



# Mirror image: An autoethnographic reflection on ethnography

Jonathan M. Hollister, Doctoral Candidate  
School of Information at Florida State University

## Introduction

- Ethnography is the thick description of culture, a discussion and analysis of human behaviors that is mindful to account for and describe the complex contexts in which such behaviors occur (Geertz, 1973; Van Maanen, 1995, 2006)
- While studies described as ethnographies have increased in Library and Information Science since 2005, they often fail to define their iterations of ethnography nor rationalize its use (Khoo, Rozaklis, & Hall, 2012)
- Some researchers claim their work is ethnographic yet only use a single data collection method or spend very little time at the field site (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012)
- There is a need to improve LIS curricula to better enable both researchers and practitioners to better understand the information behaviors of information and library users (Khoo, Rozaklis, & Hall, 2012)
- Thoughtful descriptions and discussions of ethnographic approaches in practice are among the first steps to address this need

## The Dissertation Project

- Exploration and description of the digital literacy practices and information worlds of active role-players in a new MMORPG, *WildStar* (<http://wildstar-online.com>)
- Hybrid ethnography combining features from Hine (2000), Steinkuehler (2004), Gillen (2009), Pearce and Artemesia (2009), and Knoblauch (2005) to create an adaptive, multi-sited, data-intensive game ethnography
  - Recorded in-game sessions, guild and public events
  - Artifacts from guild and community websites, wikis, social media
  - Semi-structured interviews, both in- (16) and out-of-character (17)



## Reflection – What Worked Well?

- ✓ The Role-Playing (RP) Community in *WildStar*
  - ✓ Exceptionally welcoming, open, forgiving to newcomers unfamiliar to RP & lore
  - ✓ Well-organized in- and outside of the game using websites, forums, & wikis
  - ✓ Extremely active, multiple events daily
- ✓ Researcher as Role-player as Ethnographer
  - ✓ Most informants appreciated the effort
  - ✓ 16/17 informants did both in- and out-of-character interviews
  - ✓ Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours each, breaks and patience were much appreciated
- ✓ Thick Data Collection Tools
  - ✓ Video capture via Open Broadcasting Software (<https://obsproject.com/>)
  - ✓ Artifact collection via HTTrack Website Copier (<http://www.httrack.com/>)
  - ✓ Built-in in-game chat-logging

## Reflection – Challenges

- ❑ Things Get Personal
  - ❑ Informants shared many personal details, including their experiences with harassment and mental illness
- ❑ It's a Wild World, It's Hard to Get By Just Upon A Smile
  - ❑ Role-playing is complex & time-consuming
  - ❑ Persistent server with thousands of players
  - ❑ Difficult to balance time commitments
- ❑ Instability with the Game and Larger Community
  - ❑ Guild collapse, shift to public events
  - ❑ Top level employees at Carbine leaving
  - ❑ Layoffs, public perception of a failed game
  - ❑ Low server population, server merges
  - ❑ #Gamergate
- ❑ Hardware Issues
  - ❑ Older laptop, overheating issues resulted in the loss of one day's worth of data
  - ❑ *WildStar* still needs to be optimized for older systems

## Next Steps

- Interface the RP community throughout data analysis and writing to ensure accuracy of my observations
- Continue to refine and seek feedback on hybrid ethnographic approach, apply to different setting and communities