
Cite only the version published in *Human Studies*

Being Together, Worlds Apart: A Virtual-Worldly Phenomenology[†]

Rebecca A. Hardesty*
& Benjamin Sheredos

University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093

This is a pre-print of an article published in *Human Studies*.

The final authenticated version is available online at:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-019-09500-y>

Abstract Previous work in Game Studies has centered on several loci of investigation in seeking to understand virtual gameworlds. First, researchers have scrutinized the concept of the virtual world itself and how it relates to the idea of “the magic circle.” Second, the field has outlined various forms of experienced “presence.” Third, scholarship has noted that the boundaries between the world of everyday life and virtual worlds are porous, and that this fosters a multiplicity of identities as players identify both with themselves-offline and themselves-in-game. Despite widespread agreement that these topics are targets for research, so far those working on these topics do not have a mutually agreed-upon framework. Here we draw upon the work of Alfred Schutz to take up this call. We provide a phenomenological framework which can be used to describe the phenomena of interest to Game Studies, as well as open new avenues of inquiry, in a way acceptable and useful to all. This helps to distinguish the core of the field from the supplemental theoretical and critical commitments which characterize diverse approaches within the field.

[†]**Acknowledgments:** The authors are, first and foremost, indebted to each other for their patience and their respective areas of expertise. They are also appreciative for comments they received on earlier drafts from (i) participants at the *International Communication Association’s* 2017 meeting, (ii) Morana Alač, Don Everhart, Yelena Gluzman, and Sarah Klein, and (iii) the anonymous referees at *Human Studies*. They are particularly grateful to the editors, Martin Endress and Stefan Nicolae, for their patience. In addition, they would like to thank the organizers of, and participants at, *The Society for Phenomenology and Media’s* 2015 annual meeting for feedback on related work.

* *Corresponding Author:* rhardesty@ucsd.edu

“It is said that a certain man in Abydos being deranged in mind, and going to the theatre on many days looked on (as though actors were performing a play), and applauded; and, when he was restored to his senses, he declared that that was the happiest time he had ever spent.”

— Aristotle, *On Marvelous Things Heard*

Introduction

Video games enable users to step into the “magic circle” that defines the playground of a virtual world (Castronova, 2008; Huizinga, 1950; Nardi, 2010; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Users experience their own “presence” in that world, and the “co-presence” of others – often as virtually *embodied* presences *via* avatars (Schroeder, 2002; Hardesty, 2016). Research has shown that the boundary between worlds is permeable, and our ability to extend ourselves into online gameworlds presents challenges for understanding our own identities (Pearce & Artemesia, 2008; Taylor, 1999; Turkle, 2012). Since identity is (at least partially) socially co-constructed and intertwined with place, living across multiple worlds can create a multiplicity of identity (Nitsche, 2008; Pearce & Artemesia, 2007).

The foregoing claims represent much of the current landscape of Game Studies on multiplayer online video games.¹ For the sake of brevity, and although we focus only on a subset of the broader literature on games and only on some kinds of video games, we will call this literature “Game Studies” (GS). We do so to demarcate it from the other body of literature with which we engage: phenomenology. As indicated (and as discussed further in the section “[Brief Survey of Game Studies](#)” below), researchers in Game Studies have identified and isolated a variety of topics as targets of inquiry. Researchers have approached these topics from their preferred theoretical orientation. In part because of the lack of a shared conceptual framework, GS has become somewhat fractured regarding these topics. While the work which has been accomplished is significant, we contend that the literature

¹This indicates the scope of our aims here. We will not be addressing: 1) all games (including physical/tabletop games); 2) strictly single-player games; 3) virtual worlds which are not game spaces. Our focus is on online games that involve multiple players interacting with each other. Examples of these kinds of games, as we will discuss, are MMOs (massive multiplayer online games), MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role-playing games), MMOAGs (massive multiplayer online adventure games), multiplayer RTS’s (real-time strategy games), and MOBAs (multiplayer online battle arenas).

has yet to provide a full account of phenomena central to *the experience of* playing video games. One phenomenon of particular interest, which we will explore in this paper, is how players in online multiplayer games (particularly games involving 3D avatars) experience each other as other subjects and how they could possibly have the rich and authentic social relationships they claim to have.²

In this paper, we offer a basic re-unification of prior research on this topic by extending Alfred Schutz's (1967) phenomenological conception of sociality to understand players' experience of being together in digitally-mediated video gameworlds.³ We maintain that a parsimonious and theory-neutral unification of phenomena that have been prominent targets of research in GS can be gained by recognizing that virtual worlds support novel forms of what Schutz calls⁴ "face-to-face" encounters between consociates, or novel forms of being together with others. He also calls this a concrete "We-relationship," but we privilege the term "face-to-face" to emphasize the direct, interpersonal character of the relationship (Schutz, 1967, p.167). We maintain that it is the possibility of "face-to-face" interactions in and across worlds, virtual or not, that enables and reveals the multiplicities of identity that have served as a focal point of much recent research in GS. In these interactions, participants are aware of each other's presence and also aware that the other is reciprocally aware of them. What is crucial, in our view, is that the basic phenomenal experience of the "face-to-face" relationship that Schutz describes does not require proximity in the space of the everyday life-world, and can (and does) occur in virtual spaces. To mark this distinction between a commonsense conception of a "face-to-face" relationship (which

²See Taylor (2002, p.54) and Pearce & Artemesia (2008, p.7) for examples of players reporting their experiences of feeling socially connected and "together."

³Zhao has similarly pursued an extension of Schutzian phenomenology to cyberspace (2004, p.92). However, our framework does not invoke Zhao's concept of "telecopresence" (*ibid.*, p.98) or of a "face to device" interaction (*ibid.*, p.99), since we rather focus on how we can encounter others face-to-face* in a digital environment.

⁴Note that no literal German equivalent of the term "face to face" is centrally employed in the original text of *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*. Following on Schutz' use of the English term "face-to-face" in later work, this phrase became the preferred English translation for phrases like "*der umweltlichen sozialen Beziehung*" and "*die umweltliche Situation*" – phrases far less likely to invoke commonsense conceptions of everyday bodily proximity. Schutz always emphasized that the core phenomenological features of what he called a "face-to-face" relationship were only a community of space and time during interaction (see, e.g., Schutz' "Making music together," reprinted in 1962, p.172, *fn.19*).

does, we admit, involve everyday bodily proximity), and the more fundamental relationship which is targeted in Schutz' phenomenological analysis, we refer to the latter using the technical term "face-to-face*" relationship. We contend that an intuitive or "commonsense" understanding of a face-to-face relationship is *already* abandoned in Schutz' phenomenological description: for him (and for us) it is a technical term used with a specific meaning, to thematize aspects of social experience that are quite commonly overlooked.⁵

We will discuss the face-to-face* relationship further in the section "[Schutz' Phenomenological Approach](#)" below. However, it is worth clarifying the way we are using this term early on. To call an interaction a face-to-face* or concrete We-relationship is to pick out the "We-ness" or "being-together" aspect of a living social interaction, beyond whatever else may occur between those individuals. This being-together is the essential structural component of the experienced relation. The particularities of a face-to-face* encounter do matter, and they can be analyzed for how they enrich the dynamic structure of two subjects being together. For example, the specific visual, tactile, or olfactory sensations one has in close, everyday bodily interaction might inform one's experience of the other. These are some ways the structure of a direct social relationship can be "concretized... and filled with content [*inhaltserfüllte*]" (*ibid.*, p.164).⁶ Schutz sometimes describes these particularities as a "fullness of indications" [*Symptomefülle*]" which express the other's conscious life. However, there is no special set of particularities which are necessary for a face-to-face* relationship, instead a wide variety of particularities may be sufficient for it. What is required for a face-to-face* relationship, according to Schutz, is that each be reciprocally aware of another, and that each partner have "specific knowledge [*besonderes Wissen*] of the specific manner [*besonderen Sosein*]" in which he is being regarded by the other part-

⁵Cf. [Schutz \(1967\)](#) §34. Generally, while phenomenology seeks to analyze everyday experience, this does not mean that its analyses traffic in the everyday or commonsense meaning of terms and concepts. Caution is often required to avoid invoking the (often ambiguous) naïve or commonsense meaning of terms employed in phenomenological descriptions (cf. [Husserl 2014](#), e.g., the final sentence of §33, or [Schutz 1967](#), §21-22). Likewise, while in everyday conversation "face-to-face" refers to physical bodily co-presence, in phenomenological analysis, it is possible and necessary to disentangle the notion of everyday bodily proximity from the experience of "being together."

⁶Walsh and Lehnert's English translation of *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* ("The Phenomenology of the Social World") has been aptly described as "unfortunately very unreliable" ([Evans, 1989](#), p.326, *fn.12*). Here we limit our English quotations to the acceptable portions, and provide the original German for any key phrases.

ner” – whatever the specifics may be in each case (*ibid.*, p.168). What is important is that some such specifics are available, and that in ongoing interaction, the other is present (*gegenwärtig*) to me, here and now, in *some* richly expressive way (*ibid.*, p.169).

Although Schutz did not have interactions *via* video games in mind, we maintain that his account allows for this kind of rich togetherness to occur through interactions in video gameworlds, as long as the gameworlds afford the player the opportunity to have reciprocal awareness of others and make themselves appear as conscious subjects (and not merely as in-game objects). As in the everyday case, there is no special requirement for any specific kind of sensory experience: many varieties may suffice. The important result for GS is a better understanding of virtual sociality, and a re-unification of research topics. The important phenomenological result is the recognition that some video games afford us access to genuine, social life-worlds beyond the everyday life-world.

Some influential scholars, such as Sherry Turkle, have implicitly resisted the conceptual move we promote here. Drawing contrasts with her work will enable us to concisely frame our view and clarify our aims. Turkle expresses concern about “how we are changed as technology offers us *substitutes* for connecting with each other face-to-face” (2012, p.11, our emph.). In more recent work she has continued to argue that “when we have [e.g.] our mobile devices with us, we see that we turn away from our children, romantic partners, and work colleagues” – this same claim is extended to computer software, social media in general, and virtual spaces (Turkle, 2012, p.29). She regards our engagements with others *via* a variety of technologies as a “flight from conversation” that affords only superficial or in some way diminished relationships. Conversely, we maintain that, from a phenomenological perspective, some technology should be understood as offering us new ways of connecting with each other, face-to-face*, even when we are physically apart. Unlike Turkle, our primary aim here is not to discuss or safeguard “the value we put on [commonsense] face-to-face human connection” (*ibid.*, p.284). However, our claims do have relevance to evaluative projects such as Turkle’s. If one supposes that face-to-face* encounters *only* occur in through bodily proximity in the everyday life-world, then it is natural to follow Turkle in supposing that any value we place on being together will assign primary importance to our interactions in the everyday life-world, and thus to worry that new technologies risk “disrupt[ing] our attachments to things that have always sustained us,” namely everyday social interactions (*ibid.*, p.284). This

is Turkle's route: when we fail to socially engage each other in bodily proximity in the everyday life-world, choosing instead to engage with and through technology, she claims we fail to participate in any face-to-face* relationship whatsoever, and pass up valuable social interaction. We end up *Alone Together* (the title of her book) in the everyday life-world:

“A ‘place’ used to comprise a physical space and the people within it. What is a place if those who are physically present have their attention on the [physically] absent? At a café a block from my home, almost everyone is on a computer or smartphone as they drink their coffee. These people are not my friends, yet somehow I miss their presence” (2012, pp.155-156).

The primacy accorded here to our experience of sociality in the everyday life-world has force so long as we think it is the *only* place where we can be together. Yet we maintain that an adequate framework that accommodates the bulk of research in GS requires us to put life in virtual worlds on equal phenomenological footing: a virtual place can just as well be a place for being together, a place for genuine face-to-face* encounters. Still, we want to do justice to Turkle's core phenomenological observation: when someone lives into a virtual world and we do not join them, they are not being together in the everyday life-world with us. However, this raises the questions: “*where are they* in those moments? And if they are not with us, who are they with? They are being together with others, but worlds apart from us. Our primary aim in providing an extension of Schutz's framework is to offer a common set of phenomenological tools that will enable researchers to adequately describe increasingly prevalent situations like these. Additionally, we intend for this framework to be capable of analyzing, and capturing, the richness and intimacy of interactions that players report in multiplayer gameworlds.

We admit that our focus on GS here is narrower than Turkle's and we cannot aim to provide a fully-adequate response to all instances of sociality afforded by, or mediated through, technology. Turkle's work encompasses people's engagement with social robots and electronic toys, as well as digitally “networked life” in many forms (including multiplayer online games, simulations, and social networks such as Facebook). Overzealous engagement with all these technologies can, in her view, risk alienating us from each other – as seen in the case of smartphones in cafés discussed above. We make no claim that our extension of Schutz preserves the possibility of face-to-face* encounters in virtual places in *all* these cases: but we do seek to preserve

it in the case of multiplayer online gameworlds. Exploring how one might generalize this framework to other cases is a task for future work.

The paper proceeds as follows. First (“[Brief Survey of Game Studies Research](#)”) we provide a more detailed introduction to recent Game Studies, identifying several popular loci of investigation. Second (“[Schutz’ Phenomenological Approach](#)”) we provide an introduction to Schutz’s nuanced phenomenology of the social world. We then (“[Extension and Application](#)”) show how the Schutzian account can be extended to sociality in virtual worlds, and how it provides a robust framework for future GS by addressing all the loci of investigation. Finally (“[Concluding Remarks](#)”) we summarize the virtues of the Schutzian framework, and draw some conclusions for phenomenology.

1 Brief Survey of Game Studies Research

Canvassing the recent literature in Game Studies (“GS”), we find three broadly distinct, yet related, loci of investigation. Here we briefly discuss each in turn: “the magic circle,” in-game “presence,” and the basic notion of virtual “worlds” as such.

1.1 The “Magic Circle”

In his analysis of “play,” Johan [Huizinga \(1950\)](#) proposed to distinguish the time and space in which play occurs from the time and space of the everyday life-world. Frequently, GS texts have cited Huizinga to discuss the unique spatiality of games. Commentators have latched onto the term “magic circle” as the generic concept here, though in Huizinga’s sketch it appears as only one example among many. The more general notion is that of a playground, a “temporary world” in which all play occurs, and which is “marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course” ([Huizinga, 1950](#), p.10).

For Huizinga, the world of play is distinct from the everyday life-world: the “rules” of play temporarily transform everyday space into a space that is charged with new meaning. He compares play to a sacred rite, in which “the participants... are convinced that the action actualizes and effects a definite beatification, brings about an order of things higher than that in which they customarily live” (*ibid.*, p.14). It is not surprising that GS has appropriated

the notion of the magic circle to characterize virtual gameworlds, which are somehow accessible from the everyday life-world, and yet simultaneously exhibit their own spatiotemporality, their own “rules” of play, and their own meanings and values (see, e.g, [Pearce & Artemesia \(2007\)](#)). Importantly, however, GS has revealed that the boundaries of the “magic circles” which demarcate today’s virtual worlds appear to be highly permeable ([Taylor 2002](#), pp.51ff; [Castronova 2008](#), pp.147ff.; [Boellstorff 2006](#), pp.119ff; [Nardi 2010](#), pp.118-120).

Most centrally, the permeability of the magic circle has been linked to issues of users’ experienced *identity* and *selfhood* – topics that will re-appear in the sub-section on “presence” below. Users explore themselves in virtual worlds, and typically take at least part of their “virtual” identities with them when they leave a virtual world. Some express that they feel more at home in virtual worlds than they do in the everyday life-world, and regard their virtual activities as the true expression of themselves. An early, yet representative example is provided by T.L. Taylor, who interviewed a user of a 2D, avatar-based game called *The Dreamscape*. The user reported: “I identify this brown cat as me more than I identify my [‘real’] picture with me... I can’t see ‘me’ in the WW [‘waking world’] but I can see ‘me in the DS [Dreamscape]” ([Taylor, 2002](#), p.54; first insertion is ours). For these users, Huizinga’s sketch of the temporary nature of playgrounds may seem to have it backwards: it is everyday life which is an unwelcome interruption of life within the virtual world. The importance of this issue only increases when one notes that some users maintain a single experienced identity across multiple virtual worlds (what [Pearce & Artemesia 2008](#) dubbed a “trans-ludic” identity). This shows that the boundaries between virtual worlds are also permeable.

Importantly, while a variety of different theoretical conceptions of identity are potentially applicable here, our phenomenological orientation is necessarily neutral about particular kinds of identity (e.g. personal, social, collective). While a phenomenological framework could give an account of how these are experienced, the framework itself has no interest in the reality or validity of these types, nor is a phenomenological framework beholden to any theory of identity developed elsewhere. To the extent that a “trans-ludic” identity is experienced as stable across multiple virtual worlds (and especially to the extent that it forms a unity with “offline” identity in the everyday life-world), one might seek to understand identity on the classical model of a metaphysically independent substance. To the extent that experienced iden-

tity becomes truly multiple as it is shaped by social interaction in diverse virtual worlds (see our remarks on “presence” below), one might rather seek to understand identities as socially-constructed entities or relationships. For our purposes, what is important are only the diverse manners in which identity is *experienced* by users: we make no claims about any further reality that identity or self may possess. We likewise make no attempt to adjudicate between the different ways in which users experience themselves: we simply take all of them as phenomena.

1.2 Presence

A second locus of GS has been the experienced “presence” of players in virtual worlds. In general, the notion of “presence” is focused on the subjective experience of a user, and refers to “a mental state where a user feels subjectively present within a video game space as the result of immersion” (Nitsche, 2008, p.203). Many varieties of presence have been distinguished (see Lombard & Ditton 1997), but we here confine ourselves to Nitsche’s basic three: 1) felt “personal presence” *of the user* in the gameworld; 2) “social presence,” or the user’s feeling of *co-presence* with others in a shared (virtual) space and time; 3) “environmental presence,” or the presence *of the world* to the user as persistent and durable.⁷ We take these varieties of presence to be phenomena, of which there are many theoretical analyses. We showcase some of the diverse theoretical perspectives that have been taken towards all three varieties of presence. While some theoretical perspectives can be read as analyzing only one variety of presence in isolation, we underscore that many theoreticians agree that several varieties of presence should be understood in relation to each other. We highlight how some theoretical perspectives fail to provide a fully-unified treatment of the varieties of presence – thereby clarifying the significance of our Schutzian perspective’s ability to unify them successfully.

Perhaps the most limited approach to presence (at least on one reading) is a performance-theoretic view, according to which, to experience presence is to “step into a dramatic role in relation to the game space,” which requires that the user be positioned as “a creative performing element inside the spatially located discourse” of the game (Nitsche 2008, p.212; see also Bernie

⁷Carrie Heeter (1992) originally used these categories to describe presence in virtual worlds in general, not specifically video games.

De Koven's conception of "play communities"). The performance-theoretic approach is most readily understood as targeting personal presence, though there are hints toward co-presence (e.g., in Nitsche's appeal to a "discourse") and to environmental presence (e.g., in Nitsche's appeal to a discourse which is "spatially located"). The phenomenological difficulty for a general application of the performance-theoretic approach is that it conflicts with the fact that some users do not experience their in-game-presence, or that of others, as mere role-playing, and do not experience their encounters in the virtual world as a set piece. (See again the quote from Taylor offered in the previous section). These users *identify* with their in-game representations as themselves, or extensions thereof — not simply as *dramatis personae* — and similarly experience the others they encounter as living *in* a virtual world. Correspondingly, for them, the virtual world may be equally, if not more, "real" than the everyday life-world. Counter to an intuitive reading of the performance-theoretic view, players' experiences suggest that environmental presence, personal presence, and co-presence arise through more than participation in a drama which is "put on," and instead involve an engagement in which both identity and world are lived as actual.

Other analyses link presence more closely with experienced identity and self-hood (not with a "mere" role). In Taylor's analysis of *The Dreamscape*, a user establishes his or her in-game identity in virtue of being digitally embodied *via* an avatar, and achieves presence through the *visibility* of the avatar (Taylor, 2002, see esp. pp.42 & 44). Taylor's analysis emphasizes the co-production of both a player's presence alongside social co-presence with others. For example, players customize their avatars' appearances to signify group-membership, simultaneously enacting personal presence and signaling their social status in the co-presence of others. (*ibid.*, pp.45-47). Because personal presence relies on visibility on this view, the visible proximity of one's avatar to another can signify intimacy, and the act of occluding another player's avatar with one's own is sometimes considered an aggressive invasion of personal space (*ibid.*, pp.42-43). However, in Taylor's description, environmental presence has a rather static quality — the gameworld is largely treated as the constant backdrop against which players achieve both personal and co-presence

Alternatively, Pearce & Artemesia view the role of "world" as being intimately linked with identity and presence.⁸ In her studies, users of the game

⁸Pearce notably co-authors her work on the Uru with her in-game identity/avatar

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst collaboratively developed a “fictive ethnicity” which tied their in-game identity to a specific, virtual locality: the users identified as natives to their virtual home-world, calling themselves the Uru people or “Uruvians” (Pearce & Artemesia, 2008). However, Pearce also demonstrates that such identities can be “trans-ludic.” In her case, a group socially constructed their identity in one virtual world: the gameworld of *Uru*. When the servers for *Uru* were shut down and that homeworld was lost, the Uruvians regarded themselves as “refugees,” and they carefully planned migrations to other virtual worlds. They brought their Uruvian-refugee identity with them to many other virtual worlds, collectively maintaining the group identity and even replicating its (virtual-)material culture in a new locality. This is a striking example of the way in which *social*, *personal*, and *environmental presence* can be experienced as co-constructed in virtual worlds.

We note, however, that (like the performance-theoretic appeal to “roles”) calling such in-game ethnicities “fictive” risks deforming the phenomenological import of players’ experiences. We take it that the true puzzle of understanding the permeability of the magic circle is not to understand how players *pretend to be* Uru, but rather to understand how they genuinely *experience themselves as* Uru. As one of Pearce & Artemesia’s subjects put it, in a poem written after the *Uru* server shut-down: “This is no longer a game to me / These people are part of my family” (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009, p.209). For this reason, we would modulate Pearce & Artemesia’s claim, saying simply that Uru players have an *experienced ethnicity*: their personal presence is informed by environmental and social co-presence insofar as they experience themselves as members of a community that is genealogically linked to a specific (virtual) locality.⁹

We maintain that Pearce & Artemesia’s account offers a hint at a phenomenologically adequate conception of how players experience the relatedness of personal, environmental, and social presence, and their co-construction. To generalize the account, it is important to see that even when a virtual locality is not quite so robustly connected to player identity as to constitute an experienced ethnicity, in Pearce & Artemesia’s sense, it still informs and constrains a user’s in-game identity. Players experience themselves as, we shall say, *denizens* of a given virtual world, whether or not this aspect of

“Artemesia.”

⁹We do not presume that such aspects identity-in-relation-to-a-place are the only, or even the most important aspects of ethnicity in the everyday life-world. The reader is free to fill in “ethnicity*” if they prefer.

virtual identity is experienced as tying them to one virtual locality within a given world. This aspect of virtual identity is often left implicit rather than thematized by denizens.

1.3 Worldness

This brings us to the third and final locus of GS research: the notion of a virtual *world* itself. As the foregoing discussions of presence help to indicate, there are a number of diverse conceptions of virtual worlds. It is generally granted that something must occur in order for a world to appear for a user, or in order for environmental presence to be achieved. A general characterization of experienced virtual worlds, which most researchers would probably agree on, emphasizes four features: they (*i*) have “worldness” (they are object-laden sites of action); (*ii*) are social (i.e., they afford co-presence); (*iii*) are stable or persistent (i.e., they consistently afford environmental presence); and (*iv*) are open to users (i.e., they afford users’ personal presence, and we are able us to step into the “magic circle” that defines the boundary of the world) (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.7). We have already shown that there are disparate theoretical analyses of points (*ii—iv*): the result is that beyond the generalities canvassed here, there is likewise little agreement regarding how best to understand the notion of a virtual gameworld.

In what follows, we offer a Schutzian, phenomenological framework for understanding experienced life in virtual gameworlds, as we have just characterized it.¹⁰ We maintain that this Schutzian view preserves the targets of past research, unites and relates them in a more substantive manner, and offers a starting point for further work by sketching out future avenues of inquiry.

2 Schutz’s Phenomenological Approach

Schutz (1967) drew upon Bergson and Husserl to provide philosophical foundations for sociological research. It remained Schutz’ lifelong goal to articulate the structure of our experienced life-world (cf. the posthumous volumes

¹⁰We do not claim that all video games must be understood as offering just such a world. We claim only that many do, and that these have been a major focus in much research in GS.

[Schutz 1962, 1964](#)). Schutz' most basic aim was to provide a phenomenological *description* of the experienced social reality that any social science undertakes to study. This is our focus here: we are interested in Schutz' "worldly phenomenology" (contrasted with the more philosophically ambitious "transcendental" phenomenology of Husserl – cf. [Embree 1980](#); [Psathas 1980](#)).

What Schutz owes to Husserl is the clarification of the everyday life-world in terms of the "general thesis of the natural attitude" ([Husserl, 2014](#), §30).¹¹ In everyday life we presume the actuality of the world and of things in it (including other persons). The general implicit "thesis" which guides all our activities – and which we would typically not consider bothering to make explicit – is the thesis *that the world exists*. The term "life-world" is a way of thematizing the world as it is taken-for-granted in our naïve, natural experience. Schutz surpasses Husserl in thematizing *sociality* as a pervasive aspect of the everyday life-world, by distinguishing the "general thesis of the alter ego" ([Schutz, 1967](#), pp.97ff). This general implicit "thesis" which guides all our social activities with others is summed up as: "The Thou (or other person) is conscious, and [their] stream of consciousness is temporal in character, exhibiting the same basic form as mine" (*ibid.*, p.98). This is a pervasive feature of our naïve experience of the world: we are in it with others. In this section we follow Schutz in distinguishing four different spheres of social reality, or four different kinds of experienced others, which correspond to four further specifications of the general thesis of the alter ego.

The (implicit) general thesis of the alter ego is that we are in the world with others. We do not experience *everything* in the world as a subject: inanimate objects are not typically experienced in this way. Likewise, we may not always regard other subjects as such, if we experience them only as a body, an object, or even a tool for our own ends. Whenever we go beyond the general thesis of the alter ego, and experience an other subject as a *concrete* reality, we are taking up a specific attitude that Schutz calls *other-orientation* (*Fremdeinstellung*). We have "conscious experiences directed toward the other self" and experience "the other *as other*," as an animate subject (*ibid.*, p.144). Other-orientation is the naïve (implicit) positing of the actual existence of concrete subjects (*ibid.*, p.146).

¹¹Husserl would not explicitly articulate the notion of the "life-world" itself until later, but intended it to tie back to the general thesis of the natural attitude in the way we have sketched here (cf. [Husserl 1970](#)).

Not all others are experienced alike. For example, one posits the concrete, but not specifically personalistic, existence of an other when one recognizes that *someone* has left a note or package at one's door. This provides an example of one form of Other-orientation that Schutz calls "They-orientation" (*Ihr-Einstellung*), and the others toward whom one is They-oriented are called one's *contemporaries* (*ibid.*, p.183). In They-orientation, the other remains somewhat *anonymous*, and is experienced only as "typical" (*ibid.*, cf. 183-186). They-orientation is not fully-informed by engagement with any particular person; instead one's prior experiences of how people act and "are" becomes a "stock of knowledge," and one presumptively draws upon this to imagine "types" of people and predict how people of *that type* would act (*ibid.*, 80). These "contemporaries" make up one sphere of social reality: the relatively anonymous mass with-whom one shares a social world (*socialien Mitwelt*).

This is distinguished from another form of Other-orientation, called "Thou-orientation" (*Du-Einstellung*) (*ibid.*, p.183). We enact Thou-orientation whenever we experience an other as a concrete and unique *individual* with their own flow of consciousness: here our prior presumptions regarding "a person of such-and-such type" may be palpably challenged, and discarded. When two subjects are *reciprocally* Thou-oriented, they enter a concrete "We-relationship," whereby they mutually recognize their co-existence, and share experience of each other as living, expressive individuals (*ibid.*, p.164-165). Schutz calls these people one's "consociates" or "fellow-people" (*Mitmenschen*), and they constitute a second sphere of social reality: the sphere of consociates, or the directly experienced surrounding world of social reality (*sozialen Umwelt*).

Schutz also calls the concrete We-relationship a "face-to-face relationship" (*ibid.*, p.164) – recall that we call this a face-to-face* relationship to distinguish Schutz' phenomenological description of this structure of social experience from any commonsense conception of it. The term face-to-face* highlights two aspects Schutz considered essential to establishing a living social relationship: *temporal simultaneity*, and the *spatial immediacy* of the other's presence (*ibid.*, pp.103; 163-164). A paradigmatic face-to-face* encounter occurs during joint attention to each other, where each person is reciprocally trying to understand the other's experience. Both are aware that they have the other's attention, and both adapt their thought and action in an effort to understand, and to be understood. The exchange occurs in real-time, and the space of expressive interaction is immediately shared:

we stand before each other, and express ourselves in a common lived space (*ibid.*, p.163-164).¹² As Schutz puts it, “in the living intentionality of the direct social relationship, the two partners are face to face, [i.e.] their streams of consciousness are synchronized and geared into each other, each immediately affects the other...” (*ibid.*, p.162). Our consciousnesses flow along together, and we “grow older together” in our shared place and through our shared time (*ibid.*, p.172).

This expressive-spatial immediacy distinguishes consociates from mere contemporaries. The anonymity of contemporaries, to whom one is They-oriented, arises because their individuality is not put on display in a shared space of expressive interaction. One does understand a mere contemporary as having experiences, but in They-orientation one does so by drawing from one’s stock of knowledge: contemporaries are regarded as “typical” people with “typical” experiences, not apprehended in their unique individuality (*ibid.*, p.184-185).¹³

The boundary between these two social spheres is fluid and indeterminate: someone *enters into* your sphere of consociates – they enter into a face-to-face* relationship with you – as they approach you and engage in intimate interaction. Prior to that, though you may be familiar with this person, they are not presently your consociate, since you are not face-to-face* with them. When a conversation ends and you part ways, the other (even a dear friend) gradually ceases to be your current consociate as you cease to share expressive-spatial immediacy (*ibid.*, p.176-177). It is open to us to approach contemporaries whom we do not yet know, and Thou-orient towards them as individuals. If they reciprocate by Thou-orienting themselves to us, and establish with us a shared space of expressive interaction, we encounter each other face-to-face* and become consociates. The world of contemporaries is thus best viewed as an open horizon of possible consociates.

One shares temporal simultaneity with both contemporaries and consociates. This distinguishes them from the remaining two varieties of others we experience in the social world: predecessors and successors. The pure sphere of predecessors (*Vorwelt*) is composed of people in the past, whose experiences do not overlap with one’s own, who lived and died prior to one’s birth (*ibid.*, p.206). What is essential is that a predecessor is someone that “I

¹²This may appear to be in agreement with Turkle’s (2012) position; but see “[Extension and Application](#)” below.

¹³Compare Mead’s conception of the “organized, generalized other” (1934, pp.196ff).

can never set out to influence,” though they may influence us – nothing we do can affect them, though what they have done may have a lasting influence on us, and we thus cannot enter into any face-to-face* relation with them (*ibid.*, p.208). Because of this, one always experiences a predecessor in some degree of anonymity. However, one can try to gain knowledge of them in their individuality through records (written, oral, monuments, etc.).

The sphere of successors (*Folgewelt*) is not fixed and determined like the sphere of predecessors. Quite the opposite: it is so “completely indeterminate and indeterminable” that, as Schutz pithily puts it, “our orientation toward our successors cannot amount to more than this: that we are going to have some” (*ibid.*, p.214). Although one can speculate about future others (or even one’s future self) they are unknowable from the present.

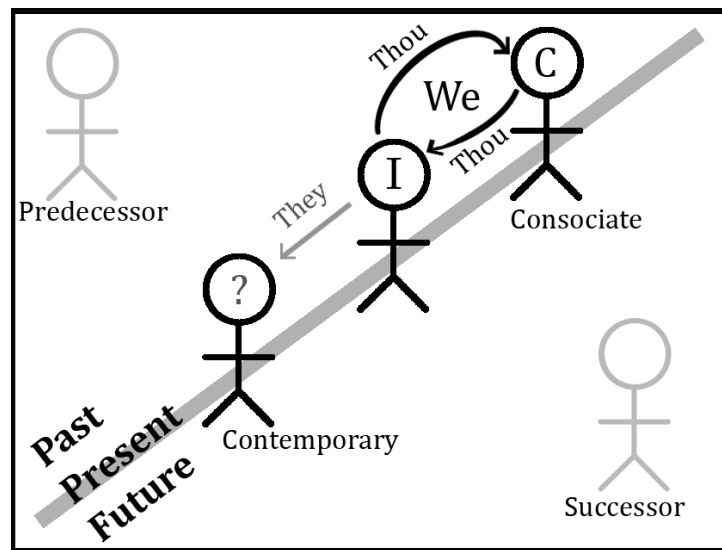


Figure 1: A schematic representation of Schutz’ spheres of social reality. The grey line divides the whole panel into past (upper left), present (grey line) and future (bottom right). An individual “I” is in the center. Their predecessor(s) are in the past, and their successor(s) are in the future. Existing simultaneous with I is a Contemporary (to whom I is only they-oriented, and who appears accordingly in anonymity). Also simultaneous is a Consociate (with whom I is reciprocally Thou-oriented, and who accordingly appears as another concrete individual).

This concludes our overview of Schutz’ phenomenological description of the social world. The description is *intended* to be quite general or schematic: for example, the sphere of “consociates” does not distinguish between antagonists, close friends, romantic partners, etc. Supplementary phenomenological description, achieving greater specificity, is required to distinguish these important aspects of social reality – the task is to enrich, not replace, Schutz’ basic phenomenological description of the social world.¹⁴ We offer a schematic visual representation of the Schutzian description of the social world in [Figure 1](#) above. In what follows, we focus primarily on the sphere of consociates and the sphere of contemporaries. As we demonstrate in the next section, applying these concepts to virtual gameworlds requires only a slight modulation of Schutz’ view.

3 Extension and Application

Having provided an overview of a Schutz; framework, we now propose extending it to accommodate social reality in and across online multiplayer gameworlds. Just as Schutz’ phenomenological description of social reality is prior to any scientific analysis of it, so our intention is to provide a descriptive framework which can be considered neutral with respect to the various theories (e.g., performance theory) which have been invoked in GS. In the subsection “[The Core Extension](#),” we clarify how we extend Schutz’ account in a way that remains true to the spirit of his work, and discuss how the extension connects with the previous loci of games studies. Our account is intended to be quite general, and the work in this sub-section is mostly conceptual. However, in the sub-section “[Clarification & Application](#),” we discuss in greater detail how this extension enables us to address previous loci of research in GS, and we provide concrete examples to illustrate the applicability of the framework.

3.1 The Core Extension

Our aim is to take Schutz’ account of the spheres of social reality as they occur in the *everyday* life-world, and apply it to parallel spheres of social

¹⁴Schutz provided more incisive descriptions of a few more specific kinds of subject we might experience in the social world, such as “the Homecomer” and “the Stranger” – see [Schutz \(1964\)](#) *Collected Papers vol. II*, Part II.

reality that arise in the *virtual* world of multiplayer online games. While Schutz (of course) did not consider online games, our extension has several precedents in his work.

In the first volume of his *Structures of the Life-World*, Schutz takes from William James and Edmund Husserl the insight that what we regard as “real,” in any given moment, depends upon a certain harmony and coherence of experience. This is a core component in a phenomenological account of experienced “worldness.”¹⁵ Schutz thus distinguishes a number of different “finite provinces of meaning, upon which we could confer the accent of reality” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p.23). Each of these domains of cohesive experience can be said to have the character of an enclosed world. Schutz distinguishes several worlds from the most basic everyday life-world: “the world of science,” “the world of religious experience,” fantasy worlds such as the worlds of “daydreams, games, fairy tales, jokes, poetry” and also dream worlds (*ibid.*, pp.24-34). Schutz himself initially suggests that the everyday life-world “may, with some emendation, be characterized as the ‘primary reality’” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p.28ff.). What we are after is a pair of clarifications: one regarding this notion of primacy, and another indicating some necessary emendations.

Schutz sometimes treats the everyday life-world as “that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult human simply takes for granted... By this taken-for-grantedness, we designate everything which we experience as [initially] unquestionable; every state of affairs is for us unproblematic [only] until further notice” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp.3-4). We have inserted qualifiers here since they are necessary: while we do take for granted many concrete states of affairs occurring within the life-world, each of them is only unproblematic “until further notice.” Each can become problematic and can be called into question. It is then up to us to pursue “explication,” getting to know the situation better so as to restore the cohesiveness of experience and return to a (tentative) grasp of reality as unproblematic (until further notice) (*ibid.*, pp.8-16). What cannot ever be called into question is the existence of the life-world *as such*, as the horizon of all such explication. As Husserl puts it:

Everything which, as an existing object, is a goal of cognition

¹⁵A detailed examination of experienced worldness is beyond the scope of this paper. Below we say a bit more, but we refer the interested reader to Husserl’s work, especially *Ideas II* and the *Crisis*.

[e.g., explication] is an existence *on the ground of* the world, which is taken as existing as a matter of course... Cognition may bring us to correct details in our opinions about existence, but this means only that, instead of being thus and so, something is otherwise – otherwise *on the ground of the world existing in totality*. It is this *universal ground of belief in a world* which all praxis presupposes, not only the praxis of life but also the theoretical praxis of cognition (Husserl, 1973, p.30; first two emphases added; see also Husserl 1950, pp.48ff.).

It is this unquestionability of the everyday life-world as a *totality* that best-captures its status as a “primary” reality from a phenomenological standpoint. Many other claims made on behalf of the everyday life-world, we suggest, are equally well applicable to the social worlds afforded by video games. Thus, what we propose is to recognize a plurality of social life-worlds. Consider, for example, some of Schutz’ other remarks regarding the everyday life-world, to which we add enumerations:

The everyday life-world is [1] the region of reality in which man can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism [*seines Leibes*]. At the same time, [2] the objectivities which are already found in this realm (including the acts and the results of actions of other men) limit his free possibilities of action. They place him up against obstacles that can be surmounted, as well as barriers that are insurmountable. Furthermore, [3] only within this realm can he be understood by his fellow-men, and only in it can he work together with them. Only in the world of everyday life can a common, communicative, surrounding world be constituted. [4] The world of everyday life is consequently man’s fundamental and paramount reality (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p.1).

The term that has been translated as “animate organism” is *Leib*, which is more typically translated in phenomenological texts as “lived Body.” One’s lived Body, the zero-point of orientation, is not at all synonymous with one’s physical flesh (cf. Husserl (1993, §§35-45 and §56, esp. subsection “h” – compare Schutz 1973, p.37)). If we take players’ experiences of personal “presence” seriously, we should allow that an in-game “avatar” can serve

as a lived Body, and thus claim 1 remains true of the virtual worlds we are discussing here. Taking co-presence and “worldness” seriously means recognizing that claims 2 & 3 cannot suffice to (exclusively) characterize the everyday life-world, since there are social online gameworlds in which the same claims are true: the “only” in Schutz’ claim 3 must be dropped. As a result, we maintain that the “consequently” in Schutz’ claim 4 is a bit too quick. If something like claim 4 really does follow as a consequence from 1-3, then it follows for gameworlds as well: a world with which one engages, and which affords and constrains actions alongside others, is *a* fundamental reality, i.e., *a* life-world – perhaps one among many.¹⁶

The everyday life-world *is*, as Schutz says, a primary or paramount reality in a unique sense, but its primacy is best understood through its status as in-principle unquestionable. This is not quite true of video gameworlds. When one steps into the “magic circle” and is living in a gameworld, that gameworld does constitute the taken-for-granted ground of all one’s in-game praxis.¹⁷ So long as one remains in this mode of experience, and the varieties of in-game “presence” are sustained, the everyday life-world is bracketed, and the accent of unquestioned reality is conferred upon the gameworld. States of affairs within the gameworld can be called into question, but so long as one lives in it, the totality of the gameworld, as the horizon of all “explication,” cannot itself be called into question. However, when we cease to live into gameworlds, and return to the everyday life-world, we attain a perspective from which the totality of the gameworld *can* be called into question: gameworlds are, of course, typically not regarded as “real.”¹⁸

Even here, there are important precedents and clarifications in Schutz’ work. Despite his focus on the everyday life-world, Schutz remarks that for as long as we take up an attitude which engrosses us in a particular world

¹⁶We think the applicability of claims 1-4 makes it acceptable to speak of multiple life-worlds. If one reserves the term “life-world” for the everyday life-world, one will still need to recognize a plurality of lived social worlds.

¹⁷The everyday life-world is the taken-for-granted ground of everyday activities like “playing a video game,” however it cannot be understood as the ground of all *in-game* praxis. For example, many games involve “fantastic” practices like casting magical spells – none of the taken-for-granted existences of the everyday life-world can support this kind of praxis, and the praxis is not engaged with existences in the everyday life-world.

¹⁸The cessation of living-into a gameworld can be voluntary (e.g., one might cease in-game activity to examine the graphical details and contemplate the skill of the game’s designers) or involuntary (e.g., due to an in-game glitch or lag, or a disruption from the everyday life-world, such as an errant cat appearing in front of your monitor).

(province of meaning) that world becomes real to us (*ibid.*, p.24-25). Further, his conception of freely-imagined fantasy worlds recognizes the possibility of *socially shared* artificial worlds (*ibid.*, p.32). This possibility is in fact already licensed by Schutz' core claims regarding how face-to-face* relationships normally afford us access to what we *know* is the shared everyday life-world: we know we are in "the same undivided common environment [*Umgebung*]" when we can "point to [*hinzeigen*]" some object in it and coordinate our experiences to it (Schutz, 1967, pp.170-171). There is no strict requirement that either what we point to, or our shared environment as a whole, must be located in everyday space. And in volume II of *The Structures of the Life-world*, Schutz notes that, strictly speaking, our naïve experience of the everyday life-world does not present it to us as the *only* reality:

...only when this reality character is set as absolute by a *theory* of reality that blindly denies the claim to reality of other provinces of meaning, does the dream (and other non-everyday provinces) appear unreal... Theories of reality of this kind form, as is known, the core of the more or less rationalist worldviews predominant in modern societies. They reshape the natural attitude of members of this society... completely different theories have shaped the worldview of other societies... In the historical reshaping of the natural attitude in these societies, in the common sense that is "sound" there, dream-reality may be equal or superior to, or even "more real than," everyday reality (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, pp.120-121).

Elsewhere Schutz (1957) discusses how the province of meaning of a social world is created by those within it. A group develops its own social world by interpreting itself as a social body, constructing and even institutionalizing shared standards of rationalization. It is these implicitly shared conceptions of what is "rational" for an agent which create the orderliness and harmony of interpersonal experience which results in a stable social world. A group may gain some degree of reflective awareness of its everyday methods and activities of "rationalization and institutionalization" as these change throughout the group's history, but a group typically does not reflectively understand these activities as constituting a world, despite their doing so (*ibid.*, p.245).¹⁹ The same, we suggest, can occur in gameworlds.

¹⁹Similar claims are reflected in Erving Goffman's (1978) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

In short, once we take experienced “presence” seriously, the permeability of the magic circle becomes, phenomenologically, grounds for recognizing a plurality of life-worlds. We have argued that this account of the experienced worldness of gameworlds is consonant with Schutz’ own approach.²⁰ To cast our proposal in terms of prior GS, what we propose is tantamount to re-conceiving “the magic circle.” If it is possible to live into and co-produce a virtual world with a similar degree of reality as the everyday-life world, the rigid distinction between our “daily lives” and the playground of the magic circle becomes not only permeable (as GS has shown) but (this is our point) which world one lives in becomes a matter of which province of meaning one is participating in at any given moment. We turn now to address more fully how the Schutzyan framework accommodates the remaining foci of previous GS.

3.2 Clarification & Application

If we make the proposed extension of Schutz’ account, we endorse a multiplicity of lived social worlds: the one everyday life-world, and many virtual life-worlds all with equal potential for experienced “reality.” This is distinct from the position Ollinaho (2018) recently takes in his application of Schutz to understanding how virtual worlds are becoming woven into the everyday life-world. He says that through virtualization, “another zone of primary relevance other than that of ‘here and now’ has been erected and *has become a part of* the life-world of normal persons engaged in the world of daily life” (*ibid.*, p.4, our emph.). Unlike Ollinaho, we seek to preserve players’ experience of the distinct nature of gameworlds, rather than treating them as new annexes of the everyday life-world; and unlike Ollinaho, we propose to pluralize the concept of the life-world to accommodate this.²¹ We turn now

²⁰We admit that Schutz himself may often seem to work under the assumption that corporeality is essential to the (everyday) life-world, and that corporeal proximity with Others is required for face-to-face* interactions. However, we maintain that when Schutz stresses the importance of experiences of the “live corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*]” of oneself (e.g., 1973, pp. 32, 37, 43, 93) and of the Other (e.g., 1973, pp. 62, 254), what is centrally under discussion are *lived Bodies* as experienced fields of expression and origins of action. This is especially clear when he speaks of “perceptions of [one’s] own animate organism [*Leibes*]” during dreaming – cf. 1973, p.32).

²¹We agree with Ollinaho that virtual worlds “gear into” the everyday life-world, and influence its relevance structures. But we would resist his gambit to uphold the primacy of the everyday life-world by claiming (*a*) that virtual worlds are merely symbolic, and

to address more fully how our Schutzian framework accommodates the foci of previous GS, discussing them in what we hope is a perspicuous order.

Co-presence: Taking co-presence seriously requires permitting the possibility of face-to-face* encounters in virtual worlds. Schutz supposed that in a face-to-face* encounter between consociates, they must experience both spatial immediacy and temporal simultaneity. We focus here on the spatial. Schutz’s description of what constitutes spatial immediacy is *not* commonsense bodily proximity in everyday space. All that is required is that another’s “lived Body is present to me in its fullness of indications *as a field of expression [mir sein Leib in seiner Somptomfülles als Ausdrucksfeld vorgegeben ist]*” for their subjective experiences (1967, p.163, our emph., translation corrected). This does not set forth a requirement that one has particular sensory experiences of the other (e.g., of their fleshly body), or that one has an ability to acquire detailed knowledge of his or her consociate’s subjective experience. All that is required is that through the fullness of concrete indications of our consciousness, we are able to have a “general correspondence” of each other’s experiences (*ibid.*, p.165), and that two consociates can “grow older together” as their subjective experiences unfold in unison.

Schutz himself, focusing upon the social reality of the everyday life-world, often seemed to work within the assumption that a face-to-face* relation involves proximity between fleshly bodies. However, as discussed above, we regard this assumption as unnecessary to his account, and *we propose to explicitly abandon it*. This assumption is upheld by some scholars, who hold that a face-to-face* interaction is impossible in a virtual world in virtue of some priority given to flesh bodies (see [Turkle 2012](#)). This not only precludes a nuanced approach to a study of virtual worlds, but imposes an unsupported *a priori* determination of what constitutes legitimate sociality. We suggest that from a phenomenological perspective, the corporeality or virtuality of bodies should be considered irrelevant to the question of whether one can stand in a face-to-face* relationship. It is compatible with Schutz’ basic phenomenological account that a virtual body, such as an in-game avatar, can serve as the expressive field which enables us to experience each other’s

(b) that from a scientific-*theoretical* perspective, virtual life-worlds are ontologically dependent upon the physical structure of the everyday life-world ([Ollinaho, 2018](#), p.199). To us, claim (a) is phenomenologically disingenuous, and claim (b) is orthogonal to the phenomenological question of primacy.

subjectivity, and can thus enable face-to-face* interaction.²² To be in a world is to be in its space, and to be in that world with others is to be there with them -- to grow older with them there, in the shared immediacy of expression. Where one's flesh is located in everyday space is of no essential consequence for this basic phenomenological analysis. In short, we can take players' experience of co-presence seriously, and countenance their face-to-face* interactions, by extending Schutz' view.

We offer an illustration. *Steam* is a game distribution platform that provides access to a large library of games. *Meadow* is a multiplayer online game that affords great possibilities of rich social interaction. Its developers call it “a forum in games clothing.” In this game, players are embodied as animals and can engage in a variety of behaviors (e.g, vocalizing minimally, jumping, sitting, sleeping). Direct text-based communication or spoken communication between players is not possible, but there is a symbolic system of communication, in which players can make static, pictorial “emotes” appear in little speech bubbles above their heads. Players can choose to communicate via pictures of their animal, (e.g., an image of their animal waving, laughing, crying, etc.), symbols, (e.g. a forward arrow, an ‘X’, a question mark, a checkmark, etc.), or symbols that refer to objects within the gameworld (e.g., a tree, water, mountains, a group of animals, obelisks, etc.). Additionally, players can combine any two of these symbols together. Through using these symbols as well as embodied gestures, players can communicate with each other where to go in the gameworld and what to do (e.g., crack open “obelisks” together to gain points, collect flowers, or just play in some mud). For example, one can combine the mountain symbol with a question mark which other players interpret as, “Shall we go to the mountains?” or “Mountains next?”

Players report feeling deeply connected with other players throughout the course of a play session. One player, Nuvi, reflected that one of the biggest joys of the game was “when you end up a co-captain of a little crew of animals, feeling some unspeakable bond with the quiet bunny that is always at your side waiting for everyone else to catch up.”²³ Additionally, there is an entire thread in *Meadow*'s *Steam* community where players thank other players (or to try to find players) with whom they interacted. NinjaGerbil wrote a note recently,

²²We recognize that, as of now, virtual bodies typically afford *less* expressiveness.

²³[Public review](#) on *Steam* of *Meadow* by Nuvi at 3:10pm, February 11, 2018.

To a certain badger on Europe server, Grove 1: thank you for brightening my day!... you were friendly and we often found ourselves making the same jokes and both highlighting collectibles with snow at the same time. You also have a very good eye; and you pointed out so many collectibles that the group would have missed otherwise—how on earth you were the only one to spot that giant fabled mushroom that literally went over our heads, I don't know [confused swan emoji] You stuck with me through all the people that joined and left our group, and I was really touched that you supported me when I was leading the group, even when a few particular goats would not slow down for the others... [angry frog emoji]...I certainly will not forget you! [love-struck badger emoji].

[Public comment](#) on “Player Thanks Thread” in *Meadow* discussion forum on *Steam*, posted at 1:39pm on February 15, 2018.

In both these instances, NinjaGerbil and Nuvi report feeling bonded with other players, despite not being in the fleshly presence of another human. Nuvi grew older with the rabbit in a face-to-face* relationship while waiting for other animals to catch up to them. NinjaGerbil clearly learned about the badger player, reporting that they made jokes and shared attention. The fact that both players felt compelled to post about their experiences which included their feelings of “We-ness” (joining, at the time, almost four thousand other players who also posted on this thread), speaks to the richness of their interaction with others – despite the lack of everyday verbal communication, and the lack of human-like (virtual) embodiment.

Worldness: We've discussed how in Schutz' account, group-identities can function to support rationalizations and institutionalizations that delineate distinct social worlds. Once we extend Schutz' account to recognize a plurality of life-worlds, and once we recognize that everyday spatial proximity is not required for face-to-face* interactions, it follows that group-identities can similarly function in virtual worlds to constitute new social worlds in them. Pearce & Artemesia's (2008) discussion of experienced in-game ethnicities offers one clear example: there the institutionalization of the social world was explicit as the Uruvians, fearing extinction as their homeworld was shut down, established enclaves and cultural education centers in other virtual worlds as a way of maintaining their identity and ethnicity.

In the everyday life-world, there are many such social worlds, all of which occur in a single shared physical space. The case is not importantly different with gameworlds. As part of the experience which defines it as a world, each virtual world typically has its own spatiality: what is often called its *physics*, and which in video games is “simulated” by a physics engine. The spatiality of a virtual world often appears in a mode not dissimilar to everyday space. It is a short walk from “here,” in the everyday life-world, to a nearby shop; it may just as well be a “short walk” — effected by a mouse-click — to a nearby shop within “Runeterra,” the world of the game *League of Legends*. Despite this similarity of experienced meaning, the two worlds stand apart: there is no way for one to *walk* from the everyday life-world to any virtual gameworld. This reflects the (to some extent) self-enclosed character of each virtual world. However, *within* this space, there exist locales which are valued according to specific, shared “finite provinces of meaning” which constitute social worlds. For example, in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, the players in different factions assign different social values to the same locale in game-space, according to their group identity and shared aims. In the case of players aligned with the Republic, the Empire’s capital world of Dromund Kaas is inaccessible enemy territory, whereas for Empire-aligned players, it is home.

The Schutzian framework also enables analyses of titles that have multiple worlds within them. For example, in the (not entirely accurately titled) *World of Warcraft*, there are in fact multiple copies of the over-all gameworld, with each copy called a “realm.”²⁴ Normally, players cannot communicate with other players who are in different realms, even if they are both in identical copies of “the same” forest. However, there are special areas called “Cross-Realm Zones” (CRZs). CRZs are jointly accessible to players in different realms, and allow them to see and interact with each other. CRZs are often in-game cities or areas that require players to form a cooperative group in order to complete a particular task. When a player leaves a CRZ, other players will see them vanish and will no longer be able to communicate with

²⁴One motivation for realms is that MMOs like *World of Warcraft* face a difficulty due to limited in-game resources. For instance, a player might pursue a quest to thin a population of “Springpaw” lynxes in a relatively small area; however, if dozens of players are also pursuing this same quest, a player might have to wait awhile for enough Springpaw lynxes to appear for them to kill. This could cause boredom, frustration, or anger at other players. The game designers circumvent this by having many instances of “the same” area (and thus, many places a player can go to complete the quest), in different realms.

them. While a player may know that a player who has left the CRZ is still (elsewhere) in-game, they are no longer in the same gameworld.

Cases like this result in an increase in the complexity of social relations in and between worlds. The extended Schutzian framework enables us to address this complexity by distinguishing between (i) everyday, (ii) intra-ludic, and (iii) trans-ludic variants of the social relationships which Schutz himself so aptly distinguished only in the everyday life-world. We illustrate this novel complexity of social relations in [Figure 2](#) below. A CRZ in *World of Warcraft* essentially allows players to quickly cross the boundary between trans-ludic contemporary and intra-ludic consociate.

When we live in the everyday life-world, all the others with whom we are in direct social commerce are in that world with us (see again [Fig.1](#)). Likewise, when we live into a virtual world, we find with us *intra-ludic*, “virtually” present predecessors, successors, contemporaries, and consociates. Some of these others are Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) who have no human subject controlling them. But most are controlled by users who are similarly living into the same virtual world. Since there is a multiplicity of gameworlds, it is constantly the case that whichever world one lives into, there are further subjects who are one’s mere contemporaries, *living in another life-world*. For example, you, the reader, are currently not living with anyone in Runeterra, nor *vice versa*.²⁵ Likewise, those in Runeterra are not living with players in any realm of Azeroth (the titular *World of Warcraft*).

Despite that, we in the everyday life-world *do* have a kind of social relationship to the subjects currently living in virtual worlds: they are our *trans-ludic contemporaries*. They are potential consociates: we could live with them in a face-to-face encounter, if either we join them in their current life-world, or they return to ours. Doing so is a bit more mediated than simply walking up to a stranger on the street, but the living social relation we establish, and the transition from being mere contemporaries to being consociates, is fundamentally the same from a phenomenological standpoint.

²⁵It is perhaps worth asking where you, the reader, are living in this moment. If one were to extend our argument to worlds beyond that of MMOs, it could be said that you are living into this paper as a finite province of meaning. Depending on how immersed you are, it may be that you are experiencing yourself as standing in relation to us, the authors, as your predecessors who have both physically and conceptually moved around this space before you. For our part at time of writing we relate to you as a successor – someone we have imagined and contemplated extensively, but someone of whose uniqueness and specificity we are unaware.

Distinguishing trans-ludic and intra-ludic varieties of social relation is not only useful for understanding social relationships between subjects in the everyday life-world and virtual gameworlds, it is also useful for understanding social relations between subjects in different gameworlds. Currently, it is

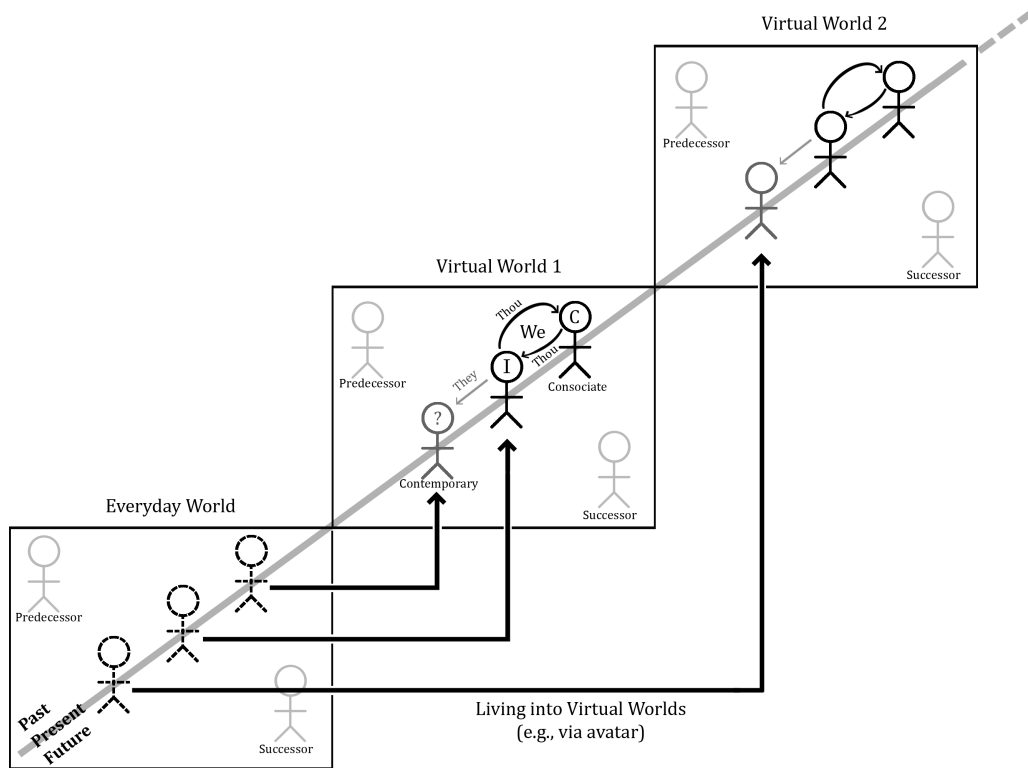


Figure 2: Schematic of the extended Schutzian framework. Each panel represents a world in the same manner as Fig. 1 above (the everyday life-world at bottom left, a virtual world in the center, and another virtual world at top right). All three subjects shown in the mundane world are living into a virtual world (indicated by dashed lines for stick figures in the mundane world, and the arrows running between panels). Within each virtual world, all of Schutz’ spheres of social reality are replicated. All this occurs simultaneously in the time of the mundane world (note the single grey line running through all panels) yet each world also has its own “native” past, present, and future, in addition to its native space.

common for a user to be confronted directly with the multiplicity of social worlds that games support. It is possible for two users to be “friends” on the *Steam* distribution platform. By default, anytime a user is in-game and a friend begins playing another title, the user receives a notification (in the form of a pop-up at the bottom of their screen) indicating which game their friend has begun playing (whether it is a multiplayer game, or not). When a user sees this notification, they are made aware that their friend is currently a trans-ludic contemporary, and they are told which gameworld their friend is in. This is illustrated in [Figure 3](#) below: a screenshot depicting actual gameplay of a multiplayer online game, *Tribes:Ascend*. There are several game modes in *Tribes*, but a squad-based “capture the flag” mechanic is popular. In [Fig. 3](#), the character shown at right is, we would argue, an intra-ludic consociate. We admit that possibilities for interpersonal expression in *Tribes* are quite limited: there are no canonical gestures, no facial expressions, and in-game chat is limited to deploying a fixed list of catch-phrases plus voice-overs (e.g., “Retrieve our flag!”). Still, in actual gameplay, teammates often work together in close (virtual) proximity, and an emergent (virtual) body language indicates player intentions.

In [Fig.3](#), the consociate shown at right is a bit hesitant to engage the opposing team, and this hesitance was expressed through the position (near home base) and movement of the avatar (or rather, the lack of movement to engage the opposing team). While this face-to-face* interaction was occurring, a pop-up at the bottom-right in [Fig.3](#) showed that a friend had begun living in a different gameworld. Knowing which worlds their friends are currently living in, a player can consider whether they prefer to remain they-oriented to them, or whether they would instead pursue a face-to-face* relationship by joining them in another world. The Schutzian framework provides, in advance, a basic understanding of all such social relationships. And there are many such cases: even limiting ourselves to the *genre* of multiplayer FPS titles, there are over 500 titles on *Steam*, each of which affords precisely the kinds of relationships described here.

From this perspective, it becomes imperative to pursue not only a “static” analysis of some instance of a player living into a gameworld, but also to consider the “dynamics” of how players switch between everyday and virtual social spheres, and how their social relations rapidly shift. The player’s virtual embodiment becomes one target of particular interest. Although Taylor and others are correct to emphasize that being digitally embodied is vital for presence, we can no longer treat it as an “all or nothing” experience.

On this phenomenological approach it becomes an open and complex question to determine how, at a moment, a player experiences themselves as living into a virtual body, and to what degree (see [Hardesty 2016](#)).

Identity and the Magic Circle: In traditional Game Studies, the permeability of the magic circle has been linked to a multiplicity of identity. We have re-described the permeability of the magic circle phenomenologically as



Figure 3: A screenshot from *Tribes: Ascend* showing others in a virtual social world and simultaneously the activity of a trans-ludic contemporary. The shot is from the player's in-game point of view. An intra-ludic consociate (teammate) is shown to the right. Intra-ludic contemporaries are shown in the distance (in the water under the ship – they are marked with red and blue arrows). In the bottom-right corner, a pop-up indicates (with a high degree of anonymity) the activities of a trans-ludic contemporary in another virtual world. (Thanks to Hi-Rez Studios and Valve Corporation for permissions).

a multiplicity of life-worlds. It follows naturally from our account that one's identity will take on a multiplicity of new aspects as the number of worlds which one could live into is multiplied. If one does live into any virtual world, one will identify (or be identified by others), at least in part, as a *denizen* of it, in addition to being a denizen of the everyday life-world. Even if one does not herself choose, or have the opportunity, to live into any virtual life-worlds, this also affects identity as it is perceived by others: a person who lives only in one life-world might be compared to a person who never leaves their hometown. Insofar as one's experienced identity or "presence" is conditioned in any way by place or by social sphere, the multiplicity of lived social worlds will necessarily result in a multiplicity of identity. Put another way, the possibility of genuine, face-to-face* interactions in and across open worlds, real or virtual, is what *enables* and *reveals* multiplicities of identity. Our Schutzian framework thus neatly links several major loci of research in previous GS. Incidentally, the distinction between how insiders and outsiders understand what it means to be a "denizen" of a world can neatly explain, e.g., Turkle's observation that our experience of others changes as they spend more time living outside the everyday life-world. Turkle's observation ultimately brings to light the unique social relation we stand in to trans-ludic contemporaries. We can do justice to this phenomenological observation without endorsing Turkle's evaluations against this social relation.

Varieties of Presence: To begin to sum up, on a Schutzian approach, the three broad varieties of presence (outlined above in '[Brief Survey of Game Studies Research](#)') are treated as not exclusionary, or even richly contrasting, but rather intimately co-constitutive. As we have discussed, [Pearce & Artemesia \(2008\)](#) provide detailed empirical support for this claim in their account of "fictive" ethnicity in virtual worlds. We do not wish to minimize their contribution, but what we stress is that, in the Schutzian framework, this follows for both virtual worlds and the everyday life-world as a matter of course: on this phenomenological account, we should *expect* such co-constitution between varieties of presence in virtual worlds. Co-presence naturally finds a place in Schutz' phenomenological account of social relations (specifically in the descriptions of they-orientation and thou-orientation). These basic descriptions of varieties of co-presence are broad enough to be adopted by any of the accounts reviewed above (e.g., Taylor's reading in terms of embodiment and social visibility, or Pearce & Artemesia's social constructivist account). Once we have taken the step to recognize a plurality of social life-worlds, Pearce & Artemesia's emphasis on the socially

co-constructed character of identity-as-place, and the interactions between *co-presence* and *environmental* presence, is readily accommodated at the ground floor of our extended Schutzian account: these life-worlds are understood as the most basic places in which a subject can dwell among others as *denizen*. The physics of virtual worlds is no small part of their experienced worldness and their environmental presence, but the co-presence of others in a shared social, virtual world is also constitutive of its worldness, constituting it as a *shared* (and thus somewhat “objective”) location. And with sociality comes significant changes in one’s identity, altering experienced *personal* presence. Thus the plurality of life-worlds readily accounts for the possibility of a multiplicity of identities. In this way personal presence, co-presence, and environmental presence are readily understood in advance as generally co-determined in our extended Schutzian account.

Likewise, a Schutzian account anticipates Pearce and Artemesia’s finding that changes to individual and social identity can affect corresponding changes in a world’s environmental presence: e.g., a virtual world came to be experienced as a lost homeworld for the Uruvian subjects that Pearce and Artemesia investigate. A Schutzian social world, like individuals’ identities and activities, is co-constituted through interactions with others: as a shared, “finite province of meaning” is enacted, everyday behaviors become socially sanctioned and expected, and familiar places become laden with shared meanings as sites that solicit appropriate actions. In this way, the world itself achieves an embodied social presence. In the loss of such a world, denizens will be unable to carry out behaviors in their appropriate place, and thus will be unable to *be* the individual they experience themselves to be. One would expect of a profound reaction of the sort Pearce & Artemesia observe.

4 Concluding Remarks

We conclude by outlining what we see as the major strengths of the Schutzian framework, and sketching how it can facilitate future inquiry into life in virtual life-worlds.

One great strength we see in the extended Schutzian framework lies in how well it coheres with, and unifies, previous insights regarding how users live into virtual gameworlds. The foregoing illustrates how the main themes of prior research into virtual worlds each find their natural place within the

Schutzian framework, and thereby emerge as complementary avenues of inquiry in a unified research agenda. Importantly, our phenomenological account aims only to provide a preliminary description of the phenomena of social life in virtual gameworlds. Thus, it does not prejudge for or against anyone's favored theoretical analysis of these phenomena. Likewise it does not prejudge for or against anyone's favored ethical or critical evaluations of these phenomena. It thus helps to clarify the common ground that all researchers in GS can share, as a preliminary step before undertaking these important avenues of inquiry.

Another strength lies in the fact that the Schutzian framework succeeds in providing us with basic distinctions we need to make sense of what is now becoming standard practice in virtual life. Early work (e.g., [Taylor 1999, 2002](#)) studied virtual worlds which were relatively isolated (not only from each other, but also from the everyday life-world). But as [Pearce & Artemesia \(2008\)](#) have pointed out, and as we have stressed above, the boundaries between worlds (both real and virtual) have been recognized to be increasingly permeable. Henceforth, any adequate description of the phenomena of virtual life will require some conception of what we have called intra-ludic and trans-ludic varieties of social relation. Our extended Schutzian account readily provides these much-needed resources, illustrating their utility in the case of video gameworlds.

The greatest strength of the Schutzian framework, however, lies in the fact that it provides a basic understanding of users' experiences in and across virtual worlds which is rooted in *no more than is already required* for understanding our social experiences in the everyday life-world. As shown above, we need only slightly *weaken* one common assumption regarding Schutz' account: in particular, the assumption that everyday spatial proximity is required for face-to-face* interactions. As we sought to show through textual evidence, this commonsense interpretation of a "face-to-face" encounter is not in fact an essential component in Schutz' social phenomenology. Once we drop it, we can readily apply his descriptive framework to virtual worlds. The alien territory of virtual worlds is then readily understood *via* an extension of a basic phenomenological understanding of the everyday life-world. It is thus possible to systematically approach and validate players' experiences of having intimate and meaningful social interactions and relationships with other players in gameworlds.

Finally, the extension of the Schutzian framework has profound phenomenological implications. In Husserl's conception, it is crucial that "the

life-world does have, in all its [subject-] relative features, a *general structure*” which is essentially shared in everyone’s experience, and which constitutes a constantly shared, “universal life-world *a priori*” (Husserl, 1970, p.139, original emph.). Most fundamentally, this universal structure is summarized: “thing and world on the one side, thing-consciousness on the other” (*ibid.*, §37), and it is supposed that all our *praxis* takes place on the presupposed ground of one world which is continuously and communally constituted through this structure. If we recognize the plurality of life-worlds, we see that while this universal structure does characterize *each* life-world, it does not suffice to integrate all our praxis onto a *single* unifying ground of *one* shared world. This raises a set of interesting questions about the boundaries and transcendencies of the everyday life-world (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, pp.99-130). Phenomenologists have not seriously considered the possibility that in our experiences of the everyday life-world, we could encounter a boundary on whose other side lies another life-world that we could inhabit. Phenomenology has analyzed only one of many life-worlds. Virtual worlds can, and ought to, be studied in pursuit of phenomenology’s aim of providing an ultimate clarification of the constitution of the life-world(s).

References

- Boellstorff, T. (2006). A ludicrous discipline? ethnography and game studies. *Games and Culture*, 1(1), 29–35.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B. P. C., & Taylor, T. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton University Press.
- Castronova, E. (2008). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. University of Chicago press.
- Embree, L. (1980). Methodology is where human scientists and philosophers can meet: Reflections on the schutz-parsons exchange. *Human Studies*, 3(1), 367–373.
- Evans, J. (1989). Afterword. In R. Grahtoff & J. Evans (Eds.), *Philosophers in Exile: the Correspondence of Alfred Schutz and Aron Gurwitsch 1939-1959* (pp. 321–326). Indiana University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1978). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth.

- Hardesty, R. A. (2016). Living-into, living-with: a schutzian account of the player/character relationship. *Glimpse*, 17, 27–34.
- Heeter, C. (1992). Being there: The subjective experience of presence. *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments*, 1(2), 262–271.
- Huizinga, J. (1950). *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture*. The Beacon Press.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (D. Carr, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1973). *Experience and Judgment* (J.S. Churchill & K. Ameriks, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1993). *Ideas pertaining to a Pure phenomenology and to Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book* (R. Rojcewicz & A. Schuwer, Trans.). Kluwer Academic Press.
- Husserl, E. (2014). *Ideas for a Pure phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (D. Dahlstrom, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1913).
- Lombard, M. & Ditton, T. (1997). At the heart of it all: The concept of presence. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3(2), 0–0.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*, volume 111. Chicago University of Chicago Press.
- Nardi, B. (2010). *My life as a night elf priest: An anthropological account of World of Warcraft*. University of Michigan Press.
- Nitsche, M. (2008). *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. MIT Press.
- Ollinaho, O. (2018). Virtualization of the life-world. *Human Studies*, 41(2), 193–209.
- Pearce, C. & Artemesia (2007). Communities of play: The social construction of identity in persistent online game worlds. *Second person: Role-playing and story in games and playable media*, 311–18.
- Pearce, C. & Artemesia (2008). Identity-as-place: Trans-ludic identities in mediated play communities—the case of the uru diaspora. *Proceedings, Internet 9.0: Association of Internet Researchers Annual Conference*.
- Pearce, C. & Artemesia (2009). *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in*

- Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. MIT Press.
- Psathas, G. (1980). Approaches to the study of the world of everyday life. *Human Studies*, 3(1), 3–17.
- Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT press.
- Schroeder, R. (2002). *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. Springer-Verlag New York, Inc.
- Schutz, A. (1957). Equality and the meaning structure of the social world. In A. Broderon (Ed.), *Collected Papers II* (pp. 226–273). Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A. (1962). *Collected Papers, vol. 1: The Problem of Social Reality*. (M. Natanson, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A. (1964). *Collected Papers, vol. 2: Studies in Social Theory* (A. Broderon, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Northwestern University Press.
- Schutz, A. & Luckmann, T. (1973). *The Structures of the Life-world*, volume 1. Northwestern University Press.
- Schutz, A. & Luckmann, T. (1989). *The Structures of the Life-world*, volume 2. Northwestern University Press.
- Taylor, T. L. (1999). Life in virtual worlds: Plural existence, multimodalities, and other online research challenges. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3), 436–449.
- Taylor, T. L. (2002). Living digitally: Embodiment in virtual worlds. In R. Schroeder (Ed.), *The social life of avatars* (pp. 40–62). Springer.
- Turkle, S. (2012). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic books.
- Turkle, S. (2016). *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin books.
- Zhao, S. (2004). Connected contemporaries as an emergent realm of the life-world: extending Schutz’s phenomenological analysis to cyberspace. *Human Studies*, 27(1), 91–105.