

Discord Community Challenges, Tools, and Strategies

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Introduction

Online communication in and around games shapes the social experience of learning and play, and the platforms and communities through which players interact dictate what they say and how they say it. In an online landscape where players are often confronted with toxicity, understanding how these platforms are structured, how their features are used, what tools and techniques moderators rely on, and what challenges face moderation is the starting point for tackling those problems and fostering an inclusive and productive community.

Discord is by far the most popular multimodal communication platform around games. With 140 million monthly active users in 2021 (Curry, 2021), Discord is now seemingly competing with broader communication platforms like Slack and Teams as opposed to other gaming-focused platforms, like TeamSpeak and Ventrilo. Since Discord is now, in many ways, the default means of communication across a wide spread of games and communities, it is home to rich interaction between players that provides necessary context for the online gaming experience for many. That context is one of persistent communities that form around games but grow and live on communication platforms. Without an understanding of the kinds of interaction and moderation that take place outside of the game, making sense of how players navigate social and emotional behavior around games is impossible. For these reasons we focus on Discord in this review, which explores platform design's effect on communities, challenges inherent in moderation and community management, available moderation tools and strategies to address those challenges, and NASEF's effective use of these tools in managing its own, unique community. This review both highlights some of the most difficult aspects of Discord's history and recognizes Discord's strengths in community-building.

Structure of Discord

Discord's structure gives communities inherent hierarchies that influence how rules are set, disputes are resolved, and norms are demonstrated. Anyone can make their own server with channels for text and voice that also allow file sharing and live streaming. Note that "server" here does not refer to the hardware hosting these channels, but is what different communities on Discord are called. The level of organization and moderation on each server is entirely dependent on the server owner, who can assign roles, give permissions, and make server- and channel-wide rules; add, delete, and customize channels; invite and ban other users; and bestow those same abilities on other server members. Channels can be designated for discussion of any topic, for use by teams during play, or for just sharing cat pictures. The inherent hierarchy of the structure of owners, admins, moderators, and other server members allows for but does not require transparency in rule application and community management,

while the versatility of channels and roles allows servers to fit the needs of their users. All of these are decisions that server owners, admins, and moderators have to make with intentionality to avoid stagnation or misuse.

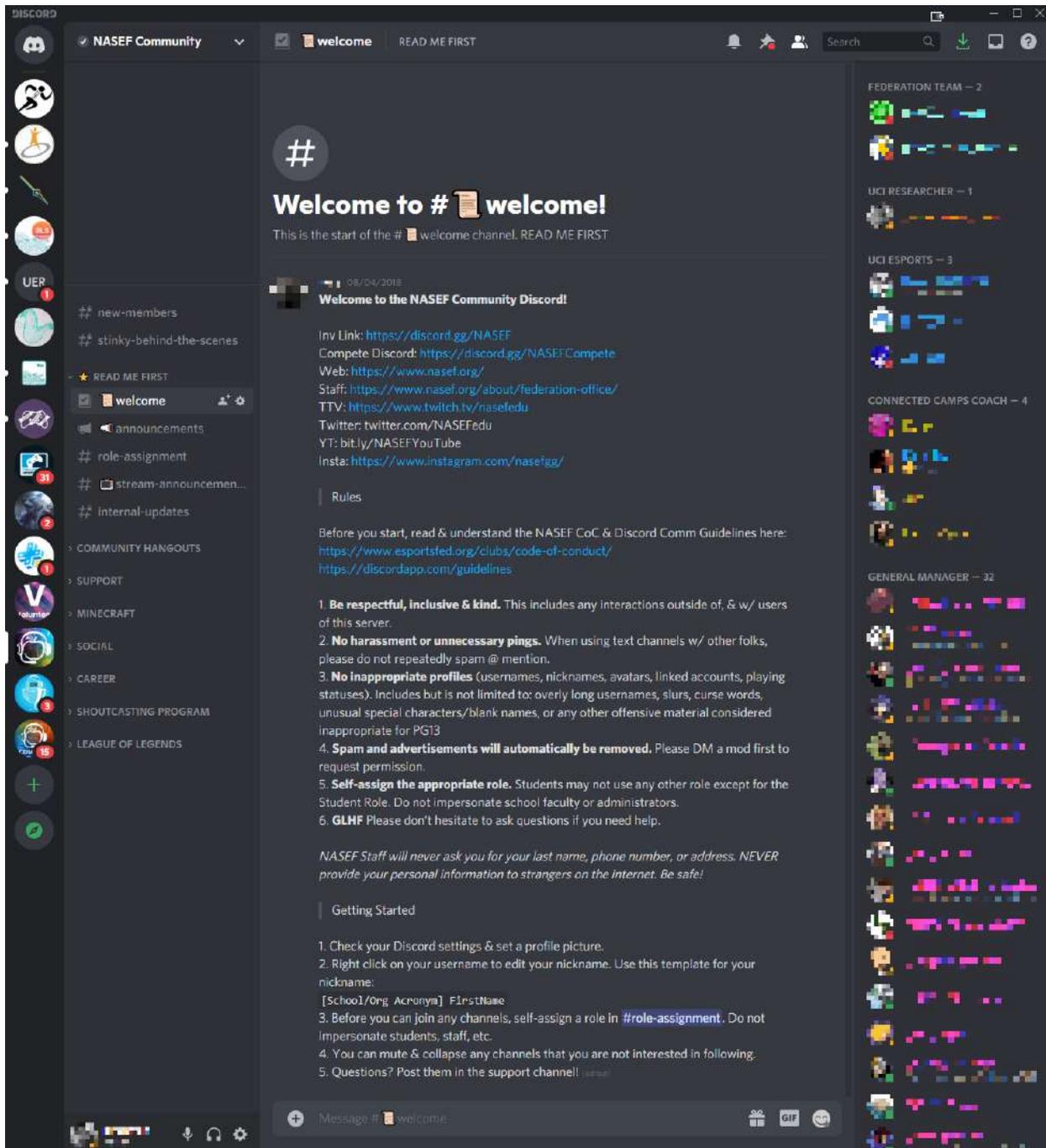


Figure 1. Screenshot of the NASEF Community server's welcome channel. From left to right, Discord displays the servers the user has joined, the channels in the selected server, the content of the selected channel, and the users and their roles in the selected server.

To that end large communities structure their servers so that each channel has a clear purpose and the server-wide rules and norms are on the first page a new user sees. The

NASEF Community server illustrates this approach well, creating unambiguous spaces for discussion of different topics and transparency in the rules that guide the moderators' decisions (figure 1). Large servers that do not have as much of a connection to an organized offline community structure, the way NASEF does, will often use the member roles to make the server hierarchy clear. The official League of Legends Discord server, for example, lists the admin, then the moderators, then the moderation bots, and then tiers of general users determined by their engagement with the server. This transparency of role hierarchy makes clear both who to approach for assistance and who has the community's trust in carrying out moderation and governance.

The Challenges & Tools of Discord Moderation

When misuse, abuse, and toxic behavior do occur on the platform, it falls to the server moderators, admins, and owner to address it. Until 2017, the server owner was as far as that responsibility could go (Blout & Burkart, 2020). After Discord made headlines for being the platform on which white supremacist organizers gathered to plan the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (Roose, 2017), many extremist communities were banned, which established use and speech that Discord would not accept on their platform, making it difficult for extremist communities to stay and share their rhetoric (Conway, Scrivens, & McNair, 2019). Through the application of these rules regarding acceptable content for the platform, Discord modeled one way to signal community norms. Establishing those norms is a vital step for each server to cultivate the community space envisioned by the server organizers, and that work relies on how admins and moderators determine, model, and apply server rules.

A common practice for servers trying to establish the norms of their community is to include an introductory text channel where a new user must agree to a set of rules before being able to join any of the servers' other channels. This approach makes the server rules and admin behavior more transparent, but it is not enough if the goal is to craft an inclusive culture. While users ostensibly agreed to the rules, transgressions can prevail. A server's culture is built of interactions and moderator decisions, and none of the research on moderation suggests asking users to agree to a set of rules is sufficient. In fact, research on Discord moderation focuses on the difficulties servers have ensuring those rules are followed and on the tools and strategies moderators and admins employ to identify and address transgressions (Jiang et al., 2019).

Unique to platforms like Discord that include both voice and text channels is that different modes of communication require different tools and approaches. While automatic moderation bots have their limitations in text channels, they are useless with live voice. Even human moderators can only address issues in a voice channel if they are present when the transgression occurs or if the channel is recorded and they are able to match the voice to a user. As Jiang et al. (2019) found,

Not only did the moderators have a hard time enforcing the rules, proving that a rule violation even happened was also a challenge for them. While recording may be a desirable solution, our findings pointed out that voice-only recording was not enough because moderators were not able to link members' unique voice to their identities.

Furthermore, the vague platform policies on recording may subject the volunteer moderators to legal ramifications. (Jiang et al., 2019)

Further, bots used for automated moderation of text channels can be easy to circumvent by intentionally misspelling and using coded language. Even the official League of Legends server's rules (as of July 2021) end with "Don't evade filters. This applies to both words and links. If something is censored, it is censored for a reason!"

Moderation teams can also use bots to support the humans doing the work, instead of automatically moderating language. Bots that automate the record-keeping of moderation are common with larger communities. The acknowledgement of the strengths and weaknesses of

automating different aspects of community management is a necessary conversation for moderators as their communities grow. Kiene and Hill (2020) explain that online communities are more likely to adopt user-innovated moderation tools when they operate at scale. Extending previous work, we found that the effect of size was strongest for moderation tools that allowed the systematic logging and indexing of moderation actions like warnings and bans. Our results suggest that certain types of work for volunteer moderators, like organizing and managing online communities, may benefit from automation at scale more than others. (Kiene & Hill, 2020)

The “systematic logging and indexing” described here can be essential both for transparency in community governance and for helping a moderation team understand the work they do. When a community is too large for any one member of that team to keep track of, it is essential that they keep records of their rule applications to ensure fair governance.

Recommendations for NASEF

NASEF’s community Discord server is unique. Its ties to offline, competitive, and scholastic communities and its role in organizing teachers, coaches, and students put requirements on it that most Discord communities do not think about. Student engagement on the server is, then, likely different from how those same students are participating in other large servers. That difference can be positive, creating a unique online space that ties into the programming the students participate in. It also translates, though, into lower engagement than servers of a similar size. That lower engagement poses a question about how to leverage the NASEF community server to best support participating students. If organizers and students would like to see the community Discord server act more like large servers that see more activity, the server may want to employ structures and features discussed earlier. One such decision is in the roles used to categorize server members. Adopting a role hierarchy of admin, moderators, and user tiers would nudge the server away from its scholastic club environment, but it could also encourage discussion less dictated by club roles and employment and more by topic. It would also clarify who governs and moderates the community. Visibly including mentors on that moderation team by including senior students in addition to general managers and coaches who can give input on moderation decisions would give those decisions – and the code of conduct on which they are based – a grounding in the community that NASEF participants are building in their schools and clubs. The NASEF community Discord server could be a powerful tool in tying those disparate clubs together through more than competition. To do so, though, students and general managers would need to use the server in ways they are not currently, and if students and teachers are to use NASEF Discord servers for within club and federation-wide communications, that grounding is necessary. These questions are the difficult work of community management. They do not have right answers, but this review aims to help organizers examine the context in which they are made.

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