THE 'VOID' AS 'HETEROTOPIA PAR EXCELLENCE' IN DISHONORED: DEATH OF THE OUTSIDER

Mihai BURLACU[1]

Abstract: *This paper presents an intellectual exercise of approaching a virtual space as if it were 'real'. I approach the 'Void', one of the spaces emphasized in the action-adventure stealth video game Dishonored: Death of the Outsider from the standpoint of Cultural Anthropology. My purpose is to describe the 'Void' and establish whether it can be considered a 'heterotopia par excellence', in Foucault's terms (Foucault, 2008, p. 22). I argue that the 'Void' connects and inverts multiple places and meanings in a similar manner to the ship from Foucault's 'heterotopology'. Thus, it represents a fictional example of a 'heterotopia par excellence'.*

Key words: *heterotopia par excellence, heterotopology, panopticism, the 'Outsider', the 'Void'.*

1. Introduction

The last spinoff instalment in the *Dishonored* series entails an interesting development of the main narrative line introduced in 2012. The first two games of the series introduced and expanded upon the fictional world in which gamers have the opportunity to fight in an intense political turmoil. In my paper, I revisit the 'Void' from the *Dishonored* series' universe, as it is represented in the last standalone expansion pack entitled *Dishonored: Death of the* Outsider. I proceed to compare it with Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia par excellence', which was derived from his 'heterotopology'.

My excursus presents first and foremost an intellectual exercise of approaching a virtual space as if it were 'real'. I begin by briefly presenting the synopsis of the *Dishonored* series. I continue by discussing the dichotomy between the 'panopticism' of the game's 'real' world and the type of emplacement represented by the 'Void'. Subsequently, I compare the characteristics of the 'Void' with the features attributed by Foucault to the ship, which is considered by him to be the 'heterotopia par excellence' (Foucault, 2008, p. 22).

Dishonored: Death of the Outsider was developed by *Arkane Studios* and published by *Bethesda Softworks*' in September 2017. I have chosen the series' last spinoff because its story examines the Outsider's past and the reason for his existence and intrinsic

---

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, mihai.burlacu@unitbv.ro

connection with the 'Void'. Furthermore, as an archetype, I assert that the 'Outsider' can be considered the regenerating 'nucleus' of the 'Void'.

2. The *Dishonored* Series Synopsis

In the first game of the series, the only playable protagonist is Corvo Attano, the 'Royal Protector' who has been framed and imprisoned for the assassination of his secret paramour, the Empress Jessamine Kaldwin. Actually, he is framed by the usurper 'Lord Regent' Hiram Burrows. Corvo escapes and becomes an assassin, in order to eliminate Burrows' associates, redeem himself, avenge the Empress' death and restore his daughter to the throne. He manages to overcome his challenges with the help of the powers granted to him by a god-like being: the so-called 'Outsider'. Interestingly, the resulting disorder is actually side-lined by the catastrophic rat plague introduced by Burrows.

In *Dishonored 2* there are two playable protagonists. While Corvo is a recurrent playable protagonist, his daughter Emily Kaldwin is a new playable character. The game begins and ends in the city of Dunwall, but most of the narrative is set in the southern coastal city of Karnaca. The storyline commences fifteen years after the events from the first game, with the dethronement of Emily by the witch Delilah Copperspoon and the Duke Luca Abele of Serkonos. The player may choose to play either with Corvo or with Emily. The chosen playable character is able to escape Dunwall with the help of Meagan Foster (i.e. Billie Lurk from the last instalment of the series). Emily or Corvo travels to Karnaca, were Delilah had originally began her political ascension. Afterwards, one of them rescues various allies and kills or neutralizes Delilah's cronies in order to restore Emily to the throne. The progression of the plot is strongly influenced by the 'Outsider', who plays an essential role in the game. Again, in the backgrounds of Karnaca there is another epidemic: the plague of parasite 'bloodflies'. From a narrative standpoint, this outbreak has the same role as the rat plague from the first game.

The storyline of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* unfolds two months after the end of *Dishonored 2*, and just like in the previous game, the plot is set in the city of Karnaca. The protagonist of the last *Dishonored* series' expansion is Billie Lurk. She follows the trails that lead to her former mentor, Daud. With his help, Billie explores the city in order to obtain the artefacts necessary for killing the source of magic and chaos in the *Dishonored* series' world: the 'Outsider'. The narrative of this sequel entails a more detailed exploration of the 'Outsider's past and motives.

3. From 'Panopticism' to Heterotopia

Remarkably, as Youssef Maguid (2018) has emphasized, the ensemble of places where *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider'*s story takes place has many unmistakable similarities with the archetypal seventeenth century city affected by plague described by Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). He emphasizes how outbreaks of plague were contained in cities by "a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death,

the killing of all stray animals; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant" (Foucault, 1991, p. 195). The description is essential for understanding his social theory of 'panopticism', which is grounded on the thesis that one's behaviour can be controlled and influenced through altering the built environment.

The fundamental element of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider's* architectural 'panopticism' resides in including in the built environment and even in the narrative, the idea that everyone is scrutinized at all times. From an environmental and architectural standpoint, Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' is enacted in several ways. Firstly, there are the high buildings and towers from which the *Serkonan High Guard* and the overseers of the *Abbey of the Everyman* keep a watchful eye on the city. Secondly, guardsmen are generally placed at the centre of circular galleries with a well-lighted and clear line of sight into the surrounding rooms. Thirdly, subjecting the inhabitants of Karnaca to constant observation creates a psychological effect of self-censorship. Thus, in the words of Maguid "they 'discipline' themselves for constant fear of being caught misbehaving" (Maguid, 2018, para. 4). Thus, fear is prevalent in the society envisioned in the game.

However, while the guiding principle for designing the various places from *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* is 'panopticism'; the environment is also built to facilitate movement. There is a curious paradox at play here: the surveillance confines space, time and place, yet the protagonist's powers, which are enhanced by the 'Outsider', create curious connections and juxtapositions. The player has the possibility to use 'semblance' in order to adopt the appearance of another person and hide themselves in plain sight, to 'displace' herself in order to travel vast distances, to 'foresee' threats and opportunities through solid objects and also to access isolated places. These powers are inextricably correlated to the 'Outsider' and the 'Void'. Accordingly, it could be claimed that the protagonist is a vector through which the 'Void' percolates into the 'real' world. She is not the only one.

Although the 'Void' appears to exclude, it actually connects in a way that is similar to the description given by Foucault in the fifth principle of his 'heterotopology'. The magic epitomized by the 'Outsider' represents for all intents and purposes "the greatest reserve of imagination" (Foucault, 2008, p. 22) available for the inhabitants of Karnaca. Furthermore, the paradoxical nature of the void allows it to seep into the 'real' world through multiple places where the 'Void' is closest to the surface of reality. The most obvious examples of such places are the 'Outsider's' shrines and especially the abandoned silver mine from Shindaerey North Quarry, outside Karnaca. One can enter the 'Void' after having performed a certain number of rituals or at the bidding of the 'Outsider'. Moreover, there are other places, other heterotopias that are consecrated to the rituals necessary for entering the 'Void'. Again, the prime example is the Shindaerey North Quarry.

Upon entering the world of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*, one cannot ignore the duality of the places represented in the game. As the narrative unfolds, the apparent dichotomy between the 'panopticism' of the 'real' world and the heterotopia represented by the 'Void' is used as a powerful tool of immersion for the gamers. While

the sequel is by no means a 'sandbox' game in the sense of *Witcher 3* or *Fallout 4*, it includes multiple references to the 'Void' as a place that represents a 'sandbox' for the 'real' world.

4. The 'Void' Revisited

The 'Void' is the space of the 'Other': it is epitomized by the 'Outsider' and consists of mirrored representations of *Dishonored*'s 'real' world, which are inverted and juxtaposed in a chaotic manner, as can be seen in Figure 1. At the same time, it is envisioned both as the beginning and the end of the 'real' world. The 'Void' has complex mechanisms of opening and closing that isolate and simultaneously make it penetrable. However, as the 'Outsider' hints on several occasions, in the 'Void' there is no clear distinction between inclusion and exclusion. This is also evident by the fact that it has multiple juxtaposed connections with the 'real' world. For example, certain events that happened in the *Dishonored* series' 'reality' can appear as still images or even scenes. These scenes are drawn or excluded from the mind of the protagonist during his inclusion in the 'Void'. Thus, the 'Void' doesn't only percolate in the 'real' world, but also in the protagonist's mind.

Fig. 1. *Fragments of reality represented in the 'Void'*

The 'Void' is by no means an empty space or a mere abyss. The interactions with the 'Outsider' suggest that various places and times are trapped within it. The 'Void's' mediating character between multiple places and times can be understood as a function of its position as a dialectical second, preceded by the 'real' world, in the composition of the *Dishonored* universe. The 'Void' entails multiple incomplete processes of signification. The most relevant being the ritual in which the 'Outsider' attained godhood. It epitomizes a space of hidden appearance and of inversion.

When approaching the 'Void' one cannot ignore its relation with time: it can flow and stand still in various places within the 'Void'. Time is represented as an extension of space within the 'Void': disconnected from its surroundings and separate from the 'real'

world. Time is instantiated and created in the 'Void' from which it sometimes seeps into 'reality' and vice versa: events from the 'real' world translate into fixed scenes in the 'Void'. Thus, time becomes space: an ephemeral moment is set in the permanence of a place. In multiple cases this translation is presented in-game as a consequence of a crisis. For example, in the first game of the series, the event of the assassination of Empress Jessamine Kaldwin is translated in the 'Void' in a snapshot scene. Basically, the 'Void' functions both as a reserve of imagination and a repository of scenes translated from the 'real' world.

The 'Outsider' has many similarities with Simmel's 'stranger', being at times physically close and also socially distant from the protagonists (Simmel, 1972, pp. 143-149). The 'Outsider' gained his supernatural perception by being forcefully subjected to a ritual in which his throat was slit, his name was lost and he partially 'merged' with the Void. Thus, his transformation is intrinsically correlated with the theme of loss. He was abused by those that wanted his transfiguration. Additionally, beyond his veneer of humanity, the 'Outsider' cannot be considered a villain or a hero, neither alive nor dead.

The 'Outsider' became the embodiment of the 'Void': a god-like being with almost unlimited curiosity and perception, but still endowed with human emotion. He is first and foremost an observer of the events from the 'real' world. However, this doesn't mean that he cannot manifest himself, granting his mark and the magic power associated with it. More importantly, the 'Outsider' acts as a regenerating 'nucleus' of the 'Void' and as a catalyst of its magic. He also manages the incomplete processes of signification in relation with the 'real' world, by selecting who will or won't be imbued with the 'Void's' magic, which is a stylized representation of imagination.

In *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*, based upon the player's choice, the 'Outsider' may be killed or freed from the stone in which it was encased millennia ago, as can be seen in Figure 2. Furthermore, he may be released from the 'Void' to live anew. Either way, no one will be left to decide who will or won't be instilled with the magic of the 'Void'.

Fig. 2. *Late-game image of the Outsider's physical form encased in stone*

5. Conclusions

The 'Void' inverts multiple places, times and meanings. As a repository of imagination, it is the dialectical opposite of the 'real' world, which in turn is characterized by 'panopticism'. Additionally, through the mediation of the 'Outsider' it translates and incorporates various scenes from the 'real' world. It entails a sort of 'deprivation' in relation with the 'real' world, which materializes in the form of a trap. Indeed, in a broad sense, the 'Void' acts as a trap for various meanings. It causes the appearance of new connotations and the dissolution of old ones under the catalysing influence of the 'Outsider'. He represents the 'nucleus' of the 'Void'. Interestingly, this 'nucleus' has a regenerating effect for the 'Void' and may move freely through time and space. He manages the incomplete processes of signification in relation with the 'real' world, while being physically blocked in the 'Void'.

Accordingly, I argue that the 'Void' entails nearly an inexhaustible reserve of imagination, which is exemplified by magic. In the *Dishonored* universe, the 'Void' is "a place without a place that exists by itself" (Foucault, 2008, p. 22). It is both self-enclosed and infinite. Just like the ship from Foucault's 'heterotopology' it connects and inverts multiple places and meanings, representing a fictional example of a 'heterotopia par excellence'.

References

Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books (Original work published in 1975).

Foucault, M. (2008). Of other spaces. In M. Dehaene & L. De Cauter, (Eds.), *Heterotopia and the city: Public space in a postcivil society* (pp. 13-22). London/New York: Routledge (Original work published in 1967).

Maguid, Y. (2018, February 21). Panoptic power. Dishonored: Death of the Outsider. *Heterotopias*. Retrieved from http://www.heterotopiaszine.com/author/youssef-maguid/

Simmel, G. (1972). The stranger. In D. N. Levine (Ed.), *Georg Simmel on individuality and social forms* (pp. 143-149). Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press (Original work published in 1908).