

Discord the Disruptor: Game Changing Servers for Worldwide Topic-Based Collaboration Channels

How the company dealt with becoming a notorious chat tool for white supremacists, disrupted the chat server industry, then scaled to \$3.5 billion valuation in six years without ads or invasive privacy policies.

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Our Topic

Discord History: 2015-2021

- The evolution of its technology, and user population.
 - How the company dealt with becoming a notorious chat tool for white supremacists, disrupted the chat server industry and scaled to \$3.5 billion valuation in six short years without using ads.
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- **Overview of the topic**
 - **Summary of Development:** Discord launched with just Voice and Text chat upon its release in 2015, then in 2017 screenshare and video calling was implemented in calls of up to 10 users. In 2019 Discord started rolling out Server Screensharing which meant video calling with far more users than the standard 10 users. This was because Discord was making more money from Discord Nitro purchases (which is a monthly subscription) to improve their server bandwidth and capabilities and due to the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020. Discord also partnered with Spotify in February 2018 which allowed users to display what song they actively are listening to on Spotify as their status.
 - **Discord's Extensive Features:** Discord has features loved by the most basic of users and the incredibly advanced users. These features go right from automatic Game and Spotify detection right up to full-on API for advanced users to script their own Bots. Intelligent Discord users have made bots that can moderate chats, output music through a YouTube search and much more. The most common Discord bot to have in a server is a music bot. To put it simply, it is scripted to join the call, and outputs the requested video as audio through the microphone (obviously this is all virtual and simulated, not someone else on the other end playing music through their phone). This means that the music sounds good and is really easy to use as everyone can hear the same music and adjust the bot's volume individually, so it's like listening to the same tunes in your car, but in a call with lots of friends!

- **History of the topic's development**

- Who founded it? Jason Citron (Founder and CEO) and Stan Vishnevskiy (CTO), fellow gamers
- Where was it founded? San Francisco, California



- (image from: Ruetir, 2021: <https://www.ruetir.com/2021/01/30/how-discord-is-shaping-the-future-of-the-internet/>)
 - Why did they invent it?
 - Citron and Vishnevskiy wanted to communicate in real time with friends whilst gaming. In 2015, when they designed Discord, all the existing platforms were “slow, unreliable, and complex (Discord, 2021).”
 - Citron and Vishnevskiy wanted to surpass Skype or TeamSpeak (Curry, 2021).
 - What problem or gap in the existing market were they trying to solve? How was it programmed? How did the developers decide on their initial desired target users and how did they shape/change Discord to appeal to those target users?
 - How did their target user base pivot and expand and why?
 - It began as a platform for gamers. Now it is used for any group from “hiking clubs, to art communities, to study groups” (Discord, 2021).
 - Metrics: It currently has over 100 million active users and 13.5 million active servers per week (Discord, 2021).
 - How do they monetize it/make it profitable?
 - Discord Nitro subscriptions. Discord Nitro gives users the ability to further customize their profiles, stream their activities in higher quality and upload Images and Videos that are of higher quality.

- User groups: How Discord went from predominantly a niche gamers' communication tool to a mainstream platform.

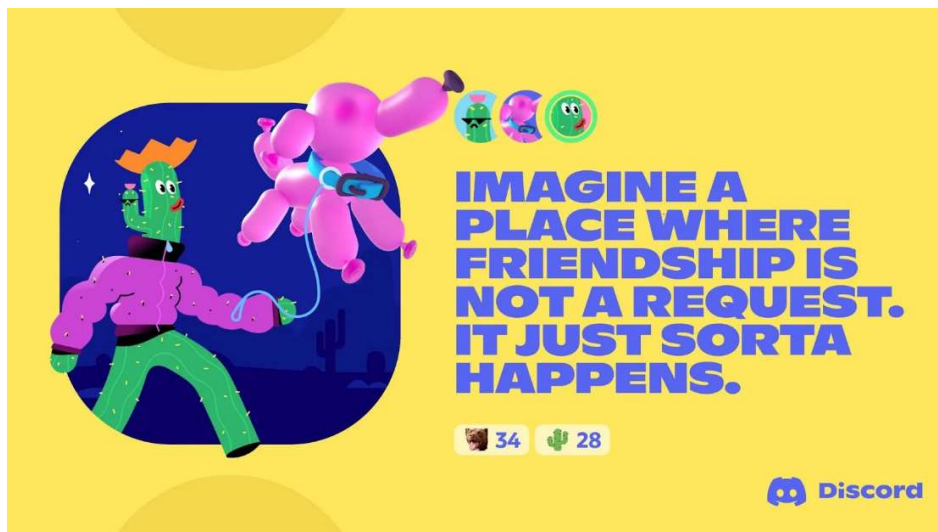


Image from Discord.com

- Discord began in 2015 as a tool exclusively for gamers (Discord, 2021) but by 2019, it had attracted 30% of its user base from outside of the scope of gaming (Liao, 2020). Prior to the pandemic bringing users to the platform en masse, interest categories for the non-gaming users were interested in threaded communication and unscheduled, real-time chats for large groups like teachers and parents, or for any "like-minded groups" from "Korean pop music fans" to "fashion enthusiasts (Liao, 2020)."
- Discord expanded its user base dramatically during the increased need for professional and social online collaboration tools evoked by the Covid-19 pandemic. Between February and July 2020, Discord increased its total monthly users by 47% (Liao, 2020). During those five months, it also dramatically expanded the breadth of its user base globally, bringing in new users in countries such as Italy, France and Spain (Liao, 2020).
- Co-founder and CEO, Jason Citron, comments in July 2020 on their \$100 million in funding for expansion and rebranding to welcome all users, "We all spend a lot of time in front of our screens. As we look back at the last few months, it's clear that as people spend more and more time online, they want online spaces where they can find real humanity and belonging. This is what Stan and I were doing when we were teenagers sitting at home playing games, and it's why we created Discord (Discord Blog, 2020)."

- **Problems Discord faced as it became a general communication tool**
 - What problems have they encountered and how did they handle these issues (i.e. white supremacists gravitated to it for a while and used the platform to organize the Charlottesville attack. This gave their platform international negative press. Discord developed new tools for monitoring content and emerged from this with a better brand/reputation. (Forbes, 2020).
 - Discord was the most favoured platform for alt-right and white supremacists at one point. It has worked hard to change that. (Brown, 2020). Steps that Discord took, include:
 - “... a set of initiatives to combat hate speech on its platform. Those include vowing to audit the ways its users spread racism; developing new software to manage abuse; diversifying its staff; contributing to organizations focused on racial justice; and offering customized services to community organizers and activists.” (Chin, 2020)



Image from: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/8/16/16157160/charlottesville-responses-policy-changes-online-hate-groups>



Image from: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/08/state-of-emergency-in-va-after-white-nationalist-rally.html>

- **How does Discord work?**
 - Before chat servers like Discord, gamers had to set up their own servers to chat during a game or deal with somewhat old and clunky available options like Skype or TeamSpeak. Skype was originally the communication software of choice for most gamers due to it being pre-installed on most computers, and it was also available on mobile devices. Skype and TeamSpeak became quickly outdated however due to the confusing layout, poor audio quality and underwhelming support.
 - How does Discord stand out from its competitors? What differentiates it?
 - “Voice chatting in Discord isn't like setting up a call, it doesn't involve dialing or sharing a link and password or anything at all formal. Every channel has a dedicated space for voice chat, and anyone who drops in is immediately connected and talking. The better metaphor than calling is walking into a room and plopping down on the sofa: You're simply saying, I'm here, what's up?” --Pierce (2020).
- **User interface**
 - Allows for multiple platform interface options such as screen sharing, video or audio chat.
- **Servers**
 - Users can create their own servers.
 - Owners of servers can create roles and assign them to individual users giving members certain permissions like managing roles and channels or changing nicknames of other members. Roles can also be used to distinguish groups of members by setting a role colour.
 - Owners of servers can host private, password protected or public channels.
 - There are two types of channels:
 1. Voice Channels
 2. Text Channels
 - Users can screen share or talk using a microphone through voice channels.
 - Users can send text messages, gifs, gifts, emoticons, and files through text channels given they have the correct permissions.
 - Users can notify one another when talking to each other in servers by pinging/tagging them.
- **Direct Messaging (DM)**
 - Users can direct message by adding each other as a friend.
 - DMs can be used to send friends messages, files, gifs, gifts or emoticons and voice chat or screenshare privately.
- **Required Equipment**
 - You do not need any “special equipment” to use Discord. You can use it on a Smartphone or PC. There is nothing extra required compared to other chat platforms (standard audio-visual equipment). It is quick and easy to install and has an intuitive interface.

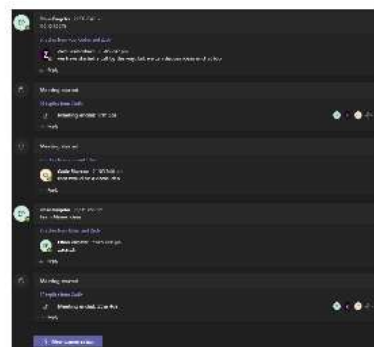
- Competitive Advantage: Discord vs. MS Teams



- Linear discussions allow for easier readability.
- Messages can reply to other messages to maintain context.
- You can 'mention' whole groups of people at a time to notify them all together.
- Custom names can be set for people individually.
- Optimised and responsive application with user-friendly buttons.
- Flexible notification settings.
- Responsive video calls and screen sharing.



- Conversations collapse in on themselves, hiding the majority of the conversation.
- Not a lot of customisation options.
- Notification hell; you get both mobile and desktop notifications even while you are clicked on the program.
- Slow on low-end machines.



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Figure 1. Comparison between Discord and Microsoft Teams. Created by Kaleb Dickson, 2021.

- **Suggested predictions.**

- What problems might it run into now that it has a wider user base?
 - Child exploitation, illegal transactions, self-harm, predatorial behaviour.
 - It already has encountered these types of issues and has a clear and robust policy to work with law enforcement agencies, domestic and international.
- The larger it becomes, the more it becomes an interesting target for an information security attack. What might it already be doing to prevent and detect this? How does it currently address malware attacks?
- Conclusion: since it has successfully met with major challenges and pivoted with speed and agility, there is a good chance it will use the same successful model to address future problems and continue to be a solid company.
- It is an excellent tool for software engineers to share projects and collaborate. (Discord, 2021).

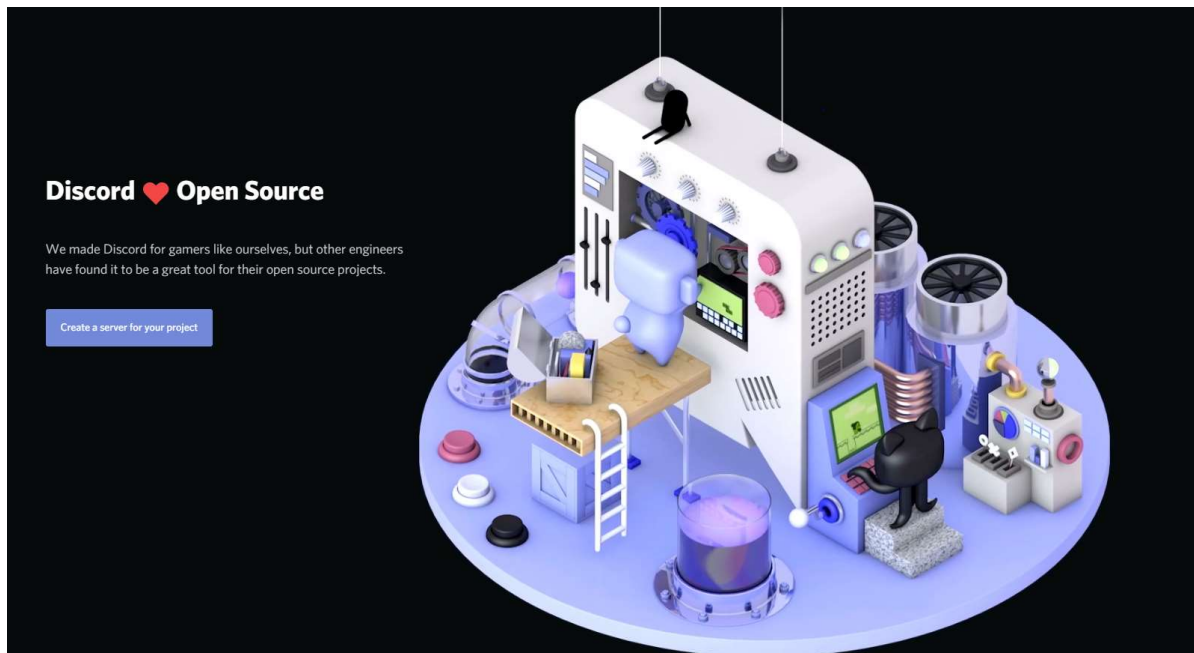
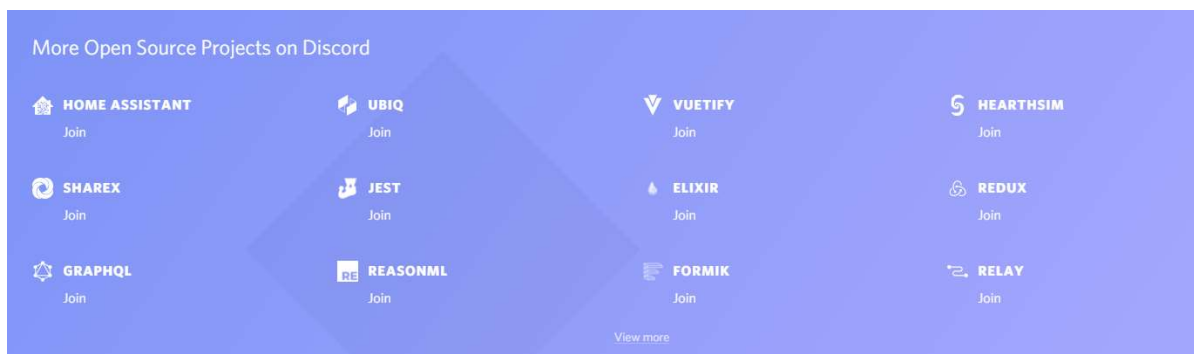


Image above and below from <https://discord.com/open-source>



Include any references you will use, as a deposit for accessing them as you plan your presentation.

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