Negotiating with Values: The mediation of vision between users and applications

Aaron Dore

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The notion of user ship is accompanied by an expectation to develop a propensity to identify with growth. This basic and decontextualized premise stems from the fundamental capitalist logic that prioritises re-investment and is designed to maintain a state of self-increase. This essay aims to interrogate the relationship between numerical growth as an underlying and widely disseminated globalised goal, and the formation of a set of socio-technological views and approaches that all users are required to develop on a distinct basis, whilst engaging with contemporary technology. The work of several theorists from a variety of disciplines will be employed as a way of exploring this territory.

What can be understood as a relative homogenisation of the individual's experience, is a perspective that needs to be situated in light of a set of competitive modes of social participation and production. Within the context of the photographic image on Instagram, Lev Manovich's observations of competitive practices provide a practical starting point, "Competitive photography always has a collective, social nature. The main feature of competitive photography is likeability"[1]. To approach a medium that has primarily been historically associated with issues of representation and aesthetics, and then refactor any exclusivity into a notion of likeability, unavoidably ends up becoming about numerical values and a capitalistic inherited imagining of success.

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[1] Lev Manovich, "Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self," February 1, 2016, 1–20.
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The effects of capitalism on the realm of the imagination are extensively covered by Max Haiven in his book *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*. He notes that "to a very real extent, we now face an integration and exercise of capitalist power on a global scale that is both more widespread and more intensive than ever. Not only do few spaces exist in the world that are free of capital's influence, but capital increasingly reaches deep into our social, private and subjective lives."[2] By focusing more specifically on the implications that this prolonged integration of capitalism is having on our creative and expressive identities, the idea of "the good life" will be examined from both philosophical and psychotherapeutic stand points. This interdisciplinary foray will serve as a method to address more specifically the fluidity of the fully functioning and open individual – an image of thought that will provide a clear diametric to the prospect of "imagining ourselves as essentially isolated, lonely, competitive economic agents."[3]

Haiven situates the context of the term 'commons' as referring to "alternative anti-capitalist institutions that make life worth living", he also makes the observation that while such spaces form strong social and meaningful commonality, "they may exist within (indeed, may be necessary to) capitalism". This perspective emerges as a recurring truth when applied to the domain of technologically based socio-creative platforms, it often only requires a brief appraisal of any divergent online community to note that they articulate themselves through a persistent negotiation with each other, and with the undermining of value that capitalism inevitably imposes.

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[2] Max Haiven, "Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power," March 19, 2018, 1–180. P 22
[3] ibid. P 10

By utilising the Walkthrough method[4] as a means of inspecting the design Discord, a text and VOIP application targeted at gamers - the aforementioned relationship between the existence of the commons and an environment that proliferates the pathological value[5] of capital, can be initially approached from a more objective perspective. All users must appraise and traverse the terrain of this relationship when attempting to develop a way of moving freely away from adhering to "a code of action laid down by some group or institution"[6], and closer to developing an awareness that "he is free to live his feelings subjectively, as they exist in him and also free to be aware of these feelings"[7].

The Walkthrough Method at its core provides a way of presenting the underlying implications toward value that are present within mobile and desktop software applications or 'apps'. It's grounding in Actor-Network-Theory, which situates sociocultural and technical processes as mutually shaping[8], licences attaining a higher degree of objectivity and subsequent recognition of experiential possibility, it "allows the researcher to place oneself in the user's position and imagine the range of affordances the user perceives."[9] By considering the App's vision, operating model, manner of governance and mediator characteristics during the technical walkthroughs of each product, the nature of formerly uncovered associations with pre-existing

[4] Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: an Approach to the Study of Apps," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (January 16, 2017): 881–900, doi:10.1177/1461444816675438.
[5] Haiven, "Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power." P 8
[6] Carl Rogers, "On Becoming a Person," March 26, 2018, 1–316. P 189
[7] ibid. P 188
[8] Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: an Approach to the Study of Apps," *New Media & Society* 12 (December 28, 2017): 146144481667543–20, doi:10.1177/1461444816675438. p 7
[9] ibid. P 7

cultural discourses, economic aspirations and direct implementations of capitalist ideologies, will become more accessible for a theoretical examination.

Discord was first released in 2015 and is available as a desktop, mobile and web application for Windows, macOS, Linux, Android and iOS. This technical walkthrough will use the browser-based web service that discord provides and then the desktop application as it's point of examination.

The product's home page immediately addresses users of alternative VOIP applications (skype and TeamSpeak) to begin using Discord instead. The text is centred, with a strapline that reads "It's time to ditch Skype and TeamSpeak" (Figure 1). There is also an emphasis on the free and secure nature of the service that the app provides. It is apparent that the intended target audience is gamers in general, the aesthetics are neutral and do not appear to prioritise any single gaming community over another. Supporting this observation, the background artwork on the login and registration screens display artwork from an array of different video games (League of Legends, Warcraft, Dota2) (Figure 2). There are two main buttons, one that links to a download of the program for the appropriate operating system of the device that the user is viewing the page with, and one that opens the web version of the application (Figure 1).

 Both login and registration can be carried out on the web platform and the downloadable version of the app, after registration the process of logging in greets the user with a message that welcomes the user to Discord, it reads, "From here on out, things only get better with friends. Let's take a minute and setup **your server**, shall we?" (Figure 3). The values imposed in this introductory message relate specifically

to the issues of community, ownership and work in tandem, to establish the nature of the implementation of governance within the service that the app provides. After setting up a server on the web app, the new user is given 'quest indicators' to learn about the features of the app; there are instructions to invite your friends, download the desktop app, stay connected to your server via use of the phone app and they give a reminder that their help desk team is available through their twitter account (Figure 4).

Regarding issues of integration, it becomes apparent that the app is marketed toward users whom already have a pre-existing group of friends or acquaintances that they will be able to integrate with, messages like "Send this handy link to your friends to grant them access" and "Grab the desktop app to find friends from other services like Skype or Battle.net" (Figure 5), appear to establish the developers valorisation of online communities. It is only through articulating a vision of possibility whereby positive constructive user interaction that reflects the community guidelines is exemplified; in which the materiality of their service and any subsequent implications toward data collection can remain somewhat latent goals.

Without any friends to invite, or invites to accept, the application does not enable the user much in the way of opportunity, Discord ultimately gives the user a sense of control by giving them all social autonomy. The preferences menu contains UI customisation options, audio options, notifications and an option to subscribe to Discord Nitro - a paid for membership that costs $49.99 for a year or $4.99 a month and allows you to "Share your appreciation and get fun perks!". This is the only paid service that is offered to the user, the perks include: increased file sharing sizes,

animated avatars, the ability to use custom server emoji's on any server, higher quality screen sharing and your own choice of Discord tag number (subject to availability) (Figure 6).

Whilst gaming communities are the initial focus for the Discord service, the overarching selling point is undoubtedly the notion of free communication for all constructive communities. On the discord website, the 'more' dropdown menu has a link to a page titled open-source[10], this page details how various open-source development teams are utilising discord as a means of project management, with features such as web-hook integration from GitHub, syntax highlighting and the unlimited member per project capability - projects such as Home Assistant, Yarnpkg, Reactiflux and Vue.js are all transitioning to Discord from other services such as Slack and Gitter chat.[11]

The notion of being a secure service is also re-iterated via the description on their twitter account (Figure 7) and is articulated as a matter of external threat prevention such as vulnerability to DDOS attacks through the features page. It relates the idea of being secure to aspects of the apps service design that are purposefully closed source - unlike TeamSpeak, Ventrilo and Mumble, whereby the user would need to pay for and manage their own server and then maintain that server's security in whatever way they saw fit. Discord's servers are all internally managed, giving the user little insight into what happens with their data. It appears that Discord's accessibility, simplicity and

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[10] "Open Source on Discord," *discordapp.com/Open-Source*, accessed March 27, 2018, https://discordapp.com/open-source.
[11] "Open Source on Discord."

ease of use all cooperate to encourage the user to be indifferent toward considering any issues of privacy.

As a means of further analysing the relationship between the ownership of user data and the operating model that Discord adheres to, the terms of service documentation can be approached in order to recognise the way in which user's content is legally situated. It states:

> "By uploading, distributing, transmitting or otherwise using Your Content with the Service, you grant to us a perpetual, nonexclusive, transferable, royalty-free, sublicensable, and worldwide license to use, host, reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate, create derivative works from, distribute, perform, and display Your Content in connection with operating and providing the Service."[12]

These terms are incongruent with the portrayal of the Discord service that has positioned itself as not only a free product but also one that supports the common good of constructive communities. With the notion of residual materiality within a context of online communication, and the prevalence of data driven industries that revolve around understanding data as a quantitative entity, when centralised and managed, becomes analogous to any other form of traditionally harboured capital.

Although this observation may be considered essentially truistic, it is well within the scope of the user's capability to be able to identify these types of issues when using

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[12] "Discord Terms of Service" *discordapp.com/terms*, accessed March 27, 2018, https://discordapp.com/terms.

such technologies and application-based services. Even though many app services when scrutinised "often defy user expectations of the app provider's right to their content"[13], there remains a formation of mitigating factors that allow for users to embark upon a viable process of negotiation or employ practices of dismissal. These processes comprise the unique way in which capitalism has monopolised contemporary technology, developing platforms that aren't necessitated to be innovative but instead exist as improved versions of competitors pre-existing services and products. In light of this case study, Discord explicitly rejects a position of originality – exemplified by the nature of the services tag line, which works to position the Discord service as a more efficient, more secure and all round improved option over any alternatives. By situating it as such, it's inherently deterministic qualities are quickly overlooked. Upon closer interrogation, it would be naïve to assume that the structures in place to guide and navigate the user through online spaces such as these, would not be implicitly politically, economically and ideologically driven. In exploring why these structures remain largely unnoticed by users, Justin Lewis wrote that "while humankind has undoubted capacity for conflict, we are used to pitting ourselves against clearly defined adversaries rather than well established aspects of our own lifestyle."[14]

The genre of crises appears to assert its influence at the level of ideological state apparatuses, reappearing within social discourse, media and academia. If by acknowledging what seems to be excesses of opportunity, whereby "the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis,

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[13] Light, Burgess, and Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: an Approach to the Study of Apps." P 13
[14] Justin Lewis, *Beyond Consumer Capitalism*, (Polity, 2013). P 33

with one happening piling on another"[15], the individual is subjected to an unavoidable and overwhelming sense of choice and possibility. Lauren Berlant identifies this as a "heightening interpretive genre"[16] - it is the presence of such choice that generates "an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life."[17] In the context of making a connection between this notion and the usages of apps such as Discord, Lewis's observation that "excessive choice becomes a burden rather than an opportunity, diminishing our ability to act creatively or independently"[18] is poignant. Indeed, the very act of mediating between the vision of the app developer and the vision of oneself becomes an adjustment that is an accomplishment in its own right[19]. The manner in which the user maintains an autonomous conception of their own imaginative potentiality, as well as an awareness of the moral-intimate-economic[20] aspects of their mitigated experience that are not derived from the self; necessitates the construction of a common that unifies people through a collective experience within space that isn't theirs.

The user's imagination of the good life forms an integral part of this process of negotiation. Berlant cites the conception of the 'good life' as a fantasy – "the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something'."[21] This widely accepted definition holds up as the philosophy of capitalist economic systems, as societies become adept at quantizing ritualistic consumption as a way of seeking egotistical, spiritual, familial and political satisfaction.

[15] Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," August 30, 2011, 1–354. P 7
[16] ibid. P 7
[17] ibid. P 7
[18] Lewis, *Beyond Consumer Capitalism*. P 40
[19] Berlant, "Cruel Optimism." P 3
[20] ibid. P 2
[21] ibid. P 2

The surplus of choice that is a result of decades of growing GDP has undeniably begun to represent success, both on a technological, individual and national scale.

In contrast to Berlant's understanding of the good life, Carl Rogers notes:

> It seems to me that the good life is not any fixed state. It is not, in my estimation, a state of virtue, or contentment, or nirvana, or happiness. It is not a condition in which the individual is adjusted, or fulfilled, or actualized. To use psychological terms, it is not a state of drive-reduction, or tension-reduction, or homeostasis.[22]

It is Roger's experience through client-centred therapy that reveals for him that 'the good life' is not an end goal that one can buy into, and it does not correlate to traditional capitalist notions of success. "The good life is a *process,* not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination. The direction which constitutes the good life is that which is selected by the total organism, when there is psychological freedom to move in *any* direction."[23]

The characteristics that comprise this process include moving away from defensiveness toward the pole of openness to experience, an increasing tendency to prefer to live fully in each moment – "the self and personality emerge *from* experience, rather than being translated or twisted to fit preconceived self-structure."[24] It also includes an increasing trust in oneself, trusting emotions and intuition as a way to choose the correct path. This person would be able to function more fully, as an organism accepting of fluidity and experience. The implications of this conception of the good life also includes a new perspective on freedom of choice versus determinism. Rogers compares the defensively organized person, who factors in

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[22] Rogers, "On Becoming a Person." P 185 - 186
[23] Ibid. P 186 - 187
[24] ibid. P 189

some denial or distortion of 'data' to make a decision, with the fully functioning person. It becomes apparent that a society formed of fully functioning people could not support an economic system based upon ever-growing consumerism. If each person was wholly satisfied with their lifestyle and choices, then growth would become redundant as a societal and economic philosophy.

Discord then, can be understood as a service, application and product that revolves around a basic aspect of human existence – communication. It is by valorising the vastness of difference present within the online sphere of community driven activity, that an ideological image of thought – largely that the individual can utilise technology to achieve something akin to the good life, disregarding the negotiation of data as capital - can manifest; thereby allowing value to be momentarily re-envisioned in the mind of the user. As the competitive mode of reproduction that is imposed upon the users' interactions are localised within the scope of their online social space, users can willingly opt out of communities that adhere to values they find incoherent. This superficial level of choice affords the user a sense of control and autonomy, allowing the platform to proceed unquestioned - thus the process of 'adjustment' becomes an ordinary, unconscious co-operation. To contextualise this in alignment with Manovich's observations on Instagram, it becomes apparent that the user who does not recognise the worth of likes, followers and the process of tagging their images as complicit in constructing a quantitatively driven conception of value - but whom still utilises the platform as a means of displaying or documenting photographic work - is exercising their right to 'the commons' within a determined scope of options.

The safety that a static definition of value offers the user who has gone through a process of adjustment, remains of central importance. It is perhaps useful to note

Rogers' analogy in which the behaviour of the hypothetical person who is "open to his experience"[25], is computationally capable of receiving and processing "all of the data from his sense impressions, from his memory, from previous learning, from his visceral and internal states."[26] This correlation provides a delineation of what is required in order to calculate what Rogers defines as "the most economical vector of need satisfaction"[27] in context of any given existential situation. This analogy pivots around an actuality of human insufficiency; it is the trustworthiness of an individual's calculation of experience that is relative to their experience of exploring experience itself. As such the imperfect nature of the total organism of the hypothetical person, is accepted through a complete induction into a state of awareness that does not devalue any aspect of the experience of the person, regardless of the emotional implication.

The user who chooses to forgo any control over their data in order to utilise Discord as an online space of commonality, in full awareness of his participation within a numerically driven ideology that reinforces capitalist values, is perhaps closer to actualizing the good life. "The fully functioning person, on the other hand, not only experiences, but utilizes, the most absolute freedom when he spontaneously, freely, and voluntarily chooses and wills that which is also absolutely determined."[28] [29]

[25] ibid. P 190
[26] ibid. P 190
[27] ibid. P 190
[28] ibid. P 193
[29] John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, (Penguin UK, 2000). P 364-371 (Timshel extract)

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Rogers, Carl. "On Becoming a Person," March 26, 2018, 1–316.

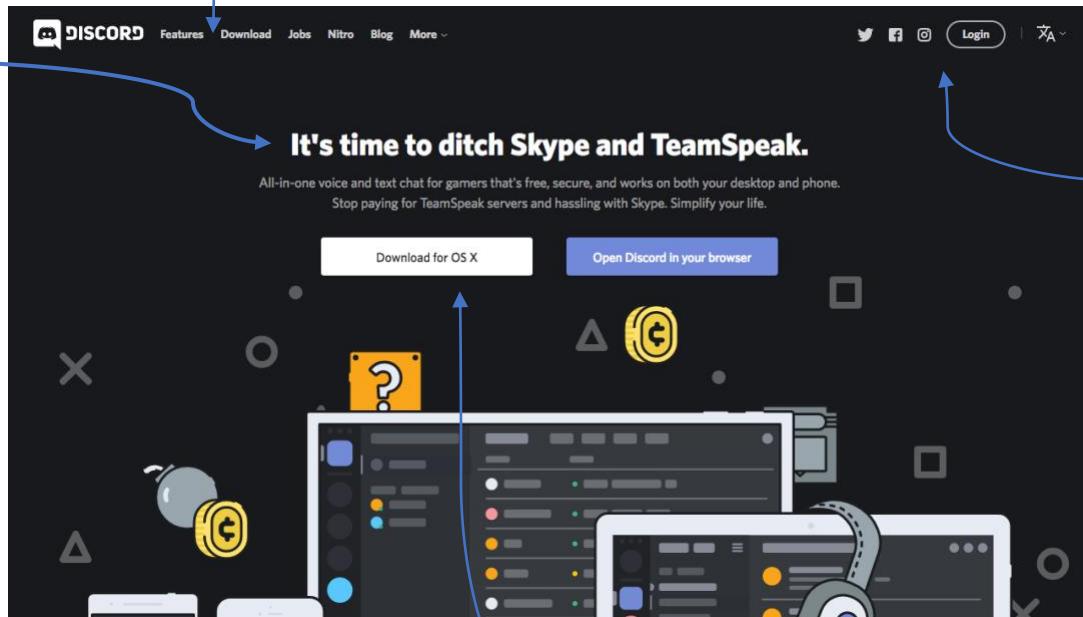John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, (Penguin UK, 2000).

Webography

"Open Source on Discord." *Discordapp.com/Open-Source.* Accessed March 27, 2018. https://discordapp.com/open-source.

"Discord Terms of Service" *discordapp.com/terms*, accessed March 27, 2018, https://discordapp.com/terms.

Discrete menu listing

Authoritative
language,
centred on
the page.

Twitter,
Facebook,
Instagram,
Login and
Language
buttons are
all grouped.

Figure 1.

Download link for device compatible OS

Background image shows art from various games, shown here
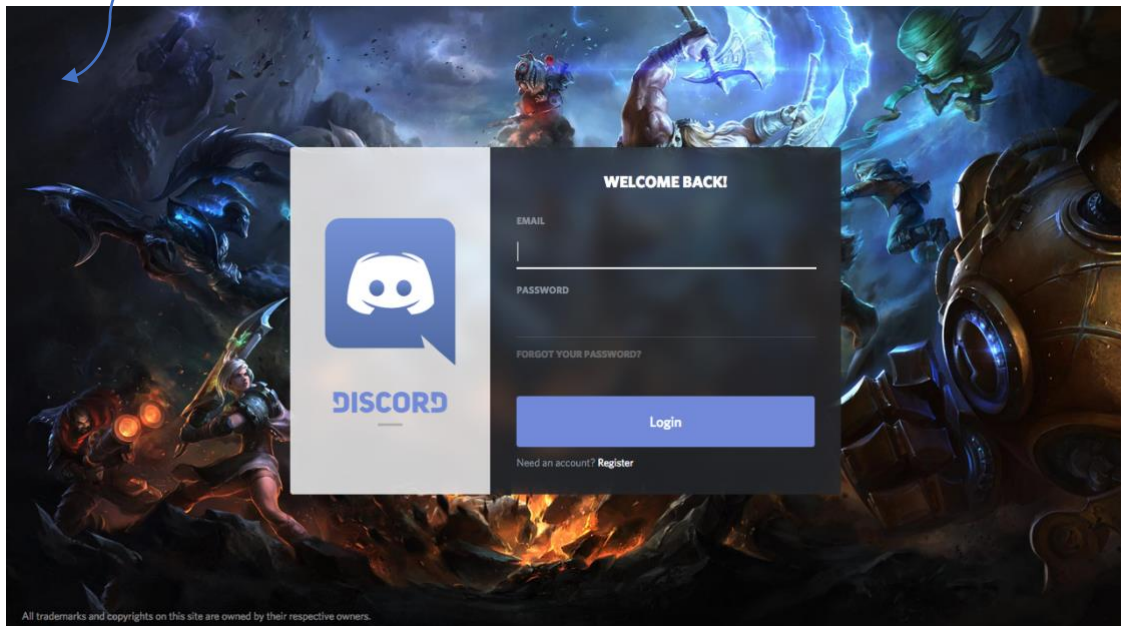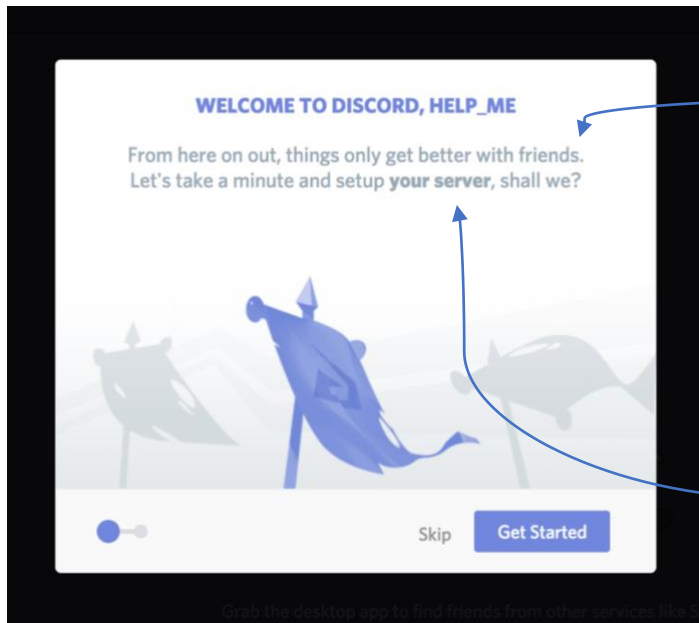displaying League of Legends artwork.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Importance of the user having access to pre-existing communities.

The inference of ownership is supported by the bold text

On the Browser version, this link appears to encourage users to switch to the downloadable version
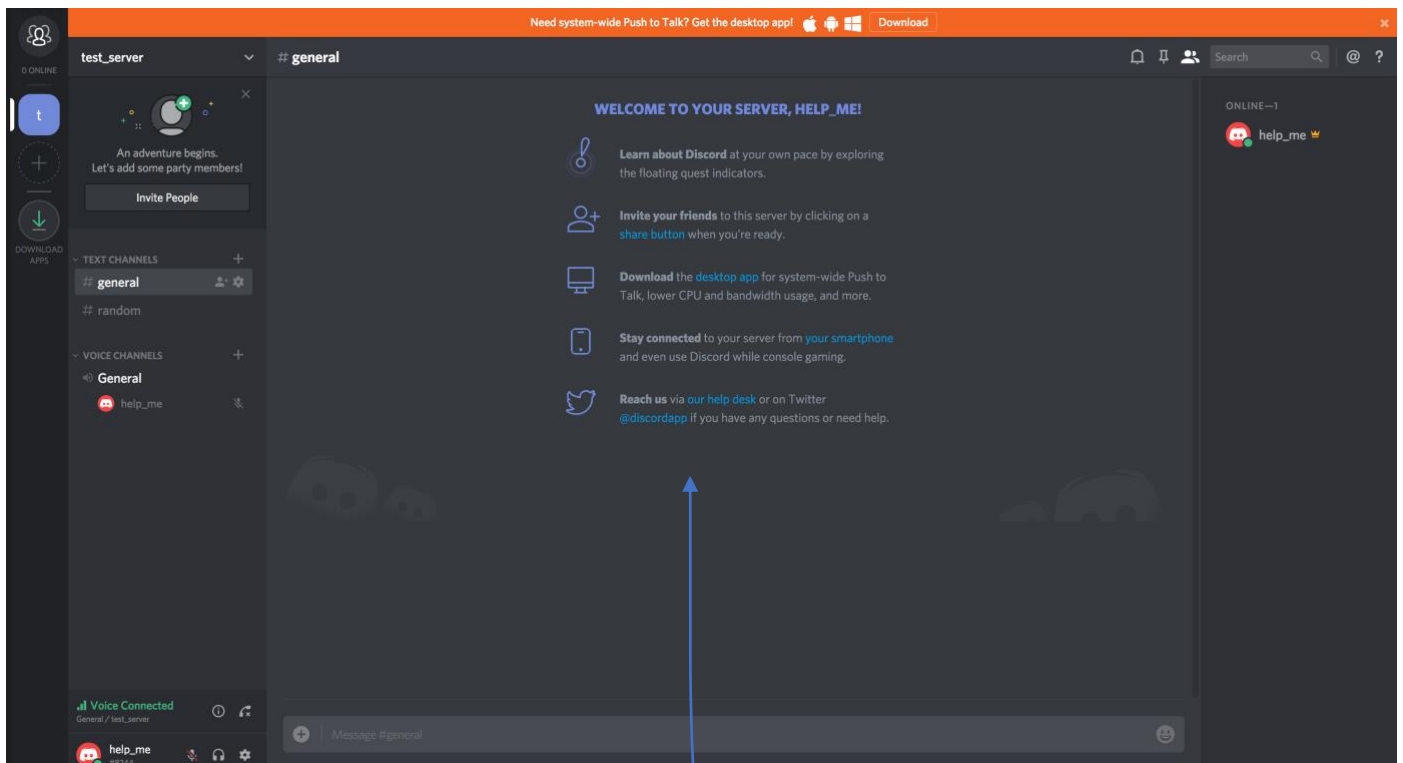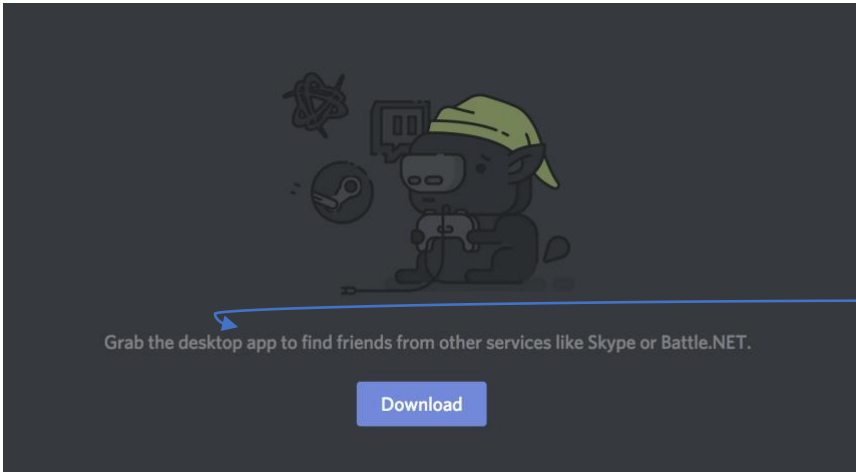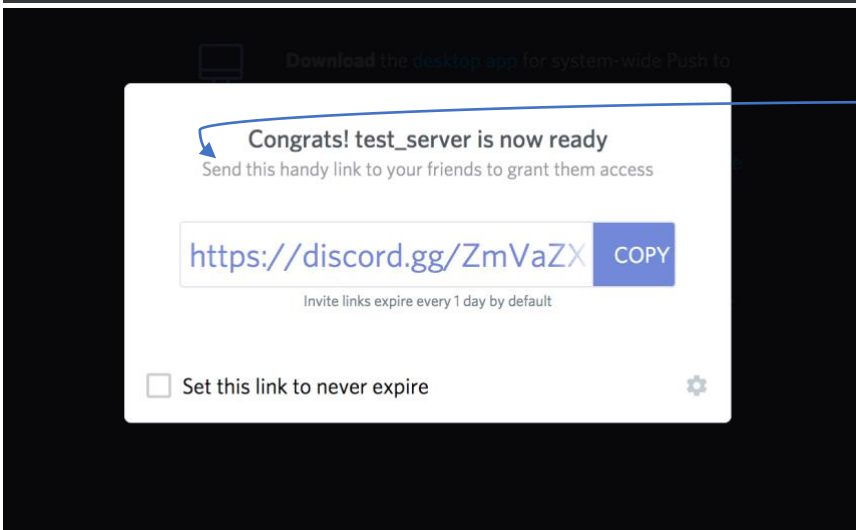

Figure 4.

Introductory messages re-iterate the functions and goals of the app.

Expectation for the user to already being a part of an ongoing community.

Language conveys the ease of use present during server creation.

Figure 5

The only in–app purchase that is available through Discord, is Discord Nitro.

Support Discord's Development
Share your appreciation and get fun perks!

$49.99 / Year $4.99 / Month
2 MONTHS FREE

ESC

Settings divided into User/App sections.

DISCORD NITRO

Choose Your Discord Tag
While subscribed to Nitro, choose any available Discord Tag and be the number you always wanted to be.

#0117
WUMPUS

Animated Avatar
Upload a GIF avatar that plays in your profile and when moused over in chat.

GIF

Higher Quality Screen Share
Up your screen share game with 720p 60fps or 1080p 30fps.

60FPS

Use Custom Emoji Everywhere
Get a global passport to use your custom emoji in any server or DM.
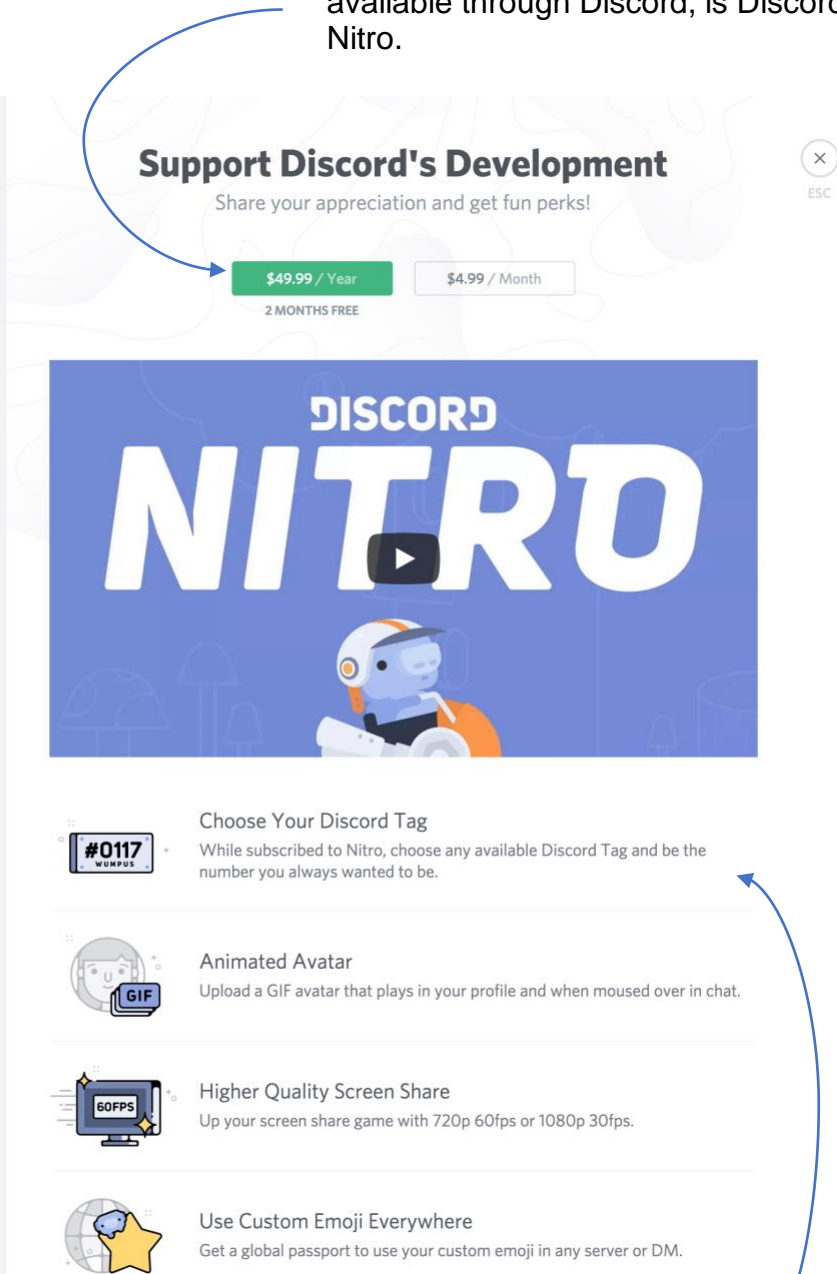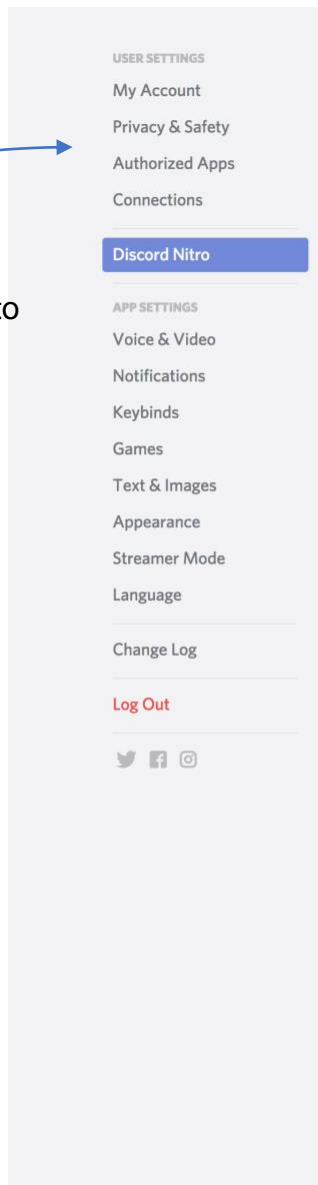
Figure 6

List of the features that purchasing the Nitro service allows users to make use of.
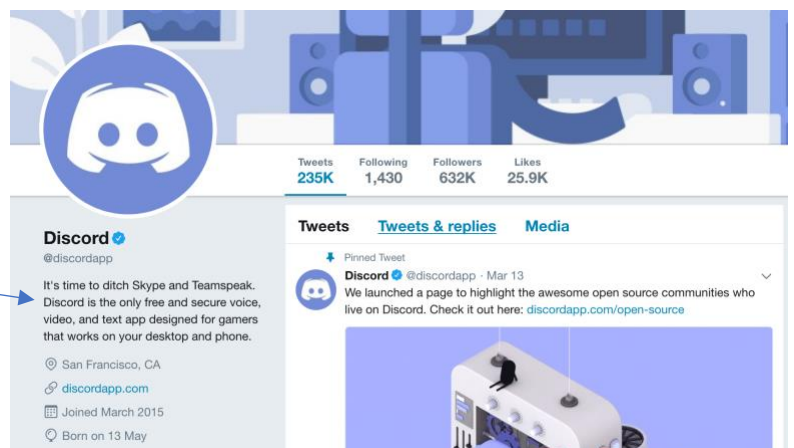
"only free and secure voice, video and text app"

Tweets   Following   Followers   Likes
235K   1,430   632K   25.9K

Tweets   **Tweets & replies**   Media

Pinned Tweet

Discord @discordapp · Mar 13
We launched a page to highlight the awesome open source communities who live on Discord. Check it out here: discordapp.com/open-source

Discord ✔
@discordapp

It's time to ditch Skype and Teamspeak. Discord is the only free and secure voice, video, and text app designed for gamers that works on your desktop and phone.

San Francisco, CA
discordapp.com
Joined March 2015
Born on 13 May

Figure 7