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BEYOND HATEWARE: NETWORKS, AFFECT, AND COLLABORATIVE ECOSYSTEMS IN A FANDOM DISCORD SERVER

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Background

Originally created for text and voice chatting while playing video games, the messaging platform Discord allows users to create chat rooms called “servers.” Some academic research on Discord has been focused on how the platform facilitates criminal activity, radicalization, and bigotry (Van Der Sanden et al. 2022, Heslep and Berge 2021, Davey 2024), with the platform even being described as “hateware” based on how the affordances of the platform and the decentralized moderation have created networks of hate and harassment (Brown and Hennis 2019, 18). However, as the user base for Discord has diversified from gamers to broader internet communities (Beer 2021), there is a growing body of literature on how other groups, specifically fandoms, are using Discord. In addition to questions of abuse and moderation, scholars are increasingly investigating how people are using the platform to produce affect, create networked power structures, and build communities of shared interest (Wagenaar 2024, Kocik et al. 2024, Kennedy 2022).

A common way to conceptualize relations in our technical, digital, virtual age is as “networks:” complex series of direct connections between agentic entities, potentially spanning out infinitely and able to be “traced” (Latour 2007, 5). Just as earlier work used “networks” as a means of discussing Discord’s social and anti-social qualities, this paper critically uses Actor Network Theory (ANT) and the theory of distributed cognition to describe the way relations are created and maintained on the platform. Additionally, this paper adds to the literature on Discord by providing an in-depth, qualitative look at the inner-workings of one Discord server rather than a high-level analysis of broad trends among servers, which do not attempt to describe the daily reality of users interacting with each other.

This paper uses as its fieldsite the private Discord server pseudonymously called The Lagoon, which was created for fans of the television show *Supernatural* to discuss both the show and the creative writing they produce based on the show and its characters called fanfiction. About 125 pseudonymous fans from around the world belong to this

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server. Most studies of Discord have focused on large servers with thousands of users. In contrast, I chose this server because it reflects the size and intimacy of the servers in which my participants spent most of their time, and more accurately reflects the average size of a Discord server (Beer 2021). In this context, I ask: What are the networks of relations in The Lagoon? How do users actually interact, positively or negatively, with each other? What can this server tell us about the possibilities of community-building on Discord, beyond the networking of hate?

Methodology

To answer these questions, this paper employs digital ethnography (Hine 2015, Boellstorff 2015, Kozinets 2019). Specific methods are three months of virtual participant observation, semi-structured interviews with twenty-six members with diverse activity levels in the server, and frequent unstructured interviews with members and the volunteer administrators. Informed consent was obtained from a strong majority of members, with unaccounted for members excluded from data gathering.

From the ethnographic and interview data, further analysis was done using abductive coding with a focus on repeated interactions with human and nonhuman agents and any discussion of affective states generated through those interactions (Timmermans and Tavory 2022).

Results and Analysis

Ethnographic research revealed an environment in which a few members of The Lagoon posted messages in the server every day, some posted several times a week, and many were largely inactive except for lurking. Posting messages also had varying effects, from starting a long and energetic conversation to receiving no reaction at all. The relations between Lagoon members were therefore messy and unevenly distributed.

The daily conversations that did take place, however, were often incredibly collaborative, whether by brainstorming ideas for new fanfiction together, helping each other with editing, using “bots” to play or help with writing, or inducing productivity by competing against each other to write the quickest. The administrators also built the incentives of The Lagoon to encourage collaboration, with higher positions in the leadership structure correlating to increased responsibilities to facilitate member interaction, like scheduled chats or assigned roles to edit member fanfiction, rather than any increased authority over other members or expanded access to exclusive parts of the server. Authority and moderation of the server was therefore predicated on facilitating relations between members.

Ultimately, this paper finds that the people and technical objects that constitute the discord server make up a distributed cognitive system, meaning that “thought” is a process that takes place within the system between human and nonhuman elements, as well as within the individual (Hutchins and Klausen 1996). Cognitive processes like “inspiration” or “productivity” are coproduced through the distributed cognitive system in The Lagoon and experienced as collective affective states.

However, as gathered through interviews with server members, ranging from most to least engaged members, I found the actual relations that constitute activity in The Lagoon are much more nebulous than direct person-to-person communication. Instead, people reported feeling supported and/or inspired to write fanfiction as a result of the server even without being active in posting in the server.

This paper proposes the term “collaborative ecosystem” to clarify the nature of this cognitive system in a way that includes both active and less-active server members, expanding the network of influence to include those without direct and traceable interactions with other members. Building on the visual metaphor of the network of tracing associations (Latour 2007) and the rhizome stem structure (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), the visual metaphor of the ecosystem evokes a system wherein things like algae, fish, rocks, bacteria, and plants interact with each other in potentially messy, toxic, or healthy and productive ways. Using “collaborative ecosystem” as a metaphor allows this paper to theorize about the true social organization of some Discord servers and what affect they have on their members.

The potential toxicity in Discord ecosystems has been explored in the literature, and The Lagoon’s ecosystem also displayed some fragility, imbalances, and even toxicity, as seen in the uneven distribution of relations. However, this paper argues there is a powerful potential for collaboration through the cognitive system within the server, and shows evidence of the positive sociality possible on Discord.

Significance

This paper adds to the growing work on non-gaming communities on Discord and shows how some users are using the affordances of the platform beyond voice-messaging or integration with other platforms. Through its qualitative ethnographic methods, this paper gives a glimpse of how a specific server works and provides a case study on actual user experiences and interactions and provides an example for future case studies. This qualitative, highly-localized project supplements more general, platform-wide analyses and adds an essential dimension to the literature on Discord.

Additionally, while the words “social” or “community” are not favored by ANT theorists, the question of how to build healthy norms in social groups, especially in online spaces marked by pseudonymity or anonymity, is a broader concern in an internet era marked by many forms of toxicity. The Lagoon, with its radical collaboration, is a case study in what “community” can look like online, even on a platform also known as “hateware.”

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