THE SEMIOTIC RESOURCES OF THE INTERACTION ORDER IN ONLINE CHAT ROOMS: A CASE STUDY OF A *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* COMMUNITY

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Master's Thesis
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November 2020

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanities and Social Sciences	Laitos – Department Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Tekijä – Author Jenni Luukkonen	
Työn nimi – Title The Semiotic Resources of the Interaction Order in Online Chat Rooms: A Case Study of a World of Warcraft Community	
Oppiaine – Subject Englannin kieli	Työn laji – Level Pro gradu -tutkielma
Aika – Month and year Marraskuu 2020	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 69 + 4

Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Tutkielman tarkoitus on selvittää, miten vuorovaikutusjärjestyksen (eng. interaction order) semioottiset keinot ilmenevät multimodaalisessa chat-viestinnässä. Työ pyrkii laajentamaan vuorovaikutusjärjestyksen käsitettä fyysisten kommunikaatiotilanteiden ulkopuolelle. Tutkimus keskittyy Discord -chat-ohjelman sisällä toimivaan World of Warcraft -yhteisöön ja sen jäsenten viestintätottumuksiin. Analyysi kartoittaa käyttäjien tapoja ilmaista itseään, aistimuksiaan, ajan kulkua sekä etäisyyttä muihin. Lisäksi pohditaan sitä, miten Discord ympäristönä edesauttaa ja rajoittaa edellämainittuja ilmaisutapoja.

Aineisto kerättiin hyödyntämällä virtuaalista etnografiaa, johon sisältyi yhteisön sisäistä havainnointia sekä dokumenttien keräämistä viestihistoriasta. Tarkempana kohderyhmänä toimivat yhteisön ylläpitäjät (ns. moderaattorit) sekä vakinaiset käyttäjät. Teoreettisesti analyysi perustuu multimodaaliseen diskurssianalyysiin, jonka avulla tutkitun tilan ja siellä tapahtuvan viestinnän semioottisia piirteitä tunnistettiin.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että vuorovaikutusjärjestyksen semioottinen ilmaisu on huomattavasti erilaista verrattuna fyysiseen vuorovaikutukseen. Nämä eroavaisuudet johtuvat suurimmalta osin kehollisen viestinnän puutteesta. Kohdeyhteisön säännöt, käyttäjähierarkia ja -rajoitukset vaikuttavat myös omalta osaltaan siihen, miten ilmaisutapoja käytetään. Lisäksi analyysissa huomattiin, että monet Discord -sovelluksen ominaisuudet sekä mahdollistavat että rajoittavat käytettävissä olevia viestintäkeinoja. Näin ollen voidaan todeta, että vuorovaikutusjärjestyksen ilmentyminen verkossa riippuu laajalti viestintäympäristöstä ja sen teknologisista käyttömahdollisuuksista.

Asiasanat – Keywords interaction order, online spaces, discord, chat rooms, face-to-face interaction, semiotic resources, virtual ethnography, multimodal discourse analysis	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

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1 INTRODUCTION

Being in the presence of others and interacting with them is ingrained in our social life (Goffman 1982: 3). Because most of our time is spent in these interactional events, virtually all of our actions are socially situated. The effect of social situatedness is so great that we base our solitary actions on the practices of face-to-face communication as well (Goffman 1982: 2). To conduct microanalysis on these characteristics of our daily social encounters in the world, Goffman developed the concept of the interaction order (1983) that aims to analyze how individuals use semiotic resources and physical orientation to perform to and with others in social settings. As a development to Goffman's work on social order, Scollon and Scollon (2003), in their own research on geosemiotics and indexicality in the material world, combine his theories on the presentation of the self in physical spaces with Hall's (1969; 1970) studies on the "hidden dimensions" of physical interaction. This study's purpose is to apply Scollon and Scollon's framework of the interaction order to online spaces and examine how some of its aspects manifest in text-based computer-mediated communication.

The interaction order centers heavily around communication in the physical world because of its origins as a method of analysing face-to-face social contexts. However, the explosive increase in online interaction and the different allowances and limitations that it has in comparison to social events in physical spaces have greatly altered today's interactional domain. In addition to lacking physical contact, online spaces enable the integration of multimodal communication with text, images, audio and video. Different sites and applications can be connected to each other with few limitations through hyperlinks, and most can be accessed at any point in time. Online users can be present in multiple spaces simultaneously as well, which would not be possible in a physical environment. Because of the deep integration of the interaction order in our social actions and the conceptualization of the virtual world as a space, individuals are bound to utilize many of the features of said order in online spaces to

emulate it. The application of the interaction order to the digital space is, therefore, a logical extension of the concept in the sociological landscape of the Information era.

Studies on the interaction order in technologcially mediated communication have already been conducted since the 1990s when access to the Internet became more commonplace. Attention was drawn towards websites (Miller 1995), cell phones and television (Katriel 1999). More recently, research has been conducted regarding digital presentations of the self, for instance through photo and video material (Fernández-Dols and Carrera 2011). The role of the interaction order in various video games, such as Second Life (Grant 2009) and World of Warcraft (Tietz 2015), has also gained traction as a focus because of the analogies between physical and in-game spaces as social environments. Modern, multimodal, text-based communication has not seen as much attention, however, which may be due to the abstract nature of the representations of users in the online space itself (as opposed to the more tangible photos, video and in-game avatars in the aforementioned studies). It is also possible that today's technology and online social spaces diversify faster than the sociological theory and analysis on the topic does, which results in some uncovered territory. The purpose of this study, then, is to reveal how aspects of the interaction order might function in online spaces where social actors have highly conceptual representations and provide results that can be utilized in future research on the relationship between the interaction order, space and non-physicality.

The analysis presented in this study focuses on the interaction order in a multimodal online chat environment called Discord. The featured phenomena aim to highlight the manner in which the semiotic resources of the interaction order appear in multimodal, digital instant messaging (IM) and how said resources have transformed to adapt to the technology-mediated space in which they appear. Even though Scollon and Scollon's framework of the interaction order addresses both the resources used to realize the order and the interactional groupings, or units, of people in a space, the

focus of this study is on the former. Section 3.1 elaborates on the reasoning for this decision.

In more specific terms, the following analysis aims to provide insights into self-presentation, the indexicality of time, perception and interpersonal distances and their relationship with the social space within a chat community for the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft. Section 2 begins by introducing the central concepts of the interaction order and some past research on the topic in online spaces, followed by theories of online environments as spaces and the forms of embodiment and presence taking place in them. Section 3 explains the purpose of the present study, the functionality of Discord as a software application, and the methodologies for data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the findings of the analysis with the aid of data samples, focusing on the four categories of semiotic resources and the World of Warcraft server as a social space. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the study and provides points of discussion on the results.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study highlights the development of the interaction order as a sociological theory and goes into further detail on the four categories of its semiotic resources that Scollon and Scollon (2003) consider relevant to their geosemiotic approach to interaction in physical spaces. Interactional units are excluded because of this study's focus on the semiotic tools used for grouping instead of the grouping itself. Theories on online spaces and embodiment are included to clarify on the social and spatial aspects of online interaction and how their functionality compares to communication in real life. This comparison is central to identifying the differences between the interaction order of the physical and the virtual world.

2.1 The interaction order

The interaction order is a concept of social behavior introduced by Erving Goffman that describes face-to-face communication as a set of intrinsic social practices and procedures, realized by co-present participants through the utilization of self-presentation and the physical space they occupy. The term "interaction order" was not coined until the early 1980's (Goffman 1983) but the primary aspects of the theory were developed in his earlier research on performance, public relations and social behavior in face-to-face contexts (see Goffman 1959; 1963; 1972; 1982). Despite its importance in the research of social behavior, the interaction order and its development have been relatively difficult to summarize, which is largely explained by Goffman's non-traditional way of doing research in the field of social interaction. In his texts, it is found that he rarely explains the methodologies he uses and deviates from conventional academic form through his lack of hypotheses or any other clear research aims (Drew and Wootton 1988:2). Additionally, his early terminology for the

interaction order and the angle he takes in arguing it varies across publications (Kendon 1988: 15). This atypical approach and the consequent lack of ”Goffmanian tradition” in similar research is considered to stem in part from Goffman's weariness towards intellectual circles and their conventions (Drew and Wootton 1988: 2), as well as from the lack of integration into the systematic, individual-oriented analysis of social interaction performed by the sociologists and psychologists of his time (Drew and Wootton 1988: 3).

Despite the complexity of Goffman's framework, the precursor to the interaction order can be traced back to his studies on performance. According to Goffman (1959), social interaction between individuals follows a model of performance that is analogous to theatre. Individuals assume characters that they present to their audiences based on the nature of the social setting and their interaction with the presentations of others. The analogy is not completely applicable to actual social situations, however: For instance, the ’stage’ of interaction in real life is not a construction of something imaginary but a real environment where events are not fully rehearsed (Goffman 1959: xi). More importantly, the social settings of the real world do not have an audience as a third party that observes the social exchange of performers. In real interaction, the others that the individual performs for and who perform in turn are simultaneously the audience (Goffman 1959: xi). The analogy, despite its shortcomings, highlights how face-to-face communication centers around what social actors choose to present of themselves and in what manner they do so. The performance theory's focus on self-presentation as a social act introduced the personal front as a semiotic resource that is utilized in the interaction order, which is examined further in Section 2.1.1.4 of this study. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of second parties as actors that greatly affect performance and social situations gave rise to the concept of 'teams', i.e. groups of individuals who ”co-operate in staging a single routine” (Goffman 1959: 79). Teams are likely to be the inspiration to Goffman's later theories on ”withs”, parties that are perceived to be grouped, which he further divided into the interactional units that

Scollon and Scollon (2003: 46) define as the other half of the interaction order. The development of the 'with' is considered to be the concept that the definitive interaction order was built on (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 61).

To gather a more concise idea of the interaction order as a larger social phenomenon, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 46) propose a framework for the concept based on categorizing the types of social behaviors that Goffman has noted as crucial to it. This outline is utilized to examine aspects of a larger concept called geosemiotics: the semiotic study of signs, discourses and actions in the material world. In addition to Goffman's analyses, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 49) incorporate Hall's (1969; 1970) anthropological theories on subconscious communicative awareness, perceptual resources and the interactional utilization of physical spaces in their approach. While the interactional resources identified by Hall focus primarily on the internal sociopsychological aspects of an individual while Goffman's concepts prioritize the external social acts between individuals (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 58). Despite the difference in perspective, both Goffman and Hall's research are heavily related to humans as social actors in physical space, making them integral to research conducted on the interaction order. This specific interpretation of the interaction order thus shows that the fundamentals of the concept are not limited to the work of Goffman. In this study, Scollon and Scollon's framework provides a comprehensive and well-defined structure for analysis, which is much needed because of the aforementioned scattered nature of Goffman's past research.

As mentioned, the focus of this study is on the semiotic resources in Scollon and Scollon's (2003: 46) outline. These resources are used in social situations to "construct the entities of the interaction order" (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 47). In other words, people in a given space signal how they want to be present and who they want to group with through these resources. Most of Scollon and Scollon's (2003: 46) outlined semiotic resources for the interaction order stem from the research of Hall (1969; 1970).

While Goffman's introduction of the personal front, the units of interaction and the overall presentation of self are integral to the interaction order, which he also later named himself, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 49) consider Hall's theories on perception of time and space as well as interpersonal distances a crucial complement to how the interaction order in the material world is realized. The convergence of theories that Scollon and Scollon present is further supported by Goffman and Hall acknowledging each other's work in their own publications (Hall 1969: 104, Goffman 1971: 72n).

To elaborate on the significance of the interaction order in geosemiotics, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 45) note that ”we simply cannot use language without implying the groupings of the interaction order”. The statement refers to the interplay of indexability and indexicality through both actions and language, which implies an individual’s position and grouping in the physical world. The indexable nature of the world and the communication therein means that an individual can recognize and point to physical signs or even parts of social interaction as semiotic objects in space (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 11). Simultaneously, individuals anchor themselves to their surroundings by indexing said surroundings with the semiotic resources available to them, for instance by pointing to objects physically or through language (e.g. through the use of words such as “that”) (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 2). The indexing an individual performs in physical space conveys information on the positions of the speaker, the listener and the indexed sign, which, in turn, imply how these individuals are grouped based on the principles of the interaction order (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 45). It is further noted that neither Hall nor Goffman attempted to link their research on the interaction order to the indexicality of language (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 54), which makes Scollon and Scollon’s approach crucial to revealing the connection between interaction and the semiotic space where one interacts. In the context of this study, verbal indexicality, in particular, is an important aspect of the analysis of resources due to the lack of physical bodies.

Scollon and Scollon's (2003: 57) primary argument on geosemiotic indexicality is that "the sign only has meaning because of where it is placed in the world". A sign for an emergency exit in a building is given as an example: The sign is first and foremost recognized as a sign for an emergency exit because of the universal practice of including a man running towards the direction of an arrow next to it in such a sign (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 30). Secondly, the arrow in the sign indicates the direction one should take if an emergency arises (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 30). Thirdly, and most importantly, the meanings tied to these semiotic features are as they are because of where the sign is (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 31). The sign does not only show where to run, it also shows the direction one should take from the point in space where the sign is, a dimension of indexicality that is made possible by the sign's material placement (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 30-31). In other words, signs index, i.e. point to objects or concepts in their surroundings. The semiotic effect that the location has on the sign implies a similar relationship between a social setting and the semiotic resources that are used in said setting.

Goffman's (1959; 1963) recognition of the importance of spatial arrangement and perceptual boundaries strongly correlates with indexicality and strengthens its role in the interaction order. According to Goffman (1959: 22, 93-94; 1963:), the mutual agreements on spatial order and boundaries during gatherings – including the separation of the front- and backstage (Goffman 1959: 111-112) – and the physical setting where they take place are crucial in maintaining organized interaction. Identifying how individuals use the features of the space they are in also draws attention to "the wide variety of ways in which the environment is structured for interaction" (Kendon 1988: 30). The notion that an individual is conveying social meaning based on his or her relation to the space around him or her, which, in turn, affects how said individual indexes his or her surroundings and how he or she is indexed, further implies that indexicality is integral to physical interaction.

2.1.1 Semiotic resources

The analysis of semiotic resources in computer-mediated communication requires the establishment of the resources that are in play. Hall's (1969; 1970) contributions to Scollon and Scollon's (2003: 46) outline of the interaction order consist of three types of resources, also known as "dimensions" in Hall's own work: The sense of time, perceptual spaces and interpersonal distances. Goffman's writing does provide insight for every aspect of semiotic tools in interaction but in this framework its utilization is centered around the personal front.

2.1.1.1 The sense of time

Hall (1970) discusses time at length as a part of his studies on culture and its effect on communication, focusing on the different ways in which people understand time internally and how it can lead to misunderstandings with others. When considering the sense of time as a semiotic resource, however, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 50) choose to move slightly from the internal perspective of Hall towards how a person's sense of time – specifically, the passing of it – is embodied and externally expressed.

Indexical language that relates to tenses and temporal features of the world functions on the assumption that there is a perceived present in the physical world to base it on (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 32). Indicating time with the adverbials "now" and "then", for instance, would not work without acknowleding the present time and the time that comes after it. Semotic parallels can be drawn between things being in different physical locations ("here" and "there") and things happening in space at different times ("before", "now" or "later") (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 39). In short, the social actor is positioned in time and space simultaneously (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 41),

which makes the perception of time a factor in social semiotic decisions and supports its inclusion in the interaction order.

The role of time in the interaction order centers largely around the details of urgency and the dichotomy of "monochronism-polychronism" (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 50). Urgency as a term correlates with an individual's sense of how slow or rapid the passing of time is, and how the urgency of his or her need affects it. For instance, a person who is anticipating an event, or waiting for help with a time-sensitive matter, will feel as if time is progressing slowly. Conversely, someone who does not have equally urgent goals is likely to feel time move faster (Hall 1970: 177). This sense of time and its speed varies both individually and culturally (Hall 1970: 149). Monochronism refers to the act of doing one thing at a time and has its opposite in polychronism, which denotes doing multiple things at the same time (Hall 1969: 173; 1970: 150). The tendency for mono- and polychronic involvement in social situations has individual and cultural variance as well, which often forces individuals to step outside of their comfortable level of involvement to accommodate others. According to Hall (1970: 173), physical spaces should be designed to ease this adjustment by offering physical screening to reduce polychronism and removing said screening to increase polychronic contact, when applicable. This notion further implies a connection between the sense of time and the physical space where time is perceived, which Scollon and Scollon (2003: 50) expand on.

In practice, the sense of time in physical spaces can be identified by observing how body language indexes the internal states of urgency and monochronism. According to Scollon and Scollon (2003: 58), a person looking at his or her watch, or someone who is moving rapidly and nervously (2003: 51), is likely to express a sense of urgency. They also state that a monochronic individual focusing on one task at a time will keep his or her eyes and movements fixed to the task (2003: 51). Polychronic behavior, then, would likely have an individual talk with others or perform smaller, quicker tasks in-

between. Urgency and the monochronism-polychronism dichotomy both affect an individual's sense of time and how he or she expresses it (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 50).

2.1.1.2 Perceptual spaces

The space that one can socially use often has perceptual boundaries (Goffman 1959: 107). In other words, the space is bounded by what can and cannot be sensed. For example, walls form a visual barricade, while sound-proof glass between rooms limits hearing while maintaining a larger visual area. Hall (1969: 41) provides more details on the individual senses, dividing them into distance receptors for senses that perceive far-away objects and immediate receptors that examine close-up objects. The former type includes the visual, auditory and olfactory senses, while the latter consists of the thermal and haptic senses. Perceiving space through them lets individuals identify the social function of a given space and, consequently, the social behavior that is expected in said space (Hall 1970: 106). Furthermore, perception of sights, sounds, smells, touch and temperature in a space enables indexicality related to them, such as exclamations of ”Did you see that?” upon a surprising event that the interacting individuals can visually observe (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 52).

The physical world can be further divided into 'perceptual spaces' where every sensory perception gives rise to different definitions and boundaries for the space at large (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 52). The difference in perceptual spaces is especially apparent when comparing the visual space with the auditory space: Visually, it is easier to find details in what limits vision, such as walls, across great distances. Hearing has a smaller range and, more importantly, one cannot distinguish how sound is physically affected if the auditory boundaries are too far away (Hall 1969: 43). It is thus heavily argued that the perceivable aspects of physical spaces are integral in

defining their features and functions which, in turn, affect the social behavior of people that practice the interaction order in these spaces.

It is noteworthy that not all senses are as dominant in a space as others. More specifically, the visual and auditory spaces often take over most examination of an individual's surroundings, which places the olfactory, thermal and haptic spaces as well as taste in the background (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 53). However, every perceptual space still has its own impact on an individual's interpretation of the world around him or her. A coffee shop is less appealing as a space for enjoying food and beverages if it smells of disinfectant instead of coffee (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 53), a small room with a large crowd becomes uncomfortable because of built up heat (Hall 1969: 57), and individuals react differently to touching other people as they navigate a space where direct contact cannot always be avoided (Hall 1969: 61). In a social space, reactions to similar sensory stimulus, especially when the source of them is related to other people in the space, are often driven by what the interaction order dictates is the appropriate response. In other words, culture – and through culture, social behavior – gives our senses structure and meaning (Hall 1969: 101).

2.1.1.3 Interpersonal distances

As with the sense of time and perceptual spaces, the subject of personal space and its management has its focus on how the internal concept of appropriate spacing between individuals shows itself physically (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 50). Hall (1969: 114-116) defined interpersonal distances as varying between individuals, where the measured physical distance is combined with how a person perceives the other with his or her senses. Initially, Hall (1969: 114) landed on eight distinct interpersonal distances but chose to regroup them into four primary types: the intimate, the personal, the social and the public distance. Each of the four distances includes a close and a far phase, which further define the range of the main types of distance.

The smallest distance between two individuals occurs at the 'intimate' level, which ranges from physical contact to 18 inches of separation. This type of distance is mostly used for ”love-making and wrestling, comforting and protecting”, and can be a source of discomfort in a public social setting (Hall 1969: 117-118). At 18 inches to four feet, the interpersonal distance is considered 'personal' in nature, which is mostly used for one-on-one conversations (Hall 1969: 120). For impersonal exchanges, casual social gatherings and formal meetings, the distance used is 'social' and falls between four and twelve feet (Hall 1969: 121-122). Beyond twelve feet, the interpersonal distance is considered 'public', and interaction at this range is often limited to large public gatherings where a public speaker is noticably far away from his or her audience and the voice of the speaker requires amplification (Hall 1969: 125).

Scollon and Scollon (2003: 53-54) consider the physical display of interpersonal distances indexical of relationships between people and their expression to others in a social space. For example, a romantic couple may index their social involvement with each other by walking shoulder to shoulder, which is within intimate distance. The nuances of interpersonal distances as a resource of the interaction order arise when one examines social behavior during situations where individuals are forced by the environment to keep a distance that is too close or too far for the interaction at hand (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 53-54). For instance, two strangers standing at an intimate distance similar to the aforementioned romantic couple need to socially display that they are not romantically involved. The semiotic strategies for doing so are as much a part of the interaction order as the differences in social distance themselves.

2.1.1.4 Personal front

The personal front is listed as the last of the four major categories of semiotic resources in Scollon and Scollon's (2003: 46) overview on the interaction order. The concept was

first mentioned in Goffman's (1959) study on self-presentation that aimed to draw sociological attention to physical interaction. The social front, as a whole, is "the expressive equipment … intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman 1959: 22). This front is divided into the physical setting of the social encounter and the personal front which is the unfixed and fixed sign equipment that the individual carries with him or her, such as clothing, physical features, posture, mannerisms and speech patterns (Goffman 1959: 23). Performance, in this context, refers to Goffman's dramaturgical approach to interaction where individuals are performing a role in a given social setting to control the impressions they leave on others, akin to theatre (Goffman, 1959: xi). The way in which one expresses him- or herself through the personal front correlates with conveying these impressions.

The personal front of an individual in a physical space consists of both conscious effort and unconscious aspects inherent to the person. Expressions that are consciously controlled are what a social actor "gives", while expressions that are not controlled are what a social actor "gives off" to others (Goffman 1959: 2). Examples of the former include clothing and word choices, whereas the latter consists of sign equipment such as biological features and voice. However, the line between these two types of sign expression can be ambiguous: A common aspect of social performance is "intentionally conveying misinformation" (Goffman 1959: 2) in order to deliver an impression either the individual or the ones in his or her presence desire (Goffman 1959: 6). Additionally, some individuals, such as stage performers, have learned to knowingly manage their voices and mannerisms that are generally considered to be 'given off' (Goffman 1959: 73). The difference of conveying misinformation in stage performing and general communication is that others expect the former to be a faked performance, whereas there is more trust in the authenticity of the personal front in non-staged interaction (Goffman 1959: 70). Because performances are not required or expected to give a true reflection of one's internal state, it can be assumed that the

personal front is most often constructed with a mixture of honest and dishonest expressions that suit the specific social setting in question (Goffman 1959: 71).

In addition to sign equipment, Scollon and Scollon (2003: 58) highlight civil inattention as a component of the personal front. The term describes a phenomenon where a person in a public social setting acknowledges the presence of others but intentionally ignores them to signal that he or she does not wish to interact with them (Goffman 1963: 84). The aim of such behavior is to indicate mutual acceptance of the presence and behavior of strangers with inattention, for instance by making eye contact with a passer-by before averting one's gaze at a closer distance (Goffman 1963: 84). The technique can also be utilized to punish social transgressions with explicit staring, which implies that people expect each other to respect the conduct of a given social setting (Goffman 1963: 87). Scollon and Scollon (2003: 58) find that the concept of civil inattention is also closely related to Hall's (1969) ideas on interpersonal distances because the proximity of others affects the degree of attention: Individuals further away can be stared at more easily than those close by (Goffman 1963: 85). The personal front and civil inattention are seen as connected because the "embodied actions"of a person, such as inattentive physical behavior, are not only dependent on his or her intent but on the social behavior of everyone else as well (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 59). In other words, part of the personal front is to "fit in" with the conduct of the social setting (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

Finally, Goffman's (1959) concept of a "frontstage" and a "backstage" is an example of how physical spaces can be utilized in the expression of the personal front. When an individual is on the frontstage, which is the social setting or place where he or she performs in a controlled manner (Goffman 1959: 107), he or she exaggerates and suppresses actions in order to fulfill the desired performance (Goffman 1959: 111). Conversely, when the backstage is entered, the individual is more inclined to show his or her suppressed social actions because it is a place of privacy (Goffman 1959: 112).

An example of such a place is the backstage of a theatre. The backstage is also where the adjustment of the personal front often happens, ranging from the changing of clothing to relaxation and perfecting one's behavior and appearance (Goffman 1959: 112). The front- and backstage can be extended from theatrical contexts to other aspects of the social world, such as work environments with back rooms for staff to use outside customer interactions (Goffman 1959: 114), or bathrooms in houses and public places (Goffman 1959: 121). Scollon and Scollon (2003: 57) note that social actors define as well as index the frontstage and the backstage through social roles and physical spaces, which makes the front and back regions and their effect on the personal front another tool for the interaction order.

According to Scollon and Scollon (2003: 58), it is possible to interpret Hall's three dimensions (the sense of time, perceptual spaces and interpersonal distances) as parts of the personal front, considering that a person externally communicates these dimensions to others as a part of his or her self-presentation. They state, however, that the difference between Hall and Goffman is the approach: While Hall concentrated on the internal effects of psychology and culture, Goffman focused on the external expression of the self or one's internal states. Scollon and Scollon (2003: 50) clarify that their focus is heavily on the embodied display of semiotic resources in the interaction order, which makes Hall's perspective less relevant. In this study, the resources are analyzed from the same angle.

2.1.2 Research on the interaction order outside physical spaces

Despite the heavy focus on face-to-face communication in most studies on the interaction order, the prevalence of virtual and technological communication in the past 20 years has steered research outside of the physical domain. Even though analysis of modern text-based online communication (e.g. instant messaging) in the context of the interaction order is still relatively scarce, attention has been drawn

towards several aspects of technology-supported interaction practices such as phone and video calls (e.g., Katriel 1999, Parkinson and Lea 2011), websites (e.g., Miller 1995) and video games (e.g., Grant 2009, see also Tietz 2015).

Miller (1995) provides an early perspective to Goffman's interaction order online by examining the way in which web pages frame social, non-physical encounters. He (1995: 2) recognizes that in electronic communication, the need to express oneself and follow social order does not dissipate, which means that the development of the Internet as a social space – not just as a channel for information exchange – requires its users to come up with new ways to realize the interaction order. Web pages, in particular, represent an early form of this development, providing users with a way to interact in a highly curated way while being minimally involved with the other party. According to Miller (1995: 3), Web pages can even be considered more an embodiment of the ”electronic self” than a concrete form of interaction because of the often carefully constructed representations that they are used for and the relative lack of communication between reader and sender. He also raises the question whether electronic communication of the 1990s fits into Goffman's concept of interaction because the development of the electronic self seems to be more dependent on interaction in the physical world instead of the Internet providing a new social framework independent of the face-to-face domain. The conclusion drawn implies that even though electronic communication brings new ways to interact and self-express, it is still an extension of the physical social context (1995: 7). Similarly, the presupposition in this study is that the use of interactional resources in online spaces does not evolve into a new kind of interaction order but an adaptation of the one outlined by Goffman, brought about by its role in face-to-face interaction.

Katriel (1999) also points out that technology is bringing dimensions to the interaction order that were not as prominent in Goffman's time. Instead of online phenomena, attention is brought to cell phones and interpersonal television talk shows, and how

these technological media open new avenues for ethnography in communication research. In relation to cell phone communication, Katriel (1999: 97) identifies the emergence of a new kind of ”interactional field” where some manner of social involvement with other parties is happening within an already established interactional unit. Such a field is formed when, for instance, two people are physically grouped but both are using cell phones to interact with someone distant. Phone conversations in public spaces have the additional effect of removing much of the privacy associated with conversations between two individuals, which forces the callers to exaggerate their inattention to the outside world to avoid the awkwardness of public attention (Katriel 1999: 98). These observations indicate that technological interaction is less dependent on physical situatedness and co-presence, and more concerned with interpersonal relations themselves, which piques interest in the social rules of despatialized forms of interaction (Katriel 1999: 98). The blurring of the line between private and public interaction in talk shows is also highlighted: Conversations between the host and the guest are considered a public display to an audience despite the expectation that a one-on-one conversation is a private affair. The interpersonal exchange thus becomes a balancing act of social contexts where interaction and performance intermingle (Katriel 1999: 99-100). The lack of spatial situatedness and its effects on interactional conventions continue to be relevant in this study as well.

As existing technologically mediated communication has developed, so have the ways in which users can socially situate themselves in a virtual space. The publication by Kappas and Krämer (2011), collaborated on by several authors, draws attention to the manner in which visual cues, video connections and avatars (virtual presentations of the self) facilitate ”face-to-face interaction over the internet” (Kappas and Krämer 2011: 11). Fernández-Dols and Carrera (2011: 41-42) discuss the social power of facial recognition through images and video on the Internet and link the capacity to heavily curate one's visual representation to Goffman's concepts of the front- and backstage. They note that the relative ease of producing personal images and video with the

technology of today has made it possible for individuals to self-present in attractive, idealized ways while leaving much of themselves in the backstage, easily hidden from view because of the level of communicative control. Parkinson and Lea (2011: 103), in their research on emotion management and interpersonal social functions during video calls, bring up the effect that video communication has on spatial orientation and movement in the social space. Specifically, they state that the potential closeness of the user to his or her video camera may bring about feelings of unease due to it being analogous to a more intimate social distance, which may prompt changes in the level of intimacy in the conversation. While the high level of control in visual self-presentation is an aspect to consider when analyzing the personal front of users in text-based online chat rooms, the study of how social interaction functions within the medium of video is more concerned with how a person orientates and presents him- or herself when the face-to-face domain is limited instead of the domain being absent.

Another example of interaction order research in technological contexts is provided by Grant (2009), whose analysis on the multiplayer video game Second Life shows how a virtually interactive environment brings about novel and complex interaction practices to realize the interaction order. The peculiarity of Second Life as a social space stems from its gameplay: Users control human characters that they have created for themselves in a virtually constructed, three-dimensional world with the end goal of mimicking the social behavior of the real world. They get together for parties and other events, go shopping and talk with each other in groups (Grant 2009: 8). The environment transforms social situations into a display of skill as users conduct even the most private conversations among others in order to show their expertise in controlling their characters and navigating the game's social landscape (Grant 2009: 10-11). This can mean managing simultaneously happening conversations (Grant 2009: 11) or grouping up with other characters to form visually discernible social boundaries (Grant 2009: 14). Virtual spaces such as Second Life further showcase the diversity of social possibilities that are enabled by online connectivity. The presence of the

interaction order in video games in addition to the other technological contexts examined in this section lends credence to the idea that face-to-face conventions extend to online spaces, and that the manifestations of the interactional resources are dependent on the social allowances and limitations of a given environment.

2.2 Online spaces

Establishing the functionality of the interaction order in relation to the space in which it occurs also requires the establishment of the space itself. The focus of the analysis in this study moves away from the face-to-face domain and into virtual environments, which drastically changes the nature of the interactional space. Examining virtuality as a space and virtual embodiment provide a basis for understanding how spaces and, in turn, the interaction order function outside of physicality.

2.2.1 Defining online spaces

Katriel's (1999) early notion of communication moving towards a form that does not necessitate physical proximity can be said to be a normal way of interacting in today's technologically abundant world. Despite the despatialization of interaction, terminology surrounding non-physical environments still refers to a space of some kind. According to Adams (1997: 1), the vocabulary used to describe technologically mediated communication is dominantly geographical, ranging from metaphors such as "cyberspace" and "rooms" to users being "in a network". A somewhat similar trend in word choices is noted by Turkle (1999: 644), who draws attention to the use of the term "window" to describe the separate applications that have been opened on a given device. Windows connect virtual navigation to a physical construct as well, but instead of referring to the user being in a space, they refer to the user looking through a metaphorical window into a space beyond it. Turkle (1999: 644) argues, however, that an open window means presence in the virtual space that the window leads into, and

that having multiple windows open on a device separates an individual's presence into several co-existing ones even if the user is only focusing on one of them.

Adams (1997: 11) suggests that the motive for this emphasis on place terminology is for the sake of familiarity: The lack of physicality in an environment where social action, culture and the self are present is replaced by metaphors of place. These metaphors, through their references to real places and activities performed in them, make navigation of the network and the orientation of one's actions easier. For instance, a network for chatting that contains several smaller chats can be visualized as a building with multiple rooms where users move from one place to the next (1997:4). Oberzaucher et al. (2011: 240) also note the difficulty that humans have in the processing of online interaction because of the abstract nature of embodied social techniques. Spatial conceptualization and semiotic choices, then, serve as an anchor for non-physical situatedness and aid both internal and interpersonal mapping of virtual actions.

Presence and movement in text-based communication is more abstract than in settings where the dimensionality of space is visually constructed. As an example of such a setting, Grosz (2001:40) points out that virtual reality is a resource for spatial situatedness that lets hardware and software developers construct virtual spaces which aim to make technologically built objects and locations feel real to the users' senses. In virtual reality, a user can, through VR hardware and software, move inside a constructed three-dimensional simulation of space and interact with it – and with other VR users – in first person. According to Grosz (2001:41), these simulations make interpersonal proximity and some shared perceptual experiences possible for individuals who, in reality, are geographically far apart. Rubio-Tamayo et al. (2017:14) state that virtual reality has the potential to simulate the full range of human senses – including haptic and olfactory senses – in the future as well. Even though virtual reality provides new possibilities for spatial interaction in cyberspace, it should not be

considered an indicator of a future where virtual spaces become physical. Virtual spaces are created through the transfer of information (Grosz 2001: 40), which makes them distinct from physical spaces despite the accuracy of the VR simulation of senses, interactable places and objects. Hillis (1999:60), in a similar vein, describes virtual reality as a space that is "socially constructed" instead of following the objective boundaries of the physical world, which allows virtual worlds to extend beyond physical restrictions. In other words, spaces in virtual reality are based on data that conceptualizes physicality regardless of how perceptible they are. This makes VR spaces fundamentally comparable to any other online space where the conceptual connection of software is done through terminology.

The use of geographical vocabulary and the perception of the virtual world as a navigable set of abstract places conceptually linked to their physical counterparts supports the notion that online spaces are indexable by the interaction order: The structuring of websites and software allows presence and movement, for instance through logging into a chat room to enter it, spending time in it, and finally leaving the space by logging out. This spatial conceptualization, together with the social settings of the Internet, creates a platform of interaction that necessitates the interaction order but also requires it to adapt to the physically limited circumstances. Virtual reality provides environments where the interaction order can function relatively similarly vis-à-vis face-to-face communication because the accuracy of the spatial simulation removes some of the restrictions that other forms of online interaction put in place, such as the lack of bodily orientation and movement. Despite such advancements, online spaces are still created with ideas and information, which also alters the nature of presence and embodiment in said spaces.

2.2.2 Embodiment and presence

Physical interaction functions on the premise that the communicative actions of individuals are embodied, i.e. they originate from a physical body instead of language (Oberzaucher et al. 2011: 240). This also holds true for the semiotic resources of the interaction order which are expressed in an embodied manner to others in the same physical space (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 50). In online spaces, however, the body is not a concrete entity that can be used for interaction, which forces individuals to find alternatives for embodied communication.

Historically, cyberspace was assumed to be a place of disembodiment where the body couldn't follow and where new identities could be created with the aid of anonymity (Rudnicki 2017: 2). This theory has been largely abandoned due to virtual spaces becoming an extension of daily physical life and the eventual utilization of online communication by friends and acquaintances for interaction (Rudnicki 2017: 3). The modern focus is largely on the axis of self-expression via digital means (Rudnicki 2017: 3), although the complexity of online embodiment as a concept "where bodily, technological, reflexive and social aspects are intertwined" increases the difficulty of formulating comprehensive and deep methodologies in the sociological field (Rudnicki 2017: 5).

Regardless of all the various features that online embodiment can encompass, the lack of physical semiotic resources is always a major aspect of it in text-based online interaction. Bente and Krämer (2011: 177), however, point out that the fact can be as useful as it is limiting: Interaction that is not based on direct face-to-face contact opens more possibilities for communication because physical social cues can be easily hidden. They continue that concealment of the body leads to the development of new methods to communicate non-verbally and allows for more control over said communication. They also list avatars in video games and virtual reality as examples of technological non-verbal tools for embodied interaction. The interaction order in online spaces is

expected to follow this pattern of creative building of non-verbal features to facilitate the use of semiotic resources.

The question of embodiment without a physical body leads to a subsequent question on non-physical presence online and the way in which it is perceived. Büscher et al. (2001: 79) note that online spaces are not separate from the real world but extensions of it, brought about by the application of "everyday practices of orientation, movement, and interaction in space" to provide a sense of virtual presence. One example they provide of such behavior is the use of indexical language during a virtual activity: When individuals accessed a virtual co-operative game together from the same physical interface, they made references to the positions of themselves and other players as well as movement between the regions of virtual space to imply presence in the game environment itself. (2001: 87-89). They argue that managing one's position in a non-physical space is a representation of action in said space at a specific time, and that the connection of action to the things within the space gives rise to a sense of presence. This point is equally relevant in text-based online communication, considering that the actions users take, for instance sending messages in specific chat rooms, logging in or logging out, are used as indicators of social presence.

Turkle (1999: 646) argues that online spaces support the existence of a self that is not unitary because the the lack of a bodily anchor enables the growth of multiple simultaneously existing identities and roles. Specifically, the ability to open multiple applications, or windows, on a device and shifting attention between them hints of a "distributed presence", i.e. a self that is present and performs roles in several places at the same time instead of being bound to the social contexts of the physical world (Turkle 1999: 644). Jones (2010: 157-158), in his research, supports Turkle's claims and takes them further by highlighting the co-presence of students in online and offline spaces and the way in which they manage their attention between the two. He finds that instead of shutting out the physical world in favor of cyberspace, the students

manage their attention to interact with both spaces interchangeably, for instance by talking with the members of their families physically while using a personal computer.

The simultaneous presence of the self in the physical and virtual space becomes an important additional consideration in the interaction order of online spaces: The indexicality of the semiotic resources increases in complexity when a person can index his or her physical and virtual surroundings interchangeably and divide his or her presence to multiple spaces at once.

3 THE CURRENT STUDY

This section outlines the details of the research process at hand. First, the aims of the study are elaborated on. Afterwards, the functionality of the Discord client as well as the available customization and permission tools are explained to establish terminology (emphasized in bold print) and general understanding of the software. Finally, the methodology and theoretical principles for data collection and analysis are outlined.

3.1 Research aims and questions

The purpose of this study was to analyze the use of the semiotic resources of the interaction order outlined above on the World of Warcraft Discord server. The specific research goal was to identify the primary interactional features that function as indicators of the sense of time, perceptual spaces, interpersonal distances and the personal front for the users of the chat server. Furthermore, the social semiotic affordances of the server and client were of interest : It was assumed that the underlying reason for the semiotic adaptation of interactional resources is related to the online space that they are utilized in. After the identification of the semiotic resources and the form that they take, the analysis was concluded with reflections on how Discord functionality and the World of Warcraft server as a space have affected the use of said resources.

The study at hand did not include the analysis of social grouping or unit formation despite the importance of these concepts in the interaction order at large. Instead, the approach taken in this study focused on the semiotic resources that, through indexicality, enable the formation of units. The scope of the analysis was narrowed down in this way to allow for a more comprehensive examination of the tools that

facilitate social grouping while preventing the expansion of the study beyond a manageable size. Additionally, research on interactional units would require a perspective that addresses the ambiguity of the units due to the lack of physical proximity more strongly, especially in terms of recognizing the subtle implications and displays of social grouping. This would require a different kind of ethnographic focus with different methods for data collection and analysis.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

- How do the four types of semiotic resources of the interaction order – the sense of time, perceptual spaces, interpersonal distances and the personal front – manifest and index space on the World of Warcraft Discord server?
- How do the affordances of the World of Warcraft Discord server as an online space accommodate and affect the semiotic resources of the interaction order ?

The majority of the analysis focused on the first research question with the second question functioning as a consideration of the reasons for the forms that the semiotic resources take. The formulation of the research questions was based on the presupposition that semiotic resources are used on the chat server and that they adapt to the circumstances in which they are used. This assumption is supported by notions that were presented in the theoretical framework, namely the extension of the physical social behavior into online spaces and the human capability to adapt interactional resources to non-physical environments.

The World of Warcraft server was chosen as the target environment for this study because of my personal, long-term participation in it as a member and a moderator. My involvement in the community since November 2015 has provided me with knowledge on the server's social conventions, which served as an inspiration and a starting point for data selection and initial recognition of semiotic resources.

Furthermore, my familiarity with the Discord software in general has given me a comprehensive understanding of its functionality and social tools, which enables effortless utilization of the client in data collection and a competent perspective in the analysis of Discord as a social setting.

3.2 Discord as an online environment

Discord is a free online chat application aimed specifically for video game communities, although its user base has diversified over time as its popularity among young adults has increased. In addition to a downloadable software client for personal computers, smartphones and tablets, Discord can also be accessed through a web browser. The platform offers text-based instant messaging as well as avenues for voice chatting and video calls. Concurrently, there are more than 250 million unique online users of the software[1].

The core communication framework of Discord centers around chat **servers** (see Appendix 1). A user can choose to either create a server or join an existing one, and can be a member of multiple different ones simultaneously. Servers are joined through invite links generated by the client which can be sent to other users. Once the user joins a server, he or she appears on the **user list** on the right and can communicate with everyone else who has joined the same server. Within the server one finds at least one text **channel** and one voice channel, used for communication either via text or audio and video respectively. More channels of either type can be created to, for example, organize discussions based on a topic. Messages sent within a specific channel can only be seen by entering the channel in question. A user's **status indicator**, a colored circle on the bottom right of the profile picture, can be changed from the bottom left of the

[1] C. Coberly, "Discord has surpassed 250 million registered users", *Techspot*, 13 May 2019. https://www.techspot.com/news/80064-discord-has-surpassed-250-million-registered-users.html (Accessed 16 November 2020)

client, with options labelled as “Online” (green), “Idle” (yellow, also known as “Away”), “Do not Disturb” (red, also known as “DND”) and “Invisible” (grey). The “DND” indicator suppresses all client notifications until the status is changed to something else, and the “Invisible” indicator makes the user appear as offline. Users can also display automatic **status messages** that display their computer activity to others. These messages include notifications of games or applications the user is ‘playing’, and in the case of music applications, notifications of what he or she is ‘listening to’. Both status indicators and status messages are globally displayed and cannot be set on a server-to-server basis.

User customization on the Discord client functions on the global (i.e. client-wide) and server-specific levels. The **username** and **profile picture** of one’s profile can be edited in the general settings for the client (see Appendix 2). A username is required information but a custom profile picture is not. If a custom picture is not uploaded, the client gives the user a default profile picture with the Discord logo on a plain background. Server-specific customization adds the possibility for optional **nicknames** and **user roles** (see Appendix 3). Setting a nickname lets a user override his or her global username on a server-to-server basis. Roles, on the other hand, are identifiers attached to users that describe the user they are assigned to. Colors and user permissions can be attached to roles, and they can be given descriptive names. The color of the role that is given to a user dyes his or her username with the same color, and the name of the role is shown in the profile view that pops up when a user is left-clicked. These features are often used for personalization and labelling.

Features such as channel access and server-specific customization options are dependent on the **permission** structure of the server in question. By default, the creator of a server has full permissions. These permissions allow the server owner to, for example, manage server and channel information, remove and invite other users, change the nickname of any server member, manage server-specific emotes, delete

messages, create user roles and assign said roles to users. Specific permissions can be enabled for specific roles, which allows a server owner to restrict or allow the use of server tools by assigning roles. Furthermore, user roles can be put in a specific order where roles that are higher than one's own on the list are "locked", i.e., they cannot be edited or self-assigned. On larger servers such as the World of Warcraft server, it is customary to choose a group of chat **moderators** who are bestowed higher permissions with roles as well as utilize the role hierarchy to enable varying levels of permission (see Appendix 4). Additionally, a public server is likely to have a set of rules in place that ensure that users do not disrupt interaction (see Appendix 5). **Bots** are often set up by moderators on servers to make community management easier and to add useful or humorous in-text features for users. Bots can be programmed to, for example, post automatic updates, answer to user-given text commands with custom responses, alert moderators of joining and leaving members, track changes to user information and provide detailed logs of moderator actions.

Communication on Discord can be considered, in terms used by Herring (1996: 1), both "synchronous" (immediate and happening at present) as well as "asynchronous" (read some time after being sent). While instant messaging constitutes the core of communication, all messages are also logged and can be read again at any time. Discord's textual communication has multimodal capabilities as well, for example the embedding of image, video and audio files, the hyperlinking of channels within a server and the incorporation of graphical emotes. In addition, individual users' attention can be drawn by an in-text command called a **mention** (formatted as *@username* in-text), which highlights the message in the mentioned user's message log and sends a notification to his or her device. The client also provides a **search** bar that can be used for fetching specific messages from the log of the server in question. The search allows for filtering based on included words, the sender of the message, channels, mentions and other criteria (see Appendix 6).

3.3 Research methods and data collection

The methodology for data collection and analysis combined online ethnography with the principles of multimodal discourse analysis. This subsection links the two concepts to the research and explains the reasoning behind the methodological choices. Details of the process of data collection and analytic work are also provided.

The aim of online ethnography is to qualitatively gather data and answer questions regarding social behavior in a specific online group or community through said data (Skågeby 2011: 411). The method takes into consideration the involvement of the researcher in the observed community (Skågeby 2011: 413), the social setting as an important element that affects interaction (Skågeby 2011: 412), and various applicable data collection strategies, such as document collection, online observation and interviews (Skågeby 2011: 414). Collecting data and acquiring preliminary findings through online observation was integral to examining the interaction order of the World of Warcraft server because features of the interaction order appear *during* interaction that is organic and socially situated. The role of the communicative space in the alteration of the forms that the semiotic resources take also aligns with the interests of online ethnography.

The initial insights that gave direction to data collection and the comprehensive analysis on semiotic resources in social settings were grounded in the principles of multimodal discourse analysis. The premise of the theory is that all forms of communication and all modes that are in play make meaning, not just language (Kress 2010: 32; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 111). These modes encompass both embodied forms of interaction such as talk, gaze, touch and other non-verbal actions (Kress 2010: 32), as well as digital modes such as images, layouts and colors (Kress 2010: 97). In fact, anything can be a mode if it fulfills a social semiotic function in interaction (Kress 2009: 87). The theoretical base for this interpretation lies in social semiotics and the

metafunctions of communication that work to "represent meanings about actions, states, events of the world"(Kress 2010: 88; see also Halliday 1978: 112-113). This approach is crucial to understanding the semiotic features of multimodal interaction.

The affordances of materiality that modes use for meaning-making should also be considered because the semiotic potential of a mode depends largely on the material capabilities that are available for the mode to use. (Kress 2010: 80). For instance, an image makes meaning through the affordances of visual representation in a spatial frame but cannot do the same with speech because images do not have the temporal and auditory affordances for it (Kress 2010: 82). Affordances of a material, in conjunction with the way in which a social community uses said affordances, give rise to different modes to semiotic expression (Kress 2010: 80-81). This extends to the affordances of technology that affect what kind of meaning-making occurs (Kress 2010: 185). For example, an older smartphone without a touch screen conceals the keyboard to enable a larger display, which leads to a preference to use modes such as links and copies for communication instead of writing because the affordances of the phone prioritize navigation and visuals (Kress 2010: 87-88). Furthermore, Kress (2010: 35) notes that social actors participate together in a system of meaning-making where meanings gain their characteristics through social interaction, based on the social circumstances. The theory of multimodal discourse analysis, then, places equal importance on the semiotics of resources and the circumstances of their production, which aligns with the analytical perspective of Discord as a space affecting the manifestation of the semiotic resources of the interaction order.

The data samples utilized in the analysis consist of screenshots captured directly from the software client. In addition to allowing simple digital storing of data, capturing samples as images is crucial to cataloguing the various observations for a case study on text-based, multimodal online interaction. Data collection mixed two of the methods outlined by Skågeby (2011: 414), document collection and online observation.

Observation was the primary method of examining the synchronous chat activity of the server but the search feature of the client was also used in order to find data on verbal indexicality in the server's message log. The earliest preliminary data was collected on the social structure of the World of Warcraft server in February 2018, while the majority of primary data on semiotic resources was gathered in February 2020.

Data collection on semiotic resources focused largely on two smaller groups of users in order to manage the number of observed individuals in the context of the server which, at the time of writing, has approximately 89,000 total users. The two primary groups observed were regular users and server moderators, denoted by the user roles given to them. Regular users are members who are active and behave well, which earns them a special user role that shows their dedication to the community and gives them some benefits, e.g. image uploading and a dedicated text channel. Only regulars and server staff have permission to access said text channel, which made that specific space useful for the gathering of data via document collection. However, interactions of these users were collected outside of this text channel as well because the observation was not limited to one region of the online space. This way, the impact of the whole server structure on the interaction order could be examined.

Even though the World of Warcraft server is considered to be a "public" online space, the display of identifying information such as profile names and pictures – both on Discord in general and in the analysis of this study – prevents anonymity. Therefore, the collection of data necessitated informed consent. During data collection, consensual research participation was ensured by requesting informed consent from users and moderators who actively interact on the targeted chat channel via the online survey tool Webropol. Consent for the collection of data on the layout and functionality of the Discord client itself was requested from Discord's privacy department via email. Due to the massive number of users on the World of Warcraft

server, any server-wide, general requests for participation were not feasible, which led to a focus on selected users instead of general field observation. The preferred method of focused observation and document collection was thus to narrow down the target community to small, active user groups that communicate together in a more restricted space, make general notes of potential participants based on their resource use and request consent before collecting the actual data samples. While consent for research could have been requested on the chat channel at large before any observation in it took place, such an approach was not preferable because the observation of the user groups' activity was not restricted to the regular users' channel. Data collection that was driven by key participants also enabled the more focused use of the Discord client's search feature for further samples.

The decision to restrict data collection to specific user groups was also based on the observation that this collection of users shows similar interactional patterns to the general userbase. This assumption was supported by long-term participation in the community as well as the understanding that regular users are veteran members who have settled into the community and, consequently, into the interactional behaviors that have developed in the online space. Limiting the data to the group of regular users was preferred for efficiency and a more focused approach.

In light of the principles of multimodal discourse analysis, the first analytical task was to identify the modes present on Discord and the World of Warcraft server that exhibit meaning-making, such as user information, messages and the various non-textual components of messages. The semiotic functions of these modes were subsequently correlated with the functions of the semiotic resources of the interaction order The data samples collected followed the distinct categories of semiotic resources that were outlined in the background section and the research questions. Additionally, the data included some visual presentations of the functionality of Discord, the tools that the client gave to its users and the general structure of the analyzed chat server. These

features were relevant to the establishment of the online space in which individuals interact and the subsequent effect it has on embodiment, presence and interaction, which made them important to identify and understand. The categories were as follows:

- the personal front
- perceptual spaces
- interpersonal distances
- the sense of time
- the tools and functionality of the Discord software client
- the structure and organization of the World of Warcraft server

The information gathered regarding Discord as an application related to the affordances in global and server-wide user customization, status indication, server management, messaging and permission structures. This information was used to both define Discord as an environment earlier in this section as well as support the analysis on the interactional effects of Discord's features. The data pertaining to the World of Warcraft server provided details of channel structure, user hierarchy, permissions and social conduct. These details were utilized to further connect the online manifestations of semiotic resources to the concepts of space in the chat environment they appear in.

The relevant data and modes for each semiotic category of resources were identified by corresponding the physical semiotic resources of the interaction order with the general semiotic elements of the Discord client, users, and communication events based on background theory. Sign equipment was correlated with the general visual representation of a user, verbal and non-verbal communication in message content were equated with written language and non-written multimodal features

respectively, and status messages and indicators showed implications of mono- and polychronism.

The data on urgency, most perceptual spaces and interpersonal distances were found to rely largely on verbal indexicality because of the lack of physical and technological avenues for non-verbal indexing. Even though online spaces cannot inhabit temperature, touch or smell, there was an interest in the purpose of observed verbal indicators of perceptions related to them. To collect relevant data on such use, words related to temperature ('hot', 'cold'), hearing ('loud', 'quiet'), olfaction ('smell') and touch ('touch') were looked for with observation and message searches that filtered out non-participants[2]. Additionally, the use of the indexicals 'here', 'in' and 'there' were documented to analyze how users perceive the boundaries of the spaces they talk in. Expressions of the passing of time required a more complex approach: Phrases such as telling someone else to 'hurry up' and stating that something 'takes forever' were formulated as possible verbal expressions of urgency affecting the sense of time, which provided promising data samples in message searches. The indexing of interpersonal distance was semiotically connected to the utilization of mentions, which was tentatively interpreted as an indicator of one-on-one conversation at a social distance. The details of these semiotic comparisons and ideas were further developed in the analysis.

[2] To filter a search appropriately, search options (see Appendix 5) were used to limit results, either to messages found on the channel for regulars ('in: channelname') or from specific participants ('from: username').

4 FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of the manifestations of semiotic resources on the World of Warcraft server. Additionally, the impact of the technological framework on Discord and the concepts of online embodiment and presence are considered in relation to the semiotic resources.

4.1 The sense of time

The concepts of urgency and mono-polychronism have significant differences in the mode that is used to index them. Urgency, i.e., the display of the slow passing of time when an individual wants something to be done quickly, relies on the verbal indexicality employed by the user. Example 1 showcases such usage:

(1)

Elle: @Angmar HURRY UP AND RESPOND I NEED TO GO BACK TO NAPPING

Here, the user Elle is waiting for a response from another user called Angmar. From her perspective, the reply is taking Angmar too long to send, which prompts her to attempt to gain his attention with a mention. Additionally, she tells him to "hurry up" – emphasizing her frustration with the use of capital letters – because she wants to return to her nap as soon as possible. For Elle, napping is an activity she wants to get back to quickly but because Angmar is delaying her, she chooses to indicate her impatience verbally to make it known to him. Non-verbal signs of impatience, which are typical indexicals of urgency in physical spaces, are not available to Elle on Discord. Consequently, Angmar cannot notice her impatience without a written message that states it.

In addition to informing others of impatience, users index urgency by directly referring to the feeling of time slowing down in messages:

(2)

Pumpkin Pion: *flops into chat* work gave me a new laptop, I hate setting everything back up, takes forever

The user Pumpkin Pion lets the regular channel know that his new laptop for work takes a long time to set up in a preferred manner. The use of the phrase "takes forever" carries the implication that the user perceives the time that it takes to set up the computer as uncomfortably long. The impatience related to the situation is likely to stem from the desire to resume work quickly on a newer, better device that is ready for use, and the slowness in reaching this point results in a display of urgency.

Status indicators, while primarily utilized to signal availability on Discord, were found to index polychronism on some level, especially in combination with status messages. Figure 1 shows the status configuration of Elle, displayed on the server's user list:

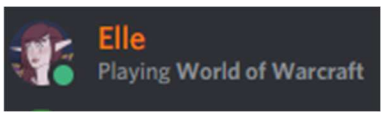

Figure 1: Implied polychronism through status

The green circle on the bottom right side of the profile picture signals that the user has set herself as "Online", i.e., available for chatting. It also indicates that she has been active in the application very recently: If she had not, the client would have changed her status indicator to "Idle" after five to ten minutes of inactivity. Additionally, the user's status message below her name shows that she is playing World of Warcraft. In other words, the user is online and assumed to be interacting with others while doing an activity outside of Discord, which implies polychronic switching between the tasks

performed in both applications. However, even though the automatic timer on the *Idle* status indicator proves that she is doing something on Discord, at the very least briefly focusing on the application to read messages, there is no certainty of whether she is focusing on the game application or even a potential third window in-between. Furthermore, the user could be "afking" in-game, a term that refers to players doing nothing in the world while staying logged in and present in the virtual space. An additional complication is the option to disable personal status messages in user settings altogether, which conceals the use of other applications. Because of the uncertainty of "doing", the implications of polychronism are only superficial. Consequently, monochronism is equally infeasible to index reliably: Even if users displayed no status message, they could still be doing something else on the computer. This is the case in the opposite situation as well where a user is "Idle" on Discord due to no activity in the application, pictured in Figure 2.

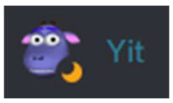

Figure 2: An "idle" user.

Even though the status indicator signals inactivity, there is no certain information regarding his activity elsewhere, and monochronism cannot be observed. Furthermore, possible verbal statements of "only" chatting on the server do not guarantee monochronism because the meaning of "doing nothing else" is often used figuratively to state that nothing important is being done:

(3)

Kyatastrophe: im going to do precisely nothing today

Example 3 shows the user Kyatastrophe declaring that she will do "precisely nothing" that day. The expectation is not that she will do no embodied tasks whatsoever, but

that she will not engage in anything significant or effortful. Ultimately, the indexicality of mono- and polychronism is semiotically ambiguous without physical observation of the user.

4.2 Perceptual spaces

The Discord client's interface provides visual, conceptual boundaries to aid navigation and enable usage in general. The division of conversation into different channels that cannot be seen without entering them creates an abstract sense of containment, which allows users to refer to other channels on the server as representations of other spaces:

(4)

Jenxa: I don't know anyone in general chat

In Example 4, the user Jenxa is chatting on the text channel restricted to regular users, telling others on said channel that the users "in general chat" are strangers to her. The use of the preposition "in" indicates that the user indexes the channel called "general" or "general chat" as a space that other users are located in. Furthermore, because this message was sent on the channel for regulars, it can be inferred that the user conceptualizes herself as being outside of general chat, in a separate place.

An additional example of the conceptualization of space on the server relates to the usage of the indexical "here". The user Elleiana utilizes it as follows:

(5)

Elleinia: I copied the tag from here into another server :sweat_smile:

Here, the user is explaining how she copied a bot feature from the World of Warcraft server to another one. In this context, the indexical "here" does not index the channel where the interaction takes place but the server as a whole. Therefore, the World of Warcraft server is considered a representation of a space as well, where the channels in the server are conceptualized as smaller spaces within a larger one and the server as a space in a network of other spaces. The word "here" does not always index the online space, however:

(6)

Timewalker Doge: They sad [sic] something about another storm here

In Example 6, the user comments on the weather in the physical region he is currently in. He does this by indexing the location with "here", similarly to Example 5. The use of indexicals in the chat environment thus requires the identification of context: In Example 5, the reference to "another server" in the same message shows the reader that the sender refers to the server, whereas Example 6 can be inferred to talk about the real world because online spaces lack weather. The users' simultaneous perception of the online space and the physical space gives rise to a more complex system of indexicality where spaces are indexed interchangeably.

Indexicality of the senses on the World of Warcraft server relies on verbal communication due to embodied indexicality being unavailable. Users do not index sensations of smells, haptics or temperature within the Discord client itself because there is nothing to be sensed. Visual perception is indexed most saliently during commonplace debates and discussions regarding "dark mode" and "light mode". These terms refer to the Discord client's options of presenting text as white on a dark grey background or as black on a white background, respectively. The use of these different modes alters the way in which the space is perceived in terms of color, and light mode use is often commented on in a humorously negative manner because of its alleged strain on the eyes. The following exchange highlights this behavior:

(7)

[**andm** posts a screenshot of Discord chat messages on her screen that shows her usage of light mode.]
andm: I suppose he talks about tpv
Kinger: I think so
Kinger: I don't know why he's taking it to DMs though
andm: yeah I don't either
Kinger: or why you're using light mode :squinteyes:

In Example 7, the user andm posts a screenshot of her Discord client that is set in light mode, which prompts Kinger to comment by asking why she would use it. The image itself indexes what andm sees, whereas Kinger's mocking question, combined with an emote of squinting eyes, implies that he visually perceives the client in dark mode. The different preferences in color modes and the option to change between them at will indicates that there is a large difference in the personal visual perceptions of the online space and that users can control the way in which they see the space. Furthermore, the popular understanding of light mode being an undesirable feature allows users to address light mode in the same way others do in the social setting, which suggests that (online) culture affects the meaning-making of the senses in online spaces as well.

Auditory perceptions are limited to the message notification sounds that the client provides. They are sometimes indexed in messages:

(8)

andm: whops sorry about that
andm: didn't hear the notifications

Example 8 shows the user apologizing for missing messages due to not hearing the notifications of the client. Even though she indexes client-related perception, the sound

was sensed by her physical body in physical space because it was emitted by the device that she uses to access the chat environment. The user cannot physically immerse herself or her senses into the online space to hear the notifications "within" the space of the server. Similarly, visual perceptions of the client are based on the information that can be seen on the display of a device instead of embodied observation of the online space itself, which highlights the nature of said space as conceptual and abstract.

The remaining perceptual spaces are largely expressed in relation to physical circumstances. The user "ммм" indexes the smell of cheese at his physical location in Example 9:

(9)

ммм: dang it – I ate some cheese and forgot the box here – everything smells like cheese now lol

He also describes the direction of his touch in the following sample:

(10)

ммм: damn it! I keep triyng [sic] to touch my beard but it's gone

Lastly, Example 11 shows a user describing her perception of the temperature in the region she lives:

(11)

Jenxa: Its 46 this morning. I'm cold

All of the aforementioned instances where perceptions are indexed are related to the physical surroundings of the individuals. The display of perceptual spaces that are often only perceivable by the user in question implies that the server functions as an extension of physical social action: Because the use of these semiotic resources is

socially ingrained, it can be argued that the presence of social actors – even online – causes individuals to perform semiotic actions to them to unknowingly attempt to realize the interaction order with them. A less interpretive alternative is that indexing perceptual spaces provides topics for discussion.

4.3 Interpersonal distances

The semiotic resource of physical distance between people becomes difficult to define in a space where human bodies are not present. Furthermore, users are not forced into situations where they have to display their intent in the context of the space to avoid misunderstandings about what the distance entails. Despite this fact, some conceptual parallels can be drawn between the implied distances of the online chat environment and the concrete distances of physical interaction.

Interpersonal distances in conversations that occur on the World of Warcraft server are indexed to some capacity with mentions. One participant mentioning the other to start a conversation between the two can be seen as equivalent to the verbal initiation that occurs between two people in a physical space who want to engage in conversation within personal distance. Explicit intent to address the other is mandatory in text-based chat rooms due to the lack of non-verbal cues. Additionally, mentions reduce confusion caused by the visual presentation of messages as a chronological list in text-based chat rooms. An instance of a conceptual one-on-one conversation can be seen in Example 1. More participants can be invited to join the conversation by mentioning multiple people in the same message, as is shown in Example 12:

(12)

a g-g-g-ghost: @Nick @Bœuf Bourgeoisie @Kinger @Kyata Not sure how you guys feel about anime, but I highly recommend Knights of Sidonia if you haven't already

seen it.

Kyata: I like anime

…

Bœuf Bourgeoisie: I have watched that, really good

Multiple mentions index the conceptual equivalent of addressing a group of people at social distance. However, it is not guaranteed that all the mentioned users respond to the message: The user that mentioned four others only received responses on the topic from Kyata and Bœuf Bourgeoisie while Nick and Kinger sent no reply. The example shows that even though conceptual interpersonal distances can be indexed, the lack of physicality allows users to give them little thought. This would not be feasible in the physical world where a specific proximity to another person necessitates the display of intent. Additionally, exchanges where messages are targeted at specific people do not benefit from the privacy created by distance because they can be read, interrupted and joined by anyone who has access to the channel in question.

The restricted access to channels facilitates a social situation where higher ranked members can be theoretically perceived as being at a public distance from regular users. For example, the channel for announcements displayed in Figure 3 is read-only for anyone who is not a moderator, and is often used by moderators to send written, public messages with important information on the server or World of Warcraft. In this sense, the channel can be considered a platform for public speaking.

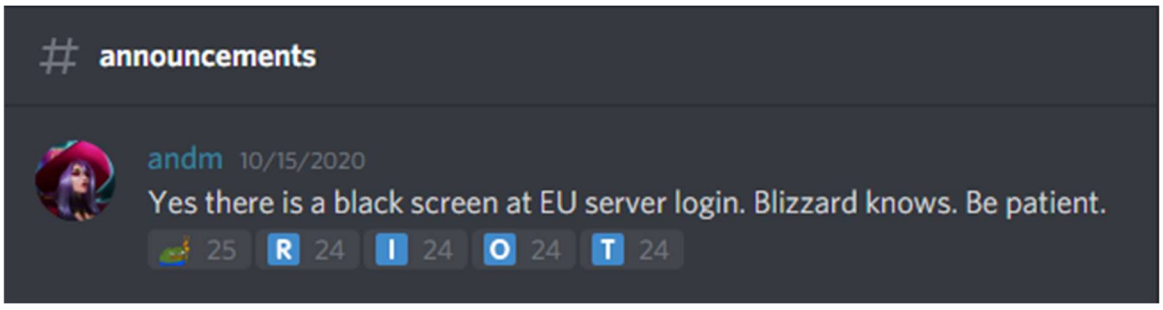

Figure 3: A moderator message on the "announcements" channel

Because of the restrictions put in place, other users cannot individually respond to the messages on the same channel. Even though traditional IM responses are limited, Discord has a feature that allows emotes to be attached to the messages of others as "reactions". This feature's usage can also be restricted, which is not the case on the server at hand. Emotes themselves are a semantic tool meant for expressing feelings and expressions when the face-to-face domain is lacking, which in this context means that the use of emote reactions can be seen as equivalent to listeners displaying an interactionally appropriate response – an expression, a clap or a cheer – to a public speaker's utterance at physical, public distance. While the social arrangement bears some similarity to speaking at a public distance in physical space, in the vast majority of physical contexts there would be no restriction of speech. Additionally, the feeling of distance created in this context is not analogous to physical positioning, but social standing: The users follow a social hierarchy where moderators have a higher status, which is further indexed by the moderator sending messages on a read-only channel. At most, the interpretation of the channel as a space of public speaking provides a sense of public distance.

4.4 The personal front

The most visible manifestations of the expressive equipment of a given user on the World of Warcraft server are illustrated in Figure 4.

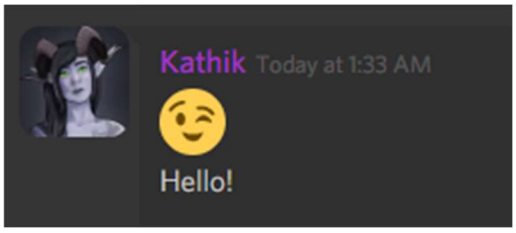

Figure 4: The expressive equipment of a Discord user

The profile picture of the user (also known as the avatar) resides on the left side, separate from the frame that contains the username and the content of the sent message. Any image can be uploaded as a profile picture, although the use of personal photos on the server is scarce. The avoidance of photos can be attributed to the desire to maintain privacy, especially in a large online community. Alternatively, server users may wish to use fictional characters that they identify with as representations of themselves. The separation of the personal front from embodiment allows for more freedom in the choice of visual representation.

The username, the second of the major pieces of sign equipment, is presented above the message in a bolder font and can be overriden into a server-specific nickname if the permissions for it are enabled for the user. In addition to letters and numbers, nicknames can include graphical emotes and symbols, such as the nickname in Example 9. Some users do not use nicknames at all, which can be a way of keeping oneself easily recognizable both globally and on the server. Nicknames are also utilized by more prominent users to signify their role in the community. Figure 5 shows how the user Carl has added "[bot dev]" to his name as an indicator that he works on one of the primary bots integrated into the server. The inclusion of a community role into the nickname is both a matter of identification and status: It is analogous of a badge attached to clothing.

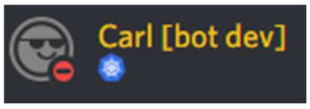

Figure 5: A user adding further identification to his nickname

Additional sign usage that is relevant to nicknames includes the social phenomenon of trends. Figure 6 shows a similarity in nicknames in terms of color and effect:

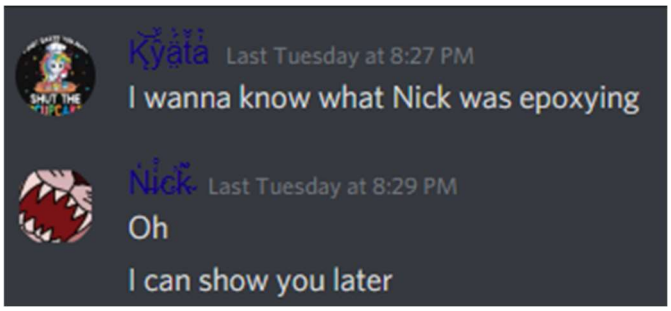

Figure 6: The "glitch text" trend in nicknames

In this sample, a moderator and a regular user have modified their nicknames with "glitch text" or "scrambled text" via an online website[3]. The decision to add glitch text to nicknames related to a major storyline in World of Warcraft where inner corruption was a central theme. Glitch text is widely associated with either data corruption or corruption from a fictional source in online culture. which prompted the moderators of the World of Warcraft server to create a temporary nickname trend with glitch text that other users could also participate in by either changing their nickname, requesting the "Corrupted" role that colors the name dark blue, or by doing both.

Even though glitch text is often associated with fictional corruption, its use in nicknames was framed semiotically to be specific to World of Warcraft and consequently, the community that uses it in this context. The choice to apply the emote to the nickname instead of the globally visible username further amplifies the notion that the trend is relevant to a certain server instead of all of them. Therefore, the association between glitch text and an in-game event form a new meaning for the use of glitch text, which indicates that the online space and the discourse in it can have an effect on the personal front.

[3] https://zalgo.org/, an online text generator that converts text input into glitch text.

The color of the name in Figure 4 deviates from the default white color that users with no color-assigning roles have, indicating that the server has made it possible to express oneself through color choices. Roles that are not colored also exist but they are largely used to grant access to specific channels. The colored roles available to users are often labelled in order to organize and visibly tag users with further identification. The ones available to regular users on the World of Warcraft server are named after the 12 playable character classes[4] in the game. The colors correspond to the color coding of the classes in-game: For example, the light purple in Figure 4 is used to represent the "demon hunter" class. There are colors attached to other roles as well, such as those of moderators and regular users, to signify a specific group of people in the community that somehow differs from the normal userbase. The class colors can be self-assigned by anyone, which makes them the primary manner of color customization. Because of their connection to the character classes in World of Warcraft, the role colors are a semiotic link between the user and his or her game-specific persona. This makes the personal front topically relevant to the social setting by attaching concepts in the video game to the sign equipment that is used in the community for said game. Many users refer to in-game content with profile pictures and names as well, often by choosing images or artwork of in-game characters as user icons or by using the name of their characters as their own on the server. Both types of referencing are used in Figure 4. It is also possible for users to assign themselves a class role solely because they prefer its color. This changes the semiotic value of the color from class representation to the representation of personal taste, although this difference in meaning is not known to other users unless explicitly stated.

Roles further determine the color that a user displays through role priority, presented in Figure 7. In the role hierarchy of Discord, colored roles that are placed above others

[4] A character class is the choice of profession that a player makes for their character in role-playing games that determines the abilities and skills the character can use, e.g. a mage, a fighter or a healer.

in the role list override the ones below them. The World of Warcraft server has placed some colored roles such as individually requested colors of active members and the temporary color for users who are having their birthday above the class-related roles that are normally used for personalization (see Appendix 4). This is to ensure that the colors have a special semiotic purpose and that the users attached to them stand out. Moderators have the largest pool of colors to choose from because they have access to class colors, the moderator color and the color assigned to regular users whereas a normal user only has access to the first.

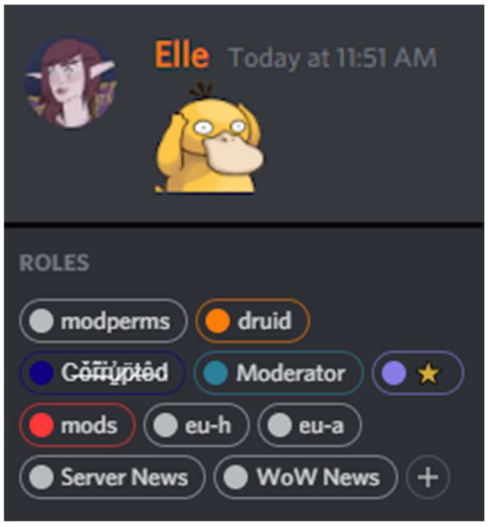

Figure 7: Role priority and its effect on name color

Role priority and the option to attach multiple colored roles to oneself allows for preference in self-expression: for instance, the user in Figure 7 has several roles due to her status as a moderator but because of role priority she can assign herself a class role that overrides her other roles and displays her name as orange. It allows her to avoid using the dark blue color of the next role in the hierarchy, "Corrupted", as a part of her personal front. However, it is important to note that the collection of roles that a user has on her profile carries some semiotic significance as expressive equipment. The different roles, both colored and not, display information through their labels. In Figure 7, the user can be seen to play on the European server in World of Warcraft

because of the "eu-h" (short for Europe-Horde) and "eu-a" (short for Europe-Alliance) roles. The roles imply that she lives in Europe, which adds the quality of being European to her expressive equipment. In other words, roles carry semiotic information that has developed in the social setting of the chat server, and this semiotic information can be assigned to users for self-presentation.

The technological affordances of the World of Warcraft server facilitate ways to even exploit the dynamic nature of the aforementioned visual aspects of the personal front. An example of this is the use of a bot's sign equipment to post on channels for humorous purposes in Figure 8:

Figure 8: The use of a bot as a personal front

The "!echo" text command, followed by the hyperlink to a channel (formed by using the # symbol as a prefix for the channel name) and message content, prompts the bot to send the message content to the specified channel as itself. The function is often used to make joking implications of the bot being sentient and talking with other users independently. In Figure 8, the user performs the joke by entering the text command on the channel for regular users that normal users cannot see, which hides the command from the "general" chat channel to strengthen the implication of sentience. The ability to send messages while appearing as someone else hints at other possibilities of exploiting the personal front, such as making one's online sign equipment identical to another user's by using the same image, name, nickname and

roles, if possible. Even the four-digit discriminator attached to the global username can be changed. The ability to completely alter the personal front is brought about by the fact that the personal front of a user is not attached to a physical body. Because there are no biological markers that could be used for identification, the potential for superficial deception is high.

Writing styles of users carry their own expressive meanings. Generally, the writing styles of users vary between grammatically appropriate punctuation, the lack of punctuation and capitalization and variants in-between the two. Users also have their own preferences for multimodal content in messages. Discord provides the possibility to use standard and custom-made emotes (shown in Figure 9) as well as embed images into messages (shown in Figure 10), which are the primary multimodal tools used in communication. Embedded images that are used to interact are often still images or animated GIFs of a reaction or an expression, chosen to represent the reaction of the user in question. Such use, in combination with emotes, suggests that graphical multimodality in messages is used semiotically to index moods, facial expressions and to imply the tone of a message in a social context where the physical face or the tonal features of speech cannot be used. What is also notable is the tendency for users to have favored emotes and images that they use in messages at a higher frequency and the ability to create new emotes that semiotically encompass the specific expressions their creator wants to convey. Preference and personalization indicates that in addition to writing styles, emotes and images are a large part of the sign equipment in Discord messaging.

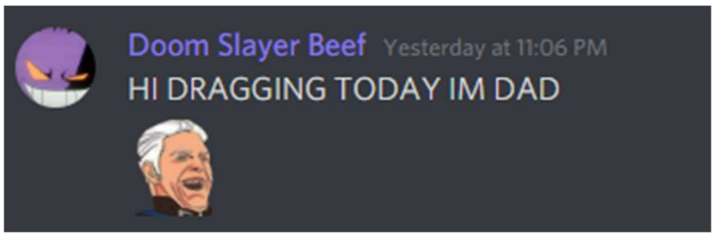

Figure 9: Emote use in a message

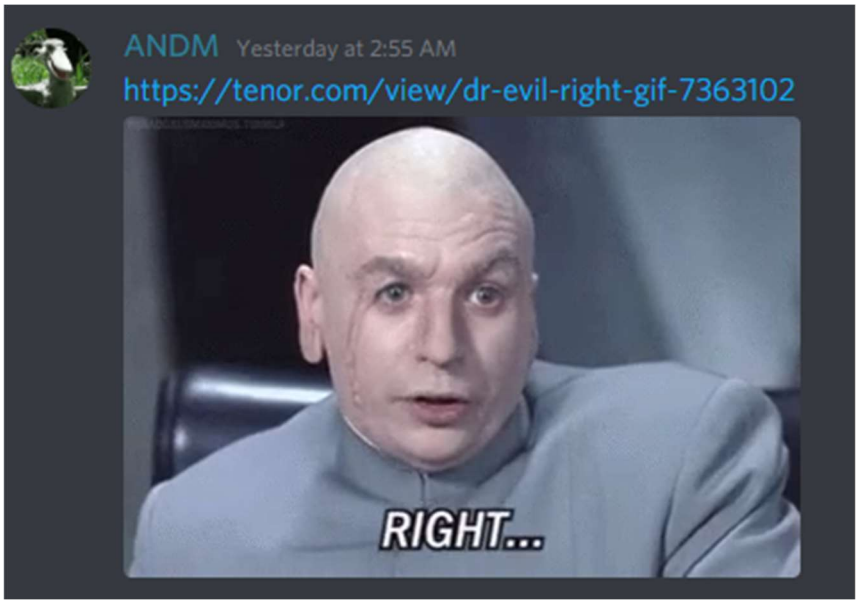

Figure 10: An animated GIF used as a reaction

In general, users have high amounts of freedom and control regarding their sign equipment. Much of the physical personal front pertains to what is "given off" unintentionally, such as biological characteristics. However, the sign equipment on Discord is always "given" because every aspect of it can be adjusted based on preference, which is a consequence of the non-physical circumstances. Exploitation of the personal front is largely prevented by social conduct: The rules of the World of Warcraft server and the social conventions of Discord communities combined with the generally proper behavior that is learned in the physical world form a framework of conduct that users refer to in order to fit in. In practical terms, this means, for instance, a general willingness to follow server rules to avoid social disruption or avoiding the use of pornographic material as a profile picture.

A concrete example of the effect of social conduct on the World of Warcraft server's personal front are the permissions tied to user roles, which cause the colors to imply social standing and personal conduct. This is evident in the moderator role that can be

chosen as the one displayed to others. An instance of color being tied to proper behavior is the existence of a bright red role called "Muted", which is assigned to rulebreakers as a warning or to defuse conflicts. The role prevents the user from sending any messages and the community is in understanding of the role having such limitations due to its frequency in Discord server moderation. Therefore, the bright red name color on this server is semiotically tied to something undesirable and an indication of transgression. Conversely, moderators who choose to display the shade of blue of the "Moderator" role that gives them full permissions express that they have the ability to alter the online space, for instance by changing the social rules of the server or by adding, rearraging or removing channels. They can also bar regular users from the space through restrictions or bans. However, presenting oneself as a moderator also brings the social obligation of behaving in a more professional manner because it is expected of the role in Discord communities. The use of the "Muted" role and its perception in the community cannot be taken as a direct example of civil inattention because intentional ignorance of a transgressor cannot be reliably observed. However, it can be stated that the social conduct developed and enforced on the server makes all user groups aim to "fit in" by behaving appropriately and following the rules, perhaps to a higher degree than in physical public settings in the case of normal users because the punishments for inappropriate behavior are more severe.

As an additional consideration on the manifestation of civil inattention, a phenomenon similar to the concept occurs when two one-on-one conversations overlap:

(13)

290 Flavors: I think I'm defo gonna do the Mentor thing. Is that open yet?
andm: should I try to get out for a kebab
andm: @Elleiana if I destroy scotland by accident are you ok? it was for a kebab
Kyatastrophe: @290 Flavors ya
andm: I can't play and I'm stressing the fuck out of my brainz for the appartment [sic] research

Elleiana: Most kebabs just deliver
Kyatastrophe: by faction emissary
andm: I need some food

Example 13 presents two pairs talking to each other simultaneously on the same channel: The user 290 Flavors is being addressed by Kyatastrophe while andm starts an exchange with Elleiana. Because andm initiates conversation with a mention towards Elleiana before Kyatastrophe manages to respond to 290 Flavors, Kyatastrophe has to mention her recipient to avoid her message being perceived as a response to andm's message right above it. The two exchanges proceed independently of each other after the establishment of recipients with mentions, which implies that 290 Flavors and Kyatastrophe are intentionally averting their attention from andm and Elleiana, and vice versa. Such behavior is considered appropriate in the context of the social conduct that has developed on Discord and textual online communication, and said conduct affects the aspects of the personal front related to public behavior as users aim to fit into the community to avoid social alienation.

4.5 Reflections on the affordances of Discord and the World of Warcraft server

The affordances of the Discord client and the World of Warcraft server impact the use and nature of the semiotic resources outlined above to varying degrees. As mentioned in earlier sections, the lack of a physical body forces chat users to rely on the modes made available by the Discord application to convey the numerous embodied actions that are integral to the interaction order in physical spaces. The non-physical nature of the online space is the primary reason for the alteration of the semiotic resources of the interaction order.

The transformation of urgency from a non-verbally indexed resource in physical spaces to a verbally indexed one online occurs either because there is no necessity for

any other mode to fulfill this semiotic purpose or because the affordances of Discord are not sufficient for it. The limitations that Discord places on the display of urgency are the more plausible reason for this change because the analysis of verbal urgency implies that users have a semiotic need to express it. The software provides better non-verbal tools for the display of polychronism but the technology cannot accommodate for the ambiguity of all the actions a user takes while on a personal computer, which leads to ambiguity in the usage of the semiotic resource itself. While the distributed presence in multiple applications in itself can be seen as polychronism, a perspective that emphasizes the doing of polychronic tasks in applications challenges this view. It is likely that beyond cases such as video calls where physical cues are visible, mono- and polychronism cannot be non-verbally indexed in an adequate way in chat environments.

Discord as a space is limiting to the number of perceptual elements in it. The use of digital devices requires vision, hearing and touch in various ways but most of this utilization relates to the concrete handling of the device in the real world and does not allow for immersive perception of the online space itself. Visually perceptual boundaries, the concept of space and one's position in said space are highly conceptual which is both facilitated and perpetuated by the chat client: The construction of servers and channels as contained spaces promotes the concept of movement from one space to another, leaving and entering the online space through logging out and back in, as well as the concept of being present in a bounded space where other spaces cannot be seen. The suggestions of movement and location also imply the existence of a virtual presence, i.e., a representation of a user's physical presence. The theory of representations of action as generators of virtual presence (Büscher et al. 2001) mentioned earlier in this study is applicable: Users create presence through the represented action of sending messages on a specific channel, which excludes their presence from other channels. Other senses don't imply conceptual perceptual boundaries on Discord in this way, although it can be argued that the lack of

perceptual dimensions is considered a conceptual boundary in itself due to its restriction on the indexable features of the online space. In this context, the chat environment can even be considered semiotically limiting because there are less perceptually significant features in it. Despite these limitations, Discord as a space allows for a degree of user agency regarding the visual and auditory perceptual aspects that are present. Color modes and the option to mute notifications are examples of customization that change the way users experience the online space with their senses. The possibility for these changes also brings the possibility of semiotic variance in other aspects of the interactional resources. For instance, specific role colors might be poorly visible while using dark mode, which makes them less desirable as sign equipment for a dark mode user.

Interpersonal distances as a semiotic resource face the greatest semiotic limitations in the online space. The high impact of proximity on the meaning-making of the resource in physical spaces means that in a non-physical space, most of the semiotic functionality is eliminated. Mentions and the structuring of some channels as avenues for public announcements allow for abstract concepts of distance to be formed but these concepts do not facilitate the same kind of proximity-based displays of intention and meaning that distances in physical spaces do. The issue lies in the inability to relate one's personal concept of location to a specific point on a channel and the conceptual location of another user: When there are no precise points of reference in space, there can be no proximity. The general ideas of presence and location in online spaces have more validity because those representations only require a general position, such as a server or a channel.

The understanding of channels as separate spaces brings the concepts of the frontstage and backstage into consideration. Because user access to channels can be restricted, the formation of a frontstage and a backstage is supported by the affordances of the online space. In the context of the World of Warcraft server, the channel for regular users

serves as a backstage where moderators and regular users can talk freely about moderation and the current state of public channels, such as in Example 14:

(14)

Yit: I guess I have to give the randos credit for not making general chat into a right click whackamole

The user in the example drops his more professional front as a moderator and gives his personal opinion of the general chat channel on the restricted channel for regular users, stating that he is somewhat thankful that "randos" – members on the server who are either new or talk sporadically – did not force him into a "right click whackamole", a metaphor for banning multiple users in quick succession for inappropriate conduct. The user chooses to express this view in the relative privacy of the backstage while the general chat functions as the frontstage of the World of Warcraft server. There is an additional "backstage of a backstage" in the form of the moderator channel that can only be seen by the moderator user group, which enables the temporary abandonment of the front used on the channel for regulars as well. The structuring of the server and the creation of isolated spaces for specific user groups have also enabled a system where moderation work is a backstage activity and discussions on the server and its users in relation to moderation are kept hidden, which shows that specific channels have specific social functions.

It is evident from the data that the personal front exhibits the most diverse semiotic features, which can be explained by the abundance of user customization options as well as the possibility for multimodal, text-based self-expression through messages. While Discord provides such functionality, other online chat applications and environments are bound to have different toolsets and, therefore, different manifestations of the personal front.

The inclusion of the permission structure in the client causes servers to have varying affordances for the usage of the personal front. In the case of the World of Warcraft server, the roles meant for cosmetic purposes can be self-assigned by any user whereas on other servers the process might require assistance from a user with higher permissions. The server also restricts the use of nicknames to users that have self-assigned a color to themselves, which poses restrictions to the personal fronts of users that are brand new or who have joined the server without interacting with the role system. Additionally, moderators on the server can forcibly change the user color and nickname of someone with a 'lower rank', i.e. a role that is lower in the permission hierarchy. The affordances of sign equipment, specifically name colors and nicknames, are thus dependent on the structure of the user permissions that the server moderators have put in place, which implies a phenomenon where a person's virtual personal front can be severely limited or even directly manipulated if the communication platform has the framework for it. A physical space can also restrict individuals in this way, for example by only permitting uniforms or by heavily enforcing specific kinds of behavior and actions (e.g. the military). The difference arises from the absolute control of the personal front that the server administration can practice: Instead of the front being strongly affected by human authority and social pressure, the permission system of Discord can make it impossible for a normal user to utilize every feature of personal customization that would otherwise be available. A person in military training, while expected to wear his uniform and behave in an orderly manner, can always dress and act outside of the norm of the social space he or she is in. The same cannot be said in virtual spaces where user hierarchies and system-based limitations determine the level of control that an individual has over his or her personal front.

Rules set by moderators largely represent expectations in conduct that are typical of public Discord communities, further specified to fit the overarching discourse around World of Warcraft (see Appendix 5). Other users adopt this as the appropriate manner to behave, and even call out transgressors to moderators:

(15)

Kysera: discord invite spam in monthly spooktober

In this example, a regular user informs a moderator of spam – the flooding of a text channel with nonsensical text to disrupt interaction – on the channel called "monthly spooktober". Regular users are especially alert in regards to inappropriate behavior and often use the backstage of the regular users' channel to inform moderators of trouble, which the moderators answer to in a swift and decisive manner. The display of social rules, the pressure to follow them and the relatively rigid interpretation of them gives server-specific rules a higher level on importance in the development of the server's social conduct. The "ratting out" of bad behavior in Example 15, for instance, is a common form of fitting in on the server because it shows awareness and following of the rules that are in place, which, in turn, strengthens the image of the user as an individual that behaves in a proper manner. Knowledge of the rules and conduct on a server provides information on what behavior is acceptable, which leads to the manifestation of semiotic resources in accordance with acceptable behavior.

5 CONCLUSION

This study was an interpretive semiotic analysis that showcased several ways in which the semiotic resources of the interaction order are used in text-based multimodal communication. The main findings conclude that the personal front gains new semiotic dimensions in multimodal online spaces, whereas the sense of time, perceptual spaces and interpersonal distances as resources face varying degrees of limitations. It is notable, however, that the analysis of visual perception provided insights on the way users conceptualize space and presence based on the affordances of the technology that is used to communicate. It was also found that some semiotic resources were not used to index the social space of the server itself. Rather, they were utilized to index the physical setting of the user in the chat room as an extension of the physical space and as points of discussion with others. The affordances of the Discord client and the World of Warcraft server in relation to the semiotic resources were considered as well, and the primary conclusion was that non-physicality affected the use of semiotic resources, in some cases to an extent that greatly limited the use of resources. Interpersonal distances were affected in this way the most because of their reliance on proximity.

The restrictions that the software allows to be placed on the communicative space have a significant impact on the semiotic resources of the interaction order. These include barring entry to channels while giving it to others and limiting the use of specific tools for the personal front, such as nickname assignment. The moderation of speech through rules and user hierarchy is an indicator of an explicit kind of social enforcement of conduct, which in combination with the limited permissions affects the way in which users present themselves. The use of explicit rules and the low tolerance for social transgressions on the server were found to contribute to a system of behavior where abiding by the rules and calling out those who did not is an indicator of proper behavior. The social conduct on the server in conjunction with the social conventions

in Discord communities at large serve as guidelines on how to use the semiotic resources of the interaction order in a way that is acceptable in the community.

The data for this study centered around users who were relatively familiar with each other. The exclusion of non-regular users limited the potential of the analysis in terms of diverse semiotic resource use and the discovery of features outside of the higher-ranking user groups. However, the massive size of the Discord server combined with the scope of the analysis necessitated a narrowing down of the target group. An extended reiteration of this study should take these issues into account by expanding the focus and the window of observation and by diversifying the data pool instead of focusing on subgroups of users. The definitions of "public" and "private" in online spaces should also be considered in large-scale data collection to ensure an ethical approach.

Future research on the topic should aim to find relationships between the interaction order and space in different communities, hosted in different online spaces. These spaces include but are not limited to social media sites, livestream communities and different kinds of chat rooms with different affordances for semiotic resources. The various possibilites of multimodal communication and their effects on semiotic resources should also be considered, especially in environments where the combination of different communicative channels such as audio, video and text gives rise to new multimodal semiotic practices. The preliminary implications on power structures in online places and their effects on the social semiotic space should also be analyzed further with the methodological support of critical discourse analysis. The concepts of presence and distributed presence can be incorporated by conducting data collection through mixed methods that combine online and offline aspects.

A long-term goal for the development of the interaction order would be to extend the points made here on semiotic resources and presence to a possible framework on the

functionality of units or otherwise apparent social groupings within an online space. If semiotic resources in a space are what we use to realize the way in which we position ourselves in a space, then there is merit in the idea of groupings of some kind to exist, although the findings made on interpersonal distances show that the application of physical proximity is not simple, and that research on groupings in a non-physical, text-based setting is a theoretical and methodological challenge. It is possible that the interaction and meaning-making in online text communication does not see the performance of social grouping as a priority, which then makes the semiotic resources more important in online contexts. Regardless, the analysis of any aspects of the interaction order is likely to reveal more on how we understand virtuality and the Internet as a social semiotic space.

6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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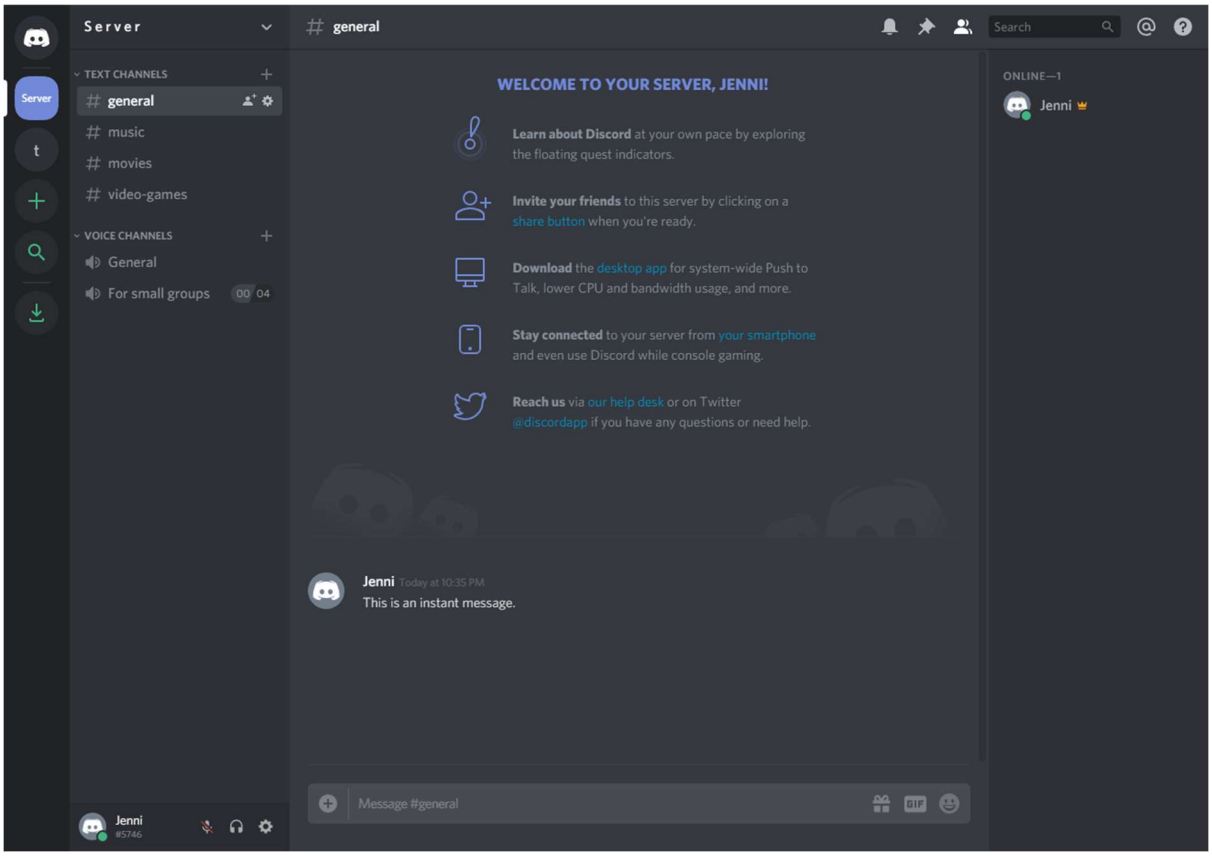
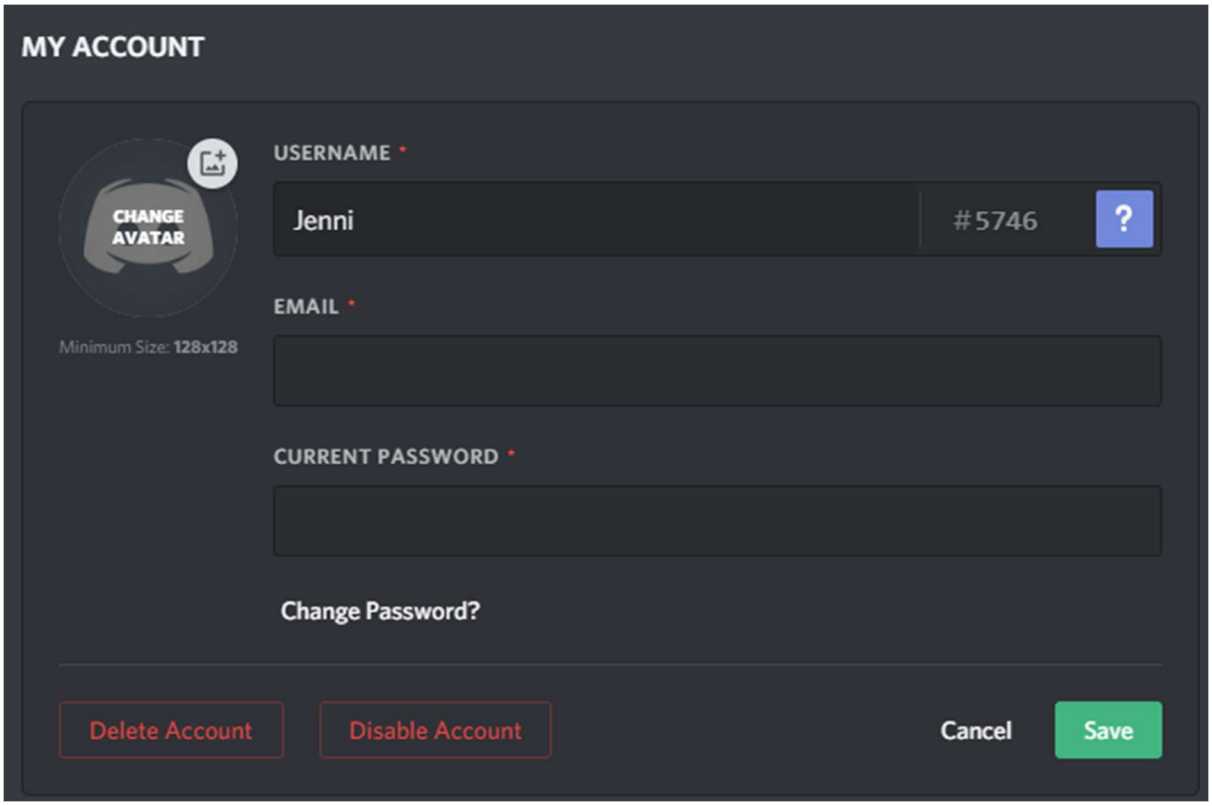
7 APPENDICES

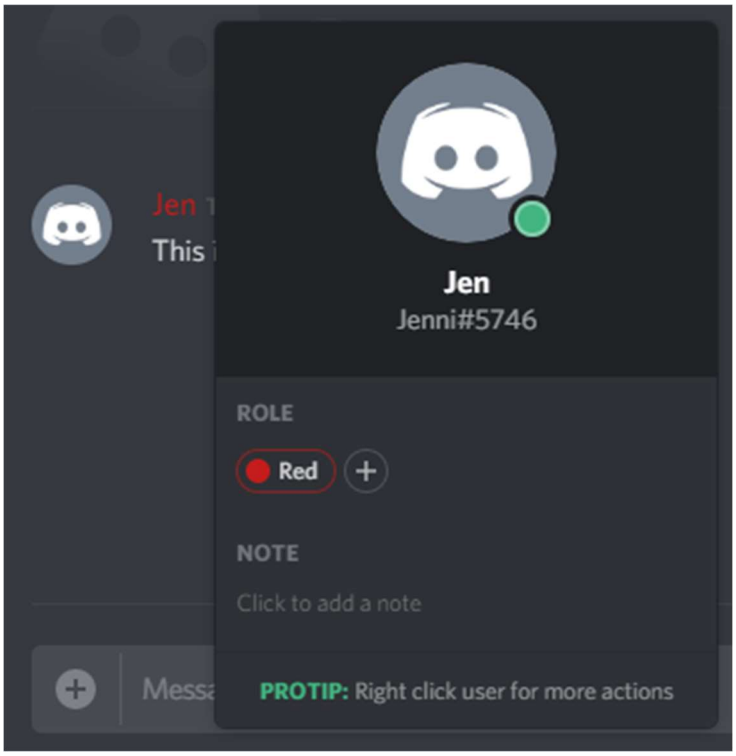
APPENDIX 1: A standard Discord server layout



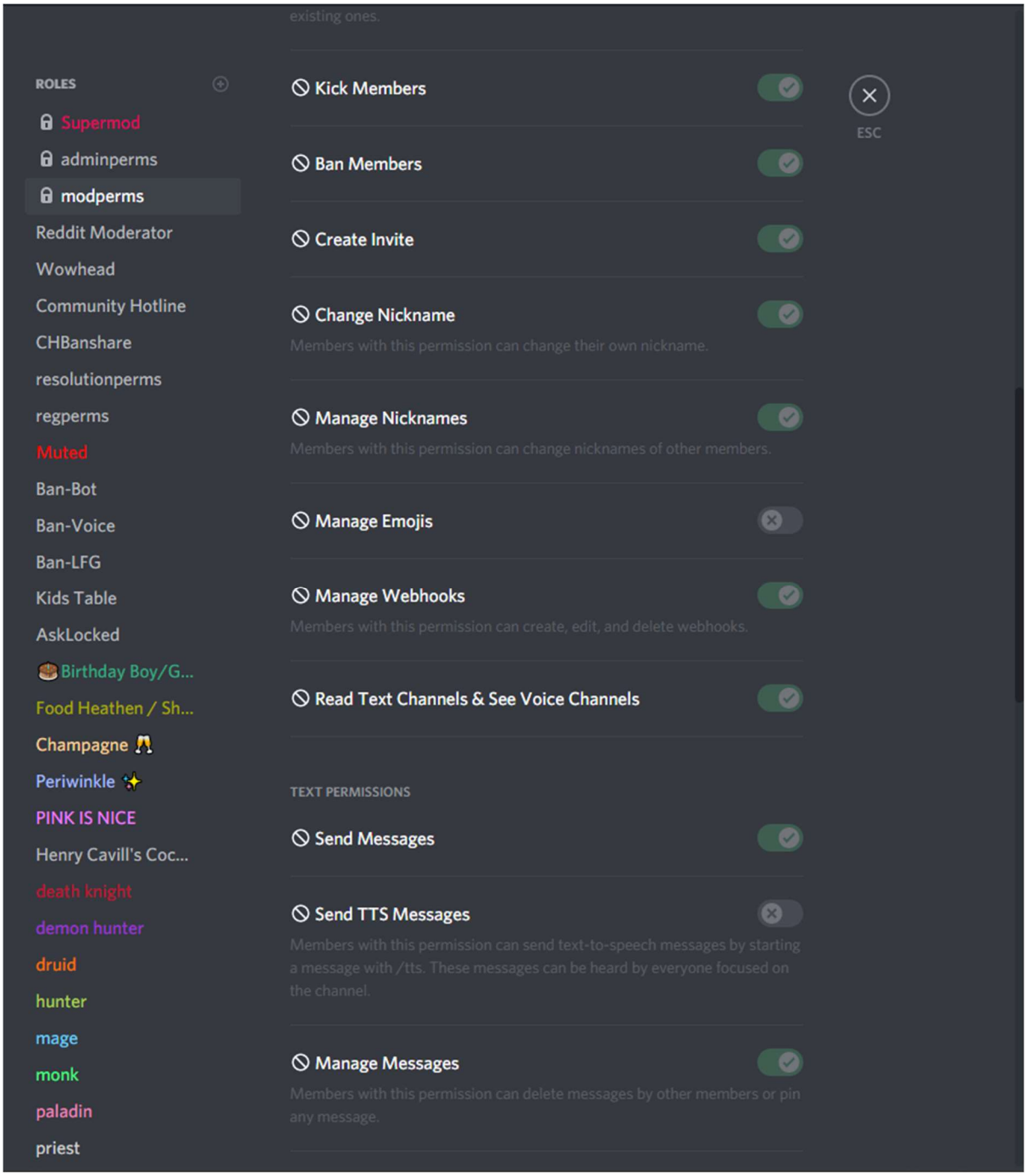
APPENDIX 2: User customization



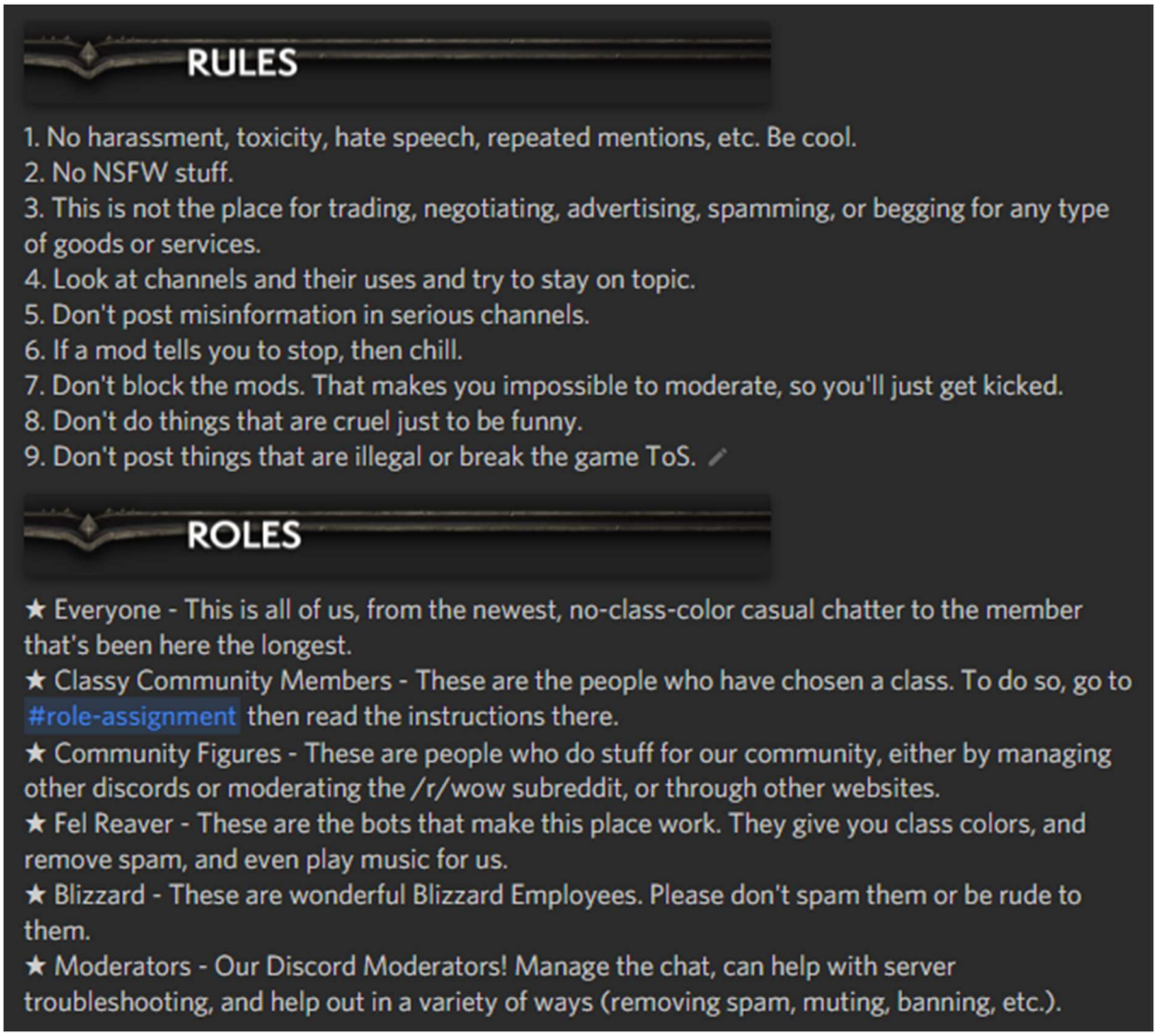
APPENDIX 3: Server-specific user customization in a profile pop-up



Appendix 4: Partial view of the role structure on the World of Warcraft server



Appendix 5: The rules of the World of Warcraft Discord server



Appendix 6: Search bar and the available search filters