DISCORD AND THE HARBORMEN GAMING COMMUNITY

Maya Anderson

Comm 416

June 7 2019

**Introduction**

Discord is an application mainly used by video game players to communicate with one another. A specific gaming community known as the Harbormen has made consistent use of this platform to communicate with its members. My interest lies in exploring how Discord has shaped this online gaming community. Social media is known to play a role in our very identities, and the platforms we use can often determine what personas we present (Cirucci, 2012). Exploring Discord specifically may yield different results than one would find in other platforms due to the niche audience and nature of the application. As a result of affordances, the platform has potential to remove social insecurities and enhance communication (Kowert, Domahidi, & Quandt, 2014). I would ultimately like to understand if Discord helps enforce the values and behaviors of  the Harbormen gaming community.

There are several studies on the impact of video games and gaming communities on sociability and skill development, yet they do not address how culture is created within these gaming communities, much less how the platforms utilized by these communities influence them. Studying this may create a greater understanding of how individuals experience community and culture in these online environments. It may prove also prove useful to leaders of gaming communities by locating areas of improvement, highlighting favorable communication techniques, and understanding members' needs.

**Company Profile**

Discord is an application specifically built to enhance communication among video game players. The platform allows its users to communicate via voice, video, and text chat features. These affordances give users the ability to post pictures, videos, images, and links, either through

specific community servers, private messages, or group messages. The application is available on PC, Mac, mobile devices, and even has a browser version (Parent's Guide to Discord, 2017). Users can create usernames, upload a profile picture, and link their Discord account to other social media sites like Facebook, Twitch, Twitter, etc. The platform boasts a total of 250 million users, of which about 14 million use it daily (An inside look at the gamer chat app Discord). These users send about 315 million messages per day (Discord About, n.d.).

Discord brands itself as being built by people with a love for video games in an effort to create an efficient and accessible communication platform. The application was publicly released in May 2015 under the tagline "It's time to ditch Skype and TeamSpeak" (Marks, 2016). Since its origin, Discord has tried to set itself apart from other applications with similar affordances. Their About page expresses the company's passion for games and bringing people who share that same passion together. While the original intent was for gamers, there are Discord communities for any interest, from application development to home improvement. What began as a small team has expanded to a company worth $1.65 billion in 2018 (Winkler and Needleman, 2018).

Very little is disclosed about Discord's finances or its employees. Basic use of the application is free, so the company has several investors, including Greylock Partners, Spark Capital, Benchmark Capital, and Tencent (Discord About). These companies, among several others, have an interest in supporting evolving technology and advancements in social media. The investors have backed other services like AirBnB, security companies, Postmates delivery service, Tumblr, Kik, Twitter, and the Occulus Rift VR headset.

Recent developments for the application include a video call and screen sharing feature which was released in September 2018. Users are able to join a group call of up to nine others.

Like Skype, the platform supports video chat among all group members and the screen sharing function allows others to view the same content simultaneously (Screen Sharing and Video Calls). Discord is making constant improvements, taking feedback from its users to further enhance the application. The company appears to make adjustments based on what its audience desires, and thus has been a major contributor to its success.

**Culture Description**

The Harbormen gaming community is one I have been associated with for about three years now. It was created in late 2016 on the forums for an in-development game, Worlds Adrift. The Habormen's main leader, otherwise known as the commodore, wrote a code of ethics he felt would provide a good foundation for a gaming group. The code is of his own creation and has been used as a recruiting tool since the group's origin. It ends with having members commit to "the creation of a civilized world where honest players thrive and the cruel and corrupt have no power" (The Code of the Harbormen). In other words, the group aspires to be a community of players who makes efforts to assist and inspire others rather than put them down.

The Harbormen play a variety of games, from survival to strategy genres. As such, it has a diverse membership with a wide range of interests. The group is composed of people from several different countries, adding a multi-cultural aspect to the group as well. To be a member, one must accept the code. Unlike other communities where there may be interviews and a rigorous selection process, it is far more open and accepting. The group does have membership tiers, however, which users can be promoted to after receiving nominations from their peers when displaying intelligence and dedication, employing teamwork strategies, and interacting with the group on a consistent basis. These tiers are more so a recognition of involvement and respect rather than being based on power.

Discord is an everyday use for the Harbormen, used to communicate goals and objectives for the various games they play. It plays a fundamental role in how the group operates. It is used to make announcements, send alerts, vote and discuss issues and future directions for the group, send important game updates, and even just to chat with other members. Without it, it certainly would not be the same.

**Relevant Literature**

One study I find relevant to this research argues that social media is hardly different than video games. The author writes that social media is known to play a role in our very identities, and the platforms we use can often determine what personas we present (Cirucci, 2012). The same can be said for video games, where users have the ability to develop personas through character creation. Video game communities combine both traditional social media and video games to create a hybrid that can change based on what game is being played. There can be multiple personalities at play in different games, and they are further influenced by how the player wishes to present themselves with other members of the group. This only further certifies the fluidity of identity.

Other studies detail how communnities are founded and continue to function as a group. Leach (2014) writes that communities can be defined as a group of people learning from failures, being conscious of how one's actions affect others, and embracing interactivity. It is important to note that these are some of the key values of the Harbormen and are frequently used to encourage and inspire members. Przybylski, Ryan, and Rigsby write that communities are also built by people with needs like social interaction, autonomy, competence, and control (2010). Keeping this in mind, we may have a better understanding of why certain personas are presented within the group and how to identify them.

Another study I deem relevant focuses on social interaction in online game friendships. Kowert, Domahidi, and Quandt note that anonymity in video games and social media has potential to remove social insecurities and enhance communication (2014). While tangible effects are difficult to quantify, they add that online friends have increased the support available to individuals and added more numbers to social circles. The Harbormen have put great emphasis on improvement, which includes developing communication skills and getting more apprehensive members involved. Like Cirucci, the authors also address how interrelated social media and video games are, though precisely due to the friendships that are created and the impact these friendships can have.

**Methods**

To get an accurate and insightful account of how Discord is creating or enforcing the culture in this community of gamers, the research focuses on members of the Harbormen gaming community. The nature of the study is a qualitative ethnography due to my own level of participation within the group and to get a deeper sense of individual thoughts. which Members of the Harbormen were notified by its central leader that research was going to be conducted in the realm of their social media use and video game interactions and were asked if they had an interest in volunteering to participate in the study via private messages. Once accepted, an interview hour was set and conducted at the appropriate time via Discord's voice chat feature. A total of ten interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed in notes to promote accuracy.

I also observed interactions among group members on both Discord and in the games the group plays. This was recorded with field notes, which documented key highlights in member interactions, including anomalies and standard behaviors. It was also imperative to interview the leadership team of the Harbormen, as their interactions with members ultimately influence the

culture of the community (Jang & Ryu, 2011). The leaders were the only specific participants I wanted to include. Other members were approached on the basis of availability and active participation in the community. Overall, the interview questions sought to gain an understanding of how members use Discord in comparison to other platforms, and how the Harbormen server affected communication in the group. In addition to the 20 questions asked, follow-up questions were given based on responses.

The study is limited in that interviews only give information participants want to give. I did not present the questions beforehand to promote more genuine answers. Ideally, more interviews would be encouraged but each took a significant amount of time to get more in-depth answers. The study also does not have responses from those who are less active in the Harbormen, which might be beneficial to have in future studies.

The following data was sorted based on demographic information and interview questions, highlighting common trends and deviations. The field notes are also summarized as supplemental material to provide further insight on participant responses to interview questions.

**Findings/Analysis**

Ultimately, the research uncovered Discord being a great help to enforcing the Harbormen's values and beliefs, though the communication practices Discord encourages can also be seen as a deterrent to them. I asked participants questions about Discord, how they used the platform, and how they interacted specifically within the Harbormen server. On average, Harbormen members have used Discord for three years, and typically on a consistent daily basis. Most had used other voice and text chat applications like Skype, TeamSpeak, Ventrilo, Mumble,

and Facebook to communicate with other online gaming groups in the past. In comparison to

these other services, Discord was deemed the best platform for gamers to communicate.

> "[Discord] is a more comprehensive solution, incorporating social media linkage, voice
> chat, text chat, private messaging, all of the above."

> "[Discord is a] nice mix between Mumble and Skype. I was like wow, this is everything I
> was looking for."

> "It's a very happy medium. It has a user-interface that's very friendly, and not as intensive
> like Teamspeak."

Others expressed the ease of use for the platform. The convenience of being able to

interact with different communities in various servers is something they did not find in other

applications. Discord was described as having most features its competitors have, and even more.

Participants feel the application is clean and intuitive. Little effort is needed to set up a server

and connect with others who have similar interests. Most problems they have stem from users

not using it efficiently, such as creating too many channels and not having inadequate roles.

When Discord is lacking, its affordances have made it simple to connect with other services.

Members were drawn to the Harbormen server mostly through two games the community

has put much attention on: Worlds Adrift and Atlas, both in development survival genre games

that feature ship building. This fits the nautical theme of the Harbormen, as their logo is an

anchor on a blue background. Advertisements were made on game forums, Reddit, the

Harbormen website, and one effective tactic used to recruit members is to interact with other

players in game. Others were invited to the group by friends and in one case, a member

transferred from another Worlds Adrift group after it had gone inactive. Members describe the

initial appeal of the Harbormen as just having decent, pleasant people to play games with.

> "The Harbormen are the most straight forward up-front, wanna be the nice guys guild.
> After reading the code I was like yes, I want to be part of this."

> "In essence, [being a Harborman] means to be a member of a brotherhood of basically white knights. Those who are willing to help out in whatever circumstance they can. They're more likely to promote general enjoyment of a game rather than seeing others suffer just for their own personal enjoyment."

In addition to being on the group's website, the code has its own channel in the Harbormen server. It is used as a quick way to locate the agreements of the community. Individuals must first commit to following the behaviors outlined in the code to become a member. While the people who end up with membership in the group are generally good natured "white knights," the code's presence on Discord is a way to filter out those who would not be a good fit. Anyone joining the server is promptly asked to read the code channel and either accept or deny the terms. The code was often mentioned as an appeal to new members, usually stated as the main reason people wanted to become a Harborman. Participants were referring to specific clauses throughout the interviews and felt that it not only guided behavior in the game, but behavior in Discord, too.

> "The code isn't any different from me. I read the code, and for the most part it's how I would act, period. For me, it's easy to be Harborman because it's basically me already."
>
> "[The code] is really just the general nature of people who join the Harbormen."
>
> "[The code] basically outlines things that people should stand for anyway. Being decent for decency's sake."

In cases where members are not a match with the group, they either voluntarily leave when seeing a disconnect with the others or are asked to leave. Participants also expressed a lack of gaming communities who follow a code like the Harbormen, which enabled people to freely act in any way that suits them, often resulting in harm to others. Some expressed desires to invite friends to the group but felt they would not be a good fit for the code. There is an intuition that comes with understanding the nature of a group, and they understood traits that would be

undesirable. Harbormen members are generally accepting of their own peers and allies, and willing to contribute to the overall goal of making the games they play fun for everyone.

Most communication occurs within the Harbormen server, but members note that they speak to an average of six people on a regular basis, some of which via private messaging. The group tends to rely heavily on voice chat, making little use of text channels except to share frustrations, memes and other jokes, pictures, and game information. About two-thirds of communication is conducted via voice chat channels. In several cases, members tend to flock to voice channels when certain members appear. A prominent example of this is the group's commodore, who is often absent from group activities. When he joins a voice chat channel, members are quick to join him. This could best be compared to the role of a celebrity and his fans. While he does not interact with them much, he is a charismatic figure that others want to be around.

Other seemingly more favorable members are magnets for others in the group as well, notably due to personality more than any particular rank. I have actually seen this occur more with those in lower ranks, aside from the commodore himself. This can likely be attributed to this sense of "otherness" that the ranks themselves create, separating members based on the powers available to them. Those with higher ranks tend to be more distant and reserved yet step in on occasion to interact with the group, often when their duties require it.

While the Harbormen present themselves as an all-inclusive group, there are still underlying layers of communication, especially when certain games are played. Voice channels may be filled with people playing a variety of games, but certain voices may be more prominent than others. A noticeable silence occurs when others feel they should not contribute to the conversation so that they do not interrupt anything happening in the game. Silence from others

can stretch on to the point where one member noted, "I forgot they were here." However, members will often drop down to other voice channels when they need to share important information or would like the space to talk. It is only a matter of getting through the initial hesitation, which may be a result of not wanting to disrupt game communications. It is also important to note that an outstanding majority of Harbormen members are males, which may have some implications for communication practices in the group.

Despite this, every participant acknowledged that out of any other communities they have been a part of in the past, they communicate most in the Harbormen and have more time and energy invested in this community. One member was noted saying "This is where all my friends are," in the main text chat channel. Even when members may be pinged with @everyone notification from the server, they tend to have a desire to support their peers and understand that most information is typically important to at least one segment of the group.

Still, there is segregation in the Harbormen. Some participants expressed their desires for certain roles for different games so that they would not be notified of information deemed irrelevant to them. Game channels they do not interact in are also muted and pushed out of sight. If one does not own or have interest in a particular game, there is little reason to communicate in a channel dedicated to it. Several participants said they liked the Harbormen being a multi-gaming community, though the structure of the server supports separation. There is no incentive to interact with others who do not play the same games. A few members are not even seen unless a certain game is being played. Throughout my time conducting research, some members had returned from a hiatus after not engaging for several months on end because the group was not playing a game they had much interest in.

In a way, the Harbormen is one overarching community while supporting various other sub-communities. With a different channel for every game being played, it is easy to optimize the server to one's personal preferences. Discord give users the ability to keep certain channels completely out of sight. Every member of the server can tailor it in a completely different way. If a member only has interest in playing a specific game, they can choose to ignore all other communication channels. Rather than pulling people together, Discord's affordances have inspired niche groups that have no need to collaborate with others. The segregation goes even further as more recently, members have created their own server to communicate about a certain game, creating a shift in how active the server is. These members also happen to be quite prominent, and their frequent absence has left the voice channels more empty than before.

Some feel detached entirely because they do not have a gaming computer. The Harbormen do play a variety of games, but they do not expand to consoles or other alternatives. Members without a gaming computer are encouraged to chat anyway, though when individuals only join voice channels to talk about games, it can be somewhat isolating. Most text channels are meant for game discussion as well, creating what was described as this feeling of being an outsider. Members who did not have gaming computers expressed they had little contributions to make to overall discussion. They feel limited to communicating via text chat, as joining voice chat when others are playing a game seems to be an interruption. One participant mentioned that while the server boasts over 100 members, he hardly sees more than five percent of them. The commodore responded to this with "I'm gonna fix that," but this is an issue that has yet to be addressed.

**Conclusion**

The main factor that pulls people to the Harbormen is its code. Members then stay because they find people are generally good-natured and the community is seen as a decent

group to play games with. Having easy access to the code as a channel in Discord continually enforces the values outlined from the Harbormen's origins. Even if one does not frequent the channel, its presence in the server is a consistent reminder and is used in the process of promoting individuals to member status. People want a code like the Harbormen's in a gaming world where very few players are genuinely kind. However, contrary to the group's overall theme, the Discord server is also a segmented community. It can be a family for some, but the same people are found communicating over voice chat, and others participate solely through text. Nothing is in place to connect these two groups together, or even those that play completely different games.

The Harbormen prides itself on being able to cater to various playstyles and supports this by having a more open-ended approach to the games they play. When a game gains traction with a few members, a channel is added for people to communicate information about that particular game. Yet in some cases, a channel has taken weeks to be added for one group of players or may never be added at all. There is little to no standard for what makes a game channel worthy.

The organization of the Harbormen Discord server almost hinders the mentality behind the code and the desire of the commodore to have everyone be an active participant in the community. It ultimately helps to uphold and reinforce aspects of the code, but the way members communicate via the server can be in direct opposition to the values of the group. Discord is a useful tool for gamers at any level, and members tend to enjoy the features it provides. It is up to its users to use this tool efficiently in a way that brings all server members together. Research should ultimately work to reach some sort of conclusion to the problems it uncovers. As such, future research should seek to discover if the issues found in this study are part of a bigger Discord culture, and whether they can be treated.

**Bibliography**

An inside look at the gamer chat app discord (2019). Retrieved from https://www.msn.com/en-

      ph/news/world/an-inside-look-at-the-gamer-chat-app-discord/vp-BBVLnwI

Cirucci, A. (2012). First person paparazzi: Why social media should be studied more like video

      games. *Telematics and Informatics,* 30(1), 47-59. doi: 10.1016/j.tele.2012.03.006

Discord about. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://discordapp.com/company

Leach, D. (2014). Grand theft utopia: What can video games teach us about community?.

      *Communities*. (165), 20-21.

Jang, Y. & Ryu S. (2011). Exploring game experiences and game leadership in

      massively multiplayer online role-playing games. *British Journal of Educational*

      *Technology*. 42(4), 616-623. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2010.01064.x

Kowert, R., Domahidi, E, Quandt, T. (2014). The relationship between online video game

      involvement and gaming-related friendships among emotionally sensitive individuals.

      *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, And Social Networking*. 17(7),447-453. doi:

      10.1089/cyber.2013.0656

Marks, T. (2016) One year after its launch, discord is the best voip service available. *PC Gamer*,

      PC Gamer. Retrieved from https://www.pcgamer.com/one-year-after-its-launch-discord-is-

      the-best-voip-service-available/

Parents guide to discord. (2017). Retrieved from https://blog.discordapp.com/parents-guide-to-

      discord-c77d91793e9c

Przybylski, A., Ryan, R., Rigsby, S. (2010).  A motivational model of video game engagement.

      *Review of General Psychology*. 14(2), 154-166. doi: 10.1037/a0019440

Screen sharing and video calls. (2018). Retrieve from https://support.discordapp.com/hc/en-

      us/articles/115000982752-Screen-sharing-Video-Calls

The code of the harbormen. (n.d). Retrieved from http://www.theharbormen.com/our-code/

Winkler, R. and Needleman, S. (2018) Discord valued at $1.65 billion in new funding round. *The*

      *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/discord-valued-at-1-

      65-billion-in-new-funding-round-1524163751