



**RECONSTITUTING THE SENSE OF THE REAL:
A SCHUTZIAN PERSPECTIVE ON ONLINE GAMING**

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Abstract

The ongoing virtualization of daily life represents one of the most significant shifts of the 21st century. The actual boundaries between physical and digital are increasingly negotiated, challenging common conceptions of what is “real”. Using a conceptual framework grounded in Alfred Schutz’s phenomenological sociology, the paper explores the intersubjective experience of online gaming as participation in a very specific “finite province of meaning” within an expanding social multiverse. As millions of individuals chose to regularly migrate from the paramount reality of the “world of work” to the immersive alternative worlds of massive multiplayer games, social life undergoes unpredictable transformations. The study analyzes how the very sense of reality is reconstituted within these digital environments, where sensory immersion and the suspension of everyday physical limitations alter the subject’s cognitive style and temporal experience. By contrasting the everyday “world of work”, characterized by wakefulness and vivid pragmatic interest, with the world of play, the research investigates the shifts in the “tension of consciousness” that define virtual sociality.

Keywords: *phenomenological sociology, world of work, massive multiplayer online gaming, finite provinces of meaning, sense of the real .*

Introduction

The accelerated virtualization of everyday life is, arguably, the most significant shift of the 21st century (Bartulis, 2024; Das, 2024; Berger, 2020; Sandu, 2018). The phenomenon of online gaming is experiencing explosive statistical growth, as immersion into the alternative worlds of games or networks becomes increasingly seamless. Our social life, in its entirety, is on a

path of irreversible change. It is expected that the exodus of millions more people from the real world toward virtual gaming environments will produce social transformations that are currently impossible to estimate or anticipate (Castronova, 2007). Gaming culture is so pervasive in daily life that even "nine-to-fivers" engage in complex cooperative strategies within massive multiplayer games. These have become so popular that countless hours are consistently dedicated to improving personal performance levels (Reinecke, 2009). Beyond this form of "ambient sociability" (Lazzaro, 2004), the existence of real communities of passionate gamers who regularly meet at international conferences and symposia has become commonplace.

Any perspective on play as a social activity must stem from the ontology it implies: play does not begin where everyday reality ends; rather, play signifies participation in another shared, imaginary reality. Berger (2020) argues that MMORPGs exhibit a distinct accent of reality and cognitive style. By approaching massive multiplayer games as "finite provinces of meaning" (Schutz, 1962) within our everyday life-world, this study aims to discover how the sense of reality is constituted in an increasingly sensorially immersive world, where the limitations of daily life are temporarily suspended. The particular cognitive style and the unique temporality of the online gaming experience come into focus.

The World of Everyday Life as the World of Work

As a realm of immediate experience common to us all, the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) is the world of meanings experienced daily—a world comprising both culture and nature. We experience it as an irreducibly inter-subjective reality and interpret it from a first-person perspective, grounded in a fundamental epistemological premise: our actions have meaning for others because they interpret them in the same way we do. Within the reciprocal acts of the continuous giving and receiving of meaning, the ontology of a world is constituted which Schutz (1967) argues is pre-given to us primarily as a texture of meanings composed of language, symbols, arts, and institutions. As a cultural crucible where our visions of the world and life are born, it appears to us as a "home-world"—familiar, self-evident, and pre-scientific (Husserl, 1970)—a world governed by common sense and symbolically constructed through both bodily and non-bodily languages (Schutz, 1967).

Our life-world is historical and trans-generational (Husserl, 1970); it is the world of our contemporaries, predecessors, and successors. However, most importantly, it is the world we share with our *consociates* (Schutz, 1967), our closest contemporaries in space and time with

whom we communicate directly. This proximity, above all, makes it epistemologically familiar and pre-validated, though it is not devoid of occasionally flagrant contradictions. Common sense serves as the perpetually updated interpretive framework for our social action in a world pre-given to each of us as an onto-epistemological horizon—the background against which every object, old or new, appears in its significance (Husserl, 1970).

Everyday interactions are made possible by universal access to a "stock of knowledge" that remains constantly available to everyone, constituted through *typifications*: "passive associations that operate at the level of the natural attitude of the life-world" (Schutz, 1943). Taken as true from the outset, types are conceptual categories formed on the basis of similarity, essential to the process of signifying and re-signifying daily life. We are generally unaware of how they operate because, most of the time, we are not concerned with things in an abstract manner. Types emerge from our practical interest in the life-world, in the sense that we retain only what is relevant to our immediate goals.

Typifications are transmitted through language and become the "knowledge at hand" shared by community members, defining what is "natural" and infusing daily life with lived meanings. This has two foundational epistemological consequences. First, it enables the interchangeability of perspectives (Schutz, 1943): others can put themselves in our place at any time because they share the same typifications. Second, the idealization of congruence (Schutz, 1943) allows for collaboration based on the assumption that others interpret situations in a manner sufficiently similar to our own to achieve identical pragmatic ends. The way we define situations in everyday life is predicated on these types of presumptions.

Finite Provinces Of Meaning

Schutz's sociological phenomenology is founded on the observation that we inhabit a world of objects with which we work and which work upon us by offering constant resistance. Drawing from the Bergsonian concept of *attention à la vie* - which describes not a detached reflexivity, but an intuitive mode of attention characterized by a spontaneous openness to the present moment and immediate sensory experience - Schutz (1943) elaborates his own concept: the tension of consciousness. Upon this, he founds a social ontology rooted in immediate experience and the way the world appears to our consciousness as intentional beings. Our conscious life unfolds across numerous planes, covering a vast spectrum of experiences lived ontologically unproblematically, in the sense that we do not doubt their reality at the moment of experience. Various tensions of consciousness are directly proportional to our "interest in

life," lived as participation in a multitude of social worlds (Schutz, 1972). Work and fantasy represent the two extremes that describe the limits of our involvement in the daily life-world as a world of the body.

The more interested we are in reality, the more concentrated, sensorially receptive, and anchored in the present moment we become. We encounter the surrounding reality and its most pressing demands in the world of work, the inter-subjective *topos* where the "sense of the real" is most intensely activated. The requirements of daily life imperatively demand a full interest in life; therefore, they solicit us maximally in a state of "full vivid wakefulness" (*wide-awakeness*). In the world of work, we are fully present in our acts, remaining unreservedly committed and bodily involved in the realization of our projects, consistently oriented toward fulfilling our plans. From this follows the axiom: only in the world of work do we, as social beings, fully encounter reality. Through labor, the *wide-awake self* experiences its own temporality in its entirety, being fully present in its acts, receptive to the past, and interested in the future. This unreserved engagement helps the individual realize themselves as an "I" (*ego agens*) in relation to others. However, even if the sense of the real is self-evident in the world of work, it does not entirely abandon us in fantasies, even though we are not forced to respond to such pressing demands. Yet, if we are involved, for instance, in a captivating reading, we will experience a completely different state of attention—a different tension of consciousness. We do not encounter reality as a single, non-contradictory sphere; rather, we experience and interpret it as a multitude of relatively autonomous sub-universes, finite provinces of meaning (Schutz, 1962), characterized by a cognitive style based on a sense of normalcy unique to each. Each has its own set of rules and its own logic, both founded on a specific sense of reality. What we can conceive and naturally accept in the worlds of fantasy is often completely unacceptable or inconceivable in the world of everyday experience. The world of work differs from the world of play, and the world of fiction is vastly different from the practical world of daily experience. What is possible and absolutely normal in the world of fiction or gaming may appear completely meaningless or even ridiculous in the life-world. Experienced as alternative realities, these worlds exist for us as provinces of meaning with permeable but well-defined boundaries between which we continuously transition. They appear to us as distinct realms; we understand and interpret them differently, and the rules functioning in some are naturally suspended in others without disturbing our sense of the real. While daily experience in the world of work is characterized by practical commitment and limited by the laws of physics, in the worlds of imagination, we can fly, become invisible, or

travel through time. As realities in which we participate, they are constituted and structured by the way our attention is governed by competing hierarchies of relevance—meaning that profoundly different aspects spontaneously enter our focus of attention, excluding others. Nevertheless, as the realm of immediate sensory experience, the world of work remains the archetype of all possible experiences.

Although we experience the social universe as a multiversum as liminal beings, we remain cognitively and emotionally anchored in the fundamental reality of the world of work—the world in which we fully experience unity with our own body and empathize most actively with our consociates. However, in the increasingly accelerated process of the virtualization of the world of work, the sense of temporality and the relationship with one's own body change, which entails shifts in the tension of consciousness. Virtual environments involve sensory immersion, active participation, emotional investment, and para-sociality. We immerse ourselves sensorially in new provinces of meaning—realms of experience with distinct cognitive styles, such as collaborative platforms, social networks, and online games. Meeting others in virtual space requires a specific mode of *attention à la vie* and varying intensities of the tension of consciousness: from the most intense participation of the wide-awake self (similar to the world of work, interactive gaming, or virtual business meetings) to the relaxed consumption of audio-visual content on social media.

Methods

For the purpose of comprehending game experience versus the pragmatics of the everyday world, the conceptual framework of my approach was grounded in Alfred Schutz's sociological phenomenology. Players temporarily suspend the constraints of their everyday reality, and voluntarily accept the internal logic of the game. I used conceptual analysis in order to comprehend how contemporary digital architectures of Massive Multiplayer Online Games exist as autonomous social worlds (Castronova, 2007; McGonigal, 2011), within the paramount reality of the world of work (Schutz, 1962). In order to evaluate this shift from the "wide-awakeness" of the world of work to the inner state of virtual play, phenomenological description was engaged to capture the particular cognitive style, and unique tension of consciousness that characterize the immersion into virtual gaming environments as finite provinces of meaning. The essential structures of the gaming experience, specifically its feedback systems, cooperative requirements and narrative depth were analysed.

Results

1. Play and Work: The Sociality of Online Gaming

Work, as understood by Schutz, is the endeavor to overcome the resistance of objects and to transform the world within our immediate proximity for the purpose of survival. This always implies surmounting inevitable obstacles. However, Suits (2005) observes that when we play, we respond to the invitation to overcome obstacles that are not necessarily placed in our path. We accept the challenges of designers, dedicating time and effort to finding solutions. When working, we seek to solve problems by saving time in the most efficient way possible; therefore, from a strictly practical standpoint, our efforts in the world of play appear entirely gratuitous. Participants in a game of golf, for example, choose to compete according to rules that maximize the difficulty of completing the game because the stake is the play itself, proposed and accepted as an autotelic endeavor (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Any form of play presupposes a temporary suspension of seriousness and of the vivid interest in survival that inspires the pragmatic attitude and orientation toward objects in everyday life (Goffman, 1961). We voluntarily participate in a world where we know we will not be required to fully consider the consequences of our actions. Nevertheless, children participate with intense emotional involvement in play, experiencing joy and suffering in these worlds created spontaneously to be abandoned and recreated just as easily. Participation in provinces of meaning such as dreams, play, or cinema tends to suspend the coercive aspects of reality (Schutz, 1962). Re-immersion into real life is epistemologically shocking in direct proportion to the shift in cognitive style. Within the time and space of the interactive game world, one can assume alternative identities and even die without "really" dying. However, this suspension is not total, in the sense that actions continue to have consequences within the game world.

The various tensions of consciousness are directly proportional to our interest in life; hence, Schutz asserts that *attention à la vie* regulates our conscious life and is its governing principle (Schutz, 1962). We live either within our present experiences, oriented toward their objects, or we return in a reflexive attitude to our experiences as past events and question their meaning. The fact that certain life-worlds spontaneously captivate our interest and appear more relevant triggers the phenomenology of *attention à la vie*, cognitively articulating our "stream of thought." (Table 1)

Table 1. Phenomenological Dimensions of the Self in Various Contexts

Type of Self	Wide-Awakeness	Embodied Action	I or Me
Working Self	Yes	Yes	I
Performing Self	Yes	No	Me
Gaming Self	Yes	Yes	I

It is natural that the most cognitively and pragmatically relevant problems are those we feel most acutely - the demands of everyday life. However, in gaming, our interest is also vivid in a pragmatic sense because we are called upon as problem solvers. The same sense of presence is activated, leading us to discover ourselves as what Schutz calls the "I": intersubjective beings intentionally oriented toward particular aspects of the life-world. In this sense, the gaming experience (e.g., a network strategy game) presupposes a presence in our acts and an engagement with intersubjectively lived reality similar to that of the everyday life-world. Below is a comparative analysis of the multiplayer game world as a type of voluntary conduct, highlighting the tension of consciousness required by real-time interactive gaming (Table 2).

Table 2. Various types of voluntary conduct

Type of voluntary conduct	Presence of intent to complete a project	Premeditation / Projective thinking	Bodily involvement	Socially visible conduct	Socially invisible conduct
Work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Performing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fantasizing	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Gaming	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Schutz's thought operates with a distinction between two poles: pure thinking and pure action. The question is: is virtual play work, fantasizing, or performing; is it *covert conduct* or *overt conduct*? *Covert action* involves only thinking—a mental action limited to problem-solving that does not turn toward the outer world—whereas *overt action* is the bodily action that transforms the outer world. Work is *overt conduct* par excellence. If an individual action does not necessarily involve projective thinking and bodily involvement, it is *performing*—a *covert* action without socially visible consequences. Because it is not *embodied*, it lacks this character. Furthermore, if the intention does not persist, it is simple reverie or fantasy. Virtual play is *overt action* because it is directed toward an intersubjective world that is not merely imaginary, as it possesses a foundation in physical reality. Moreover, actions have quantifiable consequences according to game rules that reverberate in the gamers' own subjective worlds. Virtual technologies are *embodied technologies*; they involve the senses through immersion and require bodily manipulation.

Voluntary participation is the primordial *sine qua non* condition; the freedom to enter the game, and to quit, ultimately allows the game to exist as an ontologically different world from that of everyday life. All players must accept the goal from the start and respect the rules of the game as a shared world. The intense effort expended in response to the game's challenges can be interpreted in terms of a stimulative performance, entirely premeditated and involving a certain degree of bodily involvement. Thus, it is not a matter of virtual escapism, but of intentional and consistent engagement. The need for entertainment, relaxation, or a break does not typically demand this intense level of cognitive and emotional commitment or active persistence.

2. Sensory Immersivity and the Sense of the Real

Games raise the question of the relationship between the "real world"—the *world of work*, as Schutz calls it—and the virtual world, which exists as a finite province of meaning within our life-world. The way the sense of reality is constituted in the virtual world is directly linked to the issue of sensory immersivity. Although we are situated and historical beings, any sufficiently captivating narrative suspends the world of everyday life almost instantaneously. In gaming, this temporary suspension is increasingly mediated by technology; we have consoles, headsets, virtual reality goggles, and more. However, we currently lack a significant portion of the sensory experience, as we are deprived of tactile and olfactory sensations, despite being provided with an abundance of visual and auditory stimulation. Existing technological

interfaces, though they sometimes require intense bodily participation, do not yet allow us to feel objects in the virtual world as we do in the paramount reality of everyday life.

When playing virtual tennis, the eyes move following the ball and the hands coordinate; our senses are activated, yet we do not fully experience that familiar sensation of movement found in the everyday world. We do not manipulate or move real objects that offer resistance; instead, we interact just as intensely with their virtual representations. Although our immersion remains strictly partial from a sensory standpoint, we are emotionally and cognitively engaged almost as much as in the real world—sometimes even more—provided the game piques our interest. By its very design, the game intentionally exposes us to intense, short-lived emotions.

As an experience with cognitive-optimizing value, gaming bets on the "happening," presupposing participation in a reality that is radically augmented in certain respects to provide us with flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This is a psychological state arising from full involvement in the game and complete attunement to the present moment—a state of maximal sensory activation and sustained engagement at the upper limit of attention within the proposed scenario. Games are worlds designed in such a way that the player desires to remain inside, rather than necessarily reaching the end. The sense of the real is constructed both through the tension with and the complementarity to the experience of the everyday world.

3. Cognitive Style and the Experience of Temporality

By participating in massive multiplayer games, we make tactical and strategic decisions, competing—either alone or in teams—within an alternative reality where the limitations of everyday life are temporarily suspended, even if only imaginarily. The issue of cognitive style becomes increasingly relevant from a sociological perspective, especially as we integrate into or initiate communities that collaborate intensely in real time (Berger, 2020). Virtual play presupposes voluntary participation in a pre-designed world whose architecture structures the players' experience. In this regard, McGonigal (2011) observes that, regardless of their complexity, all games are constructed within a logic of capturing and maintaining attention. Consequently, the goal is declared, the scenario is semantically intelligible, the rules are explicit, and the feedback system is accurate and responsive.

To captivate and sustain the participants' attention, a multiplayer game must inspire an imperative sense of a shared goal. Players do not embark on a solitary quest but rather on an adventure—whether initiatory or investigative—alongside others. This finality provides meaning and significance; therefore, the rules are universally valid and serve as legitimate

means of achieving the goal to which they are absolutely subordinate. They act as accepted boundaries that, under certain conditions, can be transcended or suspended—limits designed to stimulate the sense of the possible by activating the player's creativity. Thus, as the player progresses, the game becomes increasingly unpredictable.

Real-time feedback is designed to keep participants informed, moment by moment, of how close they are to achieving their goal. Expressed through comparable individual scores, accumulating points, or attained mastery levels, the multiplayer game is invariably designed to provide a measure of progress. This assures participants that the goal is entirely attainable, sustaining their competitiveness and passion while stimulating commitment to the idea of winning or finishing. The more promptly and sensitively rewards are delivered in response to the player's achievements, the more effectively they motivate, inducing the experience of success and maintaining the player's desire to continue.

The experience of time in virtual gaming is intimately linked to the state of flow it provides (Keyes, 2001). In real life, we do not constantly experience that sense of full, unreserved engagement; we do not always exist "inside" the moment. While there are intensely significant moments that captivate us or demand our maximum effort, it is equally true that we are often absent from the continuous present of everyday habits, constantly escaping into the world of our own reveries, listening to music, going to the cinema, experiencing moments of prayer, or contemplating nature. The need for temporary escape from daily routine is constant. From this perspective, network-based virtual gaming is undoubtedly engaging rather than a form of passive escapism. It requires sustained cognitive effort and a resilience similar to that needed for solving real-life problems—concentration, patience, and persistence—providing *fiero* because it offers para-social rewards: possible achievements that are valued by many others.

Conclusions

Immersion into the world of virtual gaming presupposes a partial and temporary suspension of participation in the *world of work*—as the common everyday world—and the transfer of our attention toward another shared realm, that of fantasy. The depth of this immersion is influenced by the intensity and effectiveness with which the gamer's attention is captured and sustained. The most profound immersion is achieved when the gamer's attention is totally absorbed by the virtual environment of the game through realistic graphics, compelling and engaging narratives, and, above all, real-time interactivity.

Haptic-reactive interfaces and reversible audio systems sensory-facilitate the detachment from the reality of daily life. This type of technological mediation of experience can amplify the sense of the real. In this regard, experienced as inner duration (*durée*), time in the virtual game world is lived in a way both similar to and different from how it is experienced in the life-world. While the world of everyday life is dominated by a pragmatic sense—time being lived as the inner duration necessary to complete work tasks or solve pressing problems—participants in the gaming world often lose their sense of the passage of time, largely due to achieving the state of flow.

Schutz's sociological phenomenology is founded on the observation that we live in a world of objects with which we work and which work upon us by offering constant resistance. In this sense, multiplayer games are privileged *topoi* of intentionality—para-social spaces that make a sense of community possible. They involve significant emotional investment: gamers intensely desire and persistently pursue victory, conceiving and executing medium- and long-term strategies with perseverance.

Berger (2020) argues that hybrid virtual-material spaces, including massive multiplayer online games, are created essentially by extending the world of work into the virtual. But games cannot be considered merely simulacra of daily reality (Baudrillard, 2007), but rather alternative realms of intense performance, addressing the craving for engagement and novel experiences, nurturing the hunger for happening, and fulfilling the satisfaction of collaborative problem-solving. That is why the experience of multiplayer online gaming involves participation in a significantly enhanced intersubjective reality. The sense of the real is thus constructed both through the tension with and the complementarity to the experience of the everyday world.

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