

Foucault's Heterotopias as Play Spaces

Popular abstract: In larp and role-playing, players often have experiences of being in another space that is beyond just having a strong imagination. Michel Foucault (1986) was one of the first philosophers to seriously examine the substance of this "otherness" of certain spaces in a society, which he called "heterotopias," and this paper seeks to examine how the concept of heterotopias can provide both game designers and players with a valuable toolset in thinking about play spaces. We will begin by summarizing Foucault's six principles of heterotopias, exploring what might make a given play space a heterotopia, and finally reflect on the dangerous waters about heterotopias that require sensitivity and respect from game designers and players.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Certain spaces, both architectural and social, can project a feeling of "otherness." For example, when entering a cathedral, even for a secular individual, there is a sense of entering "another place." (Gutic, Caie, and Clegg 2010). Sometimes this "otherness" can be an entire subculture concealed within a larger social body. For instance, there are many who would regard their place of work as a space with its own boundaries and rules which are entirely different from the any other part of their life as described in Saloma-Akpedonu's (2006) study about the IT Industry in the Philippines.

In larp and role-playing, players often have experiences of being in another space that is beyond just having a strong imagination. In games where players must take a moment at the end of the game to "shake off" their character or reset their internal bearings to return to themselves and their usual world, there is a good chance that they have experienced this sense of having entered a different place during the span of the game.

Michel Foucault (1986) was one of the first philosophers to seriously examine the substance of this "otherness" of certain spaces in a society, which he called "heterotopias," and this paper seeks to examine how the concept of heterotopias can provide both game designers and players with a valuable toolset in thinking about play spaces. We will begin by summarizing Foucault's six principles of heterotopias, exploring what might make a given

play space a heterotopia, and finally reflect on the dangerous waters about heterotopias that require sensitivity and respect from game designers and players.

2. DEFINITION OF A HETEROTOPIA

Before further examining the idea of heterotopias as a play spaces, it will helpful to define exactly what a heterotopia is. Foucault's most explicit definition of a heterotopia came in a lecture he gave to a group of architects in 1986 entitled "Of Other Spaces." He begins defining a utopia as an idealized or perfected society (or part of society) that lacks any real place in space and time. A utopia may have a direct analogy to the "real space of a Society," but they are ultimately an idea and are "fundamentally unreal spaces" (Foucault 1986). Heterotopias, on the other hand, are real places that are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia." It is a space where we can often identify a specific location of where it begins and ends, but they "are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about."

We find parallels between Foucault's concept of the heterotopia and the work of Johan Huizinga, specifically his concept of the Magic Circle (Huizinga 1955) which asserts that play spaces are defined by spatial, temporal, and social boundaries defined through ritual actions and agreements which create another form of self-delineated otherness that is taken on temporarily for play. We will see where the Magic Circle concept might fall short as a tool for the

examination of games in a contemporary milieu and where the heterotopia concept would serve better.

Foucault lays out six principles of heterotopias wherein he provides real world examples (1986):

First Principle. *All cultures (probably) have heterotopias, and these primarily fall into one of two main categories: heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation.* Heterotopias of crisis are reserved, privileged, or sacred spaces for members of society in “crisis” (crisis here means an involuntary state of being that is substantially different from what society regards as “normal”). Examples of members in crisis are adolescents, the elderly, and pregnant women. An example of a heterotopia of crisis is a nineteenth-century boarding school — a revered and wholly separate place for adolescents. Historically, these groups have been put into places that are separate, with their own norms of behavior, but still maintaining a connection to society at large.

Foucault acknowledges that the heterotopia of crisis type is disappearing in modern society and is largely being replaced by his second category, heterotopias of deviation: These are spaces set aside for members of society whose behavior deviates from “normal.” Examples include retirement homes (which Foucault notes could be regarded as either a heterotopia of crisis or deviation) and psychiatric hospitals.

Second Principle. *Heterotopias have a specific function that is a reflection of the society in which they exist.* Foucault notes how the heterotopia of the cemetery has changed over time. Once placed at the heart of a city, cemeteries moved to the outskirts of cities as perceptions about death (namely, the idea of death as an “illness”) evolved.

Third Principle. *Heterotopias are capable of bringing multiple, possibly incompatible, real spaces together into a single space.* An example is the cinema or theater, which creates various spaces on a stage or screen at one end of the room. Here we have an overlap with Huizinga, with his overlaying of imaginary play space onto a physical space.

Fourth Principle. *Heterotopias are often “linked to slices in time,” and will often break with the traditional passage of time.* An example of this principle is the heterotopia of the museum or library, which are places that, in a very real way, attempt to “stop” or “accumulate” time. Another example at the opposite end of the spectrum is the heterotopia of the festival, which can transform an empty field into a whirling

display of activity then back to an empty field in a relatively tiny and temporary segment of time.

Fifth Principle. *Heterotopias have a system of how one enters and exits the space, both isolating the heterotopia and making it penetrable.* For example, a prison is a heterotopia that one enters under compulsion, where a sauna is a heterotopia that has a literal “purification” ritual, namely the act of showering before entering. For Huizinga (1955), crossing into the Magic Circle was itself a ritual and an acknowledgement of entering this othered space.

Sixth Principle. *Heterotopic spaces have a specific relationship with the space that remains, namely as a space of illusion or a space of compensation.* For instance, a brothel could be considered a space of illusion, while a nineteenth-century new world colony might be a heterotopia of compensation that seeks to have a “perfect” version of the member’s original home country.

3. WHAT MAKES A PLAY SPACE A HETEROOTOPIA?

First, it is important to define what we mean by a “play space.” For the purposes of this paper, we are defining “play space” as a merging of both the imaginary world of the setting and game rules/norms with the physical, geographical, real world location in space and time that players occupy to play a game such as a kitchen table for a tabletop role-playing game or an event space set aside for an larp. It is this combination of ideas and imagination (e.g., rules and setting), a tangible space (e.g., a kitchen table with 5 chairs around it), and a particular slice of time (e.g., a Thursday evening where a group meets from 6pm to 10pm to play the game) that constitute a “play space.”

Although our focus is on larp and role play, by this definition, we would recognize a pick-up game of soccer in the park as a “play space” as well. Before the game begins, the park is just a field of grass, available for any variety of purposes or for no purpose whatsoever. A group of friends gather with a soccer ball and agree on boundaries, locations of the goals, roles for each player, general rules of play, and a set length of time to play, and suddenly a “play space” is created in a specific real place for a specific length of time.

We might use this soccer example to show a point of difference between the application of Huizinga’s Magic Circle and Foucault’s heterotopia: Both

concepts easily engage with the soccer game in the park. However, if the game was set on the deck of an aircraft carrier, we might find Foucault better able to address the significance of that setting through his interest in social and architectural spaces. A Magic Circle is created when players 'other' themselves for the purpose of a game, a heterotopia is created when 'others' find a space within a larger structure in order to engage their othered selves.

Using Foucault's principles we can examine various play spaces and ask if they can be considered a heterotopia. This question was explored explicitly with the play spaces of eurogames by Wilson (2015), who asked if the board game *The Castles of Burgundy* (2011) constitutes a heterotopia. Wilson concluded that if a player passed a "Foucauldian mirror test" – that is, if the act of playing the game caused the player a moment of meaningful self-reflection – then yes, a eurogame such as *The Castles of Burgundy* could be considered a heterotopia. For Wilson, the mechanic of bringing livestock tokens onto one's estate allowed him to conceptualize that these animals were being rescued, which reinforced his real life values as an ethical vegan.

4. IS DUNGEONS & DRAGONS A HETEROTOPIA?

At first glance, a group of friends at a table role-playing through a classic fantasy dungeon may indeed seem to constitute a heterotopia. Playing a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* is a type of "deviant" behavior (first principle) in that the players are behaving in a way that is consistent with game play but not with their everyday lives. A classic fantasy dungeon game also juxtaposes multiple spaces into a single space (third principle) through the use of maps, miniatures, dice, storytelling, and imagination (sixth principle).

Continuing this examination, the *D&D* gaming table is most certainly linked to slices of time (fourth principle). In play, time is marked off in a very specific way for the characters of the fiction, be it a 5-second round of combat or a noting that the journey between towns takes two weeks. Additionally, most *D&D* games are scheduled for a very specific start and stop time. Not only is a time and place established for a game, but the players must undergo a "ritual" of creating a character and learning the rules of play to participate (meeting the fifth principle).

An area where the classic fantasy dungeon play space may fall short of being a heterotopia is the second principle, which we summarized above as

"Heterotopias have a specific function that is a reflection of the society in which they exist." However, if a player entered into a debate about the morality of how the city guard treats its goblin population, and that player reflected on our modern issues of the relationship between the police and minority populations, then we can find evidence of the second principle through Wilson's (2015) "Foucauldian mirror test."

A heterotopia exists within a larger architectural and social space but is apart from it. However, a heterotopia operates in reaction to this larger framework – it considers the world from the margins and found spaces between the controls and intentions of society as a whole. *Dungeons & Dragons* remains blissfully ignorant of the space which hosts it. It doesn't encourage the looking outward or looking inward – the self-awareness – of a heterotopic participant. *D&D* players tend to not occupy the margins of a space but colonize it, taking control then abandoning it when done. We have little need to reach beyond the boundaries of Huizinga's Magic Circle when we discuss *Dungeons & Dragons*.

5. THE PLAY SPACE OF JUST A LITTLE LOVIN' AS A HETEROTOPIA

In contrast, let us now turn to the play space for the larp *Just a Little Lovin'*, a Nordic larp about the AIDS crisis in the gay communities of New York City in the early 1980s (Edland & Grasmø 2011). The game is played over the course of five days – one for prep, workshoping techniques, three for actual play, and one for debriefing.

The play space easily meets all of six of Foucault's principles: it is both a heterotopia of deviance and crisis, the designers have a specific vision of the players to experience the themes of desire, friendship and fear of death (serving a specific societal function and passing the mirror test), multiple spaces both real and imagined are brought together in the play space, a key moment in time is captured (1982 to 1984), the players must undergo both training and a physical transformation via costume to play the game, and an illusion of time and space via in-game behavior and physical set design is created. The sensation of a "different" sense of time appears to be particularly profound in this larp, and Foucault himself describes it well when he states, "The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (1986).

A heterotopic examination of *Just a Little Lovin'* provides a richer and more nuanced result than

Huizinga's Magic Circles. The setting of the game itself is a community of people often forced into the heterotopic margins of society, and the mechanics of the larp itself from prep to debrief are intended to heighten that feeling of investment in a social space that is best defined as a heterotopia of a heterotopia (Gronemann & Raasted 2013).

6. THE DANGEROUS WATERS OF HETEROTOPIAS

Foucault's (1986) lecture sought to define the word "heterotopia" beyond the realm of language and into the realm of architecture. Games, in a sense, are architecture as language. Words on a page, when acted on by a group of players, can become a heterotopic space. Where Le Corbusier once said "architecture is a machine for living," we can hold the jargon of games as a "machine for playing."

We can see from just a small sampling of play experiences from *Just a Little Lovin'* that heterotopic play spaces can have keen personal and emotional effects on the players who enter the space. Beyond just an academic exercise, we see great value to the game designer in using some of the definitions and tools outlined here to help recognize when their intended play space could become a heterotopia. When creating a heterotopic play space, we encourage the designer to recognize that their players will be entering, in a very real sense, a space that will have an acute sense of "otherness" to it.

Another noted effect of thinking about the play space as a heterotopia is that as a designer and as a player, it becomes more challenging to engage in mere emotional tourism or exploitation of the subject matter of the game. The designer is, in effect, asking the player to both physically and mentally enter the play space. In a non-heterotopic game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, a player can casually describe the actions of (to borrow the popular phrase) a "murder hobo" and have no regrets or particular insight into their own behavior. However, in a game of *Just a Little Lovin'*, a player is asked to recognize the reality and humanity of the people and places they are about to embody and enter.

In this sense, we can then learn to treat entering and exiting the heterotopia of a play space the same way we might treat entering and exiting the real world heterotopia of a hospital for mentally ill patients. When entering such a hospital, certain norms of behavior are expected, particularly those concerning the safety of the visitors and the patients. For a heterotopic play space, we would be wise to take into account the same considerations.

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BIOS

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Jason Giardino began his now 30-year journey with role-playing games at the age of 11 when his babysitter brought over *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* books to work on her new character instead of homework. Giardino holds a B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania and an M.S. in Computer Information Science from Regis University. In addition to working as a Senior Engineer with Comcast, he is a staff member of Portland, Oregon's "Games to Gather" nonprofit organization where he hosts monthly board game socials and facilitator training events.