

(1) Beyond Presence and Copresence: A Phenomenological Account of Experiences in Shared Virtual Environments

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Abstract

The study of shared virtual environments (SVEs) has centered on presence and copresence and this has yielded important insights. One limitation, however, has been that presence and copresence vary with the context of use, or with the activity carried out in the VE. If we analyze activities in SVEs in a phenomenological or micro- social interactionist way, we see that there are several – but only a few *key* - factors that shape presence and copresence regardless of setting and activity. We also find that the experience in SVEs can be analyzed in terms of the 'focus of attention' of the user, and this simplifies the analysis because a) the focus of attention is limited, and b) this focus has a limited range of things it is devoted *to* in VEs.

To pursue such a phenomenological account, we can draw on the data from two sets of trial VE sessions and on the author's own experience (the author was a participant observer in both sets of sessions, but the discussion will also be based on data from interviews, video- and audio- recordings, and logs from the other participants). These two sessions, it will be claimed, are representative of a range of the most typical or common VE settings.

We can divide the experience into the following components: 1. place (where?) 2. task (doing what?) 3. interpersonal interaction and communication (how engaging with others?). This is perhaps the most general classification of the VE experience, but only the third applies specifically to *shared* VEs.

In relation to presence and copresence, this account raises several questions deserving of further research:

Under what conditions will a mismatch in focus of attention between the three components diminish presence and copresence? (and conversely, when is the user oblivious to such a mismatch?)

Under what conditions will the disruption to the flow of the focus of attention by forces outside the VE will diminish presence or copresence?

More generally, how can the flow of the focus on the three components be structured over the course of the experience so as to maximize and maintain presence and copresence?

By identifying the most common forces shaping experiences in SVEs and presence and copresence, it will be possible to put forward some hypotheses for further research and for how to design systems.