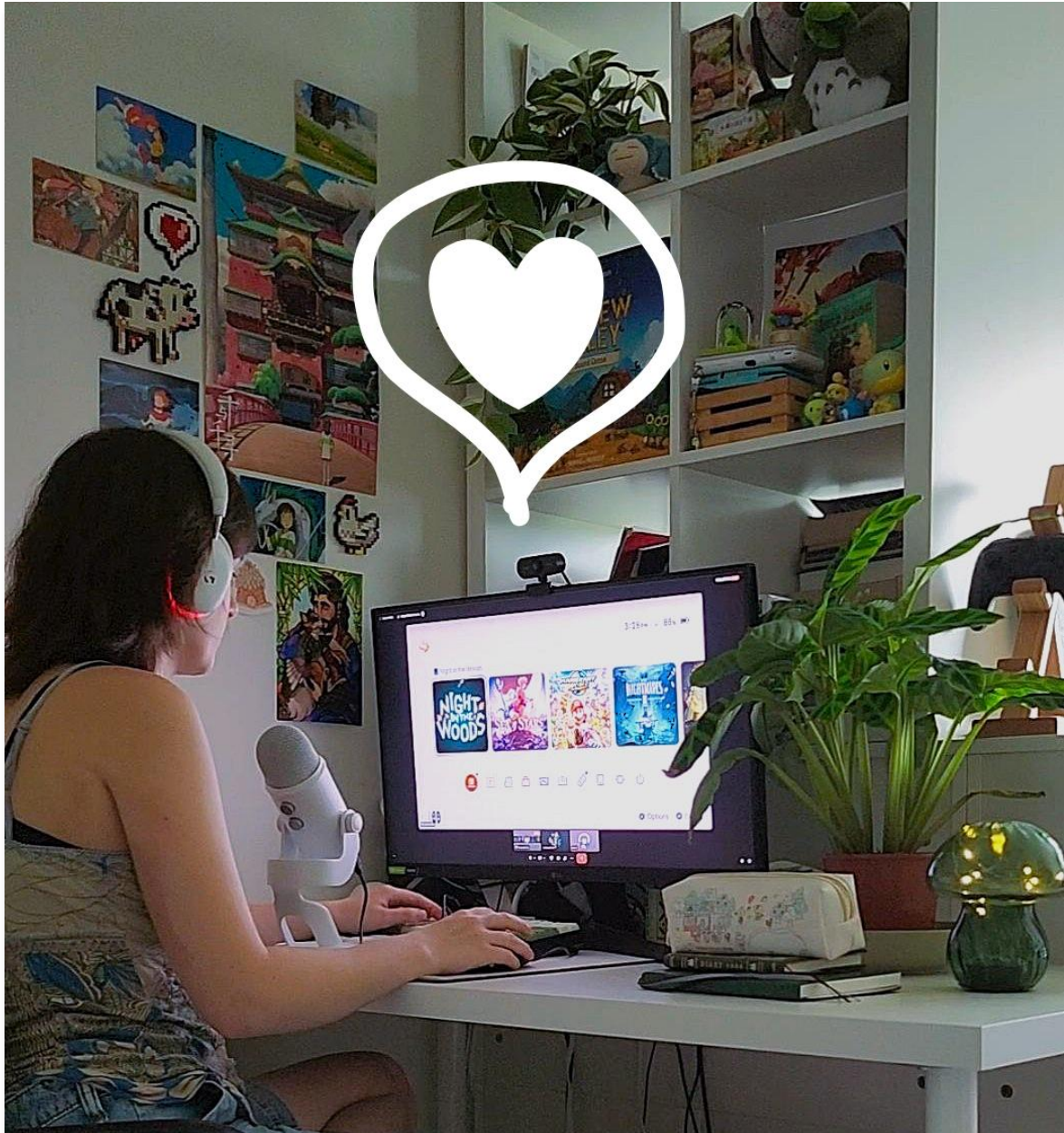


Instantly There and Constantly Present

Care in online gaming spaces



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Abstract

This thesis researches how care is practiced and experienced in online gaming spaces, with a particular focus on Discord. It explores the research question: What does care look like in online gaming spaces, what specific care practices emerge within these spaces, and how are they shaped by the design and features of platforms like Discord? Through qualitative data from multiple participants as well as ethnographic data from my own experiences, various care practices were observed, including listening, empathizing, giving advice, sharing experiences, motivating others, and gaming together. Challenges of online care such as missing physical presence were recognized, but most participants noted that they accept the limits and adapt accordingly. The thesis has found that the observed care practices are enabled and influenced by various affordances within Discord's design, which enable flexible forms of interacting and create a sense of constant presence and availability. These aspects are central to how care is practiced, making it both meaningful and effective for the participants in this study.

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1. Introduction

“And now I’m never alone again. Now I can just send a message on Discord at any time of the day. And there’s always someone there” (Participant 1)

The fact that many people build and maintain networks of care within online gaming communities is frequently overlooked. Video games are often viewed solely as a form of entertainment. Yet for many, these spaces are more than just a form of amusement. They function as spaces for meaningful social interaction and important sources of care and support.

Gamers spend their time across different online spaces, creating networks of spaces where they play together. At the centre of these digital networks, Discord often serves as the main hub for their groups and communities. On Discord, gamers communicate both while playing and outside of games, using the platform to connect and build relationships. One of Discord’s key features is its high level of customization. Users can create or join servers based on shared interests, choose roles within these communities, customize channels (sub-spaces within the community), and control the way they present themselves. Moreover, Discord offers a variety of communication options, including voice calls, text messaging, and collaborative gaming or other activities. This flexibility in customization and communication methods creates a sense of safety, comfort, and belonging, creating conditions for meaningful spaces of care.

The significance of these spaces as sources of care is further increased by their high availability. While public social infrastructure and formal care institutions are becoming increasingly inaccessible, online spaces are becoming a valuable resource for informal care. They allow people to reach out to others regardless of distance or other barriers, and to receive continuous and immediate support.

In this thesis, I explore both this high degree of customizability and accessibility and research how these characteristics enable and influence care practices. I ask the question of what care looks like in online gaming spaces such as Discord, what care practices are present, and how online platforms can encourage and support these practices through their design and features. I conceptualize Discord as a ‘space of care’,

where people interact, foster relationships, and practice care in ways that are shaped by the platform's design and affordances. Moreover, I argue that the high accessibility of online gaming spaces such as Discord positively affects care practices.

1.1 Societal relevance

The societal relevance of this research lies in the growing need for accessible forms of social support, especially when formal care institutions are not always available or easy for people to access. Mental health services are becoming increasingly inaccessible due to long waiting lists and high costs (OECD, 2023). As a result, many people are not getting the care and support they need. Additionally, many public services and facilities that normally serve as spaces where social relationships and networks are built are closing (Klinenberg, 2018). Other studies similarly point to the disappearance of community-based places such as libraries and bars (Oldenburg, 1996). These problems highlight the importance of care that exists outside of formal institutions. When formal care is not available, everyday social environments, such as online spaces, can provide meaningful care that is affordable and widely available.

Researching online environments is socially relevant because these spaces are deemed highly accessible due to the high availability of digital devices and internet connectivity (Naslund et al., 2016). For many people, these environments provide accessible opportunities for interaction that are not limited by physical proximity, money, or formal institutional access. This accessibility is especially significant for people who deal with social isolation and/or loneliness, due to mental health barriers or a lack of available physical social infrastructure in their environment (Nilsen et al., 2024; Ringland et al., 2016; Steineck et al., 2022). Online gaming spaces then become meaningful and accessible forms of social infrastructure and sources of care and support.

Researching how care is practiced and enabled by digital platforms not only contributes to a greater understanding and awareness of the importance of these spaces but also has practical implications. By researching how specific online platform features can foster care, this thesis offers insights that may be valuable for platform designers. It provides more information on how digital platforms can be intentionally designed to

enable and maintain everyday care practices. Such insights can help shape online spaces that are more inclusive and capable of supporting meaningful social connections.

1.2 Scientific relevance

The scientific relevance of researching care in online gaming spaces is found in the still underexplored ways that care and emotional support are practiced within these spaces. While there have been studies on social dynamics in online gaming spaces, there remains a limited understanding of how relationships are formed, how care and support are expressed, and what effects this care has on people. This lack of understanding is reinforced by the generalization of gaming experiences in existing research, which often frames gaming primarily in terms of addiction or toxic spaces, as Kowert & Kaye (2018) state. This puts the positive effects, such as meaningful social interaction, to the background. Moreover, the increased use of digital infrastructure is feared and has even been proven to have negative effects on people. For example, Orben & Przybylski (2019), using a large dataset, concluded that increased use of digital technology has negative effects on adolescents' well-being. While these concerns and research results are valid in certain contexts, it is important to consider that social experiences in gaming spaces are diverse and contextual to the player and the game, as Kowert & Kaye (2018) emphasize.

Besides the negativity bias in academic research, I've noticed through my literature search that studies focusing on social dynamics in gaming spaces are often quantitative and don't capture the emotional depth and nuanced experiences of people experiencing social support from these spaces. I also discovered that qualitative research on the social dynamics within gaming communities pays limited attention to the emotional value and personal meaning people attach to their involvement in online gaming communities. Although various studies show that care and social support exist in online gaming spaces, there is little to no research that delves deeper into this or takes it as a central subject.

I therefore expect to gain new and valuable insights when looking through the lens of care and support, especially by conducting qualitative research to explore in depth how

people practice and experience care. It can hopefully help fill the knowledge gap around this subject and contribute to a better understanding and awareness of how online gaming environments can provide meaningful forms of care.

1.2 Research objective and research questions

My thesis aims to present the diverse ways in which people receive care from their online gaming spaces. I look at how Discord functions as social infrastructure that encourages care, and I argue that it is mainly through customizability and personalization of both space and interaction that meaningful and unique care practices arise. Moreover, I explore accessibility as a recurring theme in participants' descriptions of care in their gaming spaces. I argue that the power and effectiveness of care lie in its accessibility: in online gaming communities, care is consistently within reach, immediate, and adaptable to diverse needs. I also look at the different challenges that people experience with care in online gaming communities, as well as in what ways online and offline care are combined in a complementary way.

To explore these themes, the study focuses on the following main research question: What does care look like in online gaming spaces, what specific care practices emerge within these spaces, and how are they shaped by the design and features of platforms like Discord? This question is answered by means of four sub-questions:

1. In what ways do online gaming communities, such as those on platforms like Discord, serve as spaces that enable practices of care?
2. How does accessibility within online gaming spaces shape the ways care is practiced and experienced?
3. What are the challenges of practicing care in online gaming communities?
4. In what ways is care in online gaming communities bridged to offline interactions and support?

These sub-questions each have their own sub-chapter in the findings. In chapter one of the findings, Discord is discussed as a social infrastructure, explaining how its characteristics enable certain care practices. Chapter two will describe the observed care practices, as well as how the concept of accessibility influences them. Chapter three presents the challenges of care in online gaming spaces such as Discord. Chapter

four will address how care in online gaming spaces is bridged and combined with offline care. I will conclude the thesis with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I build the theoretical foundation for the analysis. I begin with a literature review that summarizes all relevant literature about online gaming spaces. Based on this literature, I then develop a conceptual framework that brings these ideas together. This conceptual framework serves as the foundation for analyzing the data collected in this research.

2.1 Literature review

The aim of the literature review is to understand how online gaming spaces have been conceptualized thus far and where this thesis contributes new insights. I begin by introducing a definition of care that reflects the approach taken in this thesis. Next, I examine how games and gamers have often been framed negatively in earlier research, as this context helps understand why the caring dimensions of gaming communities are often overlooked. After discussing these stereotypes, I move to studies that discuss social dynamics within online video games and how these dynamics have shifted with the rise of new platforms and design choices. Finally, I discuss existing research on care and support in online games. Here, I summarize what we already know about how care works in online video game spaces, along with the aspects that remain underexplored.

Defining care

Before diving into literature on care in gaming spaces, I start by outlining the definition of care that aligns with the perspective taken in this thesis. The definition I draw on in this thesis is Tronto's definition of care, described in *In Moral Boundaries* (1993). She describes care as the ongoing human activity of maintaining, continuing and repairing our world, including ourselves, others and our environment, by taking the needs of others as the basis for action. She conceptualizes care through four separate but interconnected phases: attentiveness (caring about), responsibility (taking care of), competence (care-giving) and responsiveness (care-receiving). Attentiveness means

noticing when someone has a specific need and being aware of it. Responsibility implies taking it upon oneself to address someone's need once it is recognized. Competence is about being capable of providing the necessary care. Responsiveness indicates paying attention to how the care provided is received and adjusting accordingly. Besides this definition, she also argues that care is not limited to formal caregiving but is understood as a relational and ethical practice embedded in everyday life (Tronto, 1993).

Adding to this definition by Tronto (1993), I draw on the definition of 'spaces of care' by Conradson (2003). His definition is as follows:

"[...] a socio-spatial field disclosed through the practices of care that take place between individuals. Given the inextricably relational nature of care, the emergence and endurance of such spaces depend upon the willingness of some individuals to move towards others and, amongst those being engaged in this way, upon a receptivity to such initiatives." (Conradson, 2003)

He emphasizes that spaces of care are created and sustained through relationships, interactions and practices.

Negative stereotypes in the literature

Now that I have outlined the perspective on care that guides this thesis, I turn to the negative stereotypes that exist around online gaming spaces. During my search for literature about online gaming spaces, it quickly became clear that there are many negative stereotypes around gaming and that it is often misunderstood and wrongly conceptualized. For example, Kowert & Kaye (2018) described that research often generalizes the psychological effects of gaming and pays little attention to how different types of games or the social context in which they are played can lead to very different experiences. They also discuss the stereotype that gamers are often seen as socially inept, lonely and lazy (Kowert & Kaye, 2018). Domahidi et al., (2014) describe that online friendships are often considered less valuable than those in the physical world, and that it is assumed that spending time online and making connections in gaming environments comes at the expense of one's ability to build and maintain offline connections. Kowert & Kaye (2018) argue for letting go of these outdated stereotypes

and changing the way video games and gamers are approached. According to them, it is important to avoid generalizations and instead acknowledge the diversity of video games and the many ways in which they are experienced.

Other concerns around gaming involve safety in online game environments. In online environments where people communicate with each other, aggressive behaviour and hate speech regularly occur (Zsila et al., 2022). Gray (2018) shows that hateful behaviour in online games is often directed at women, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, and youth. She emphasizes that the potential for anonymity in online environments does not eliminate racism and discrimination; many gaming spaces continue to be dominated by the norm of the heterosexual white man. This also highlights the importance of moderation and digital safety within game environments, a topic explored in greater detail later in this literature review.

Advantages of video games and the social possibilities

Despite these negative perceptions, the benefits of video games are also being explored. Research shows that video games can help reduce stress and anxiety, making them a valuable tool for mental support. For example, Granic et al. (2014) conclude that engaging with virtual environments can help with emotion regulation and allows people to encounter a wide range of perspectives and experiences (Granic et al., 2014). The rest of this literature review will explore how games can offer diverse and meaningful social interactions.

Scientific research into the social dynamics of online video games began during the rise of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), which remain the primary focus of studies on the social aspects of gaming. Games like World of Warcraft are still played today, although their peak popularity was between the 2000s and roughly 2015. In MMOGs, hundreds to thousands of people interact simultaneously within a shared virtual world, collaborating to achieve common objectives. Steinkuehler & Williams (2006) describe MMOGs as virtual “third places”: informal spaces that facilitate social interaction and community building, where individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives and cultures in an accessible environment. Longman et al. (2009) and O’Connor et al. (2015) found that MMOGs serve as sources of social support, where

both online and offline matters are discussed. O'Connor et al. (2015) demonstrated through qualitative research that people receive social support not only in the form of in-game advice but also for personal and emotional issues, such as relationship difficulties. Additionally, they describe that these games provide significant support to individuals who are socially isolated in the physical world. Their research also highlighted that the relative anonymity afforded by game identities lowers barriers to sharing emotional and personal experiences. This finding aligns with the research of Cole & Griffiths (2007), who confirmed that anonymity within video games reduces people's fear of judgment or rejection, enabling more open communication and the formation of deep social connections.

A significant number of studies compare online and offline social connections, especially due to the assumption that online connections are weaker or even come at the expense of offline relationships (Kowert & Kaye, 2018). Domahidi et al. (2018) refute this and show that online gaming does not have a negative influence on social support or offline friendships, and can even strengthen existing connections, because contact and giving social support is possible in new and diverse ways (Domahidi et al., 2018). Likewise, Treppe et al. (2012) show that online gaming (in their case within the context of e-sports teams) can promote meaningful connections and social support, both online and offline, with people often continuing their online relationships in physical world interactions.

Trends: new design choices and platforms

Although earlier studies provided interesting and valuable insights into social dynamics in games, these dynamics have continued to change over time. They change due to new design choices and the emergence of new online platforms. Research focused a lot on MMOGs, especially World of Warcraft, because these games are interesting social environments in which people interact in different ways, as described above. Over time, updates and expansions to World of Warcraft have made it increasingly possible for people to progress through the game without engaging in social interaction, resulting in fewer opportunities for building social connections (O'Connor et al., 2015). The social dynamics researched in these studies have therefore completely changed and no longer represent the social interaction that currently takes place in these environments.

This development highlights the crucial influence of game design on in-game social dynamics. When a game encourages cooperation and mutual dependence, players are more likely to form close social connections. Colder Carras et al. (2018) emphasize that it is therefore important to stay up to date with the ongoing changes in the video game industry, as evolving design choices significantly shape how people interact and how online social dynamics develop (Colder Carras et al., 2018).

Nowadays, a large part of social contact takes place via platforms built around gaming, such as Discord and Twitch. These digital environments function as social infrastructures where people build connections and communities (Hamilton et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025). What stands out is that social interaction is increasingly distributed across multiple digital platforms. For example, Discord often serves as a central hub for communication (through text, audio, and video) while users remain active in other online environments. In short, users are often simultaneously active on different platforms, causing their social life to take place in a complex and connected network of online environments (Bankov, 2019; Sheng & Kairam, 2020).

Video games as caring spaces

Following the discussion of key research on social dynamics in online games and the recent changes affecting them, the next section explores how care and support manifest within these digital spaces. I discuss literature that considers games as valuable platforms for building and maintaining social connections and as meaningful environments in which care and support exist.

With limited social possibilities, people use games to stay in contact with each other or to seek new social contacts. This was, for example, visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which there was a general increase in people playing online games. For example, Yee & Sng (2022) explain that many people turned to *Animal Crossing* during the pandemic to fulfil various psychological needs, with social connection being a particularly significant one. *Animal Crossing*, a calming and creative life simulator, was an important platform for people to experience a feeling of connectedness during the pandemic. It offered a space to maintain existing connections, meet new people, and belong to a broader community (Yee & Sng, 2022). Even though there were limited

possibilities in the game to talk (short messages via in-game text and emotes), the game gave people a general feeling of connectedness and a sense of presence of others, which gave them social fulfilment during periods of isolation.

Online gamer spaces and communities can serve as environments for groups of people who come together based on shared interests, identities, or experiences. Ringland et al. (2016) researched an online community established for people with autism. This community is built around Minecraft and an online forum. The authors describe that online communication can help people with autism because the pace is more manageable, and there is less stress that people with autism can experience during face-to-face interactions. Online platforms and Minecraft also offer space for diverse and creative forms of expression that can help people with autism communicate in ways that best fit their needs. For example, they communicate via the forum with visual media and text, but also by building together in the Minecraft world or exchanging in-game objects. The communication often moves to the private domain, such as via personal messages or closed online spaces.

In this community, different forms of care and support are present, where sharing experiences and finding understanding and recognition mean a lot to the people in the community (Ringland et al., 2016). The shared foundation of Minecraft and autism makes it accessible to build strong friendships. Within this environment, players frequently share advice related both to gameplay and to real-life challenges, often relating to the everyday struggles they encounter.

These forms of support are also visible in the study by Tekinbaş et al (2024), in which they studied an online community consisting of a Minecraft and Discord server for young people who have experienced the loss of a loved one. This community provided a space where young people could connect with others who were going through similar emotions. Interactions within the server proved to be helpful and supportive for people during the grieving process. (Tekinbaş et al., 2024). The Minecraft world offered various activities that stimulated self-expression, creativity, and reflection within the community. For example, there was a memorial garden: a space in which people were invited to build something in memory of the person; objects based on their experiences and memories.

Sheng & Kairam (2020) describe how Twitch, a platform where people livestream video games, and viewers can interact with both the streamer and each other through chat, creates spaces that foster deep and meaningful connections. They show how interactions in the Twitch text chat can grow into relationships grounded in trust and support. The authors explain how Twitch communities are places where people can easily open up because they do not speak face-to-face, and the emphasis lies more on shared interests. The person who streams their game usually has a fixed schedule, causing the same people to meet repeatedly, creating the possibility to build strong relationships. Sheng & Kairam (2020) describe how people also often seek each other offline, and how some contacts develop into strong friendships and sometimes even romantic relationships.

Gray (2018) argues that the possibility of anonymity in online games does not eliminate racism and discrimination, as many gaming spaces remain dominated by the norms of the heterosexual, white male. Therefore, she emphasizes the importance of people being able to create private spaces where they can control who has access. Gray describes Xbox Live as an example: an online communication platform on Xbox where players can play, talk, and build communities together. She interviewed a group of black lesbian women who formed a community on this Xbox Live platform, connected by recognition, mutual understanding, and care for each other. The space serves as a safe place where, contrary to their physical environments (home, school, etc.), they can be fully themselves and do not have to hide their identity and sexuality (Gray, 2018). Gray emphasizes the possibilities technology offers to create online spaces free from the influence of privileged groups. She shows that online game communities can play an important role in discovering and expressing one's identity.

Several themes are visible in these examples of online communities. Game worlds offer access to environments in which people can build strong connections and freely express themselves. They offer a social domain that can be valuable for people looking for communities where they can be themselves. They serve as spaces of care, where people share personal stories, experience empathy and recognition, and find emotional support through shared experiences and through advice and help about online and offline situations.

Conditions for a caring space

Based on this existing literature about care in gaming spaces, there are several characteristics that are seen as conditional to the above-described care practices.

Literature emphasizes that communities built around specific games provide a natural foundation for connectedness, as people already share a common interest in the game itself. Sheng & Kairam (2020) state that online gaming environments such as Twitch promote social connectedness because the channels focus on specific topics. This causes people to assume they share common interests, which quickly leads to a feeling of connectedness. Kim et al. (2025) confirm that this is also the case for Discord; servers are often thematically set up around a particular game, interest, or community, making it easy for people to foster connections (Kim et al., 2025).

Sheng & Kairam (2020) observed how a fixed schedule of interactions, characteristic of Twitch and Discord, causes participants to look forward to future meetings in the long term. Because of the existence of fixed channels and recurring activities, such as weekly talks or joint activities and game moments, a feeling of continuity also arises; people keep coming back and gradually build connections and a community.

Online communities are often characterized by their diverse ways and forms of making contact, spread across different media and platforms (Bankov, 2019; Sheng & Kairam, 2020). Ringland et al. (2016) emphasize that the possibility to get to know each other in different ways, for example via text, image or sound, contributes to building meaningful connections. Sheng & Kairam (2020) also confirm this and call it a “toolkit” of different communication services from which people can choose. By deciding for themselves where and when they share personal information, they can regulate the amount of information well and communicate in ways that best fit their needs, which ultimately contributes to a feeling of control, safety, and connectedness within a community.

Degree of personalization and autonomy for environment and identity

Because personalization is central to this thesis, this section explores how earlier studies have investigated the ways personalized gaming environments influence the presence and practice of care. Although online games and platforms have the potential

to foster nurturing and caring spaces, studies show that such environments only emerge when specific conditions are present to support positive and safe community building. Studies point to certain key factors that contribute to building that safe and positive gaming community. Many scholars stress the value of enabling users to establish private spaces and decide who, as well as how many people, are allowed to enter. For example, Gray (2018) writes about Xbox Live, which, through technical features such as the possibility to create private channels, gives users control over who can participate in the community. She emphasizes that an environment that feels safe and comfortable is essential for a space in which meaningful interactions take place. Sheng & Kairam (2020) confirm that the size of a community influences the degree of interaction and connectedness in the community. They observe that smaller communities on Twitch encourage deeper relationships because there is more repetition and recognition in the interactions. As a community grows, anonymity increases, and emotional and deeper interactions occur less.

Discord takes personalization and autonomy even further by allowing users to create their own spaces. These online spaces, known as “servers,” can be divided into different channels dedicated to specific topics. Kim et al. (2025) emphasize how Discord encourages community building by giving users the autonomy to decide how their community space looks, which fosters a sense of ownership and engagement. They also explain that when people have a say in how their environment is shaped, they feel more connected to the community and motivated to create a safe and caring space. Tekinbaş et al. (2024) support this view and highlight the importance of involving young people in the creation of digital communities. They argue that when young people have the opportunity to influence their digital environment, they are better able to build caring, inclusive, and meaningful communities based on their social needs.

In addition to the ability to personalize their environment, Tekinbaş et al. (2024) also emphasize the importance of having control over how people express their identity within the community, as well as the freedom to experiment with it. This control over self-presentation helps people feel freer and safer to be themselves, which contributes to a stronger sense of connection with both the community and the environment. Gray (2018) echoes this, highlighting that online gaming environments naturally provide

space for identity experimentation, a quality highly valued by many people, especially queer individuals.

Moderation

In addition to predefined rules within a community, different forms of moderation can be applied depending on the type of community to maintain a caring and safe gaming environment. For example, Ringland et al. (2016) describe a server specifically designed for people with autism, where users must first fill out a form. This form includes a statement confirming that the user either has autism themselves or is a friend or family member of someone with autism who participates in the server; only upon approval are users granted access. Furthermore, the server is supervised by volunteers who provide various forms of support to people (Ringland et al., 2016). Similar moderation is found in a Minecraft world dedicated to grief support, where new players are first guided by a bot that explains the community's core values in an accessible way, such as "Be kind, Be mindful, Be respectful, and Be yourself" (Tekinbaş et al., 2024). Only after completing short tasks and demonstrating understanding do people gain full access to the server. Within the server, moderators and experienced people are available to offer different kinds of assistance (Tekinbaş et al., 2024).

Conclusion and literature gaps

In conclusion, the literature on video games presents a wide range of perspectives, with negative stereotypes still being highly present. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of games, it is important to highlight their positive dimensions, such as the rich social context they offer. The social context of games was first acknowledged in MMORPGs, which led to extensive research within that genre. Technology and game design constantly evolve, and as a result, the social dynamics within gaming spaces also change. Nowadays, people make extensive use of central platforms like Twitch and Discord to form communities from which they operate across various other platforms, creating a social life that unfolds within a complex and interconnected network of online environments.

As the literature has described, gaming spaces can take on the role of caring environments, especially for groups who come together based on shared interests,

identities, or experiences. Game communities serve as spaces where people share personal stories, experience empathy and recognition, and find emotional support through shared experiences by offering advice or help regarding both online and offline situations.

Although some research highlights positive aspects of gaming, much of the literature still focuses on negative issues like addiction and toxic behavior, and pays little attention to the positive interactions that happen in gaming communities. Moreover, there is an abundance of quantitative research analyzing large-scale datasets on gaming behavior and social dynamics in games, while fewer studies have qualitative approaches.

Additionally, much of the literature from these searches focuses specifically on the MMOG genre, leading to this genre often being regarded as the most representative or dominant example of social online gaming. However, there are many other forms of social online gaming across different genres, which are not yet widely recognized in the literature. Furthermore, there is little attention in the literature to the network of digital spaces and the various modes of communication through which gaming communities operate; social interactions are not limited to a single game or a single platform.

Lastly, it is noticeable that qualitative research on social dynamics within gaming communities pays limited attention to the emotional value and personal significance that people attach to their involvement in online gaming communities. Although various studies show that people care for one another within gaming communities, there is little to no research that explores this in depth or takes this concept as the central focus.

2.2 Conceptual framework

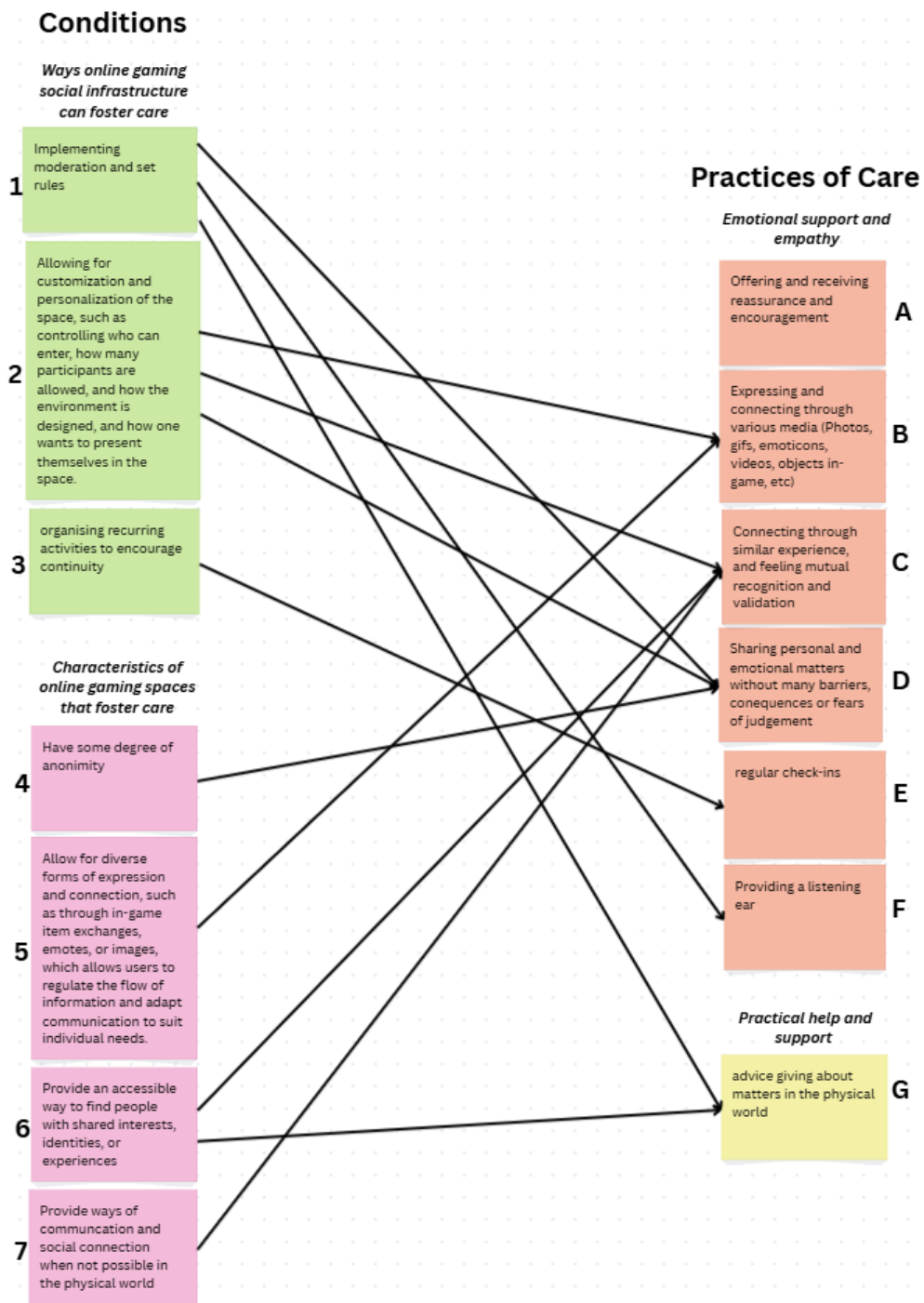
Having outlined the main concepts and theories on care in online gaming spaces, I now bring these elements together into a conceptual framework. The goal of creating a conceptual framework in this research is to give an overview of the already existing ideas about online gaming spaces, as well as to use these concepts to create a coding scheme for analyzing my data. I expand on this in the methods section.

Before presenting the conceptual framework, I briefly revisit the definition of care that this thesis draws from. Firstly, I draw from Tronto's (1993) definition of care to examine how care is practiced in online gaming spaces. She describes care as a set of practices grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity. Building on this definition, my research looks at how Discord's technological conditions shape the meaning of care within online gaming communities, and how these characteristics may enable, structure, or even constrain care practices.

Secondly, I take the perspective of Conradson (2003) on spaces of care. He mentions spaces of care are mostly defined through practices of care and relationships between people. This perspective is particularly relevant for online gaming communities, where care is practiced digitally rather than geographically. Using this definition leads me to focus on relations and practices between people: the daily actions, interactions, and routines through which community members look after one another within Discord spaces.

However, this definition also raises an important discussion point within my thesis: is care solely the result of interpersonal relationships, or can the digital environment itself encourage or even be conditional to care? In physical environments, care is often supported by bodily presence and shared space. In digital environments, by contrast, the platform may play a much larger role, as its structure (such as how the interface looks or how users are allowed to present themselves) strongly shapes behavior and social dynamics. In short, by applying Conradson's framework, this thesis investigates whether care in online gaming spaces can be fully explained by interpersonal practices alone or whether the platform itself contributes to the emergence and sustainability of care.

Combining these perspectives with concepts explored in previous literature, I present the following conceptual framework that visualizes the conditions and the forms of care that I have found in previous relevant research.



The conceptual framework described

In this section, as well as the next, I present and explain the conceptual framework. I begin by outlining its general structure, including the content of the boxes and the sources it draws from.

This thesis looks at both practices of care and the conditions that shape them. The conceptual framework is therefore divided into sections: 'conditions' and 'practices of care'. Following that, I divided the conditions section into 'ways online gaming social infrastructure can foster care', and 'characteristics of online gaming spaces that foster care'. I made this distinction because the literature differentiates between inherent characteristics of gaming spaces and structural features that can enable and encourage care.

The boxes in the first section describe ways that infrastructure can help create spaces of care, in terms of design and organizational aspects.

- Moderation allows for a safe environment, which in turn creates a space where care can take place (Tekinbaş et al., 2024).
- Allowing users to personalize the space enhances their sense of connection to the community, which in turn motivates them to contribute to creating a safe and caring environment (Gray, 2018; Kim et al., 2025; Sheng & Kairam, 2020).
- Organizing recurring activities builds continuity, creating trust and connection over time (Sheng & Kairam, 2020).

The boxes in the second section explain some inherent characteristics of gaming spaces that can foster care.

- Online gaming spaces have some degree of anonymity, which lowers barriers to sharing emotional and personal experiences (Cole & Griffiths, 2007), and encourages a space where people care for one another.
- The different forms of expression allow for ways of communication that feel comfortable for the user, which increases social connection and allows for care to take place (Ringland et al., 2016; Sheng & Kairam, 2020).
- A common interest in the game itself encourages people to connect (Kim et al., 2025; Sheng & Kairam, 2020), which creates opportunities to build caring relationships.
- Online gaming spaces can open up possibilities and access to spaces of care when not possible in the physical world.

Now that I have described the conditions to care, the next section will focus on the practices of care themselves. The literature made a distinction between ‘emotional support and empathy’ and ‘practical help and support’, a distinction that I have incorporated in my conceptual framework.

For ‘emotional support and empathy’, I have found the following care practices:

- Offering and receiving reassurance and encouragement (Ringland et al., 2016; Tekinbaş et al., 2024; Gray, 2018)
- Expressing and connecting through various media (Photos, gifs, emoticons, videos, objects in-game, etc) (Ringland et al., 2016; Tekinbaş et al., 2024)
- Connecting over similar experiences (*Ringland et al., 2016; Tekinbaş et al., 2024; Sheng & Kairam, 2020*)
- Sharing personal and emotional matters without many barriers, consequences, or fears of judgement (Gray, 2018; Sheng & Kairam, 2020; Tekinbaş et al., 2024)
- Regular check-ins (Sheng & Kairam, 2020)
- Providing a listening ear (Ringland et al., 2016; Tekinbaş et al., 2024)

For ‘practical help and support’, I have found the following practices:

- Advice giving about matters in the physical world (Ringland et al., 2016; Tekinbaş et al., 2024)
- Practical help about in-game matters (Ringland et al., 2016; Tekinbaş et al., 2024)

The conceptual framework explained

Having described the boxes of the conceptual framework, I will now explain the relationships between the conditions and care practices, along with which authors identify those relationships. As shown in the figure, the numbers represent the associated condition, and the letter represents the associated care practice.

For the boxes under ‘conditions: ways that online gaming spaces can encourage care’, I have identified the following conditional relationships:

- **1→D**: Implementing moderation and set rules creates an environment where personal and emotional matters are shared, without many barriers,

consequences or fears of judgement, which contributes to a space where care can take place (Tekinbaş et al., 2024).

- **1→F:** Moderation can help by providing a listening ear, which overall contributes to a caring space (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Tekinbaş et al., 2024).
- **1→G:** Moderators can offer help beyond the game, such as directing users to mental health resources or giving advice about offline challenges (Tekinbaş et al., 2024).
- **2→B:** Allowing for customization and personalization of the space creates the possibility to communicate through different media tailored to what the user feels comfortable with, which (Kim et al., 2025; Sheng & Kairam, 2020) proves to contribute to social connectedness and therefore to caring spaces.
- **2→C:** Kim et al. (2025) and Gray (2018) both write that people shaping their own environment based on shared interests or identities fosters connection and care. The ability to create private spaces that prioritize specific values (such as sharing and mutual understanding) fosters a caring space.
- **2→D:** Gray (2018) as well as Sheng & Kairam (2020) emphasize the importance of being able to decide who and how many can enter a space, as this can give people the control over creating a space that feels safe to share emotional matters without many barriers, consequences or fears of judgement.
- **3→E:** Sheng & Kairam (2020) describe how organizing recurring activities, such as weekly talks or joint activities and game moments, creates a feeling of continuity; people keep coming back and gradually build connections and a community.

For the boxes under 'conditions: characteristics of online gaming spaces that foster care', I have identified the following conditional relationships:

- **4→D:** Online gaming spaces have some degree of anonymity, which lowers barriers to sharing emotional and personal experiences (Cole & Griffiths, 2007), which encourages a space where people care for one another.
- **5→B:** By online gaming environments allowing diverse ways of expression, users can connect through various media. With this, they can control and regulate the amount of information well and communicate in ways that best fit their needs.

This creates comfort and safety, which makes way for care (Sheng & Kairam, 2020; Ringland et al., 2016).

- **6→C**: Gray (2018) explains that online spaces can be an accessible tool for people to find others with similar experiences and identities. She described how black lesbian women formed a close community based on shared identity. Kim et al. (2025) similarly describe how shared game interests on Discord formed natural communities of recognition. Being seen and supported in turn fosters care.
- **6→G**: Ringland et al. (2016) describe how members of a gaming space for people with autism create a space for people to share challenges in the physical world and find support in people who go through similar things.
- **7→C**: Yee & Sng (2022) describe that during the time of COVID-19, when socializing opportunities were limited, people turned to the game Animal Crossing to feel a connection with others.

3. Methodology

So far, we have discussed the theoretical foundation of this research, which I used to create a conceptual framework illustrating the conditions and the associated practices of care. In this part of the thesis, I will explain how this conceptual framework has guided the research process and which methods were used to collect and analyze the data.

As mentioned earlier, the goal of the conceptual framework in this research is to give an overview of existing ideas about online gaming spaces and use these ideas to develop a coding scheme for analyzing my data. My aim is not to test nor confirm these concepts and their relationships, but rather to use them as a guide. In practice, this means turning these concepts into codes that help me identify relevant themes in my data. Most importantly, I look for new concepts and relationships that are present in my data, which means that I use both a deductive and an inductive approach. The following section will first explain the methods used, then describe the coding and analysis process of the data.

3.1 Conducting interviews

Firstly, I collected data in the form of semi-structured interviews that I conducted online through Discord voice or video calls. I asked respondents to answer questions related to how they experience care and support within and through being part of a gaming community. I spoke with approximately 10-15 participants who have diverse experiences with games and game-related groups and communities. With this research method, I aimed to understand how people practice and experience care in their gaming community. The questions that were asked revolved around what care looks like for them, what experiences people have with giving and receiving care, what this effect has on the participants, and the challenges that are experienced around care in online gaming spaces. Looking at the conceptual framework, I mostly aimed to identify the practices of care, as well as discover new forms of care.

3.2 Conducting auto-ethnography

In addition to conducting interviews, I used an auto-ethnographic research method to include my own experiences with gaming communities. During my interview with various people who are active or even owners of Discord servers, I was allowed to join different servers and meet new people. In the span of 2 months, I wrote down my experiences with online communities and their social dynamics, particularly within Discord. I documented my observations and personal reflections from my time participating in Discord communities. This information is quite general, as I do not mean to reveal any personal details that can be traced back to specific people. This research method allowed me to capture everyday experiences and practices/routines of care within these communities, as someone who is immersed in the environments and is personally influenced by the practices of care themselves. It worked well in combination with the conducted interviews, because it provided depth and context whilst collecting valuable data on recurring practices within Discord groups. Looking at the conceptual framework, with this method, I aimed to gather more information on the conditions, as it immersed me in the structure of Discord and allowed me to take a closer look at how specific infrastructural elements encouraged aforementioned care practices.

3.3 Analysis of a Discord server

Lastly, I did a brief analysis of a Discord server, of which I aimed to gather information on the structure and its important elements. I attempted to take note of everything I saw when I entered the server, including the names and functions of channels, how people's profiles are structured, which roles people take, etc. Throughout this thesis, I will use insights from this context analysis to provide background information on the server's structure and how it shapes interactions within the community.

3.4 Analyzing the data and inductive research

Now that I have provided more information on the methods used in this research, the following section focuses on how this data was analyzed. As I mentioned before, I used the conceptual framework to develop codes used to analyze the collected data. This leads us to the following coding scheme, which includes code names, their definition and their inclusion criteria.

Theme 1: Conditions

Subtheme: Ways online gaming social infrastructure can foster care

#	Code Name	Definition	Inclusion Criteria
1	Implementing moderation and set rules	Enforcing rules or guidelines to maintain respectful, safe, and inclusive interactions.	Mentions of banning/muting people, having moderators, posting rules.
2	Allowing for customization and personalization of the space	Allowing users to control access, participant numbers, environment design, and self-presentation.	Mentions of avatar customization, invite-only rooms, rearranging in-game space
3	Organizing recurring activities to encourage continuity	Creating regular, repeated events that keep people engaged and connected.	Mentions of the organisation of recurring activities such as twitch streams, in-game weekly raids, monthly tournaments, standing meetups.

Subtheme: Characteristics of online gaming spaces that foster care

4	Have some degree of anonymity	Protecting or concealing real identity to enable open communication.	Mentions of the aspect of anonymity in online gaming spaces, such as use of nicknames, avatars, pseudonyms.
5	Allow for diverse forms of expression and connection	Providing multiple communication modes (text, voice, emotes, media).	Mentions of the use of diverse forms of expression through for example emojis, gifs, in-game actions, voice chat.
6	Provide an accessible way to find people with shared interests, identities, or experiences	Mechanisms to connect people with similar backgrounds or hobbies.	Mentions of coming together in an online space through similar interests, identities or experiences.
7	Provide ways of communication and social connection when not possible in the physical world	Tools for staying in touch despite distance or physical barriers.	Mentions of online gaming spaces assisting in staying in touch despite barriers, through for example in-game video calls and Discord hangouts.

Theme 2: Practices of care

Subtheme: Emotional support and empathy

8	Offering and receiving reassurance and encouragement	Giving or receiving emotional boosts or motivation.	Mentions of giving and/or receiving reassurance, encouragement and motivation.
9	Expressing and connecting through various media	Using memes, gifs, videos, images, in-game objects to connect emotionally.	Mentions of connecting through diverse forms of media.
10	Connecting through similar experiences, and feeling mutual recognition and validation	Finding common ground through shared experiences.	Mentions of discussing similar life events and experiences.
11	Sharing personal and emotional matters without barriers or fear of judgement	Disclosing personal stories or feelings in a safe environment.	Talking about personal subjects such as mental health and relationships, while not

			feeling judged in the space.
12	Regular check-ins	Routinely asking about others' wellbeing.	Mentions of regular and returning contact with the community.
13	Providing a listening ear	Paying attention and letting others share without interruption.	Staying in chat to listen, showing understanding, not necessarily needing any practical advice, but just someone to be present and listen.

Subtheme: Practical help and support

14	Advice giving about matters in the physical world	Offering practical help for non-game situations.	Mentions of offering and/or receiving practical help that can be of use in the physical world.
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These codes were used to identify recurring concepts in both my interview and auto-ethnographic data. Besides discovering already researched concepts, I identified themes that had not been mentioned previously, but that I did find in my own research. During my research process, I therefore decided to create a new theoretical framework that illustrates newly discovered concepts and theories identified in my research. This new theoretical framework will be presented in the conclusion and will be compared to the initial conceptual framework. The new theoretical insights also inspired the structure for the findings chapter, which will be expanded upon in the next section.

4. Findings

Having outlined the conceptual framework based on existing literature and having described the methods used, the following chapter presents the findings that resulted from this research. As described in the methods, I gathered my data through interviews, auto-ethnographic research and content analysis of the platform Discord. Through analyzing this data, I aim to answer my main research question: In what ways do online

gaming communities, such as those on platforms like Discord, serve as spaces that enable care practices?

To answer the main question, the chapter is structured around the four sub-questions that I have stated before. Firstly, I discuss Discord as social infrastructure and explain how its characteristics enable certain care practices. Then, I describe more about care practices I have observed, as well as how the concept of accessibility influences them. This is followed by the challenges of care in online gaming spaces such as Discord. The last part addresses how care in online gaming spaces is bridged and combined.

Before turning to the findings, the graph below gives an overview of the participants and the communities or groups they are in, helping to contextualize the environment in which their relationships and care practices take place.

Participant	Community/group and details
1	Creator and owner of Community1 ¹ , made around their Twitch Channel. Community1 has around 80 participants.
2	Has their own community around their Twitch channel of around 50 people, and is an active participant of Community1.

¹ The auto-ethnographic research in this study was done in Community1.

3	Is an active participant of Community1.
4	Has their own group, and is an active participant of Community1.
5	Is a part of group1.
6	Is a part of group1.
7	Has their own group.
8	Has their own group.
9	Has their own group.

4.1 Care through customization on Discord

In the first sub-question, I focus on how Discord can be understood as a space of care. As outlined in the literature review, this perspective has not yet been applied to online gaming environments. Discord is predominantly understood in academic literature as a communication tool: there are few to no studies done on this social platform through the lens of care. During my research process, however, I observed many care practices, and I found that they were shaped and influenced by the platform's design. In particular, the high degree of personalization and customization of environment, identity, and communication methods provided by Discord seemed to play a central role in enabling and influencing these practices. These characteristics allow for unique and diverse ways of care to emerge.

Because this theme had such a strong influence on the care practices I observed, I developed a sub-question around it and made it a central element of the new theoretical framework. Therefore, in this part of the thesis, I focus on describing and

explaining how personalization shapes Discord as a space of care. I first describe the structure and interface of Discord, extracted from data gathered in an existing Discord server and from interview excerpts with people active in Discord communities. I then discuss how these characteristics allow for care practices to take place. I end the subchapter with a brief conclusion and a discussion.

Customization of space

To understand more about how Discord functions as a space of care, I now describe its structure and the way these spaces are organized. Discord is a social platform initially developed for gamers to chat with each other while gaming (Discord, Discord.com). The platform allows users to create their own virtual spaces, which are called ‘servers’. Anyone can make a server, and the owner is the ‘admin’, meaning they decide how the server looks, who can join, and what roles and permissions members have. They can customize channels, set rules, moderate content, and more to shape the experience for everyone who joins. Owners can also assign moderators, who then have the permission to manage members, create server rules, and overall help maintain a positive and safe community environment.

Personalization is central to how Discord operates. For example, servers contain ‘channels’ which can be described as separate spaces within the overall space, and these channels can be personalized however the user wishes. Channels can either be text-based, where users communicate by sending written messages, images, or links, or voice-based, where users can talk to each other in real time using their microphones. Below, Participant 2 describes how they designed their own server, assigning different subjects and purposes to every channel.

I also have many different text channels: Media, memes, food, artists, people's pets, and their setups.² I also have voice channels, where they can play and game together. And then also some other channels that are more specifically focused on a particular game, like Warcraft or Valorant. (Participant 2)

² With setups, the participant means people’s computer setup pictures, so how users have designed their computer and gaming space.

Participant 7 also describes their experience with a Discord community that felt like a community space due to how the owner had designed it.

And then that community. Yeah, he [the owner of the server] really treated it like a community. The Discord server was also really set up like a real community, so to speak. Around his streams, actually. And then sometimes new people would join. And then... it grew again. (Participant 7)

To get an even clearer sense of how a server is organized in practice, I took a closer look at a Discord server that, for privacy reasons, I refer to as Community1. This server was set up for a group of people who met around the Twitch streams of Participant 1. Twitch is a live streaming platform where people can broadcast activities such as gaming. The viewers can respond in real time through a chat, creating interaction between the viewers and the person who is streaming. Coming together regularly to watch the streams of Participant 1, the community decided to create a Discord server that serves as their communal space.

Stepping into Community1, the first thing that stood out to me was the sheer number and variety of channels, each serving its own purpose. Most interactions within the community take place in the 'general' channel. People talk about many subjects there, ranging from how their day is going to their favorite movies and shows. There is also a 'photo-booth' channel, which focuses more on visual communication, mainly through pictures. There are channels dedicated to pets, food, and memes. Lastly, there are a few voice channels, including one for watching movies together and another called "Afterparty" for hanging out after the moderator has streamed on Twitch (Discord server analysis, p. 5). Altogether, the server's layout revealed how many different forms of interaction were possible, all supported by the flexibility of Discord's design.

Discord's built-in activities add yet another layer of interaction. These can be launched in a voice channel (Discord server analysis, pp.1-2). These activities range from card games to being able to watch YouTube videos together. Community1 made use of these too, by, for example, having a dedicated voice channel where movies are broadcast, and having a text channel focused on mini-games that people can play within Discord. In addition to that, Discord can be connected to other applications such as Spotify, which

shows in real-time what music a person is listening to on their profile. Discord also detects which video game you're currently playing and displays it on your profile, along with how long you've been playing. Members can thus see what others are doing, what they are listening to, and what they are playing, as well as for how long (Discord server analysis, pp. 1-2).

Care through various media and communication methods

Having outlined the structure and uses of Discord, I will now describe how these characteristics enable and influence the ways people connect.

Dedicated channels and care

One way Discord's structure directly supports care is through the use of dedicated channels. During my ethnographic research, I saw how having separate channels for different interests connects people easily. A user initiated a conversation about a particular game, which the channel is designated for, and someone else joined in. This conversation kept going across multiple days, fostering a connection between these two people, with conversations eventually moving beyond the game itself (ethnographic diary, p.10). The interest itself becomes the subject people initially connect on and lays the foundation for a deeper connection. A mutual interest can thus serve as an accessible entry point for building meaningful connections.

Besides fostering social connections, I observed how having dedicated channels can create spaces that support care. Participant 1 (the owner of Community1) described that they made a separate text channel for heavier topics relating to mental health.

Yeah, because I did notice that it was often necessary, and I didn't want it to be in the public channels. Also, because sometimes the topics are heavier, so we really created a separate space for it. And it's actually being used quite well. There are people who never come to my stream, never post anything else in the Discord, but then I see them once a month, just venting a bit. And it's always like, you know that it means something, even for people you might not know very well.
(Participant 1)

They described creating a dedicated safe space to discuss heavier subjects so that these are not discussed in the more public channels. As they describe, people feel encouraged and safe in an intentionally supportive environment to vent. This also gives other members the freedom to choose whether they want to interact or stay active in other parts of the server.

Activity sharing: a low-barrier step towards social connection and care

Another feature of Discord that I discovered encourages connection and care is activity visibility. This function allows people to see what others are doing, whether they are playing a game, listening to music, or engaged in a voice channel. This feature subtly opens new opportunities for interaction. Participant 9 mentioned making use of this: they explained that they like to have their current activities shown on their Discord profile to attract people with similar interests. They hoped that people would react to it, and it would start a conversation that eventually develops into a friendship.

I found this an interesting way of connecting with others, and coincidentally, I experienced something along the lines of it shortly after. While spending time in Community1, I participated in an everyday activity called Wordle. This is a puzzle game that can be played as an activity within Discord. Because other members can see your progress, whether you are stuck, close to finishing, or done, someone I barely knew messaged me privately: “Are you struggling to solve it? Can I help?”. That small interaction turned into a deeper conversation: it started with them asking about my thesis and naturally drifted toward a more personal topic regarding them missing a romantic partner. I tried to reassure them, offering understanding and sharing my own feelings and experiences (ethnographic diary, p. 9-10). Looking back, I realized that the Wordle puzzle had acted as a low-barrier topic; a simple, shared activity that opened the door to a deeper conversation where care was involved. In this way, activity visibility creates a reason for people to interact in a casual way, which can lay the foundation of care practices.

Care through mixed media and shared spaces

Besides offering starting points for interaction, Discord also supports care by enabling people to connect through a range of media and shared spaces. By offering multiple

ways to connect, Discord allows care to be expressed through a variety of media, tailored to users' needs. For example, Participants 5 and 6 described that they often listen to music together while they game, which works as a bonding experience and a way to relax together while gaming. In the quote below, Participant 7 emphasized the flexibility of hanging out on Discord, which can be adapted to people's needs, whether that means "just watching" or actively participating.

He [the owner] would say like, I'm doing something tonight. Would you like to watch? Then you can watch. Or... You could also play games together or something. People were also invited to play a tabletop simulator online. Or something like that. (Participant 7)

I made use of Discord's diverse and flexible ways of connecting during a call I had with an online friend that I had met on the server. We moved to different activities, from space to space, depending on our moods. For example, we played a card game through Discord, which created a fun atmosphere where we could laugh together. When I started sharing more personal and emotional matters, we decided to switch to a game where you could color in pictures together; a calming activity that fit the tone of our conversations. After this, my friend showed me (through broadcasting their screen to me) a game that they played a lot in their childhood. During this night, Discord felt like a very comfortable space to connect with a friend on different levels. I received care in the form of a listening ear while I expressed some issues I was experiencing in my personal life. This experience, along with those shared by the interviewed participants, illustrates the extent to which the space can be customized to suit different needs, and how this encourages connection and care (ethnographic diary, p. 8).

To further illustrate how care can be tailored to users' needs through different media, participants described how they often set up a shared voice call to meet up, even when everyone is engaged in their own activities. Participant 9 describes how their friend group developed a routine of meeting in a voice call, which has since become a shared ritual for them. They describe how, rather than doing one activity together, they often share one space, doing their own individual activities while talking to each other.

The conversations we have when we're all just doing our own thing in voice chat, uh, also keep us coming back. It's the equivalent of like going out for a coffee, but you know you can't do it physically, so you have to do it online and like a voice call so you all just sit around to do your own thing and talk about what happened that day. I guess it's that sheer, let's say ritual, not in like a cult way, it's the, it's kind of like in sociology where you know going out for a coffee is described as a modern day ritual. That's what our ritual is, it's all of us coming home from something we're doing, and all just sitting down at the computer and talking about whatever happened that day. (Participant 9)

Participant 1 mentions something similar. They describe that they don't only use voice calls for engaging activities such as games. They work on their own activities while being together, and the presence of someone in a voice call can work as a form of care.

Or we watch a movie together. Or if I have to study and I don't feel like it, I just say, "Would someone please turn on their camera to keep me accountable?" We then mute ourselves for three hours, but we sit at our computers studying together for three hours. (Participant 1)

Sometimes we mute ourselves when we have to work, but it's always nice to have that extra support of someone being there. (Participant 1)

I have also experienced this during my ethnographic research, where I stayed on call with people from the community, to help me focus better on my research. It served as a source of motivation and focus, as having someone there creates a sense of "being watched" and provides someone to talk to, helping reduce the feeling of isolation while working on an individual task (ethnographic diary, p. 14).

Gaming itself as a form of care

So far, I have discussed how dedicated channels, activity visibility, and flexible modes of communication support diverse forms of connection and care. The final finding in this section on connecting through different media and communication methods highlights how gaming together itself can serve as a form of care. Participants 1, 3, 5 and 6 mention gaming as a form of care for them, as it allows them to escape to a virtual

world, where they can joke around with them in a light-hearted and relaxing way. Below, Participant 5 expresses that gaming with their friends can temporarily distract them from problems in the physical world.

So, for example, if you're gaming, you can actually kind of step over it to distract yourself from that problem. (Participant 5)

Participant 7 also emphasizes this idea of relaxation through distraction, as well as having completely new social experiences that are different from social experiences in the physical world. Having to deal with heavy experiences during their work, they see Video games as a form of aftercare.

Imagine you work every day, you socialize with certain people, but it's different when you meet up with certain, let's say, strangers online to play a game. So gaming opens up a whole new world for me. And I really enjoy that. When you log in online, it's a kind of refuge and aftercare that you have online with friends. Because everyone can support you if you ask them to, but it's really important to me that you just play a game and forget what's happening in the outside world for a while. You have no worries, no stress for any reason whatsoever. It's just you in another world. And that's really a point for me that keeps me a little stable, sort of in life. It's a kind of escape for me in terms of care. (Participant 3)

Customization of represented identity

Moving from the customization of space, I now turn to how users can shape and represent their identities in online environments such as Discord. On this platform, each player has a unique username and can personalize their profile in several ways (Discord server analysis, p. 4). People can customize their profile with an avatar, a biography where they can share whatever they wish others to know about them, and a status that communicates their current activity or mood to others. For example, you can set your status to “Online,” “Idle,” “Do Not Disturb,” or “Invisible,” and you can also write a custom status with text or emojis to show your current activity or thoughts (see figure 1).



Figure 1: How a profile looks like, customized with a picture, biography (blurred out), pronouns, and the activities you're doing at that moment.

Besides customizing a profile, people can customize how they appear and present themselves on a server. This is done through 'roles'. Roles can be focused on by whatever the owners of the server desire. In Community1, for example, roles allow members to change the color of their names, choose what games they are interested in, and decide whether they want to be notified when there is a movie night happening. Through these roles, the owners can also regulate who receives notifications for specific events and tailor announcements to the right groups. It is not required to fill in these roles, and one can reveal as much information as they wish (Discord server analysis, p. 4).

Anonymity

This flexibility is complemented by Discord's support for anonymity. Discord provides the option to not fill in all your information; your real name, as well as your phone number, are not required to make an account. Participant 3 explained that this feature makes them feel both comfortable and secure.

Well, I think Discord is really ideal. It's not social media in the sense that your personal data is online. That's not the case with Discord. You can fill in whatever

you want. You determine your own online security and privacy. How much you want to share. And I think that's really great, you know. (Participant 3)

Beyond privacy being an important factor in the protection of personal information, it also plays a significant role in encouraging care. For many participants, the privacy and anonymity of online platforms such as Discord contributed to a safe environment to talk about personal subjects. This will be expanded on in the second sub-question.

Conclusion

In this part of the thesis, I argued that the high degree of personalization and customization of both space, identity and communication methods in online gaming spaces enable spaces of care. This theme was already lightly present in previous research, but I found it to be foundational to many care practices, which led me to dedicate an entire sub-question to it.

I first discussed how the customizability of space enables and influences care. This was best illustrated by Participant 1, who explained that they set up a specific channel dedicated to discussing mental health. They described multiple occurrences of people writing long messages about something negative they experienced in daily life, and other people supporting them through empathizing and writing motivational messages to try and keep their head above water. It was clear to Participant 1 that in creating such a space, people feel encouraged and safe in an intentionally supportive environment to vent. Similarly, Participant 3 described how having control over their represented identity and how much of their information is revealed creates a safe environment to appear as whoever they desire. Based on these findings, I characterize spaces of care as spaces that encourage agency and control through the customizability of space. When people can shape their own environment, it allows them to create spaces that feel safe and comfortable for them. These findings align with those of Kim et al. (2025), who highlight that Discord encourages community building by giving users autonomy over their spaces, fostering ownership and engagement, and by Tekinbaş et al. (2024), who emphasize that involving young people in designing digital communities helps them create caring, inclusive, and meaningful spaces.

Secondly, I discussed that specific features in Discord, such as activity visibility, can serve as affordances for care. When users can see what others are doing (whether they are playing a game, listening to music, or engaged in a voice channel), this very subject can serve as a conversation starter which in turn opens doors for care. This was for example seen in an occurrence I had with someone I barely knew, who saw that I was struggling to finish a game. After some superficial talking, they opened up about problems they experienced and asked for advice. Based on these findings, I characterize spaces of care as spaces that provide opportunities and affordances for people to spontaneously connect. There are no existing studies that focus on small everyday interactions as catalysts for care, which makes this finding particularly significant. It highlights that care can come from small affordances that platform designers can incorporate in their social platforms to encourage spaces of care.

And lastly, I argued that care in online gaming spaces is encouraged through the customization of communication methods. Interacting is possible through text, voice, gaming, or shared activities. Some participants described hanging out on a call to catch up each day while doing their own activities, while others shared that they would listen to music, watch a movie, or play games together to take their minds off stress and everyday concerns. They expressed the comfort of being able to adapt to whatever fits their mood and situation, and how this allows for diverse care practices to take place. I thus characterize spaces of care as spaces where people have control and a choice over diverse communication methods that fit their needs. This is something that Ringland et al. (2016) and Sheng & Kairam (2020) have also found. Sheng & Kairam (2020) called it a “toolkit”: being able to switch to a communication method that fits the needs of the people involved. In physical environments, it would be difficult to replicate the flexibility, choice, and adaptability that online spaces offer, making these diverse care practices a unique feature of digital interactions.

4.2 Accessible care in online gaming spaces

And now I'm never alone again. Now I can just send a message on Discord at any time of the day. And there's always someone there. (Participant 1)

While the previous findings highlighted how digital spaces and their features can enable and facilitate care practices, this chapter examines an inherent characteristic of online spaces: their ability to make care accessible at any time. In this chapter, I explore the question of how the meaning of care changes when others are always close, and there are many people available to help at any moment. Like with the previous sub-question, this was a recurring theme that formed the foundation for many care practices that I observed.

Using data from interviews and my own experiences, I describe accessibility as a recurring theme in participants' descriptions of emotional support in their gaming spaces. I then argue that it is through this accessibility that care practices in online gaming spaces become effective.

I start by describing how participants talked about the initial accessibility of finding and entering an online gaming space, and how shared gaming interests helped them form connections with others. I then examine the practices of emotional care described by participants, explaining how the concept of accessibility, especially in terms of affordability, immediacy, and virtual proximity, influences these practices and increases their effectiveness. Finally, I explain how the anonymity provided by online gaming spaces such as Discord makes care more accessible for many participants.

Finding community and building connections through common interests

Last week, we actually started a small group with people from Reddit, whom I got to know there. Yes, simply because I posted, "Look, I'm looking for people who want to play this game with me. None of my friends play it. Is anyone interested?" And then you immediately get a hundred friend requests. That's how fast it goes in those online communities. (Participant 1)

The theme of accessibility quickly became an overarching theme during my research, beginning with how people initially found or created their communities. About half of the participants mentioned the immediacy of this process, emphasizing how easy it was to join and find people who have an interest in playing specific games and meeting new people with similar interests. Participant 1 above mentions posting on the platform

'Reddit,' where they were looking for people to play a specific game with. Many people replied to their post, which illustrates that these platforms allow users to reach a lot of people to possibly connect with in a short time frame.

Participant 2 mentions how they found people with similar interests in online gaming communities.

I don't really know that many people in real life who are really into games, anime or manga. I know a few, but not that many. It's just a way to be a real nerd. Yes, I've really found my people here because of that. (Participant 2)

They mention not knowing many people in their immediate living environment that share their interests, and their online community provides a way for them to find their kind of people with whom they can be themselves. This shows how online communities can serve as a gateway to finding like-minded individuals they might not come across in their living environment.

The subject of games as a social facilitator

I thus found that online gaming communities provide access to like-minded people for the participants I spoke with. Almost half of the participants mentioned that, when joining a new online gaming community, having a shared interest in games made it more accessible to form connections with others.

I mean, yes, if you're in a community for a particular game, then everyone has the same interest. It's like when you start talking about it, everyone is always enthusiastic and very nice. So, it's always very easy to strike up a conversation with people and make connections that way. (Participant 8)

For example, when you meet people at work, one person might really love festivals, but another might really love gaming, you know? You could end up becoming good friends, but you don't really have anything in common. Online, it's different because you immediately click with someone if you already play the same game. (Participant 7)

I discovered that the subject of games serves as a social facilitator for many participants, providing a reason to talk and a reason to persist and deepen their

connection. This is something I've experienced during interviews. Interactions could feel awkward at first, but the topic of games often broke the ice (ethnographic diary, p. 4).

In addition to providing an accessible way to start conversations, I found that gaming can also help maintain and deepen connections. Multiple people I interviewed invited me to play games sometime in the future. I have added them as friends on Discord and Steam (a platform used to play games), which now offer a low barrier for staying in touch and organizing future gaming sessions. This illustrates that games can encourage regular interaction by becoming the shared reason for coming together (ethnographic diary, p. 4).

While gaming can serve as both a social facilitator and an accessible way to stay connected with others, Participant 8 highlighted how sharing a common interest in games can serve as a foundation for care. They describe being more motivated to help and support others when they recognize shared experiences or values.

I do think that [having similar interests] can be motivating [to give care and support], because, as I said, you do form a bit of a bond when you share the same interests. So I think, if you're in a community like that and you see someone say something like, "Oh, I really like this game, it helped me with something," then I think it's very easy to support each other in the community and offer a helping hand. (Participant 8)

Connections deepening

Meeting up for games initially, participants describe how the games facilitate connections that eventually go beyond the games themselves, shifting the focus toward deeper friendships and emotional bonds. Most participants have shared how games initially brought their groups together, but over time, the primary motivation for coming together changed from the games themselves to the friendships and bonds they had built.

Even when we're not gaming or streaming, we're still just... There's always someone chatting on Discord. It's not always about gaming. We also know each other on a personal level. Some people have gotten to know each other in real

life now, even though we live in different countries. There are plans to go to a festival together in the Czech Republic this summer. So, it's not just about gaming anymore. It's just become a real group of friends. (Participant 1)

Emotional care and the influence of accessibility

In the previous section, I explained how participants found it easy to join online gaming communities, which provided them with immediate access to like-minded people they might not have found in their offline environments. I then described how making connections was made more accessible by having gaming as a common interest. By making it easy to interact and connect, online gaming communities create opportunities for care to be practiced.

To better understand how care practices are influenced by the concept of accessibility, I first focus on the specific care practices I have observed. The following section will then connect these practices to the ways accessibility influences them.

Talking and listening

I begin by describing the most mentioned practice I have observed: talking and providing or receiving a listening ear. Participants highlighted a wide range of topics discussed in their gaming communities. As Participant 7 explains, the subjects discussed range from lighter events to more serious ones, with positive experiences also being shared.

We really talk about everything and anything. And that really varies from relationship problems to, um, deaths within families, um, yes, also things that aren't going well at work. Or, yes, there are also things that are going very well, of course, and that is shared too. (Participant 7)

I observed that participants are attentive and responsive to what type of care their online friends need. Participants 2 and 4 express that they first like to evaluate what type of care someone needs: a listening ear or practical advice. Participant 2 notes that people in their gaming community often just need someone to listen to them.

Yeah. But you have to like, kind of be there for them as well when they go through stuff. Like, evaluate if they just need someone to vent to, or if they actually need

advice. And, yeah, sometimes you just had a bad day, and you just need to get it out of your system. And you just need someone to just hear you. (Participant 2)

Yes, it's really just mostly listening and then offering help when they ask for it. (Participant 4)

I listen. It's a bit of everything. It can be from a very serious problem to... To everyday things. But we listen to each other and we try to support each other or give advice. If we have experience with that. (Participant 2)

Practical advice

I found that while some people need someone who listens to them, others need practical advice, as illustrated by Participant 2 below.

For example, one of the friends I have on my server, whom I've never met in real life. He was going through a very difficult time. Um... Recently. He wanted to buy a car. But someone took the money and never gave the car to him. And it was a lot of money. Yes, I try to give him advice then. (Participant 2)

Additionally, I observed a conversation in the Discord server in which someone shared they were breaking up with their partner, forcing them to move out of a space. They asked for practical advice about the move, and many people joined in to offer their opinions and suggestions (ethnographic diary, p. 12).

Similarly, Participant 7 described a long conversation they had with a friend about a toxic relationship. The friend sought advice, asking what they should do.

Yes, we did talk about that. And, um, it was a very emotional conversation. In the sense that he really laid his heart on the table with, oh, but what, huh, what should I do now? So, yes, we did talk about it. And in the end, that relationship ended, of course. Yes. But yeah, it was a long, long conversation, yes. (Participant 7)

Relating

When observing and being part of conversations relating to mental health in a text channel, it stood out to me how often people write their own stories to relate to each other. This often came in the form of long texts, describing a similar situation they were

in and the struggles they faced. For example, when someone expressed that they had left a friendship behind and ‘focused on surrounding themselves with people who bring out the best in them’, someone else sent a long message describing a similar experience, and how letting go of a friendship had a positive effect on their mental health (ethnographic diary, p. 11).

Encouragement

Another care form that I often observed was giving and receiving encouragement and motivation. For example, someone announced on a public channel that they had finally found an apartment that allowed them to have a more private and comfortable space. They expressed that the community really got them through the difficult years of living in an uncomfortable place, to which the users replied with affectionate words and emojis (ethnographic diary, p. 2-3). In another instance, someone posted a drawing in a Discord channel focused on art. I responded by saying I like their work. They thanked me, saying that such positive feedback motivates them to continue pursuing drawing.

(ethnographic diary, p. 11)

Practices of care and accessibility: affordability, immediacy and virtual proximity

Now that I have described the care practices I observed, the next section examines how these practices are shaped and amplified by the accessible nature of online gaming communities. Throughout my research, I have found that accessibility not only enables care but also strengthens its impact. I first explain how participants found online gaming communities to be accessible in the form of affordability. Next, I discuss how participants described care as being effective and accessible due to its immediacy in online gaming spaces. Finally, I describe how participants expressed the sense that there is always someone nearby to provide care.

Affordability

I begin with the most practical form of accessibility that participants highlighted: affordability. Two participants mentioned the financial benefit of having an online gaming community.

Especially because nowadays, whether you go to a café or do something else, it's often so expensive. It gets expensive really quickly. And then you can just go online, and even if you don't want to game, I can sometimes just send messages saying, "Does anyone want to set up a voice call with me and chat?" Then we just chat about nothing. We turn on our cameras, sometimes play drinking games in Discord. (Participant 1)

And I know plenty of people, or I sometimes see friends of friends, and then I think, yes, it's nice that you're going out for a night of drinking together, but what do you talk about? And you immediately spend 25 euros a night or so, and then you think, gaming is free, you know? (Participant 5)

They compare online gaming with other social activities that take place in the physical world, such as going to a café or going to the club, which can often be expensive. They see online gaming as an affordable way to connect with friends, whether as an alternative or an addition to in-person interaction.

Immediacy, high availability and constant presence

Aside from being an affordable and accessible alternative, most participants emphasized another aspect of accessibility: the immediacy with which care can be offered and the high number of people available to provide it. I noticed how Discord itself encourages this: many people leave Discord running in the background. When the app is active, users appear as 'online' and will receive notifications on their device, even if they're not actively engaging with the platform and are doing something else in the meantime. This creates a sense of constant connection and encourages quicker responses from others.

But he just messaged us like in the group publicly, and we all pretty much instantly offered support and asked how he was doing, how he was doing, does he need any help, and so on. (Participant 9)

Participant 9 illustrates this immediacy by expressing that they provided the needed care to their friend instantly. They mention how they and other people in their community could immediately be there for their friend who was going through a rough time, providing them with emotional support and help where necessary.

I noticed that this immediacy also gives participants a sense of constant presence of others, because someone is almost always there to answer. Participant 1 and Participant 7 both highlight this sense of constant presence, with Participant 1 noting that their online gaming community makes them feel they are never alone.

And now I'm never alone again. Now I can just send a message on Discord at any time of the day. And there's always someone online. (Participant 1)

Sometimes, when you're busy with work or are not feeling quite yourself, I know all about that; you can quickly start to feel a bit isolated. And then this is a very accessible way, so to speak, to seek contact after all. (Participant 7)

Participant 7 explains that their online gaming community supports them during isolated times at work, giving them an easy way to reach out and connect with people. This is something I also experienced during my research: having the ability to contact people and interact within virtual spaces alleviated the isolation I often felt, especially when spending long hours indoors for work (ethnographic diary, p. 15).

Participant 1 highlighted an important point: the immediacy of care in online gaming communities is reinforced by the large number of people in the community, meaning there is almost always someone available to offer support.

If I haven't seen [a message relating to mental health] myself immediately, by the time I do see it, there's always someone who has sent a message or replied.
(Participant 1)

Several participants described how this immediate and constantly present care not just stands on its own, but also complements professional care. Participants 1, 3, and 4 express that this combination of formal and informal care is very effective for them.

The mental support I get from my community is so... it's really worth its weight in gold to me. So I can imagine that for people who actually go to a psychologist every week, or every two weeks, that it's even more meaningful to them—that there's always someone there, even if it's just once, to listen. (Participant 1)

Participant 1 notes that professional care is especially effective when complemented by the constant presence of others, with someone 'always there' to listen. Participant 4 describes a similar experience.

I'm also in therapy now, once every three weeks. Even when I was going once every two weeks, I sometimes felt it wasn't enough. Sometimes you just have an evening where you feel really down for one reason or another. You just want to talk to someone about it right away. And if someone is online, you can talk to them, and we can actually call each other about it. They just did it right away, you know. Instead of having to wait a week or so to see a professional. Yes. Usually, talking about it helps a lot. Yes. And because it's so easy to do that in Discord.
(Participant 4)

They mention how the high availability of people in their online gaming community creates a form of care that works well in addition to their professional care. Their online gaming community then provides a highly available and accessible support network when professional care is not available.

[After a difficult incident at work] At work, I was given a whole support and aftercare team, but at the end of the day, I still find myself sitting at home alone after what happened. And then I really start thinking back to what happened. At that moment, I logged online and talked to friends, you know, who really helped me through it. They were just friends I had met through gaming. I was able to talk all night, I didn't feel lonely, and they stayed with me until I went to sleep. In real life, it's just much harder to find people with whom you have such a connection or click. It's just much easier online. And that makes care in the online gaming world much more effective for me than what it can sometimes be in the real world. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 also highlights the benefits they experience from the high availability and accessibility of online connections. Instead of processing something heavy in isolation, they could rely on their online friends, who stayed on a call with them until they felt better. Similarly, Participant 9 shares a situation where they helped someone who was

going through a rough time. They describe the benefit of being able to be constantly present for them online, emphasizing that it would be 'very bad if he was fully alone'.

Like one of my friends, he was in the server when he was having a very rough time in life where, uh, his studies weren't going so well, he might have been kicked out of his apartment and all that, and we were just trying to offer emotional support and tell him what he could tell to his parents and how to kind of handle the situation basically, helping him so he wasn't quite literally just fully alone. It would have been very bad if he was. (Participant 9)

Low-threshold interaction through anonymity, comfortability to reach out and open up

The previous section described one of the most prominent findings in this thesis: the immediacy and constant availability that empower care practices within online gaming communities. In this final section of the sub-chapter, I turn to another characteristic that makes these communities accessible for participants: the anonymity and privacy of the online environment. Most participants emphasize that this privacy and anonymity contribute to a safe environment to talk about personal subjects. Especially for participants 2, 3 and 9, online gaming communities serve as an accessible and supportive space for emotional sharing.

Like, sometimes it's, it's just difficult to talk to, to someone, you know, from real life. And it's just easier to tell everything to an external party. Like, someone that has nothing to do with it. Because the, yeah, the fact that it's anonymous, it has taken away from the pressure of keeping stuff secret, like, for your reputation, for your family and stuff like that. You just vent to 100% and it's, it, it feels amazing. (Participant 2)

In real life, you don't talk about things so easily, but if you just... Look, I can talk to you now. I can't see you. You can't see me. We're just two strangers to each other. But I can tell you a very detailed story, you know? Because let's be honest. What are the chances of you actually meeting that person in real life? (Participant 3)

Hanging out with people through a screen is of course always easier because you don't have to make eye contact or really have, so to speak, repercussions if you mess up, because you know them only online. (Participant 9)

They mention that it feels more accessible and low-threshold to talk about personal matters because there are no social repercussions. As Participant 2 expresses, the person talking online doesn't live in their immediate environment and is completely external to them, which makes it accessible to open up more freely without any consequences. Besides being an entertainment for others, they express how it helps them manage difficult situations in their lives, and how it thus functions as a form of care.

Like, I am a very talkative person, like, when I stream or when I am in like a voice chat with friends, when I am going to stuff, I will give extensive detail about everything. And I think it has kind of become, like, their entertainment. Well, because I always learn it as a joke and it, it has become, um, it kind of has become, like, a coping mechanism. (Participant 2)

Like the previous participants, Participant 3 explains that it can sometimes feel easier to vent to a stranger. Unlike sharing something with someone in your immediate environment, there is no risk of the information being passed on, which makes opening up feel safer.

Sometimes it just seems much better to be able to express yourself freely to someone completely random, without any consequences, because if you tell someone in real life, they can't pass it on to someone else. (Participant 3)

Conclusion

In this section, I questioned how the concept of accessibility within online gaming spaces shapes the ways care is practiced and experienced. Through data from interviews and my own experiences, I centered three key characteristics: the immediacy with which support can be given and received, the continuous availability of others, and the sense of constant social presence that participants experience. I explained that it is through these characteristics that care practices become effective for participants.

Before that, I identified other ways in which online gaming spaces are accessible. I described how participants could easily find their niche community due to the many options available online. This is especially valuable when people can't find a group or community they belong to in their immediate environment. Adding to this, I explored a theme also touched upon by Yee & Sng (2022): when barriers make it difficult to meet people offline, online spaces can become accessible alternatives or meaningful additions to offline social interactions. Yee & Sng (2022) found that people turned to online games during the COVID-19 pandemic to fulfill various psychological needs, such as social connection. Similarly, my research indicates that people often use online spaces as social environments when offline meetups become too expensive or when physical distance limits in-person contact. These findings have strong social implications: online gaming communities can act as inclusive social infrastructures providing access to care and support networks that might otherwise be unavailable due to financial, environmental, physical or mental constraints.

Another aspect reinforcing the accessibility of online gaming spaces is the comfort participants feel in reaching out and opening up, which is supported by the anonymity these platforms provide. Many participants emphasized the reduced social barriers and the low chance of someone from one's immediate offline environment being involved, making it easier for people to share personal experiences and emotions.

After I described various ways online gaming spaces can be accessible social platforms, I identified several care practices observed in Discord. The most mentioned practices include listening and giving advice about offline matters. These forms of care have been observed in past literature by O'Connor et al. (2015), who wrote that people in MMOGs helped each other with personal and emotional issues, such as relationship difficulties. Moreover, I observed that participants relate to one another through shared stories, using empathy to validate each other's feelings and experiences. Ringland et al. (2016) also wrote about understanding and recognition being a recurring care practice in a Discord and Minecraft space; they observed. Besides identifying practices already described in previous research, I also found new practices in my own data that have not been discovered before. One of them is participants influencing someone towards a choice that would positively impact their life. Participants told me how, through actively

conversing with someone, they were able to influence that person's decisions. Another form of care I observed is encouragement and motivation, where community members celebrate each other's achievements and offer feedback. Reflecting on these practices of care, I found that when people cannot be physically present but want to support someone, they find creative ways to help the person in need as best as they can online. These practices range from people writing exceptionally long messages in an attempt to empathize and help someone, as well as using creative imagery such as videos and photos to cheer someone up.

After discussing the various care practices observed, I moved to perhaps the most important finding of this thesis. Participants highly value the constant presence and availability of others, as well as the immediacy with which care can be given. So, although the practices of care might be as simple as 'providing a listening ear' or 'writing your heart out', their significance is amplified by this constant accessibility and immediacy. For example, Participant 3 described how, after a difficult day, their online friends provided care and stayed present until the moment they fell asleep. They noted that this form of care suited them better than offline support because it was continuously available, unlike professional help, which is limited to specific times. Similarly, Participant 4 described that this constant support is effective in combination with professional help. The fact that there is always someone there can complement professional help, as it provides constant support in between therapy sessions.

As a result, care practices such as providing a listening ear or doing activities and games, combined with the ability to access this support instantly and continuously, are what make online care practices very effective for most participants I have spoken to. I found this through my own research, and it appears to be underexplored in previous studies. This finding is socially relevant: It shows that online gaming communities provide a low-threshold and immediate way to access emotional support, allowing care to reach people who might otherwise struggle to find it. For mental health professionals, these findings suggest that informal care in online gaming communities can complement formal care by providing continuous support between sessions.

4.3 Challenges of care in online gaming spaces

Until now, I have described mostly positive sides of care in online spaces. I explained that care in these spaces is flexible and customizable, made possible by the high availability of people, the immediacy of their support, and the sense that someone is always nearby. To also understand more about the negative side, I included interview questions that asked participants about the challenges of care in online gaming spaces. I asked participants to reflect on negative experiences related to care and to describe situations in which care within these spaces was not sufficient.

The following chapter analyses these research findings. I first discuss the challenges participants experienced in their gaming communities, such as the mental burden of constant availability, the ease with which people disappeared, and situations where online gaming spaces became toxic. I then describe the experiences of participants where online care was not sufficient to meet their needs. Finally, I present examples that illustrate the limits of what online care can provide.

Downside of accessibility: the mental burden of constant availability

In the previous chapter, I described a defining characteristic of the online gaming spaces I examined: the accessibility of care, made possible by the constant availability of people who can offer support and by the immediacy with which this care can be provided. I discovered that this same accessibility also has a negative side. This is illustrated by Participant 1 below.

Especially because it's one thing to post it on the mental health channel, for example. But like the couple I just told you about, that was always in private messages. So on top of the Discord server and my stream, I also had to take on the mental capacity for their relationship every day. Because they were literally arguing every day for a month or so. And I was getting her side of the story, his side of the story. And I was just like, I'm more involved with you guys in private than on my Discord server. Yes. I also felt like I wanted to help out every now and then. But if it just keeps dragging on for so long, maybe it's just better to seek professional help. (Participant 1)

Participant 1 describes that they became the primary person a couple consistently relied on for support. They explained that this couple struggled daily, and since Participant 1 felt a personal responsibility to help, they spent time each day listening to both sides of the situation. Discord providing constant availability can thus have its downsides, such as increased emotional burden, in this case crossing the personal boundaries of Participant 1.

Easy to disappear

In addition to the burden created by constant availability, Participant 7 described a characteristic opposite to the 'easy to access' nature of online spaces. They pointed out that, conversely, it is also easy to disappear from these spaces.

online, let's say, you might be dealing with people who just don't get in touch for a while, or that you, yes, indeed, those people who just disappear for a while, you think, hey, that's actually kind of weird, or something. It's easy to disappear, let's say. (Participant 7)

They compared knowing people in your environment to knowing people online. In your environment, you might run into the same people repeatedly, which could help encourage caring and supportive dynamics between people. Online, however, one has the possibility to completely disappear and disconnect in an instant, without others noticing.

Online is basically your only way of interacting, because, for example, you have your sport or whatever, and you see people there, and outside of that you see people again, to do something social, I don't know, and then you can say again at a training session, oh, hey, we haven't seen each other outside of that for a long time, let's meet up again. (Participant 7)

This is thus an interesting contradiction of online gaming spaces I discovered and also noticed during my time in Community1. I regularly observed members noting the absence of others, often saying things like, "Where have they been?" In one instance, people were tagging someone (typing their username in the chat, which triggers a notification to that person and lets them know they are being directly addressed), hoping they would notice and reply, but they did not return anymore. I also observed

someone coming back after a long time, saying 'Sorry, I was away, I was dealing with something mentally' (ethnographic diary, p. 18).

Uncaring and unsafe spaces

In the following section, I describe diverse instances of online gaming spaces becoming uncaring and/or unsafe for participants. It is important to note that this research did not specifically focus on toxicity in gaming spaces, for the reason that this subject has already been researched extensively. It will thus be a short section, but it still provides interesting and relevant insights.

Firstly, participants 7 and 2 mentioned how their online gaming space could turn into an unsafe space when something unpleasant happened. Participant 7 mentions how someone in their community made racist comments, which created an unwelcoming and unsafe environment for others.

Yes, he may not have been targeting people in that community specifically, but he did say things that made other people say, "Sorry, but that's just not acceptable." And you're not making it pleasant, enjoyable, or inviting other people to say or do anything. In that sense, it made the online atmosphere, I would almost say, it made it all a bit unsafe or something. Something was said about it, and then he slowly disappeared. (Participant 7)

Participant 2 describes a similar situation in which a person repeatedly spoke about self-harm but refused to accept help. The comments kept going, and Participant 2 explained that this affected the overall atmosphere of the Discord server, making it an unsafe environment for an otherwise safe space for many participants.

I have experienced a conflict in the community of Participant 1. Um, there was a certain person that was talking about self-harm, and, um, Participant 1 and their moderation, they offered a listening ear, they offered help, they offered various things, but this person kept coming with, uh, self-harm talk and, and it was not only bringing the mood down, but, like, her server is, like, a safe space for a lot of people, and constantly seeing that and the person is, not accepting the help, they just want to, like, really put their negative feelings out there. (Participant 2)

These findings illustrate that safe and supportive online spaces can also turn into the opposite: uncomfortable or unsafe spaces. It made me realize that, interestingly, it only takes one person's actions to affect an entire community. Participant 7 further describes the impact when something like this happens.

You notice that people are less responsive to each other, less active. Or that people really feel like, oh my gosh, this was my favorite online place, so to speak. And now that's no longer the case. (Participant 7)

When I asked Participant 2 about their negative experiences in online gaming spaces, they described a difficult and unsafe situation they had faced in their own community.

Also, like, something that's become really dangerous with, like, Discord or streaming is, like, the, parasocial relationship you can have with people online. Like, you feel like you know them because you, you watch their stuff all the time. And you feel like they understand you because they only say stuff that they're really, um, they really resonate with you. And you really love this person, but this person doesn't know who you are. (Participant 2)

They explain that they once had someone in their community who believed they knew them very personally due to them constantly watching their stream on Twitch.

Participant 2 explained how this person eventually moved to stalking behavior. This is another example of gaming spaces turning into unsafe and uncaring spaces.

When online care is not enough

Wanting more: missing physical presence

After describing some situations of toxicity that participants experienced in their online gaming community, I now turn to their reflections on the challenges of care: when support in these spaces falls short.

Nearly all participants talked about missing the physical presence of others.

Participants 1 and 9 mention the frustration of not being able to be physically present when a friend is going through a rough time. Participant 9 expresses how it affects them emotionally that they are unable to provide the help their online friends need, at the exact moment something bad is happening to them.

But it's also hard because you get to know people you've been in contact with every day for the past six months. And when they tell you about a shitty situation, I sometimes think: I wish I could just go have a drink with you, give you a real hug, drag you out of that house. Yeah, that's hard. (Participant 1)

I'd like to say that the biggest limitation of online support is the fact that you can't be there for a person at the exact pivotal moment when they're going through a rough time. Which genuinely sucks because you could be there for a person when they're not having a sucky moment, you don't see them often, though, and when they actually really need you, you can't physically be there in real life. And when you try to offer help, they go 'you can't really do anything', you end up feeling a little bit stumped. I wouldn't say useless, you just end up feeling a little bit stumped and kind of confused, just wanting to help, but you're unable to. At least that's what sucks to me the most. (Participant 9)

I also saw that the absence of physical touch is a significant challenge for participants. Participant 4 describes that they miss physical touch as a form of care. Gestures like a simple hug from a close friend are something online friends can't provide, and this absence is something they feel.

I'm pretty touch-starved. I recently tried a relationship, but it ended pretty quickly, pretty badly. We just weren't right for each other. But that person did give me hugs and all that kind of stuff. And that's something I really miss now. And I actually miss that in the care I receive as well. Just getting a hug from a good friend, that's not possible online, you know. (Participant 4)

Besides missing physical presence and touch, I also noticed that participants pointed out that online spaces make it difficult to read someone's body language. Participant 5 expresses that meeting up with friends physically feels more intimate. They describe how not seeing someone's body language affects them, as they like to see whether people are engaged and taking the conversation seriously.

Um, I think that, let's say, I don't necessarily know how to call it, but I think that when you're together in real life, the distraction and the intimacy, yes, I'll just call it that, the intimacy, let's say, is perhaps a little higher than when you're talking to

each other through a microphone. And in real life, you can also see, like, is this guy being a bit, like, serious about it, or is he completely distracted, you know? Like, you know better whether that person is really listening, and, like, maybe doing something with the information or something, so also body language and things like that. (Participant 5)

This aligns with something I experienced, where I misread the emotional tone of a situation (ethnographic diary, pp. 6-7). These findings made me reflect on how body language plays an important role, and how online interactions can lack the nuances and full context that in-person interactions have, making it easier for misunderstandings to happen.

To conclude this section, Participant 2 describes meeting up in person makes them feel more 'real', saying that while online gaming spaces can provide diverse ways of social interaction, it doesn't replace the experience of meeting up with people in the physical world.

Sometimes it's, it's way better than just talking over the internet or... There's just, like, um, how do I say this? I feel real when the person is actually there.

(Participant 2)

Needing more: the hard limits of care in online gaming spaces

'There is only so much you can do,' which was a phrase that I regularly heard when discussing the challenges of care in online gaming spaces. During my research, I found that these limits become apparent both because of missing physical presence, but also because online interactions often make it difficult to fully understand someone's context, emotional state, or the severity of their situation. Participant 1 describes a situation in their Discord server that illustrates this.

Someone started posting suicidal thoughts in the mental health channel. And when he posts things like, "Yes, today I really want to do this and that," I don't know how to respond, what to do, or if he's okay. If he then disappears from Discord for two weeks, yes, it's a bit like, "Oh no, has he really done something? Is he okay?" Should I send him a message? Or would that be crossing a line?

(Participant 1)

I discovered that, when dealing with heavier topics such as these, there is a clear boundary to what care in online spaces can provide.

Sometimes we were really at our wits' end: "What should we do about this situation?" The problem is often deeper than something we can solve. We don't know much about it. There is nothing we can do except lend a listening ear. Eventually, we simply can't give an answer anymore, just for fear of saying something wrong. What if we say the wrong thing? What if we say just that one thing that's the last straw? (Participant 1)

Participant 1 describes the fear of 'saying something wrong', something that Participant 8 also points out. They explain that the severity of someone's problem can make it feel difficult to respond in the right way, especially when you don't fully know them, which can be harder online because much of someone's context or emotional state is often unclear.

If someone has really serious problems, then I think it can sometimes be a bit complicated. Because, imagine someone says something really serious to you, and you're like, yeah, that can be scary, and you really have to watch what you say, for example, so that sometimes you... Yeah, I think it can be a challenge, like, oh, can I help that person without making things worse? (Participant 8).

Participant 1 later mentioned that, with luck, someone in the community happened to be a psychologist in the offline world. Although legally limited to offering only basic support³, they were able to share helpful resources that the person could use.

He [the psychologist] said: Look, I want to talk to him, I want to send him a message telling him where he can seek help. So that was very welcome at that moment, because we didn't know what else we could do for him. (Participant 1)

Conclusion

To give a more holistic view of care in online gaming communities in this thesis, I aimed to record interview data on what people feel are the most challenging aspects of care in

³ Participant 1 explained: "they're not allowed to send private messages to the person, because of their job and because it's kind of illegal to take on a patient outside of working hours who isn't paying".

online communities. The research findings reminded me that while online spaces can foster meaningful care, there are hard limits: situations where professional help or physical presence becomes essential, and where simply being there online is not enough.

Before I dove into the challenges of care in online spaces, I described several negative experiences that participants had relating to their online gaming community. Firstly, Participant 1 illustrated that the possibility of constant availability in online gaming spaces can feel mentally heavy. This dynamic can lead to expectations that others are constantly available, even when they cannot sustain the pressure of always being there to help. Another challenge during care in online gaming spaces was mentioned by Participant 7. They described the ease with which people can disappear online. Reflecting on this and comparing it to the aspect of accessibility, I concluded that online gaming spaces are environments that can be easily entered, but just as easily left.

Because toxicity in gaming has already been extensively researched, this study chose not to focus on that topic. However, participants still mentioned a few occurrences of online gaming spaces becoming toxic or unsafe. Participant 2 described a situation in which an individual pretended to know them well, a dynamic that eventually escalated into stalking behavior when Participant 2 attempted to cut off contact. Two participants described how easily a gaming space can shift from feeling safe to unsafe after an unpleasant event. Even if only one person causes it, the entire community can be affected, turning a normally safe space into an uncomfortable and unsafe one.

The ease of disappearance, as well as the toxicity instigated by people with bad intentions, aligns with points made by Zsila et al. (2022) and Gray (2018). Online, people might feel less accountable for their actions, meaning the barrier to using certain words and engaging in certain actions is lower. As a result, people may act more recklessly than they would in situations where they are physically present (Zsila et al., 2022; Gray, 2018). I therefore conclude that anonymity can function in two ways. It can create a safe and low-threshold environment for care, but in contrast, it can also reduce people's sense of accountability. This, in turn, influences care practices: when people feel less

accountable for their actions, care becomes less stable and reliable because support can be withdrawn suddenly or disturbed by toxic behavior.

After this, I described the most mentioned challenge of care in online gaming spaces: the absence of physical presence and touch. So, although participants acknowledged that care in their online gaming space has been helpful to them, some still viewed offline care as the superior form of care because this physical presence plays an essential role in their experience of care. This brought me to the realization that there is something inherently irreplaceable about physical presence.

Lastly, I described insights relating to how one does not fully know someone or their context online, which can create confusion about what to do in heavier conversations. Participants 1 and 8 both explained that it is difficult to know exactly what someone is going through and what the appropriate support would be. Participant 1, for example, described a situation in which they were unable to provide the care needed because the person required professional support.

Reflecting on these findings, I realized that many of the challenges participants described share a common thread: the concept of 'distance.' They mention that physical distance disrupts care for them, both through missing physical touch and not being able to read bodily language. Distance also appears in not knowing someone's full context when trying to give care. Participants mention worrying about saying the wrong thing or unknowingly overstepping boundaries, especially when conversations include more serious mental health concerns. Lastly, participants mention cases where distance is apparent through anonymity and the fluidity of online identities. I have observed that anonymity can encourage people to open up, but it can also make them feel less accountable for their actions. This can encourage toxic behavior, but also allows people to disappear easily without explanation, which can create instability and uncertainty in relationships and caregiving. Altogether, I conclude that distance creates a contradiction in care: it can enable support by lowering social barriers and reducing pressure to open up, yet simultaneously constrains care through the ways described above.

4.4 Bridging online and offline care

So far, I have explored how different inherent and structural aspects of online gaming communities shape care practices within online gaming communities, as well as the challenges that arise in these spaces. During my research process, I noticed that many participants brought up offline care and how it relates to online care. This made it clear that online care does not exist in isolation: it interacts with, depends on, and often complements offline forms of care. I therefore dedicate this last chapter to examining how online and offline care are bridged.

I will start by describing how people's friendships transitioned from only online to also offline friendships. I then discuss how some participants mentioned using the social skills they learnt online as stepping stones to engage more confidently in offline social situations. Then, I describe how online care is extended to the offline world, with people physically visiting their friends to provide care. Finally, I discuss how online care has brought about significant changes in the offline world, for instance, by encouraging people to make positive changes in their lives.

Online to offline social interactions

From only online friends to also offline friends

During interviews, I observed that many friendships that begin online extend into the offline world. Multiple participants mentioned that they have met their online friends in person, with some even meeting up regularly. For example, Participant 7 describes how the creator of the community invited people in their community to come to a large event centered around the streaming platform Twitch.

But he was there [at an event set up around the streaming platform Twitch]. And he had actually invited people from... Hey, I'm in Amsterdam. Come and join us. Because you do get to know each other in that sense... A little bit, or something. It all happened quite organically, actually. (Participant 7)

Participant 7 describes meeting up with online friends as an 'organic process'; a natural progression from an online friendship. Similarly, Participants 3 and 9 shared that they have met their online friends in person.

I have even met friends online, for example, whom I actually met up with and who ultimately became my best friends. (Participant 3)

Everyone in that group, uh, believe it or not, we all met up in real life during October of last year, and that was very, very good. We kind of realized that we're all actually pretty freaking close, and we all care for each other very much, and we can talk about all our problems. (Participant 9)

These examples show how online connections can naturally continue and evolve into the offline world. Both participants express how meeting offline was an important moment in their friendship, with Participant 9 expressing that seeing each other in person made them realize the depth of the connection they have built up online. I experienced this myself, too: through my ethnographic research and interviews, I developed a friendship with someone who happened to live close to me. We decided to meet up, have a coffee, and chat. It felt as if we were just continuing what we had built online. This time, however, we interacted in different ways than we were used to. There was no game running in the background. Instead, we engaged with the physical world: getting coffee, walking, and visiting the library together (ethnographic diary, p. 6). The quotes and my own experiences illustrate how online and offline interactions can complement each other, and how these two types of interaction can work together to strengthen relationships.

Applying skills learnt online to the offline world

Building on the ways online connections can extend into the offline world, Participant 9 describes how the skills and confidence they developed through online interactions enabled them to slowly engage more comfortably in offline social situations.

Of course, my biggest problem was the anxiety I had, hence why I couldn't really talk to people in real life. So I went to the online space, and it was a very, very important thing for me until I could eventually branch out and kind of learn how to socialize outside of the online communities. (Participant 9)

Well, to me, it used to be way more difficult to build connections in real life. So it was a lot easier to do it online up until a certain point—a tipping point. It got very kind of easy and very similar to also make friends in real life. And now, pretty

much both actions of making friends online and in real life are pretty easy for me.

(Participant 9)

Similarly, Participant 7 describes that having an online community can be the stepping stone to eventually branching out to offline connections.

And I actually think that, whether the friendships are online or not, it doesn't really matter that much. Um, yes. And that such a large online community, so to speak, might even be a stepping stone for some people to start seeing people in person again. (Participant 7)

Bridging online and offline care

From online care to physical-world help

Now that I have described several examples of how participants' friendships and social skills transition from online to offline, I will turn to examining how care initiated in online communities can extend into the physical world. In the previous chapter, I thoroughly described the challenges of online care, including the absence of physical contact and the inability to be present in person at the exact moment someone needs support. More than half of the participants described overcoming those challenges by extending online care into the physical world, as the quotes below illustrate.

And then they broke up. So I went to the girl to help her move her things out. Because it just wasn't healthy for her to do it alone anymore. (Participant 1)

And when he said he needed help with certain things, I came over to his house and helped out a lot, since he was now technically living on his own. (Participant 9)

Both participants recognized that online care was no longer sufficient and decided to travel to the person to give practical and emotional care. Similarly, Participant 5 described how they visited a friend to give care in the form of distraction.

Yeah, um, for example, one of my friends in the smaller group had just broken up with his girlfriend because of certain things she did. And I actually went over to see him, like, 'Hey, come on, let's go do something — just take your mind off

things.' But also, back when it was me, you know, it was more about them just listening, like, 'Hey, this happened, and this is how it is.' (Participant 5)

Participant 2 extensively described an experience where someone they had only interacted with online came all the way from another country to help them move, even covering costs without expecting anything in return. They express surprise at how much support and care can come from people you don't know offline.

For example, in September, I had to move, and I couldn't afford it. I couldn't do it alone either. I had a viewer whom I didn't even know in real life. And this person came from another country just to help me. They paid for so many things out of their own pocket. And they didn't want anything back. They genuinely cared, and it wasn't about getting anything in return. (Participant 2)

Combining care from online gaming communities with professional care

As I have already elaborated on in chapter 2, participants said that combining care from their online gaming communities with professional care is effective, because the two types of care complement each other. This combination is another way in which participants bridge online and offline spaces. Participant 4 below describes how this combination works.

I'm also in therapy now, once every three weeks. Even when I was going once every two weeks, I sometimes felt it wasn't enough. Sometimes you just have an evening where you feel really down for one reason or another. You just want to talk to someone about it right away. And if someone is online, you can talk to them, and we can actually call each other about it. They just did it right away, you know. Instead of having to wait a week or so to see a professional. Yes. Usually, talking about it helps a lot. Yes. And because it's so easy to do that in Discord.
(Participant 4)

From online care to offline change

Another form of care I frequently observed in online gaming spaces is giving someone a 'push': encouraging them to make personal choices that could positively impact their li. This practice bridges online and offline worlds: participants use care to motivate each

other to take steps, such as seeking professional help or making other important decisions.

What is also very special is when you can help with that little push or give them a kind of nudge. And that person ultimately takes that step. (Participant 1)

Yes, let's say, um, there was one girl, for example, and she, um, she was just really traumatized. And that's, that's very sad. And then you notice, like, that, you know, when you talk to her about it and, you know, there were other people who had similar complaints, it's like, oh, well, you know, but how was that for you and what did you do about it? And that way you can help someone a little bit on their way. (Participant 7)

Participant 9 describes how this form of care works, explaining that the combination of the strength of one's connection with another person and the way words are communicated can influence someone's decision to make positive changes in their life.

Yeah, so if it's something like where they're on the uh where they're on a fence about making a decision you know is good for them, and you want to try and push them to making that jump across the fence onto the good side and improve their quality of life, uh, it just takes a little bit of skill a bit of how much you mean to the person and a bit of I guess persistency with convincing them. (Participant 9)

Another example of how this type of care can have strong effects in the offline world is described by Participant 4, who mentions that their online gaming group helped them realize that they needed professional help and motivated them to actually take that step.

I have, yes, what is it, a kind of body dysmorphia and eating disorder. And then also fairly low self-confidence. That group really made me realize that I have an issue. So I sought professional help for that. (Participant 4)

Conclusion

In this last sub-question, I explored the various ways in which participants combine online and offline care. I started by illustrating that online interactions often continue offline, and concluded that many friendships are built on a complementary

combination of online and offline interactions. Trepte et al. (2012) and Domahidi et al. (2018) wrote that combining both types of online and offline interaction creates meaningful relationships, because it allows for diverse ways of connecting.

Participants, as well as I from my own experience, noted that taking the step to meet in person after forming a friendship online was meaningful and added a new dimension to an already strong friendship. In short, these findings show that online and offline interactions are closely linked, each supporting and strengthening the other to build deeper friendships.

My findings indicate that this complementary dynamic works similarly for care. I have shown that online care is not confined to the digital world, but functions through a complementary relationship between online and offline interactions. Many people extend care in their online gaming community to offline care and combine it in ways that all needs are fulfilled. For example, when someone needs practical help or physical presence, participants mentioned visiting their online friends in person. Moreover, people combine online care with professional care. They describe that online friends can provide support by ‘always being there to talk’, and this is especially valuable in situations where professional care is not available. The implications of these findings are that the effectiveness of care can be enhanced when online and offline support systems work together.

One slightly critical remark by a participant perfectly illustrated how online and offline relationships and care are experienced as inseparable for some people. Upon mentioning whether they were bothered by online friends often not being regarded as real friends, they mentioned, ‘Of course that sucks, but aren’t you reinforcing these stereotypes by differentiating the concept of online friends from physical friends in your research?’. This participant did not understand the goal of making this distinction because, for them, there is no difference. This made me look critically at my own research: through defining ‘online friends’ as a separate entity from ‘friends in the offline world’, I might reinforce the exact difference and separation that is harmful to many people. It made me more aware that the boundaries and categories we create in research do not always align with participants’ experiences.

Finally, my findings challenge a persistent negative stereotype in the literature regarding online friendships. As Domahidi et al. (2018) describe, online friendships are often dismissed as 'less valuable' than offline relationships. However, my research suggests otherwise. Participant 9, for example, explained that meeting in person after developing a friendship online made them feel a genuine connection, even though the relationship had existed entirely in the digital space until that moment. Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized that their online friends have become some of their closest friends, despite only knowing each other virtually for a long time. I have thus shown that online friendships can be just as meaningful as offline ones, which disproves the notion that online friendships are inherently weaker.

5. Results and discussion

I start this discussion by briefly summarizing the key findings of my thesis research, so the following sections can be understood in the context of the results. In the first chapter of the findings, I characterized spaces of care as spaces that encourage agency and control through the customizability of space and identity. Moreover, I described spaces of care as spaces where people have control and a choice over diverse communication methods that fit their needs. In the second chapter of the findings, I described how online gaming spaces enable accessible and immediate care due to the high number of available people who can give care, also giving participants a sense that there are always people around to provide support. I then argued that these characteristics make care practices more effective. In the third chapter of the findings, I explored the challenges of care in online gaming spaces, and concluded that the concept of distance constrains care in various ways. In the last chapter of the findings, I discussed the ways in which participants combine online care from their gaming communities with offline care.

Redefining care in online gaming spaces

Now that I have briefly outlined the main results, I turn to the discussion. I first redefine the concept of care based on my findings. I then discuss how my thesis fits into the

broader academic debates about the subject of online gaming spaces. After this, I discuss the practical and social implications of my findings. Lastly, I talk about the limitations of my research, as well as suggestions for future research.

Firstly, I describe how the results of my thesis alter the definitions of care that I provided in the literature review and the conceptual framework. In my theoretical framework, I first discussed Tronto's (1993) ethics of care, which includes four interconnected phases: attentiveness (caring about), responsibility (taking care of), competence (care-giving), and responsiveness (care-receiving) (Tronto, 1993).

Throughout my research, I mainly noticed how online gaming spaces such as Discord influence practices related to attentiveness and responsiveness. Firstly, Discord supports attentiveness by making it easy to see what others are doing (whether someone is playing a game, listening to music, or active in a voice channel) so people can notice when someone might need support, and easily reach out to them. Participants explained that even just seeing a friend online could encourage them to send a message or invitation to join an activity. Secondly, Discord encourages responsiveness by providing many communication options, which enable participants to adapt their care practices to the needs of others. Some people may want to actively talk, while others want to play games together, or simply be present in a voice call without conversation. My research showed that participants adjust their care to fit the needs of different people, and online gaming platforms such as Discord make this adaptivity possible by providing flexible options for care.

Besides this definition, Tronto (1993) emphasizes that care is not limited to formal caregiving but is understood as a relational and ethical practice embedded in everyday life. My research findings align with this, showing that care in online gaming communities also works through these everyday, relational practices.

In my theory, I stated that my thesis engages with the definition of 'spaces of care' provided by Conradson. He emphasizes that spaces of care are mostly created and sustained through relationships, interactions and practices. He spends less time on the ways in which material, technological, or infrastructural elements may also shape these spaces. My thesis therefore, expands on this definition by describing that in the case of

online gaming spaces, care emerges through a complementary combination of relationships between people and design characteristics of the platform. Online gaming spaces thus extend the definition of spaces of care by Conradson, demonstrating that care is both relational and technologically mediated.

Relation to existing research

After outlining how this thesis engages with existing definitions of care, I now place the thesis within the broader academic landscape that I have described in the literature review. Existing studies on online gaming spaces are mostly focused on toxicity or addiction. Research that did address social dynamics in online gaming spaces often argued that online games support relationship building, but the field has lacked studies that examine how these relationships take shape, how bonds develop, and how care dynamics arise from them. In short, much of the literature treated the presence of social dynamics as a general outcome and did not look beyond that.

This thesis addressed that gap by looking through the lens of care, examining what care practices look like in online gaming spaces such as Discord, and exploring how the platform itself influences these practices. Through qualitative research, I centered the experiences of people, adding to a body of work that mostly tried to understand gaming through a quantitative lens, skipping many important details on how people actually experience these spaces.

Since online gaming platforms keep evolving, new research is constantly needed to understand how social dynamics change alongside these technological changes. My thesis looked at a recent development where gamers often have social networks spread out over multiple gaming spaces, using Discord as a central hub. This stands in contrast to much of the earlier literature, often focused on one gaming space, such as specific MMORPGs, a genre that is not as active anymore. In short, this thesis contributes to existing knowledge by offering an updated perspective on how social dynamics and care work within the current ecosystem of online gaming spaces, seeing online gaming communities as networked rather than isolated spaces.

Only recently have online gaming spaces been recognized as spaces where care exists. There are, however, few studies that look at how specific platform design elements

encourage specific forms of care. For example, Tekinbaş et al. (2024) explore how socio-technical design principles underpin caring online play communities. They however, don't expand on what particular design principles encourage what specific care practices. By taking this approach, my thesis has proven that these conditional relationships exist and that specific design affordances lead to specific care practices.

Social and practical implications

After describing what my thesis has contributed to existing research done on online gaming spaces, I now outline the practical and social implications of this thesis. In terms of the practical implications, this thesis has proven that platform features can encourage spaces of care. The findings of my research are thus relevant for platform designers, as spaces of care can be enabled and maintained through platform design. Firstly, by providing users the freedom to customize their space and identity, it enables people to shape their own environments that feel safe and familiar, which in turn allows for care. Moreover, by giving people options for different modes of communication, they can choose whatever fits their needs, which creates a safer and more comfortable environment for people to socially connect and care for one another.

This thesis also has practical implications for mental health professionals. It has provided an interesting insight into the combination of formal and informal care. Many participants have mentioned that care from their online gaming communities complements therapy. This is mostly because their online communities provide them with continuous support, outside of the restricted times that therapy is available. Mental health professionals can thus keep in mind that care from online gaming communities can be a valuable additional source of care.

The social implications of this thesis are that online gaming communities are valid and meaningful spaces for emotional support. The findings suggest that people use these spaces to look beyond what is in their environment. When there are certain barriers or restrictions in their immediate environment, or people have mental problems, online environments become meaningful to gain new social experiences that are otherwise not possible or difficult.

Research limitations

This study only managed to interview a small number of participants, mostly part of the same community. The results are not representative of what care in online communities looks like, because there are many different communities, each centred around different subjects and games. By only focusing on one community, I might have missed valuable insights. Overall, this limitation significantly decreases the generalizability of this study. The focus on Discord, as well as on only one community, might make this study not as applicable to other contexts.

Another limitation of this study lies in the predefined structure of the research. I specifically focused on conditions enabling certain practices, which created the assumption that every care practice is a result of a specific condition. Further in the research process, it often became unclear which conditions shaped certain practices. A care practice could be the result of a combination of all, or it could exist completely on its own. In the end, I had to modify the structure of my research, which made way for a new kind of relation: how underlying conditions or characteristics can positively influence specific care practices. Viewing care through this lens ultimately revealed why care in online gaming spaces is so meaningful to people.

Future research

This research has revealed that there is still a lot unknown about social dynamics in online gaming spaces. I uncovered many new concepts that have not been addressed in previous research. More specifically, there are no existing studies that look at online gaming spaces through the lens of care. This research, however, demonstrates that there are many diverse and unique care practices present in these spaces. There is, therefore, still a large knowledge gap, highlighting many possibilities for future research.

For example, my research focused on a community that played games in a more casual way. A participant pointed out that care might look very different in communities more focused on competitive gaming. There are many different contexts and communities that all have different forms of care depending on their social dynamics and the games they play. Future research could look at these different contexts to better understand how care takes shape across a wider range of communities.

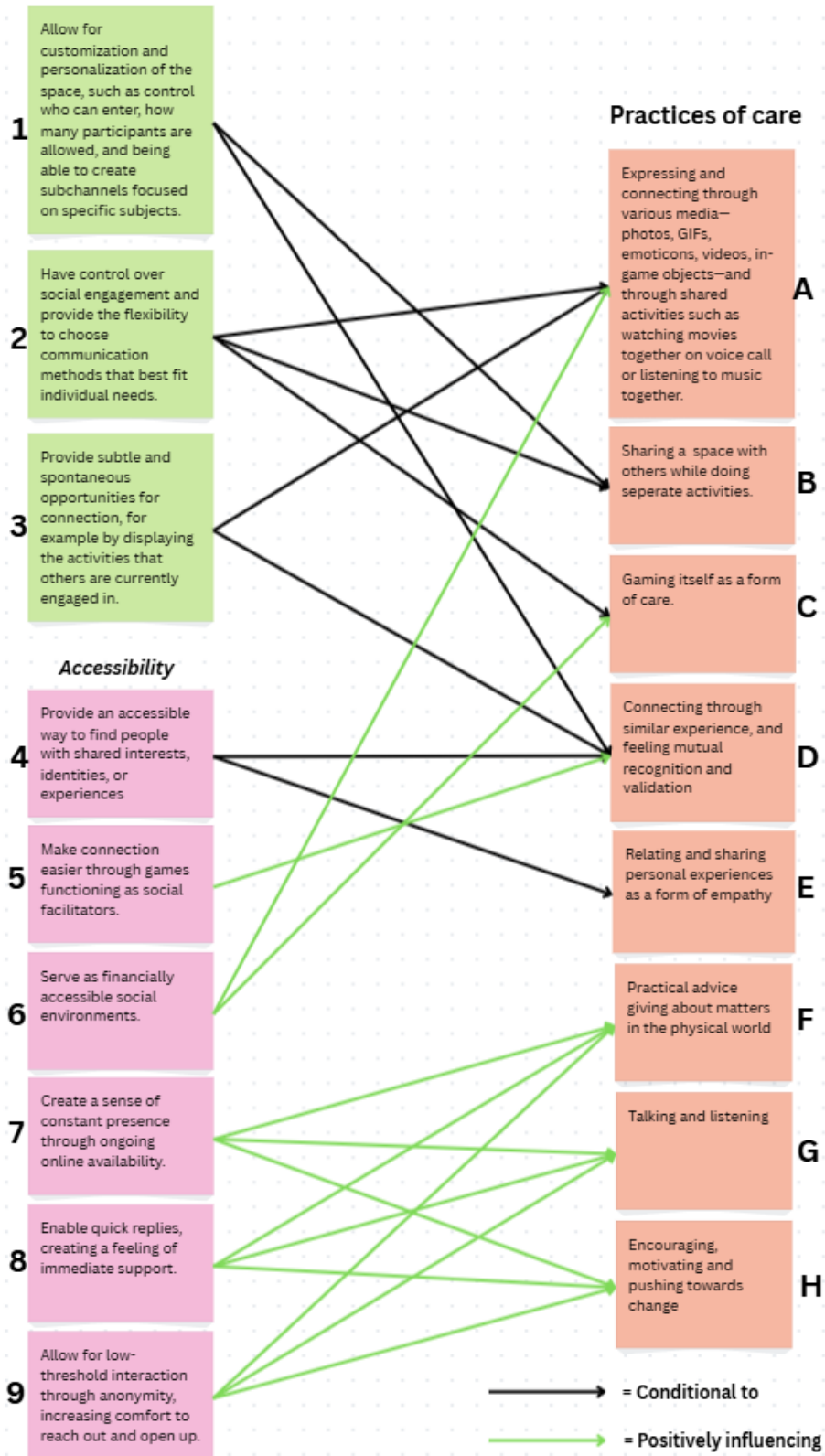
Moreover, future studies could focus on platform changes and their effects on social dynamics and care. Right before I finished this thesis, Discord added a new feature focused on displaying your favourite games. This update made me aware that platform features are constantly changing, and future research could explore how such changes influence interactions, relationships, and care practices within online gaming spaces.

Researching the relations between online and offline care revealed many interesting insights. For example, this research has found that people combine professional care with care in their online gaming communities. Future research could delve more into this subject to uncover the dynamics and complementary possibilities of formal and informal care.

In conclusion, online gaming spaces are still underexplored in terms of how social dynamics unfold and how care is practiced. As discussed in the literature review, much research on gaming is biased toward negative perspectives. This study contributes, in a small way, to addressing that negative bias by discussing the positive aspects of gaming. More research on the positive sides of gaming can contribute to more understanding and awareness about what gaming and online games mean to people.

Conditions and underlying characteristics of online gaming spaces

Personalisation and customization



6. Conclusion

The main question of this research is: “What does care look like in online gaming spaces, what specific care practices emerge within these spaces, and how are they shaped by the design and features of platforms like Discord?” I aimed to research different platform characteristics of Discord, and study how these design features enable certain care practices and what forms of care emerged.

This conclusion is structured around the newly developed theory, illustrated by an adapted theoretical framework displayed above. This new framework combines concepts and theories from the existing literature and from my own research, along with concepts that don’t appear in the literature yet but were found through my research.

To include the new theoretical insights from my research, I adjusted the overall structure of the framework compared to the initial version. Firstly, instead of “characteristics of online gaming spaces that foster care,” I named this section “accessibility within online gaming spaces”. In this way, the map shows more directly that care in online gaming communities is strongly supported by the concept of accessibility, a key finding of my research. Secondly, I removed the sub-theme “practical help and support” because throughout my research, it often overlapped and interacted with emotional support. Creating a separate category for it, therefore, seemed redundant. Moreover, deleting the category emphasizes an important finding in my research: that online and offline are often combined and bridged. Lastly, my research concluded that some platform characteristics do not explicitly enable care practices but strongly increase their effectiveness. The map displays this newly discovered relation through green arrows showing what platform aspects positively influence what practices.

Building on these structural changes, I began the findings by answering the first sub-question: In what ways do online gaming communities, such as those on platforms like Discord, serve as spaces that enable practices of care? I described Discord as a social infrastructure defined by its flexible ways of designing a community space. I first found that this customization freedom facilitates care. The personalization and customization options within online gaming spaces, such as Discord, allow people to spend time in

ways that suit their personal preferences, such as by sharing a space with others while doing their own individual activities, which participants have explained to be a form of care (1→B in the new theoretical framework). By customizing channels around specific subjects, people with similar interests are brought together, making it easier to connect and interact, and for care to take place (1→D). These insights add to the existing findings of previous research by Kim et al. (2025), who describe Discord's platform features and customization as encouraging community spaces. My findings show that these same characteristics not only support community building but also enable practices of care.

I then further answered the research question by describing that the ability to regulate modes of communication and customize the structure of spaces fosters feelings of safety, agency, and comfort. This, in turn, allows care practices to happen and also strengthens responsiveness in Tronto's (1993) sense because participants can choose communication modes that best fit the needs of the person they are supporting. I also described that Discord's many ways of communicating create diverse practices of care. This communication flexibility of Discord makes it possible for people to be in a shared space while doing their own activities, which participants mentioned to be a common practice of care for them (for example, being on call during work, where the presence of others can be motivating) (2→B). Flexible and diverse communication methods also make it possible to play games together, commonly mentioned as a practice of care by providing an escape from reality (2→C). Although authors have mentioned before that people make use of and benefit from these different modes of communication (Sheng & Kairam, 2020), my findings provide more detail about how this looks in practice. For example, I found how people practice care online through being present in a call without actively interacting, which shows that care can also be expressed through silent availability. This is something that previous research has not touched upon. In conclusion, my thesis conceptualises spaces of care as spaces that give people control over diverse communication methods that fit their needs.

Lastly, within this sub-question, I described another finding that has not been discussed before in previous research. I found that Discord offers features that make it easier for people to connect through different forms of media. For instance, if someone's profile shows that they play a certain game, it can create an opportunity to

connect by playing that game together (3→A). Being able to see what others are interested in, like the games they play or the music they listen to, provides a conversation starter if they have a similar interest (3→D). In my research, I revealed how these initially superficial interactions can turn into meaningful conversations where people show care for one another. I then concluded that care is encouraged by spaces that provide opportunities and affordances for people to spontaneously connect. Taken together, the findings of this sub-question are relevant for platform designers; spaces of care can be enabled and maintained through intentionally designing features that support accessibility, flexible communication, and opportunities for spontaneous connection.

I then presented the second research question: How does accessibility within online gaming spaces shape the ways care is practiced and experienced? I first described how online spaces such as Discord provide an accessible way to find people with similar interests and experiences. This allows people to connect with each other through these similar experiences, fostering mutual recognition and validation as a form of care (4→D). Being around people with similar interests and experiences allows for care in the form of relating and sharing personal experiences (4→E). Participants also mentioned online gaming spaces as an affordable way to participate in a social environment, which opens doors to interact and connect through various media (6→A), including through games (6→C). Confirming earlier research (Yee & Sng, 2022), I found that people often use online spaces as social environments when offline meetups become too expensive or when physical distance limits in-person contact. Through this, I concluded that gaming communities can act as inclusive social infrastructures providing access to care and support networks that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

While spending time together in the diverse ways that Discord allows, participants practice care through listening, giving advice, empathizing, sharing stories, and motivating each other. They emphasized that what makes these practices most effective is the constant presence and availability of others, which makes care highly accessible and immediate. This constant availability of people thus turns simple practices such as ‘venting’ or ‘just hanging out’ into powerful and effective forms of care (7, 8, 9 → F, G, H). These findings, which have not been discussed in previous research,

are one of the key contributions of this study and thus form an important part of the new theoretical framework. They conceptualise online gaming spaces as sources of care that are consistent, reliable, and always within reach.

After outlining how platform affordances strengthen care practices, I turned to the third sub-question: What are the challenges of practicing care in online gaming communities? This is an aspect not illustrated in the newly developed framework, but it is still important for understanding the full picture of how care works in online gaming spaces. As I researched the challenges of care in online gaming spaces, it became clear that the notion of distance underpinned many of the challenges participants described. The absence of body language and physical presence makes it harder for people to notice subtle emotional cues, which complicates the care form of attentiveness that Tronto (1993) describes as central to care, since this relies on recognizing and responding to the needs of others. Participants also expressed worries about giving the wrong advice in situations that included heavy mental problems, and expressed that there are limits to what online care can do. Although these challenges exist, most participants note that they acknowledge the limits and adapt accordingly.

In the last sub-question, I described how participants expressed complementing offline care with support from their online gaming spaces. They explained that the constant presence and availability of others in their online community works well in combination with professional care. When professional support is not immediately accessible, there are still people present who can offer ongoing support. This finding adds a valuable insight to those of Domahidi et al. (2018): while they argue that combining online and offline interactions can strengthen relationships by offering different ways of connecting, my research shows that this works similarly for care. Online care can become even more effective when it is supported by offline forms of care. This also has strong practical implications for mental health professionals, who can keep in mind that online gaming communities can be a valuable additional source of care outside of the times formal care is available.

This thesis has contributed to existing research by shifting attention from general social dynamics and toxicity to the specific ways care takes shape in online gaming spaces. It is unique in using qualitative research methods to uncover how relationships and care

practices develop in online gaming spaces. It also greatly contributes to existing knowledge by giving an updated perspective on how social connections and care dynamics function in the current online gaming ecosystem, which is constantly changing. In the research limitations, I discussed that my findings cannot be generalized to all online communities. However, it is worth mentioning that some online gaming platforms can have similar characteristics, creating similar possibilities for care. For example, Gray (2018) explored how people created support networks in Xbox Live spaces, and similar to my research, found that being able to have control over a space (who and how many people can enter) increases how safe a space feels. Likewise, Sheng & Kairam (2020) found that strong relationships are built through the use of diverse and mixed media on Twitch, something that Discord also provides, and I have found contributes to care. Because these findings align with mine, it suggests that the insights from this study may also apply more broadly to other online gaming platforms, especially when they provide similar platform characteristics.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that care in online gaming platforms such as Discord emerges through both personal motivation of the participants and technological design. With this, I expanded on existing care definitions, such as that of Conradson (2003), who described that care is primarily enabled through interactions and relations between people. I have shown that in the case of online gaming spaces, care is enabled through a complementary combination of relationships between people and platform characteristics. Putting all findings together, I conclude that the platform affordances of Discord enable flexible forms of interacting and create a sense of constant presence and availability, which are fundamental to how care is practiced in online gaming spaces.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Discord content analysis

General information about Discord

Discord is a downloadable program for many different systems, such as Windows PC, Android, and macOS. It is completely free, but gives the option to further customize your profile and servers by buying a subscription called 'Nitro'.

When opening Discord for the first time, there is not much going on yet. You can add people as friends using their usernames and start private chats with them. An external invitation (through websites such as Reddit, YouTube, etc.) is necessary to join a server. Invitations to a server take the form of a link, the accessibility of which is determined by the server's owners or moderators. If the link is made public, anyone with access to it can join the server.

Accounts and identity

On Discord, you use a unique username. Your profile can be customized with an avatar, a biography in which you can write whatever you want people to know about you, and a current status, which lets others see what you're doing or feeling at the moment. For example, you can set your status to "Online," "Idle," "Do Not Disturb," or "Invisible," and you can also write a custom status with text or emojis to show what you are doing.

Applications and bots

In Discord servers, bots are used to handle automated tasks such as playing music, assigning roles, delivering updates and announcements, etcetera. These bots can also be used for moderation, for example, by automatically removing spam messages, filtering inappropriate content, or assigning warnings to users. Moreover, Discord provides many minigames and activities that users can play together, such as trivia, word games, or built-in activities like watching YouTube or playing chess directly in a voice channel.

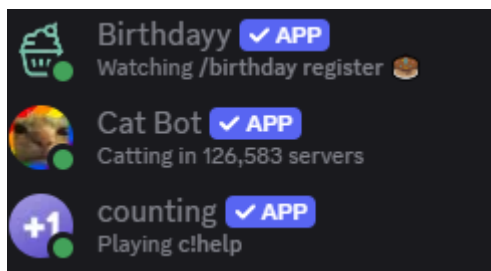


Figure 2: Different bots that can be integrated in servers

Integration with other apps

It is possible to connect Discord with other applications, such as Spotify or Twitch. This displays one's activity in these apps on their profile (such as which song they are listening to, or if they are streaming), which can then be publicly seen (by people in their active servers, as well as the people added as friends).



Figure 3: How activity is shown on your personal profile

Observing in a Discord server

Entering the server, setting the stage.

Upon accepting the server invitation, the custom server icon was visible on the left side of the application. I entered the server by clicking on the icon. An overwhelming number of channels appear on the left side of the screen. On the right side of the screen, all the users of the server are listed.

Each channel has its own name and purpose. There are two types of channels that support different types of communication. Text channels are characterized by their main form of communication being text, visual communication such as images, emojis and multimedia such as images and videos. There are also voice channels, which only allow video and audio chatting.

Immediately, I was sent to the 'rules' channel, which clearly stated the rules of the server⁴. The rules briefly describe the kind of behavior that is expected from users, such

⁴ I know from past experiences with other servers, the user sometimes has to confirm information by answering a set of questions. The user can access the server only upon

as being respectful and kind towards others, not spamming, respecting privacy, and using appropriate language. In the server, there is a separate channel dedicated to the rules of another server that is focused on sharing more personal and emotional matters. These rules emphasize creating a safe and supportive environment by prohibiting suicidal or self-harm content, requiring trigger warnings for sensitive discussions, and reminding members to seek professional help when necessary. Both 'rules' channels state that a failure to follow the rules may result in removal from the server, as they are trying to maintain a safe, supportive and respectful environment.

As the owner of this server is a streamer on Twitch, the first section of channels is called 'Broadcast Corner'. These channels focus mostly on announcements and other information related to the Twitch channel of the owner. Only the owners and moderators are permitted to send messages in this channel, whereas the other users can use it as a channel for receiving useful information about for example, when a stream starts.

Roles and self-presentation

confirmation by the owner or moderator. In this way, the server owners have control over who can join, even if the link is publicly available.

The next set of channels are focused on you as the user. Firstly, one can customize how they appear and present themselves. This is done through 'roles'. Roles can be focused

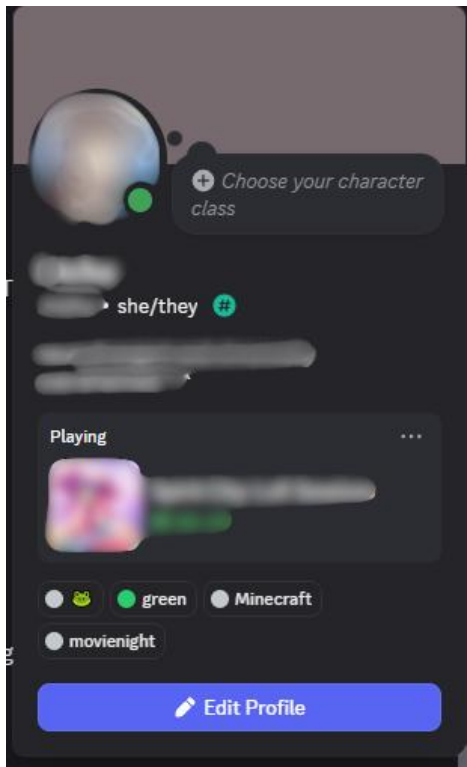


Figure 4: My self-presentation and roles within Community 1

on by whatever the owners of the server desire. In this server, there is a possibility to change the color of your name, choose what games you are interested in, and decide whether you want to be notified when there is a movie night happening. Through these roles, the owners can regulate who gets pinged for specific events and tailor announcements to the right groups. It is not required to fill in these roles, and one can reveal as much information as they wish.

First thing after joining, users are encouraged to introduce themselves in the 'passport-control' channel. Here, one can decide if and what they want to share about themselves. The owner provided a template at the start of the channel, but encourages members to be creative with what they share.

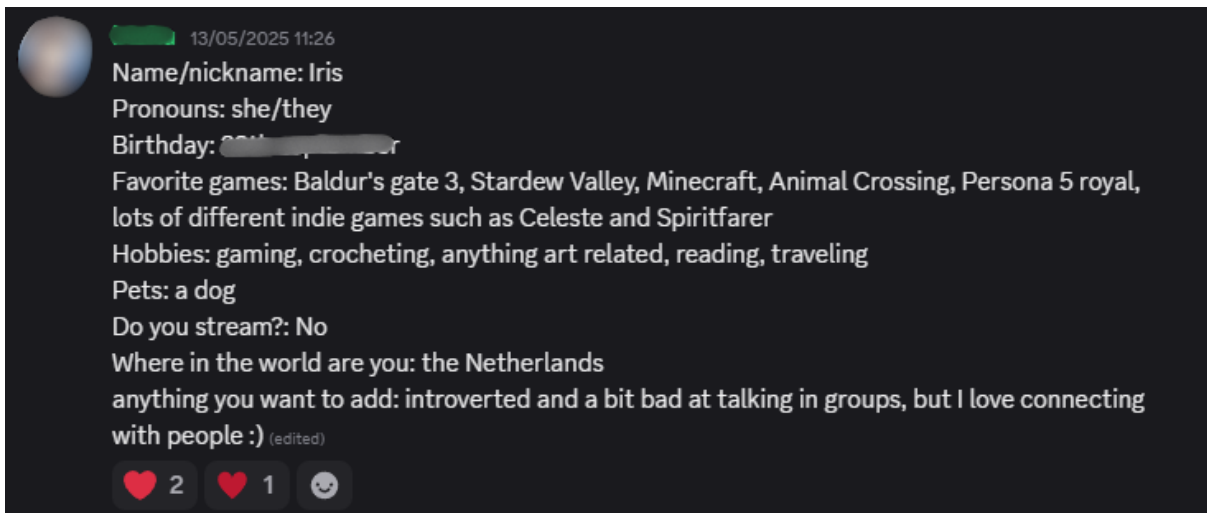


Figure 5: The message I sent in the Passport-Control Channel

Another channel serves for ‘self-promo’; a place where users can share social media they are active on. Many people, for example, post when they start streaming so that others in the server can be notified and support them. Lastly, there is a channel where people can register their birthdays. Through the use of a bot, users are notified of everyone’s birthdays in the community.

Channels for hanging out

Most interactions take place in the ‘general’ chat. People talk about many subjects there, ranging from how the day is going to their favorite movies and shows. There is also a ‘photo-booth’ channel, which focuses more on visual communication. There are channels dedicated to pets, food, and memes. In this channel, members take turns counting one number upward at a time through individual messages. If someone makes a mistake, the count resets back to one, and the challenge starts again. Lastly, there are a few voice channels, including one for watching movies together and another called “Afterparty” for hanging out after the streams.