Living-Into, Living-With: a Schutzian Account of the Player-Character Relationship

Author's corrected version

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Note: *The author has here made several minor revisions, for the sake of clarity, to the published version of the article in Glimpse. Page numbers in this document do not match those of the publication. Please cite only the published version.*

1. Introduction[1]

Games Studies reveals the performative nature of playing a character in a virtual-game-world (Nitsche 2008, p.205; Pearce 2006, p.1; Taylor 2002, p.48). Tbe Player/Character relationship is typically understood in terms of the player's in-game "presence" (Boellstorff 2008, p.89; Schroeder 2002, p.6). This gives the appearance that living-into a game-world is an all-or-nothing affair: either the player is "present" in the game-world, or they are not. I argue that, in fact, a constitutive phenomenology reveals the Player/Character relationship to be a multi-dimensional matter of empathy.

I advance a broadly Schutzian framework, drawing on his 1932 discussions of "face-to-face encounters" and "historical predecessors," showing how attention to empathy reveals a variety of "presences" that different kinds of Player/Character relationships afford.[2] The central determinants of empathetic affordances which I focus on here are (*i*) how much players know about a character (especially the character's past) and (*ii*) how players learn this

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[2]This is intended to be general enough to be applied to the relationship that a player of any game has with their character.

information. The simplest characters (e.g., *Halo*'s "Master Chief") permit the player to interact with them only as anonymous extensions of their own lived body. But when (as in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*) player and character undergo synchronous discovery of personal history, the player "lives-into" the character as more than just an anonymous, yet coordinated, organ, instead sharing both time and internal space with it. In other cases (e.g. *Mass Effect*), a character's past prior to, or moral values different from, the player, can make the character appear as a personalistic "other," allowing the player to only live alongside, or "live-with" that character.[3] The purpose of this discussion will be to show that a phenomenological analysis reveals that the relationship between a player and their character is complex, highly variable, and inherently social. Furthermore, it will add to the growing body of scholarship that demonstrates that video games are rich social objects deserving of study.

2. "Presence" in Game Studies

Presence is one of the central foci of Game Studies literature on video games and is significant to the field because it is a way of capturing the broad, multifaceted experience of self in a game-world. Despite varied conceptions of presence, Michael Nitsche provides a concise definition which is broad enough to merit widespread agreement. Presence is: "a mental state where a user feels subjectively present with a video game space as the result of immersion" (Nitsche, 2008, p.203). Nitsche goes on to distinguish three types of presence one has when playing a video game. 1) "personal presence:" the feeling of undeniably being in the game-world. 2) "social presence:" a player's feeling of being with others in the same game-world. 3) "environmental presence:" the presence of the world itself as it is presented to the player as being world-like.

Generally speaking, "personal presence" concerns how and why players have meaningful and legitimate social experiences in virtual game-worlds, although treatments of presence vary (cf. Hardesty & Sheredos 2017). Some approaches are inspired by Bernie De Koven's idea of "play communities" and his use of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi concept of "flow" (see Pearce

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[3]Please note that all of these games are "single-player games," which means that the only human-controlled character is the one that the player is currently playing. All other characters in that hrame-world are controlled by the computer and not playable by the player.

2006, p.5). Others adopt a performance-theoretic view which sees players as stepping into a "dramatic role in relation to the game space" (Nitsche, 2008, p.212). Others explicitly reject the experience of playing a videogame as "mere roleplaying." In these accounts, a player achieves presence through the establishment of selfhood via a virtual avatar (Taylor, 2002, pp.42,44).

I focus on "personal presence," i.e. how a player experiences their self in a game-world. Before understanding how one relates to other players in a game-world that allows multiple players, it is important to understand how a single player relates to their character and the presence in the game-world they achieves through this relationship. Despite the careful attention Nitsche pays to the variety of presences, his work, like the majority Game Studies, treats presence as an all-or-nothing state. A player either feels there in the gameworld or does not.[4]

Having given a brief overview of some ideas of "presence" in the literature on video games in Game Studies, I will now show that a phenomenological analysis supports this literature, and also reveals personal presence as highly variable and flexible.

3. Two Concepts of Empathy

In order to understand the Player/Character relationship and, specifically, how a player's character presents itself to the player as such and what kind of empathetic intentionality (or noetic act) is involved, §§3.1–3.2 will outline two concepts of empathy found within phenomenological literature.

3.1. Living-with

The first concept of empathy can be found in Edmund Husserl's 1910–1911 lecture series *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* in which he devoted considerable space to exploring the role of empathy in the program of phenomenology. For Husserl, "In empathy [*Einfühlung*], the empathizing I experiences the inner life or, to be more precise, the consciousness of the other I" (*ibid.*, p.83). It is a technical term that connotes a kind of intentionality akin to a perception, where the unique feature of empathy is that is presents one with another's subjectivity. Husserl remarks elsewhere that "empathizing perception" would have been a more accurate description (2006, p.164). With this kind of empathy an other is actively constituted in one's experience

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[4]This is not a failing of the field, but an area that has not been explored due to the relatively young state of video games and the little attention they have received.

as being an other who has an equal capacity of self- and other-awareness.

Alfred Schutz' description of the "face-to-face" relationship one has with another person is similar.[5] Schutz says that such a relationship occurs when "the partners are aware of each other and sympathetically participate in each other's lives for however a short amount of time" (Schutz, 1932, p.164). Schutz can be seen as elaborating on Husserl's description *Einfühlung* by stating that in an empathetic relationship the participants must affect and be aware of each other as well as "grow older together" by having different orientations to the same experience. For the sake of this paper, this kind of empathy will be called "living-with" because it implies being with an other.

3.2. Living-into

"Living-with," or *Einfühlung*, is to be distinguished from a second concept of empathy. Edith Stein and Dan Zahavi have said that although Husserl intended for "empathy" to refer to the intentional acts that present us with others who have their own subjective experiences removed from the perceiver, there is a threat that the phenomenological account of our access to another's interiority could dissolve their alterity (Stein 1964, pp.12-13; Zahavi 2001, p.153). This is because in Husserl's writing, it is sometimes suggested that the way in which one experience an other is that one *fundamentally* experiences them as similar to oneself. This kind of empathy becomes a kind of "oneness" (whether complete or partial) with an other. Stein argues that this is an incorrect reading of Husserl; however, it was one that appeared in contemporaneous literature.[6] She characterizes her interlocutor's (Lipps) view as "I am living 'in' the one in the same way as in the other, experience the movements of the one in the same way as those of the other" (Stein, 1964, p.16). In her dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy*, she goes to great effort to counter this reading of Husserl, as does Zahavi, who suggests going "beyond empathy" in order to resolve the issues Husserl's critics raised (Zahavi, 2001, p.154). This type of empathy will be referred to as "living-into" because it captures the experience of oneness on this reading of the term.

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[5]For a full discussion on Schutzian face-to-face relationships in video games, please see Hardesty & Sheredos (2017).

[6]Please note that this was Edith Stein's doctoral dissertation on which Edmund Husserl served as her advisor.

3.3. Reconciliation

Stein and Zahavi have not sought to reconcile these two definitions of empathy; instead they point out only that phenomenology needs a concept of the first sort and that this has to be distinguished from the second meaning. I will reconcile the concepts by distinguishing them as two species of empathy. To summarize, Husserl's *Einfühlung* will be called "living-with." The second version of empathy, characterized by a feeling of oneness with an other, will be called "living-into." Delimiting these two versions as different species of empathy makes them valuable tools when attempting to account for, and describe, the Player/Character relationship.

4. The Lived Body and "Master Chief"

Turning now to the case studies, an appeal to Schutz' work will help deploy the two species of empathy covered in 3 and provide an account of the presence as it is achieved through the Player/Character relationship. However, before directly applying these two kinds of empathy, I will offer a distinguishing case which does not involve either kind of empathy, but is what most people think of when they hear the word "video game."[7]

In *Halo*, a player interacts with the game-world as a faceless, cybernetically-enhanced super-solider named "Master Chief" who critics have described as not being a person (Gray, 2013). The player has a first-person perspective on Master Chief and sees through his eyes, from within, as he shoots villains and saves the day.[8]

Schutz's contemporary and friend Aron Gurwitsch becomes helpful for understanding the ways in which a player relates to Master Chief. Gurwitsch relies on Maurice MerleauPonty and Gestalt theory in order to understand the lived body. The lived body is not confined to the boundaries of the flesh body, but it is a coordinated accomplishment of many things (or organs)

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[7]The purpose of going through this example is threefold: 1) to draw the distinction between an anonymous tool/avatar and a personalistic character; 2) to clarify that empathy is not involved in the relationship between a player and this type of character; 3) to show that even in, what some might call, a superficial and shallow game, a Schutzian approach can reveal the richness of Player/Character relationships.

[8]Although this game does allow one to play with other real people (who are also playing other iterations of Master Chief), for the sake of this paper, the player of Master Chief is just interacting with computer-controlled characters.

in action.[9] This is consistent with Schutz' own views on "the world within potential reach" which he describes as the world as it appears in immediate experience. The experienced (social) life-world is coordinated with respect to one's body and, because of the dynamic system of the body, is in constant change (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p.37).

Thus, in *Halo*, when a player is attempting to make it safely through a level, their physical body, which is controlling Master Chief, is also responding to the virtual events in the game-world. Master Chief becomes a bodily organ, mutually coordinated with their meaty organs. In this way, the physical and virtual bodies qualify each other and the lived body of the player when playing Halo becomes a unique whole which includes the player's physical body, Master Chief, and whatever gaming technology used play the game. Master Chief becomes an anonymous extension, or avatar[10] that reshapes and affects one's overall body-schema. Master Chief is not a personalistic "other" because he is not experienced as such any more than one's own hands are considered independent people.

Although there is an interesting player-character relationship here, it is not one of empathy. My remarks here in §4 do not preclude the other two case studies from involving an extension of the lived body; however, the following sections will focus on how they are representative of the two species of empathy (living-into and living-with).

5. Living-into "Daniel"

In *Amnesia: the Dark Descent*, the player begins in a dark house without knowing who they are, how to move, or what they are supposed to do. Although this is the experience of many players starting a new game, what is

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[9] "Far from begin merely mutually coordinated, the different organs and their functions condition and determine each other in such a way that in the function of any organ... the functions of other organs are enveloped and implied. In dependence upon one another and with regard to the task towards which the body is polarized in a given situation, functions are assigned to several organs involved in total bodily posture" (Gurwitsch, 2010, p.294).

[10] The distinction between avatar and character is an important one which I have flagged. In this paper, I am reserving the use of the term "avatar" to capture the type of character that is experienced as tool-like or, as this discussion has said, an extension of the lived body and not as a personalistic other. Using the term avatar to describe all characters misses the phenomenological point that a player does not experience all characters as tools. As §§5–6 show, players experience characters from different games as being personalistic others.

interesting about Amnesia is that the character is in the same position as the player: the character has total amnesia. Events in the gameworld inform the player quickly that their name is Daniel and that they are being stalked by a zombie. This is a "horror-survival" game whose success depends on it being scary in such a way that the player feels that their own safety is in jeopardy, despite the game-world being unable to physically harm the player. The game requires that a player become immersed in the world and experience personal presence, i.e. feeling that they are there in the game-world. What adds to the feeling of immersion is that the player sees through Daniel's eyes in a first-person point of view and never sees the backside of the body.

This close relationship that the player has with Daniel is a paradigmatic example of "living-into," which is characterized by a feeling of oneness where the alterity between self and other dissolves. This kind of Player/Character relationship *surpasses* the requirements of "living-with," or *Einfühlung*. Schutz provides several requirements for establishing a faceto- face, or living-with, relationship: 1) a person must share a "community of space" with an other; 2) the partners of an interaction must "grow older together" (Schutz, 1932, p.181).

The requirement of sharing a community of space with an other, is surpassed through the relationship a player has with Daniel and, as result, the player lives-into him, not as an other or a tool/avatar, but as themselves. Because a player has a first-person perspective in Daniel and not a third-person viewpoint (as the player does in Hah), the player has an *identical* community of space with him. There is no physical separation from the character and the player other the experience of Daniel having a virtual body.

Schutz' second requirement is that in an empathetic relationship, "the two partners are face to face [such that] their streams of consciousness are synchronized and geared into each other... growing older together" (Schutz 162). The two partners must have independent, but similar, subjective experiences. In *Amnesia*, Daniel knows no more than the player, and both the player and the character experience simultaneous self-discovery of their *shared* personalistic identity. Thus the player experiences their stream of consciousness, and their character's, as *identical* with Daniel's, which far surpasses Schutz' requirement.[11] This design feature blurs and dissolves the

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[11]For instance, the player and Daniel learn their name at the same time. It is imaginable that the character would experience the same lack of identification as the player when

feeling of otherness with Daniel and the player lives-into him, reacting to the horrors in the game-world. It is productive to understand this in terms of empathy because it captures the identicality of emotional and social experience of the player and character.

6. Living-with "Commander Shephard"

A player will not always live-into Daniel and may sometimes experience him as an other. Breaks or interruptions may occur, and the Player/Character relationship might shift to something which fails to constitute identity with Daniel, i.e. the player might cease to empathize with Daniel in the sense of living-into. The Mass Effect trilogy provides an example of a game where the player experiences their character primarily as a personalistic other. In other words, this is a case where a player "lives-with" their character whereby they presence an other as an *other*.

In *Mass Effect*, the player plays a soldier referred to as Commander Shepard. As in *Halo*, they have the task of saving the world, but *unlike* Master Chief, Commander Shepard has a personality, a past, and an active and player-determined role in shaping the world. Before the game begins, the player picks one of several broad personal histories (e.g. being a hero who single-handedly saved the day, or being a ruthless pragmatist who sacrificed innocent civilians) as well as appearance and gender. These choices impact the player's experiences of the game-world as well as how computer-controlled characters react to Command Shepard in certain situations.[12]

Although the player's relationship with Commander Shepard meets the requirements of Schutz' face-to-face relationship, the player cannot continuously *live-into* their character because of two features. First, the player realizes that the character knows more about their in-game past than the player, which creates the experience of Shepard being a distinct subjectivity. For example, during the prologue of *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard enters into a conversation with another character regarding their past heroics in the recent war. The player can choose how to characterize their past by selecting one of several dialogue options that are displayed on the screen. For example,

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hearing the name. Furthermore. the design feature of "having amnesia" offers meaning to the player's initial fumbling attempts to navigate the game-world (which occurs in, and is potentially distracting, in all video games).

[12]This is called a "role-playing game" where the player's objective is to make personal and often emotionally-laden decisions.

in response to the question "Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams was killed in action. It was your call Why did you leave her behind," the player can choose "It was a hard choice," "We are done here," or "It was that or die." Upon selecting one of the options, the player hears an elaborate response and learns that Shepard considered the solider who died to be a *friend*, even though the player may have never interacted with this other character. In this way, the player learns about Shepard. A Schutzian analysis of this would say that the character's past self is acting as a predecessor in the current situation, preventing the player from fully living-into them.[13] Shepherd seems to have a hidden personal interiority which is, revealed piecemeal to the player, and not simply *shared* as in the case of Daniel.

Another feature which contributes to "living-with" Shepard as opposed to "living-into" them is that there will be times when the player disagrees with their character. When a player disagrees with how Shepard talks about a situation, it feels like Shepherd is speaking out of their own subjective experience, and not the player's. Although there is a "general correspondence" between the player and character's response to the ingame events (because they are in the same place at the same time), the character's actions seem like those of another person with their own subjective meanings (Schutz, 1932, p.165). This prevents the player from feeling oneness with the character, which causes them to relate to Shepard through *Einfühlung*. However, this is still a social interaction because Shepard appears, and is constituted, as a *personalistic* other.

7. Conclusion

This is not to say that living-into a character is better than living-with one, or that a player cannot vacillate between the two ways of relating to their character. Indeed, it is possible to relate to a character in any of the three ways discussed in the same game, which changes how a player experiences their presence in a gameworld. The experience of vacillation and fluidity of relation points to a reconception of presence. A player can be immersed in a game and achieve a *kind* of presence in at least three different ways. First, a Player/Character relationship can take the form of bodily extension through an avatar, as exemplified by *Halo*. Second, as demonstrated by *Amnesia*, a

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[13]A predecessor is "a person in the past no one of whose experiences overlaps in time with one of mine" (Schutz, 1932, p.208).

player can live-into a character and experience a degree of oneness. Third, a player can experience their character as a personalistic other and live-with them, as discussed in the context of *Mass Effect*. This type of understanding of presence is made possible, and is supported by, the clear requirements of a Schutzian framework and the attention to the experience of a player. A phenomenological approach to understanding video games reveals them to be complex sites of intra and interpersonal sociality and worthwhile objects of study.

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