# Organizing Discord: Survey on online spatiality, identity, and memory in the platform.

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**Abstract.** Even with COVID-19 rendering humanity largely unable to relate in the simplest form of face-to-face meetings, an alternative was found in the virtual world, where one could be simultaneously isolated from disease while being connected with people through the Internet. However, this solution has been worrisome as it could play part in accelerating issues related to Modernity, such as uprooting and creating a lack of touch with physical reality. This scenario, which is expected to be further pushed on by the emergence of metaverses and the risk of new pandemics, has created fertile soil for new forms of existing which are more fluid. How do people feel about that and how do they perceive themselves in this process? In order to shed light on this question, a survey was organized and issued on Discord's servers, which are "places" of text and voice chatting that have significantly grown during the presented context. Although with sample restrictions, such a survey consisted of close-ended answers and provided the picture that virtuality indeed plays a significant role in the formation of memory and identities of the respondent users, which is manifested in their perceived behavior.

**Keywords:** User experience, Discord, Place, Avatarity, Virtual Reality

## 1. Introduction

In the recent decades of capitalism, we started to linger more and more to the digital world, absorbing it into our existence as humans and gladly adhering to its laws as if they were natural. The COVID-19 pandemic further pushed us into this world to the point where it became apparent that we could not any longer discern our lives from our digital lives, forging a being-in-the-world, in the Heideggerian sense, that has different ways of connecting with itself and to other beings: whether they are other people or locations, everything must pass through an avatar, a 2D or 3D medium which is the digital representation of something with consciousness or not (1).

The comprehension of these new forms of life within this transformation in temporality and spatiality is of special interest as this process of digitalization has given no sign of ceasing or slowing down in the foreseeable future, which might greatly impact the way through which human beings exist and are perceived by each other, giving rise to questions regarding identity and therefore memory. Not only that, there is the fact that we are at the brink of the blooming of one or many metaverses which intend to be the next step in the evolution of human existence, absorbing large portions of "real-life" relations and workplaces in the process. (2)
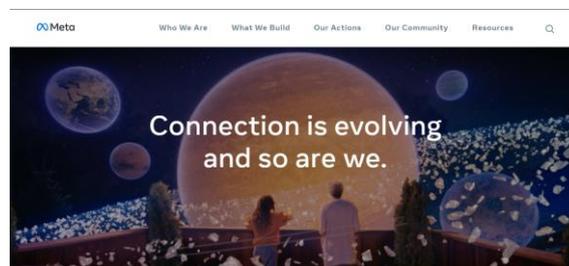


Fig. 1 – Meta's website frontpage (2022)

However, as the metaverses and its spatial features are as of yet not accessible to the wide public, it is impossible to study the users' experience of it. Nonetheless, it is still possible to analyze how people perceive their existence within the available technology and means of communication which might offer in what could be called minor scale that which would be expected of a metaverse in a large scale and bigger depth instead.

In such context, the "Discord" platform of text and voice chatting is noteworthy due to 1) its successful strategy of selling itself as a *Place* (or places) where one could meet others despite its virtuality and lack of physical spatiality and 2) exponential growth during the pandemic. Thus, the aforementioned characteristics alongside the personal experience of the author influenced the choice of this platform as the object of study of the present paper, which was conducted through the application of a survey to

Discord users regarding their virtual experience aided by a thorough literature review on the themes of spatiality, affection, and attachment, which are terms that jointly play roles in the definition of a Place. The studies on such matters deeply carry influences of Hegelian and Heideggerian currents of philosophy, but here they are explained in terms that try to be clear to those unfamiliar with them.

## 2. Research Methods

When it comes to the research methods, the present research draws inspiration mainly from two other works which studied people's digital behavior during the ongoing pandemic, being them "The bright and dark side of social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic: Survey evidence from Japan" by Cato et al. (3) and "Virtual place during quarantine – A curious case of VRchat" by Rzeszewski and Evans (4).

The first work provided insight into how to gather data from a large number of people by issuing surveys through digital means to assess their response to the current situation, where they are deprived of the "old normal". Such email-sent surveys consisted of questions followed by multiple pre-determined answers which represented degrees of the respondent's agreement with the contents of the questions or statements.

When it comes to the second work, I followed a similar path in the sense that this study also consists of the interpretation of the impressions of the users of a software. However, while Rzeszweski and Evans investigated opinions about a virtual reality which had spatial dimensions, what is studied here is a platform which included in its marketing strategy the notion of it being a "place" while itself lacking spatiality, and what could be the impacts of existing in such a place on human perception of reality.

Therefore, to address such a matter a Google Forms survey in the referred style and based on the literature review was issued to Discord users. The original intent was to issue it in randomly selected large and public servers with its moderators' permissions, however, it was found that such servers usually have strict rules against self-promotion or content which deviates from the original purpose of that server. Thus, with the present research falling into these categories in the eyes of such moderators, it ended up turning into another direction instead, with a smaller sample than expected: less than 20 respondents, which included people known to the researcher.

## 3. Conceptual background: Space, Place, and Virtuality

From the New Geography of Milton Santos (5), space itself should not be mistaken for the physical landscape and its multitude of forms, as this stance before objects would prevent analysis of historical contexts and the relations between them and the objects. In other words, failure in understanding the place of an object in socioeconomic time and the underlying human agency would incur in perceiving an object as if it were in stasis, existing apart from the flow of time.

Addressing this question, Milton Santos creates a pervasive and yet unifying definition of Space: "Space, therefore, is this: a set of forms each containing fractions of society in motion", with the motion being the human impulse and technics through which the world is shaped and deprived of its "purity" to become a reflection of the Human's Being, which in its turn will serve as the basis for the next stages of the never-ending and ever-accelerating process.

Such Miltonian dialectics have an important component of *virtuality* — of making concrete that which was once merely imaginary and being influenced back by what emerged from it, with Space constantly updating and manifesting itself as the "field" of Existence, where human experience happens, which is a way of describing reality the technology philosopher Yuk Hui traced back to the Greek Antiquity of Plato and Aristotle (6).

This stage of civilization, however, is marked by its heavy contrast with Modernity when it comes to the difference in the rhythm of life, determined by technology. As the humanistic geographer Yi-fu Tuan explained (7), the relation of the modern Human with the natural environment has become gradually less vocational and more recreational. Mostly, Nature no longer plays part in the constitution of a Human's Being the same way it does in less technologically-developed times, becoming some sort of external object to be manipulated and from then on increasingly existing as an extension of human personality and measures instead, thus creating *Places*. One can wonder whether it is even possible for a Human to exist without attributing meaning — something extremely unlikely to be conceived, — but what can be taken from Santos and Tuan is that the creation of Places in modernity has had its roots grown away from the natural and physical environments.

In fact, these "roots" seem to have found fertile soil in digital environments, where there is an opportunity to experiment with different identities and relationships mainly at the user's will, largely unrestricted by offline physicality and spatiality. The online experience thus provides both a means of achieving the realization of personal fantasies and a Place which affects and might be affected by the offline existence of the user through the psychological feelings of belonging and ownership (8), which have been just discussed.

# 4. Discord App: "Your Place to Talk"

Discord is a text, video, and voice chatting software consisting of private chats (called "direct messages" or simply DMs) and rooms called servers, which might be private or public and can be accessed through invite links. The creation and customization of servers is a function available to every user accordingly to their interest, who can personalize the server with name, icon, channels for different purposes and "roles", colored and uniquely named tags which might represent moderation and permission hierarchy within a server or simply a way of setting some members apart from others.

The servers' users, at unaltered permissions, can send text messages, links, videos, GIFs, join voice and video channels, share their screen (streaming function) and change their own nicknames in each Discord room. They may change at will their username, profile picture, the "about me" and status sections, which can't be restricted by permissions and roles.

This platform initially emerged as a means of communication of the gaming community and accordingly directed its visual strategy, which included gaming-related imagery and slangs. However, Discord over time grew out of this initial focus due to its big number of users who used the platform for reasons and interests other than gaming — Since 2015, "Discord has grown to more than 100 million monthly active users [...] across 6.7 million active servers", accordingly to the Discord CEO Jason Citron (9), who in 30th June 2020 used this information to justify further visual changes that would make "Discord more welcoming, more inclusive, and more trustworthy so more kinds of communities can find a home here."
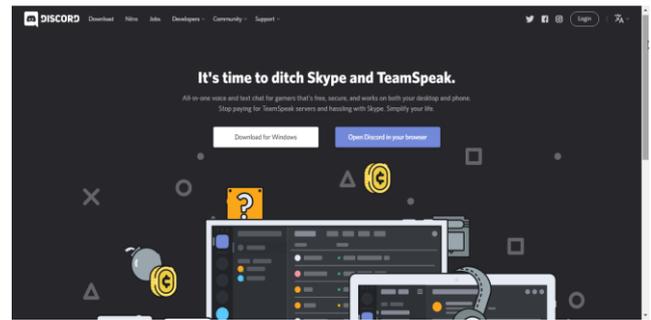


**Fig. 2** - Discord's frontpage on 14th January 2020 retrieved through the Internet Archive's WaybackMachine (2022)
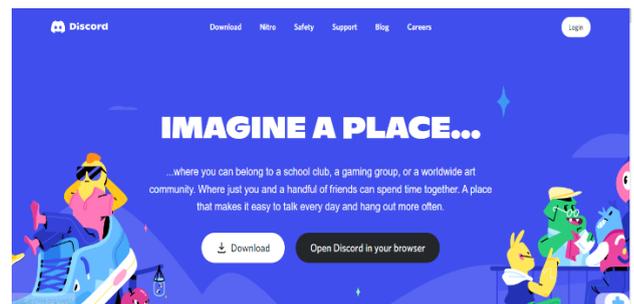


**Fig. 3** - Discord's frontpage on 12th February 2022

It is also especially noteworthy that this change occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a significant surge in Discord's usage and revenue happened that might have been boosted by that same scenario.

**Tab. 1** – Discord's active users (10)

| Year | Monthly active users |
|------|----------------------|
| 2017 | 10 million |
| 2018 | 45 million |
| 2019 | 56 million |
| 2020 | 100 million |
| 2021 | 140 million |

**Tab. 2** – Discord revenue (10)

| Year | Revenue (estimates) |
|------|---------------------|
| 2016 | $5 million |
| 2017 | $10 million |
| 2018 | $30 million |
| 2019 | $45 million |
| 2020 | $130 million |

# 5. Application of the survey, results, and interpretation of data

As previously mentioned on "section 2: Research Methods", the sample pool worked with was largely smaller than expected since public servers, which have been found as being hyper-focused on their own thematic, such as a game or genre of music, don't allow deviances from the original purpose of the server, which halted any attempts of issuing the survey as originally intended. In the end, the survey was the same, but the respondents were Discord users known to the researcher instead of numerous unknown users.

Therefore, expected issues in accurately depicting reality are not exactly related to bias, as the questions were made to users regarding their experience on Discord, but related to the low number of respondents of the survey (n.: 19), which might have offered different results if it was a larger sample pool.

The results are presented in the table below, which shows the statements and how the nineteen people felt about them, alongside the interpretation of such data.

**Tab. 3** – Survey results: Discord User Experience

| Statements (S.) | Completely agree | Agree | Neutral/Don't know | Disagree | Completely Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1)** My Discord profile pictures and nicknames have more aesthetic value than sentimental value to me. | 2 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 1 |
| **2)** I change my Discord profile pictures and nicknames frequently. | 4 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| **3)** I say and do things on Discord that I wouldn't offline. | 3 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 2 |
| **4)** People in Discord call me by my nicknames even on calls or in face-to-face meetings. | 5 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| **5)** I like my offline personality better than my online one. | 1 | 1 | 11 | 2 | 4 |
| **6)** The prospect of living much of my time in a virtual reality is pleasant. | 3 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 2 |
| **7)** Servers and DMs have a significant role on my social life and memory. | 5 | 7 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| **8)** I may be a different person in each server. | 0 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| **9)** I simultaneously interact in more than one server or DM. | 5 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 2 |
| **10)** I catch myself offline using expressions and slangs that I learned online. | 7 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| **11)** Discord distracts me from my duties and/or objectives. | 2 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 5 |
| **12)** Discord is a tool in accomplishing my duties and/or objectives. | 6 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 0 |

The statements were thought of as a tool in trying to measure Discord's roles in its users' lives, and therefore were directed to matters such as identity and memory affected by digital spatiality. Whereas the survey results show that the users in question don't necessarily perceive themselves as different beings when offline and when online *(S. 3; 5; 8)*, it is nonetheless shown that an overwhelming share of the respondents is affectively moved by happenings that take place in or have the communication enabled by Discord *(S. 7)*, mostly adhering to linguistic codes learned online even when offline *(S. 10)*. These respondents sometimes even have their real names toppled by their online counterparts, although this is likely dependent on whom the user is interacting with in Discord — if the original meeting happened online or offline *(S. 4)*.

Speed and ephemerality inherent to the experience of Modernity also seem to extend to Discord, given the ease with which one is able to change their online appearance *(S. 1; 2)* and act in ways that they normally wouldn't, be it due to the limitations of physicality or the lack of anonymity that the offline world is made of *(S. 3; 9)*. Curiously enough, contrary to that, the users seem unsure and even unwilling to

have virtual reality as an integral part of their lives. They seem to rather want it to stay something apart, or more like a tool *(S. 6; 11; 12)*.

The mentioned ephemerality also gains new dimensions when you perceive Discord's structure. At the same time, people simultaneously send many messages which might give the impression that the chat is constantly fading away, you can also use the search options to recover messages and other forms of data from years ago — or instantly delete all of them with but a few clicks, which points to new forms of relating to memory.

# 6. Conclusion

The present study purposes itself as being a way of quantitively verifying speculations regarding the experience of virtuality through the issuing of surveys to the users of the Discord platform of text and voice chatting, which entitles itself as a *Place* in its marketing strategy.

It was found within the sample pool that even though Discord, and to a further extent, other digital environments of the same type, lack the physical component of most definitions of spatiality, it nonetheless is a place in the conception of its users, who hold experiences in the virtual world as having an impact in the whole of their beings and identities, even when offline. This is considered to reiterate the importance of further investigating the relationship between humans and the virtual, which in a sense has always existed and has never given signs of ceasing.

Known limitations of this study include 1) the small sample pool of nineteen people, which is because most Discord servers are hyper-focused on their own thematic, giving few opportunities for this survey (and any other activity unrelated to the original purpose of a server) to gather more respondents, and 2) the fact that the conclusions came from answers to close-ended questions. If the first limitation was known beforehand, the strategy of interviewing some Discord users might have proven itself more able in providing a bigger picture, even if such questions were based on a solid literature review. Lastly but not least, 3) it is known that Discord's revenue is heavily reliant on its subscription system called "Nitro", which offers ways of further customizing one's profile and servers, but this was not included in the research as it was deemed as being hard to generalize.

# 7. Acknowledgement

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