

Games as Hybrid Spaces

I had been waiting on stage for half an hour before everyone had finally turned up; the diverse and bizarre dress styles in the audience stood in shocking contrast to the black seats, normal-mapped textures and blocky architecture of the large theatre. A woman with a large, stark-white afro at the front, two rows behind her a man in full military dress, complete with tilted beret. At the very back row, a man dressed in a black sweater with a Goth-style dog collar, a comically undersized crown perched upon his sandy-blond pompadour haircut. Not the sort of people I might have expected at a conference but, living here, in this world, I had long since learned to ignore my assumptions about social propriety.

Behind my armchair, an enormous orange sign bore the word 'CNET'. The stage lights bounced off it, bathing the spots where my interviewer and I sat with a warm glow.

Once conversation channels were free of chatter, the man sitting opposite me cleared his throat and, with a quick glance at his notes, started the interview.

'Welcome, Ms. Anshe Chung, to this CNET Conference. Seeing as everyone in this room already knows who you are, we really don't need to bother with introductions. I'll just get right to it, then. How did you get started with Second-'

But his question was cut short, and it didn't take long to realise the cause of the disruption. Hundreds and hundreds of bright pink, disembodied penises were flying past my face. Some were enormous, others were miniscule – it was hard to discern, for they were blowing past like a blizzard, wobbling grotesquely. Filling up the entire room, passing through the geometry of the building, clipping through my body...

This short story that you just read is, actually, not quite fictitious. It is an example of me using crude poetic license to craft a story – complete with characters, settings and conflicts – out of something that happened in the real world. Or, at least, it took place in real time; time that was *stolen* from a day in the real world. To be more specific, the phallic meteorological phenomenon described above was the work of a 'griever', an in-world resident of the game/life-sim 'Second Life' who sets out to vandalize an event. In this case, the anonymous prankster chose to disrupt an online interview between online media-giant CNET and 'Second Life' millionaire Ailin Graef – better known by her avatar's name, Anshe Chung. The attack, it seems, was a protest of some sort against Chung, her bloated real estate prices in the game, and aggressive business tactics. However, this is irrelevant, and not the reason I turned the event into a narrative, and on top of that, asked you to read it. It could well have been a 'Second Life' wedding that was assaulted with animated, flying penises, or perhaps a masked ball. In any case, it is an entry point into discussing a cultural phenomenon that is unique to video games, and pervasive in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) in particular. I am talking about the schizophrenic space one

occupies whilst playing a game. It is a space between diegesis and non-diegesis, machine and operator and, ultimately, between utopia and heterotopia.

My aim here is to draw attention to a relationship that I have observed between a contemporary form of 'play' (to borrow a term from the field of ludology) and Foucault's theory on utopias and heterotopias, in the hope that we might consider the existence of a third, hybrid-space within Foucault's model. However, before I continue with this line of argument, it is important to specify the various actors, both human and non, to which I am referring, and to show how they relate to Foucault. Firstly, there is the utopia, the diegetic gaming world. In 'World of Warcraft' (the world's most popular MMORPG), it is called Azeroth; in 'Second Life' it is a vast, nameless city. Alexander Galloway states that "the diegesis of a video game is the game's total world of narrative action" (Galloway, 2006, p. 7). This can include both on and off-screen elements; characters who are encountered or implied, a story or quest, a player's avatar, and the environments and sounds in their idealised form, as they exist in the narrative. In naming the diegetic gaming world a utopia, I am accepting Foucault's definition; that they are sites with "no real place", that they have "a direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society (sic)", and that they "present society itself in a perfected form" (Foucault, 1967). Let us take 'Second Life' as an example, in case there are any doubts about how online video games might fit. Even though 'Second Life' could be considered as no more than a very elaborate construction that exists on various servers positioned throughout the world, their locality leaves no trace upon the experience of the narrative gamic world. In this sense, a 'Second Life' server has no real place or locality, aside from that which is constructed by its constituents. The world of 'Second Life' is also analogous to the society whose constraints it tries to

transcend; it has a dynamic economy, politics, history and technology. Finally, 'Second Life' certainly does attempt to present society in a perfected form, by allowing its constituents to make avatars that embody their desires and, most importantly, giving them tools to achieve those desires (for a price, of course).

Conversely, Galloway regards the non-diegesis as "gamic elements that are inside the total gamic apparatus yet outside the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story" (Galloway, 2006, p. 8). This is rather convoluted, but can be expressed simply as, that which remains of a game once the narrative elements have been removed. As such, the sound of tropical birds in 'World of Warcraft' form a part of the diegetic soundscape, but is triggered, and subsequently affected by real-time digital signal processing, by the game's sound engine – a non-diegetic actor. The game's interface is also a non-diegetic element, as is the pause button. However, with a Latourian principle in mind, I would like to expand upon Galloway's rather limited definition of non-diegetic gamic elements. What of the non-human actors that are not "inside the total gamic apparatus"? Diegetic sound can only be perceived with some sort of voltage controlled amplifier (monitor speakers, or headphones), which surely deserve to be considered part of the non-diegesis. The acoustic space in which the player resides is also part of the non-diegesis, for it ultimately shapes the way we perceive the sound. Then there are the online forums, the primary channel of communication by which players discuss the game, and receive news from the developers. I could say much more about the relationship between the diegesis and non-diegesis in video games, but it would not be relevant in the context of my argument. It is enough, for now, to understand that the space a gamer inhabits while playing a game is negotiated by diegetic elements within the

narrative world of the game, and non-diegetic elements that exist both within the gaming apparatus, and well outside of it, in the physical space of one's home.

I stated before how I consider the diegesis of MMORPGs such as 'Second Life' a utopia, accepting as I did so Foucault's definition of the term. When defining heterotopias, however, he dismissed a space that is all important to my understanding of the space of gamic action. The home and the bedroom are, in his own words, "closed or semi-closed sites of rest" (Foucault, 1967). In her article, Mary McLeod considered this exclusion an "unconscious disdain for sites of everyday life" (McLeod, 1996, p. 20). I choose to look at Foucault's assertion from a technological standpoint; the space of the house (and, undoubtedly, the bedroom) has undergone an enormous change since Foucault delivered his lecture. The house, I would argue, is very much a contemporary heterotopia, especially when one considered Foucault's so-called third, fourth and fifth 'Principles'. The house is very much "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1967). Houses, as many of us may have experienced, can be divided into partitions, and each autonomous space can be a reflection of the individual who shaped it. I am talking about bedrooms that reflect the personality and age, the desires and fears, of their occupants. So, too, am I talking about the imaginary spaces in the house; spaces impregnated with socially-negotiated stereotypes that exist in such stark contrast to the real use of the space. Televisions - that enduring symbol of family entertainment - sitting in kitchens where meals are prepared (or, indeed, heated up in their foil packaging). Or the work shed - the space of imagined primal masculinity - cluttered not with imposing tools and functional machines, but with excess consumer goods and family curiosities.

When describing his 'Fourth Principle', Foucault made mention of "heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time... museums and libraries". In fact, the process of "accumulating everything... establishing a general archive... [of] all epochs, all forms, all tastes" is no longer unique to heterotopias at all; it is arguably symptom of postmodernity, of time being made obsolete, of everything being stored on hard drives, recorded, categorised and remembered. With a home computer and a connection to the internet, the contemporary house (and perhaps even individual partitions within that house) is not only a part of this process, but can actively contribute to it. Seemingly, the house has never been in violation of the 'Fifth Principle', for it does, as Foucault describes, "presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable", and entering a house does require one to submit to "rites and purifications", such as house rules.

I will now attempt to bring everything together, and return to my original point; that the act of playing a game – more specifically, an online role playing game – places the gamer in a schizophrenic, hybrid space between the gamic diegesis and non-diegesis, between utopia and heterotopia. I will hopefully achieve this with a brief explanation of my opening short story, and what flying reproductive organs have to do with anything. The story was an attempt to describe in a concise manner the experience of actually playing a game. It is for this reason that I created a narrator/protagonist, of sorts, and used personal pronouns to place you (the reader) in their perspective. Then, in describing the environment from their point of view, I used combination a practical adjectives, and video game jargon that is commonly used to describe graphical elements within a virtual environment – terms like 'architecture' and 'normal-mapping'.

I then went to mention that the conversation channels, a common part of MMORPG interfaces that allow graphical text input and reading. After that, a character starts a conversation with the protagonist; an exchange of dialogue that mirrors real-world conversation in register, but not in form, in that it is a single body of text, uninterrupted by descriptions of tone ('...he said', '...she shouted') that one might expect from a typical narrative. Following this, I drop all pretence, and expose that the situation is taking place in a virtual world, or at least in a very bizarre dream or imagining, by describing the objects 'clipping' through the protagonists' body – the effect in computer games when collisions are turned off, and solid objects can pass through one another. I reveal that it is 'Second Life', a video game after all. Try as might to provide an unbreakable virtual utopia, it is as much affected by the pranks of the 'griever' sitting at home as the space of the home is invaded by the game.

Perhaps my explanation is entirely unnecessary, or at the very worst ignorant, for it assumes that participants in 'Second Life', or 'World of Warcraft' – or one of the dozens of other online games – do indeed role play, and allow themselves to believe in the illusion as much as their house-bound senses can allow them. For my part, I can attest that this was certainly true when I played 'World of Warcraft' in years past. To play a game is to occupy a schizophrenic space; a constant negotiation of conflicting, disparate elements. It is hearing the crash of a wave in the ocean, and knowing what it means within the narrative of the world with which you are interacting, and knowing where it is placed in the virtual space, but hearing it emanate from a speaker atop your computer desk, and reverberate around your bedroom, asserting your own heterotopic locality whilst referring to a virtual utopia.

References

Foucault, M. 1967, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*,

<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

Galloway, A.R. 2006, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

McLeod, M. 1996, "Other" Spaces and "Others", in D. Coleman, E. Danze & C. Henderson (eds), *Architecture and Feminism*, Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 15-28.