

The Rise of Discord

(STS Research Paper)

An Undergraduate Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia Charlottesville, Virginia

In Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Science, School of
Engineering

Jack Vance

Spring, 2021

Department of Computer Science

Introduction

In our ever-changing world, people are finding new ways to interact and fulfill the social desires we have as humans. Online communities have been around since before the days of MySpace in 2003. The rise of social media and smartphones enabled everyone with an electronic device to have an online presence in some shape or form. Discord, an app targeted at online gamers has changed the way that people are able to interact online. I personally spend a lot of time on discord in voice chats and text chats talking to people from across the country (some in Canada and Europe as well). Online interaction is now more important than ever, with the threat of sickness when in contact with too many people due to the pandemic.

Jason Triton made his first social gaming platform, OpenFeint, in 2012. This platform was built for mobile and had a very simple interface where users could chat and see who is playing what games. He sold OpenFeint, then founded his own game development company. They focused on games that relied on teamwork and communication, but Triton realized that it was hard for players to communicate effectively, so he moved on to his next project: Discord. Discord was released in 2015. The target audience, of course, was gamers, and that is how it started to grow. Originally gamers joined discord to talk with their friends through voice chat during games and use the text chat rooms to see who wants to play. Five years later, discord has over 250 million users and many of them are using discord to connect with each other regardless of whether they play games (Coberly, 2019). I am even in multiple discord servers for my classes this semester. The user base will be primarily younger and in areas with decent internet connections, and currently, the majority of discord users' population still overlaps with the population of gamers. Another group that may increase in the future would be students/educators as teachers look for ways to increase involvement during online classes many of them have turned to discord as a solution. The third group is online communities. Many online communities on other platforms have created a discord server as a way of interacting with each other (Chin, 2020).

In this paper the questions: who is choosing discord for their communities, how is Discord different from other platforms, and how is an effective community on discord made, will be explored.

Literature Review

Discord is unique as an app for gamers, professionals, educators, and friends alike. Although it is useful for many different demographics, Discord has only been around since 2015, so there has not been significant research done on this platform. Using previous literature, different perspectives on social media, online communities, and Discord itself were found.

Social media is now very ingrained in society educationally, politically, and in advertising. Online interactions through social media or other means are more beneficial when they are reinforcing real-life interactions. Facebook provides a place where people are able to find communities that share their interests. Incorporating social media platforms into a course's curriculum can increase student motivation (Noor Al-Deen, H. S., Hendricks, J. A., & Ebook Central - Academic Complete (2012)). Facebook primarily consists of users posting and liking other user's posts, sometimes commenting as well. On Facebook, posts are made, then the algorithm makes those posts appear on certain people's feeds. Finally, users either like/dislike and move on or engage in commenting on the image or video. Each user's feed will be different based on their past usage of the app. Facebook also allows users to communicate private or personal information in a very public way for many people to see at once (Meikle, G. 2016).

The scope of online communities can vary widely. Some online communities succeed due to having a large amount of content in the form of events, images, or videos for the members to discuss and interact with. Some online communities evaluate newcomers when they join to avoid allowing toxic members into their community. It is more difficult to encourage commitment in an online community than in an in-person organization (Kraut, R. E., Resnick, P., Kiesler, S., & Ebook Central - Academic Complete (2011)). Online communities need to meet Maslow's hierarchy of needs for people to contribute more, safety, belonging, then self-esteem must be satisfied in that order. If someone does not feel safe then they

are less likely to use an app and less likely to feel like they belong. A lot of people use social media to offer support and give support to others they know online and in-person (Riva, G., Wiederhold, B. K., Cipresso, P., & DOAB: Directory of Open Access Books 2016).

Many Reddit communities created Discords for users to interact more on a daily basis. On Discord, content is more difficult to moderate because there is a higher volume of messages and interactions are more personal. Different tools like scripts or bots can be used on Discord to help moderate and improve communities (Kiene, C., Jiang, J. A., & Hill, B. M. 2019). Discord allows students and teachers to communicate more effectively outside the classroom. Students and teachers have access to communication at any time with Discord and the message history is always available. Students can also view questions asked by their peers that TAs or teachers have answered on Discord. According to a survey taken by students who took a course that was supplemented with Discord, over eighty percent of students believed Discord was helpful (Fonseca Cacho, Jorge, "Using Discord to Improve Student Communication, Engagement, and Performance" 2020).

Discord enables both gamers and games to promote more activity by finding common interests. In community Discord servers users often discuss everyday life and other topics in addition to the community's subject (Baguley, J. 2019). Discord versus social media may enable users to feel more comfortable and less insecure while using the app due to the control of the privacy of the users and common interests. In Discord, users can post "pictures, videos, images, and links" in various places such as group messages, private messages, or community servers. Some communities have a process to join the Discord server, such as an interview, while others joinable with just a link. Most community Discord servers have announcements with alerts and discussion chats as well. Additionally, Discord users can easily switch between communities or chats (Anderson, M. (2019).

Framework and Methodology

Actor Network Theory (ANT) is best used to describe the relationships in between the discord apps and its users. ANT is a framework that describes topics as a series of changing networks of relations. The Discord app itself is a very strong actant in this network. Through the Discord application, many people are able to connect and form communities, strengthening the network. Often new users of discord are invited by friends, teachers, or colleagues, that have used discord before. Additionally, within discord itself, many users are invited to other new communities or servers by friends in a mutual server. This further strengthens the network by introducing more nodes to each other and increasing use of the actant, Discord.

Discord has many tools like roles, emotes, channels, categories, and servers that allow users to create the communities in their own vision. These tools or components are actors that help strengthen the actant, Discord, and attract more nodes, users, to the network.

Among discord's actors are its ease of use, customization, and various methods of communication. Discord has direct messages, group messages, and servers. Within each of these users can send text messages, links, voice chat, video call, share their screen, or send other types of media. A single user can be a member of up to 100 community servers. Switching between these servers requires only a single click. Additionally, each of these servers has voice and text channels that can be used for various purposes. Voice channels on discord are very convenient because you can see who is in the channel already, it only takes one click to join, you can leave without ending the call, and there is no ringing sound like answering a phone call. With strong, compelling actors, many nodes are attracted to the network.

Now, Discord is not just for gamers, you can talk with friends from high school, college, or around the world and feel like they are right there with you. Current users encourage online communities and educators to create discord servers for their audiences to allow them to communicate more online. When joining a course or visiting an online community it is not unusual to see invitations to a discord

server as well. Currently, Discord is in the phase of translating from just an app for gamers to an app for everyone, but Discord does not have to change its features for this because the actors involved in the app are applicable to any online community.

If more and more nodes keep joining the network, Discord will continue to grow in its number of users and its user base and what it is used for until it is no longer an app for gamers, instead it will become an app for everyone.

For data collection, I am planning on making a questionnaire and sending it to as many people on Discord as possible to get the most data possible. The sample size will be as many people as will fill it out and the demographic will be people I am able to contact on Discord. A survey will help me acquire information on how often certain people use Discord, what they use it for, how they rate it compared to other platforms, etc. Additionally, I want to interview owners/admins of different Discord servers to get more information on what managing a Discord community is like. Owners and administrators will have a different perspective, as they have to deal with moderating disruptive users and encouraging growth and user interaction. Potential Biases include my usage of discord and the users that receive the survey having similar views as I do. I can account for this by sending the survey to as many different groups as possible.

Data Analysis

I created a survey with ten questions to ask people about their usage of Discord and other social platforms. The survey was sent out to all of the Discord servers I am in as well as posted a subreddit dedicated to filling out surveys. The results may be skewed toward the demographics of people who already use Discord and Reddit because of this. To determine who is choosing Discord for their communities, demographic questions were asked about users age and gender. To determine how Discord is different from other platforms questions were asked about why Discord is used and how often users are on the platform. Questions were asked about how to set up an effective community and keep it active to

determine how to make a successful community on Discord. A variety of responses were received about these questions from over 50 respondents to the survey.

Now let's get into the demographics of who uses Discord. Results from the survey suggest that the majority of people that use Discord are quite young. Over 80% of respondents were under the age of 25 and only 5% were above 30 years old. Two-thirds of the respondents were male and only about one-third was female, but this is less extreme of a difference between my personal perceived difference of the demographic differences on Discord. Over time, this ratio may even out more as more people join Discord for more purposes as well. Of those filling out the survey over 95% had used Discord before and most use it frequently. About 80% of the respondents use Discord daily for a variety of different reasons.

Often the reason someone uses Discord is to join a server that has a topic or group of people they are interested in interacting with. For example, someone may join a Discord server where people talk about their favorite TV show or play a game they like. The next question to discuss allowed multiple selections and it helps answer the question of why people are using Discord. Eighty percent of the respondents have joined a Discord server for gaming purposes. This is not unexpected as Discord was originally meant as a way for gamers to be able to talk to each other during games similar to TeamSpeak. Unexpectedly around 30% of respondents had used Discord for educational purposes as well. I first saw Discord servers made for my classes in the fall 2020 semester due to the pandemic. These results suggest that this may be becoming somewhat common for classes that are more online based. Around 10% of people have also joined Discord servers for topics like art, sports, and tv shows. Few people joined Discord servers for language exchange, books, science fiction, or politics.

One of the final two questions of the survey asked users about how they would set up a new Discord server to make it successful. This question was open for a short response, so participants can type their answer. Many of the respondents said they did not know how to or have never created a successful public server. Among the responses, one of the most common ideas was to have a solid structure and foundation to the server. This includes getting a good team of moderators that can be both active and fair in their administration. This also means setting up the channels to be self-explanatory, easy to use, and not

cluttered. Another common response is to have a really good topic and community to center the Discord server around. For example, making a server that is dedicated to a certain TV show would be a great topic to choose. Then you have to invite other people that watch that show and share the similar interest to the Discord server. It is really important to have members that are regularly active as well. Having mods that are active will help this. Once you have a large enough membership of show watchers, then the Discord should be active on the day a new episode comes out. Centering the server around a topic like this ensures that the Discord will be active when episodes or news about the show comes out, but what about when there are no new episodes what will keep people there?

The final question of the survey is also open ended for short answer responses. This question asks users how to keep a Discord server active over long periods of time. There were many different responses to this question and many are similar to the previous question. One of the most prominent responses was to have frequent server events and contests to keep people engaged. Events can range from gaming tournaments, to social mixers, to writing challenges, to art challenges, to themes, to anything really. Having a strong management team was also a frequent response. This is expected as Discord moderators often have to deal with problematic users and run events to help with engagement. If the leaders of a community put in more effort they are more likely to see more activity from other members of the community as well. Other answers include having a reason or topic that is meaningful enough to the members of the server to keep them interacting.

Discussion

For the next part of the study I interviewed several frequent users of Discord to get their thoughts on why they use the platform. The user Harcos said he often uses Discord to stay in contact with military or other friends that he knows in person, but cannot see often. Additionally, he has met a lot of new people on Discord that he has become close with online. Harcos says Discord has “everything you need, messaging, voice chats, music bots, photos, games. It’s a hub for everything.” Harcos experience reinforces the idea that Discord, as a platform, has so many tools that it is bound to succeed. Furthermore,

Harcos, like me, has met people from areas far away from where he lives and made connections and friendships through Discord he would not have otherwise.

Next, I interviewed someone with the username Nick. Often on Discord users will not use their real name as their Discord name in gaming oriented communities, but this is becoming more common with the rise of more general social and educational Discords. Nick values that Discord has text and voice channels that can be rearranged and organized easily to suit the needs of each community. He says the roles that can be assigned to members of a server provide further organization. Additionally, the mute, deafen, and disconnect buttons help with organizing when a large number of people are in a voice chat at once. Nick says Discord is the only place where he can go on 24 person raids with voice communication for the game Elder Scrolls Online. “Discord is faster, more reliable, more user friendly, and more accessible than nearly all of its counterparts.”

AceRenegade is the username of the next person I interviewed. AceRenegade uses Discord because it is easy to use and has the best layout of any platform for organizing meets or playing games online. AceRenegade is really into the video game Rocket League. Through Discord, he was able to meet other people that play this game and eventually they made a team together that competed in small tournaments. AceRenegade helped make and organize a Discord server for his Rocket League team, so they could communicate effectively.

Someone who has had a different experience than the other users I interviewed on Discord goes by the username Chaz. Chaz mainly uses Discord because it is quick and easy to talk to his friends on the platform. Chaz is not just gaming on Discord, he also uses Discord to search for potential romantic partners. This can be difficult, Chaz explains, as people can lie about their personal details, such as gender and age on the internet. “When you just see an icon and hear a voice you can only know so much.” While Discord is great for some things, I do not believe that it is a great dating app; however, that may change as the platform evolves and more people use it in different ways.

Conclusion

In Discord, as in social circles, people are dynamic. Because of this, Actor Network Theory explains the relationship between Discord users and the app quite well. Without Discord and its easy to use, customization, many of the users would not be on the platform or interacting. Discord as an app is the catalyst that enables so many relationships to develop, but these relationships are always changing. If time is not put in, if administrators are not active, if events are not planned, these strong relationships of talking everyday can wither away. A Discord community, like a club or relationship takes work. If you want to have an active community for a long time, you will have to be active, your moderators will have to be active, and you will need to keep coming up with new ideas and events to keep people engaged.

Discord is an app that is growing daily thanks to its easy to use interface and vast customization. Many users feel strongly about the features of Discord being superior to competitors for what they want out of an app. What started as only an app for gamers to communicate faster during missions and raids has become an app for students, socialites, musicians, artists, and people of all interests in places around the world are able to connect on Discord. Discord has a primarily younger and male audience, but is growing in both popularity and diversity as time goes on. Anyone can make a Discord server, but the secret to keeping people active in your community lies in frequent events paired with active and fair management. Of course, the most important thing is centering your community around a topic and finding the community that enjoys or relates to that topic.

Bibliography

Anderson, M. (2019). *Discord and the Harbormen gaming community*. Retrieved from <https://mayajanae.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Discord-and-the-Harbormen-Gaming-Community.pdf>

Baguley, J. (2019). *Gates and channels: An ANT-oriented approach to understanding fan community behavior and identity on a Discord chat server*. Retrieved from https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/21878/james_baguley_thesis_final.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Bainbridge, W. S. (2020). *The Social Structure of Online Communities*. Cambridge University Press.

Chin, M. (2020, June 30). Discord raises \$100 million and plans to move beyond gaming. Retrieved December 05, 2020, from <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/30/21308194/discord-gaming-users-safety-center-video-voice-chat>

Coberly, C. (2019, May 13). Discord has surpassed 250 million registered users. Retrieved December 05, 2020, from <https://www.techspot.com/news/80064-discord-has-surpassed-250-million-registered-users.html>

Fonseca Cacho, Jorge, "Using Discord to Improve Student Communication, Engagement, and Performance" (2020). *UNLV Best Teaching Practices Expo*. 95.

Kiene, C., Jiang, J. A., & Hill, B. M. (2019). Technological Frames and User Innovation. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW), 1-23. doi:10.1145/3359146

Kraut, R. E., Resnick, P., Kiesler, S., & Ebook Central - Academic Complete (2011). *Building Successful Online Communities: Evidence-based Social Design*. MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.

Mattson, K. (2017). *Digital Citizenship in Action: Empowering Students to Engage in Online Communities*. International Society for Technology in Education: Portland, Oregon.

Meikle, G. (2016). *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*. Routledge: New York.

Noor Al-Deen, H. S., Hendricks, J. A., & Ebook Central - Academic Complete (2012). *Social Media: Usage and Impact*. Lexington Books: Lanham, Md.

Riva, G., Wiederhold, B. K., Cipresso, P., & DOAB: Directory of Open Access Books (2016). *Psychology of Social Networking Vol. 1. Personal Experience in Online Communities*. de Gruyter: S.l.