very comfortable with the process, and that she was genuinely interested in everything everyone had to offer (Braem).

Griffiths had been offering workshops for some time in what she called "Visceral Playwriting," encounters of various lengths, sometimes just pure process, sometimes with a final presentation. The experience could be as short as two to four hours, or as long as two months. Lauren Hyatt recalls: "Linda introduced us to the 'The Jam' [. . .] It was sort of getting sound and action into our body: we used our bodies as instruments to discover where our impulses were and to follow them. It was an awesome way to put any discussion we had had into practice" (Hyatt). As a graduate student and teaching assistant, Sean Guist took on the role of recorder and note-keeper, recalling:

The exercises we used were all thematic explorations of her play: coming of age; gaming; technology; global impact; passage of male adolescence; parallel universes [. . .]. Linda started paring [the material] down and picking out moments and images and ideas. From there, she encouraged the actors to learn the language of their

characters as this could lead to 'germs of possibility,' and to think about how to create a game with combat and characters. We then kept working and shuffling scenes, fine-tuning motifs and ideas. We came up with twelve scenes with gaming transitions, and created a map of the progression, order, actors, transitions and key phrases that had to be kept. (Guist)

Griffiths did some directing in rehearsals too, mainly to guide audience focus. It was a quick process: for example, in the rehearsal I observed, one student mentioned an anecdote from his own life at the start of the session, and from that came three scenes about relationships.

Griffiths clarified that, in a real production circumstance they would be careful not to use the verbatim story, and would make a composite character instead, but that within the creative rehearsal process they are “amoral” about stealing material (personal interview). Sean Guist explains: " She spoke about 'visceral playwrighting' and that it was about emotions/feelings/actions/experience rather than plot, and often was explored through personal experiences and reflections and interviews and that all jumping off points are worth exploring [. . .] My notes have Linda saying 'GO FOR IT EMOTIONALLY' and for each performer to choose a specific narrative line for their character and to then find allies amongst other narrative lines " (Guist, emphasis in original).

In conversation with instructor Gail Hanrahan and students Cameron Lomon and Erica Barr, the consensus was that Griffiths was encountering a subject matter and dealing with an age group that, as Barr described it, was "really foreign to her." Lomon observed that Griffiths "was excited about how ignorant she was," and excited to talk to people that are a part of a different world. The students introduced her to the reality of "how obsessive kids can get; they have no social lives except online" (Barr). Hanrahan agreed that Griffiths was interested in the

age group of the students: "She knew she didn't know this world, the game but also youth. She wanted to explore what the games meant and how people that age talk about them. She was going out on a limb with something she knew nothing about" (Hanrahan).

At the final performance, Griffiths commented that, if she were to continue to work on *Game Over*, as a separate entity, she would investigate gender further, go back to the beginning of the process and get the students to do more interviews and research. She concluded that there was no "message" to *Game Over*, that there was no attempt to be balanced or comprehensive, but rather that it was these specific actors' take on it. Although, interestingly, Griffiths also commented that she found the students more judgmental of gaming than she was herself; she compared video games favourably to her own escape into literature as a child (personal interview).

Games to be Played with Caution

Griffiths' work on the parallel play *Game Over* with students at the University of Lethbridge provided her with unique firsthand accounts of teenage online gaming culture that proved useful to the subsequent development of her manuscript *Games to be Played with Caution*. Griffiths' script went on to a multi-staged development process, including a reading at the Banff Playwrights Colony, before premiering at the Alberta Theatre Projects' enbridge playRites Festival March 7 to April 5, 2014 with the title *Games: Who Wants to Play?*.ⁱⁱⁱ It was the last playRites Festival mounted by ATP, and one of the last productions of a new play by Griffiths, who passed away later that year. In 2016, the play was published by Playwrights Canada Press, again entitled *Games: Who Wants to Play?*

The earlier play, *Games to Be Played with Caution*, exists in multiple versions, but to illustrate some of the development that took place I will refer here to the iteration from 2010 to demonstrate the evolving tactics Griffiths explored in order to represent youth culture. In the 2010 version, the play takes place in two time periods, starting with the present when a teenager, Zach, has been incarcerated in a psychiatric facility and is visited by his friend Micky in order to film a segment of their online game review series. The action then shifts to three years in the past (identified as the year 2008), where a multi-level set represents the upstairs adult world of Zach's parents, Dan and Marion, and the downstairs- level basement where Zach (age 15) and Micky (age 16) play games. In the ending of this version, Zach kills his parents by setting fire to their bed, thus explaining his incarceration in the present time period. Micky remains Zach's friend, visiting him even after the murder, so that the conflict in the play's world is clearly one of generational breakdown. Zach and Micky explicitly reject the adults' generation, saying "They may never get it," meaning they may never understand the appeal of youth culture, particularly gaming; they characterize Zach's parents as aliens or zombies (2010,11).

This generational divide is related to various discussions around the importance of loyalty. In the 2010 version, Micky wants to replace the "clan" of online gamers he and Zach have been playing with, arguing "We can't get anywhere with those guys, they're losers" (2010,13). The boys' goal is to advance to higher levels and eventually become professional players like their idol Fakesharp99, who makes a lot of money by competing in tournaments (2010,14). But Zach rejects the notion of abandoning their team, feeling it would be a betrayal and likening it to the kind of thing their fathers would do. Zach points out: "This is the kind of

shit my Dad does, your Dad too. They tell them to fire people and they just do it" (2010,14).

However, Micky is less interested in concepts of honour, and he criticizes Zach's interest in mythological/fantasy world games where players cooperate, preferring instead the combat narratives and first-person shooter games (2010,20).

Zach remains distant and disturbed in all the play's versions I have read, but the biggest difference is the eventual target of his anger. In *Games to be Played with Caution*, Zach sets fire to his parents' bed. In the final (produced and published) iteration, *Games: Who Wants to Play?*, Zach instead turns on and viciously beats Micky into unconsciousness, perhaps to death, before going upstairs and joining his parents in their bed for comforting "cuddles," like he did when he was a small child. His mother, Marion, commented earlier that, while her generation rebelled against older people and the "establishment" (she references the kidnapping perpetrated by the FLQ), she is confused by what she sees as her son's generation turning on their own. She cites infamous school shootings like the one in Columbine, where adolescents kill others of their own age (72). Zach's attack on Micky would seem to be consistent with her observations, since he has chosen to take out his rage on a peer rather than his parents. Zach's violence toward Micky could even be seen as a rejection of his gaming addiction.

However, there are two complicating factors: first, the attack on Micky has been filmed and put online in order for it to go "viral." In this sense, it is Zach's ultimate sign of commitment to a world in which only what happens online really matters. Second, as we in the audience see Zach get into bed with his parents, ostensibly a happy family ending, the body of Micky is still present in the downstairs world; it is only a matter of time before morning comes, and the

parents discover what their son has done. In this way, Zach has, perhaps more perversely, declared his total alliance with his peers and ruined his parents' lives.

In conversation with Griffiths, she mentioned that the initial idea for *Games to be Played with Caution* was sparked by friends whose son became a professional poker player; she was fascinated with the idea of gaming for a living (personal interview).^{iv} In the "Playwright's Note" for the ATP production, Griffiths makes the subject matter more personal by relating the play to her brother. She writes that when she was nineteen and her brother was twelve, "I watched my brother and his friend [. . .] go into the basement and basically not come out for five years. Then, after five years, I watched my brother emerge from the basement as a young man. What had happened? [. . .] It appeared that my brother had undergone a transformation more profound than the passage of time. When I began thinking of it later, it seemed a perilous journey for a boy to grow up [. . .] A passage between life and death" (Griffiths *Program* 10). In her note, Griffiths sympathizes with her friends who are mothers of troubled teenage boys. Despite coming from "great homes with smart and generous parents," these boys had difficulties that "seemed incomprehensible," including trouble getting through high school: "I began to be interested in the forces of male adolescence in the second decade of the two thousands. What was happening to the boys? That was the thread I followed over a trail of six years" (Griffiths *Program* 10).^v

According to ATP's production dramaturg Vicki Stroich, there was a strong team assisting Griffiths throughout the re-writing and rehearsal process, including dramaturg Daniel MacIvor and director Amiel Gladstone.^{vi} Stroich explains that they did not want an ending that

was as "bleak" as Zach killing his parents: "There was a lot of discussion about our sympathies for the characters and whether we should have any. We decided we didn't want that ending for them." At the same time, they did want Zach to act out with some sort of violence. By choosing to have him go up to the parents' room with a candle, the danger is present but there is still a question in the audience's mind: "Could they heal? Would they turn him in? Would they come together as a family? They need to somehow deal with having a dead or injured teenager in their basement" (Stroich).

Stroich reports that the path to that choice was ever-changing, and that the ending was confirmed in pre-production workshops before rehearsals began. This decision in turn led to the question of why Zach turns against and beats his only friend, Micky. Stroich suggests there is a sense of rivalry with Micky: Zach feels that he is not the son his parents want and he is alienated from their lifestyle, while Micky does want that life and manages to be accepted by Zach's parents. Further, Micky makes it clear to Zach that he is only hanging out with him because Zach is "safe," a plot thread that escalated through the workshop process as Micky became the antagonist. As for the ambiguity of the ending, Griffiths wanted the audience to be uncertain whether Micky is dead; certainly, the intention was that Micky suffers a "savage" beating, but the choice was made to not explicitly say anything about death and to leave the ending unclear (Stroich).

In reference to the new ending, director Amiel Gladstone recalls:

The first ending [. . .] that I read was close to what was on stage, although probably more annihilistic. There was a version [. . .] where Zach had a can of gasoline which he poured everywhere as he was going up to his parent's bed, the idea being he was going to set everything alight as fires raged outside.

It played as too cartoony to the rest of the production and didn't have the right kind of weight. Having Micky lying in a heap, not moving, and Zach climbing into bed with his parents felt more like the tone the show needs. Everyone safe, but not at all safe, cozy for the moment as a tight family, but things were about to end. The bed being an island, as an attempt at refuge, but just as dangerous as "out there", depending who you were in bed with. (Gladstone)

Actor and playwright Karen Hines participated in a reading of the play in Calgary that took place just before rehearsals began, and reports that Griffiths was very happy with it. Hines believes that Griffiths decided to change the ending, not because she was afraid to deal with dark subjects, but because she did not feel the play necessarily warranted an ending quite that dark: she imagined people leaving the theatre after seeing Zach murder his parents, and "She didn't want to do that to an audience." Hines speculates that, because Griffiths herself was so ill and vulnerable at the time, she needed to end her play on a more helpful and healing note (Hines).

Fascinated by the connection between teenagers, gaming, and violence, Griffiths drew on the tragic case of a real-life Canadian teenager to add further nuance to her final version of *Games: Who Wants to Play?* She created Michael Ferguson, a character who does not appear in earlier versions of the script, is discussed but never appears onstage, and is dead before the play begins. Vicki Stroich explains that the character is based on the death in 2008 of a real teenage boy in Ontario who ran away from home when his parents took away his Xbox and then died after falling from a tree.^{vii} In the first scene, Marion makes reference to Michael Ferguson and, when her husband Dan does not recognize the name, she says: "He's dead. Haven't you seen the news? His body was found out where they've let everything go wild [. . .] He ran away from home. I don't know what happened after that. Nobody knows" (7). Throughout the play, various theories about his death are offered:

Marion: That's why he ran away. They stopped him from playing games.

He runs away. He walks out of town onto the highway. A van stops to give him a ride. There is a man in the van, two men, a man and a woman, a group of angry teenagers. Hikers find his body weeks later, in the gorge, naked, eaten by animals (29).

In Act Two, as Micky and Dan bond over a beer, they theorize that Michael Ferguson "was into snuff films." Dan confirms: "I heard that. He got involved with those snuff people. He met them online" (58). Perhaps the most important reference to the character occurs in an exchange between Marion and Zach as they do laundry together:

Marion: He was a troubled young man.

Zach: How do you know?

Marion: His parents were on the news.

Zach: What do parents know?

Marion: Parents know their children.

Zach: Yeah?

Marion: Yeah.

Zach: When does that happen? (44-45).

After a pause, Marion responds by telling Zach about being pregnant with him and about his birth, implying that she wishes he was still that simple for his parents to "know." The play concludes with Zach telling an entirely innocent version of the Michael Ferguson story -- that he had simply climbed up into a cave to read a book, tried to set a fire, and slipped and fell -- concluding: "There was no evil" (78).

According to Vicki Stroich, what fascinated Griffiths was that the real boy's death was not a murder or the result of violence. While everyone "assumed the worst, it was actually pretty run of the mill. The boogeyman of teenage violence was actually remarkably innocent" (Stroich). In the play, the parents focus on their fear of the worst that could happen. According to Stroich, "Zach is not a burgeoning monster until his parents make him one [. . .] the parents are the manipulators." Stroich observes that Griffiths was concerned about "the way the world is for parents and teenagers," and came to see the parents as the problem: "they were building what Zach became by creating their vision of how things were going wrong" (Stroich).

Reviews of the 2014 ATP production uniformly picked up on this theme of the parents' manipulative game-playing. Ruth Myles states explicitly: "Everyone in the play is running some sort of game: Dan and Marion play at being a happily married couple, despite the fact their union is based on a lie." Myles is referring to Dan's revelation that he deliberately damaged a condom in order to get Marion pregnant when she was still reluctant to have children. Myles goes on to point out that Micky "plays up his role as the friend the parents like, with an eye to becoming part of the family." Here, Myles is noting Micky's deliberate appeal to Zach's parents, playing the young suitor to Marion and the best buddy to Dan. The reviewer also alludes to the new presence added to the script since its earlier versions: "And at the centre of it all is the death of Zach's friend Michael Ferguson. Was he kidnapped? Was he a troubled teen who ran away when his video games were taken away? Or was he just a boy who died in a tragic accident?" Myles finds the dialogue between the parents "stilted and forced," while the actors playing Zach and Micky "fare better, imbuing their teen talk with alternating doses of passion and disdain" (Myles).

Louis Hobson, writing for *the Calgary Sun*, is more positive, calling the play "a topnotch drama that rips its heart from news headlines and any number of talk shows. Parents, educators and authorities are convinced that the violent, sadistic video games young people play these days are turning them into potential monsters." Like Myles, Hobson notes "that we realize that everyone in the house is playing some kind of game, some of which are really dangerous sexually, emotionally and intellectually" (Hobson). Hobson picks up on Zach's ambiguity and links it to the mystery of what really happened to Michael Ferguson; his death "could be as innocent or malevolent as Zach might be which each audience member must determine on their own [. . .] One moment I was convinced [Daniel] Maslany's Zach was a totally misunderstood innocent teen but then I watched those eyes when he confronted his parents and eventually [Richard] Lee Hsi [who played Micky]. There was something there beyond just a temper tantrum." Also like Myles, Hobson finds the teenage characters believable but the adults stilted, and wonders if that was Griffiths' - and the actors' - intention. He concludes that, "Psychological horror is a genre few playwrights dare tackle which makes Griffiths' invitation to join *Games: Who Wants to Play?* one not to dismiss too lightly," a quote used on the cover of the published text.

Finally, reviewer Jessica Goldman is the most positive of all in her assessment, and astutely picks up on Griffiths' intentions. Like the other reviewers, Goldman notices "everyone is playing some kind of game" in the play and calls it "zeitgeisty," praising Griffiths' ambiguous ending because it "smartly leaves the audience asking questions without succumbing to the preachy tropes so often found around issue plays." Goldman lists the games being played: Marion plays at being the cool parent but really wants Zach "to go back to being the sweet little

boy she once knew"; Dan plays at being the disciplinarian when he really wants a friend to drink beer and play hockey with him; Micky plays at being confident "but he's ashamed of his immigrant family and is looking for surrogate parents to befriend."

Like the other reviewers, Goldman concludes that Zach is the character that interests Griffiths the most "as she explores the impact and possible dangers of gamer culture on a family." His parents are concerned but afraid to do anything about his gaming, and when they finally do, their action "launches Zach's behaviour in several different directions that at once confirm his parent's fears of the negative impact of gaming yet also shows that the only evil in gaming is people's fear of it." She asks if "video game violence is harming the boys or is it simply the new tribalism by which young men bond and establish themselves," suggesting the kinds of games the parents play are far more potentially harmful. Goldman also cites Zach's sweet relationship with his virtual girlfriend Keira as evidence that he "is a good kid. But never far from our minds is the creepiness of the situation and Zach's obvious inability to socialize with any woman not of the virtual world." In her concluding recommendations, Goldman reiterates that "Griffiths isn't simply writing [games] off as unhealthy or dangerous. Instead she's asking questions about obsession and what it means to grow up well-adjusted in a world where gaming is the norm." And again returning to the theme of male adolescent rites of passage, she writes, "Young men have always found something to obsess about whether it was cars or music etc. and parents have always been worried about whether their son's passions were 'healthy'" (Goldman).

Evidently, Goldman captured what Griffiths hoped to accomplish; in an email to her director, Amiel Gladstone, Griffiths wrote: "That is a fabulous review. To know that someone on the outside understands is so huge -- and for me to be called zeitgeitsy. What heaven" (qtd in Gladstone).

Games: Who Wants to Play?

As we have seen, the visceral playwriting technique that Griffiths developed, and her long experience with devising, served the University of Lethbridge students well as they explored the early version of her play. In turn, Griffiths took from them the firsthand experience of adolescents involved with gaming, their language and attitudes, and was able to develop her script further until it was ready for production at ATP. The youth culture of role playing and fantasy games like World of Warcraft posed a real fascination for Griffiths, which is not surprising for a writer known for adding some level of the mythological or fantastical to all her theatre creations. As Patricia Keeney writes: "Often referred to as her fabulist instinct and contextualized by her own production company, Duchess Productions, as a 'dance between the personal, the political, and the fantastic,' this non-naturalistic impulse (harnessed to real story) is her particular connection to the unknown, the unseen; it is her larger spiritual home" (IV). In an interview with Kathleen Gallagher, Griffiths acknowledges her commitment to a kind of spiritual dimension in each of her plays, observing "there are recurring themes in my work. There is almost always a point where somebody prays, for instance [. . .] you will find an element of the other dimension, fantasy, the fantastic" (qtd in Gallagher 120 - 121).

Griffiths has described her younger self as "a dreamy, floaty girl" (Theatre Museum), recalling, "When I realized that fairy tales actually came out of a spiritual tradition, a shared mythological tradition which is also a psychological tradition, I finally stopped feeling ashamed. Because I had to stop myself back then, because I was really starting to live inside one of those books" (qtd in Rudakoff 20). This is reminiscent of a comment she made in Lethbridge, about being reluctant to play World Of Warcraft herself because "it is so much up my alley" she was afraid it would suck her in completely (personal interview). She clearly has empathy for the adolescent boys in *Games: Who Wants to Play?* They are deeply involved with their alternative world, and once Zach is deprived of it, Griffiths understands that he acts out of a profound sense of loss.

In *Games: Who Wants to Play?*, Griffiths' preoccupation with other, more mystical, realities finds expression in the alternative dimension of gaming. In an early interview with Judith Rudakoff, Griffiths talks about the many ways she relates to the idea of duality in her own personality. In her play there is a duality between adult culture and the teenagers' gaming culture, and forces of light and dark are defined differently in the two worlds. The on-line character, Keira, for example, comes from the realm of Griffiths' beloved fairy tales, a beautiful and fragile girl who is loved by the young hero, Zach, who must save her from his own father. The father, Dan, becomes the villain in this fairy tale, casting an evil spell on Keira because his intentions for her are not pure: he desires Keira and uses her to spy on his son. Dan treats Keira like a pornographic program and then as spyware, while Keira and Zach define their relationship in terms of romantic, even poetic, love.

In the interview with Rudakoff, Griffiths describes how difficult it is to put into words the kinds of feelings and spiritual longing she wants to express, and she draws on the work of a feminist author to try to explain herself: "The American writer Starhawk has a good word, immanence, that she uses in *The Spiral Dance* and *Dreaming the Dark*. In using it she's trying to find a word to describe God that redefines it at the same time, that finds a new perspective on it. That's how I believe change, revolution, magic happens" (qtd in Rudakoff 22). Starhawk writes from a radical/cultural feminism rooted in neo-paganism and goddess worship,^{viii} and a connection can be drawn to Griffiths' 1993 play *Spiral Woman and the Dirty Theatre*, in which she melds her spiritual quest with her experiences in the theatre world. The play is a fairy tale where Griffiths imagines a world in which theatres are run by warring clans, writing, "These are stories of Trish, an underground actress and clan member of ever-beleaguered, Dirty Theatre. At the time this story begins, the theatre is fighting the gathering darkness as Trish is struggling with the forces of clan loyalty" (qtd in Althof et al, 202). The connection to Starhawk's ecstatic "spiral dance" is made more explicit in a version of the play excerpted in *Taking the Stage*; here Griffiths writes that "[a]t times throughout her story, especially when the story centres on her mysterious illness, [Trish] moves her body in a spiral motion, as if trying to unwind her body from within" (34). Through Trish as her alter-ego, Griffiths is clearly seeking ways to integrate her foundational experiences in the theatre world with her feminist belief system, with a way to feel connected with a clan and to make sense of her own life decisions and spiritual quest. As we have seen, Griffiths returns to the idea of loyalty to one's clan through her character Zach. He feels connected to other gamers across the world, and his clan identity is a way to reject the corporate world of his father, much as Trish rejects the corporate world of arts councils and

funding grants to pledge her allegiance to artists. But unlike Trish and her theatre clan, Zach cannot live in his alternative world of fantasy games, largely because he is a teenager and must accommodate the adult concerns of his parents, in particular his mother, Marion.

Griffiths uses Marion as a stand-in for herself to explore her relationship to youth culture: sympathetic, eager to understand and relate, but ultimately an outsider. While Griffiths is fascinated with young people, her character Marion is dealing with her own child, and the stakes are therefore heightened. *Games: Who Wants to Play?* is the first time that Griffiths has written a central female character interacting with her child as an important presence onstage. Children have been present in her plays before, but in far more oblique ways. For example, in the course of *Maggie and Pierre*, Maggie goes from being a (flower) child herself to the mother of three, but her children never physically appear onstage and they are repeatedly framed in a negative way. Most seriously, the children are weapons used against her by her husband and by the public, who condemn Maggie by demanding, "What kind of mother could leave those beautiful children?" (88). In an important monologue in which she responds to her critics, Maggie confesses that she does not know who she is supposed to be -- "I don't know if I'm a wife or a mother or a career..." (89) -- and admits that she cannot live up to the image of perfection expected of her.

Maggie's search for her identity as a woman continues with Marion. The actor who played Marion in the ATP production, Kate Newby, explained: "It felt as though the character of Marion was a different person in every scene. In the end, I decided Marion's game was to try on different personae/roles. This notion anchored me and gave me an opening into what women

constantly face - our ever changing roles and personalities in our search for identity" (Newby). This struggle for female self-definition is a recurring theme in Griffiths' plays. For example, Patricia Keeney has suggested that another of Griffiths' central female characters, Wallis Simpson in *The Duchess*, can be understood as Griffiths' version of Hedda Gabler, "both women trapped in a world too small for them, disastrously thwarted in their ambitious, narcissistic all-consuming drive to create themselves" (XI-XII). Continuing the comparison with Ibsen's characters, Marion can perhaps be understood as Griffiths' Mrs. Alving from *Ghosts*, as another mother who ends her play in a struggle to save her doomed son.

Marion certainly presents herself as a concerned mother to Zach, worried about the environment, fretting over daily news stories about male adolescent cruelty, terrified by the death of Zach's friend Michael Ferguson. She is supportive of her husband and claims not to be bothered by his impotence (6). But as the play progresses, Marion is seduced by the games that Zach and Micky play, and she convinces them to let her join in. She is exhilarated but physically overwhelmed, and vomits into a backpack (26). As her physicality and sexuality are awakened, she responds to Micky's aggressive flirting and kisses him passionately on the stairs, the liminal world between adulthood and adolescence (67). In the play's most complex scene for Marion, she tries to involve the three male characters in her own world by dressing up in a new outfit she has bought, and modelling it for their feedback and approval. Dan and Micky compliment her, but Zach finds the dress too sexual and revealing and calls her a "ho," provoking a physical confrontation with his father. In Zach's eyes, her sexuality is incompatible with her role as a mother, while Marion is trying desperately to integrate the two. Marion's line to Zach - "I can't see you; your face is distorted. I look to see your sweet face but you've gone. I'm disappearing

too" (62) - is extremely telling. While she can see herself as the young mother of a sweet baby boy, she cannot find her identity as the more mature mother of a troubled and withdrawn teenager.

In an important scene with Zach, as they do laundry together, Marion recalls: "I still wasn't sure, even after you began to kick, even after all that agony that's supposed to bond you. I just didn't see myself going all motherly. They put you in my arms and I still didn't feel it. Then you leaned back and looked right into my eyes, as if to say 'Who have I got as a mother?' And I was yours. I chose you" (45). Again, we see that Marion was able to reconcile herself to mothering a baby, but that she is struggling with how to be herself as a woman with a fifteen-year-old son. Ultimately, she decides to let go of her preoccupation with Zach; instead, she chooses to re-commit to Dan and they are able to have sex again (76). As a couple, they consider adopting another son and trying again (70); they agree to cut off Zach's gaming privileges, and they congratulate themselves on finally being good parents and partners. But of course the final scene, in which they offer Zach cuddles while the audience knows the violence he has committed, reveals how deluded they really are. Marion and Dan have had their parenting predetermined by their own cultural scripts and their own needs - for a sweet boy or for a buddy - and they find themselves unable to respond to the son they actually have.

After her own experiences with her teenage brother and the children of her friends, Griffiths turned to other sources to make sense of youth gaming culture. Her time with students at the University of Lethbridge, her research into real-life cases like the one that led to the character of Michael Ferguson, and her long developmental process across multiple

versions of the play, ultimately led her to a portrait of parental failure. Contemporary forces have distorted Zach's passage into young adulthood, and his parents have not been able to offer him an alternative. Griffiths has created a conflicted female adult character to embody her own complex relationship to motherhood and generational divide, and a teenage boy character to embody her fascination with fantasy and alternative cultures. *Games: Who Wants to Play?* joins the rest of Griffiths' work as a compassionate exploration of themes that preoccupied her throughout her career.

ⁱ At the time of the course the student's name was Lauren Steyn.

ⁱⁱ "World Of Warcraft is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game with millions of players and was released in 2004. The game features players interacting with each other within a fantasy world via avatars. Players are encouraged to cooperate and compete with each other. Player progression is measured through multiple levels which are determined by the accumulation of experience points and items which increase the characters' power. Wealth is measured through the accumulation of in-game currency which includes gold, silver, and copper pieces. [. . . Literature] likens the evolution and development of WOW to be a parallel civilization, if not for the population but for the social environment where millions of players interact within" (Ford 4).

ⁱⁱⁱ I would like to thank Jamie Dunsdon, Amy Lynn Strilchuk, Vanessa Porteous and Dianne Goodman for their research assistance. Many thanks as well to all the interview participants quoted in this paper.

^{iv} Griffiths also confirmed that she was interested in pursuing a topic that was contemporary and male as a contrast to her previous play, *Age of Arousal* (personal interview).

^v Griffiths was tapping into a common fear in public discourse regarding teenage males. See Wente for one example.

^{vi} In her program note, Griffiths states that Daniel MacIvor had been working with her for the past year and a half as a dramaturg.

^{vii} Brandon Crisp died October 13, 2008. In February of 2014, Toronto's Young People's Theatre produced a play based on the incident called *n00b*, written by Christopher Duthie. It was also produced in March of 2014 in Calgary as part of the Y Stage Theatre Series at Vertigo Theatre.

^{viii} *The Spiral Dance: a Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979); *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (1982).

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