Gates and channels: An ANT-oriented approach to understanding fan community behaviour and identity on a *Discord* chat server

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Abstract
The aim of this thesis is to understand how humans and software are entwined in the
development of an online fan community. It is situated on the popular text- and voice-chat
program Discord, which has enjoyed rising popularity with videogame-based groups since its
launch in 2015. My goal with this research was to determine the affordances of the platform,
analyse how they were implemented in a case study community, and then finally determine
how these specific implementations allowed the community to flourish.

Engaging in a digitally-oriented ethnographic ('netnographic') study of how the online
fandom of Failbetter Games, an independent videogame studio, manifested itself on the
platform, I began observing their activities with the intent of identifying noteworthy
phenomena. I came to focus on the sociotechnical processes of the community – the
relationships that emerged between what actions the platform allowed, how users availed
themselves of these allowances, and how users interacted with one another.

I challenge the heavily human-interactivity-focused approach taken by conventional
netnographers in virtual community studies, arguing that researchers could benefit
substantially from evaluating the digital ‘architecture’ that these communities build and
configure around themselves. From my investigation I develop a typological model of ‘gates’
and ‘channels’ for understanding how online communities manage discussion and constitute
shared social identities through a complex network of human/software actors and
interactions.
Statement of originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In online spaces, communications and technology are inextricably entwined. The design decisions of programmers determine the rules of the medium through which users talk to one another, and, consequently, have implications for how online communities form and develop. A community’s culture, grounded in shared norms, values, resources, technologies, social practices and rules of conduct, develops over time through members’ technosocial interactions (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000). When a community in one context adopts a new software environment that lets users write their own rules, it may undergo processes of self-reflection and transformation as it finds a new stability. Using a case study of a videogame fan discussion server on the relatively new chat platform Discord, this thesis focuses on the complex interplay between human and non-human elements in a virtual community.

Researchers of digital communities recognise a need to account for the impact of communicative medium on users’ interactions and self-expression (e.g. Herring, 2004). Different forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) come with their own inherent restrictions and capabilities for would-be communicators; instant messaging allows for short, swift text-based exchanges which differ dramatically from those carried out through slower mediums like email (Murray, 1988). Where these technologies lack rich communicative features, users have found innovative ways to convey nuance and achieve their communicative aims using the tools available to them (Walther, 1992). Virtual communities, bounded as they are by software, work within and beyond the constraints and capacities of their platform. They tend to mobilise the rules and resources of that platform in their performances of culture. Platforms therefore evolve, not only through software updates implemented by their programmers, but in each individual instance of use as different user groups harness platforms to their own ends.
Digital cultures studies have employed the methodology of ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2010) to analyse the role of digital communications mediums on the information and cultures observed within. In this study, I diverge from conventional netnography, with its focus on describing and analysing human online behaviours, to look also at non-humans and their role in producing and maintaining community norms, rules, identity, etc. day-to-day, moment-to-moment across an array of users, software, and text. This new approach is informed chiefly by actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 1988), in which patterns of technology usage are seen to arise from the influence of various ‘actors’ – including people, concepts, specific features of the technology, and so on – upon one another. Under ANT, the distinction between the social and the technical is collapsed, and we distinguish instead between human and non-human actors, and between a technology’s intended use patterns as produced by actors (‘programs’) and practices and forces that work against the programs of other actors (‘anti-programs’), to qualify how and why the technology is used and designed the way that it is for a given virtual community.

I situate my study on the officially endorsed, fan-run Discord server for Failbetter Games (FBG), an indie videogame development studio most notable for creating the 2010 browser game Fallen London. I take the view that the community constituted and mediated by the FBG Discord server is co-constructed by users, coded elements of the Discord platform, and the specific architecture of the server itself. My research employs methods that are prima facie netnographic, namely participant observation and interviewing, but emphasises how community values are written into the digital space’s design as much as they are carried out by community members. By examining the roles of individual, purpose-designed actors (‘artefacts’) in constituting communities, I develop an ANT-oriented framework for analysing online community cultures in persistent web spaces such as servers and chatrooms.

After thoroughly analysing two key technological/cultural artefacts that prominently influence the community – the Discord platform itself and the videogame Fallen London – I develop the
theoretical concept of gates and channels to explain the server’s successful operation. Gates and channels are ANT programs borne out by both users and server architecture that manage the flow of discussion. Gates regulate, slow and sometimes block the flow of discussion, whereas channels direct them. Together, gates and channels help to constitute the identity of the space and of its participants.

The following sections of this introduction provide an overview of the project. The first section provides relevant background information on Discord. The second establishes the background for Fallen London, FBG’s oldest and most important game title. The third documents the chapter structure of the study.

1.1: What is Discord?

Discord is a cross-platform freeware application for mobile and computer devices developed by Discord, Inc., initially released in May 2015. It supports two main modes of communication: text-based instant messaging and real-time voice calls. Each can be used for either dyadic (one-on-one) or multiparticipant conversations. People who play videogames use group voice chat to coordinate multiplayer gameplay, while text-based chat is used more widely for all kinds of discussion (with the case study server using text chat almost exclusively). Communities on Discord reside within ‘servers’ comprised of multiple separate ‘channels’, a setup which allows participants to hold different conversations in different metaphorical rooms without disrupting other topics.

Discord, Inc. markets Discord as a superior alternative to platforms such as Skype and Teamspeak, particularly for communities and social groups who like to play videogames (‘Discord — Company’). Greater network reliability, along with improved security for users, were two key improvements it offered over other platforms at the time of its launch (Lazarides, 2015). As a variation on existing digital communications platforms such as Skype, Discord
incorporates variations upon these standards to become preferred/dominant over other options (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). I will argue that it anticipates potential breakdowns found in those other platforms. Since its launch, the platform has seen regular updates which have either improved its existing infrastructure or added new functionalities, such as extra options for formatting message text.

Other benefits it affords users include emojis, the ability to install custom software agents (‘bots’) on servers to give them extra utility, and a host of ways to configure rules for servers and individual channels. These features are taken up as tools by users, especially server moderators, to produce gating and channelling programs that give the server structure.

As it currently stands, there have been very few formal academic studies that explore Discord or any communities thereon. Thus, in addition to setting out my ANT-netnography hybrid approach, I aim in this study to provide a platform analysis of Discord that may be useful to future scholars.

1.2: What is Fallen London?

Fallen London is a browser-based adventure game set in an alternate history Victorian London located deep underground. Since its commercial launch in early 2010, Failbetter Games has operated Fallen London continuously, regularly adding new content on a ‘freemium’ model of business. Users gain access to a majority of the game’s content for free, but they can gain access to special content and perks via a paid subscription (‘Exceptional Friendship’) and/or by purchasing premium virtual currency (‘Fate’).

Fallen London is a narrative-heavy game with a cryptic, sometimes elliptical style of storytelling that encourages players to delve progressively deeper into its setting’s mysteries. Its story is conveyed entirely through short written snippets which hint at the existence of deeper truths. The game operates on a real-world waiting-based system, with players typically
having to wait several hours between play sessions. While gameplay is primarily singleplayer, it also provides several options for socialising with other players and offers in-game incentives for participating with its player community. Meanwhile, players in search of knowledge they have not yet found may use online spaces such as FBG’s official forum website (https://community.failbettergames.com/) to benefit from one another’s knowledge and experience.

As a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) united around a shared interest in FBG, the FBG fan Discord community configures its server to reflect elements of Fallen London narrative and mechanics. In my study I consider how player/fan ‘practice’ is enacted using server architecture.

1.3: Chapter outline

Chapter 2 of this thesis details the relevant literature that informs this study. Prominent areas include social constructivist theories of technology, virtual community studies, CMC, and fandom studies.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology that I followed for this project. It follows mostly netnographic methods, but substantially incorporates ideas from actor-network theory.

Chapter 4 engages in the netnographic process of entrée for each of Discord and Fallen London. In both cases, I look analytically at the core elements of each that become mobilised by the case study server.

Chapter 5 relays the findings of my modified netnography. In it I expand further on the concept of gates and channels, and then examine the manifestations of each one on the FBG server in kind.

Chapter 6 summarises the results of the project, identifies potential areas that could be addressed with the theoretical model I have produced, and suggests future avenues for study.
Chapter 2: Literature review

This research seeks to understand the interplay between users and technology within an active videogame fan community situated on Discord. It investigates how fan identities, interactions, and the server space itself are constituted via a combination of social norms, programmable utilities, and fandom-related artefacts maintained and negotiated by the community’s members. To do this, I draw upon social constructivist epistemological principles which have underpinned past studies involving technology use to analyse server architecture and activity, including Latour’s actor-network theory (1988), Pinch & Bijker’s social construction of technology (1984), and MacKenzie & Wajcman’s social shaping of technology (1985). Established theory around digital communications, virtual communities and videogame fandom grounds my exploration of the case study server as an example of a unique kind of fan community, locating the project at an intersection of these fields.

The social construction of technology (SCOT) approach is founded on the idea that a technological artefact’s definition and purpose are determined through discourse between ‘relevant social groups’ (RSGs) (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). While Discord might market itself as an alternative for gamers, and its core functionality of text- and voice-based communication is comparable to (if perhaps more sophisticated than) that of similar programs like Skype, its cultural significance and purpose is determined not just by its developers but by the many different groups of Discord users. Likewise, videogames are socially constructed in a variety of ways ranging from social to recreational to competitive (Itō et al., 2010). SCOT researchers refer to discrete items or features of technology as ‘artefacts’; in the digital era, these can be things as small as individual software programs or as broad as the Internet itself (Yousefikhah, 2017, p. 36). Central to the negotiation of meanings between RSGs is the idea of interpretive flexibility: that there is “not one best way” of designing an artefact, but rather multiple co-present ways in which an artefact is defined by varying parties (Bijker & Pinch, 2012, p. 6).
An artefact’s development is a cyclical process of variation and selection, in which multiple interpretations of an artefact emerge from different groups’ use of it and some of these interpretations are ‘selected’ to become the new standard (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). In presenting itself as better than older platforms, Discord seeks to be selected as the new platform of choice for users who play videogames, who use those older platforms, and others. Using SCOT, researchers consider the meanings that various RSGs assign to artefacts to determine what those artefacts ‘become’ through the discourses around them. SCOT refutes technological deterministic approaches to technology studies, maintaining that there is no singular ‘ideal’ cultural outcome for a cultural artefact nor any ‘natural’ end state of a technology (Bijker, 2009).

Since SCOT views artefacts’ meanings as the outcome of social activity, it has been critiqued for “substituting technological determinism with social determinism” (Latzko-Toth, 2014, p. 580). SCOT advocates have subsequently updated the framework to suggest that the construction process affects the environment around an artefact, and the RSGs themselves, in addition to the artefact itself. Essentially, users and the technology are ‘co-constructed’; they are “two sides of the same problem” (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003, p. 3), with each shaping and being shaped by the other. This revision averts the problem within SCOT of presenting social groups as static entities.

The customisability of Discord servers is an absolutely crucial consideration in this study’s assessment of community culture. Latzko-Toth (2014) finds that on Internet Relay Chat (IRC), an early popular text-based chat platform and one of Discord’s effective predecessors, users can “play an active role in co-designing and configuring the media through which they interact, provided they get (or create) the needed space of freedom and autonomy” (p. 592). Users can, for example, augment social spaces by introducing bots, scripts, and other programmable features (Saetnan, 2000). We must distinguish, therefore, between user-driven innovation and
developer-driven innovation in order to determine how a given community might be uniquely configuring Discord’s server technology for itself. Another issue with SCOT, brought up by Winner (1993), is that it is sometimes hasty to declare artefact definitions ‘resolved’. Any currently agreed-upon understanding of an artefact can be challenged by variations that emerge in the future. That Discord is still receiving major software updates suggests that users’ relationships and interactions with it are far from fixed.

While users in SCOT are sorted into RSGs, which usually differ by agenda, they can also be categorised according to their expertise/depth of knowledge with the concerned artefact(s) (Saetnan, 2000). On the FBG Discord server, all users are accorded one or more ‘roles’ which signify their identities as moderators, FBG studio staff, ordinary members, etc. We identify the RSGs of the case study server based on their in-server roles, but also distinguish between experienced server participants and those who are relatively new. We base this on the idea that those who have been involved with the server for longer will be better inculcated into its sociotechnical framework. We might consider how features of this framework are configured to induce newcomers to participate, how they are used by veterans, and how veterans may have had a hand in shaping them. The videogame titles developed by Failbetter, particularly Fallen London, should also be identifiable in the server’s layout and its members’ activities due to their place at the heart of the server’s fandom-based identity.

How the rules and architecture of the FBG Discord server facilitate and are shaped by its resident community be better explained with reference to two other constructivist models developed within a few years of SCOT. Social shaping of technology (SST) (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985) contrasts SCOT’s idea of ‘construction’, in which social forces decide what technology becomes, with the concept of reciprocal ‘shaping’ between society and technology. Central to SST is the notion that “choices (though not necessarily conscious choices)” are “inherent in both the design of individual artefacts and systems” (Williams & Edge, 1996, p.
Innovation on an artefact – here the case study server – is not linear, but rather is influenced by the society in which its use occurs. The society, in turn, is influenced by changes made to the artefact. Building on this, Baym (2013) proposes that technology affects society through affordances (those actions it allows or makes easier), constraints (those it prohibits or makes harder), preconditions (skills and resources required to use it) and unintended consequences, while society shapes technology via economic, political and cultural factors.

*Actor-network theory* (ANT), an alternative framework developed by Bruno Latour, views the relationship between humans and technologies through a sociotechnical lens. Society, a key driving force behind technological development in SCOT and SST, is contested by ANT, which argues that social forces are produced by networks of ‘actors’ – such as humans, objects, texts, and technical artefacts – interpreting (translating) and harnessing (enrolling) one another to exert influence within a shared system (Latour, 1988). ANT explains that artefact designers try to encourage users towards preferred patterns of use (‘programs’) and nullify or reduce practices and forces that work against said patterns (‘anti-programs’) by creating *inscriptions* in the design (Latour, 1991). These inscriptions represent elements within an artefact’s design which privilege a particular idea of how it is to be used, and thus “attempt to anticipate and promote if not restrict future patterns of use” (Randall, Harper, & Rouncefield, 2007, p. 106). Designers condition artefacts to encourage certain behaviours through programs and counter any problematic interpretations through *anti*-anti-programs. *Discord* affords server creators a great amount of freedom when customising their social spaces, and so we must examine the processes by which users shape and respond to the rules and how our case study server’s architecture may have evolved to accommodate community needs.

Through an extensive cycle of design, use, and redesign, digital communications artefacts such as social media and chat platforms – being what du Gay et al. (2013) would call *social technologies* – become linked to cultural understandings of how they should be used. Research
into communications technology has shown that these understandings are typically held at either a peer-group or institutional level – that is, patterns of behaviour while using the technology vary significantly between communities (Fulk, 1993). Moreover, being part of a group that uses a social technology can bring one’s own attitude toward that technology in line with that of the collective. With social technology platforms, RSGs can consist of organisations, institutions and/or groups of unorganised individuals; furthermore, these groups are not pre-defined, but rather form around the artefact in an unstructured way (Elle et al., 2010, p. 137). SCOT may be useful for determining how negotiations between Discord’s users and developers has influenced the platform’s features; however, examining the implementation of these features in custom servers is better done through a more minutiae-focused ANT approach.

It is important to address how technical actors within the case study server, such as its rules and channel structure, are constrained in their evolution by the rules/structures of Discord itself. The media studies sub-discipline of ‘platform studies’ proposed by Montfort & Bogost (2009) provides a framework for this. In a series of explorations into the history of the Atari 2600 videogame console, Montfort & Bogost noted how the platform’s technical capabilities were a shaping force for both the creation and experience of creative cultural artefacts (i.e. videogames) developed for it. Central to their idea of platforms is their programmability, which permits users to build new artefacts on the platform in ways not inscribed by its original developers (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018, p. 297). From a sociocultural perspective, platforms are a point of convergence for groups with very different aims. Developers, for example, might view the platform as a medium for designing and marketing software, while users see it as a recreational or social tool (Helmond, 2015). Fallen London and Discord constitute very different kinds of platforms: the former facilitates an individual experience with interactive creative content, while the latter facilitates communication in virtual spaces that users can tweak for themselves. The forms of expression and engagement
with *Fallen London* which manifest on the FBG *Discord*, as a site for fandom situated in a communication-focused medium, will differ greatly from those that manifest from playing the game. However, given the intrinsic subcultural connection between server members and the game, we can expect some features and activities on the server to reflect elements of *Fallen London* gameplay and player identity.

Internet-enabled communications technologies have had an undeniable impact on people’s capacity to come together and interact. Digital technology has diminished geographical proximity as a necessity for socialisation (Coleman, 2011) and facilitated a convergence of media platforms (Jenkins, 2006), meaning that digital communities can be formed by and comprised of individuals from around the world. Such communities differ from traditional communities in that they exist based on common grounds such as hobbies, ideology, or shared consumption of media, rather than place (Squire & Johnson, 2000). Scholars in cultural studies and media studies recognise internet-enabled communities as fertile and evolving locations for research into new forms of communication and social space.

Many researchers exploring ‘virtual communities’ cite Rheingold’s (1993) definition as a starting point. Virtual communities, according to Rheingold, are “social aggregations that carry on (...) public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relations in cyberspace” (p. 5). Community members’ interactions with one another, informed by intrinsic assumptions about group purpose, contribute to a sense of collective identity, interactional conventions, and social norms (Lea & Spears, 1992; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000). Research into virtual communities has indicated that social-oriented digital spaces, such as hobbyist and fan community hubs, have generally more nuanced and complex communicative norms than task-oriented spaces such as project-based work chatrooms (Walther, 1995; Wood & Smith, 2005; Houghton, Upadhyay, & Klin, 2018). In her ethnography of a Usenet newsgroup dedicated to the discussion of TV soap operas, Baym
(2000) determined that social-oriented online groups have emergent organisational structures which develop as participants “pick and choose from what is available, at times using things in unexpected ways and at times not using some of the possibilities” (p. 141). Playful virtual communities are sites of innovation and appropriation of communicative norms, and analyses of behaviour within them should contemplate how the history of interactions among group members has shaped the sensibilities they now share.

Communicators in digital chat spaces such as the FBG Discord server employ tools such as turn-taking, punctuation, and paralinguistic features such as emoticons to achieve clarity and coherence (Markman, 2005). Identifying and understanding such features of online discourse is the central focus of computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, which has examined the writing habits of digital users and the social rubrics of digital interactions since the Internet’s early Usenet days. A prominent early assumption was that interactions mediated by technologies such as the telephone would be ‘lesser’ than face-to-face interactions (FTF), based on the idea that the physical co-presence of interlocutors was necessary to achieve rich expression (Riva & Galimberti, 1997). CMC, as an (at first) exclusively text-based communicative medium, was assumed to be inherently limited in its potential for informational depth (Bullingham, Vasconcelos, & Willet, 2013). This perspective was eventually countered by social information processing theory (SIP), wherein Walther (1992) posited that online interpersonal relationships could possess the same depth as FTF ones. While text-based CMC communicators do not have access to conventional supplementary cues such as voice prosody or body language, Walther argued, they adapt, appropriate and reconstruct aspects of the CMC medium to compensate. SIP has been validated by a variety of CMC studies showing how users employ unique virtual conventions and gestures to fulfil functions similar (though not equivalent; see Orgad, 2009) to those in FTF.
CMC users employ distinctive language and paralanguage techniques to convey affect, indicate their stances within conversations, and define or renegotiate their relationships with interlocutors. Some digital communications scholars have used linguistic analysis methods to understand the functions of stylistic features such as emoticons (Dresner & Herring, 2010), ellipses (Ong, 2011; Gunraj et al., 2016), nonstandard spelling (Darics, 2013) and nonstandard punctuation (Vandergriff, 2013). Sociological studies of CMC, meanwhile, have developed new methodologies around the idea of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), which seeks to take the constraints and affordances of digital communications technologies into account when analysing digital social interaction (Herring, 2004). The processes involved in digital conversation, such as turn-taking and metacommunicative signalling, are determined in part by technical factors such as whether the CMC is synchronous or asynchronous (Ellis, Gibbs, & Rein, 1991). CMD scholars have found it useful to subject the platforms they situate their studies on to a ‘facet-based’ classification scheme (Baym, 1995; Herring, 2007) to identify some of the social, cultural and technical factors affecting the practices they observed.

The concept of identity has been extensively explored as it relates to online communities and communications technology. Social identity theory, a popular framework for researchers in this field, draws a distinction between social identity, derived from membership in a group, and personal identity, constituted by an individual’s unique attributes (Tafjel & Turner, 1979). The social identity model of deindividuation (SIDE) refines this even further by suggesting that individuals build and articulate unique, context-specific identities for themselves within a given social group (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). In online communities, participants often carve out informal roles for themselves over the course of their participation, coming to be known as experts, people who befriend others, witty people, sarcastic people, silent ‘lurkers’, etc. (Kim, 2000). Discord has features through which users can perform and reify these kinds of identities, which will be implemented in ways that are unique to the server.
Server customisation, essentially a form of user-driven programming, is undertaken by moderators (‘mods’) and administrators. These users are distinguished from other kinds of participants by special sets of privileges which allow them to enact decisions about who can enter the space and how the space is structured. In social terms, mods are arbitrators who attempt to ‘norm’ certain behaviours through regulatory discourse and conflict arbitration (Lammers, 2013) and play a crucial role in shaping group identity by “balancing the freedoms online spaces offer with establishing and maintaining community bonds and good governance” (Thomas & Round, 2016). Hutchinson (2013) writes that moderators and similar authorities in digital spaces serve as ‘cultural intermediaries’ who, by enrolling human and non-human actors, seek to “maintain the equilibrium” between the wishes of community members and the normative purpose of the online spaces they oversee. Among the non-human actors that moderators can enrol are social actors (e.g. community norms, social authority), technical actors (e.g. mod privileges, bots, and artefacts the mods themselves have designed for the space), and textual actors (e.g. codified rules, users’ messages).

In a study of online community structures, Maloney-Krichmar, Abras, & Preece (2002) explain that the vitality of an online community site is tied to its members, and therefore its sociability. Sociability as they understand it stems from three things:

- The site’s purpose;
- The people that come to the community; and

While the moderators wield technical powers (such as the power to restructure the server or the power to ban troublemakers) on behalf of the community, their power is also dependent on the community’s continued existence and approval. It is thus imperative that ordinary community members have some input into how the server is structured and run. The idea of
*produsage*, wherein ‘everyday’ users produce social and cultural artefacts of their own (Bruns, 2007), thus manifests on *Discord* on two levels: mods-to-platform (whereby the mods reprogram and customise the space) and community-to-mods (whereby the space’s current and future structuring is negotiated).

Maloney-Krichmar et al. (2002) further lay out several elements of online community design which research has found to be important to communities’ longevity:

- That the aesthetic design of the webspace is appealing to new & existing members;
- A clear statement of the community’s purpose, albeit not one so narrow as to be exclusionary;
- A community-centred approach to design wherein members have a say as to what is good for the community; and
- The creation of policies to deter against and address misconduct (2002, p. 19).

Based on these necessities, Preece & Maloney-Krichmar (2003) propose a framework for understanding online community design, wherein online communities structure their spaces to achieve both *sociability* (described earlier) and *usability* (through social support, information design, navigation, and community access to decision-making power over design). Admins and mods on *Discord* possess the power to design and reconfigure server rules and architecture, and thus preside, in Latourian terms, over its inscriptions. There is an opening for this research to discuss how non-mod human actors factor into the translation of server design features, and how said features serve the community in terms of functionality and the expression/constitution of identity.

Many researchers have employed ethnographic approaches in their efforts to understand online communities qualitatively. Jacobson’s (1996) work on naming conventions in synchronous
text-based ‘multi-user dungeons’ (MUDs) involved a kind of ethnographic fieldwork comprised of community observation/participation and retrospective chatlog analysis to reach an “authentic representation” of digital social acts (pp. 461-2). Tom Boellstorff (2008), an anthropologist, conducted his study of the online social game *Second Life* using observation-based methods to draw conclusions about the nature of roleplaying across various user-made ‘worlds’. Passive, ‘fly on the wall’ observational ethnography has been used in the past to gain insights into ‘gamer’ subculture on online forums (Brace-Govan & Demsar, 2014). Ethnographic methods adapted to online spaces have been collectively termed ‘virtual ethnography’ (VE) (Hine, 2000). Proponents of this methodology often hold that online phenomena should be analysed based on individual and contextualised online practices, rather than as contingent on presupposed features of digital technology (Antonijevic, 2008). However, others have recognised that the affordances and constraints of a digital communications platform have an impact on online community practices and forms of expression. Robert Kozinets (2010) thus proposes an alternative approach to VE called ‘netnography’, which differs critically in that it sees online communities as distinct from, rather than extensions of, their analogue equivalents. Netnography focuses on participant observation, and, more importantly, seeks to acknowledge the socio-technical and structural differences between CMC and FTF interactions (ibid., p. 60). This has been used to great effect in fandom studies to identify and explore notable practices and identities, as in Gray’s (2005) discussion of critical, contrarian ‘anti-fans’ on online forums. Netnography is valuable to digital community studies as it requires researchers to actively consider the affordances and constraints imposed by the platform on the social/cultural practices of the community being studied. It does, however, lack the attention to minute technical details which ground ANT studies. To investigate how community is constituted with the help of software actors, it is necessary to explore beyond social activity to also look at design.
The FBG Discord server can be described as a fandom space, and its individual users as fans. Scholars have made the distinction between being a *fan*, an individual identification based around passion for a particular media franchise, and being in a *fandom*, a social identity that demonstrates a shared sociality and identity (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Academic understandings of fandom are codified by Jenkins’ (1992) description of fans as ‘textual poachers’, who appropriate cultural artefacts, and of fandoms as ‘participatory cultures’, whose members play an active role in shaping those artefacts’ meanings. Digital technology is said to have played a role in changing public perception of fandom, which, once considered a fringe phenomenon, is now recognised as more mainstream. This is owed partly to the ‘convergence’ of media, which has seen consumer audiences migrate to more diverse and populous (digital) spaces in search of entertainment (Jenkins, 2006). As a result, Jenkins notes, there has been increased cooperation between media industries and creative content producers hoping to better understand and expand their consumer audiences (ibid.). Early fandom studies literature focused on critical perspectives which cast fans as ‘resistant’ consumers who appropriated media texts for their own enjoyment, often in defiance of the original authors or producers (Goodman, 2015). More recently, however, discourse has shifted away from the idea of ‘resistance’ toward that of ‘participation’, based on the idea that, even if mass media still holds a privileged voice, “more media power [rests] in the hands of audience members” than before (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 163). Digital media has given rise to “more seemingly direct and rapid connections between the object of fandom, or media producer, and their fans” (Bennett, 2014, p. 8); fandom spaces are now more visible and accessible to media producers, and vice versa. The discourse between videogame communities and videogame studios has become “decidedly more two-party” (Milner, 2013, p. 9) due in part to the reach provided by digital platforms and the willingness of game studios to engage with fans directly. The large production costs and consequent sales expectations of blockbuster ‘Triple-A’ game projects means that major
publishers are often risk averse and thus favour conventional gameplay formulas and relatively opaque development processes. Many independent ('indie') developers (whether solo or studio), in contrast, have become able to turn a profit producing unconventional or nostalgic products (Keogh, 2015). Direct interaction with players is a valuable means by which developers can gather feedback that can help shape the final product to be more enjoyable - and thus more appealing to their wider consumer audience (Milner, 2011).

In recent years, videogames and the communities that form around them have been a very active site of co-creation, defined as the “joint effort of companies and customers to create product value and personalised experiences through a continuous, real-time, and direct dialogue” (Samper-Martinez et al., 2015, pp. 135-136). Development teams, by allowing their player/fanbases to engage with and contact them, have been able to harness them as test audiences who provide feedback on unfinished game builds or suggest features. This phenomenon is documented notably by studies into the long-running public beta of Minecraft (Banks, 2013) and the rise of the ‘Early Access’ development model (Lin, Bezemer, & Hassan, 2018). Both are examples of ‘direct participatory design’ between players and developers (Jacobs & Sihvonen, 2011), wherein users participate in design and designers participate in use (Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004). These phenomena, Keogh (2015) argues, originated as innovative methods through which indie developers funded their games, but they have since sometimes been co-opted by Triple-A publishers to further reduce investment risk. Moreover, in the wake of many notable instances of Early Access games being abandoned by developers before they could be completed, there is a need for developers to convince consumers that the initial investment (whether via crowdfunding or by purchasing the title while it's in beta) will yield a finished product (Eloranta, 2016). Transparency of development, such as through regular progress updates and game builds, can help with this process as they demonstrate the developers' accountability to their audience.
Videogame fan communities can be understood as communities of practice (CofPs) which emerge from ‘designed’ virtual community spaces (e.g. web forums) through members’ active negotiation of shared artefacts (Wenger, 1998). Chat platforms provide spaces in which fans, driven by a shared interest, can partake in the collaborative formation of discourse around fan artefacts, primarily media texts and franchises. At the same time, fans and fan activities are very socially motivated. In an extensive ethnographic study of young people in new media CofPs, Itō et al. (2010) identify three different ‘genres of participation’ across online sociality: hanging out, which is chiefly friendship-driven and oriented around socialisation; messing around, which is informal, inventive, and more clearly interest driven; and geeking out, which is interest-driven and based on intense engagement with a particular media property, genre, or technology (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2010). Fan communities come into being through members’ desire to discuss shared interests and engage in creative work, but fans also recognise fandom as a place where friendships can be made and maintained (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2013). Participation leads to the production and acquisition of social and cultural capital, in which objects and concepts of value to the community are defined and manifested (Bourdieu, 1986). In videogaming groups, Consalvo (2007) notes the existence of a special kind of capital tied to knowledge and expertise regarding games, which she refers to as ‘gaming capital’. This capital forms the basis of discussions about game narratives, mechanics, and individual players’ progress.

Situating this research in an online fan community, we must account for the significance of FBG game titles as cultural texts around which the community is centred. The study combines the fandom studies socio-cultural view of fan/fan-media relationships with a SCOT/SST perspective on Discord as a platform, then uses ANT to scrutinise how both manifest on the FBG server specifically. In doing so, I aim to develop a methodological framework through which a virtual community’s culture can be understood in terms of not just its human
participants, but the non-human actors that its participants adopt, create, and manipulate to constitute the digital space they share.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this study, I sought to explore qualitatively how aspects of fan identity, CofP practice, and community norms were constituted by human and non-human actors within the ‘official’ FBG Discord fan server. I spent thirty days analysing the server’s layout, contents, culture and activities mainly through participant observation, with supplementary data provided via interviews and other ethnographic methods. My approach drew primarily upon the methodology of netnography (Kozinets, 2010), incorporating some principles from grounded theory and computer-mediated discourse analysis. I selected these methodologies for their flexibility, their suitability to studies of culture, and their being specially designed to qualify human interactions in digital spaces. The netnography was augmented with actor-network theory so as to give more focus to non-human features of server culture.

3.1: Data sources

This study adheres to the notion of the internet as a culture, which takes the view that online sociality “has an inherent cultural coherence” and “is meaningful and understandable in its own terms” (Orgad, 2009, p. 361). As a result, it relied chiefly on online rather than offline data.

Messages recorded in the chat history of the FBG fan Discord server were the primary data source for both stages of the study. Findings from the participant observation were supplemented by data sources such as studio websites, social media posts, formal game reviews, and academic literature on online communities, fandom, and videogames. These were used early on to establish the wider-level context of Failbetter’s flagship game Fallen London, including its aesthetics, mechanics, narrative, and development history.

Digital interview data in the form of answers received from one of the community moderators was also collected to help establish the server’s history and governing procedures.
3.2: Netnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on analysing the actions and intentions of social agents within a given space and outlining how their behaviours are rationalised within the wider group (Ley, 1988). In its earliest form it was employed by anthropologists, representing an epistemological shift away from ‘armchair theorising’ towards direct observation of the cultures and phenomena they sought to understand (Harrison, 2018). It was later adapted by the Chicago School of Sociology for studies of human interaction in urban environments. It has also been adopted by communications researchers as a means for identifying values, language, and patterns of behaviour, on the basis that these things should be learned gradually over “direct, prolonged contact with group members” (Agar, 1996, p. 243).

Central to ethnography is an emphasis on *culture*, which refers to (a) a community’s way of life, and (b) the ‘symbols’ that represent its beliefs and norms, including language, behaviours, and artefacts (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 148-9).

Ethnography fits into the social constructivist research philosophy, which takes the view that we do not construct our interpretations of objects in isolation but rather “against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 305). Ethnographers gather data by “studying people in their everyday contexts” and/or “participating in social interactions with them”, with the goal of understanding the subjects’ world (Williamson, 2006, p. 87). An ethnographic study’s focus is rooted in local, special and unique knowledge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the researcher seeks to provide a rich, insightful depiction of the culture selected for study through methods including participant observation, interviews, and surveys. It is both a methodology for and a product of research, yielding written description of a culture based on fieldwork findings. Findings, like methods, are flexible and open-ended and can thus pave the way for more focused future studies.
No literature currently exists on communication using Discord, and very little is written on officially endorsed fan community spaces. This study thus sought to fill gaps in the research around fandom use of a popular chat platform, focusing on features such as its governance frameworks, relationship with the game studio, and methods of expressing its members’ social identity.

In recent decades, the increased role of technology in facilitating communications and hosting communities has required ethnographers to extend their methodology into digital spaces. According to Miller & Johnson (2008), digital technology has “led to the deconstruction of old ideas about place and culture and a new alertness to the social worlds of the media and the workings of power within them” (p. 268). Virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) seeks to accommodate this shift by transposing ethnographic methods into virtual online spaces; netnography diverges from this by considering online communities to be distinct from, rather than just extensions of, non-digital groups (Kozinets, 1998). Working with technocultural artefacts, netnographers take the stance that the nature of social and cultural interaction “is altered – both constrained and liberated – by the specific nature and rules of the technological medium in which it is carried” (Kozinets, 2012, p. 39). Based on ANT paradigms, this study considers the social culture of the server to be a product of interactions between human and non-human actors, rather than a backdrop to interactions between the server’s human members (Latour, 1988). Discord and the specific features of the FBG server, I contend, do not just ‘alter’ interaction, but play a part in producing it.

Netnography offers benefits for studies of uniquely online phenomena, allowing the researcher to harness built-in features of communications platforms, such as message transcripts and content search functions. These utilities can also allow for ethnographic analysis that is partially retrospective. In this research, the message histories of server channels were used to review conversations which the researcher was not present for, and, once relevant themes were
identified, to pinpoint content relevant to them. The results section for this netnography uses ‘thick description’, a form of description and analysis which “makes explicit the detailed patterns of cultural and social relationships” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 152). In this study’s case, I sought to explore sociotechnical relationships, as under ANT these are what leads to concepts like ‘society’ and ‘culture’.

3.3: Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is a constructivist social sciences methodology which, like ethnography, has a background in the pragmatist Chicago School of Sociology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is an interpretivist approach which involves synthesising classification categories based on researchers’ early observations. GT was developed as a way for qualitative researchers to “construct useful middle range theories from [their] data” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 160). Researchers collect data, develop working theoretical frameworks by analysing the data, and then return to the field to refine the framework.

Ethnography and GT share two key epistemological assumptions. Firstly, they both entail gathering data through practical observation of the cultural ‘world’ selected for study (Williamson, 2006; Charmaz, 2006). Second, neither seeks to prove pre-existing theories about the subject matter (Bamkin, Maynard, & Goulding, 2016). With these traits, the two methodologies are often considered effective in studies focused on new kinds of digital spaces (Robson, 2002) and for streamlining observations toward key concepts (Bamkin et al., 2016).

Noting the complex relationship between moderators, ordinary members, and the design features of the server in my early observations, I decided to frame my analysis using actor-network theory, which allows researchers to analyse social, cultural and technical elements as separate actors which together constitute social concepts within a technological environment (Latour, 1988). Over the course of my research, I refined my focus to investigate the
organisational structures of the community as manifested in actors, programs, and anti-programs to illustrate the interesting ways that technology and community were entwined with one another.

3.4: Entrée

‘Thick description’ in ethnography typically requires observations to be grounded in the specific social context of the target community (e.g. Baym, 2000). However, under ANT, ‘context’ is yet another abstract social force that arises from activity within extended actor-networks (Latour, 2005). As the site of a fan community, the FBG fan Discord depends upon many actors and ‘actants’ (collections of actors which come together to act as a whole) found in networks which exist outside of it, namely the fan objects (Fallen London, FBG) and the platform (Discord). I therefore dedicated the first two sections of netnography findings to identifying noteworthy actors in each of the case study server’s ‘parent’ actor-networks, without which the case study community could not exist.

After defining their questions/sites/topics of interest, a netnographer must perform an entrée into the research area. A netnographic entrée consists of identifying online communities most relevant to the research subject, learning as much about those communities as possible, and reaching out to the communities to develop an understanding of their norms and activities (Sandlin, 2007). Throughout my observation I sought to qualify actors within the FBG server community first in terms of Discord features, and then in terms of Fallen London play. This provided necessary groundwork for analysing the unique actor-networks and subcultural programs constructed within the server itself.

To establish the relevant history and technical affordances of the Discord platform, I employed a combination of desktop research and Herring’s (2007) facet-based classification scheme. I then proceeded to identify some of the platform’s communicative affordances and discuss their
roles in user-to-user communications. The SCOT concepts of variation, selection, and RSGs (Pinch & Bijker, 1984) were applied to clarify contentions between the interpretation of Discord by Discord, Inc. and how users implemented it. I analysed the platform by comparing it to other, older CMC modes, particularly IRC, and justified this analysis with references to CMC literature.

Aspects of a game such as its genre, history, narrative, and art style are important reference points when considering how the game is perceived and constructed (Newman, 2008). Accordingly, my entrée into Fallen London sought to outline its gameplay, key themes, cultural influences, and other elements which seemed likely to manifest in interactions on the server. Some researchers argue that firsthand knowledge of any game(s) linked to an area of digital cultures study is an important research asset, without which researchers may struggle to decipher subculture-specific language or understand the social context of play (Williams & Skoric, 2005). In this case, I was able to draw upon my own previous experience playing Fallen London to provide a clearer overview of its role in the community’s construction.

3.5: Participant observation

After receiving permission from the FBG server’s mod team, I undertook participant observation for a period of 30 days. During this time, I employed a largely passive ‘observational’ approach (Langer & Beckman, 2005), but participated in server social activities from time to time. This phase of the research sought to observe and analyse the roles played by various actors in the creation of collective identity and a coherent space of fan production. Based on established precedents of ethnographies involving ANT (Randall et al., 2007), I set out to identify and ‘follow’ the actors and inscriptions present on the server early in my observations. I sought to extend this analysis beyond the textual elements in the actor-networks, using the idea of the ‘gated community’ as a metaphor to explain the significance of community members, moderators, and server infrastructure in community processes.
The study aimed to find balance between unobtrusive observation and judicious participation. Based on the argument that abstention from interaction helps to ensure the authenticity of data (Brace-Govan & Demsar, 2014), an approach weighted towards observation over participation seemed suitable. However, others argue that participation allows researchers to become a part of the studied phenomenon (Griffiths, 2010) and thus, if carried out judiciously, may allow for a more direct, experience-based understanding of community dynamics. In research which requires input from those observed, registering one’s presence can help reduce guardedness and improve cooperation (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988).

My observation process used an interpretive approach, treating social activity on the server as text with layers of embedded meaning. This allowed me to engage in a cycle of entering the server space, making detailed notes on the practices I observed, and withdrawing to explore findings in depth by relating them to relevant academic theory (Yi-Sheng & Wei-Long, 2017). Each ‘pass’ of the community yielded data that was better informed of the community’s nature (Eisewicht et al., 2015).

3.6: Computer-mediated discourse analysis

Computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) is a hybrid methodology devised by Susan Herring (2004) that approaches the analysis of digitally mediated content (e.g. text, hyperlinks) in a way that accounts for the unique structural and cultural quirks of online media. It is a flexible, language-focused approach, incorporating elements of both content and discourse analysis, with the central premise that human behaviours in CMC are carried out primarily through language and manifest linguistically (Herring, 2010). With this, researchers can choose a discourse analysis paradigm (e.g. conversation analysis, pragmatics) after identifying behaviours of interest, based on whatever is best suited to dissecting the behaviours chosen.
My study applied the paradigm of *ethnography of communication* (EoC) to analyse CMD exchanges that illustrated netnography findings. EoC was first proposed by Hymes (1962) as an approach to analysing patterns of language use within communities, grounded in the assumption that communication is systematic, social, and culturally distinct. Ethnographies in this program are guided by questions of “*what media or means people use to communicate*” and “*what the meanings of these means are for the people using them*” (Carbaugh, 2011). This approach allowed me to assess message contents in terms of both their fandom-specific meanings and in terms of how they mobilised the affordances of the *Discord* platform.

In the next two chapters I offer my analyses of *Discord* and *Fallen London* before explaining in detail the components of my ‘gated community’ metaphor. I then describe analytically the significance of each of these components, *soft gates*, *hard gates*, and *channels*, to the running of the FBG *Discord* server. Throughout my dissertation I use several extracts from the server chat, used with permission, to guide and illustrate my findings.
Chapter 4: Entrée

4.1: Discord

As mentioned in the introduction, Discord’s marketing articulates it as a chat platform with especial utility for gaming groups. At its time of launch, it stood out as a platform with distinct ‘upgrades’ over pre-existing platforms like Skype, Messenger and Teamspeak with its distributed data centre network and anonymity-protecting security infrastructure (Lazarides, 2015). Post-launch, major updates to Discord have added features such as an online videogame storefront (Goslin, 2018) and the ability for game development studios to create their own ‘Verified’ servers (Alexander, 2017). Such features demonstrate the developers’ intent to open up commercial fronts through collaboration with videogame industry parties.

That said, Discord should be understood first and foremost as a social platform rather than a tool of gaming. My own introduction to the platform – wherein two different social groups of mine migrated to Discord servers away from Skype chatrooms – had me following others into this new software environment based on a vague consensus that it was ‘better’ in general, not just for gaming. Most members of both groups played videogames regularly, but videogaming was not the premise on which either community existed. With over 130 million users worldwide as of May 2018 (Grunin, 2018), Discord’s engagement with its userbase has grown in scope and complexity. The variety of RSGs involved in defining Discord has expanded, and non-gaming RSGs have been acknowledged; for example, open source coding communities are referenced on the platform’s official website (‘Discord — Open Source’).

In practice, Discord’s design and update history reflect a far more versatile software environment than one specifically focused on gamers. While reliable synchronous voice chat is of undeniable appeal for multiplayer gaming groups, it could alternatively (and just as plausibly) be used for social calls in general. Instant messaging, meanwhile, requires neither
peripherals (e.g. microphones, headsets) nor the constant co-presence of interlocutors, and allows for more controlled and sophisticated acts of impression management (Bullingham et al., 2013). When one is a participant in multiple servers, with multiple community-specific identities to maintain, it is useful to be able to move out of one space and into another at will, and to be able to carefully consider one’s messages before sending them (Walther, 1996).

For reasons likely including the above, the FBG server overwhelmingly favoured text-based over voice-based communication. Text-based channels greatly outnumbered voice-based channels numerically (over 50 text channels versus 3 voice) and use of the voice channels was actually very rare. *Fallen London*’s singleplayer nature means that there is no imperative to use voice-based chat, though there are some incentives for interacting with other players (detailed in the next section) which players might seek to obtain through occasional coordination in text-based chat. Digital networks favour the creation of loose, passive relationships between human participants (Lovink & Rossiter, 2005), and in this community, where participants are unified by their interest in a particular text/franchise/creator, the medium of instant messaging allows them to come and go as they please.

Applying Herring’s (2007) facet-based classification scheme provides us with the following overview of *Discord*’s affordances:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium facet</th>
<th>Discord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synchronicity</td>
<td>Text &amp; voice channels are synchronous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message transmission</td>
<td>One-way (text) &amp; two-way (voice). Text-based CMC does not allow recipients to see others’ messages in the process of being written, which has led to some calling it <em>quasi</em>-synchronous (Vandergriff, 2013). However, <em>Discord</em> displays a notice to the user when one or more others in the same chat space are typing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Persistence of transcript

Messages stay in chat history indefinitely unless deleted by the sender or by someone else with privileges (such as a moderator). Users may also edit messages after sending. The chat history indicates if a message has been edited.

Size of message buffer

Up to 2000 characters per individual message; images or files up to 8MB in size can be uploaded in chat (50MB for premium Discord subscribers).

Anonymous messaging

Unavailable. Each user has a username and an ID tag consisting of four digits, which can be viewed by everyone else on a server.

Private messaging

Available.

Filtering

Available. Users can block or mute other users, though messages from blocked users are still visible if on a shared server.

Quoting

Manual. An indented quote format can be invoked by prefixing message contents with a greater-than sign followed by one unit of whitespace (i.e. “> ”).

Message format

Messages present the sender's username/nickname, timestamp (if sent within the past week), and date (if outside of the past week).

**Figure 4.1.1:** A facet-based classification of Discord as a CMC medium.

*Discord’s* design and affordances are reminiscent of IRC in many respects. Like IRC, *Discord* allows for synchronous, one-way text messaging, and frames its digital spaces in terms of ‘servers’ and ‘channels’ – though the distributed nature of *Discord’s* data network makes this terminology purely metaphorical. Unlike IRC, message transcripts within *Discord* are permanent, persisting for as long as a server/private messaging channel remains active. According to Herring (1999), transcript persistence heightens users’ meta-linguistic awareness – inviting them to reflect on past communication – and allows them to participate in multiple conversational threads at a time. As a result, a *Discord* channel is not just a communication space; it is also a sociocultural text that is built on whenever someone posts in it. The social
interactions of interest-based communities on *Discord* become a cultural history that participants can refer to and enrol in future acts of expression.

**Figure 4.1.2:** Screenshot of the *Discord* interface. A user can be in multiple servers (leftmost sidebar), each of which has its own list of channels. Channels can be created, renamed, locked, etc. by users with mod/admin status.

Another IRC affordance echoed by *Discord* is its automatic creation of internal hyperlinks when users type either the name of a channel (prefixed with `#`) or that of a user (prefixed with `@`). A previous ANT study (Potts, 2009) describes hyperlinks as inscriptive non-human actors which help guide people to information outside of the current discursive space. By enrolling hyperlinks in text-based dialogue, the *Discord* user can create anti-anti-programs against ambiguity or a lack of understanding by ‘pointing to’ the person or space they wish to negotiate with other users. In terms of platform design, the hash symbol-based channel format allows users to identify and follow topics that interest them, as on Twitter (Bruns & Burgess, 2011).

The text-formatting options that *Discord* affords its users, such as boldfacing, italicisation, and underlining, are important actors that CMC users can enrol to express nuanced ideas and sentiments (Hatzipanagagos, 2006). Many theories of digital communication (e.g. Walther, 1992)
note that the absence of vocal intonation, body language and other metacommunicative cues that convey secondary information about how messages should be interpreted (Bateson, 2006) can lead to ambiguity in text-based CMC. Such ambiguity is an anti-program produced by the constraints of text-based communication because it hinders the CMC user’s goal of communicating. Formatting, therefore, can be enrolled as an anti-anti-program to make meanings clearer. Boldfacing, for instance, can emphasise certain words or passages, while a strikethrough suggests a post-hoc correction to a transcript which could signal either editorial transparency or ironic self-censorship. Discord’s developers’ inclusion of text formatting options, then, allows users to communicate with greater clarity and depth.

The social shaping process of Discord has led it to allow for ever more nuanced and specific forms of expression through text. This is evident in the developers’ addition of new formatting options post-launch (Discord, Inc., 2019). Introducing new features to a CMC system is important because, as Herring (2007) notes, the availability of special technical means to engage in certain behaviours makes those behaviours more likely to occur. The more built-in metacommunicative actors there are, the more intricate users’ anti-anti-programs against misunderstanding have the potential to become. One notable example of this is ‘spoiler tags’, which black out text or an image (bounded on both sides by double vertical lines, i.e. ‘||’) unless the recipient left-clicks on it. Spoiler tags – added to the platform in a March 2019 update (Ro, 2019) – signal that the bounded text or image may be something that the speaker's interlocutors do not wish to see. 'Spoilers', a fan term for facts or events which dramatically transform one’s understanding of a narrative once learned, are considered problematic because they deprive less up-to-date or experienced fans of the opportunity to experience a story authentically. By enrolling spoiler tags, users can enact anti-anti-programs in their messages to discourage (and thus protect) other participants from knowledge they do not wish to acquire by accident.
By enrolling spoiler tags, fans produce anti-anti-programs against other users seeing message contents by accident.

‘Roles’ and ‘bots’ are two key non-human actors in Discord server communities. Several studies (Barcellini et al., 2008; Toral et al., 2009) have observed that online CofPs construct labelled roles distinguishing between different kinds of members. These roles can reflect a variety of things, from its organisational structure (e.g. moderators), to specific user expertise or interests (e.g. roleplayer), to participants’ overall levels of contribution (e.g. veteran/newcomer). On Discord, roles exist as digital tokens assigned to individual users, such that any user’s roles for a server can be viewed by clicking on their name whilst inside that server. As non-human actors, Discord roles are appended to users’ identities, and can either grant privileges (such as access to hidden channels) or simply express facts which the user wants to make known (such as preferred pronouns). They are thus metacommunicative in a different way to text formatting, signifying facts about a user’s identity on a particular server. Roles are an important software-based actor through which participants’ identities as fans, and moreover as members of the server, are constituted.

Bots, meanwhile, are autonomous programs, often written by end-users, which run without direct human input but are designed to react to inputs from users. Users enrol bots by performing actions (e.g. posting messages) that trigger one of a bot’s programmed responses; bots therefore augment the rules of chat spaces by providing new capabilities (Golbeck & Mutton, 2004). The functionality of bots on a server are important evidence of translations
undertaken by the resident community and represent communal reshaping of the platform to better suit them.

In her discussion of how platform features influence communicative behaviour, Herring (2007) gives the example of chat systems requiring individuals’ usernames to differ from their registered email addresses, which encourages the use of pseudonyms. Discord’s approach to usernames, in which users have both a typed name and a four-digit ID number, allows multiple people to have the same username – effectively allowing users with coincidentally similar online monikers to use them without encroaching upon one another’s identities. Users can further distinguish their identities in different spaces (e.g. different videogame player character names) using the affordance of freely customisable, server-specific nicknames. Nicknames allow online community members to further articulate their identities within that space (Jacobson, 1996), and are yet another method of community-specific identity production through technical means.

Ultimately, the articulation of Discord between the platform’s developers and its users has steadily expanded the number of tools available to its users. This makes sense given its closed-source freeware service model, wherein all users have access to its essential features but can access additional features (such as increased file-attachment size limits) via a paid monthly subscription called ‘Discord Nitro’. The freeware commercial model depends on leveraging the users’ role as co-creators of value and the networks they produce through use of the platform (Reime, 2011). Discord is thus articulated to give users (both individually and as communities) progressively more power to creatively translate and augment their spaces with non-human actors and develop programs and anti-anti-programs to suit their needs and preferences.
4.2: *Fallen London*

My first exposure to *Fallen London* occurred in 2014, when an acquaintance of mine recommended it to me during a discussion about videogames. As a browser game, it has existed since 2010, long before *Discord* – as has its online community. The official Failbetter Games fan *Discord* represents an organic offshoot of the FBG fandom, presumably containing many old fans in addition to newcomers. Distinct from other pre-existing FBG fan spaces, such as its official forum website (https://community.failbettergames.com/) and its unofficial wiki (https://fallenlondon.fandom.com/wiki/Fallen_London_Wiki), the *Discord* server fills a similar niche to that of FBG’s official IRC server, providing a synchronous space where players can hang out and discuss FBG or other topics. Where the *Discord* server differs from the IRC channel is in its affordances – described earlier – and in its consistent growth since its creation in 2016, having over 2,700 members as of September 2019.

*Fallen London* is set in an alternate history Gothic version of Victorian London that has been relocated to a deep underground cavern by enigmatic powers. Its setting, aesthetics, and narrative carry heavy Gothic tones: the world is "deep, dark and marvelous"; squalid, decadent, cryptic, and sinister. As a genre, Gothic fiction originated in the 18th century as a 'dark' transformation of Romanticism which responded to the narratives of rationality and reason that became pervasive during the Enlightenment era. Creative works in the Gothic tradition are defined by what Botting (2014) calls *negative aesthetics*, depicting characters, places, actions and societies that are irrational, unstable, and unrestrained. In a historical context where order and reason had come to dominate discourse, Gothic works revolved around horrors of "transgression, excess and monstrosity" (Botting, 2014, p. 8) which order and reason could not hope to control. In more recent times, there has been a scholarly shift away from understanding the Gothic as merely a genre toward seeing it as a "set of discourses" (Spooner, 2007, pp. 1-2) centred on fear inspired by the irrational. In Victorian-era Gothic fiction, London is often
depicted as "a vast Gothic edifice, encompassing within its environs millions of secrets, millions of decayed and dangerous pasts waiting to blossom into story" (ibid., p. 21). *Fallen London*’s version of the city, central to the wider setting of the cavern, reflects this idea. To the newcomer, it juxtaposes recognisable markers of the Victorian era (e.g. stovepipe hats, hansom carriages, thick industrial fog) with the hidden, older magics and horrors of the cavern London is situated in. Failbetter Games cited texts such as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* series, and the works of G.K. Chesterton as significant cultural touchstones for *Fallen London* (Failbetter, 2011).

The conventions of Gothic fiction resonate well with *Fallen London*'s primary modes of storytelling. Prominently, many writers have observed that Gothic fiction allows readers to "participate in the protagonist's ordeals, reacting as they react, undergoing the same rites of passage as the central character" (Kirkland, 2012, p. 109). The game's story is told through two mediums: a map of unlockable locations featuring various mini-adventures called 'storylets', and an 'opportunity deck' of randomised cards which represent additional, less-easily-accessible stories. Each storylet begins with a brief snippet of prose – no more than a few paragraphs – followed by a list of one or more possible actions that will end or progress the adventure. Another prose snippet is displayed with the outcome of each action the player takes, along with any changes to the game state (such as the player's items and ‘Qualities’, the game’s term for traits/stats). Items and Qualities additionally have their own short mouseover descriptions. This results in a kind of narrative heteroglossia wherein epistolary elements (e.g. in-story documents and diaries) and other 'outside' voices (e.g. quotes) feature regularly alongside or in place of conventional second- and third-person narration. Such a fragmentary style imbues the story of a Gothic hero – in this case the player character – with a mix of interest and trepidation, as they proceed with curiosity despite the unknown horrors which might await them (Botting, 2014, p. 6). Narrative heteroglossia in the Gothic mode has also been said to
foreground a sense of 'pastness', such that "the past's possible resurgence into the present" is a central anxiety of Victorian Gothic texts (Ridenhour, 2013, p. 114). To this end, the game is filled with cryptic references to events which evidently occurred long before London was brought underground, whose effects are still felt in unknown ways. Travelling to new parts of the city and delving ever deeper rewards the player with a growing understanding of the meaning behind vague recurrent phrases such as 'The Cities that Fell' and 'Do you recall how they came to that place?'. Cryptic references like these appear often in lore discussions between players in FBG fan spaces, representing in-jokes and insider knowledge held by sufficiently experienced community members.

Players may spend up to 20 'actions' to advance their story, which refill at a rate of one every ten real-world minutes. This means that, in practice, that one ‘plays’ Fallen London for several minutes every few waking hours on average. With the vast amount of free content that has been added since its commercial launch in 2010, Fallen London can be thought of as an interactive, choose-your-own-adventure text which takes months to gain a basic understanding of and years to come close to ‘completing’. As a cultural text which expects regular engagement from its ‘readers’ as the price of seeing what it has to offer, the game can easily be described as ergodic literature. Aarseth (1997), in his work on cybertexts, uses this term to explain games as works wherein "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (p. 1). Written prose is the main vehicle for Fallen London’s narrative; it is also an essential part of the incentive for playing. As players make choices, they receive feedback about the success or failure of those choices, and this reciprocal cycle of choice and feedback gradually allows them to build knowledge of both how to play and what the story is (Hayot & Wesp, 2004). Players become familiar with recurring non-player characters (NPCs), become progressively more involved in their stories, and develop strategies that allow them to reach far-off realms of the narrative.
Applying Aarseth's (2012) narrative theory of games to *Fallen London* places it roughly in the category of the 'hypertext game', offering choices between kernels (the player's chosen path within a story) but with fixed satellites (all available actions and their possible outcomes). The game space is largely what Aarseth would call 'extra-ludic', with clickable buttons taking up a minority of the screen space. In terms of web design, *Fallen London*’s interface follows the reflects the concepts of *legibility* and *mystery*, which Kaplan, Kaplan, & Ryan, (1998) describe as important for encouraging recurrent user visits. *Legibility*, or making a site navigable via memorable components or ‘landmarks’, manifests in *Fallen London*’s use of various rectangular icons to represent items, Qualities, storylets, cards, and actions. These icons, through being repeatedly encountered by players, entrench themselves in players’ memories and thus facilitate quicker recognition of important gameplay concepts that are on the screen in each moment. *Mystery*, meanwhile, entices through obliqueness, “[enhancing] one’s desire to explore a space by conveying the feeling that much more can be found if one keeps going” (Rosen & Purinton, 2004, p. 790). Finally, since people have been shown to have a lower tolerance for high volumes of onscreen text compared to printed text, the game’s snippet-based prose style ensures that it is ‘scannable’ (Nielsen, 2003). With its vast game world containing over 1.5 million words as of 2017 (Conditt, 2017), *Fallen London* is designed to allow its players to experience and engage with its narrative through recurring iconography and eye-catching Gothic writing and aesthetics.
As the player makes decisions on behalf of their in-game character, they engage in a process of “meaningful participatory authorship” (Hayot & Wesp, 2004, p. 420) that is characteristic of ergodic literature. While the writing and images within Fallen London may be the product and property of Failbetter Games, each player character belongs, in a sense, to the player who created them. A player character’s amassed items and Qualities allow players to engage in ‘self-tracking’, a practice associated with the ‘quantified self’ theory of digital-era identity. Quantified self, according to one of its founders, is about “self-knowledge through numbers” (Wolf, 2009, n.p.). This quantification becomes yet another textual actor in discussions of game mechanics and individual player progress on the FBG Discord server. Familiarity with the game’s rules, meanwhile, translates into a form of socio-cultural ‘gaming capital’ (Consalvo, 2007) which experienced players can enrol in offering help to newer ones. Most in-game actions involve probability-based checks based on four ‘skill’ Qualities (Dangerous, Persuasive, Watchful, and Shadowy) which evocatively categorise the tone of each action or questline – a
Shadowy act, for instance, implies larceny or deception. As the story goes deeper, skill checks grow harder, creating an experience of escalating difficulty and complexity.

*Fallen London* lets its users create and present unique virtual selves through their characters. When registering an account, one creates a simple avatar comprised of a unique name, a gender (man, woman, or ambiguous/non-binary), and a silhouette-style cameo portrait. Each player character has their own linkable profile page on which players can display items, Qualities and story snippets, all “digital tokens” which allow them to articulate their character’s identity (Marwick, 2013, p. 358). Items, Qualities and snippets of varying rarity can be collected and curated in a process Pearce (1994) calls 'systemic collecting', wherein collection boundaries are “set externally, (...) contextualised by the society in which they were formed, (...) and [built] based on a preconceived and external taxonomy that can be fulfilled” (Winget, 2011, pp. 32-33). *Fallen London* players, particularly those who have reached the late game, will often work toward far-flung yet achievable goals which require substantial time and resource investment, then place the most hard-won of these in their profiles’ display slots. For FL player communities, individual achievement can manifest in obtaining certain items, reaching certain story outcomes, or uncovering deep, spoiler-level game lore.

Sociality among players is important for Failbetter Games due to the nature of the online game they have been operating for the past nine years. The game is monetised using a ‘freemium’ or ‘free-to-play’ model of service, providing a substantial amount of content for free but offering additional content and convenience for paying users (Anderson, 2009). This manifests in two forms. The first is an optional subscription called ‘Exceptional Friendship’, costing £5 per month, which grants an increased action/card capacity (up to 40 actions and 10 cards respectively), a new, long story every month, and access to an additional location within London. The second is a premium virtual currency called ‘Fate’ which can be spent on instant refreshes of actions/cards, special options within storylets, or on entire premium storylines.
(such as those given monthly to subscribers). Free access to content is the key method by which online freemium services stimulate demand from potential spenders, but it is also noted that value in online games is “co-created in interactive, multi-directional exchanges in communities of users” (Beltagui et al., 2019, p. 1339). *Fallen London*’s business model and design thus fit a game that is meant to be played over a long period of time, ideally having some interaction with other players. Freemium games entice players to spend money on in-game purchases by offering exclusive paid content and the ability instantly completing processes that otherwise depend on real-world timers by paying. In the latter case, offering players opportunities to change the temporal dynamics of play has been described by some scholars as evidence of a growing ‘impatience economy’ in games which warrants further critical analysis (Evans, 2016).

Online freemium games like *Fallen London* depend on creating and maintaining a ‘critical mass’ of users (Beltagui et al., 2019; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003), to which end user-driven player communities are invaluable. Sociality is encouraged within *Fallen London* via a non-essential but useful secondary mechanic (Sicart, 2008). 'Social actions', or just 'socials', allow players to send and receive offers of help and resources. Socials typically benefit one player more than the other, with the helper sometimes receiving some small reward from the game. The greater benefit, however, lies in the reciprocal relationship engendered by encouraging players to support one another's adventures. The fact that many stories in *Fallen London* have multiple mutually exclusive, non-repeatable resolutions gives a further incentive for players to seek one another out. Comparing experiences and sharing data is essential for players wishing to gain as complete an understanding of the lore as possible. The official fan *Discord* server should thus be considered in part as a place where fans engage collaboratively to break down the game’s embedded mysteries and discuss those they have already uncovered.

Besides *Fallen London*, FBG have also released two spinoff games: *Sunless Sea* (2015) and *Sunless Skies* (2019). Both are top-down exploration games oriented around resource
management, respectively situating the player as the captain of a steamship and of a locomotive flying through space. Both retain the Gothic, narrative-focused, fragmentary, numerically quantified style of storytelling/gameplay that FBG are known for in *Fallen London* (Thursten, 2015; Marshall, 2019), and each game has expanded on the *Fallen London* setting in different ways. The studio is also known for its games’ high degree of inclusivity: *Fallen London* has long included non-binary gender and pronoun options for player characters (Henry, 2016), and it and its spinoffs have featured strong diversity across NPCs.

Overall, *Fallen London*’s communities involve a great number of players who have engaged with the game for years and have a close, shared understanding of its ideas. The *Discord* server is one of many existing spaces where FBG’s active fan community is constituted, but it is a unique one. On the server, software-derived non-human actors are set up and customised to create programs that reflect fan values such as inclusivity and interest in the *Fallen London* narrative universe. Further programs and anti-anti-programs serve to encourage sociability as much as possible while keeping conversations orderly and in their appropriate places. Each of these processes is detailed in the next section, which concludes with a reflection on the relationship between moderators, ordinary server members, and the server architecture.
Chapter 5: Observation findings

5.1: The gates of online fandom

To understand a virtual community through actor-network theory, one must view technology use and socialisation alike as produced by interactions between actors, enrolled together to exert influence in a wider actor-network. As a simplified example, greeting somebody on the street enrols (i) the person being greeted, (ii) the medium of communication (i.e. speech), (iii) the words (plus body language, etc.) which signify the act of greeting, and (iv) any existing mutual recognition between the speaker and interlocutor. Programs establish tendencies regarding what actions should be carried out – be they standards of conduct at a social gathering or the intended use of a technical artefact. Anti-programs, in contrast, work against the programmed patterns of behaviour. Virtual communities are sites of online and offline sociotechnical activity, and their actor-networks more or less follow programs produced by software and human actors.

The term ‘gated community’, in its typical usage, denotes physical communities separated from the surrounding world by enclosed walls or fences, with finite entrances monitored by gatekeepers. Conceptually, the term ‘gated’ can be stretched to include gates that are psychological or conceptual, rather than physical (Bagaeen & Uduku, 2015). Just as the virtual community is said to be a ‘designed’ space created deliberately using the features and affordances of the technological medium (Johnson, 2001), the gated community is a “built environment”, shaped and managed in accordance with the values and culture of its inhabitants (Bagaeen, 2015, p. 10). In this section, I use the term ‘gated community’ to explore how the social identity of the FBG server’s fan community is constituted and maintained through a network of programs, anti-programs, human actors and non-human actors. Non-human actors may be software-based (e.g. bots, architecture), textual (e.g. chat messages), or cultural (e.g. references to Fallen London). Here, ‘gating’ does not imply strictly monitored and controlled
access, as with physically gated communities (Lemanski, 2010); rather, gates are programs through which community spaces can be entered and exited.

When one seeks to enter a community space, one will inevitably brush up against programs that complicate the process of entry. We might call these programs barriers. Barriers in academic literature have taken many forms. In economics, the term ‘barriers to entry’ denotes fixed costs which must be paid by any new entrants to a market, but not by incumbents (Demsetz, 1982). Meanwhile, sociological studies tell of how secluded communities use conceptual, physical and, and regulatory barriers to minimise the impact of tourism on their private lives (e.g. Chernela, 2011). In these cases, barriers are created to protect those within a community from unchecked entry by outsiders. Other barriers, such as the language barrier, represent obstacles posed by societally, geographically, or technologically entrenched programs which are not imposed deliberately, or even with outsiders in mind, but nonetheless limit one’s ability to participate. Thirdly, there are barriers which could be considered enablers of movement: programs which encourage productive behaviours and/or discourage destructive ones. A dirt road in a forest, for instance, imposes on travellers a physical and conceptual barrier between ‘on-road’ and ‘off-road’, and in doing so creates both a program for following the ‘proper’ route and an anti-anti-program against becoming lost. Such barriers can even outright force people to take (or not take) preferred/nonpreferred actions: a glass barrier along a train station platform prevents people from falling onto the tracks by making it impossible. I distinguish between these three barrier types as insulative, natural, and productive barriers, respectively.

Who can join a community? A community is founded on one or more axes of commonality, such as geographical location or ideology (Squire & Johnson, 2000). In defining these axes, fan communities signify to prospective entrants who they are, but also, by corollary, who they are not (Korobkova & Black, 2014). To join a gated community, one must enrol several actors,
one of which is always the ‘gate’ – the artefact through which entry is achieved. In the case of FBG Discord, the ‘gate’ is the invitation URL, which, when clicked on in-browser, prompts the Discord program to add one’s Discord account to the server’s member list. While my joining the FBG server required several non-human actors – my laptop computer, an internet connection, my Discord account, and the invitation URL – these are all ‘immutable mobiles’, actors with properties that actors within the actor-network cannot negotiate (Walsham, 1997). These barriers are imposed by the technological medium, not by the community.

CofPs can impose insulative barriers that cannot be overcome without the correct permissions. For instance, one cannot join a private chatroom without a password. Natural barriers manifest for CofPs in the form of normative assumptions, which emerge as participants find creative ways to use community artefacts (Nachmias et al., 2000) and interact with each other (Baym, 2000). We might therefore say that the one community-imposed barrier to entering the FBG Discord server is that an entrant must (a) know that it exists and (b) be interested in joining. This barrier does not restrict access, however: one could hypothetically perform all the technical actions needed to join the server without any knowledge of or interest in FBG. But fan groups, as a kind of CofP, are constituted in significant part through shared knowledge, language and social rituals, into which members are inculcated through experience (Liedka, 1999). Therefore, while entry is not technically restricted, participation in the server subculture relies significantly on assumed interest in FBG.

In this analysis, gates as actor-network programs represent appropriate methods by which barriers can be passed. Gates exist for any given community-produced barrier and are produced using a combination of software and human actors. ‘Gating’ is hereafter used to denote one or more actors carrying out a program which limits what a user can do within the server. Gates, like barriers, vary by type: soft gates are based on assumptions about participants and/or their interactions and represent natural barriers to full participation in the space; hard gates,
meanwhile, are fixed, monitored points of entry through insulative barriers which require prospective entrants to meet specific, verifiable conditions.

Separate to gates are *channels*. Where soft and hard gates restrict, slow, or block access and participation, channels are anti-anti-programs which *direct* discussion away from some in-server locations and towards others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Soft gates</strong></th>
<th><strong>Hard gates</strong></th>
<th><strong>Channels</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barrier type</strong></td>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Insulative</td>
<td>Productive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main principle(s)</strong></td>
<td>Social identity</td>
<td>Safety; Trust</td>
<td>Clarity of purpose; Cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is limited</strong></td>
<td>(Full) participation</td>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Appropriate use of server spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key human actors</strong></td>
<td>Community members</td>
<td>Moderators; Transgressors</td>
<td>Conversation participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key non-human actors</strong></td>
<td><em>Fallen London/FBG</em> references; Social rituals; Custom emojis; User roles; Bots</td>
<td>Mod privileges; Rules channel; Locked/muted channels; User roles</td>
<td>Server channels; Rules channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example programs</strong></td>
<td>Subcultural communicative norms; Inculcation</td>
<td>Mod oversight; Server rules; Warning/ban process</td>
<td>Designating channel topics; ‘Push-comments’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example anti-programs</strong></td>
<td>Newcomer hesitation; Inexperience</td>
<td>Rules violations; Defying moderators; Sensitive content</td>
<td>Disorganisation; Going off-topic; Spoilers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5.1.1: Gates and channels on the FBG Discord server.*

These three types of programs comprise my framework for analysing the actor-network of the FBG fan *Discord* server. Each contributes in its own way to the constitution of the server’s rules, day-to-day functionality, and social identity. Many artefacts within the server contained actors that contributed to more than one type of program.
5.2: Open gate policy & studio endorsement

When I sought entry to the FBG Discord, the ‘gate’ was unlocked, unmanned, and wide open. There were no gatekeepers (human or automated) and no real chance that I could be denied entry. This is not to say that the gate does not exist, however. While invisible upon entry, the gate exists in the possibility of leaving; whether one leaves voluntarily or is forcibly removed, it is always possible for someone inside the server to move outside of it.

The absence of restrictive programs in the server entry process is key to what I will call an open gate policy. Bullard (2016) has noted of fanfiction websites that online fan spaces’ infrastructures are often designed to facilitate community values. For the FBG Discord, considering the community-oriented and inclusive player culture of Fallen London, we can infer that wide participation (within reasonable behavioural bounds) is encouraged. Within actor-network theory, Latour (1991) outlines the idea of translation, whereby actors, through their enrolment, are influenced so that their interests align with the rest of the network. Anti-anti-programs represent means by which those with designing power over the network can discourage forms of use which go against the network’s intended functioning – for instance by making those use patterns harder to carry out. For the server to thrive, allowing as many (interested) people to join as possible is important for maintaining the ‘critical mass’ of users and participation needed to make the community viable and attractive to outsiders (Markus, 1990). For a virtual community that wishes to be inclusive, creating a hard gate between the inside and the outside of its gathering space is therefore counterproductive.

The only CofP-specific barrier to joining the FBG server, then, is needing to encounter the invitation link. A hypothetical entrant is assumed to have knowledge of FBG and to be interested in engaging with other fans. For a community to have good prospects for survival in the long term, Preece (2000) suggests that it must signpost its purpose clearly. Community founders should not make the purpose so narrow as to be exclusive, but without a clear purpose,
newcomers are likely to become confused, not participate, and drop away. As such, where the URL can be found outside of the existing membership matters greatly. People already on the server can copy and paste the URL directly from the server’s #info channel if they wish to invite specific people, and it can also be found in other FBG fan spaces such as the official forums. No placement of the URL has been more important to the server’s growth, however, than that carried out by Failbetter Games itself. In August 2018, FBG formally endorsed the server as its “official fan Discord” and regularly includes the invitation URL in its emails and social media posts. According to one of the moderators, this endorsement led to a massive increase in server membership, up from 700 members to over 2,700 members (and climbing) as of October 2019. When creators associate directly with fan communities, they provide those communities with cultural capital (Navar-Gill, 2018). The FBG server’s “official” designation enrolls this cultural capital to produce a program outside of the server, specifically a channelling program, which demarcates the server as ‘the’ place to go for Discord users who like FBG. This program modifies entry to the server by raising the profiles of the server and (consequently) its invitation URL. ‘Official’ status is therefore a powerful actant in constituting its spatial identity.
Figure 5.2.1: FBG’s Twitter bio includes the invitation link to its “official fan Discord”. The URL can be found in places where people interested in FBG are likely to check, but FBG’s social media boosting has been the single biggest factor in its membership growth.

This channelling effect is reinforced inside the server by the presence of FBG staff members. Studio employees are identified within the server framework by a unique ‘Failbetter Games Staff’ role, which colours their usernames purple (contrasting mods’ red, regular members’ green, and bots’ blue) and thus distinguishes them as special. Occasionally, they will appear in the server’s general-purpose channel to converse casually with ordinary community members. Scholars have suggested that social media presence is a tactic (alternatively, a program) by which celebrity figures create an 'aura of realness' which makes them seem more accessible and authentic (Petersen, 2009; Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013). When studio members interact with the server, they reaffirm the studio's relationship with the Discord fan community. Studio participation thus strengthens the server's appeal (and the aforementioned channelling program) inside the space. The mods afford the FBG staff a set of elevated privileges including a public channel on which they can post news (e.g. game updates, receiving awards) and the
right to weigh in on some important server decisions. However, server regulation and design powers (e.g. mute/kick/ban) are reserved by the moderators. With the server maintaining its identity as a fan-run space, the respect between the Discord server and the studio is grounded in a kind of mutual deference. Through the studio and server participants’ mutual enrolment of one another, the two RSGs sustain a respectful fan/creator relationship. The channelling program produced by this interaction ultimately complements the server’s open-gate philosophy, improving its ability to grow and sustain the community.

5.3: Soft-gating and player/fan social identity

Because of the customisability afforded by the Discord platform to server creators, the social shaping of technology occurs on a more visible level between server creators and server participants than between Discord developers and users. Discord does not dictate to users how its servers should be set up and used; rather, it provides a technical framework through which server creators can design specialised spaces for particular social identities and/or purposes. Since the FBG server’s purpose is to provide a space for people to interact around their common interest in a particular media franchise, its designers, the moderators, configured its architecture to reflect this shared identity and afford users unique ways to express it in chat.

With the concept of soft gates, I examine the involvement of technical artefacts in the processes of facilitating CoP social culture, inculcating newcomers, and in visibly affiliating the server (as a ‘space’) with FBG fan identity. In a typical virtual ethnography, one might qualify a fan identity phenomenon by looking at its specific social practices, as in Gray’s (2005) analysis of the contrarian ‘anti-fan’ archetype. Here, however, we look at the ways in which social identity was supplemented – and in some cases co-produced – through various custom-made technical artefacts implemented by the moderators. Acting as ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Hutchinson, 2013), moderators enrolled their software-derived privileges to translate the server to support the production of cultural artefacts. In the rapid, spontaneous medium of online chat, cultural
artefacts take the form of conversational exchanges wherein participants experiment with expression and deepen their senses of connection to one another. Fandom participants acquire ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton, 1995), which confers context-specific social status, by performing actions that align themselves with and distinguish themselves within the community. According to Sandvoss (2005), subcultural capital is the means through which power relations in fandom are “maintained and reconstituted” (p. 40), with cultural hierarchies arising from fan consumption practices, distinguishing between newcomers and veterans, identifying ‘celebrity’-level fans (MacDonald, 1998), and so on. To pass through the soft gate is to begin to identify with and make oneself known within the FBG Discord community, and, in doing so, lay claim to a basic level of subcultural capital.

Within the FBG Discord server, a mix of textual and software-derived actors was enrolled into a soft-gating program to align the server space with its inhabitants’ social identity. References to Fallen London’s narrative style, plot, characters and places, incorporated into the server’s architecture through channel, bots, and user role naming conventions, encoded FBG fandom identity into the server aesthetically. While many channel names were purely utilitarian and would have indicated their contents clearly to any observer (e.g. #rules, #info), many were named for locations in the Fallen London universe. The most prominent example was #veilgarden – London’s bohemian district, and an early-game location – which served as the server’s general-purpose chat channel. Other channels named for in-game locations included #nassos-zoologicals (a pet shop) for animal/pet pictures, #dantes-bar-and-grill for ‘food, recipes, and cooking tips’, and #museum-of-mistakes, an archive of memorable posts and uploads screenshotted for posterity. Similarly, five of the server’s six bots were named after NPCs, objects or concepts from the game. Intertextual references are a kind of in-group jargon which fans enrol to affirm their membership in a community (Falk & Harrison, 2000). In this case, it is the server artefacts, specifically their names, which enrol the fan. An entrant to the
server with any amount of experience playing *Fallen London*, being dropped into the 
#veilgarden channel immediately upon entry, will recognise and appreciate the significance of 
#veilgarden being named as it is. By enrolling the participant in this way, these programmed-
in artefacts invoke the unifying purpose of the community, instilling the participant with a 
sense of identification and belonging (Soukup, 2006). The sublocations (channels) and utilities 
(roles/bots) of the server are thus sculpted by the moderators to evoke a resemblance between 
the ‘map’ of places comprising the server and the in-story world of *Fallen London*.

As discussed earlier, online communities need to maintain a critical mass of users and 
participation in order to be viable. Channelling prospective users toward the server from 
outside via open-gate programming and endorsement fulfils the first part of this (users), but 
once they are on the server, it falls to soft-gating anti-anti-programs to help facilitate the second 
part (participation). Regardless of how many users log into an online community space, it is 
common knowledge that a large proportion of users end up as ‘lurkers’ who rarely or never 
post (Nielsen, 2006). While hypothetically the server can be accessed by anybody able to enrol 
the right technological actors, the fan identity of its inhabitants, manifested both in both their 
day-to-day interactions and the server’s embedded *Fallen London* references, constitutes a 
natural barrier to participation. If one were to join with zero knowledge of FBG or its games, 
it would be difficult to comprehend many elements of its unique subculture. Social 
participation is essential to the inculcation of new members in a CoP (Wenger, 1998). While 
curiosity and/or interest might draw a newcomer to the server, anti-programs such as diffidence, 
hesitation and distraction create a risk that they might fail to gain a social/subcultural foothold 
and subsequently fade into the background to become disengaged lurkers.
Figure 5.3.1: An individual user’s arrival to the server is heralded publicly on #veilgarden with an announcement by ‘The Persona Engine’, one of the server’s bots. The phrase ‘welcome, delicious friend’ is an omnipresent quote within Fallen London.

To mitigate these anti-programs and encourage newcomers to begin interacting with others on the server, a bot called ‘The Persona Engine’ is set up to enact a kind of initiation. ‘Initiation rites’, as they are understood in CofP literature (Mirzaee & Hasrati, 2014), represent the first steps toward establishing three dimensions of ‘practice’ outlined by Wenger (1998): mutual engagement, a common goal, and a shared repertoire. In the #veilgarden initiation, the first part of the soft gate is performed automatically by the bot (a software-derived actor). The bot, enrolled by the newcomer’s act of entry, enrols the newcomer (tagging them in the message, as above) and any users who are present in #veilgarden at that moment, along with a staple Fallen London quote to affirm the community identity. Established users, alerted to the newcomer’s presence by the automated ‘character’, can then perform the next part of the rite through more human acts of greeting. If the newcomer responds, then the anti-anti-program has successfully induced them to create a basic level of social capital from which future social activities might be staged. By prompting server members to establish mutual engagement the moment someone joins, the program improves the likelihood that people will progress through the subcultural barrier become more actively involved.

Another variety of soft-gating actor on the server, besides those that inscribed identity onto it, were those which provided the means for participants to develop creative communicative
practices of their own. While social participation is a fundamental component of CofP development, their communicative norms have also been seen to evolve as members use ‘community artefacts’, such as shared symbols, concepts, and technological features, in ways that differ from their designed purposes (Nachmias et al., 2000). Bots, roles and emojis were all customisable features of the Discord server architecture through which members were able to articulate ideas about themselves and their Fallen London characters.

Figure 5.3.2: Each user has one or more programmable roles. Some roles grant access privileges; others indicate information about users’ FL characters; others state their preferred form of address. Note: ‘Judgement’ denotes a moderator.

Some of the roles programmed into the FBG Discord server afforded users the ability to express aspects of their identity. Participants used roles to disclose simple details about themselves (i.e. ‘Addressed as [title]’, equivalent to stating one’s preferred gender pronouns), as well as details about their Fallen London player characters (e.g. ‘Correspondent’, an in-game profession). Baym (2000) establishes self-disclosure to be an important method of building rapport among members of an online fan community. It also allows them to deindividuate themselves within the wider community (see Reicher et al., 1995). To obtain these identifying roles, users would enrol a bot (‘A grubby urchin’) by posting a programming-style function as a message in chat, which would prompt the bot to attach the role to the user’s Discord account. That ordinary server members must effectively petition a bot to grant them their desired status, rather than being able to assign it directly themselves, has implications for the dynamics of power on the server which will be further explored alongside hard gates.
Discord allows users with server design permissions to assign up to 50 images as ‘custom’ emojis. On the FBG server, most of these were based on icons representing characters, Qualities and icons from Fallen London. In McSweeney’s (2018) terms, emojis can be used as an “expression of creativity and situation-specific commentary” (p. 50) and moreover may “[signal] that [the speaker and interlocutor] have a shared culture and are members of the same community of practice” (p. 51). McSweeney’s observations originate in the context of intimate, dyadic (one-on-one) SCMC exchanges, but in this multiparticipant setting, wherein one speaks to many fellow CofP members at once, it applies perhaps even more strongly.

Figure 5.3.3: Discord allows server admins to assign a limited number of ‘custom’ emojis for use within that specific server. Most of the FBG server’s emojis were rectangular icons taken directly from Fallen London and Sunless Sea.
Figure 5.3.4: Messages in #fallen-london. Participants employ the custom emoji ‘:peckish:’, an icon from *Fallen London*, to refer to a widely-known, infamous storyline in a fandom-unique way.

With custom emojis, server members demonstrate the server’s identity at the intersection of FBG fandom and *Discord* usership. They enrol the iconography from *Fallen London* through the medium of emoji to communicate concepts in a way that affirms their shared knowledge as part of a CofP. In the example above, players use the ‘peckish’ emoji in reference to ‘Seeking Mr Eaten’s Name’ (SMEN), a notorious storyline themed around hunger, betrayal, and self-destruction. By association, the icon can connote everything from the players who have undertaken the questline (‘Seekers’) to any piece of writing or lore that implies hunger. In designating emojis with unique, fandom-derived meanings, the server opened itself up to inventive displays of communication between participants.

Overall, by examining these phenomena as soft gates, we can gain insight into the ways that a virtual CofP constitutes itself through the affordances and constraints of a particular platform, while simultaneously accounting for how members’ social identity has been written into the rules of the virtual space. Human, technical and textual actors all contribute to the production of participants’ sense of who they are and why are there.
5.4: Using channels to create discursive districts

Where soft-gating programs illustrate who the members of a virtual community are assumed/expected to be, channelling programs delineate where they are expected to interact. The server’s “official” relationship with FBG is an early example: while there may exist other servers comprised of FBG fans and dedicated to FBG fandom, this server is advantaged over others due to its designation as the ‘proper’ place for Discord-using FBG fans to go. Construing the FBG server as a technological artefact, channels are inherently inscriptive in ANT terms because they privilege some patterns of use over others in accordance with the preferences of the moderators (Randall et al., 2007).

In an online chat environment, social interactions, and therefore culture, manifest primarily through written language (Herring, 2010). To impose limits on what one can say in a specific server sublocation, then, is to divide the community space into separate ‘rooms’, each of which is inscribed with its own unique purpose. Instead of producing user identity, as soft gates do, channelling programs produce identities for locations, offering suggestions about where a given conversation topic ‘belongs’ and, by corollary, where it does not.

If the core program or mission statement of the FBG server is to provide a place where people can talk with others who share their interest in the Fallen London universe, there is an imperative for the moderators to make sure that conversations are carried out successfully. To this end, the moderators anticipate and respond to the proclivities of the instant messaging medium as they translate the server’s architecture on the community’s behalf. Instant messaging is synchronous, spontaneous, interactive, and loosely structured (Crystal, 2001). Online interest communities, Itō et al. (2010) observe, tend to engage interchangeably in different ‘genres of participation’: hanging out (socialisation-oriented), geeking out (intensely interest-oriented), and messing around (interest-related, but inventive and less intense). Geeking out on the FBG server can be relegated to its own channel category (titled ‘Failbetter
Games’) wherein most conversations regarding actual gameplay and lore are expected to occur. For genres such as hanging out, then, there are other spaces inscribed: the #veilgarden channel, and many channels within the ‘Other Videogames’ and ‘Community’ channel categories.

As it turned out, the volume of discussion on the FBG server that could be classified as hanging out was very high, and channelling programs were enacted and routinely updated to keep discussions manageable. Turn disruption, wherein a conversation is interrupted due to the delay between typing and posting messages, is a regular issue in synchronous online chat (Darics, 2010), especially when there are multiple conversations taking place at once. To solve this, the moderators would identify particularly popular discussion topics in the general chat channels (#veilgarden and #general-gaming) and create new channels inscribed with those topics. The names and descriptions assigned to these new channels would define their intended scopes without ambiguity.

Figure 5.4.1: Having a channel on the server dedicated to a specific topic provides a space for interested members to talk about that topic in depth. At the same time, it ensures that the volume of conversation on the subject won’t disrupt other, existing channels.

Figure 5.4.2: A moderator explaining to others in #mod-contact that specific channels help divert large sections of traffic away from the uninscribed ‘general’ channels. (Note: ‘They’ refers to channels that were created to house specific topics.)
In creating new channels, moderators again perform their role as cultural intermediaries, this time by ensuring that conversation on the server maintains a degree of efficiency. In this case, they do so by enacting an anti-anti-program, rewriting parts of the server architecture to maintain a kind of conversational status quo. An earlier ethnographic study of moderative practices on a fan website (Lammers, 2013) proposed that moderators attempt to ‘norm’ certain practices through regulatory discourse by making ‘rules posts’ which establish or reassert a site’s social order. With channelling programs, the regulatory discourse extends beyond verbal discourse and into technical discourse: if a channel exists for it, then it ‘should’ go in that channel; the server, as a technological artefact, ‘should’ be used a certain way.

Figure 5.4.3: By enrolling their server-editing permissions, mods create new channels to direct popular discussion topics away from general-purpose spaces (in this case, on #general-gaming, a general-purpose channel for non-FBG games).

In Baym’s (2000) ethnographic study of a Usenet fan community, she observed that threads dedicated to topics which diverged significantly from the forum’s bespoke focus (TV soaps) were signified by the prefix ‘TAN’ (short for ‘tangential’) in their thread titles. This, too, would be an example of channelling. An important difference between Baym’s forums and the Discord server is that the latter, wholeheartedly accepting members’ desire to talk about non-core topics, places the onus of separating core from non-core topics on the architecture, articulating that users should ‘move’ to a location rather than mark out their current space as ‘tangential’. In all this, #veilgarden stands out in that it is, if anything, un-inscribed: it represents the designated hanging out space for any topic not rerouted by channelling. In the
gated community analogy, it could be likened to an open-air town square where people can discuss any subject without a dedicated venue.

Once an anti-anti-program against disorganisation was set by the moderators’ creation of a new channel (and thus a new ‘overall’ channelling program), it was maintained actively by members of the wider community. In some cases (as in Figure 5.4.4), users engaged in self-regulatory discourse, asking or educating other server members about the current program of channel use. When participants noted a significant deviation in the conversation on a channel toward a topic that already had its own inscribed space, they would enrol the norms of use in message posts which I will refer to as *push-comments*. These comments (e.g. Figure 5.4.5) represent *ad hoc* anti-anti-programs created on an *ad hoc* basis whereby users attempt to reassert the dominant channelling program by pointing directly to the space the anti-programmed conversation ‘ought’ to be in.

![Chat conversation example](image.png)
Figure 5.4.4: Users in #veilgarden instructing others on the overall channelling program in place on the server. (Note: some messages removed per participants’ wishes.)

Figure 5.4.5: An ironically melodramatic push-comment by a user on #veilgarden. Push-comments are anti-anti-programs created by human actors in order to reassert the overarching channel program.

The degree to which channelling programs were enforced on the FBG server varied depending on the participants’ disposition. Sometimes, if nobody pointed out the anti-program, it was able to run on until people were done discussing it. Generally speaking, if somebody in a channel made a push-comment to assert the dominant program, the scenario resolved with the off-topic conversers relocating their discussion. Where this failed, a moderator would usually come in to make a push-comment themselves, bringing in the force of moderative authority to resolve the issue. Active enforcement of channelling programs only occurred if the anti-programs persisted despite multiple intervention attempts.

Figure 5.4.6: Ordinary users’ push-comments having failed to restore the channel program, a moderator comes in and makes a push-comment in #general-gaming.
Channelling programs on the FBG server were guided overall by the principle that server members should be allowed to talk about the variety of things that they were interested in, so long as they respected others. One scenario where channelling was practised to a consistently stricter degree than average concerned the discussion of *Fallen London* ‘deep lore’ (story information requiring substantial effort to reach in the ergodic game-texts). Comments and conversations which users felt might qualify as spoiler content were relegated to the inscribed #lore-spoilers channel; moreover, people appeared to more consistently self-regulate where spoilers were concerned.

![Figure 5.4.7: A relatively new user (posting in #fallen-london) self-regulates in order to ensure that they do not post spoiler material outside the channel designated for spoiler material.](image)

Channelling programs join various topics or genres of participation to specific sublocations within a virtual community environment to ensure that conversation is well-ordered and involves minimal disruption. Looking at how socialisation is inscribed onto artefacts within a space such as a *Discord* server allows one to acquire an idea of the resident community’s priorities and sense of etiquette.
5.5: Hard gates & creating ultimata for the community’s sake

Sites of online social activity are typically understood as metaphorical ‘spaces’, but in using this metaphor, it is important to establish how the rules of such spaces are constituted (Dieberger, 1999). For a long-term virtual community, if there are behavioural standards which people within its space are expected to meet or adhere to, then there must be mechanisms by which those who do not can be forcibly removed and/or kept out. This is one of the key reasons why a virtual community might create hard-gating programs around or within itself.

Hard gates block, limit, or slow down activity and/or access to an online social space as part of a community’s efforts to maintain and assert its core values. Like soft gates, they are programs through which users can obtain entry to a space, but they are ‘hard’ in that the conditions entrants must fulfil are specific, and the barriers they allow passage through are constructed on purpose and are (if operating ideally) impossible to overcome by any other means. They are less concerned with sociality and identity and more with protection and enforcement.

More than either of the previous two community programs covered by this study, hard gates rely on gatekeeping actors. Specifically, they rely on moderators, as human actors with centralised power, and on software-derived actors, which the moderators are responsible for translating and enrolling. As Lessig (1995) notes, online environments have rules and architectures which are fundamentally artificial; that is, being programmed, they depend on somebody being able to serve as a programmer. In a virtual community environment, there must exist an authoritative group with design power who can retranslate the server to maintain its programs in the face of unexpected, disruptive anti-programs. Moreover, human gatekeepers can be flexible in their negotiations with problematic actors and are better suited to deal with anti-programs on a case-by-case basis. Software-derived gatekeepers, meanwhile, can follow the verification protocols programmed into them absolutely (Lessig, 1999). Only moderators can negotiate with the server architecture; server participants, whether seeking to gain access
to special channels or to avoid being placed on a ban list, can only negotiate with the moderators. As such, a combination of human and automated gatekeepers in hard gate programs forces prospective entrants to make themselves visible and accountable to representatives of the community and its agreed-upon behavioural standards.

The FBG server’s hard-gating programs anticipate or respond to anti-programs that conflict with the goals or spirit of the community. These anti-programs include disrespectful or antisocial behaviours, such as aggression and harassment, as well as consistent defiance of attempts by moderators to intervene (e.g. mods attempting to reassert the channelling order). These behaviours are detailed in the server’s codified rules channel (see Appendix); for example, rule #2 reads thus:

“2. Treat each other with respect. We are all fellow Human Beings, and there is no situation in which causing someone else duress is acceptable.”

This rule (and its subsections, which list possible violations) identifies the server as a ‘safe space’, a term which in contemporary culture denotes an area free of violence, harassment, and marginalisation. They have been described as spaces of ‘resistance’ to harmful dominant norms such as homophobia, racism, or sexism (The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1352). We should consider again the corollary of group identity – that the rules channel, in defining how server participants should behave, also designates the conditions under which they may be disciplined.

The most straightforward example of disciplinary hard-gating on the FBG Discord server occurs when a user is banned, although this is something which the moderators try to avoid. Given the server’s inclusive, open-gate approach to entrants, the moderators prefer to engage in spoken regulatory discourse (e.g. warnings, direct messaging) than technical intervention if it is possible to avoid the latter. When the decision is made to ban a user, the mod team enrols its technical permissions to simultaneously (a) remove the transgressor’s account from the
server space and (b) add the account to a programmed-in list. Should the transgressor attempt to re-join the server, the architecture will gatekeep automatically and reject them. Therefore, they are subject to a hard gate that selectively keeps them out of the community.

Figure 5.5.1: Every mod team decision to ban a user is posted, with reasons given, on #server-announcements. Users are usually given every opportunity to improve their behaviour, and only banned after repeat offenses with no sign of improvement. All bans are final.

Any time a ban is issued, it is formally declared, with reasons given, on the administrative #server-announcements channel. The example in Figure 5.5.1, through its citation of specific rules and detailing of the transgressor’s specific behaviours, aligns the moderators’ technical act of banning with the idea of protecting the community’s established standards. At the same time, it socially positions the transgressor’s actions and identity (i.e. as a transgressor) as being incompatible with the community.

Constructing hard gates to discipline users is a very visible display of moderative power and reduces users’ capacity to participate. As an alternative to such harsh measures, moderators sometimes performed a mix between hard-gating and channelling by making anti-programs difficult or impossible to carry out. The server’s rules laid out several methods by which mods could alter the rules of server sublocations to limit problematic conduct; for example, they could mute individual users and lock channels, both of which remove (to different degrees) the potential for a conversation-based anti-program to proceed. One interesting program of mixed
channelling/hard-gating was carried out using a *Discord* feature called ‘slowmode’. When enacted in a specific channel, slowmode would alter the rules of messaging such that users without moderator permissions were limited to sending messages only once per a set interval (e.g. 10 seconds).

Figure 5.5.2: Slowmode is a built-in technical affordance that can be applied to a channel. Moderators are exempt from this, and thus become able to ‘talk over’ people.

Invoking slowmode functioned as an anti-anti-program against spamming, disruptive or inflammatory talk, or against repeated misuse of channels. By altering the speed of chat – thereby destroying the synchronicity typical of instant messaging – for everyone but themselves, moderators elevated their utterances above those of non-mod users in the same space, making it easier for them to speak, respond, and reassert the community’s standard programs. Even after the events which prompted slowmode’s enrolment, the restriction acted as a very visible and constant reminder to participants not to engage in the behaviour that might have prompted the mods to deem the program necessary.
Figure 5.5.3: Users in #mod-contact discuss the use of slowmode. In restricting the rate of messaging, slowmode asserts the channelling program by making the anti-program functionally harder to carry out. (Note: some messages omitted for clarity. Some nicknames obscured per user request.)

The final variety of hard gate I observed on the FBG server was those which granted access to sensitive channels via a digital token that signified trust. Three channels listed on the #info page were neither accessible nor visible to me in the server’s channels-list sidebar. These were:

- #give-me-your-eyes (designated ‘selfie’ channel);
- #the-royal-beth (mental health & venting); and
- #square-of-lofty-words (for serious debates around real-world politics, philosophy, etc.)

Each of these channels had subject matter that could be considered personal and/or volatile. Therefore, as an anti-anti-program against malicious or otherwise toxic human actors, they could only be accessed by users possessing defined Discord roles titled ‘Exceptional Friend’ (a.k.a. EF; for the first two channels) and ‘Lofty’ (for the third). To acquire these roles, one needed to petition the moderators via the designated #mod-contact channel after having
engaged in ‘moderate activity’ for at least 2 weeks. A moderator would then assign the role(s) after verifying the user’s record of participation.

Figure 5.5.4: In the #mod-contact channel, users can ask the moderators for the ‘Exceptional Friend’ role if they have been moderately active on the server for at least two weeks. This gives them access to ‘sensitive’ channels.

This role-based admission system facilitated an anti-anti-program against toxic participants by essentially quantifying trust. Past research has found that online communities often strive to develop mechanisms to support trust, which becomes increasingly necessary as participants engage in riskier interactions (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). While the bar for being granted EF/Lofty roles on the FBG server was arguably not very high, it in fact conferred several benefits to the community and its members. First, the roles were given at the mods’ discretion and therefore could, if necessary, be revoked. Second, it has been observed that requiring new participants to register an account with an online community before posting helps to deter casual visitors who seek to cause disruption (ibid.); requiring two weeks of willing socialisation may similarly present too much effort to many would-be troublemakers. Third, it ensures that all approved participants are known to the moderators. Finally, having interacted with others for two weeks, applicants will have had the opportunity to inculcate themselves with the server’s subcultural and behavioural norms. The ‘trusted’ status denoted
by the EF role may have also granted users a degree of social and cultural capital that represented their commitment and thus augmented their site-specific identity.

Even though their criteria were the same, the creation of EF and Lofty as separate roles served an important role in the server’s channelling program. Based on the server goal of maintaining a safe space for its inhabitants, discussions of controversial issues like those inscribed into #square-of-lofty-words were treated as something which all members should have the right to avoid. By making the channel opt-in and trust-dependent, the program ensured that only people who actively wanted to view and engage in such debates were able to do so. In some cases, users with both the EF and Lofty roles would ask the moderators to revoke the latter, thereby removing their access. This represented an interesting use of the server’s hard-gating functions whereby users took advantage of the mod-controlled process to firmly remove themselves from upsetting or frustrating conversations.

![Chat)(image)

**Figure 5.5.5:** Sometimes users with the ‘Lofty’ role, which grants access to the server’s designated debating channel, would ask the mods to revoke their access to it in an act of self-gating.

In conclusion, hard gates on the FBG server were a means for gatekeepers to make statements about the acceptability of behaviours and the trustworthiness of users. Moderators enrolled their space-designing privileges to translate the server’s programmed-in rules to enforce standards and affirm community-supported conditions of participation and entry. This interplay of experienced server-goers and software-derived actors helped to constitute the essential atmosphere of safety, openness, and mutual respect on the server.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study has identified and developed a new ANT-oriented approach to netnography which allows the significance of various technological artefacts in the constitution of online community values and culture online to be more closely considered. It has sought to balance the inherently social nature of community with the inevitable effects that communications technologies are known to have on the communications they mediate. At the same time, it has examined the importance of platform customisability to digital communities, demonstrating the additional level of social shaping that goes on between server designers and server inhabitants.

By cross-examining the affordances of the Discord platform and the subcultural significance of Fallen London to its Discord-based fan community, I have developed insights into how the community articulated its relationship with both platform and game. My exploration also highlighted a mutually beneficial relationship between the fan community and Failbetter Games itself, whereby the latter contributed to the growth and longevity of the server through its endorsement and regular engagement. This phenomenon of creator-endorsed, fan-run social spaces is by no means new to Discord, but as Discord grows in popularity and brings out new features that deepen its ties to the videogame industry, it may prove a valuable study location for researchers seeking to understand current gaming culture.

I find that moderators on the FBG Discord server wield powers which, while we might consider them to be regulatory in nature, are essentially powers of technical redesign. The regulatory discourse of a virtual community should be understood not only in terms of what is said, but in how its digital architecture is translated by an empowered few for the benefit of all. Moderators on the FBG server carried out their duties as cultural intermediaries by translating server architecture in ways that sought to facilitate community identity, ensure conversation was
carried out cohesively and respectfully, and maintain agreed-upon standards of good behaviour and trust across the membership.

Soft-gating programs manifested in artefacts including channels, bots, and user roles that had been customised to reflect the server’s cultural connection to *Fallen London*. Other features, such as server-specific emojis, invited the server’s inhabitants to articulate their shared interest in creative ways. While many interactions on the server centred on the participants’ shared enjoyment of *Fallen London*, participants also enjoyed discussing a range of alternative topics, from other media to everyday life. Accepting that tangential discussions were a natural part of fan socialisation, the server’s architects did not seek to curtail them, but rather redirected them through the creation of new channels. Channelling programs, which were updated regularly to keep the flow of discussions manageable, represented a program for appropriate use of the server as a technological artefact.

While hard gates were avoided where possible in the interest of keeping an open, inclusive community, they were nonetheless instrumental in moderators’ efforts to ensure that the server remained a safe and accessible place for most users. Limiting access to server sublocations via technical means –by making channels role-restricted, for example – made it possible to intervene in ways that were guaranteed to succeed.

The gates/channels model provides a framework for understanding, in sociotechnical terms, how online communities are constituted and shaped both by their human members and by features of the software they use to communicate. Gates and gating programs within a server’s actor-network are imbued with assumptions about user identity (i.e. their knowledge of the community’s focal artefacts/values) and behaviour (i.e. their ability to comprehend and adhere to group norms/rules). We can use this model to ask and answer questions about how virtual communities program suggestions of *who its members should be* (soft gates), *on what
conditions members may enter/stay (hard gates), and where certain things may be done (channels) into the very fabric of the digital spaces that they occupy.

My study developed the gates/channels model as a means of qualifying the FBG Discord server as both a programmable software artefact and a site of online social culture (specifically fan culture). This model may be helpful to researchers seeking to identify community-specific modes of expression within customisable online spaces on Discord and other social platforms. Using a sociotechnical approach, researchers can identify icons, expressions, and concepts that have been thus far formalised in community rituals and paralanguage (e.g. emojis) and thus develop insights about a given fan group’s cultural connection with its chosen texts, creators, and other cultural artefacts. The fandom found on the FBG Discord expressed its affinity for FBG and its games through references to game content, invoking narrative and mechanical ideas alike.

The hard gates I observed on the FBG server could be classified as either *admissive*, in the case of the ‘Exceptional Friendship’ and ‘Lofty’ roles, or *exclusionary*, in the case of permanent user bans. Both forms of hard-gating relied on software-based tokens that could only be assigned to an individual’s Discord account by an authority figure (i.e. a moderator). Moreover, these tokens represented a verdict on whether a user was trusted. The Exceptional Friend role signified bearers who were trusted enough to be allowed to see and participate in sensitive channels. Banned users, conversely, were marked as *persona non grata* for repeated and/or serious rules violations. That bans were treated as a last resort by the mod team is key to what I have described as the ‘open-gate policy’ of the FBG server. Additional study should be done into servers with varying standards of strictness around rules, inclusivity/exclusivity, and different kinds of enforcers (e.g. human mods vs. bots) to better understand the approaches to power and authority taken by virtual chatroom communities. It may be possible to develop a typology of common power structures used in these spaces.
The concept of channels, meanwhile, can help researchers pin down the nuanced purposes that underscore a server’s existence by outlining its intended modes and patterns of use. While rules, guidelines and programmable barriers vary by community, how they are set up tells us much about what a server’s designers and/or core participants want their space to be. Our knowledge of interest-based online spaces can be expanded further if we consider how channels and channelling programs evolve in response to anti-programs that challenge a server’s status quo.

Additional research could also be done into other Discord server-based fan communities. As a popular contemporary chat platform for all kinds of online CofPs, Discord is a valuable site for ongoing research into virtual community phenomena. As innovative uses of software emerge from users’ interactions within communities, the relationship between users and their communications platforms of choice is becoming more personalised. That official Discord updates have sought to enhance the expressive capabilities of users and user communities by adding new functionality marks the platform as an interesting site for studying social technologies through a constructivist lens. Among Discord’s built-in features, ‘verified’ servers – which are not merely endorsed, but actively managed by the game studios/publishers they focus on – should demonstrate noticeably different dynamics of power to those of an ‘official fan server’ like the one studied here. Verified servers are required to have certain regulatory programs in place, such as automatic filtering of explicit content (‘Discord — Verification’). The higher degree of automation and direct creator involvement present on such servers would help with understanding how gates and channels are structured in different environments. Finally, when studying videogame-oriented fan communities, it is essential to consider the nature of the game(s) that are the primary focus of the server: a community for a story-heavy, semi-social browser game like Fallen London will naturally have very different social rituals and aesthetics to one for a competitive real-time MMORPG. It may therefore be useful to consider this study’s observations on contemporary gaming culture alongside existing
and future research into cultures around other videogame types and/or similar games produced by other studios.

The methodology could be refined by giving further scrutiny to the long-term history and development of the software-derived actors involved in gate/channel creation. As it currently stands, my approach has only been able to capture the history of changes made to the case study server’s architecture within a limited window of time. Observation over longer periods of time would allow researchers using this approach to better map the changes made to server gates and channels over time. Combined with research into a wider variety of servers on the same platform, it is my hope that this model can be refined to be useful to digital cultures research in the future.
Appendix – FBG Fan *Discord* Server #rules text

**SERVER RULES:**

1. Follow moderatorial instructions. When mods are acting in their capacity as server moderators, disobeying instructions may lead to a disciplinary action. Chances are, they are trying to keep the peace.

2. Treat each other with respect. We are all fellow Human Beings, and there is no situation in which intentionally causing someone else duress is acceptable.

   2a. The practice of Violence, Racism, Sexism, Homophobia, or other discriminatory ideologies will not be tolerated.

   2b. Do not intentionally post content to upset, offend, or be cruel to other users. We recommend breaking links to material you know others might find offensive.

   2c. Do not spam chat. If we didn't understand the message a first time, repeating it as fast as you can will not help.

   2d. This common courtesy also extends to other communities. Do not discuss/organize/encourage harmful actions against this community, or others (Including but not limited to other Discord Servers)

   2e. Also be mindful of spoilers and not ruining the experience of FBG games for others. See our Spoiler policy for what exactly does/does not constitute a spoiler.

3. We are an adult oriented server discussing an adult game with adult themes. However, there will be no NSFW images allowed of any kind. Discussion of NSFW is generally allowed, but should be kept at levels you'd expect from the general public of Fallen London. Anything more explicit will be subject to mod attention and potential moderation action. People DO play this game and read this chat while at work, do not get them fired.

   (cont.)

4. Keep talk in the relevant channels whenever possible. Especially make sure spoilers remain in #lore-spoilers, and that #mod-contact remains clear for pressing mod concerns.

5. The planning or encouragement of illegal activities is not allowed. Your local laws still apply to you, even online.

   5a. This ESPECIALLY applies to automating, botting, hacking or datamining (or any other activities that breach FBG's ToS) any of the games covered by this server.
5ai. This includes discussion of datamined content.

5b. This also especially applies to actions which might harm the integrity of the discord platform, or otherwise interfere with its normal function. This includes impersonating another user.

5c. The promotion of self harm, suicide, eating disorders, drug abuse, or other activities of a similar nature is strictly forbidden. Discussion of these activities regarding characterization in roleplay or in game is a separate matter and will be handled on a case by case basis as moderators see fit. Clarification of the role playing rule regarding this matter will be posted under role-playing rules.

6. The #square-of-lofty-words has its own specific guidelines in addition to these rules provided. They can be found here: [Some text omitted]

SERVER JUSTICE:
Small infractions are generally not tracked or noted, a mod on site will suggest alternative rule-friendly actions, delete any offending material, and we will all move along with our lives. We're not here to rule you, we're here to make sure everyone can communicate with one another in a safe space.

Moderate infractions may lead to mutes or entire channels being locked to stop any ongoing problems. They are not intended as punishment, and receiving one may not mean you've done anything wrong. It is purely a tool to control out of control situations when Rule #1 is not effective. The Mod team will conevene and determine appropriate action, after which mutes will be removed. We prefer not to mod alone, and get a in depth view of any problems occurring, as jumping to conclusions doesn't help anyone.

Any identified Behavior problems will probably result first in a talk from one or more of the moderators, trying to identify why rules were broken in the first place, and ways you can prevent that from happening again in the future. A Strike may be issued if there is concern with your ability to not err again.
Strikes are officially tracked rule infractions. They are for situations where it's questionable whether a rule was fully broken, or cases where mods feel a rule was broken out of ignorance, not malice. Strikes are tracked in an external file which FailBetter Games has full access to view. After a decision is made to issue a strike, you will be told that a strike has been issued, and the file will be updated. If you have not been notified of a Strike, then you do not have one. Not all strikes are created equal, but we do not wish to keep track of .125 of a strike. As such, Strike fall off and strikes required for ban will vary depending on individual and offense.

Strikes will generally stay relevant to moderator action for approximately 6 months from the time of the offense. Individuals who accumulate enough strikes (typically 3) or who prove themselves a clear and immediate threat to the server, will cause mods to initiate a ban process. After dealing with/muting any ongoing issues, a vote will be held among mods. 2/3rds Majority in favor will result in an immediate ban. If we ban a server member, we will make sure to make a small post in announcements as to whom we banned, and why. Secrecy benefits no one long term.

We strive to offer an individual multiple chances to improve in their ability to treat others with respect. Our ban process is slow due to this. Because of this, Ban Appeals will be ignored.

Any concerns, objections, or issues with these rules or about any behavior on this server should be directed towards a moderator in a direct message or in #mod-contact.

An exception to these punishment rules is in the case that a user posts with solely malicious intent. Examples of this can include, but are not limited to:
- Spamming.
- Joining the server purely for promotion or to spread harmful files or links.
- Posting gore, porn, and other content with no right to be posted.
- Extreme trolling behaviours with no possibility of innocence, such as spamming racial slurs.

Any users exhibiting these behaviours will be banned summarily and as fast as possible, with no ban vote given or possibility of appeal.
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