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