

# The “Virtual Heterotopias”: Reimagining Nature-Culture Relations

*Mihai Burlacu*

DOI: 10.21104/CL.2017.2.01

*Abstract* Revisiting the complex dynamics of nature-culture relations should take into consideration the juxtapositions between multiple spaces, times and meanings that constitute the current anthropological understanding of the concept of ‘environment’. As digital technologies were progressively incorporated into the ways in which the influences of the environment are perceived and reimagined, a new type of places appeared: the ‘virtual heterotopias’. They typify contemporary conceptualizations of the environment by simultaneously connecting and differentiating multiple spaces and times. In my paper, I draw upon the theoretical groundwork developed by Michel Foucault (1967) regarding heterotopias. I focus on how nature-culture relations are mirrored, signified and reimagined in virtual worlds (i.e. MMOG worlds). I consider the virtual worlds to be multileveled heterotopias where the digital counterparts of real elements from the environment seem more ‘real’ and ‘compelling’ than the originals. The new ways in which ‘virtual heterotopias’ are built in order to represent multiple dimensions of the environment ultimately contribute to a redefinition of heterotopias’ epistemological and anthropological relevance.

*Keywords* heterotopia, heterotopology, nature-culture relations, virtual heterotopia, virtual world, game world.

*Contact* Mihai Burlacu, Ph. D., Lecturer at the Faculty of Sociology and Communication, “Transilvania” University of Braşov, Eroilor Avenue, No. 25, Postal Code: 500030, Braşov, Braşov County, Romania; e-mail: burlacu.mihai@gmail.com, mihai.burlacu@unitbv.ro.

*Jak citovat / How to cite* Burlacu, Mihai. (2017). The “Virtual Heterotopias”: Reimagining Nature-Culture Relations. *Český lid* 104, 183–197. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.21104/CL.2017.2.01>

## Introduction

The contemporary dynamics of nature-culture relations involve juxtapositions between multiple spaces, times and meanings. The current anthropological understanding of the concept of 'environment' is actually composed of such juxtapositions. These juxtapositions constitute places that interfere with the ostensible continuity of 'ordinary space'. For all intents and purposes, these places are hypostases of alterity inserted into the sameness represented by the "topicality of the everyday environment" (Dehaene – De Caeter 2008b: 4). They typify contemporary conceptualizations of the environment by simultaneously connecting and differentiating multiple spaces and times. As such, they can be described using Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia', which literally means 'other place'.

In his excursus regarding heterotopias, Foucault emphasizes the heterogeneity of the space in which people live in postmodern society. Interestingly, he mentions the sets of intricate relations in which every person lives and which shape the space around us. These sets of relations "delineate emplacements that cannot be equated or in any way superimposed" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 16). These emplacements can be described by identifying the particular set of relations by which a site or place is defined. In a similar manner, clusters of relations between culture and nature can be used to describe various places from the environment.

In my paper, I draw upon the theoretical groundwork developed by Foucault (1967) regarding heterotopias and his 'heterotopology' as an analytical system. Therefore, in the process of reimagining nature-culture relations, I consider as particularly important the sites or places that have the distinctive characteristic "of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such ways as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected by them" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 17). These are two types of places: utopias and heterotopias. The former are unreal places. The latter are counter-emplacements in which all the other 'real' emplacements from a culture are concurrently represented, contested and inverted. Paradoxically, although heterotopias are physically localizable, they are outside all places, due to the nature of the sets of relations they entail. In Foucault's view, heterotopias are "effectively realized utopias" (ibid.: 17). Inside heterotopias all the other real cultural emplacements are concurrently represented, contested and inverted.

As digital technologies were progressively incorporated into the ways in which the influences of the environment are perceived and reimagined, in the last four decades a new type of places appeared, which I have labelled 'virtual heterotopias'. By instantaneously linking and differentiating various places, times and meanings at multiple levels, the virtual space includes multiple heterotopias. While Foucault couldn't have developed a comparison between

virtual worlds and mirrors, he did however mention the “unreal space that virtually opens up behind the surface” of the mirror (ibid.: 17). Similar to mirrors, virtual worlds offer individuals the possibility of having avatars, which are actually similar to Foucault’s ‘shadow’. It gives each person his/her own visibility, and as such, enables them to see themselves where they are not. Virtual worlds are themselves heterotopias and they contain ‘other places’ that could easily be described using Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’. As such, the virtual worlds contain multileveled sets of inverted relations with the remaining ‘real’ places. However, unlike mirrors, virtual worlds exert multiple return effects on the place a person occupies, because she/he can have more than one shadow or avatar in such a world.

In my article, I focus on the ways in which nature-culture relations are mirrored, signified and reimagined in virtual worlds (i.e. *Massive Multiplayer On-line Worlds*). I am grounding my argumentation on a research project where I studied the ‘virtual heterotopias’. My approach has three parts. I begin by reviewing Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’. Afterwards, I use the six principles from his ‘heterotopology’ in order to examine virtual worlds, with an emphasis on *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo III*. Subsequently, I argue that the accessibility of the ‘virtual heterotopias’ built with digital technology entails a form of ‘hyper-illusion’ in which the digital counterparts of real elements from the environment seem more ‘real’ and ‘compelling’ than the originals. The virtual worlds are actually quite different from Foucault’s heterotopia of the mirror. Nonetheless, they can be considered multileveled heterotopias because they render various representations of the environment into a multi-faceted ‘reality’. I conclude that the new ways in which ‘virtual heterotopias’ are built in order to represent and/or reimagine multiple dimensions of the environment contribute to a redefinition of heterotopias’ epistemological and anthropological relevance.

### **Foucault’s ‘Heterotopology’ Reconsidered**

In reviewing Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’ there are several preliminary considerations I must highlight. First, from a conceptual standpoint, I agree with Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter’s assertion that Foucault’s perspective on heterotopias is situated “at the intersection of a reflection on alterity and difference” (Dehaene – De Cauter 2008a: 23). ‘Other space’ denotes a qualification that entails setting aside heterotopias from the ‘remaining space’ (i.e. difference). Furthermore, Dehaene and De Cauter suggest that ‘other’ “is also an attribute of the space *per se*, which has characteristics deserving of the label ‘other’ (alterity)” (ibid.: 23). Fundamentally, Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’ reveals the dual character of heterotopias: they are both exclusive and distinct. Their dual character is revealed by Foucault when he emphasizes the relationships of reflection and inversion that heterotopias entail vis-à-vis the

remaining spaces. Therefore, while difference indicates a relational definition of heterotopias, otherness suggests separation. The two nuances are intertwined in Foucault excursus.

Secondly, I assert that Foucault's 'heterotopology' bears a striking resemblance to the mathematical discipline of topology. This discipline is concerned with the properties of referencing places in abstract mathematical space. Topology has multiple advantages in describing virtual worlds and the heterotopias they contain. Also, the extent to which Foucault's excursus on heterotopia could be interpreted as a reflection on virtual space yields numerous potential applications, similar in scope to those of topology.

Thirdly, heterotopias are generated "through the different culturally and socially determined *meanings* of heterogeneity, and the strategies of a given society, culture or civilization to cope with it" (Sohn 2008: 45). This assertion is actually based on Foucault's claim that while a universal type of heterotopia doesn't exist, "it is a constant in every human group" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 18). The characteristics of heterotopias are not only physical, but also consequences of cultural mediation and interpretation (Jormakka 1998: 125). Accordingly, the features of Foucault's 'heterotopology' are a consequence of cultural mediation and interpretation. For this reason, Hiedi Sohn describes his 'heterotopology' not as a rigid structure, but as a "flexible, inconclusive and rather unstable, volatile system or arrangement that adapts to the propensity of the meaning and criteria of normalcy and order" (Sohn 2008: 45). According to her, Foucault's system of description changes gradually in accordance with the logic of a given society, culture or civilization. Although I admit that Sohn's description has merit from a methodological point of view, I believe that she overstated the purported instability and vagueness of Foucault's 'heterotopology', while diminishing its consistency. Granting that the 'transformation of meaning' impedes the existence of a universal type of heterotopia, she apparently reduces the importance of the 'diffusion of meaning', especially in the case of virtual space.

Finally, choosing to take the 'transformation of meaning' as the common denominator to access Foucault's 'heterotopology' represents an operation whose potential has been previously indicated by Sohn. Therefore, it is possible to develop multiple interpretations of the 'other places'. The 'transformation of meaning' requires levels of normalcy and of anomaly that are key for describing the different types of heterotopias. However, these levels should not be confused with Foucault's six principles (*ibid.*: 45). As the virtual space is subjected to the diffusion of meaning, these levels also account for the varied kinds of virtual heterotopias and their effects on contemporary conceptualizations of the environment. After comparing Foucault's six principles with

Sohn’s four levels, it becomes apparent that the former can be intersected with the latter, while maintaining the ‘topological properties’<sup>1</sup> of heterotopias.

## The Principles Outlined

In his attempt to develop a systematic description of heterotopias, Foucault formulates six principles through which these ‘other places’ might be detected, analysed and characterized. Foucault outlines them carefully, with examples drawn mainly from literature. As Christine Boyer states, Foucault highlights his principles with a plethora of examples in order to assert the cultural universal need “to create thrilling spaces that instil imagination, that accumulate unto infinity all ideas and images in an archive, that establish vacation retreats where one returns to a state of primitive nudity” (Boyer 2008: 54). With this thesis in mind, I will continue by briefly presenting Foucault’s principles and their relevance for my paper.

[I] In the first principle, Foucault states that all cultures have heterotopias. While they are a cultural universal or ‘constant’, as Foucault calls them, heterotopias take various forms. Accordingly, he proceeds to classify them in two main categories:

(a) ‘Crisis heterotopias’ are the ‘other places’ reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis. They are found in so-called primitive societies or cultures. Examples include boarding schools in the nineteenth century or compulsory military service for young men.

(b) ‘Heterotopias of deviation’ are found in modern and postmodern societies or cultures. They are ‘other places’ in which individuals are placed if their behaviour or other features are deviant in relation to a meaningful norm or contextually defined level of normalcy (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 18). This category includes, for instance, prisons, asylums, hospitals and mental institutions.

According to Sohn’s theorization of heterotopias, the first principle roughly intersects with the first level by transforming the meaning of normalcy and anomaly across different societies or cultures over a given period of time. The shift between the two categories of heterotopias and the criteria associated with each of them illustrates “the transformation of the cultural meanings of taboo [...] exposing the different spatial implications conveyed in it” (Sohn 2008: 45). However, Sohn’s theoretical model intersects and doesn’t necessarily overlap with Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’.

[II] The second principle postulates that a society or culture can change the way a heterotopia functions over an extended period of time. To illustrate this principle, Foucault expounds the heterotopia of the cemetery. This

1 I use the expression ‘topological properties’ in order to designate the invariant characteristics of heterotopias subjected to ‘homeomorphisms’. Therefore, the sense I attribute to this expression is very close to the one used in the mathematical discipline of ‘topology’.

example is very suggestive, because it contains both the evolution of the social and cultural view on illness and death, while also revealing the way in which changes in cultural perspectives have spatial consequences. This principle intersects with Sohn's second level, as it involves a diachronic 'transformation of meaning'.

[III] The third principle refers to the fact that a heterotopia can juxtapose multiple spaces in a single real emplacement. More precisely, a heterotopia can layer or superimpose several apparently incompatible places in a single emplacement. For this principle Foucault chooses two interesting kinds of heterotopias. First, he refers to the way a theatre may bring a multitude of places onto the stage that are foreign or even incompatible to each other. Afterwards, he indicates that a cinema is a heterotopia as well, because the two-dimensional screen is used to project images representing multiple three-dimensional spaces. However, the most important example offered by Foucault is that of the traditional Persian garden. It comprises and juxtaposes the four parts of the world, while the water fountain or basin at its centre is the navel of the world (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 19). I consider it relevant to stress that many heterotopias have a nucleus, a nexus, a centre, or a core, which functions like the source of their alterity and the engine of their existence, even though Foucault doesn't mention this explicitly. Foucault's third principle intersects with Sohn's third and fourth levels of conceptualising heterotopias and also corresponds with two of the contemporary conceptualizations of the environment: (1) as a cultural landscape and (2) as the organization of space, time, and meaning. More importantly, the complex symbolic dynamics of nature-culture relations represented in 'virtual heterotopias' can be described using this principle, because the 'transformation of meaning' also causes the appearance of new connotations and the corresponding emergence of completely new virtual places.

[IV] The fourth principle contains Foucault's thesis that heterotopias are frequently connected with "slices in time" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 20). These fragments of time, named 'heterochronies' by Foucault, can be juxtaposed and instantiated in heterotopias. Therefore, the cemetery is a recurrent example, because it is the 'heterochrony' generated by the loss of life and is characterized by a quasi-eternity of dissolution and disappearance. While the complexity of the heterotopias and 'heterochronies' is suggested by Foucault, he couldn't have foreseen the multiplicity entailed by 'virtual heterotopias'. However, he did illustrate the 'transformation of meaning' in the case of museums and libraries: from (a) an "expression of individual choice" in the seventeenth century to (b) the modern and postmodern 'heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time', which is a consequence of "the idea of accumulating everything, the idea of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time, and inaccessible to its

ravages" (ibid.: 20). Conversely, unlike the 'heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time', there are heterotopias linked to time in its most futile or transitory hypostasis; time in the 'festive mode' (*mode de la fête*). These 'heterotopias of festivity' are ephemeral. However, as Dehaene and De Cauter point out, they also have an intrinsically cyclical aspect (Dehaene – De Cauter 2008a: 26). In Foucault's view, this type of heterotopia is epitomized by the fairgrounds where carnivals take place. Furthermore, there is a type of heterotopia that represents a fusion of the aforementioned two types: the Polynesian vacation villages where "by rediscovering Polynesian life, one abolishes time; yet it is also time regained, it is the whole history of humanity harking back to its source" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 20). The Polynesian vacation villages are both 'heterotopias of festivity' and 'heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time'. Interestingly, this principle also partially intersects with the third level of Sohn's theorization.

[V] In the fifth principle, Foucault asserts that heterotopias always have a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them accessible. Heterotopias cannot be accessible as if they were public spaces. He offers several examples to clarify this principle. Therefore, barracks and prisons are places into which entry is compulsory. Alternately, entering a heterotopia involves various rites and purifications. In order to enter into such a heterotopia, an individual has to make certain gestures so as to obtain specific permission. Additionally, there are heterotopias dedicated to activities of purification, which can have a religious and/or hygienic dimension, such as the Muslim hammam or the Scandinavian saunas. Other types of heterotopias appear to be "simple openings", while also concealing "curious exclusions" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 20). The act of gaining access into such a place is an illusion. Paradoxically, gaining access into a heterotopia equates with being excluded from it. For instance, guest rooms in South American farms and North American motel rooms are a case in point of simultaneous access and exclusion, of being concurrently sheltered and hidden.

[VI] In his sixth principle, Foucault affirms that heterotopias have a function in relation to all the remaining space. He claims that this function can be placed on a continuum between two poles:

(a) Heterotopias might have the function of creating "a space of illusion" that exposes all the real space. Hence, all the places within which human life is divided are even more illusory; such as in the case of brothels.

(b) Conversely, heterotopias might have the function of creating real spaces that are meticulously arranged in order to compensate for the disorder that characterizes the remaining space, such as the Puritan settlements established in the seventeenth century in North America. A similar example is represented by the Jesuit colonies founded during the same period in South America.

Between the two extreme types there are numerous other kinds of heterotopias. They respond to conceptual meanings, abstract thoughts, or ideals.

Foucault's last principle intersects with the fourth level from Sohn's theoretical conception regarding heterotopias.

Finally, Foucault ends his excursus by describing the ship as "the heterotopia par excellence" (Foucault 1967 [2008]: 22). The ship "is a floating piece of space, a place without a place that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (ibid.: 22). By connecting multiple places, times and meanings, the ship constituted the most important instrument of economic development and the greatest reserve of imagination. Ships have the distinctive feature of linking various places, including other types of heterotopias: colonies, gardens, brothels etc. Interestingly, this is a feature shared by 'virtual heterotopias', as I will show in the following subchapter.

### ***Azeroth and Sanctuary: The 'Quest' of Describing Nature-Culture Relations in 'Virtual Heterotopias'***

The creation of meaning in virtual worlds such as *Azeroth* from *World of Warcraft* or *Sanctuary* from *Diablo III* inherently requires a symbolic nucleus for each place. As I delved into the world of *Sanctuary* (i.e. *Diablo III*), I was able to establish parallels with *World of Warcraft's Azeroth* on several levels. The method that I predominantly used was participant observation. Therefore, I immersed myself both in *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary*. This was a time-consuming activity, which subsequently caused me to neglect other projects and tasks for months. It also engendered an insidious form of addiction that was very hard to get rid of. I was interested mainly in the ways in which *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary* could be studied using Foucault's 'heterotopology'. Over time, I understood that they could be considered both heterotopias in themselves and juxtaposed collections of heterotopias. Accordingly, I made several modifications to Foucault's 'heterotopology' in order to better understand the peculiarities of these two 'virtual heterotopias'. Most notably, I included the thesis that each of them has a nucleus that represents both an engine of their existence and a source of their alterity. Although I cannot generalize this observation, I hypothesize that this trait might be common among the various types of heterotopias.

It is necessary to make some clarifications regarding the ways space, time and place are contextually imagined and created in these two virtual worlds. In the past, there were several approaches to spatial practices in the *World of Warcraft* (Corneliussen – Rettberg 2008). However, to my knowledge, in the last decade there has been no comparative research in which virtual worlds such as *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary* have been approached as multiple juxtaposed and compartmented heterotopias.

In contrast to fictional fantasy worlds such as Patrick Rothfuss' *Temerant*, George R. R. Martin's *World of Ice and Fire* or John R. R. Tolkien's *Middle-earth*,

both *Sanctuary* and *Azeroth* are significantly smaller and more compartmented. Therefore, while in *Temerant* the distances travelled by the main protagonist (i.e. *Kvothe*) are usually measured in hundreds or thousands of miles, in *Azeroth* the distances travelled by players are considerably smaller, usually measured in terms of a few miles. For example, the undead capital of *Undercity* is located a couple of miles north of the dwarf capital of *Ironforge*. Similarly, in the *World of Ice and Fire*, the *Wall* has a length of about 100 leagues or 300 miles. In the same world, the distance between *Winterfell* and *Castle Black* measures around 650 miles via *Kingsroad*, and there are 1,460 miles between *King’s Landing* and *Winterfell*, if one allows the imagination to travel the same road. In *Middle-earth* the distance between the capital of *Gondor*, *Minas Tirith*, and the tower of *Orthanc*, the seat of Saruman, is purportedly measuring 450 miles in a straight line. Between *Barad Dür*, Sauron’s Stronghold, and *Minas Tirith*, there are 200 miles. A decade ago, Espen Aarseth astutely surmised that when “compared to the distances between the main enemy strongholds from Tolkien’s fictional world, *Azeroth*’s enemy cities are closer by a factor of 100” (Aarseth 2008: 118). In a similar manner, after comparing *Sanctuary* to *Middle-earth*, I concluded that the cities from the former are closer roughly by a factor of 50 than the cities from the latter. It should be noted that the six expansion sets added to *World of Warcraft* in the last decade extended *Azeroth* to a significant degree. Nevertheless, the proximity of the relevant places is still a prevalent characteristic for this game world, even after the launch of *World of Warcraft: Legion* in August 2016.

When compared to the distances from the real world, the differences are remarkable. For example, the *Eastern Kingdoms* from *Azeroth* measure the equivalent of approximately 8 miles from north to south, which is comparable to Bucharest’s biggest boulevards or to the axial length of a medium sized city. Likewise, *Kalimdor* has a length of roughly 9 miles. In *Diablo*’s world of *Sanctuary*, the hub town of *New Tristram* in *Act I* has the equivalent size of one and a half football fields. Curiously, most of the levels from *Old Tristram*’s *Cathedral* are actually bigger than *New Tristram* as a whole. Likewise, in *Act II* the *Hidden Camp* is actually much smaller than most dungeons from that act, being comparable to an ice hockey rink. Certainly in Aarseth’s terms, the small distances from these two virtual worlds can be explained in terms of playability and “ease of navigation” (Aarseth 2008: 118). While I was grinding through endless waves of demons in the virtual world of *Sanctuary*, I realised that although it was developed from the concept of a fictional world, it was designed without the individual flexibility of space and time. This is also true in the case of *Azeroth*, as Aarseth emphasized a decade ago (Aarseth 2008: 118–119). Instead of being fictional worlds, both of them are game worlds in the sense that within them space is definable and contextualized only in direct relation to time and vice-versa. There are no time or space gaps. This gives the illusion of continuity and objectiveness by avoiding the gaps commonly

found in the fictional time envisioned by Rothfuss in *Temerant*, or by Tolkien in *Middle-earth*.

As prime examples of virtual worlds, *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary* seem more genuine than the real world, because they do not contain the tedious repetitive activities that one has to do daily. This type of “warping” is correlated with the fine equilibrium that game designers generally try to achieve between the player’s needs and the enjoyment which she/he should experience during game play. Unlike Aarseth, I do not consider that the individual and the collective needs of a player are balanced (Aarseth 2008: 119). On the contrary, the two types of needs are actually entwined in a way that is specific to theme parks, museums, carnivals and zoos. In other words, *Sanctuary* and *Azeroth* are heterotopias that could be easily described using Foucault’s fourth principle as ‘heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time’ at an individual level and ‘heterotopias of festivity’ at a collective level. I argue that the clan raids from *Diablo III* and the guild raids from *World of Warcraft* have many similarities with the various challenges and games that are common in a theme park or a carnival in terms of rules and especially in terms of the achievement system. Individually, both (a) the ‘achievement system’ and (b) the ‘level up system’ register one’s successes. Collectively, their social dimension also connotes a cyclical aspect, because in *Sanctuary* as a member of the clan entitled *BoS*,<sup>2</sup> or in *Azeroth* as a member of a guild called *WWR*, I participated in raids on a weekly or monthly basis. In addition to the ‘loot’, experience and achievements gained for killing various bosses or ‘Überbosses’, these raids involved the cyclical and ephemeral dynamics of social interactions. In turn, these interactions continuously transformed the meaning of the surrounding virtual environment and caused the emergence of new shared connotations about the various types of environment I have encountered.

The similarity between theme parks and game worlds has been considered before by several authors, such as Celia Pearce (1997), Angela Ndalianis (2005) and Espen Aarseth (2008). But while Pearce and Ndalianis focused on games as individual attractions and Aarseth on *Azeroth* as a theme park, none have attempted to describe them as heterotopias, even though their characteristics correspond to those included by Foucault in his ‘heterotopology’. More importantly, both *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary* have simultaneously at least one nucleus that functions as the engines of their existence and sources of their alterity. In *Azeroth*, the *Well of Eternity* became the *Maelstrom* after the *Great Sundering*. In *Sanctuary*, the nucleus was the *Worldstone*. Its destruction heralded the events from *Diablo III* and in its place the *Arreat Crater* remained. In Foucauldian terms, they could be considered the ‘navels’ of their respective worlds.

2 The clan’s name is an abbreviation of *Brotherhood of Steel*, which is a reference to an important faction from another game world: *Fallout*.

Just like the robots from Michael Crichton's 1973 movie entitled *Westworld* and its 2016 reboot as a HBO series, the monsters I killed or contributed to killing in-game were respawned later. Besides the respawning of monsters, *Sanctuary* as a whole is reset each time a player exits and re-enters the game. Additionally, the player has the option to manually reset their whole campaign progress in order to start all the quests again. Therefore, by using the 'Reset Quests' feature, players have the chance to obtain increased experience and rewards when they complete a quest and a guaranteed legendary item when they kill the main antagonist, *Diablo*. Also, the environment is reset. In other words, the ephemeral character of *Sanctuary* is generated in several ways by the game engine, just like the advantageous features of a theme park, of which the player only has the illusion of control. In a similar manner, in *Azeroth* the players do not affect the world in a meaningful and permanent way. The rare exceptions in which guilds or groups of players apparently affect the world are actually pre-programmed advertised events, which usually correlate with the plot from an expansion set.

While I was 'boosting' my seasonal wizard *Xenoriel* to level 70 in *Sanctuary*, I chose to play in *Adventure Mode*. This mode allowed me to venture into *Nephalem Rifts* and *Greater Rifts*. These were actually multileveled juxtapositions of several apparently incompatible places, which had actually more in common with attractions from theme parks than they had with sites from fictional worlds or from the real world. A map of a hellish tower was connected via a portal to an icy region, which in turn was juxtaposed with a desert. This was a 'hyper-illusion' because it entailed a 'warped' apposition between environmental layouts that had no continuity. These juxtapositions are in accordance with Foucault's third principle. The discrepancies were obvious when compared with the various regions from the five acts of the *Campaign Mode*. The locations from *Sanctuary* contained environmental elements that might be compared with those found in the real world, especially in terms of landscape and flora. The 'rifts' on the other hand, had fewer similitudes with real natural landscapes.

*Azeroth* contains thematic zones connected by teleports, portals, roads, ships, mounts and even rail-based transportation. While I was playing with my Night Elf hunter *Tiberiel*, the limits of these thematic zones were plausible. However, when I saw these zones from above, the discrepancies between them were obvious. For example, in southern Kalimdor, the *Un'goro Crater* is a lush zone surrounded by three desert zones and a marsh to the north. In the *Crater*, I could easily find an eerie assortment of dinosaurs, elementals, devilsaurs and all sorts of exotic crystals. The uncanny juxtaposition of deserts, marshes, jungles and glaciers and the small distances between antagonistic ethnic groups' settlements are unrealistic, but functional. Just like in other heterotopias, each zone has a function in relation to the remaining space. This is true both in relation to other zones and in relation to the areas within

a zone and corresponds with Foucault's sixth principle. The ludicrousness of the multiple juxtapositions is alleviated only by the artificial boundaries (e.g. oceans and impassable mountain ranges) and by the level-based access restrictions. For example, the areas from *Teldrassil* can be considered an ensemble of functional implausibilities, whose accessibility requires a form of 'hyper-illusion' for the beginner Night Elf players. The great tree *Teldrassil*, as a digital counterpart of real elements from the environment, seemed more 'real' and 'compelling' than the giant *Sequoiadendron giganteum* for the players I interviewed in-game.

Reimagining nature-culture relations in a 'virtual heterotopia' such as *World of Warcraft's Azeroth* renders various representations of the environment into a multi-faceted 'reality', which is an elaborated illusion. Interestingly, the nature-culture relations symbolized by specific quests in *World of Warcraft* include references to real problems, such as environmental pollution and resource degradation. These quests actually convey values that are generally associated with the environmentalist movement (Bainbridge 2010: 33). For example, in one such quest my avatar was confronted with the corruption of the furbolgs<sup>3</sup> from Felwood. This was actually a sign of a much larger catastrophe, which was studied by members of the *Emerald Circle* of the Night Elves. They requested the help of Alliance players in order to discover the causes of the environmental catastrophe and to attempt to cure the corruption. In a repeatable quest, Arathandris Silversky requested Tiberiel as a hunter and well-trained skinner to identify patches of tainted skin among the bounty collected in Felwood by killing furbolgs. He had to have with him during this quest a Cenarion beacon. Upon bringing five patches of tainted skin, Arathandris Silversky gave my avatar plant salves and asked Tiberiel to use them to reclaim a part of Felwood from corruption. Additionally, some of the waters from Felwood were infested by toxic corrupted water elementals. The corruption was caused by a group of Jadedfire satyrs and a cult of Jadedfire Orcs. Interestingly, the quest lines implied that in the case of environmental pollution (i.e. 'corruption'), one cannot find simple solutions to complex problems.

In the *Windshear Crag* area of the *Stonetalon Mountains*, Tiberiel found environmental degradation on a massive scale. In that area, a massive logging expedition by the *Venture Company* had razed the once abundant forest. Furthermore, in the *Cataclysm* expansion set, a path had been carved into *Ashenvale*. The massive deforestation had left the valley full of mud and stumps. Consequently, Tiberiel attacked numerous supervisors, loggers, robot deforesters called *shredders*, including *XT: 9*, and an enormous woodcutting machine named *Super Reaper 6000*. This active and aggressive attempt to stop deforesting would be at best a 'quest' which would be very hard to

---

3 The furbolgs are an 'ancient' race of bear-men in the *Warcraft* Universe.

undertake in the real world. However, in the *World of Warcraft*, killing loggers and shredders is considered by the Night Elves to be akin to purifying the natural world. Interestingly, this ‘quest’ can be described using the fifth principle from Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’.

The draining of the wetlands from *Zangarmarsh*, a litoral zone from *Outland* caused the disappearance of several wetland species. As such, Lauranna Thar’well sent my Night Elf hunter on an expedition to retrieve several unidentified plant parts, which would allow her to assess the damage. Afterwards, Ysiel Windsinger sent Tiberiel to seek the origin of the water depletion. In the end, it turned out that the Naga were draining the wetlands of *Zangarmarsh* for their own purposes. Therefore, Tiberiel ‘had’ to sabotage the pumps used by the Naga. Seen from a broader perspective, the quests described here serve as a harsh reminder of the environmental dangers that lurk in the real world in ways that seem more ‘palpable’ and ‘compelling’ than their real counterparts. In *Azeroth*, the player has the opportunity to make an informed decision based on a perspective that would be almost unobtainable in the real world, when confronted with a similar situation.

## Conclusions

‘Virtual heterotopias’ contain and connect multiple spaces, places, times and meanings. More importantly, they include collections of other, smaller ‘heterotopias’ whose significance is constantly reimagined. In *Azeroth*, through quests like those regarding environmental pollution and resource degradation, the set of relations between nature and culture are concurrently represented, contested and inverted. In Dehaene and De Cauter’s terms, both *Sanctuary* and *Azeroth* could without doubt be considered ‘aporetic spaces’ (Dehaene – De Cauter 2008a: 25). They could be regarded as such because they represent many facets of actual nature-culture relations through the multiple ways in which they incorporate, stage and emphasize the real contradictions which are culturally produced worldwide and difficult to solve.

The continuous ‘transformation of meaning’ implied by ‘virtual heterotopias’ such as *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary* also causes the appearance of new connotations and the corresponding emergence of completely new virtual places. This is actually the reason why ‘virtual heterotopias’ are far greater reserves of imagination than any other type of heterotopia. Also, by combining and containing different places and times and by simultaneously connecting them, *Azeroth* and *Sanctuary* could be considered both heterotopias in themselves and juxtaposed collections of heterotopias. ‘Virtual heterotopias’ contain numerous zones and areas that are for all intents and purposes similar to theme park attractions.

Reimagining nature-culture relations in a ‘virtual heterotopia’ such as *World of Warcraft’s Azeroth* renders various representations of the

environment into a multi-faceted 'reality' which is an elaborated illusion. This process entails a plethora of new ways in which 'virtual heterotopias' are built and rebuilt in order to represent multiple dimensions of the environment. In a broader sense, these ways contribute to redefining the relevance of heterotopias from an epistemological and anthropological standpoint.

April 2017

## References

- Aarseth, Espen. 2008. A Hollow World: World of Warcraft as Spatial Practice. In: Corneliussen, Hilde G. – Rettberg, Jill Walker (eds.): *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge (MA) and London (UK): The MIT Press: 111–122.
- Bainbridge, William S. 2010. *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World*. London and Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Boyer, Christine M. 2008. The Many Mirrors of Foucault and their Architectural Reflections. In: Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven (eds.): *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. London and New York: Routledge: 53–73.
- Corneliussen, Hilde G. – Rettberg, Jill Walker (eds.). 2008. *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge (MA) and London (UK): The MIT Press.
- Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven. 2008a. Footnote. In: Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven (eds.): *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. London and New York: Routledge: 23–28.
- Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven. 2008b. Heterotopia in a Postcivil Society. In: Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven (eds.): *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. London and New York: Routledge: 3–9.
- Foucault, Michel. 1967 [2008]. Of Other Spaces. In: Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven (eds.): *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. London and New York: Routledge: 13–22.
- Jormakka, Kari. 1998. Post Mortem Eclecticism. In: Knaller-Vlay, Bernd – Ritter, Roland (eds.): *Other Spaces: The Affair of the Heterotopia*. Graz: HAD-Dokumente zur Architektur 10: 125–153.
- Martin, George R. R. 1996. *A Game of Thrones*. London and New York: Bantam Books.
- Ndalianis, Angela. 2005. *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Pearce, Celia. 1997. *The Interactive Book*. Indianapolis: MacMillan Technical Publishing.
- Rothfuss, Patrick. 2007. *The Name of the Wind*. New York: Daw Books.
- Sohn, Heidi. 2008. Heterotopia: Anamnesis of a Medical Term. In: Dehaene, Michiel – De Cauter, Lieven (eds.): *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. London and New York: Routledge: 41–50.
- Tolkien, John R. R. 1954. *The Lord of the Rings*. London: Allen and Unwin.

## **„Virtuální heterotopie“: nový pohled na vztahy kultury a přírody**

Opětovné zkoumání komplexní dynamiky vztahů mezi kulturou a přírodou by mělo brát v potaz souběžnou existenci mnoha prostorů, časů a významů, které utvářejí současné antropologické chápání konceptu „prostředí“. Digitální technologie postupně začaly ovlivňovat způsob, jak je prostředí vnímáno a chápáno, a objevil se tak nový typ místa: „virtuální heterotopie“. Jedná se o typické konceptualizace prostředí, jež vznikají současně propojením a odlišením několika prostorů a časů. Ve svém článku navazuji na teoretické základy vytvořené Michele Foucaultem (1967) týkající se heterotopii. Soustředím se na způsob, jak se vztahy mezi kulturou a přírodou odrážejí, nabývají na významu a jsou znovu vytvářeny ve virtuálních světech (např. MMOG neboli masových online hrách pro mnoho hráčů). Považuji virtuální světy za víceúrovňové heterotopie, ve kterých se digitální protějšky reálných prvků prostředí zdají být „reálnější“ a „lákavější“ než ty původní. „Virtuální heterotopie“ jsou budovány novými způsoby tak, aby představovaly více rozměrů prostředí, a nakonec tak přispívají k přehodnocení epistemologického a antropologického významu heterotopii.