The Rise of Discord

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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).

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.