

Sustainable Sociality: Managing Behaviour in Videogame Communities on Discord

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INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communications platforms play host to countless, myriad interactions between gamers every day. Users unified by shared interests and ideals coalesce into fan communities centred around specific games, genres, or developers, and engage in social, creative, and collaborative endeavours (Jenkins 2006). As such publics grow, they inevitably face challenges in terms of how they might continue to expand, maintain the ‘critical mass’ of user activity needed to sustain themselves (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar 2003), and keep their shared space(s) orderly, friendly, and safe (Lo 2018; Seering et al. 2019). Utilising the affordances of the platforms they use in imaginative ways (Baym 2000), such as by creating bots to automate procedures (Saetnan 2000), online communities adjust the spaces they inhabit to enrich interactions and safeguard shared norms (Latzko-Toth 2014).

The communications platform Discord is a site of great significance amongst game-related cultural spaces, with over 150 million current active users (Discord n.d.). Initially marketed as a tool created ‘by and for’ gamers (Lazarides 2015), it continues to see wide use from diverse gaming communities, developers and content creators (Kocik et al. 2024; Johnson 2024). In the 10 years since its launch, Discord has been the subject of scholarship examining its governance (Robinson 2022), its adoption by communities accustomed to other platforms (Kiene et al. 2019), its monetisation model (Robinson 2022a), and (very recently) its utility to fandoms in particular (Kocik et al. 2024; Wagenaar 2024). However, understanding of the dynamic methods by which communities are organising themselves on Discord – the ways they harness and innovate on the platform’s affordances, and adjust them over time – remains limited.

Within this context, the current paper presents the findings of a study that explored the complex interactions inside a community of fans of an indie videogame studio on Discord between its human inhabitants and the customised features of the virtual space they inhabited. Utilising a combination of participant observation and computer-mediated discourse analysis, this study gathered data from text-based interactions occurring across 30 days in the case study server. Using Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1988) as a framework for understanding how human and non-human (e.g. textual, technical) elements configure and influence technology use, by examining the customised design features of the community space and ‘following the actors’ (Randall et al. 2007) I found that technical actors such as server architecture,

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custom bots, and Discord features were configured to guide and shape how and where users on the case study server interacted. The resulting framework put forward by this paper presents a novel and I believe useful perspective for analysing online community practices, through which inferences about value and power can be derived by understanding how fan communities strategically configure their spaces.

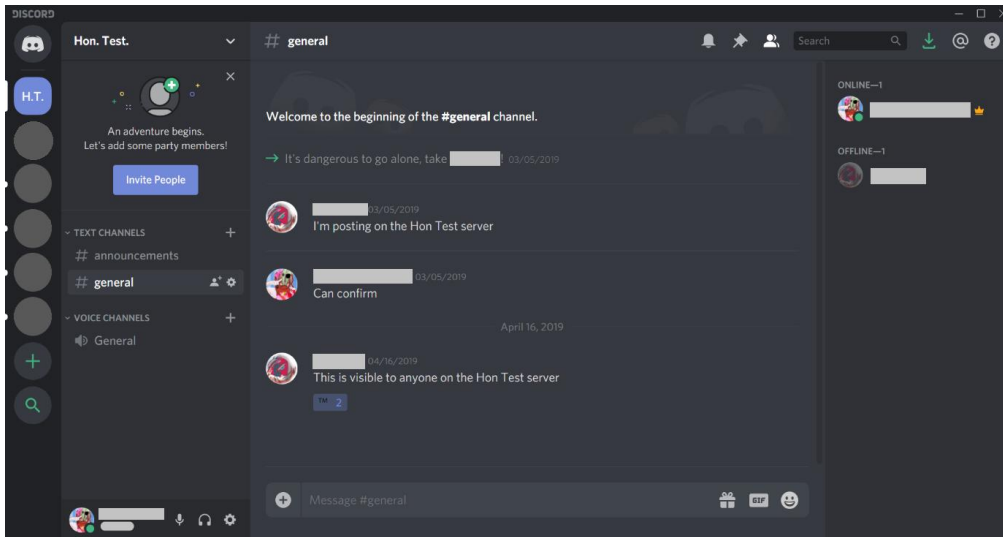


Figure 1: Discord’s server framework allows elevated users (e.g. owner, signified by the crown mark) to adjust the shared space’s rules and appearance.

Specifically, I propose that sociotechnical arrangements on the case study server took three distinct forms, classifiable based on the distinct prosocial community objectives that they helped to maintain. The first, channels, regulated social exchanges by imposing norms of how different parts of the server should be used, in order to preserve the overall quality of its mostly text-based conversations. The second type, ‘soft’ gates, were set up to encourage users to identify and engage with the community through in-group knowledge invocations and welcoming rituals, facilitating the active participation which is vital to communities in general. The final type, ‘hard’ gates, restricted access to the server and/or its sublocations based on moderator-dispensed markers of trust – allowing problem actors to be warned or removed from the server, or trusted actors to participate in channels deemed ‘sensitive’. These categories provide a nuanced method of identifying how the localised design decisions of specialised community spaces reflect and enable the resident communities’ collective social goals.

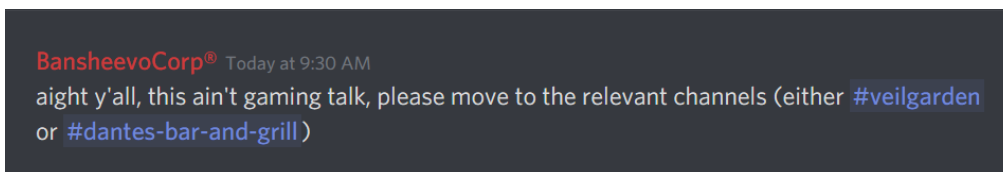


Figure 2: Discord users create sublocations on their servers to organise discourses and actively reinforce this behaviour with others.

The study also discovered complex ways in which not only moderators, but ordinary users, made conscious efforts to maintain these programs of use and realign interactions that went against them. In many instances on the case study server, users tried to curtail divergent behaviours (such as discussing a topic in an inappropriate channel) without moderator intervention, using the latter as a relatively late resort. While mods and admins supersede regular users on a strictly technical level, I found that the community had developed protocols to ensure the former’s transparency and

accountability to the wider membership, and that mods attempted to de-emphasise their status unless they needed to invoke it. The management approaches defined in the paper demonstrate how authority within online communities, despite often being tied to elevated privileges, is also constantly negotiated and enabled by all committed members.

BIO

Melissa Baguley is a PhD candidate from the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. Currently based at the Sydney Games and Play Lab, she completed her undergraduate thesis in Digital Cultures on the sociotechnical strategies employed by online videogame fandom on Discord. She is keenly interested in online subcultures and sociality, and hopes to conduct further research into the dynamics of relationships between creatively-oriented online entities (e.g. video-makers, videogame developers) and their audiences.

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