

The Information Worlds of Online Role-Players*

온라인 롤 플레이어의 정보 세계

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ABSTRACT

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are played by millions of people around the world. Within MMORPGs, players explore, solve mysteries, craft items, battle against dungeon or raid bosses, or compete against other players, all while using a variety of information and information behaviors. Role-players in MMORPGs develop identities and engage in interactive storytelling with other role-players as their characters. An ethnographic approach combining overt participant observation and engagement, semi-structured interviews, and artifact collection was used to explore and describe the social information behaviors of role-players through the lens of the theory of information worlds. The social types evident in the role-playing community in *WildStar*, a science fantasy-themed MMORPG, are closely interrelated to and differentiated by social norms and information values that dictate acceptable characters, stories, character actions, and appropriate lore sources as well as how to role-play without violating the boundary between in- and out-of-character information worlds. Role-players maintained the in-character and out-of-character boundary using a set of specific information behaviors to enable engaging and immersive role-playing experiences. Implications of the findings for the theory of information worlds as well as potential applications of role-playing and MMORPGs are also discussed.

초 록

전세계 수백만 명의 이용자가 대규모 멀티 플레이어 온라인 롤 플레이 게임(MMORPG: Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games)을 즐긴다. MMORPG 내에서 롤 플레이어(역할 참여자)는 다양한 정보사용과 정보행동에 가담하면서 게임을 탐색하고, 미스터리를 해결하거나, 게임 속 아이템을 만들거나, 괴물이나 보스와의 전투에 참여하며 다른 플레이어와 경쟁하거나 협력한다. 또한, 롤 플레이어는 자신의 캐릭터 정체성을 개발하고 다른 롤 플레이어와 함께 대화형 스토리텔링에 참여한다. 이 연구는 정보세계이론을 통해 롤 플레이어의 사회적 정보 행동을 탐구하고 기술하기 위해, 광범위한 참여자 관찰 데이터, 반구조화 면담 데이터, 위키페이지나 토론게시판의 글과 같은 참여자의 커뮤니티 활동을 보여주는 사회적 데이터를 결합한 민족지학적 접근법을 사용했다. 과학 판타지를 주제로 한 MMORPG인 와일드스타(*WildStar*)의 롤 플레이 커뮤니티에서 두드러지는 사회적 역할 유형은 게임 속에서 허용되는 캐릭터, 이야기, 캐릭터의 행동 등을 지시하는 사회적 규범과 정보가치와 밀접하게 연관되고 차별화되는 동시에, 그 안에서 게임 속 캐릭터로서와 게임 밖 이용자로서의 정보세계 사이의 경계를 위반하지 않고 롤플레이를 지속하는 방법들과 관련이 깊었다. 롤 플레이어는 특정한 정보 행동에 가담하며 게임 속 캐릭터와 게임 밖 이용자의 정보세계를 분리해서 유지함으로써, 롤 플레이 게임을 더욱 참여적이고 몰입적으로 만들었다. 정보세계이론을 활용한 분석의 의미와 롤 플레이 및 MMORPG를 적용한 디지털 리터러시 교육에 대한 가능성도 논의된다.

Keywords: Information Worlds, Social Information Behavior, Role-Playing, MMORPG, Ethnographic Methods
정보세계이론, 사회적 정보행동, 롤 플레이, MMORPG, 민족지학 방법론

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1. Introduction

Online games are popular around the globe and, in the US, are supported by a diverse use base spanning all demographic and socioeconomic categories (Entertainment Software Association 2019, Lenhart et al. 2008, Lenhart, Jones, and Macgill 2008). While there are many online game genres, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) have amassed communities of players numbering in the multiple millions. For example, on June 30th, 2011, the subscription base of the popular MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*, was 11.1 million users globally, generating 313 million USD in revenue in the just the 3rd quarter of that fiscal year (Cifaldi 2011).

Players in MMORPGs create personalized characters or avatars, go on quests and adventures, solve puzzles and mysteries, craft and trade in-game goods, and myriad other activities, often doing so while collaborating or competing against other players. This variety of activities in MMORPGs creates a large amount of information of different types and purposes. Due to the large amount and different types of information needed in games, Martin (2011) argues players require information literacy skills to manage and use information to be successful in games. Given their popularity, insights on how to improve the dissemination, communication, management, and use of game-related information by players, whom are also consumers, could potentially improve the user experience and satisfaction levels of players as well as benefit game developers seeking to increase player retention and maintain or increase revenue.

Games can support a variety of libraries' the educational, recreational, and democratizing objectives by offering opportunities for library users to learn, have fun, and get together (Adams 2009a, Ratliff 2015). Nicholson (2010) argues that games can attract reluctant users to the library and that games and gaming can connect and promote existing library resources and services. Librarians have also been offering references services in virtual worlds like Second Life for more than a decade (Grassian and Trueman 2007,

Mon 2012).

However, research on information and information behavior in MMORPGs within the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) is limited. Outside of LIS, research on MMORPGs in general has mostly focused on older, more popular MMORPGs like as *World of Warcraft* or *EverQuest II* (Meredith, Hussain, and Griffiths 2009). To address this issue, this study focuses on a different MMORPG, *WildStar*, which is described in more detail below (Carbine Studios 2014). To further narrow the scope of study and expand research on an under-researched community, this study focuses on role-players within the *WildStar*. Role-players research and develop their own characters, complete with a background, personality, profession, etc., and then interact with other role-players as their characters (in-character), engaging in interactive and communal storytelling.

Information Science field has been criticized for importing and using theories from other academic disciplines (Pettigrew and McKechnie 2001). Kwan (2018) argues the nature and experiences of games, players and gaming communities can provide opportunities to explore individual and social information seeking behaviors. Additionally, Khoo, Rozaklis and Hall (2012) argue that ethnographic studies can provide detailed descriptions of libraries and their users and that while ethnographic methods are becoming more popular in LIS research, researchers do not often clearly describe or justify their approaches. To address these concerns, this study employs an ethnographic method and uses Burnett and Jaeger's (2008, 2010) theory of information worlds as a framework to understand and interpret the social information behaviors of role-players in an MMORPG. This ethnographic study explores and describes the social information behaviors of role-players in an MMORPG through the lens of the theory of information worlds. As such, the research questions are:

- RQ: What characterizes the information worlds of active role-players in MMORPGs?
- a. What social types exist in MMORPGs?

- b. What are the social norms of MMORPG players?
- c. What types of information behaviors are evident?
- d. What types of information are valuable to MMORPG players?
- e. What boundaries exist in the information worlds of MMORPG players?

2. Literature Review

The brief literature review below describes previous research on information behavior in MMORPGs. To situate the findings below, Burnett and Jaeger's theory of information worlds (2008, 2010) is also briefly introduced.

2.1 Information Behaviors in MMORPGs

Wilson (2000, 49) broadly defines information behavior as the "totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and use." Wilson's (2000) definition allows for considerations for information behaviors outside of formalized or professional settings, suggesting a wide variety of information behaviors in myriad contexts, including MMORPGs and virtual worlds. However, research on information behaviors in MMORPGs is limited.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are a subset of MMOGs, which can be defined as (Steinkuehler 2007, 298): "[H]ighly graphical two- or three-dimensional video games played online, allowing individuals, through their self-created digital characters or 'avatars', to interact not only with the gaming software - the designed environment of the game and the computer-controlled characters within it - but with the other players' avatars as well." In Role-Playing variants of MMOGs, players must choose and fulfill specific role(s) given the mechanics or design of the game. Mechanically speaking, this often falls into one of three categories, healing

other players (healing), dealing damage (sometimes referred to as Damage Per Second or DPS), or protecting other players (tanking) (Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011). Role-playing can also refer to players who create and enact stories using their characters (Williams et al. 2011). This second type of role-playing is the focus of this study. The interactions between players and the immersive environments within MMORPGs encompass a wide variety of information and information behaviors.

Storie (2008) analyzed the information behaviors of four World of Warcraft (*WoW*) players through the theoretical lenses of sense-making, serious leisure, and situated learning, and examined the value of social and cultural information in the game space. Storie (2008) categorized four types of information used by MMORPG players: (1) goal-based information is necessary for players to immediately advance through the game and gain experience, such as locations of quests and items and recipes for crafting; (2) strategic information is knowledge of the game world that requires players to invest time and effort to research and become more effective in defeating the game world and playing with or against other players, such as game-playing and character-building strategies; (3) social information is related to the process of communication and keeping up with peers, friends, community, and in-game world events, and can include reputations of and grudges between players as well as oral histories of unique events; (4) cultural information includes the specialized vocabularies, unique activities, and social norms of the MMORPG, such as the social rules and expectations of players.

Within the game context, a player's behavior often entails the simultaneous use of two or all of these types of information (Storie 2008). Storie (2008) concludes that through play, players had fun, but also learned skills through their experiences in the game, such as game skills, social skills, and time and people management skills. Within games, players are constantly learning and seeking new information to progress (Nardi 2008). Storie (2008) noted that

the four players were primarily consumers of information rather than creators. Two of the players reported they felt they were better at research and information seeking as a result of their play, but Storie (2008) cautions that his findings do not provide any insight on the transferability of information behaviors between contexts.

Harviainen and Savolainen (2014), characterize information in virtual or synthetic worlds, including MMORPGs, as capability for action and capital. Information as capability for action includes both ecological information, that which is accessible in the game world to solve problems or achieve goals and are managed using the same information practices as in the real world, and emphatic information, which is information signified with additional emphasis or simplified by the game system to the user to improve ease-of-use or availability of information (Harviainen and Savolainen 2014). Players that are ineffective in using or managing ecological and emphatic information are likely to encounter difficulties in playing the game. Additionally, Harviainen (2014) argue that information has capital in economic, experiential, social, and power contexts. Information may have economic value and can be sold or traded for in-game currencies or items. More experienced players can use their in-game knowledge and skills to build social capital, using their in-game status and experience to limit or control access to certain content and activities, such as well-known guilds or high-difficulty raids.¹⁾ Given the richness of information practices in synthetic worlds, Harviainen and Savolainen (2014) advocate for more research on the uses and misuses of information in synthetic worlds and more studies comparing the information practices in synthetic worlds with the real world and virtual environments. Harviainen and Rapp (2018) found the activities of players often resemble information retrieval as must players navigate through the systems of the game to find information to complete tasks or achieve goals.

Adams (2009b) examined information behaviors

and actions of players in the now shutdown MMORPG, *City of Heroes*, through everyday life information seeking (ELIS) and dramaturgical perspectives. Savolainen's (2005) model of ELIS focuses on the personal, psychological, and social factors that influence information seeking in everyday activities and contexts, not necessarily those bound by the workplace. Through the ELIS perspective, Adams (2009b) notes four modes of information practices of gamers: active seeking, a player looking for information about the game; active scanning, browsing game-related resources; non-directed monitoring, unanticipated discovery through play; and information seeking by proxy (McKenzie 2003), gleaning information or gaining information from other players or non-playable characters. Adams' (2009b) reflections also discuss the importance of the different roles a player takes on and the necessity of social interaction for meaning making.

Monahan (2009) found that information seeking behaviors of *WoW* players resembled the ELIS model, but noted that many players found information serendipitously, such as through passive observations of other players' behaviors, reading comments in public chat in-game or in the comment sections on community websites outside of the game. Monahan (2009) found the primary in-game information sources were the game interface, addons, guild or raid chat channels, general chat, other players, and observations of other players. Additionally, she noted many players gained information through observations that they did not know they needed, such as information pertaining to how to get to a location, what items are needed, how to complete tasks and general strategies (Monahan 2009). Outside of the game, players consulted general reference sites, wikis, forums, blogs, online videos, guild websites, and people in real life. About 31.25% of the participants reported using outside resources due to social reasons such as "not wanting to bother others, feeling shy, or not feely sociable" (Monahan

1) For more on the economic aspects of information in MMORPGs, see Harviainen and Hamari (2015).

2009, 28). Others sought information elsewhere because it was more accessible outside of the game or not available within the game.

Hulsey (2009) describes how *WoW* players used public sources of information, such as those found on forums, to solve problems in the game and initiate social change about game issues important to them through discussions in the public sphere (Habermas 1992) of the forums as well as by the strength of the weak-ties (Granovetter 1983) created and maintained there. Hulsey argues that guilds that engage in the public sphere, intuitively, are subject to instability caused by external pressures, but may lose momentum, notoriety, and become inactive if they do not participate in the public discourse.

Whippey (2011) investigates the overlooked importance of visual and audio types of information in MMORPGs through an ethnographic exploration of *WoW*. She argues that “visual and audio information work together to provide valuable information to the player” (Whippey 2011, 3). Visual information is necessary for players to navigate and experience the virtual space of a MMORPG. Shapes, color pallets, details in the flora, fauna, and architecture, lighting, spell effects, and weather add immersive and emotive qualities to a game. For example, visual effects during spellcasting can provide feedback that one has performed an action or give warning to other players. Similarly, Afrić (2007) suggests that the visual elements of identity in an MMORPG can be considered as forms of communication that can convey meaning, plot, and background information.

Whippey (2011) found that audio information, such as voice acting, ambiance, music, and skill noises further engross the player into the game space. Voiceover scripts allow the non-playable characters of some games to supply audio information to the player. Whippey (2011) argues that audio and visual information enhances the immersive qualities of a game as well as improves their usability. For example, audio feedback in combat can confirm whether you hit an opponent or missed them. Similarly, voice over internet protocol (VOIP) technology allows play-

ers to communicate with each other. Williams, Caplan, and Xiong (2007) found that using VOIP strengthened relationships and trust between MMORPG guild members.

Karlova and Lee (2012) state that due to the vast amount and distributed nature of information related to *WoW*, both in- and outside of the game, players develop modifications (mods) or add-ons. Mods are optional software applications that allow players to alter and make customizable the elements of the existing game software’s user interface, such as making a player’s item bags sortable. Mods or add-ons can also make background metadata usable and accessible, such as those that track and display damage output and input. While not all MMORPGs permit add-ons, *WoW* allows its community to develop and use a wide variety of mods and add-ons to supplement and improve the players’ gameplay experiences. The development, sharing, and use of mods and add-ons is likely to entail the application of information behaviors and digital literacy skills.

In summary, previous research has observed and described a variety of types and sources of information as well as how players seek and use information to navigate and overcome challenges in the game world. Other studies have observed MMORPG players exhibiting a wide variety of literacy skills to manage information and facilitate play, including Gee (2009), Martin (2011, 2014), Martin and Steinkuehler (2010), among others. While related to information behaviors, a more detailed account of information and digital literacy skills can be found in the reported findings of another portion of this research project (Hollister 2019).

2.2 The Theory of Information Worlds

Given the scale and complexity of MMORPGs, a theoretical framework that accounts for the social contexts of information behaviors was necessary. As such, Burnett and Jaeger’s (2008, 2010) theory of information worlds² was utilized for this study. A brief introduction to the theory and selected appli-

cations are described below to motivate and situate its selection for this research project.

Chatman's concept of small worlds and theory of normative behavior (Burnett, Besant, and Chatman 2001) and Habermas' (1992) constructs of the life-world and the public sphere provide substantive theoretical foundations from which the theory of information worlds was derived (Burnett and Jaeger 2008, Jaeger and Burnett 2010). Jaeger and Burnett argue that the theory of information worlds "provides the researcher another approach and related conceptual tools, which can be used to create a thorough and realistic picture of information across society" (2010, 10). Information worlds are social environments created around a particular context for a certain population with identifiable social types, social norms, normative information behaviors, information value systems, but are open, to varying degrees, across its boundaries to the influence of other information worlds with which they interact and the larger information worlds and lifeworld of which they are a component (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Social types involve the "ways in which individuals are perceived and socially defined within the context of their small world" (Jaeger and Burnett 2010, 22). The social type of an individual is the role the individual fulfills in an information world as determined, in part, by how others in that world view them. Additionally, the view of a particular social type can differ between information worlds. Jaeger and Burnett (2010) describe how librarians can be seen differently across worlds: in one information world, a librarian may be a reliable provider of valuable information or, in another, considered an untrustworthy outsider.

Social norms refer to the agreed upon, but not necessarily articulated, acceptable forms of observable behavior (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). Norms

within a social world create a generally understood set of guidelines or rules for its members to follow. Social norms determine how individuals present themselves and interact with others as well as which activities are deemed acceptable.

The normative information behaviors of an information world include all potential normative behaviors associated the use or nonuse of information that a world's members exhibit (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). Like Wilson's (2000) definition of information behavior, this conceptualization of normative information behaviors accounts for a variety of information behaviors and practices that an individual may use within a given information world. Jaeger and Burnett (2010) see this flexibility as a difference compared to most other LIS research that focuses on goal oriented information seeking in formalized information retrieval systems.

Information value is defined as a "world's shared sense of a scale of the importance of information" (Jaeger and Burnett 2010, 8). A world's sense of information value is determined by a variety of parameters including content, perception, control, and economies. As such, information value systems vary across information worlds.

Boundaries are "the places at which information worlds come into contact with each other and across which communication and information exchange can - but may or may not - take place" (Jaeger and Burnett 2010, 8). This concept uses the broad, large-scale perspective of Habermas' notions of the lifeworld and the public sphere. Small, intermediate, and large worlds are all components of the total lifeworld (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). Information worlds are not independent from or uninfluenced by outside information worlds. As such, the boundaries of information worlds vary in permeability.

Propositions for the theory of information worlds

2) The theory of information worlds was first presented without its namesake title in Burnett and Jaeger (2008) and is correctly referred to as Burnett and Jaeger's theory of information worlds. However, this article draws from the titled presentation of the theory of information worlds in the 2010 book with Jaeger as the first author.

have not been formally published and, as such, are not discussed at length here. However, due to the interrelatedness of the concepts, the discussion of how information worlds can apply to MMORPGs may reveal relationships between the concepts and potential propositions of the theory in the following sections.

2.2.1 Selected Applications of Information Worlds

While the theory of information worlds is relatively new, researchers have applied it to various research questions and contexts. Given the internet-based nature of this study and for the sake of brevity, the selected applications of information worlds below focus on online research contexts.

For example, Burnett, Whetstone, and Jaeger (2013) used the theory of information worlds as a lens for a cultural hermeneutical analysis of public health record (PHR) websites. Relatedly, Jaeger et al. (2014) describe a study in which surveys, case studies, interviews, site visits along with the theory of information worlds was used to create a resource for information intermediaries (usually librarians) to help users connect with information resources on e-government websites. Through semi-structured interviews, Lee (2019) used the theory of information worlds to understand the political information behaviors of opinion leaders on Twitter. Worrall (2019) also explored online book club communities and social digital libraries of LibraryThing and Goodreads as boundary objects using the theory of information worlds.

Notably, the theory of information worlds has not yet been applied to the study of information behaviors in online gaming environments. Through the internet, players of MMORPGs play, both competitively and cooperatively, with other persons from all over the world to carry out specific goals may share similarities with social media users or other online communities.

2.2.2 Strengths and Limitations of Information Worlds

The theory of information worlds is not connected

to a particular methodological approach, which enables it to be applicable across myriad research methods regardless of methodological leaning, method, or data types, as seen above (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

However, Yu (2012) criticizes the theory of information worlds by arguing the core concepts do not allow definition of an individual's information world in a way that differentiates it from that individual's social worlds. While Burnett and Jaeger's theory of information worlds is focused on the social contexts of information behavior, it does not rule out the importance of the individual. Burnett (2015, 7) argues "while the user is never an isolated entity independent of external influences, he or she is, as an active and autonomous agent, the locus at which "need" coalesces into active information seeking and, thus, considered to be the appropriate focus for research on information behavior."

Since the theory of information worlds is relatively novel, it will continue to develop as more researchers apply and critique it. Jaeger et al. (2014) describe the additional element of bridges to help explain the process of information exchange across boundaries. Burnett (2015), in acknowledgement of Yu's (2012) critique, has integrated the theory of information worlds into a larger intertwined framework consisting of three domains: individual, social, and signification. Burnett and Burnett (2019) apply the information domains framework to cyberbullying and immigration and discuss how the interconnectedness of the domains can help explain how digital technologies can influence individual and social ethical norms. As seen below, the interaction and influence between individual and social information worlds is an important aspect of role-playing in MMORPGs.

Ethnographic study of the social information cultures of MMORPGs will provide opportunities to access the strengths and weaknesses of the theory of information worlds. The robust and scalable nature of information worlds supplies a comprehensive framework that would be necessary for a thick ethnographic description (Geertz 1973) of the social information cultures of MMORPG players.

3. Method

This study is a part of a larger research project from which another portion has been published. For the sake of clarity and to ease the burden on the reader, the method will be restated here. A more in-depth description of the inspiration and development of hybrid ethnography can be found in the previously published study (Author).

This study is a hybrid ethnography derived from Hine's (2000) virtual ethnography, Gillen's (2009) virtual literacy ethnography, Steinkuehler's (2007) cognitive ethnography, and Knoblauch's (2005) focused ethnography. The hybrid ethnography is an adaptive, multi-sited, and focused game ethnography guided by the research questions but flexible to allow for a close following of both focal research and related emergent phenomenon; examines and collects data from multiple sites; and uses overt, participant observation of and engagement in the same activities with community members. The goal of this hybrid ethnography is to achieve a genuine account and 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the information worlds of role-players in a MMORPG.

3.1 Data Collection & Analysis

Data, primarily qualitative, was collected via ethnographic fieldwork, the collection of community artifacts, and semi-structured interviews. Data collection via fieldwork and semi-structured interviews began, following IRB approval, in July 2014 and ended in January 2015; the collection of community artifacts extended until July 2015. The data reported in this article is a portion of a larger dissertation project that was planned to coincide with the release date of *WildStar* in June of 2014 to capture the emergent community in a new MMORPG during peak interest.

Fieldwork consisted of overt participant observation and engagement with the science fiction and fantasy-themed MMORPG, *WildStar* (Carbine Studios 2014). *WildStar* is set on long-lost, recently rediscovered planet called Nexus, which holds myste-

rious and powerful technology from an extinct, powerful alien race known as the Eldan (Carbine Studios 2014). After Nexus's rediscovery, two factions, the Exiles and the Dominion, consisting of different alien races, fight to control it. The researcher created two characters, with corresponding personas and backstories, for each faction to observe and participate in role-playing activities alongside role-playing community members. An overt approach was used to build trust and rapport with role-playing community. The researcher included information about their research project within their in-game and outside-of-the-game profiles to inform the community of the researcher's activities and to provide opportunities to opt-out of data collection. Chatlogs, screenshots, and screen-captured videos were collected during general gameplay and while in attendance at public role-playing events within the game world.

Purposive and structured collection of community artifacts, such as websites, wikis, forum, and social media posts, was conducted using an approach adapted Burnett et al. (2003). Three subsamples from the role-playing community's main forum website were collected: S1 was a purposive sampling of posts directly related to the research questions; S2 sampled the 3 most highly viewed threads or posts within a relevant sub-forum; and S3 sampled the 3 most activity threads or posts within relevant sub-forums. Threads longer than 4 pages only included the first and last pages and a page near the middle. All posts related to the study and member-checking were collected as well.

Seventeen sets of semi-structured interviews conducted both in-character and out-of-character. 16 of the interviewees took part in both in-character and out-of-character interviews, while one interviewee chose to only take part in an out-of-character interview. The interviews were mostly conducted via text chat within *WildStar*, though one was conducted using text chat on Skype and one was conducted via email. Interviewees could choose the interview medium that was most comfortable with them to encourage participation (Kazmer and Xie 2008).

Data from all sources was analyzed using directed

content analysis through the lens of the theory of information worlds (Burnett and Jaeger 2008, 2010). Directed content analysis uses an existing theoretical framework to analyze and thematically code research data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Given the newness of the theory of information worlds, directed content analysis was appropriate because its goal is to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1281). Emergent themes identified during coding were added to the codebook as needed.

To ensure consistency of the analysis, inter-coder reliability testing with two testers knowledgeable of the theory of information worlds was conducted using a small portion of the collected data. Additionally, triangulation via the collection of multiple types of data from various sources allowed for supplemental support for the findings. Lastly, member-checking via posts on the role-playing community’s main website discussion board forum was used to allow the role-playing community to ask questions about, discuss, and provide feedback on the study and summarized findings to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the results as well as to build rapport with community (Adams 2009b).

3.2 Limitations & Ethical Considerations

As with other qualitative research methods, the findings of this ethnographic study are not generalizable (Boellstorff et al. 2012, Schutt 2009, Thomas and Nyce 1998). However, the findings may be transferable to other online role-playing communities in other MMORPGs or virtual worlds. The use of ethnography to study online gaming communities has substantial methodological precedence and high validity (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Additionally, the use of inter-coder reliability testing, triangulation, and member-checking helped to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings.

As mentioned above, the researcher employed an

overt approach, by including information about the research project within their in-game character profile and posting to the community’s website discussion board to notify the community about the study, collect feedback, and facilitate member-checking. The semi-structured interviews used a standardized informed consent process. However, the IRB waived an informed consent process for the observation of and participation in public game-playing and role-playing events as they occurred in public spaces within the game, the infeasibility of attaining consent from every attendee, and the overt nature of the study. Given the difficulty of attaining informed consent in observational or field research in game environments, it is not uncommon for it to be waived as long as the researchers are mindful of the privacy and confidentiality of the participants (Boellstorff et al. 2012). To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the role-players featured in this study, personally identifiable information was omitted where necessary; and, in some cases, this was extended to their unique characters, too.

4. Findings

While research data for this project was collected in a variety of forms across multiple sites, the semi-structured interviews were crucial for describing aspects of the information worlds of role-players. Of the 17 role-players who participated in the semi-structured interviews, 11 (about 70.5%) identified as men, 5 (about 29.4%) identified as women, and two interviewees identified as genderfluid or genderqueer and were counted using their specified pronouns.³⁾ It should be noted that #GamerGate, an online hate campaign which continues to harass women and people of color who play, develop, and review games, began during data collection of project (see Chess and Shaw 2015) and may have contributed to fewer women and people of color feeling comfort-

3) This accounts for why the total of overall gender identities is 18 and not 17.

able playing games or participating in a study, as the topic came up in multiple interviews.

The interviewees were all adults between the ages of 20 and 41, with an average age of 29.76 years old and a median age of 29 years old. The interviewees were highly educated, with 9 (about 53%) holding a Bachelor's degree, 4 with some college education or were current students, 2 with an Associate's degree, and 2 with Master's level degrees. The academic majors, jobs, and careers spanned a variety of disciplines and industry sectors. Regarding race and ethnicity, 15 (88%) identified as white (non-Hispanic), 1 identified as Hispanic white and one identified as Asian.

As this study used directed content analysis, the findings are organized using the five core concepts of the theory of information worlds. The text excerpts, from interview or chat transcripts, forum posts, and other sources as specified, are presented in their original, verbatim form, with the occasional clarification using curly brackets {}. As such, typographical and grammatical errors are included and not uncommon. Player and character names are anonymized to protect their identities and privacy.

For clarity's sake, in examples where "players," "role-players" are identified, described, or discussed, these identities, statements, or actions are Out-of-Character or "OOC" or "OOCly," meaning they refer to the person or player outside of in-character role-playing, the actual person behind the character. Role-players often refer to role-playing as "rping" and to other role-players as "rpers." In turn, references to "characters" signify identities, actions, and statements that are understood to be in-character or "IC" or "ICly," meaning the player has assumed their created role and is participating or acting as their characters, not themselves outside of the game. As mentioned above, the researcher created two characters: Jonti Thort, a Chua Scientist within the Dominion, and Jon Thorstein, a Cassian Medic on the Exiles side of the faction divide.

4.1 Social Types

In the realm of online role-playing, social types

are dependent both on how and why players choose to role-play and how other players and characters perceive and interact with each other. The social types are described across two categories: out-of-character and in-character.

4.1.1 OOC Social Types

Out-of-character social types refer to socially perceived types of players outside of the game and not their in-character personas and stories. As mentioned in the literature review, the role-playing community in *WildStar* was a subset of the larger overall community of *WildStar* players.

4.1.1.1 Levels & Types of Role-Playing

Role-players and role-playing in *WildStar* fall into three levels of role-playing complexity: casual, medium, and heavy. These categorizations attract different types of role-players and carry different expectations for the types of and approaches to role-playing activities.

Casual role-players tend to be players new to role-playing or more seasoned role-players looking for a less rule-constrained experience or to help new role-players. Casual role-playing events allowed for players to learn how to role-play as well as the best practices and rules for successful and enjoyable role-playing without strict enforcement of the rules or strict repercussions for any violations. Casual role-playing events are sometimes less plot or character driven and more focused on socializing, networking, and teaching.

Medium role-players typically have more developed character backstories and were capable of interacting with others while in-character and collaborate with other role-players during in-game on forum-based role-play. Breaches between in-character and out-of-character conversations are less frequent and more tolerated, although in-character conversations typically take place using the say, custom emote, or animated emote channels. Medium role-playing events feature more character and story driven events and interactions where players are expected to engage with the activity or event

in-character.

Heavy role-players generally have full-fledged character stories, an established costume and appearance, and communicate with others in-character most of the time. A more strictly enforced divide between IC and OOC communication and interaction occurs at this level. The use of addons to manage and display important RP information is also more common at this level. Heavy role-players typically are more seasoned role-players with experience from role-playing in other MMORPGs or tabletop or card-based role-playing games. Heavy role-playing guilds often have a guiding theme or objective developed and led by the guild leader(s) and officer(s). However, some heavy role-players organize and host public role-playing events in game or on the forums without a guild.

These designations for role-playing levels are also used for role-playing guild recruitment, as seen in the two recruitment calls in general chat below:

[Guild 1] - A rag-tag band of misfit mercenaries just looking to survive and make a life for themselves, living from job to job. But behind the scenes lies an ancient society, woven in a complex spiderweb of intrigue, mystery, secrets, and hidden knowledge that characters unlock as they advance through the ranks and storyline. Potentially spooky! - RP Heavy - Guild
 [Guild 2] - {Guild 2} are a PVE/Medium RP guild. While they will have serious progression groups, teaching and sharing information is something important to them. A fun, casual group for play at your own pace players!

From a heavy role-playing Guild 1, includes more information about their story or plotline. In the call from Guild 2, "PVE" signified the guild was interested in Player Versus Environment activities, such as dungeons or raids, and medium role-playing. Identifying the role-playing level helped guilds to clarify rules and set expectations before or during recruitment and to guide later role-playing activities.

4.1.1.2 Motivations of Role-Players.

Another aspect of social type is motivation. A player's reasons for roleplaying impact the types of characters and stories they create and enact.

Fun was a major motivation for role-playing. While fun may mean different things for different players, it also has an impact on character creation and type. As one player remarked:

"{My character} is happy, because honestly, I want to be happy. She's friendly because I want to be friendly. Why should I spend my free time playing something miserable? That's just not fun to me."

In this case, the role-player's emotional state was supported their character's happy and friendly personality. Helping and working with others was another recurring motivation. Some role-players spend time helping new role-players or organizing public role-playing events. Others used role-playing to improve their writing, as another player explains:

[Player]: Becoming a better writer is my big motivation to rp. I want to improve to the point where I can drop aspiring from aspiring author. I also just find writing to be very fun and other rpers never cease to surprise me. Some of the stories I've seen in game are pretty high caliber imo. Rp is sort of a interactive novel imo {in my (the player's) opinion}.

4.1.2 IC Social Types

In-character social types refer to the types of characters that role-players create and interact with others while in-character. In-character social types were influenced by major role-playing themes, character factions and races, gender, class and path, personality, archetypes, and other traits.

4.1.2.1 Major Role-Playing Themes

There are four major themes or objectives of role-playing within *WildStar*: establishment, adven-

ture, social, and conflict. These categories are not mutually exclusive, as many characters, plots, or guilds fell into one or more category. These differently themed activities can be used to identify different social types of their characters.

Establishment role-play generally manifested as a story focused on a location or establishment with a set clientele or purpose. Role-players often customize their Sky Plots, player housing spaces in *WildStar*, to aid this type of role-playing. Sky Plots were designed to resemble laboratories, bars, hotels, spaceships, and myriad other places or spaces. In-character social types that engage in establishment role-play often include bartenders, restaurant owners, entertainers, and government officials.

Adventure role-play often involved open-world group activities and events. This type of role-play used the expansive world of Nexus as a playground. These types of role-playing events and activities included scientific expeditions to uncover lore, explore territories, or action-filled events such as raids on the encampments of NPCs (Non-Player Characters, characters controlled by the game's artificial intelligence), or hunting trips to conquer tough creatures. In-character social types common in adventure role-playing include a wide variety of characters, such as scientists, thieves, soldiers, explorers, mercenaries, and pirates.

Social role-play often involves low-key, informal, peaceful, conversational gatherings of both small and large groups of players. These types of events or activities typically focused on general chit chat and gossip between characters or events like celebrations or memorials. Social events were more accessible for casual and medium role-players and serve as opportunities for more seasoned players to teach newer players. Social events also lent themselves to cross faction role play. One popular cross-faction event was a weekly beach party. Like in many other MMORPGs, communication between factions was scrambled by default. Role-players used a chat addon, Killroy, to descramble cross-faction text to circumvent the issue. Social gatherings supplied opportunities for character

development, friendship building between both characters and players, and the exchange of cultural knowledge across the faction divide. In-character social types that engage in social role-play activities vary widely as many role-players take part in social role-play regardless of their characters' stories.

Conflict role-play focused on disputes, rivalries or combat between individual characters, NPCs, factions, or guilds. Some role-players and guilds based their identities and stories on conflicts with individuals or groups of NPCs, leveraging existing gameplay and story elements. Across factions, though, conflict role-playing could involve Player-Versus-Player (PVP) combat in the open game world or through more structured and planned conflicts between groups or guilds. Due to the nature of conflict role-playing, the in-character social types also varied widely, but characters, such as soldiers and mercenaries, or guilds with military or criminal themes seemed to be more prevalent.

4.1.2.2 Character Factions & Races

The faction divide was an obvious source of inspiration for conflict roleplaying and a common aspect of the other common roleplaying themes. The common motifs of "good" and "bad" did not consistently align with one faction over another as a player could design their character and story however they wanted, as long as they adhered to the social norms discussed below. Playable races differed between factions and provided another dynamic to the social types of role-players.

Playing with, challenging, and sometimes reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of a character's race is a common occurrence. After the (re) discovery of the long lost and legendary world of Nexus, alien races from all over the universe converged on the planet to uncover the secrets, artifacts, and technology of the ancient and incredibly powerful race known as the Eldan. Many of the new denizens of Nexus are interacting with different races for the first time, even within the same faction, so many of the characters' initial interactions with other alien races are

based on this situation of apparent ignorance or, in some cases, fear. Despite this, many interactions are positive in nature, allowing for empathetic exchanges and sharing of cultural information.

Other players challenge preconceptions of their character's identities in other ways. For example, the accents, dialects, and vernacular language across the races vary widely and some players choose to use them while others do not. In the interview excerpt below, a player explains their Aurin, a race on the Exiles faction, character's language use:

[Player]: Anything else you'd care for me to expound upon? ... maybe my non-Aurin-sounding vocabulary?

[Player]: Sure. When I'm speaking with people, at 'full tilt', I tend not to limit my vocabulary too well. Aurin, on the other hand, have a limited technical knowhow, and favor nature-based responses, and vernacular.

[Player]: SO for {the Player's character's} background, I had him spend a portion of the time on the Arkship awake, working with gruff engineers doing some damage control, making use of his small size.

Jon Thorstein: I have noticed that in my IC interviews.

[Player]: When he got to Nexus, he'd been used to the Human values and speaking, so the 'hippy' view and super-social Aurin were almost alien to him.

[Player]: Getting back to his people, and socializing, became a core motivation for him early on.

[Player]: And so, as they'd say, the seed was planted.

[Player]: He still talks 'human' mostly, but is learning the values and mannerisms of his people. Kind of a species ambassador.

For this player, their character's speech means a great deal to their role in the community and the ways they interact with and are perceived by other

players and their characters. The player's reasons for their character's speech and language (spending a lot of time with humans on the Arkship, an Exile spacecraft used to evacuate Aurin from their destroyed home-world of Arboria) are also possible within the lore and story of the game. That said, some players put a great deal of effort to be authentic in other ways. As a counterexample to the approach the player above took, the following excerpt from another in-character interview with an Aurin who used a more traditional accent:

Jon Thorstein: Hello! Might you be {Character}?

[Character]: looks up from her tea and smiles brightly "Yepsh's mes..." pausing "Ohs, yer th' ones wif th' flyers up 'round towns wantin' to knows stuffs...um...Thorstien! Rights?"

[Editorial clarification: Yes, that is me. Oh, you are the one with flyers up around town wanting to know things, Thorstein, right?]

Jon Thorstein: Indeed, I am Jon Thorstein! Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, I truly appreciate it!

[Character]: smiled a little "Ohs, dun thinks nuffins 'f its...figgered I might as wells helps outs. 'sides went t' a science gatherin' this week too! Was interestins, figgereds this would b' too!"

[Editorial clarification: Oh, do not think anything of it. Figure I might as well help out. Besides, I went science gathering this week, too. It was interesting. I figured this would be too!]

This player took extra steps to make their character's text pop from the screen and "sound" like an Aurin's accent should sound; which, in turn, provided additional information about the character, their race, and their story. This character's affinity for science poked at stereotypes that Aurin lack technical or scientific knowledge.

Given the setting and premise of *WildStar*, race relations, good or bad, between all those converging

on Nexus often inspired character designs and role-playing activities. As one player put it bluntly:

[Player]: I want people to be free to do what they want

[Player]: But there's a tricky thing in RPing where like

[Player]: You have to sometimes act out our regressive attitudes/thoughts.

[Player]: My characters are racist.

[Player]: I know racism is wrong, but it's authentic that they are.

Jonti Thort: Right, in accordance to lore and the character you are playing

Jonti Thort: I have seen that a lot, too.

[Player]: I feel like some people make [people make] the mistake of wanting to RP a morally pure {pure} person rather than a realistic one.

This example points out the complicated and complex nature of role-playing. Despite acknowledging or saying that racism is wrong, some players create racist characters. Given the setting and plot of the game, it is not unsurprising that issues with racism and prejudice are common. However, many players used these issues as plot devices to lead to a better understanding and acceptance between characters of different races. Out-of-character, the community was one that cherished inclusivity and diversity, so it may seem to be counterintuitive that their in-character personas might have such flaws. Even though role-players are in a fictional universe, they prefer realistic, flawed portrayals of characters.

4.1.2.3 Gender

In combination with faction and race, gender also played a role in the ways in which other characters and players perceived and interacted with each other, and, consequently, how social types are defined by these attributes. The outward appearance of characters, their features, look, gender, and race conveyed information about a character's personality or background and was often used during a role-playing

activities. Presentations, performances, and portrayals of gender had an impact on in-character social types. In one interview, a male player feels uncomfortable with the way that some men role-play female characters:

[Player]: Some men who play women are sexist, in my view

[Player]: Because the character they play is an insult to women

[Player]: They'll play an unintelligent female character because they themselves view women {sic} as less intelligent than men

[Player]: It's subtle, but it sucks.

The player goes on to say that while he did not mind that role-players had characters of a different gender than their own so long as they did so in a respectful way. This player was also concerned about his partner, another *WildStar* player, because sexist or misogynistic behavior upsets her, and dealing with sexist behavior and harassment is not uncommon in online games.

4.1.2.4 Class & Path

Class and path are both mechanical choices in the sense that they impact the ways in which a player virtually interacts with the game world. However, given the flexible and personalized nature of role-playing, these mechanical roles may or may not be an important part of a character's social type or their story.

4.1.2.5 Personality, Archetype, Other Traits

As in real life, one's personality or traits can be recognized or referred to as a particular social type, such as introvert, extrovert, or "good guy." However, during the out-of-character interviews, most of the players said their character's personality and story were different than their own personalities or backgrounds, resulting in an emergent theme and important social norm and boundary. The following out-of-character interview excerpt captures why there

might be differences or disconnects between a player's and their characters' personalities:

[Player]: say I play a 'bad guy' role a lot, or at least someone that can't and shouldn't be trusted. That's actually one thing I really like about RP is that it gives me a chance to kind of shed the cloak of everyday politeness and really start to play with other people's reactions. It feels like a big sandbox where I can test out different parts of my personality, magnify them, shrink them, and see how it ripples out. Jonti Thort: Very cool! Do you fill that role with just [the player's character I had just interviewed], or do you take the same approach with other characters as well?

[Player]: I definitely gravitate toward morally grey characters, but I do have another character that is a bit less sinister that I've recently fleshed out.

[Player]: I have a lot of trouble playing 'paladins', so to speak.

Jonti Thort: I think the grey area is more realistic:)

[Player]: Yeah, exactly. The ones who aren't tend to come across as caricatures.

This player used role-playing to explore different parts of their own personality and to try out different attitudes and themes. This was not uncommon, but there are some limitations as discussed below.

4.2 Social Norms

For role-players in *WildStar*, social norms are rules used to facilitate engaging role-playing and to maintain a safe and productive environment for all of those involved. Some of these rules were specifically stated by a guild or posted to a community website, but many are remnants of guidelines that have been carried throughout the role-playing community at large or from game to game. It is important to note that these social norms are community driven and

are not the legal conditions and terms of use designated by Carbine Studios and *WildStar* itself. While many of the social norms manifested as informal rules, they were generally abided by the community and only enforced as needed. Social norms impacted role-playing activities and role-players' behaviors across three interrelated major categories: character, information, and community.

4.2.1 Character Social Norms

Character social norms are rules that impact the design of characters and their stories and may have a regulatory influence on in-character social types and their interactions. These social norms came up frequently during interviews with role-players, specifically when asked about best practices and top annoyances of roleplaying as well as how much of themselves they put or could see in their characters. This resulted in two related social norms that impact character design: certain character archetypes should be avoided and there should be some distance between the player and their character.

4.2.1.1 No Perfect People Allowed

Readers with any experience with creative writing, particularly with fan fiction, understand that some character types are difficult to write, to read about, and to interact with. The same goes in the role-playing community. Extreme characters that are ultra-powerful, without weakness, too evil, or even those that are too good, too righteous, or too helpful are considered annoying at best and disruptive and threatening at worst during role-playing. However, these character archetypes are often the creations of new role-players. As a more experienced player lamented:

“Many of us, the older players who've spent multiple years gaming both online and in reality do have a set of rules- We always ask before doing something and tend to avoid others who break the unspoken rules. Such as 'God-Moders', the 'Special Snowflakes' and “Mr. Fix-it-all” types.”

“God-Moders” or “God-Modders” are characters designed to have unfathomable power, making their characters impervious to any weaknesses or maladies. Particularly in conflict role-playing, a character that somehow miraculously diverts or escapes all attacks would not be fair to “fight” against or fun for the other players as well as their characters involved, who are likely to fall as easy victims to such a foe. Characters that are perfect in most conceivable ways are often referred to as “Special Snowflakes” or “Mary-Sues.” These types of characters are idealistic to a fault and consummate overachievers; while they might lack god-like abilities, their other attributes, such as intelligence or piety, are often used in similar ways to handle problems. Similarly, the “Fix-it-all” archetype can also be intrusive and disruptive as characters may feel compelled to intercede on behalf of other characters or players, potentially interfering with the role-playing stories of other players.

These problematic character archetypes all exploit power dynamics in role-playing in some way. Respect for other players and their characters as well as honoring consent were important issues within the community.

4.2.1.2 Cognitive Dissonance

Many of the role-players shared warnings that being too similar to one’s own character can create problems. For some role-players, this similarity in personality, profession, belief system, etc. can create a sensitive bond between the two, potentially becoming a critical issue when one of those aspects is criticized, exaggerated, or called into question. When this happens, a player may take this as a personal attack rather than an offhand comment between characters or a simple plot device during role-playing. The reactions to this can vary from having feelings hurt, losing interest in role-playing, getting angry and retaliating both in-character and out-of-character, losing friends, getting kicked out of a guild, or even just quitting the game. One player laments this issue and describes their approach to avoid it:

[Player]: Likewise for crossing OOC/IC,

urgghh D8 it gets really bad if people use passive-aggression OOCly to channel into their characters' actions to ruin everyone else's fun.

Jon Thorstein: Does it happen very often?

[Player]: In my personal experience, it happens in every MMO community sadly. Sometimes people can't help to put themselves into their characters and get emotionally-invested into it. Which is understandable, it's human nature to empathize. But it gets very frustrating when people use it as a mean to hurt other roleplayers and channel passive-aggression. It's quite prevalent but what we can do as good RPer's is to try to detach ourselves from our characters as much as we can and see

[Player]: our own characters as literary tools rather than an extension of ourselves. Like a writer or an actor.

Here, blurring the lines between in-character and out-of-character can result in misunderstanding and confrontations. Borrowing cues from literature and theatre, some role-players saw their characters as an external device rather than an internal reflection of themselves. However, separating the two can be challenging. Rather than remove all ties between a player’s personality and their character’s, some role-players more willingly allow for exploration of different personalities or the expansion of existing traits to stay engaged and interested. Overall, this meant some characters exhibited personalities and opinions that the players themselves may find unsavory, such as antagonistic or otherwise morally grey characters or as seen above, potentially racist or sexist ones, too.

4.2.2 Information Social Norms

Information social norms decide which and how information is used for role-playing activities. Information social norms were intrinsically linked with the concepts of normative information behavior and information value. When asked to describe the rules of their community, role-players often discussed

proper ways of using information.

4.2.2.1 *Lore is Law, Most of the Time*

Role-playing characters and their stories are largely based on the plot, setting, themes, and history of the game world. Many role-players strive and prefer to create characters or stories that use accurate information based on the lore of the game. Official lore information is that which is created and published by the writers and developers of the game. Unofficial lore sources are sometimes consulted, but those will be discussed below. For many role-players, lore information is the first stop for creating their characters and their backstories. As one player explains:

[Player]: Well first things first, you gotta study the lore. Now that doesn't mean all of it because there's plenty about Nexus I know diddly about, but you should know your racial background. After that, see what key traits they have. For {the Player's character}, I locked on the aurin's penchant for hugging and being upbeat. With that very broad base, a character eventually gets born.

[Player]: But I also always start off very broad because I feel you don't know a character till you play them/ write as them.

Jon Thorstein: So it is a continual process?

[Player]: To a degree.

[Player]: I'd say after uh...two or so weeks of rping, you should have a mostly solid character.

Character creation can begin by looking to the lore of the game to learn more about your potential character's background and the culture and history of the game world. For new or casual role-players, the character creation process may be less based on lore, at least initially. Role-players learn about their characters and the ins and outs of role-playing by taking part in in-character community activities.

As discussed above, different levels or types of role-players may have more or less stringent policies when it comes to using or enforcing lore information.

One role-player expressed their frustration with other players with characters that are more congenial with the opposite faction, a group they are supposed to hate and destroy.

[Player]: Everyone has smaller pet peeves like me for example, I don't like seeing exiles who are buddy buddy with dominion icly. It makes zero sense to me and just seems out of place, but my peeve doesn't really encompass the whole of the server. I'm sure people would agree with me and plenty would tell me to shove off lol. That's the great thing about rp, you can do really whatever you want so the 'rules' can't really be applied save for the ones I already mentioned. Trollinge {trolling} especially would blacklis {blacklist}

[Player]: with alot of people.

Differences in the interpretations of lore and role-playing rules and in the personalities of the characters and players impact role-playing activities. As another role-player expanded on this during an interview:

“There is also how people interpret canon or the rules of a universe. Again much of the actual upsetting action on a minor and even major scale comes from clashing of personalities and differences in Rp subcultures. Those who favor strict canon adherence are easily upset by people who do not adhere to the rules that they themselves follow. This is not a large scale problem, but it can easily lead to divides in the community.”

4.2.2.2 *No Meta-Gaming*

The boundary between in-character and out-of-character posed limitations on how characters and players use information. While role-playing involves much improvised writing and play, out-of-character discussions and clarifications of the potential actions or plotlines for the characters engaged in role-play were common to facilitate an enjoyable role-playing experience.

However, the information that a player knows is not necessarily the same information that their character knows, unless it has already been brought up during role-playing, already known by the characters due to prior in-character interactions, or agreed upon terms between the players. Bringing OOC information into role-playing can disrupt the stories and activities of the characters and distract the players behind them. As one player explains:

[Player]: As for meta-gaming, some characters are meant to be secretive in-character. If I were to reveal some of my characters' information OOCly but it gets used in an in-character fashion without my consent, it would ruin the mystery of my character.

Some characters have covert professions, such as spies, whose secret identities must be concealed to carry on their mission(s). If another player ignores this, they risk blowing the cover of the secretive character, interfering with the role-playing. Such violations, whether intentional or not, may be interpreted as a betrayal of consent between characters and players during role-playing, leading to annoyance at the least or hurt feelings and confrontations at the worst.

4.2.3 Community Social Norms

Community social norms govern the types of acceptable behavior toward others in the roleplaying community as well as during role-playing activities. In this category, there are three interrelated rules: maintain a personal boundary between in-character and out-of-character, respect each other, and obtain consent from others during role-playing.

4.2.3.1 Do Not Mix IC/OOC Feelings

To avoid hurt feelings and to mitigate the consequences in the event one of the above social norms is violated, role-players strive to not take in-character confrontations as out-of-character or personal attacks, or to bring out-of-character quarrels or emotions into in-character interactions. Many of the

role-players described examples of friendships going sour or an entire guild dissolving due to this issue. This issue is referred to as mixing the in-character (IC) with the out-of-character (OOC) and effectively creates an implicit boundary between these two sides of roleplaying. As one player reflects:

[Player]: I believe some of the rules RPer's abide by, unspoken or not, are RP etiquettes like: No godmodding, no powerplaying, no meta-gaming (taking out of character information as in-character) and definitely, most important one would be not crossing out-of-character feelings into in-character. --

[Player]: Which is most certainly a no-no when OOC feelings get in the way of in-character actions. It would create all sorts of drama, especially in relationship RP. I believe every RP also understands OOC communication is very important too - To prevent hurt feelings and in-character actions/thoughts taken in a wrong way. Sometimes RPer's need that reassurance. [Player]: every RPer* oops

Here, the importance of out-of-character (OOC) communication is also important. Role-players often communicate across both in-character and out-of-character channels during an event or activity to make sure their intentions are known, and actions consented. Even seasoned role-players need to be reminded of this rule.

4.2.3.2 Mutual Respect

Effective and enjoyable role-playing does not come from everyone being nice to each other, but out of a mutual respect for other players, their characters and stories. Guidelines echoing the "Golden Rule" instructing players to treat others as they would expect to be treated are often explicitly stated as guild or community rules. Negative behaviors such as trolling, grieving, or other attempts to purposely annoy and cause grief for players are not tolerated and seen as disrespectful.

However, respect for characters and stories, even those deemed unsavory or morally grey, was also important. The following conversation after a guild recruitment ad captures this peculiar balance:

[Recruiter]: <{Guild name}> is accepting casual and social members who are looking for a guild to call home. We are a 1/6 raiding guild, love to socialize, and are LGBT friendly. We are working our way into organized PvP and have members interested in RP as well.

[Player 1]: any guild thats not lgbt friendly should be shuned

[Player 2]: Always true.

[Player 3]: SHUN THE NONBELIEVERS!

[Player 4]: lol

[Player 1]: it's not 1945 lol

[Player 3]: SHUUUUUUUN!

[Player 5]: Unless you are an rp guild that takes place in 1945?

[Player 3]: Better 1945 than 1901?

[Player 6]: or rp a sexist and/or racist

[Player 6]: dunno how race sprung into my mind, but yeah

[Player 5]: god, those rpers are evil

[Player 6]: or sexist, tbh

[Player 6]: Yeah, but devilishly impressive for being able to put up with their own assholery

Many guilds specifically identified themselves as LGBTQ+ friendly, welcoming, and inclusive. However, while role-players with racist or sexist characters are not always enjoyed by others, some role-players respected their approach nonetheless. As discussed above, some players purposely create hateful and spiteful characters per the lore of the game even though they do not approve of these sorts of beliefs out-of-character. That said, a destructive or harassing approach in role-playing can only be tolerated and respected if those involved consent to it.

4.2.3.3 *Role-Playing is Not Consent*

Behind every character, there is a player, and re-

gardless of the relative distance or closeness between the two, what happens to that character is an important matter. The creativity behind role-playing also requires and enables a sense of agency for both the characters and their players. Just like in their player counterparts in the real world, a character should not have to engage in any activity or make a change to their story that they are uncomfortable with. Similarly, players should not force their motives or stories on others without consent, such as interrupting or interjecting a character into someone else's story. The housing feature in *WildStar*, *Sky Plots*, helped with this issue by allowing role-players to control access.

Consent is an important concern for conflict role-playing, which may impact the wellbeing of the characters involved. This is especially true with the death of a character. One interviewee mentions that they became friends with another role-player following an event where the interviewee killed the other player's character. There were no hurt feelings because they had discussed this before and leading up to the actual in-character act. As the interviewee explained:

“As long as everyone in a story consents to an action most people will go along with a story that might harm or place a challenge for their character. Most people are perfectly fine with simply enjoying a night at the bar, or taking part in a quest storyline. Mostly in areas where people are in power to be the agents of their own destiny they will rarely take offense in my experience.”

Similarly, simply attending or participating in an event should be considered consent. As another role-player makes quite clear:

“I hate that I even have to write this out, but it absolutely bears repeating that ROLEPLAY IS NOT CONSENT. In character, out of character -- roleplay is not consent. Belonging to the

{redacted} channel is not consent. Playing a cute aurin is not consent. Being friendly/flirty with another person in public is not consent. Being in the same scene, on the same plot is not consent. Wearing certain costumes isn't consent. Giving another player consent isn't consent.”

Regardless of the different types of storylines or approaches to role-playing, consent is critical. The player above was understandably frustrated and hurt by advances made by other players and characters during role-playing because they misinterpreted the player's participation in role-playing as consent. Understanding consent in this context is related to respect for others; without it, consent may not be unobtainable.

4.2.4 Enforcement of Social Norms

The social norms of role-players were largely informal and implicitly understood by seasoned role-players. However, the social norms were often encouraged as best practices for role-playing and enforced when violations occur. These social norms, in some form or another, were often posted as the rules of membership for a guild or as the codes of conduct for a community website or forums.

Violations usually invited explicit statements or reminders of the norms, rules, or codes.

More serious violations resulted in other enforcement mechanisms, ranging from avoidance of or ignoring troublesome players to attempts at rehabilitative teaching and explanation. Many players in guilds relied on their officers or leaders to handle issues and remove troublesome or toxic players. However, interviewees did mention several examples of guild collapses due their leadership being unable to resolve issues or disputes.

Enforcing the social norms in role-playing partly depended on whether the player was willing to receive feedback and incorporate it in a meaningful way. As one player puts it:

[Player]: It really depends on the player, if they are willing to work out a compromise. When they are willing to work with us and learn (growing their own skills with gaming) they get much more enjoyment. When they don't.. they will often be ignored. That's the easiest approach over other options which most of don't like or enjoy doing.

[Player]: I've found the RPG folks tend to be very open and willing to help others, probably why you've gotten such good responses online to the study. We want more people to play with us but some, who are going to cause problems or repeated issues, won't like the cold shoulder they get from many players.

Some seasoned role-players tended to avoid or ignore troublesome players rather than deal with them directly, although this seemed to be after multiple attempts to solve the problem. When issues are not resolved outside of role-playing, players will sometimes break the boundary between in-character and out-of-character to seek a resolution or at least stop the behavior. Another interviewee described an instance where they had to pause an establishment-based role-playing event to remind one of the role-players to abide by the posted rules of the establishment, a bar in this case, to solve the issue.

4.3 Normative Information Behaviors

Role-playing as an activity can be understood as a complex or structured collections of information behaviors that includes seeking, sharing, exchanging, evaluating, managing, and archiving, both while in-character and out-of-character.

4.3.1 Out of Character (OOC) Information Behaviors

While out-of-character, players use, manage, archive, and share information from various sources. Much of this information pertains directly to character development and role-playing, but some of it is more

related to the general game or outside topics.

4.3.1.1 *In-Game OOC Information Behaviors*

Within *WildStar*, players primarily seek, share, and exchange information with one another using a multi-channeled, text-based chat system. *WildStar* had a dedicated “Advice” channel where players could ask questions to other players in the zone or region without disrupting other conversations occurring the general/zone, local say, or trade channels; though it was possible to ask questions and share information in any of the channels. In addition to the dedicated Advice channel, *WildStar* also had large social chat groups called circles which facilitate game-wide communication between a group of players regardless of whether they are in the same party or guild. There were many circles maintained by role-players and used to share information out-of-character to discuss role-playing that is occurring in different channels or at other events, or discuss unrelated topics, such as popular culture and news.

One of the popular circles dedicated to role-playing was later added as an official channel, WSRP (*WildStar* Role-Playing), which anyone could join. The WSRP channel and other role-playing circles were often used for information seeking and sharing in relation to role-playing events and activities within the game. Players often used one or more channels and circles for logistical or planning purposes leading up to and during public role-playing events.

Within the game, player- or community-created addons and built-in game features were used to manage information both for general gameplay as well as role-playing. The default features in the game offered ways to manage information but were limited in capacity and customizability. Role-players often had well-developed stories and backgrounds but remembering the details of other role-players’ characters could be difficult. As such, many role-players used an add-on called PDA (Personal Data Accessor) to manage their role-playing information in-game. This addon allowed players to include attributes about their character, such as height, age, weight, etc., a

brief biographical sketch, as well as the type or level of role-playing they were interested in, whether they were currently in a scene, or available or open to role-playing at any particular moment.

The player housing system in *WildStar*, called Sky Plots, is an immensely popular and important feature for many role-players because they were used to create locations for role-playing and served as creative outlets for players to express and develop their characters’ personalities and professions. Intuitively, the housing feature was important for establishment role-playing because many of the settings or venues are created and hosted on players’ Sky Plots. Owners controlled access to their Sky Plots by adding other players as neighbors (which in turn provides mutual access to each player’s Sky Plot) or by setting their plot to public or private. Owners could alter permissions to allow for other players to edit items, materials, and buildings on their Sky Plots, which was helpful for communally created and maintained establishment role-playing venues. However, accessing other player’s public Sky Plot could be difficult if its host was not listed as a neighbor or friend. Addons such as The Visitor and Kael’s Housing Tour, were developed by players to enable searching for and transport to publicly listed Sky Plots.

4.3.1.2 *Outside-of-the-Game OOC Information Behaviors*

Outside of the game, information is sought, exchanged, managed, and archived on a variety of websites and social media services. Players look for, create, share, and manage a great deal of information on officially supported sites, such as *WildStar*’s official wiki site and community forums, as well as on other wikis and community sites. Many guilds had their own websites and forums to share and store information related to their guild’s themes and activities. The *WildStar* role-playing community had its own website, too. There, the forums were often used for sharing character profiles, debating and discussing lore and community issues, sharing other game-related or off-topic information, planning

events, or engaging in forum role-playing. Forum role-playing allowed players to develop their characters and advance their own or communal stories or plots asynchronously. This was a more accessible option for role-players that did not have access to the game or enough free time to role-play in-game.

Social media services and sites, such as Tumblr and Twitter, were popular with role-players. These sites and services provided opportunities for information seeking and sharing directly between developers and players as Carbine developers were also active there. For instance, the organizing host for a public role-playing event, an anthropological expedition, remarked after the event ended that she used Twitter to directly clarify some information with developers:

[Player 1]: Someday we need to twist Pappy to get him in on this.

[Player 2]: Thanks for organizing this symposium {Event Organizer}, it's good to compare notes.

Jon Thorstein: Yeah, a ton of info! I knew practically nothing about the Osun {an NPC race} before tonight:)

[Player 3]: Def will catch the next one:)

[Event Organizer]: Hee! Nod, I invited him but Im sure he's got lots of things on his plate.

[Expedition Leader]: He was very helpful getting back to me in Twitter though, as was Cory Herndon. They were both lovely to work with.

Pappy is the nickname for Chad Moore, who was the Creative Director at Carbine Studios, and Cory Herndon was the lead writer for *WildStar*. As the primary creators of *WildStar*'s lore, they both served as excellent sources for clarifying or confirming information.

WildStar did not have a built-in voice communication as a part of its game client. Many players use Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, such as Mumble or Skype, to talk and share out-of-character information with other players while playing the

game or during role-playing events. Skype was quite popular with role-players because it was international and free and offered text chat in addition to voice and video services. While role-players used these services to communicate and share information while out-of-character or during role-playing to fact-check or obtain consent for their character's actions or plot changes, they were not typically used for in-character role-playing because voice chat could more easily lead to breaks in character and immersion, particularly for those that play characters with accents or of a different gender identity or presentation than their own.

4.3.2 In-Character Information Behaviors

Players also put substantial thought into the goals and professions of their characters, which generated a variety of information needs and behaviors for their characters, too.

Characters need information to survive on Nexus. For some, seeking information was a major aspect of their character's job, as seen in the below interaction between the researcher's character and a Dominion character during an IC interview:

Jonti Thort: laughs, "Indeed! What line o work are ya in? Specifics can be avoided if needed." *winks*

[Character, /emote]: ponders. "Well... that's a little bit complicated. Let's say I'm a procurer of goods and information, but I also moonlight as spiritual advisor and all around ass-kicker!"

Jonti Thort: Profitable line of work in these parts. How do you come about such goods and information? Are you a solo act or part of a larger organization?

Jonti Thort, /emote: takes out and dusts offs his notepad in a panic.

[Character]: I'm used to being solo, but I was part of an organization. Only I was their sole procurer... so basically I'm a solo act. I make friends here and there with my awesomely good looks and infinite charm!

[Character]: And money, of course. A cute fanged grin can only buy you so much.

[Character]: chuckles

Jonti Thort, /emote: laughs, “Well, I’ve had to rely on money in my experience, must need a haircut or something.” Cracks a sly smile.

This character’s description of their work suggests that information is an important commodity for their activities. Since their job involved espionage to some extent, information seeking seems to be a solo task. Given the clandestine nature of their work, discussing the specifics of how and where they find information would have blown their cover or potentially lead to retaliations from other characters, especially if they turned out to be future or past marks.

Other characters in different lines of work tended to be more social. In another in-character interview, an Exile bounty hunter describes how they get their information from other characters:

Jon Thorstein: {unrelated} ... Do you find bounty work through others? How do you go about tracking and finding information on your marks?

[Character, /emote]: furrows her brow, hand going to her hair and pulling through it again as she thinks hard about the question, “I, uh... I guess it... depends? We get bounties off people and- and they usually tell us where to go. Who to kill. Sometimes... sometimes we have to do our own scouting and stuff.” she perks up slightly as she says the last, “Oh- and that’s where I come in! I’m... a, uh... recon specialist?” she squints, nodding to herself, “...or. Or a scout, I guess.”

This character got information from others who are looking to find or eliminate other characters and found relevant information on their own if they could not retrieve it from others.

Despite being in a high-tech, futuristic sci-fi setting and having access to a variety of information and

communication technologies, many characters still seek out information from other characters directly. Characters and their players had access to or refer to a variety of technologies, such as the HoloNet, Nexus’s Internet equivalent; datachrons, smart communication devices each character carried; and the codex, a game feature that was used to track quests, achievement, or path progress; as well as the Galactic Archives, which stored gameplay and lore information unlocked as a character advances through the game, collects abandoned journals, or extracts data from datacubes found through Nexus. The copious lore information was a common reason why role-players selected *WildStar*.

4.3.3 Role-Playing as an Information Behavior

The information exchanged during role-playing is regulated to specific channels to facilitate a focused and immersive experience and maintain the boundary between in-character and out-of-character information worlds. Given the importance of, reliance on, and careful usage of information, role-playing also entails a specific set of normative information behaviors, which involve the use of symbols and channels, sequential information exchange, and the use of addons and external technology.

4.3.3.1 Channels and Symbols

In-game role-playing is a heavily social activity, with events ranging from conversations over tea, like many of my in-character interviews, to large public events, such as celebrations, holidays, expeditions, or lectures, which can have upwards of 40 to 50 (or more) characters in attendance. Since in-game role-playing was primary text chat based, role-players designate and use certain channels for IC information and communication as well as use a shared system of commonly understood symbols to designate OOC information from IC information.

While in-character, players primarily used three in-game chat channels: /say, a local public chat displayed as white text (by default) and is readable by those in the immediate area of the speaker; an

emote channel, where players can activate an animation and/or sound effect by typing a command “[insert command here]” (i.e. /smile, /laugh, etc.) from a list of supported emotes; and /e, a custom emote channel that allows players or characters to make a statement and have it appear like an emote. The text shared in both the regular and custom emote channels are grey in color. Like the /say channel, the emote and custom emote channels are only visible by players within a certain vicinity and can be seen as speech or thought bubbles above a character’s head, if the option is enabled.

Out-of-character information was primarily shared during role-playing activities and events through /party channels that are automatically created when a party (up to 5 members) or raid (up to 40 members) group is formed. The text exchanged in these channels was visible to group members only. The group chat channels helped keep the main role-playing channels clear and allowed for OOC information sharing. For example, the host of a public event needed some help marking themselves with a symbol so that the group could follow them before beginning a tour:

[Host, /party] {Host} started a Ready Check:
Are you ready?
[Character 1, /say]: Walkers....with me.
[Character 2, /say]: ... Guess I'll boot it too.
[Host, /party]: Embarrassingly, I dont know how to mark the tour lead or walking team ><
[Player 3, /party]: target, right-click, mark target i believe:)
[Host, /party]: Not working? Blargh.
[Character 3, /party]: hmm, not sure. no worries
[Character 3, /party]: {Character 3} is now a Main Tank.
[Character 3, /party]: {Character 3} can now mark targets.
[System]: Ready Check finished. All members ready!
[Character 4, /emote]: gasps at {Character 5}.

“Buddy system! Dun go too far ahead!”

[Character 5, /party]: i'm just going to auto-follow you {Host}

[Character 4, /emote]: {Character 6}.

[Character 7, /emote]: smiles over to {Character 8}, “Hey eyes open huh bud? Rangers on escort.”

[Host]: {Host} smiles at {Character 7}.

[Character 9]: {Character 1} are you drunk?

[Character 3, /party]: just follow the ghost or the UFO

[Host, /party]: The ghost with an {NPC} hound head on her mount:D

[Character 7, /say]: Well that didn't take long.

[Character 3, /party]: if anyone gets in trouble just hold still, we'll get you out of it

Here the host turned to the /party chat for help resolving the issue while the event and the conversations of other characters at the event continued on as usual. The host was able to promote Character/Player 3 to main tank, which allows them to place the appropriate location markers. Character 9 is asking whether Character 1 is role-playing their character as drunk as Character 1 was making interesting remarks and bad jokes during the lecture portion of the event. Players often sought clarification, obtained consent for actions or plot changes, or discussed information related to the current role-playing activities via channels assigned for out-of-character information. Players used and managed both IC and OOC information across multiple channels.

Circle chat groups were used primarily for general conversation and out-of-character information but could be used as an IC role-playing channel if specified and agreed upon by those in the circle. Similarly, the /whisper channel, a private channel used for discrete communication between only two characters, could be used for either IC or OOC information sharing or communication. Guilds could use their dedicated /guild chat channel, which is accessible to all guild members at once regardless of location, for either in-character or out-of-character purposes. Heavy role-playing guilds sometimes used their guild

chat for in-character role-playing; one role-player in a heavy role-playing guild explained that they used their guild chat channel to represent communication over using radio or their character's datachrons.

While the designated uses of the channels are generally observed and followed, reminders are usually offered at the beginning of role-playing activities as they may change depending on who is leading the event and how many characters are participating. This is helpful at public events where players from different traditions might be more inclined to use certain channels over others.

Sometimes out-of-character information works its way into in-character conversations. If purposefully done, the out-of-character information is bracketed with a pair of double parentheses “(())” as seen in multiple interview excerpts. These details can also be decided before beginning role-playing via a private OOC conversation. One of the interviewees explains the convention:

[Player]: ((o/))
 Jon Thorstein: Hi! How are you?
 Jon Thorstein: I appreciate your patience! Are you free for the interviews?
 [Player]: ((Doing well. Assuming this as an OOC channel, I won't have to append the (()) .))
 [Player]: ((give me a few minutes.:) Was just finishing of all things a nail trimming. Has been slowing my typing speed a little.))
 Jon Thorstein: ((ack! I have been using it OOC without even thinging about it, hope I didn't offend anyone))
 [Player]: ((No worries.:) But may be a minor footnote.:)))
 Jon Thorstein: ((can we use it as OOC?))
 [Player]: ((It's generally assumed to be OOC, but the double-parenthesies in some circles emphasizes such.))

The opening “o/” is a symbol based emote to signify a wave hello. Traditional emoticons, such as smiley faces, were mostly used during OOC rather

than ICly because the /emote and custom emote options better helped players to stay in-character, but this varied based on level of role-playing. Contrary to being a minor footnote, the normative information behavior of affixing (()) onto OOC statements was a common practice. Double parentheses were also used for editing and clarification purposes. Role-players that made a typos or misspelling often made corrections by inserting their ((revision)) using double parentheses into the IC channel, even if they are using a separate OOC channel, to keep things organized.

4.3.2.2 *Sequential Information Exchange*

Given the sequential nature of communication, timing played a minor yet important role in role-playing. Role-playing activities and events typically advanced in an order where one character says something or completes an action and the other character(s) respond in turn. However, sometimes a character will say something too soon or too late. This tended to happen when one player was a faster typist than the other, there were multiple conversations going, there were more than two characters interacting, or simply because one of the players or characters was a bit impatient or misjudges when the other character or player is done making their point.

In instances when a character was cut off mid-conversation or due the chat box character limit, players would sometimes begin or end their statements with a - or -- to signify that they were continuing on a previous statement or are going to follow up with more. Otherwise, players would have to retype what they had meant to say or offer a quick summary to keep the story from stalling, assuming they noticed the issue. If the conversation was going too quickly or there were many characters involved, things may get missed or ignored either ICly or OOCly. The following excerpt is from a public cross-faction role-playing event (all lines in the /say channel unless noted otherwise):

[Character 1 (Dominion), in /emote]: chuckles

slightly, “Why thank you little one. I am in your debt.”

[Character 1 (Dominion)]: {Character 1} bows to {Character 2 (Exile)}.

[Character 3 (Exile)]: How's things, Jon? Get more of those interviews done?

[Character 2 (Exile) in /emote]: waves dismissively. “Bring beer, better than thanks. Thanks is dumb.”

[Character 1 (Dominion)]: ((gee I was expecting a bit more))

Jon Thorstein: Indeed, I am finished with them, so now I am doing some travelling.

[Character 4 (Dominion)]: There! now try again. There was a cup lodged in a gear!

[Character 3 (Exile)]: ((Where to? Anywhere off-world?))

[Character 5 (Exile)]: Oh yah... whut kinda interviews? Lookin' fer a job?

[Character 3, (Exile)]: ((disregard ((in past.))

Jon Thorstein: Mostly around Alizar, but you can see me here now.

Jon Thorstein: ((ack))

[Character 1 (Dominion) in /emote]: pulls at his overcoat, “A little hot out here, friend chua you have the right idea.” He proceeds to lose a bit of clothes.

[Character 3 (Exile)]: Good to see you again.

Jon Thorstein: I was conducting interviews for a study partially funded by XAS.

Above, Character 3 uses an out-of-character ((statement)) in the /say channel to amend their previous in-character question directed toward the researcher’s character and then suggested to ignore it and move on with the conversation. However, the researcher missed their follow up while typing and added a response anyway. While the conversation moved on without issue, these examples demonstrate how information may get lost as the story moves quickly or if a player misses a comment in the blur of the communication across multiple channels.

4.3.2.3 External Technologies

As mentioned above, role-players often used addons to facilitate role-playing and manage IC information as well as community websites, forums, social media, and VOIP applications to seek and share information. However, some of these external technologies or services were used to extend or supplement role-playing due to in-game limitations that could not be fixed with addons.

For example, some role-players posted links to external websites and other resources to facilitate their activities and events. During a memorial service event, the host shared a link via an inserted OOC comment to help players feel more included and immersed in the event:

[Host in /emote]: ((You guys are free to mingle! We do have a tumblr site to “ICly hang the dedications” The site is at {tumblr url} If you do not have a tumblr acc, you can post as anonymous!))

The game itself did not allow for hanging a dedication or leaving a token at the memorial site, so the event’s host created a Tumblr site to allow characters to place dedications there instead.

4.4 Information Values

While information values are influenced by and related to information social norms and information behaviors described above, this section focuses on the types and sources of information sought and used by role-players, and the hierarchy of relative importance for role-playing information.

Role-players require a variety of information to facilitate their IC and OOC. The first three types of information are important for role-playing: lore information, character information, and role-playing cultural information. Other types of information include general gameplay, community, and off-topic or unrelated information.

4.4.1 Lore Information

Lore information was any information about the story, plot, setting, and history of *WildStar*. Understanding the lore of *WildStar* inspired and facilitated various role-playing activities. In the interview excerpt below, a player describes the first steps in planning their character:

[Player]: I come up with an idea, An Aurin former pirate in {the Player's character's} case. Then I look up everything I can on the race and on environment. What has Carbine said about marauders?

Jon Thorstein: SO you look to official lore first?

[Player]: I try.

Jon Thorstein: If you use something else, how do you know if it is of quality or not? What do you look for?

Jon Thorstein: Ack, sorry if I am moving to fast! Please take your time:)

[Player]: A piece of fiction only holds up so long as it's internally consistent. So if I use anything else, I do everything in my power to conform to the rules of Carbine's universe.

[Player]: I look at pirates, historically. How they worked, how they acted. And seeing how that fits with Carbine's pirates.

[Player]: Then I worked on {the Player's character's} old crew. How did that ship operate. How was the command set up? What did [my character] do? And why? How was she treated?

Jon Thorstein: How long would you say it takes you to create a character?

[Player]: Initially? Concept takes 5 minutes, the research takes up to half an hour. Then about an hour of questing to really start to get to know them.

The amount of research and time, ranging from a couple of hours to multiple weeks, put into characters varied based on how in-depth players wanted to go or their intended level of role-playing. The role-player also stressed the importance of making

sure their character's story is consistent with the official lore. However, sometimes there are gaps in the official lore information. As another role-player adds, these gaps in the official lore sometimes need to be filled with supplemental information:

[Player]: Mostly it's things from my texts, digging around on places like JSTOR and just some creative extrapolation when necessary. To RP in any set world such as WS {*WildStar*}, there has to be some reaches that are made for characters. For instance, no one can really RP as Queen Myala [the reigning Aurin leader] but a player could read up on the lore put a good argument behind it and play an Emissary or court investigator perhaps. It's an odd balance that happens between in game lore, harassing Pappy (Chad Moore) on

[Player]: Twitter for answers and my own creative piecing together of things.

[Player]: That said, I do wish some of the lore was a bit more concrete (though LoreMageddon has helped that a bit) and I wish that maybe the g[r]ind from 1-50 wasn't so lonely but it's still early and now I help anyone out that I can. Mostly since I got so much help myself at times if I called for it.

As mentioned here, role-players generally role-play characters of their own design rather than existing characters within the game. However, role-players can and do align their characters closely with existing characters or groups within *WildStar*'s lore.

Gaps in the official lore were often filled by reaching out to Carbine through social media, the game's forums, or through expansions and clarifications to the lore that are added by each installment of LoreMageddon, which is an periodic event where the Narrative Design Team for *WildStar* collects questions about the lore from the community via social media and then publishes installments of answers that expand on previously published lore and/or adds missing or new lore information. Unofficial

lore information researched by individuals and vetted by the community, known as headcanon or community headcanon, described below, could also be used to fill in the gaps in official lore information.

4.4.2 Character and Story Information

While lore information is a crucial part of the activities engaged in and the characters created, each character also has information related to their own story and the stories they are a part of. Character information includes information about professions or trades, beliefs, personalities, and other attributes.

Since players are encouraged to keep some distance between themselves and their characters, as per role-playing social norms, players often have to do additional research on behalf of their character to better understand their occupations or personalities to create a well-rounded character. One role-player provides a detailed account of the information they seek and use for their character:

[Player]: First of all, if I am playing a character with a profession or disability that's unfamiliar to me, I would try to research deeply into what is it about. For example, if I am RPing a medic, I would look into information on what sort of education, training and qualifications are required to become a profession medical practitioner. Or for {the Player character's} case, I would look up information on {omitted, personally identifiable} amputees and prosthetics. Also, the most important information that all RPer's must

[Player]: research most deeply is the lore of the MMO itself. There's definitely no buts to it. Can't have people breaking lore and start making fairy princess vampire characters. @_@--

Jon Thorstein: True, haha!

[Player]: I think it's helpful if RPer's research more about their character's profession, education and things that might aid in their character development. It helps to build the character more realistically and believable. As for trying

to find the information, let's face it -- We all google things by default XD with the Internet available to us. But I don't always take information I google immediately as reliable, I try my best to find other sources like checking for books/ebooks,--

[Player]: and even ask friends and family who are familiar with the subject. For example, if I were to play a character with depression or PTSD, I would ask my friends who have suffered and coped with depression/PTSD, to offer some insight and how they react/cope with it. I also apply my own personal experiences as well. [Player]: *Wildstar* has a lot of militaristic themes too. I was conscripted into [the informant's country's] army once so it definitely helps I have that knowledge and experience to play characters who are soldiers and military-oriented.

This and other role-players used a variety of information sources to both design and develop their characters and stories. Realistic characters were planned with growth and development in mind. Gaining an understanding of the profession, personalities, physical or mental disabilities, and other character traits allows the player to portray these aspects in a more accurate way. The players also used their own military experience to inform some of their characters. A combination of information from textual sources, people, personal experiences, and lore information was helpful for creating robust and realistic characters.

4.4.3 Role-Playing Cultural Information

As described above, there are several social norms within the role-playing community and culture of *WildStar*. Knowledge of and adherence to these social norms was critically important for facilitating enjoyable role-playing as well as maintaining a healthy and friendly community. Intuitively, this suggests that role-playing cultural information has intrinsic, cultural, and affective value. As such, the social norms of role-players can be considered as role-playing

cultural information.

4.4.4 General Gameplay and Cultural Information

As role-players enjoy activities besides role-playing and are members of the larger, non-role-playing *WildStar* community, information related to general gameplay and the overall community and culture were also relevant. General gameplay information concerns how to do something, how a class or game mechanic works, where to find things, and other news about the game. Players often turn to other players to ask for advice on where to find something or how to do something. The different types of activities within MMORPGs, such as PVE challenges or PVP combat, prioritize and use different types of information. *WildStar* was built on the concept of being challenging to high end raiders, so personal and guild achievements and advancement through end-game PVE content tended to be a higher priority for the general community.

4.4.5 Off-Topic and Non-Game-Related Information

Off-topic and non-game-related information, such as current events news, political and social issues, attempts at and successes with humor, made their way into the information exchanged and communicated by players in the game. The uses of and reactions to off-topic information varies based on the channel and its content. Seemingly off-topic information in certain channels may be discouraged, though humor tended to be more tolerated than rants or debates concerning political, religious, or social issues, suggesting that information was also judged for its affective, entertainment, ideological, or rhetorical value. In an interview, a role-player recounts a time when #GamerGate was brought up:

[Player]: Interestingly, someone tried to bring up Gamergate (lolol) in zone chat once

[Player]: And I very, very hesitantly decided to follow the conversation to see what people

would say

[Player]: I was prepared for the worst!

Jonti Thort: How did it go over?

[Player]: And actually, most people didn't care/didn't have anything negative to say.

[Player]: The person who brought it up was basically embarrassed away.

Jonti Thort: Hmm, good.

[Player]: It's been pretty heartening, for the most part. I suspect the response might be different now that megaservers are here, but [the pre-merger server] in particular was pretty tame.

Jonti Thort: Although, I think that people need to speak out against it. Thankfully GamerGaters increasingly put their foots in their mouths

[Player]: Oh, definitely. The more people that make it apparent how absurd that kind of thing is, the better.

Jonti Thort: Agreed!

Jonti Thort: Agreed!

#GamerGate was a growing controversy during the data collection period. Players responded by ignoring the original poster, which is a similar response given to those that refuse to adhere to the social norms previously discussed. Given the disputable and toxic nature of the content, this type of information seems to have been rejected due to its low rhetorical and/or ideological value.

4.4.6 Hierarchy of Role-Playing Information Sources

Role-playing information, which includes lore, character, and role-playing cultural information, can originate from a variety of sources. However, the information social norms of role-players dictate that lore information from official sources is more valuable than lore information from other sources, such as the community and individual role-players. Official lore information can be found on official websites, forums, and wikis as well as via accounts on popular social media accounts operated by Carbine employees. Role-players also circulated and shared lore information via in-game chat, wikis, and various social

media sites.

Role-playing lore information derives value from both its source and the creators of the sources. Despite coming from official sources, debates and discussions about the meaning of lore information were frequent, especially after a Loremaggeddon installment or tweet from the Carbine narrative team. For instance, the community buzzed about the news that the Aurin having evolved from marsupials rather than apes in one of the Loremaggeddon posts. Other official lore information additions were less controversial. For example, one player shared new lore information in one of the role-playing channels:

[Player 1]: Just in case there was anyone concerned, Pappy just confirmed that desert Aurin are entirely possible

[Player 2]: just did? like twitch or sometin?

[Player 3]: Hooray!

[Player 1]: MAYbe not just, idk. But on his twitter he did

[Player 1]: I just happened to see it come across my dash

[Player 2]: hrm...well they can make like, super cacti land

[Player 4]::D

[Player 4]: There can be forests in the desert.

[Player 1]: “The possible existence of deserts on Arboria is not negated {b}y this lore”

Players often contacted Carbine Studios staff members on Twitter and other social media sites with questions about lore content. Player 2 above immediately asks where and when the information was shared. Player 1 follows up with a clarification as well as the quote pulled from Pappy’s Twitter feed. However, until lore information was published from an official authority figure or source, the community could use semi- or un-official information to fill the gaps. This is often dependent on research done by role-players, either individually or in groups. For example, one player describes a gap concerning Aurin societal structure:

[Player]: Oh, well a lot of people have been trying to figure out how Aurin society would work. We know a few basics but my own studies have helped pin down some examples like the Trobriand Islanders, the Hawaiians and a few other smaller cultures out there that do have some similarities. So, since Pappy and Carbine won't go into detail too much, there's big grey areas.

This interviewee used their background knowledge of anthropology to conduct research on similar societies in the real world to get a better idea of how the Aurin society might work. As mentioned above, non-game related sources, such as books, wikis, and databases, can be used to find information related to creating characters as well as to find information that is helpful for filling in gaps. If enough of the community seems to agree that a particular piece of semi- or un-official information makes sense and fits in accordance with existing lore, it becomes “headcanon,” sometimes spelled “headcanon,” and was often used as a substitute for official lore information. As one interviewee explains:

[Player]: Sometimes “headcannon” also is something to look to if it starts to become widely accepted by the players.

Jon Thorstein: Very cool! When conflicts with the lore or headcannon occur, how do they get handled?

[Player]: That's tricky and really depends on the player. So far *crossing fingers* I've been lucky and haven't strayed too far from the path and made some lucky guesses. However, if something drastic were to change things? Going back and ret-conning or re-writing backstory and sometimes even entire player driven story arcs has to happen. Most are willing to do so, some are not.

Jon Thorstein: Interesting, have you ever had to start over?

Jon Thorstein: Or would you make necessary

adjustments?

[Player]: I've never actually fully started over. I've done some major tweaks here and there but for WS that was thankfully during the beta periods. Most of the reason being that things were still veiled under NDA agreements and could not be spoken about.

While this interviewee's characters had been largely unscathed by changes to lore information revealed through new content or additions to Loremageddon, some players may have had to drastically alter their character's design and ongoing stories and plots to adhere to the new official lore information.

Similarly, since community headcanon lore information was subject to critique from other role-players, role-players were generally encouraged to follow the aforementioned information and character social norms to avoid conflicts and facilitate enjoyable role-playing. However, different levels of role-playing had different degrees of adherence to lore. Heavy role-players were more likely to prefer official lore information over headcanon as much as possible and medium level role-players were more flexible in their use of headcanon lore. In addition to source and authority value, the accuracy or truth of the lore information may influence its value. Of course, given the fictional nature of role-playing, this "truth" value refers to the extent that the information was true per the official lore. However, filling in the gaps and discussing lore was a common part of the role-playing experience.

4.5 Boundaries

Role-players encountered numerous explicit and implicit boundaries. In particular, the boundary between in-character and out-of-character played crucial roles in role-playing activities as well as in fostering personal and community well-being. Additionally, there were boundaries between different subgroups of role-players, between role-players and the general *WildStar* community, as well as boundaries related

to personal life and social preferences, cultural differences, and logistical or temporal aspects.

4.5.1 The IC/OOC Personal Boundary

While information and character social norms aspire to create an impermeable boundary between in-character and out-of-character information worlds, the boundary was slightly less rigid in practice. Though difficult, role-players are urged to design characters that are dissimilar from themselves and keep some emotional distance from their characters to prevent hurt feelings and frustration that may result from in-character confrontations or disagreements. However, some of the exceptions in the personal boundary between IC and OOC information worlds, or overlaps between them, are beneficial for realistic, enjoyable, and meaningful role-playing.

Many role-players create and enact identities and personalities for their characters that are quite unlike their own, while others explore certain aspects of their personalities or interests that they might not be able to explore or pursue in the real world. The boundary between character and player can be breached to create more realistic characters based on the player's personal experience, work background, or the research they have done. When asked about any overlap between their character and themselves, one role-player explained why they had a lot common with their character:

[Player]: Quite some! Without going too much into detail of my personal life, I've been through really rough times in real life. So when I play characters who suffered loss or a dark past, it helps me to portray their emotions and mentality well. Also having the military background, I have some understanding in applying militaristic knowledge into play a soldier character. I won't say they overlap entirely, I still find myself needing to research things that I am foreign to. Like uh,

[Player]: Wildstar is very American aesthetic-wise? Like the Exiles seem more... Southern?

Now, I'm not very familiar with the Southern or the America culture, I would ask my American friends how to RP an Exile right ahahaha.--

Jon Thorstein: Huh, I guess I could see that, now that I think about it.)

[Player]: As for my work, being a QA technician requires me to solve a lot of problems with bug regression and making reports with the defects/bugs I find, I don't think it helps me much in-character but being a QA person and all makes me all super attentive to detail and organized when it comes to roleplay. For example, I would pay a lot of attention to emotes, details in other characters and I get super organized when I plan story plots.

The difficult parts of this player's real life and past experiences helped them to thoughtfully consider the mental health and personalities of their character's they play and present attributes in a realistic way. As seen above, role-players, try to create realistic characters and do not shy away from complicated issues or controversial topics, such as sexism and racism. As such, external beliefs, motivations, or experiences find their way into the characters and stories that players create, though not with care and thought.

4.5.2 The IC/OOC Information Boundary

The information social norms suggest a functional boundary between IC and OOC in terms of how information should be used in role-playing. Essentially, out-of-character information should not be used while in-character unless it was agreed upon as having already been understood or known by the characters. That said, a great deal of information discussed while OOC or through OOC channels directly affected role-playing activities (e.g. consent). Role-players used dedicated channels to separate IC and OOC information as well as communally understood symbols to designate OOC information that made its way into IC conversations. The IC and OOC information bound-

dary was necessary for efficient role-playing and was explicitly understood and enforced by role-players, albeit to different degrees based on the level and type of role-playing.

4.5.3 Boundaries within the RP Community

Any player that regularly engaged in role-playing activities was a part of the role-playing community within *WildStar*. Additionally, different types or levels of role-playing and role-players will hold different information values, particularly in regard to the use of lore information. These social norms, types, and information values can create boundaries between different subgroups of role-players. As one interviewee states:

[Player]: The Roleplay Community is a lot more like a tribal band society with a variety of groups within it with their own tastes, and subcultures.

The variety of groups and subcultures manifested as guilds and other groups with their own communal stories. Guilds often identified their level of role-playing when recruiting new member, which conveyed their information values and expectations for behavior and participation. While individual role-players were free to pursue plots and create characters outside of their guilds, guild activities and stories were typically kept within the themes and rules established and enforced by the guild. Role-players chose to join a guild for a variety of reasons, such as the story or friends. However, role-players were also mindful of the information values, social norms, and levels of role-playing in the guilds and stories they are involved with and in. Differences in any of these areas may result in the player taking their character elsewhere, the guild removing the player, or an attempt to remediate the player's social norms and information values to be more in line with the guild's or groups' rules and expectations.

For stories and plots that were not guild-affiliated, the role-players typically established the rules and expectations of the story and plot before beginning.

In forum-based role-playing outside of the game, the original story's author(s) typically pitched a story, suggested a rule set, and established participation expectations before beginning the actual role-playing. Many of the boundaries between role-players were implicit in nature simply based on the types of activities they are involved in (i.e., they are participating in different stories or plots).

Despite disagreements or differences in levels, themes, social norms, and information values between different subgroups of role-players, most role-players still saw and identified their community as a cohesive group. As one role-player during an interview described:

[Player]: basically, my experience on the culture of the community is broken down into two main divisions. there are of course a middle ground but the two that I've predominantly seen are the people who stick tightly to the established lore and don't accept anything outside of those bounds favorably and there's a group who accepts that the lore exists but mostly make up their own lore and use the canon from Carbine as a loose set of guidelines. rules differ between the two group

[Player]: mainly. For instance our old guild leader wouldn't accept anything that strayed from the accepted lore, things as simple as "aurin become incredibly hyperactive on caffiene." So, I guess the culture of the community that I've witnessed can be very divisive on some topics but seem to stick together when things really count. Though I've found that a lot of the players that I've encountered tend to be a bit more pessimistic and jump to the "doom train" when it comes to something that

[Player]: they don't necessarily agree with. like with the announcement of the megaservers

4.5.4 Role-Playing and the General *WildStar* Community

The role-playing community within *WildStar* is

a subset of the larger, general community. Much of the information used by general *WildStar* players was also used and sought after by role-players, suggesting a permeable information boundary between the communities. While differences in interests and activities are the simple explanations for the boundary between these communities, there were cultural boundaries between the communities due to differences in social norms. This boundary was most apparent prior to the announcement of the megaserver, which foretold the planned merging of the dedicated role-playing servers together with the non-role-playing servers. Some role-players expressed concerns before the server merger about how the non-role-players would interact with role-players after the populations were combined; some role-players even chose to leave *WildStar*.

While non-role-players could join and play characters on role-playing servers, non-role-players typically tended to join servers oriented for other activities such as PVE or PVP. With exception of role-playing on Sky Plots, role-playing in Nexus was typically hosted in public areas. Role-players were often worried that non-role-players would interrupt or interfere with their activities and events or harass them. During an interview with a Dominion character (Character/Player 2 below) after the server merger, a non-role-player (Player 1) approached the researcher and the interviewee to ask for help:

Jonti Thort: How about your run-in with Exiles?

[Player 1, in /say]: Hey, either of you want to fight Metal Maw?

Jonti Thort: ((No thanks, {Player 1}))

[Character 2]: checks watch. "Mebbe later! We are in busytimes!"

[Player 1, in /say]: Oh okay, sorry for bothering you!

[Character/Player 2 in /party]: That was encouragingly polite:)

Jonti Thort in /party: Yes!

Jonti Thort in /party: Was a little worried after they were standing there watching for a bit.

[Character 2]: So, where were we? Exiles? Lessee... not much interaction that didn't involve an exchange of zaps and zowies...

The role-player's choice of words here made it seem that the exchange with the non-role-player went more smoothly than expected. Other role-players reported positive interactions with non-role-players after the merger, often much to their relief. As another interviewee explains:

[Player]: Myself, I think that the Megaservers have been a largely positive experience. From what I've seen running {an online music service} I've seen a lot of PvE'ers out at shows and making requests and largely being positive. They enjoy things and I haven't seen the "roving packs of griefers" that people were afraid of when they were first announced. I've seen more people out and about. As far as my guild goes I haven't seen any difference. We haven't gotten any more applications and

[Player]: things have been kinda stagnant. But I don't think this is particularly attributed to the megaservers but more to people's lack of enjoyment of the game for their own reasons.

While the influx of players did not necessarily result in a lot of new role-players, the relations between role-players and non-role-players seemed to be mostly positive, with some of the general population taking interest and participating in public role-playing events from time to time.

4.5.5 Personal Life and Social Boundaries

While many role-players considered their friendships and relationships with other role-players in the game to be meaningful and true friendships, most did not interact with or know one other outside of role-playing or in the "real" world. When asked if there was a boundary between role-playing and their personal life, one role-player remarked:

[Player]: Big time for {the Player's character}. I keep the two almost entirely separate. That's not to say I'm a different person living a dual life, but more, game friends are game friends and real life friends are real life friends. Both are equally important, but different. Very rarely have I had overlap (Grand total of once). I don't even really share much of my personal life with people online.

[Player]: I also tend to be a sort of distant person at times.

[Player]: Plays into it some.

While this player seemed to suggest that they are a bit introverted, most of the other interviewees shared similar answers. Some mentioned that their own families and real-life friends did not know about their role-playing. However, there were some exceptions. One interviewee said they were planning an overseas trip to meet and stay with friends they had been role-playing with for years for the first time. Other informants mentioned they did role-playing activities in real life, such as tabletop role-playing games (e.g. Dungeons & Dragons) with different sets of friends or family members.

While interacting with other role-players outside of the game seemed to be a rare occurrence, there was one significant exception: couples. At least two pairs of the interviewees were in relationships with each other; and other role-players mentioned that their partners also played *WildStar* or they had met their partners through role-playing.

4.5.6 Global Cultural Boundaries

WildStar servers were region-locked in that once a player selected a server region (such as North America, Pacific, European regions, etc.), the player was limited to create and play characters on servers within that region. Many role-players from around the world chose to role-play on North American server, which created potential for clashes between different cultures on the global stage. As mentioned by one of the interviewees above, learning about

the culture of the other role-players you are interacting with was important. This could be challenging for international role-players for whom English was not their primary language or for those unfamiliar with US culture. As one interviewee explains:

[Player]: Sometimes I meet people who are not very... understanding to my--

[Player]: -- culture or even try to understand I have trouble conveying myself. I try my best to explain myself and be more empathetic for sure. For instance, I get into arguments with my guildies sometimes about views in masculinity portrayed in America and in Asia. Like hmmm umm, my Dominion character so happens to look androgynous, he's a guy, does wear fashionable stylish regalia, has long hair which could be seen as 'girly' to the Americans. But in Asia, we don't see it as girly

[Player]: or effeminate. Our aesthetic preferences are more graceful and delicate.

[Player]: And I take offense to having my character teased as unmanly or girly.

[Player]: But I try to be understanding that there's cultural differences and all.

As seen above, gender norms and roles vary across different cultures. While the player was offended by some of the treatment, they also tried their best to explain their culture to others. This player also explained they sometimes had disagreements with their friends and guildmates over misinterpretations or incorrect word use, and that they often had to put in extra effort to check their typing as English was not their first language.

4.5.7 Logistical and Time Boundaries

Simple logistics and time also created boundaries for role-players. Role-playing in *WildStar* was a time-consuming activity. Many of the IC interviews ranged from one to two hours long (not including the OOC portion of the interview sets) and most of the public role-playing events the researcher at-

tended lasted two or more hours.

Given the time commitment it takes to develop and research characters and to engage in role-playing, many role-players had to balance their time with other commitments. Forum role-playing was an asynchronous alternative to in-game role-playing that allowed role-players to participate in stories on a more flexible schedule.

In relation to the global boundary described earlier, time-zone differences of players also created challenges in scheduling meetings and participating in events. As one of the internationally based role-players states:

[Player]: Ah yes, the most prevailing boundary for me would be timezone conflicts. Most RP happen in the mornings for me, I have to force myself out of the bed to RP with the Americans XD My job is also full-time, 5 days a week so I end up missing out a lot of RP action sometimes. When I do actually get online like... right now, I'm usually gaming alone 8 and my friend list is empty. The only time I get a lot of RP activity is during weekends or on days where I get time off. Time to
[Player]: game/RP is definitely an issue to me.

5. Discussion

5.1 In Relation to Relevant Research

Role-players use and encounter various types and forms of information in the following categories: lore information; character and story information; role-playing cultural information; general gameplay and general cultural information; and off-topic or non-game related information. Similarly, Storie (2008) found four types of information used among *WoW* players: goal-based, strategy, social, and cultural. While there are similarities between the types of information described in this study and in Storie's (2008) study, Storie was not specifically

looking at role-players, resulting in some distinct differences.

Using Storie's (2008) categories, lore, story, and character information can be considered strategic information as these types of information impact the design and development of a player's character over time despite not necessarily being useful for beating the game. However, knowledge of lore, story, and character information does make it easier to collaborate and communicate during role-playing activities. General gameplay information equates to goal-based information, as it is needed to advance through the game in the mechanical sense (where and how to find things). Both role-playing cultural information and general cultural information straddle Storie's (2008) categories for social and cultural information. Role-playing cultural information includes news about currents and planned events as well as information about issues, rules, and values. Similarly, the cultural information of role-players includes specialized vocabularies (ICly, OOCly, headcanon, etc.) and unique activities, which manifest as their normative information behaviors (dedicated IC/OOC channels, (()), etc.).

Contrary to Storie's (2008) findings that players were more likely to consume information than produce it, role-players in *WildStar* continuously create a great deal of information, including character and story information, and community headcanon lore through the storytelling and improvisation that are intrinsic to role-playing.

Additionally, role-players store, manage, and share the information they create on their character profiles, websites, wikis, forums, and social media. In line with findings from Harviainen and Savolainen (2014) and Karlova and Lee (2012), the role-playing community is also adept at using add-ons or mods to manage and use information more easily, as also discussed in Hollister (2019). Role-players also create a variety of media. Creating artwork and using media such as music to supplement role-playing adds richness and depth to role-playing activities (Hollister 2019).

While VOIP applications were used for OOC com-

munication, role-players in *WildStar* did not use VOIP for IC role-playing because it threatened immersion, partially supporting findings from Williams et al. (2011) that role-players are less likely to use VOIP compared to non-role-players. Difficulties in emulating voices, dialects, or accents, particularly due to differences in age, gender, and race (as most of the characters are extraterrestrial aliens) between the character and player, seemed to contribute to this practice. Any of these issues could break immersion that would be maintained by using text only. While using VOIP technologies may still facilitate trust between players, as Williams et al. (2007) found, the community website and forums and role-playing events seemed to be the primary locations for communication, information exchange, and the community development, supporting findings from Hulsey (2009).

Similarly, as Afrić (2007) suggested, visual information is also important to role-players in terms of their identities. The ways in which characters presented, styled, or dressed themselves provides valuable information about their character. Medium and heavy role-players were more likely to wear specific outfits on their characters to portray their professions or personalities. Visual elements related to gender and race were also important for role-playing.

The findings above confirm that role-players in *WildStar* also exhibit the kinds of social information behaviors and encountering observed by Adams (2009b) and Monahan (2009). Role-playing itself can be characterized as a set of specialized information behaviors, a social process of seeking, creating, using, evaluating, managing, and exchanging information across multiple channels and boundaries that are regulated by the social norms and information values systems of the community. Of importance to the information behaviors of role-players overall is their social nature. Role-players rely on each other and their community, considering them to be trusted sources and evaluators of information. In this sense, many of the information needs and wants of role-players may result from the imposed queries (Gross 1995) from others in the community.

5.2 The Interplay of Information World Concepts

As seen throughout the findings, there is substantial interaction and interplay between the information world concepts. There are a variety of social types of role-players and distinct social norms that regulate both character, player, and community behavior, and in turn, influence information value systems, information behaviors, and boundaries.

5.2.1 Social Types, Social Norms, and Boundaries

Role-players are inspired or motivated to role-play for a variety of reasons, ranging from simply having fun to helping others, or working on their writing skills. These motivations and inspirations were often associated with positive emotions, such as the enjoyment and fulfillment gained through role-playing events and interactions with other players and characters. Emotion also plays a role in the character, information, and community social norms that require strict enforcement of the in-character/out-of-character boundary. This boundary serves multiple purposes in regards to these social norms: 1) to encourage players to keep a safe distance between themselves and their characters by creating characters different from themselves to avoid hurt feelings; 2) to screen against out-of-character information being used to disrupt in-character stories (also known as meta-gaming); 3) to discourage in-character disputes from tainting out-of-character relationships, or vice-versa. These social norms all try to protect the emotional well-being of the individual role-player as well as the well-being of the community.

However, two of the community social norms present seemingly contradictory motivations or conflicting priorities with the character social norm that discourages certain character archetypes. As discussed above, one community social norm stipulates that role-players treat other role-players, their characters, and stories with respect. Another community social norm requires consent from each player taking

part in role-playing activities. A player or character abiding by these community social norms, by being respectful and getting consent from others, could potentially still play a character that violates the above character norms. And, in fact, this often happens when a player creates and role-plays as a villain; given the preference for realistic or morally grey characters, this was not uncommon.

However, violating consent during role-play was unacceptable regardless of context and obtaining consent seemed to be prioritized. Dibbell (1994) argues that while a rape in cyberspace may not be a physical assault, it is still an unspeakably violent and unwanted attack on the mind of the player behind the character or avatar, resulting in very real trauma, abuse, and harassment. The role-playing community's enforcement of community social norms and the IC/OOC boundary are all meant, in part, to mitigate or prevent harassment, negativity, and abuse while also supporting an inclusive, safe, and fun role-playing experience. These norms and boundaries act as safeguards to protect the person behind the character because as it can be difficult not to become too close to your character or not to take in-character interactions personally.

While acquiring consent was paramount, the remaining social norms impact player behavior based on the context. Within role-playing, the context was created by the IC/OOC boundary. While out-of-character, disruptive, discriminatory, or abusive behavior was not tolerated; but, while in-character, such behaviors and actions might be tolerated if the players involved consented to it. Although such behaviors were often controversial, some role-players respected players for their character's design. The IC/OOC boundary created two information worlds with different variations or interpretations of community social norms.

Similarly, role-playing social norms strongly suggested players to create characters unlike themselves and to keep out-of-character business and information separate from the in-character information world. While role-playing offers players the creative freedom to be who they want to be, there were some

sacrifices or limitations to consider and abide by to facilitate a fulfilling and pleasant experience for others in the community.

Without these social norms, social types and player/character behaviors would not be regulated, resulting in a disruptive and potentially negative role-playing experience that could threaten the stability of those involved in a plot, guild, or potentially the community overall. Williams et al. (2011) found that role-players in *EverQuest II* created characters that were truer to the players behind them and argued that role-playing offers both an escape from the real world as well as an opportunity to express themselves, feel accepted, and socialize with like-minded individuals. While the character social norms of role-players in *WildStar* encourage players not to create characters too like themselves, both role-playing communities seem to fulfill the same goals, albeit in different ways.

The findings also suggest that individuals within certain contexts are encouraged to conform their personal choices to the expectations of the community or risk being excluded from it. An individual could role-play by themselves in an isolated information world, but they would have to abide by the social norms of the community if they bridged wanted to partake in role-playing activities with others.

Yu (2011) criticized the social emphasis of the theory of information worlds by arguing that its concepts do not allow for the characterization of an individual's information world that differentiates it from that individual's social worlds. While the findings may not characterize the information world of an individual role-player, it is clear that important social types, social norms, and boundaries within the role-playing community are specifically focused on navigating or mitigating potential issues that may arise between individual role-players and the larger role-playing community, as well as between individual role-players and their role-playing characters or identities. In a sense, reconciliation between an individual's information world and that of the larger community is a core aspect of becoming and

being a role-player. Given the complex social nature of role-playing, articulating an individual role-player's information without considerations of the community's impact and influence would be difficult. Accounting the individual information world of a role-player could be possible if the role-player was socially-isolated and the concepts adjusted or re-defined to focus on the individual's self-perceptions of type, norms, information behaviors and values, and boundaries. However, Burnett's (2015) expansion of information worlds to information domains may yield a more suitable and plausible solution.

5.2.2 Social Type, Information Value, Information Behaviors, and Boundaries

The social types of role-players impact information values and information behaviors, and, in turn, establishing and enforcing boundaries within the role-playing community.

For example, the heavy role-players tend to prefer, use, and consult lore information from official sources rather than accept headcanon lore information sourced from the community. This information value constraint may influence heavy role-players to ignore or reject headcanon lore information despite its value and use by role-players at the casual or medium levels. While official lore information is preferred over community headcanon information, in general, and can be understood as an information social norm of the overall community, subgroups of role-players of different social types and information value systems will prefer or require certain types and sources of information over others. This finding is similar to Lee's (2019) findings regarding journalists as opinion leaders on Twitter. Multiple social types with different social norms, information behaviors and values may exist within the same information world or perhaps as similar, overlapping information worlds. Medium and heavy role-players essentially do the same activities, they just have slightly different approaches. These differences may, in turn, create boundaries that create their own information worlds,

depending on the permeability of the boundaries or the flexibility or tolerances of social norms and information values.

According to Jaeger and Burnett (2010), the parameters of information content, perception, control, and information economies impact information value systems. To demonstrate the impact of these parameters on information value, please recall an example from Section 4.4.6 where a role-player shares a bit of lore information from Pappy on Twitter that deserts could have potentially existed on the Aurin's home planet of Arboria. Content-wise, the tweet from Pappy is relatively vague, neither confirming nor denying the possible existence of deserts. To a heavy role-player, this might not be enough of a confirmation at face value to create an Aurin character from the desert. To a medium or casual role-player, though, this might be more than enough to justify such a character or story. Since the source of the lore information is an official one, Pappy, either levels or types of role-players may value it more highly than community headcanon lore information. However, heavy role-players may have more difficulty in justifying its use due to its content.

Relating to Harviainen and Savolainen (2014), the lore information may supply social or power capital. More established, experienced, or knowledgeable role-players may be able to influence how other role-players interpret or use the information, assuming they are of the same type or level of role-player. Heavy role-players trade control of information to official, authoritative sources because they perceive this information to be true(r) to the original story or history of *WildStar*. Due to their social norms and information values, heavy role-players may enforce or control the use of official lore information for heavy role-playing.

For medium role-players, the lore information may give them the power they need to make a desert Aurin because their information value systems are more flexible and they are willing to fill in the vague gaps with community-approved headcanon lore. The more relaxed information values of medium or casual

role-players allow them to use a greater variety of information sources and to take a more active role in analyzing, discussing, and creating the information they use for role-playing.

While this lore information might not have monetary or economic value to a role-player because it is freely available, it may have intellectual or creative value because it can be used for creating characters or developing plots. Relating to Harviainen and Savolainen (2014), knowledge of role-playing cultural information (which including the community's social norms and information values systems) may provide experiential and power capital to more experienced role-players. As such, role-playing event hosts, community leaders, and guild officers, and other experienced or powerful role-players could be looked to as enforcers of social norms or as guides for new role-players.

5.3 Implications and Applications

In the context of role-playing, clashes may arise when individual information worlds interact with the information worlds of others within and outside of the community. For example, as a new role-player joins the community, the socialization and learning process involves a reconciliation between the individual's information world and the information world(s) of the community. If a new role-player does not try to or cannot adhere to the social norms of the community or learn to value and use the same types of information, their integration into the community is likely to be unsuccessful.

Larger information worlds, such as communities, are formed when social types, social norms, information values, normative information behaviors, and boundaries begin to solidify or when a consensus is reached among the individuals involved. Discrepancies or disagreements in any of these areas can lead to the creation or destruction of information worlds or conflicts between or within them. In the role-playing community, social types are regulated by social norms, which in turn are differently enforced

depending on the individual's relation to the boundaries of their information worlds. Role-playing involves multiple, overlapping information worlds in which players and characters interact with information differently depending on their social context. Social types are intricately related with social norms and information values, which often dictate information behavior, which, in turn may establish and impact the permeability of boundaries within and among information worlds.

The relationship between social types, social norms, and information values may have implications for information and media literacy as well as information avoidance and confirmation bias. For example, heavy role-players tend to prefer and more heavily rely on official game lore information and avoid community head canon lore information while medium role-players tended to be more flexible in their use of community head canon. A person's social type may influence where, how, and which types of information are trustworthy and useful. Furthermore, sharp boundaries established by social identity and associated social norms and information values may mean that some types of information are actively avoided, ignored, undermined, or simply not be made unavailable. This may suggest that information and media literacy instruction should address potential biases that learners, students, or library users may hold due to social types, social norms, or information value they associate with or subscribe to. Without addressing these aspects, learners may not be able to seek, evaluate, and use information and media effectively, efficiently, or ethically. As such, the theory of information worlds may have practical applications in instructional settings and other education settings as well as theoretical implications for myriad other social contexts.

6. Future Work & Conclusions

6.1 Future Work

Sharing a similar fate to many MMORPGs,

WildStar shut down on November 28, 2018, just over 4 years after its launch on June 3, 2014, due to a number of reasons (McWhertor 2018, Sarkar 2014). As such, this study has value in being among the few focusing on *WildStar*. Consequently, further research on *WildStar* or its role-playing community may not be possible, though it may eventually become available as through an unofficial private server (Neal 2019). The researcher hopes to continue exploration and compare the information worlds of role-players in and across other online games and spaces.

The researcher will also explore potential applications for role-playing and MMORPGs in LIS education. In this effort, a forthcoming book chapter using data from this project will provide evidence-based guidelines and recommendations for using online game-based role-playing to teach epitextual analysis and other critical literacy skills (Hollister, In Press or 2021).

Additionally, the researcher is a member of a theory development group focusing on testing and building the theory of information worlds. The data and findings from this project are being used, in part, by the group to develop a rigorous, yet flexible codebook that researchers can use across research contexts and with various types of data and methods. The codebook will be made available in a forthcoming publication from the researcher and the research group. In addition to the codebook, the researcher will continue to explore the potential applications and implications of the theory of information worlds in other research contexts.

6.2 Conclusions

The information worlds of role-players in *WildStar* are intricate and interconnected. The social types of role-players are intertwined with social norms and information values, which are interrelated to information behaviors and boundaries, both within and outside of the role-playing community. Role-playing requires a specific set of information behaviors and rules to be effective, efficient, and, importantly,

enjoyable.

Given the findings and theoretical implications of this study, the researcher hopes that more scholars and educators in LIS and related fields will explore the communities and rich worlds in MMORPGs and other online games. As more becomes known about

the complex information behaviors in online games and role-playing, the better their educational and recreational value can be leveraged in library, classroom, and research settings. Perhaps they can get into character and become an ass-kicking, spiritual-advising procurer of information, too.

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