Discord’s username change is causing discord

A race to reserve usernames is kicking off on Discord.

Starting in the next couple of weeks, millions of Discord users will be forced to say goodbye to their old four-digit-appended names. Discord is requiring everyone to take up a new common platform-wide handle. For Discord, it’s a move toward mainstream social network conventions. For some users, though, it’s a change to the basics of what Discord *is* — a shift that’s as much about culture as technology.

Discord has historically handled usernames with a numeric suffix system. Instead of requiring a completely unique handle, it allowed duplicate names by adding a four-digit code known as a “discriminator” — think TheVerge#1234. But earlier this week, it announced it was changing course and moving toward unique identifiers that resemble Twitter-style “@” handles.

Co-founder and CTO Stanislav Vishnevskiy acknowledged the change would be “tough” for some people, but he said the discriminators had proven too confusing. He noted that over 40 percent of users don’t know their discriminator number, which leads to “almost half” of all friend requests failing to connect people to the right person, largely due to mistyped numbers.

Over on Reddit, Vishnevskiy argued that the new handles wouldn’t even show up in the interface that often since Discord will allow users to set a separate display name that’s not unique. Carrying more than 500 downvotes on some Reddit replies, he called the original system a “halfway measure” and

rejected ideas like just adding more numbers to the end of a handle. “This was not a change that we decided to do lightly and have been talking about doing for many years, trying to avoid it if we could,” he posted.

During the change, Discord users will have to navigate a process that’s fraught with uncertainty and cutthroat competition. Users will need to wait for an in-app prompt for when it’s their turn to select a new username, which will eventually roll out to all users over the course of “several months.” The company will assign priority to users based on their Discord registration dates, so people who have had their name “for quite a while” will have a better chance to get a desired name.

Users are compelled to choose a common handle to avoid chances of being impersonated

This raises a lot of obvious fears and thorny questions. Depending on who gets to set their usernames first, is there anything stopping people from taking over a particularly popular creator’s distinctive name? Should Discord prevent this by holding usernames for well-known creators, even if they’re not first in line? This is a problem for a lot of social networks, but unlike with some fledgling service attracting new users, all these people are already on Discord — in some cases, they’re probably even paid subscribers.

In a statement to *The Verge*, Discord said it would be trying to navigate the change gracefully for its best-known users. “We created processes for high-visibility users to secure usernames that will allow them to operate on our platform with minimal risk of impersonation,” said Kellyn Slone, director of product communications. “Users with a standing business relationship with Discord who manage certain partner, verified, or creator servers will be able to pick a username before other users in order to reduce the risk of impersonation for their accounts.”

A lot of Discord users will fall outside those boundaries. “As a content creator who has a relatively large fanbase — my handle is subject to username sniping by someone with an older account than me,” artist ZestyLemons, who uses Discord to connect with fans, writes to *The Verge*. “I am not a Discord partner, nor am I famous enough to obtain their recognition, so I will absolutely not have security with my public handle.” ZestyLemons noted that for people who *do* get desirable names, there’s the risk of being swatted or threatened to give it up — something that’s happened on Instagram and Twitter.

Discord users understand right now that there are a lot of accounts with very similar names, distinguished only by random numbers at the end. But absolute names change that understanding. They encourage people to look for believable usernames — if somebody nabs the one and only @verge (our Twitter handle) on Discord, people could be more inclined to believe it’s us.

“It’s a bummer that Discord’s giving in to the usual social media norms.”

And this pushes people to treat their Discord names like part of a centralized identity — rather than, as many users have referred to them, something like a private phone number. It compels individuals to take a username that represents them elsewhere before someone else does. This links whoever they are on Discord back to their internet-wide identity, with all the potential downsides — like stalking or a simple feeling of exposure — that entails.

Despite fears about individual users impersonating each other, the risks for server moderation are less clear — and some Discord server admins told *The Verge* they weren’t worried. “I don’t think the change will be a big deal for admins + mods,” says Emily, an admin for a large *Pokémon Go* meet group on Discord. The server already asks people to set server-specific nicknames that match their *Pokémon Go* trainer name, so they’re

not relying on discriminators to tell people apart.

But Emily isn't a fan of the change. "It's a bummer that Discord's giving in to the usual social media norms," they said. "Discriminators were kinda clever… it allows many people [to] share the same name without stressing over the 'perfect' username. Discord is a more personal sort of social media. You're not publishing publicly into the ether – like Twitter or something – so having a clever memorable username doesn't matter."

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SupaIsaiah016, an avid Geometry Dash player who also runs a small Discord server, agrees. "The current username and discriminator system worked perfectly fine, and allowed for thousands of people to have the same name on the platform overall," SupaIsaiah016 writes to *The Verge*. "Sites that use handles and display names such as Twitter have very different reasons as to why they use those systems, as they are public social medias."

Part of the problem is simply that Discord is asking millions of settled users to make a huge change to their online identity, and there's no great way to do that without friction. But there's also a sense that Discord's old username style made it a different, albeit clunky, kind of social network. And to many users, that was a part of the appeal.

"We tend to value the freedom of anonymity in Discord."

"Discord was originally meant to be a messaging app, to which a lot of content creators used to separate their online lives versus their real, personal lives," ZestyLemons writes. *Verge* reader SpookyMulder put it another way in the comments of our original news post. "Discord has some sort of pseudo-identity culture," SpookyMulder writes. "We tend to value the freedom of anonymity in Discord than your usual social media @username

identities.”

Whether you’re a Discord user who wants to maintain a sense of anonymity or one who is all in for a more shareable and easily identifiable system, the race to get the username that’s right for you is on. But you’ll have to wait and see where the starting line is.

https://www.theverge.com/2023/5/6/23711332/discord-username-changes-community-backlash-handles