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The Phenomenology of the "Other" in Computer Game Worlds

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Abstract

This article discusses the application of a phenomenological framework to inform research in computer game worlds like massively multiplayer online games. Based on the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz, this article examines some of the key problems facing researchers in online spaces, such as the absence of the corporeal "Other." In discussing these issues using the vocabulary of Schutz's phenomenology, this article attempts to clarify some key concepts to contribute to a useful framework for conducting social research in computer game worlds. This article examines how the transcendent nature of online social experiences in game environments like *World of Warcraft* contribute to a distinct context of meaning. An understanding of the ways in which social game worlds can be constituted as sites of unique experience may be useful for researchers wishing to examine these spaces from ethnographic or similar perspectives.

Keywords

phenomenology, virtual worlds, *World of Warcraft*, Alfred Schutz, phenomenological sociology

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The emergence of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) like *World of Warcraft* is one of the more striking aspects of our time. Computer game environments of many MMOs provide at this point one of the most "realistic," multifaceted, technologically mediated entertainment experiences available to the general public, and their popularity is something not to be disregarded. For example, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* has had at its peak over 12 million subscribers at any one time (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), and although its popularity has waned recently, dropping to a reported 5.6 million members in 2015 (Activision Blizzard, 2015), it is still an impressive number in the context of player subscriptions. The much anticipated *Star Wars: The Old Republic* published by BioWare boasted the creation of over one million new accounts within the first 3 days of the games release in December 2011 (Electronic Arts, 2011), while NCsoft's *Guild Wars 2*, sequel to the popular MMO *Guild Wars* was very well received upon its release in the latter half of 2012, being touted as one of the best games of the year (Peckham, 2012). Not surprisingly, academics have responded with research exploring the cultural, economic, and psychological dimensions of this striking social uptake of new digital technologies (e.g., Ahmad, Borbora, Shen, Srivastava, & Williams, 2011; Allison, Wahlde, Shockley, & Gabbard, 2006; Cass, 1998; Collister, 2008; Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Kienle, Lober, Vasiliu, & Müller, 2010; Moberly, 2010; Pace, Houssian, & McArthur, 2009; Schultze, 2010; Williams, Kennedy, & Moore, 2011). Given its endurance over the last 10 years, *World of Warcraft* remains a focus of scholarly discussion due to both its popularity and its accessibility.

One of the essential puzzles about these game environments to which some researchers have already responded is the question of how people engaged with these realms make sense of both the game environment and the behavior of other users (e.g., Barnett, Coulson, & Foreman, 2010; Calleja, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). As is well known, the kinds of interactions which take place inside game environments involve the online player using avatars, or in the case of MMOs, "player characters," to interact in various ways in an overarching field of competitive conflict constrained only by the restrictions of the game's design. While I acknowledge debates concerning how we can understand a player's agent in the game world (Bayliss, 2007, 2010; Gazzard, 2009; Klevjer, 2007; Newman, 2002; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010), for the sake of this article, I use the term *player character* for two reasons. First, I do so in the spirit of keeping in line with the broader gamer discourse on the Internet (as such one might even consider calling player characters "toons"). Second, it signifies that the player's agent in the game world is more than a mere digital object such as the player's vehicle in a car racing game or as a kind of representative as found in nonfictional virtual worlds like *Second Life*. Instead, a player character can be understood as a *subject* in the game world and a crucial part of the fictional narrative of the game world (Klevjer, 2007), be it a named player character like Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* or a player-customized character such as in *Skyrim* or *World of Warcraft*. The qualities of such a relationship vary from game to game, alongside the limitations of virtual action that accompany

a player character, for example, in the ''degrees of freedom'' a player character has within the game environment (King & Krzywinska, 2006).

Through the appropriate use of physical interface, like a keyboard and mouse (or controller in the case of a console gaming platform), the player interacts with the game environment both *as* the player character and *through* the player character (Bayliss, 2007), an important point when considering multiplayer games. In the instances where an MMO requires the creation and use of a player character to represent the player, the player character becomes a digital entity that represents the player and becomes the way the player is identified within the game environment to other players.

The existence of the player character within an MMO changes the frame which we might apply to interpreting the experience. While social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow forms of mediated communication between (assumedly) real people in the form of textual expression, virtual worlds such as those found in contemporary MMOs introduce a more comprehensive form of avatar in the player character, often as a three-dimensional entity that can interact with the game environment in real time with other player characters. Textual communication is still required in such games, yet it is no longer directly representative of a ''real'' person. Instead, it appears on-screen that the player character ''speaks'' to others and interacts with the game environment. Social exchange in such cases is mediated through player characters, rather than a traditional avatar or username as found in commonplace social media such as blogs and forums.

In game environments like those characteristic of MMOs, the social possibilities of conflict and cooperation, the need to understand the rules of play, the need to recognize good practice, and so on are all constituted within the design of the game. However, before we can understand how players make sense of both the game environment and the behavior of other users, and in turn how a social researcher may adequately approach such matters, an initial question needs to be addressed, namely, what kind of conceptual vocabulary and frame of reference might this research require or use?

One possible relevant candidate is the tradition of phenomenological sociology initiated by Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). Schutz's phenomenology made the ''We-relationship'' in the context of direct face-to-face social experience the central point of his phenomenological inquiry (e.g., Schutz, 1967; Weigert, 1986). He drew upon Husserl's explanation of intersubjectivity for his conception of the *Other*, a term used to denote the other people who we share our world with and of who we can have meaningful shared experiences with. Granting that virtual worlds remove the ''face-to-face'' or the ''embodied'' dimension of the We-relationship from the field of interaction, the question can nonetheless be asked: How can Schutz's phenomenological mode of enquiry be useful in understanding the social experience of the Other in game environments like MMOs? In this article, I will make a case that Schutz's style of phenomenology may provide some important and useful insights into the meaning of intersubjective experience within multiplayer computer games, provided

that certain revisions are made to take into account the salient aspects of game environments in terms of the "giveness" of the Other, while considering how the constitution of technologically mediated experience influences the context of meaning of such experiences.

I will begin by outlining some of the central features of Schutz' phenomenology and then indicate what kinds of modifications will need to be made to take into account, including what other authors have said about this. I will then discuss the phenomenological constitution of the mediated experience of another person in a game environment through a player character. I will suggest that from a phenomenological perspective, the in-game actions of the player character exist as indications of the intentions of the player within the meaning-context of the game environment, and I will consequently examine how a player character's actions are construed as socially meaningful within a distinct social context. I will close by suggesting that this framework may be useful to those researching MMOs and other rich online spaces and highlight some key considerations for research in these areas.

Schutz's Phenomenology

Alfred Schutz's phenomenological project is outlined in his first major work *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*) originally published in German in 1932. In it, Schutz adapted the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl to offer a critique of Max Weber's sociological theory of rational action (Walsh, in Schutz, 1967, p. xvii). In this early work, Schutz attempted to construct a foundation for an "interpretive sociology" (*verstehende soziologie*), in establishing, phenomenologically, how experience is interpreted, how actions have social meaning, and how the different stratifications of the "lifeworld" are distinct from each other in our everyday social life (Schutz, 1967). For Schutz that lifeworld was comprised of both "directly experienced social reality and a social reality lying beyond the horizon of direct experience" (Walsh in Schutz, 1967, p. xxvii). Following his journey into exile in the United States in 1939 (where he worked for the rest of his life as a lawyer in a European bank), Schutz continued writing and further developed his social phenomenology. The fruits of that work were mostly published posthumously (e.g., Natanson & Breda, 1962–1966; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, 1989). Schutz's comprehensive phenomenology of the social world explored issues such as the constitution of social experience, the basis of one's stock of knowledge, the formation of a project of action, and how some forms of experience can "transcend" the immediate here and now.

Schutz argues that in the *umwelt* of direct social experience, we encounter our "consociates" with whom we share "a community of space and a community of time" (Schutz, 1967, p. 163). He emphasized the importance of the *We-relationship*, embedded in our face-to-face experience with another person or persons as the core of all meaningful experience (Schutz, 1967, p. 165). Within the We-relationship, the existence of the "Other" is taken for granted. They are given to us as a living object

in our immediate experience that is conscious and not unlike myself in its constitution of meaning in what Schutz regard as *the general thesis of the alter ego* (Schutz, 1967, p. 97). This realm of direct social experience is what Schutz calls the "realm" or "world" of *consociates* (Schutz, 1967, pp. 163–176). Within the We-relationship, people share an experience through the physical "simultaneity" of "streams of consciousness," meaning that parties to the experience *grow older together* (Schutz, 1967, p. 103; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 62).

However, our social experience is not confined to our direct interactions with other people who are our consociates. We inhabit a world of billions of other people who share what Schutz understood as a "community of time" but not a community of space. These people we can understand as "contemporaries" who we are with in time but not space. Unlike people who belong to the past (*Vorwelt*) or who are yet to be born and live in the future (*Folgewelt*), these contemporaries could potentially become consociates. I am able to sometimes interact with these people in indirect ways, for example, by sending a letter. I have knowledge both of the likely existence of these people (although I cannot always empirically verify it) and of the *types* of people they are. As our "distance" from others increases, as others become more and more anonymous, we enter into the realm of *contemporaries*. We can say we "know" they exist, yet our interactions with them are "inferential and discursive" and "stands, by its essential nature, in an objective context of meaning and only in such" (Schutz, 1967, p. 184). Even those whom with which we have had a prior We-relationship with, say, a close friend, becomes more and more anonymous, in this regard the longer in time since we have last seen them, becoming increasingly "typified" in our knowledge of them.

On the face of it, there is little discussion in Schutz's phenomenology of how technology influences lived experience or how communications technologies fit into his stratifications of the life world. In some of his work posthumously published by Luckmann, Schutz introduced the ideas of Mead into his discussions of the stratifications of the life world, specifically the "zones of operation" in which an actor has the capacity to influence the world around them (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp. 41–45). Schutz here seemed to begin to recognize the increasing influence of technology enhancing the ability for us to influence and manipulate the world around us. This "secondary zone of operation," built upon the primary zone of direct physical influence, "finds its limits in the prevailing technological conditions of a society" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 44), allowing us to effect change in the world beyond the world that is "within reach" of our physical bodies. Such technology was available in Schutz's time—for example, the telephone, allowing people to interact without requiring direct spatial awareness of each other. In later works, Schutz discussed how the meaning-contexts of experience can transcend our immediate experience (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 99). Nevertheless, for the most part, this appears to be the extent to which Schutz (and Luckmann) offer a phenomenological account of the effect of communications technology on the life world. Yet this doesn't mean that Schutz's phenomenology has little to say that will assist us

in making sense of highly interactive and social experiences made possible in contemporary computer game worlds.

Some Considerations of Schutz's Phenomenology in the Context of the Internet Age

The Internet allows us to effectively disregard physical space as a limiting factor in certain kinds of social interaction. From a phenomenological perspective, interactions in digital environments do not appear to align well with our experience of face-to-face interaction. As mentioned, Schutz has proposed that we encounter each other as consociates and contemporaries. While online, interacting with each other in digital environments, we are not consociates: The Other is not physically present. Yet the interactions in question like those in a game environment like *World of Warcraft* take place with a *someone* rather than a *somebody*, often in real time, indicating that the parties to the interaction share some aspects of experience and *grow older together*, that is, they are *like* consociates (Schutz, 1967, p. 171), albeit increasingly anonymous ones. Even an interaction with what is presumed to be a familiar person (e.g., direct messaging over Facebook or an e-mail) carries with it an act of faith that the conversational partner is in fact the person we believe them to be, as their corporeal presence as in the case of the face-to-face We-relationship is no longer given. The mediated character of interaction over the Internet problematizes Schutz's stratifications of the life world in this regard, as neither of the two core areas (consociates and contemporaries) align precisely with our understanding of digital environments or computer game worlds.

This line of enquiry has been taken up by Zhao (2004) who argues that the rise of the Internet presents the emergence of a new realm of "consociated contemporaries, where people interact face-to-device with each other in conditions of telecopresence" (Zhao, 2004, p. 92). Telecopresence is defined as the ability to engage in a shared experience mediated by electronic communications devices over vast distances (Zhao, 2005). Telecopresence is still a technologically mediated form of direct experience, requiring direct interaction with an object (such as a telephone) in contrast to direct sensory experience of another person's voice. Importantly though, it still fulfills a specific criterion of direct experience by sharing a community of time in concert with elements of an intersubjective (shared) experience, individuals can still grow older together (Zhao, 2004, p. 99). In addition, Zhao argues that such situations of telecopresence in cyberspace create two distinct subjective experiences—"one shared with the local people in geospace and the other with the distant individuals in cyberspace" (Zhao, 2004, p. 100). While Zhao offers quite a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between Schutz's stratifications of the life world and the condition of telecopresence in places such as Internet chatrooms, his discussion has not yet been extended to account specifically for MMO's.

Multiplayer computer game environments present a problem for social research. They are clearly not a physical space in which a direct face-to-face relationship can

take place, yet they still enable *some* forms of social relationships. They appear to sit somewhere between Schutz's realms of consociates and contemporaries. While the social value of these relationships is not in question here, the focus is on how to best understand the constitution of telecopresent, intersubjective experience, and the meaning-contexts for those users (or players) who engage in these interactions. The remainder of the article will examine only a small aspect of social interaction in multiplayer game environments, in particular the fantasy worlds found in many MMOs. In question is the nature of the mediate social experience of players engaging each other through player characters, and how this may be understood using sociological phenomenology.

The Constitution of the Experience of the Other in Virtual Worlds

In answering the question of how we can understand the Other in game environments like *World of Warcraft*, we might begin with the general constitution of experiences with other people. In the corporeal We-relationship, we encounter other people not just as physical bodies but as embodied *Egos*, whose bodies provide a field of expression for their subjective thoughts, feelings, and wishes. Although we can consider this experience "immediate"—in that it is happening *here* and *now*—according to Schutz, there is still always an element of "mediate" experience within the We-relationship, which acknowledges that we cannot directly grasp the subjective experience (interior) of another person but instead interpret the outward expression of their body's gestures or language as indications of their subjective flow of experience. This is what Schutz regards as a "transcendency" of experience, in which part of the constitution of the experience is not immediately grasped (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989). In the course of an intersubjective experience with another corporeal person in the realm of consociates, both parties grasp the immediate physical elements of the experience such as shared space and time, while simultaneously experiencing the mediate flow of consciousness of the other person. But as the experience of the other moves into the realm of contemporaries, the constitution of the experience of the Other shifts from "immediate-mediate" to a "double mediate" kind (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 114). The Other is no longer within immediate grasp, and the remaining mediate experience (i.e., my memory and recollection of them) becomes increasingly typified in its constitution of meaning (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 115).

How does this then apply to our understanding of others in computer game environments? Although the corporeal Other is absent, it is not enough to say that the experience is therefore simply double mediate, as some aspect of experience incorporates the presence of the Other, even if they are only telecopresent, constituted by a visual representation of a player character. Nor can we say that the experience is primarily immediate, in the sense that the player character and the game world in which they "inhabit" are not part of my "primary zone of operation" (Schutz &

Luckmann, 1973, p. 44), in the fact that the game world, by its nature, cannot be physically interacted with. In a similar manner to which the Internet introduces a novel stratification of the life world, that of consociated contemporaries, the "transcendent" experience of an Other within a game environment requires a clarification of vocabulary in order to engage an adequate understanding.

From a phenomenological perspective, my immediate experience in the primary zone of operation is found in my embodied sensory perception. When I am playing a computer game, this consists primarily of audiovisual phenomena alongside the touch of the hardware interface (keyboard). At this point, the only indication I have as to the existence of the corporeal Other is the on-screen representation of the Other's player character. Through common knowledge of the Internet and multiplayer computer games, I can reasonably assume from within the natural attitude that visual confirmation of another player character *indicates* the existence of a corporeal player. I can also reasonably assume that their computer interface represents the game environment in much the same way as it is presented to me (not withstanding differences between computer systems). In this regard, my experience of the Other is entirely mediated in that I cannot directly apprehend their embodied self or their subjective experiences. What I can immediately perceive, however, is the "actions" of their player character in the game environment, as given to me by the audiovisual stimulus generated by the computer interface. This aspect of immediacy, however, is not entirely accurate in that the actions of another player character are temporally but not spatially bound, in that they happen *now*, but only in a virtual *here*.

Just as Schutz acknowledges the distinction between the mediate experience of the subjective interior of a physically present Other and merely recalling memories of them (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 114), we perhaps here need to acknowledge a further distinction in a new *kind* of mediated experience in computer game environments. This also needs to be distinguished from other forms of telecopresence, such as talking on the telephone, which is mediated in the form of *now* but not *here*. Computer game worlds, ontologically speaking, do not have a geospatial "anywhere" as a point of reference, only a virtual *there*. This idea is similar to Schutz's concepts of the zones of operation and corresponding "world within reach" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp. 41–45). A computer game environment is transcendent of the player's primary zone of operation, allowing the player to act *beyond* their world of immediate reach. As such, the corporeal player's relationship with their player character within such a world is by its nature mediated by the computer interface. The player character is the player's agent in the game environment, allowing the player to "act" within the game, albeit as an "imperfect intermediary" (Rush, 2011, p. 249). Unlike a puppet, which is physically controlled while providing varying degrees of tactile feedback, the player character is at a tension between both the controlling player and the game environment, in that the player's experience of the game world is regulated by the programming code of the player character and the associated limitations of the player character's capacities to interact with the game environment. Using Schutz's vocabulary in applying this theme to experiences

between player characters, social interaction in the game world can be said to contain two distinct kinds of mediated experience: that of the player's interactions with the game world via the player character and that of the subjective intentions of the controlling player. This again stands in contrast to more direct forms of telecopresence such as a telephone conversation, in that there is no game environment with which to contend with—the conversational partners can interact directly, although mediated in the secondary zone of operation.

The constraints of the available sensory phenomena from the computer interface, as well as the constraints of the player character's capacity to interact with the game world, contribute to a heavily mediated experience of the Other. This raises questions regarding the mediate nature of the player character within the game environment, in particular how sense can be made of observable actions by player characters in game environments. We can now turn our attention to a discussion of how the player character, as an agent for the player in the game world, can exist as a field of expression for the subjective intentions of the corporeal player.

The Player Character as a Field of Expression

In considering the player character as a field of expression (Schutz, 1967, p. 117) for the corporeal player, the question can to be asked: Are the outward visual manifestations of the player character in the game environment (i.e., movement, interaction with objects, and other player characters) "symptoms" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 63) of the intentions of a corporeal player? In other words, in the context of a telecopresent, mediated experience in a game environment, what aspects of the experience are present that allow us as social researchers to interpret the intersubjective meaning-contexts of a corporeal player? Again I use the MMO *World of Warcraft* as an example.

In *World of Warcraft*, players necessarily spend their time interacting with the game environment through the player character. Much of this activity consists in the form of quests, where a player is given a task by a nonplayer character (NPC) such as killing a number of monsters (mobs), gathering a number of resources, or traveling to another area of the game world to interact with an NPC. While these acts can be considered "socialized," in that they are planned by an actor who is "'always already' in society" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 66) and who is likely learned how to perform such tasks either directly from other people or from others' intentional use of signs (such as the textual instructions for a quest as written by one of the game programmers), this is to be distinguished from socially oriented action, wherein the actor's project has at its "thematic core" a specific Other or others (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 68). This is one aspect where MMOs can distinguish themselves from single-player games, in which an avatar interacts with a fixed, closed, environment: MMOs allow for player characters to inhabit shared digital space which then allows them to act toward each other by the direction of the corporeal player. This begins to highlight the sociological importance of the player

character in the context of game worlds, as social action, on top of socialized action, becomes available in MMOs. Indeed, MMOs are much more than just sets of single-player interactions that happen to occur alongside other player characters: Games like *World of Warcraft* can be considered highly social in this regard in that the game design not only allows for social interaction in the forms of conflict or cooperation, it *encourages* or even *demands* it through group-based content like dungeons, raids, and player versus player battlegrounds.

As such, games like *World of Warcraft* are not just game worlds, they are *social* game worlds. These worlds are not inhabited by corporeal people but by player characters that must interact and communicate with each other within the limitations set by both the game's software and the capabilities of the hardware interface. This in turn raises the question of how, during play, players can interpret the ''behavior'' of a player through visual observation of, and interaction with, another player's character. Players can use the game's inbuilt chat system to textually communicate, or use an audio headset with a microphone to vocally communicate, such methods are not always employed, particularly in the heat of battle. In many cases, the player must rely on observation of other player characters in order to interpret the intentions of other players, and consequently the actions ''expressed'' by the player character become extremely important in the context of the associated experience. From the perspective of an observer in the game environment watching a player character interact with that environment in such and such a way, the same interpretive problems exist in game worlds as they do for the physical world. The subjective meaning-context for the actor remains ultimately hidden from the observer, resulting in the observer having to draw on his or her stock of knowledge of the observed action in question, alongside the available knowledge of the actor as well as the context in which the action is taking place in order to attempt to adequately interpret the likely (typical) subjective meaning-context of the actor (Schutz, 1967, pp. 113–116).

The human body, as a field of expression (Schutz, 1967), carries with it facial cues, body language, scars, tics, and so on, alongside conscious expressive actions such as gestures and speech. All of these contribute to a rich intersubjective context of meaning in the situation of the face-to-face We-relationship but also in the context of indirect social experience. Schutz gives the example of an observer noticing a man sitting on a park bench as some ducks fly by—by paying attention to the man's outward expressions (indications) such as his bodily movement, whether or not he is sleeping, or even facing a particular direction, the observer can draw on his or her stock of knowledge of typical behavior to make some basic predictions as to the *Erlebnis* of the other person (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 9), for example, whether or not the observed man has noticed the ducks, is counting them, or some other behavior. Schutz is quite right in this regard to point out such interpretations are by their nature quite limited in their adequacy in regard to the subjective meaning-context of the observed man, although they may still remain useful indications in the context of ''typical'' behavior from a sociological perspective.

Within game worlds like *World of Warcraft* that are inhabited by player characters, players must rely on a relatively more limited set of visual symptoms as expressible by the player character. More or less gone are unconscious body language, state of consciousness, facial cues, and so forth. Also gone is any direct, reliable indication as to the age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so on, of the other corporeal player. All available expressions of the player character are inherently limited by the game's design. This dictates how the player character may move around, interact with the environment and other player characters, and how communicative action is expressed. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, the range of expressions available by player characters is limited to:

- active player-directed movement, such as walking, running, jumping, or engaging in combat;
- programmed emotive moment, such as dancing or blowing a kiss using the "/emote" macro command;
- static movement, which is the programmed "idle" movement for a player character not actively being controlled by a corporeal player (e.g., the player stands there and appears to look around); and
- textual communication, even though the player character does not appear to "visually" talk (Scriven, 2013).

Aside from static movement, all other available expressions by the player character *necessarily* require input from the controlling player. The player must make decisions as to where the player character should go, how the player character should interact with the environment in a way that meets the player's goals, and, where relevant, how to communicate with others effectively via textual or voice chat. With the removal of all unconscious signifying behavior on the part of the player character (i.e., body language and facial cues), it is possible then to claim that aside from idle static movement, all other observable actions on the part of the player character are indications of the subjective intentions of the corporeal player who necessarily must make "rational" decisions as to the actions of the player character in the game environment as part of a *project* in the *future perfect tense* (Schutz, 1967, p. 61; Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, pp. 46–57).

All forms of action on the part of player characters in game environments carry with them a subjective meaning-context on the part of a corporeal player, whose intentions are expressed by the player character. It is only through the existence of a player character that an actor is able to interact with the game environment and is also the only method in which I am able to infer the existence of other corporeal players by visual confirmation of their player characters. Players rely on the visual "symptoms" expressed by player characters to interpret the intentions of corporeal players within the game environment, and, if an interpretation of the situation requires it, orient their own player character's actions accordingly. We can now turn to a discussion of the social nature of the interpretation of these observed actions.

Visual Symptoms as Meaningful Action

The player character exists as an indication of the intentions of the player through the visual symptoms given to us through the computer screen. Given this, the next task is to determine how these actions can be interpreted in a way that is meaningful, giving us an indication of the typical meaning-context in which the action takes place. Before we can do this, we need to turn our attention briefly to the constitution of knowledge and how this influences typicality. In Schutz's later published works, he and Luckmann dedicate a great deal of time discussing the nature of the constitution of the stock of knowledge, and in particular, how this stock of knowledge contributes to our making sense of the world from within the natural attitude of typical behavior. The nature of typicality exists in the idealizations of "and-so-forth" and "I-can-do-it-again" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 241), in that my mastery of a situation before me, or my expectations of the behavior of another, are generally predictable from within the natural attitude, within the appropriate context of meaning.

Game environments are for the most part constructed in a way that allows the player to engage with the game for the first time without being confronted by an absolute mess of sensory experience. In *World of Warcraft*, players entering the world for the first time (let's assume the player has chosen to play a human character) find on their screen their player character standing in front of an abbey, with a merchant's cart to the left. Such things, typically, are instantly recognizable based on prior stock of knowledge. Thus, initially, the player is faced with a somewhat "familiar" scene upon which to start their adventure. Up to this point, the experience is not too heavily "thrown into relief" in that the player can suitably call upon their stock of knowledge of *similar* items (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 229): A picture of a chair is still identifiable as a symbolic representation of a physical chair, just as a digital chair can be identified as a chair, although in a decidedly different meaning-context (such as whether or not the player character can interact with the chair in some way). Schutz also points out that typifications are by their nature imperfect, and only "relatively 'definitive'" and are often "provisional" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, pp. 232–233), as new experiences over the course of ones' life modifies existing types and creates new types to make sense of subjective experiences.

As the game progresses, and the player character "levels up," the ever-increasing complexity of the game forces the player to acquire new knowledge, challenging the existing meaning structures within the stock of knowledge of the player. Upon being faced with a "novel" or atypical experience, Schutz argues that we first turn to our knowledge of types from within our prior lived experience to determine if we can render the experience (be it an object or a process) familiar, not requiring any further explication (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 146). However, in the situation where an experience is thrown into relief, where "the current experience finally appears not 'sufficiently typical' for determination and mastery of the situation, processes of explication are induced in which new typifications on other levels of determination are rendered familiar" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 146). This process of

explication finds its core in the ''relevances'' of the situation in question in order to ''master'' the problem at hand (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 231). In essence, only the relevant aspects of the situation faced by the actor are given thought until sufficient mastery, as required in the motivational context (the in order to motive) is gained. In applying the process of typification and the acquisition of knowledge to players engaging with games like *World of Warcraft*, it seems on the surface that the process itself is relatively the same as to the physical world. The process of mastery over the game environment is arguably much the same as any repeatable skill, be it hammering a nail or attacking a digital monster. Mastery over ''mobs'' (monsters within the game) is often a process of trial and error alongside the acquisition of knowledge of a suitable strategy, one that often comes from other players via sources external to the game (e.g., websites like *WoWHead* and *WoWPedia*). There are perhaps a few considerations that must be made, however, in the context of the typifications of Others within the game world. Player characters in *World of Warcraft* are by design limited in regard to their character class or specialization (spec) which dictates the range of actions available by that character. The accompanying ''course-of-action'' types (Schutz, 1967, p. 187) point to the typical actions of that character class and specialization within a certain relevant game context, such as healing other players or protecting other players from damage in group situations. Associated with the course-of-action type is the ''personal ideal type,'' or the type of *person* that would likely engage in such actions (Schutz, 1967, p. 187). In the context of game worlds, considering the limited fields of expression by player characters and relevant aspects of anonymity, the concept of the personal ideal type becomes hazy. It is not logical for us to refer to player characters as having personal ideal types, for obvious reasons, in which case we must then be referring to the controlling player. Yet, as we have somewhat determined, our access to knowledge of the player is extremely limited; as such we can only construct quite provisional personal ideal types that are likely to be inadequate in many aspects. For example, by observation of and interaction with a player character, I cannot empirically determine any biographical information about the controlling player, their ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or any such sociological aspects; this method cannot contribute to any typifications in this regard, and any inferences would be highly speculative.

But this is not to say personal ideal types do not exist with computer games—instead, they exist in a distinct meaning-context. They also hold particular interest in regard to social research in such spaces, alongside the relevant course-of-action types. What I am speaking of here, for a classic example, is what distinguishes a ''noob'' from a ''pro'' player, or what constitutes a loot ninja, or a griefer, and so on. Player types can be discerned and interpreted from the behavior of their player characters. As such, we can consider some key points in regard to what constitutes meaningful action by player characters in game environments like that of *World of Warcraft*: An understanding of typical behavior by players, as expressed by their player characters in the game environment, is drawn from a player's stock of knowledge of the game and its practices which is in turn drawn from experience. Knowing

what one should do within an in-game social situation (such as a raid group) requires knowledge of not just what is "correct" in a course-of-action type but also what could be considered atypical or not useful; the player who does not meet the expectations of the group members by not "knowing the fight" or acting outside his or her player character's established class roles is likely to be met with negative social action from others within the group. This brings us to the final part of the discussion in examining how actions by player characters contribute to an overall context of meaning of in-game experiences as established by players.

Understanding the Other Within an Overall Context of Meaning

So far we have discussed how the technological interface mediates the experience of the Other within the game environment, and in consideration of this how actions by the player's agent in the game world (the player character) can still provide insights into the subjective intentions of the corporeal player, as well as how players within the game environment can comprehend and respond to meaningful action by others' player characters. We can now discuss how these elements contribute to an overall context of meaning for players.

As Schutz writes in regard to the everyday stock of knowledge of the lifeworld, "the structure of subjective experience of the life-world is ... a fundamental element of the stock of knowledge" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 105). He is here referring to the spatial, temporal, and social aspects of experience that are "cogiven in every situation's horizon" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 105). Every subjective experience occurs in a given time, at a given place, in a given social context, be it with others or alone. In our discussion of the phenomenology of player characters, we have explored the relevant spatial aspects (or lack thereof) and to some degree the social aspects of the potential experience of an Other in a virtual world. In taking Schutz's claims seriously, we can then ascertain that the subjective experience of controlling a player character in a game environment, as well as interacting with Others in mediate telecopresence, contributes to a distinct mode of acquisition of knowledge, which in turn contributes to the construction of a distinct set of typifications and overall context of meaning. These typifications hold relevance for the game world in question and are drawn into relief when required for mastery over a "problem" in the game.

All computer games, by design, are each distinguished by their unique capacity to engage the player in novel forms of action. Multiplayer games augment this by allowing the experience of shared social action, be it in cooperation or conflict. The overall context of meaning of action within a game environment, particularly social action directed at another player, is contingent upon a number of factors. First, the relationship between the player and the computer interface influences how the player *perceptually* experiences the game. It is the primary physical mode of interaction the player has with the game but is something that for the time being is consistent among

all games until some sort of interface is developed that can highjack our brain (think *The Matrix*). Second, the design and purpose of the game, or its "worldliness" (Krzywinska, 2006), influences the overall context of meaning. Is it a fantasy game? A simulation? Science fiction? What does the game's programming allow the player to do, and what perhaps does it limit the player from doing? Finally, the modes of social interaction available within the game environment influence how the game is understood and played. In contrast to single-player games, multiplayer games (particularly persistent open-world games like MMOs) allow intersubjective experience to manifest, contributing to a new dimension of practice. Instead of just reading game forums, guides, and Wikis or watching YouTube videos to augment one's stock of knowledge beyond direct experience, as one would do in a single-player game, multiplayer games give the player the opportunity to not only directly *learn* from other players but to *contribute* to the development of typical practice as part of the experience of play. These aspects of typical practice are key in our ability to understand and interpret the experiences of play.

Conclusion

In developing a phenomenology of player characters in MMOs, and in engaging in social research with this frame of reference on hand, we will hopefully be able to enrich our knowledge of the intersubjective experiences of players engaging in these games and come to a greater understanding of the meaning-contexts and typifications that occur within the natural attitude. It may assist us to develop a greater understanding of why some of these games are so appealing to a broad audience, as well as the factors that could lead to problematic gameplay in a context relevant to the game environment. It may also help us answer questions as to the potential benefits or pitfalls available from the development of social relationships within the distinct meaning-context of interaction through the player character.

My discussion addressed the question of how and in what ways could Schutz's phenomenology help us interpret or make sense of the distinctive kinds of social interactions taking place in game world like *World of Warcraft*, in particular, how we can understand the Other within a computer game environment. I have argued that the kind of phenomenological enquiry introduced by Schutz can, if appropriate revisions are made in the context of telecopresent, mediated experience, offer a useful foundation for social researchers to start to understand social interaction in computer game worlds like MMOs. Our understanding of the Other within computer game environments is phenomenologically distinct from physical experience, as the heavily mediated, telecopresent nature of the experience contributes to unique context of meaning, one that is framed by whichever game world is in question.

There are a few ways in which this model is useful in understanding and interpreting game culture. In considering the player character as a field of expression for the intentions of the remote corporeal player, we find that the experience itself, while still somewhat anonymous in nature, contains interactive aspects that allow

intersubjective experience to manifest. These experiences contribute to an individual's social stock of knowledge, which is key in the formation of objective typifications and is consequently used to both make sense of experience and to project future actions. By developing a greater understanding of the nature of player interaction within game worlds, we can start to explore how these behaviors translate out in to wider game culture and player practices, allowing us to start to develop links between what players do, what they like, and how they identify with each other.

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