Gaming and Extremism

The Extreme Right on Discord

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About the series

This briefing is part of ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series exploring the role online gaming plays in the strategy of far-right extremists in the UK and globally. This is part of a broader programme on the 'Future of Extremism' being delivered by ISD in the second half of 2021, charting the transformational shifts in the extremist threat landscape two decades on from 9/11, and the policy strategies required to counter the next generation of extremist threats. It provides a snapshot overview of the extreme right's use of Discord.
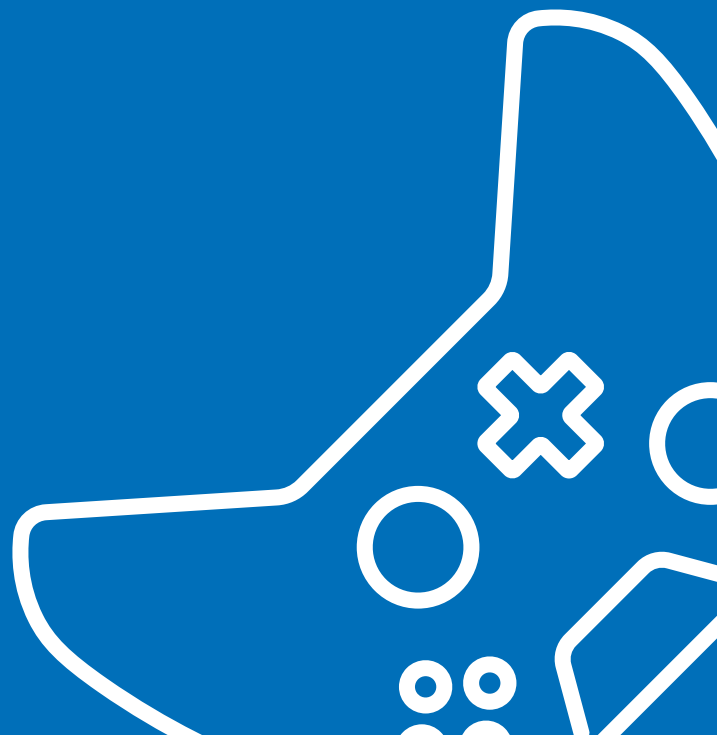
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Executive summary

Discord is a free service accessible via phones and computers. It allows users to talk to each other in real time via voice, text or video chat and emerged in 2015 as a platform designed to assist gamers in communicating with each other while playing video games. The popularity of the platform has surged in recent years, and it is currently estimated to have 140 million monthly active users.[1]

Chatrooms — known as servers - in the platform can be created by anyone, and they are used for a range of purposes that extend far beyond gaming. Such purposes include the discussion of extreme right-wing ideologies and the planning of offline extremist activity. Ahead of the far-right Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, organisers used Discord to plan and promote events and posted swastikas and praised Hitler in chat rooms with names like "National Socialist Army" and "Führer's Gas Chamber".[2]

In this briefing we provide analysis of **24 English language Discord servers** associated with extreme right-wing activity. This analysis is intended as a snapshot of current trends on Discord with a specific focus on the role of gaming, rather than a comprehensive overview of extreme right activity on the platform.

Key Findings

- **We found that the Discord primarily acts as a hub for extreme right-wing socialising and community building.** Our analysis suggests that Discord provides a safe space for users to share ideological material and explore extremist movements.

- **Of particular concern is the young age of the members of these servers, who on average, when determinable, were 15 years old.** This suggests that Discord could act as an entry point for children to come into contact with extremist ideology.

- **We found limited evidence that gaming played a role in serious strategies to radicalise and recruit new individuals on the platform.** Instead gaming was primarily referenced in cultural terms, being used by members of these servers to find common-ground.

- **Gamified online harassment through 'raids' was a popular activity across the channels analysed.** This suggests that this semi-organised cyber-bullying could be a vector which brings young people into contact with extremist communities.

- **We identified discussion in these channels expressing support for the proscribed terrorist organisations Atomwaffen Division and Sonnenkrieg Division.** This included the sharing of branded content produced by these organisations, as well as the identification of one user who expressed an interest in joining Atomwaffen.

Findings of Analysis

The following section details four key trends identified through analysis of these 24 English language discord servers:

- **Vetting, verification and channel creation:** An overview of vetting procedures enacted by channels as a form of operational security, and trends on demographic information which we were able to glean through analysing these processes.

- **Function of servers:** The role these servers seem to play in extreme right wing activity.

- **The role of gaming:** The role online gaming plays in these communities.

- **Server case studies:** Two case studies detailing extreme right activity on the platform including support for terrorist organisations, and extremist activity by young people.

Vetting, Verification & Channel Creation

Some form of vetting was employed by 13 of the 24 Discord servers examined by ISD. There were various thresholds set by server administrators to authenticate or verify new users wishing to join a server, ranging from requesting new users click and agree to follow the rules of the server, as set by the server administrators, to more sweeping requests. These expansive vetting procedures included requiring new users to answer a series of questions about their identities, religious views, and political beliefs. Often questions about political beliefs asked new users to share their views on National Socialism or whether they supported Adolf Hitler.

Four Discord servers examined by ISD asked new users to also submit a photo of their hand or arm to demonstrate the colour of their skin. Comments posted by others in reply to these images typically then ask the new user about their ethnicity or nationality.

Across all servers examined, in total, ISD recorded 62 instances of users sharing their age in response to verification requests. 45 users listed their age between 13-17 and 17 users listed their ages as 18+, with the oldest age publicly listed as 22. **The average age of users was 15.** This finding suggests that these extreme right-wing spaces are predominantly populated with young users.

The servers themselves were relatively small, with an average of 108 users in each, and most were created within the 12 months leading up to April 2021. Additionally, nine other live Discord servers discovered by ISD were found to be inactive by the time ISD researchers conducted server analysis. Taken together, this suggests extreme right-wing Discord servers like this appear to pop up and disappear in quick succession without amassing large communities.

Function of servers
Shitposting and searching for extremist content
Across all public servers analysed we found limited evidence that these spaces were being used as hubs for the organising of offline extremist activity. Instead it appears the main purpose of the servers examined is a combination of general discussion of extreme right wing ideology, shitposting (aggressively posting
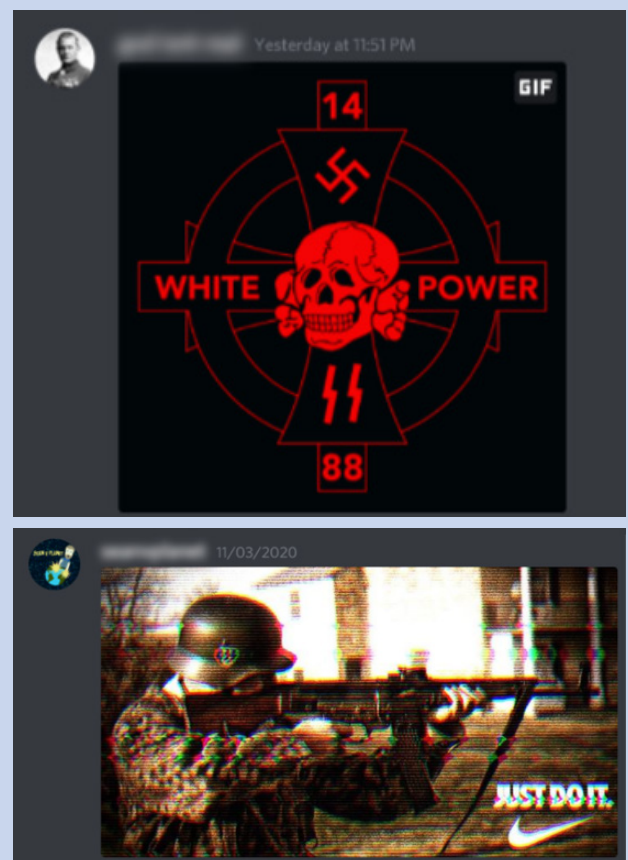

Figure 1: Memes advocating white supremacist and violence posted in extreme right-wing Discord servers

of deliberately poor-quality material), trolling, general chatting and launching raids on other servers.

The tone of the discussions across these servers is broadly comparable to the 'forum culture' seen on other fringe far-right platforms such as 8kun or 4chan, including many racist, sexist, homophobic and antisemitic comments, memes and images, as well as overtly pro-Nazi or pro-Hitler content. The casual use of racist slurs is widespread, as was the sharing of memes promoting white supremacist and neo-Nazi ideologies.

The conversations analysed suggest that extreme right Discord servers operate as safe spaces for young people curious about extremist ideologies to network and find out more information about extremist movements. Despite being small and relatively unorganised, these servers are used by young people to ask questions and seek explicit materials that they might be unable to find elsewhere.

In one such example a Discord user asked a channel where the best place online is to find Nazi videos, to which another user recommended they try a channel on Telegram, before providing a link to it. Several more specific neo-Nazi Telegram channels were posted as comments to assist the user in their aim of finding Nazi videos.

Raids

Another primary activity engaged in the servers analysed are raids against other servers associated with political opponents, and in particular those that appear to be pro-LGBTQ. Raids are a phenomenon in which a small group of users will join a Discord server with the sole purpose of spamming the host with offensive or incendiary messages and content with the aim of upsetting local users or having the host server banned by Discord. On two servers examined here, raiding was their primary function.

Among servers devoted to this activity, specific channels were often created to host links to servers that users were then encouraged to raid. Users are encouraged to be as offensive as possible with the aim of upsetting or angering users on the raided server, and channels often had content banks of offensive memes and content to be shared on raided servers.
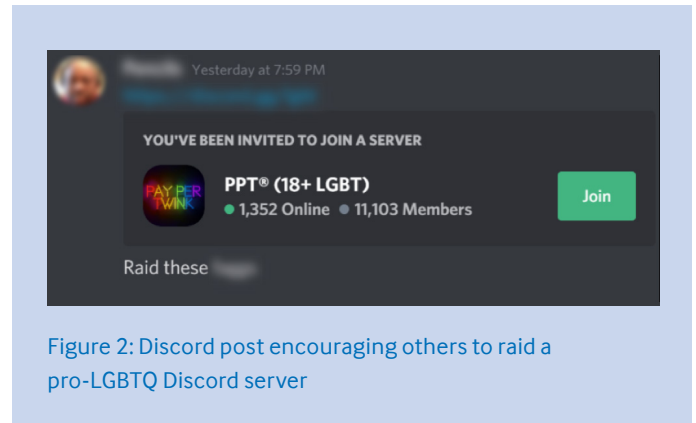

Figure 2: Discord post encouraging others to raid a pro-LGBTQ Discord server

The use of raids demonstrates the gamified nature of extremist activity on Discord, where use of the platform and harassment of political opponents is itself turned into a type of real-life video game designed to strengthen in-group affiliation. This combined with the broader extremist activity identified in these channels suggests that the combative activity of raiding could provide a pathway for younger people to become more engaged with extremist activity.

The Role of Gaming

Five Discord servers examined by ISD were found to contain references to gaming. This was primarily related to casual discussion about specific games which users enjoyed playing, such as Minecraft and Call of Duty, and in the form of cultural references, such as gifs of well-known gamers or referring to outsiders or non-gamers as "NPCs".

Beyond broader discussion we also identified one example of the use of gaming as part of the broader raiding activity described above. On one server, where users are supportive of the proscribed terrorist group Atomwaffen Division, a small number of users discussed attacks on the online gaming platform Roblox, including sneaking Nazi content and extreme-right references into the games or harassing players.

Whilst users of the channels analysed appeared interested in networking with each other on games, there were no signs to suggest they deliberately try to recruit or radicalise other users in-game. Their actions and conversations appear to be inward facing, that is, towards their existing communities and there appears to be little interest in actively trying to expand

or grow their network via gaming platforms, content or communities. Their primary motive appeared to be trolling unsuspecting gamers with offensive content, rather than bringing new gamers into their communities. Thus, rather than forming part of a deliberate radicalisation strategy, gaming appears to primarily acts as a way of finding common ground with other extremists.

These findings are notable insofar as they indicate that although references to gaming content and culture are present among extreme right-wing Discord communities and many users appear to also be gamers themselves, there are few signs that would indicate there is radicalisation playing out within online games. Rather, there is an overlap of gamers who are also interested in extreme right-wing ideologies.

Figure 3: Discord post showing a user in an extreme right-wing server sharing a link to the Roblox gaming platform, encouraging users to participate in raids against other users.
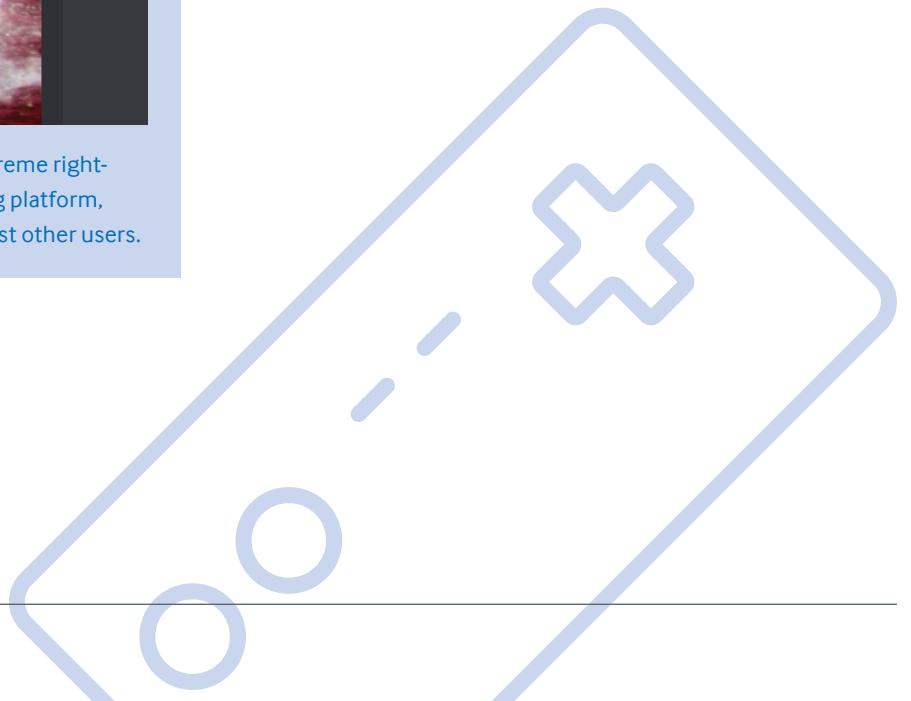
Case studies

This section features two case studies, each one related to a Discord server examined by ISD as part of this research. These have been selected to illustrate the ways in which Discord users discuss terrorist organisations; the young age of users operating on Discord; and how raids are coordinated.

Server case study 1

Pro-terrorist content

This server is explicitly supportive of the proscribed extreme right-wing group Atomwaffen Division (AWD) and is primarily used for organising raids on other Discord servers. The server has 194 members (at the time of writing), does not require new users to answer any questions to verify their identity or beliefs, and has various channels for sharing memes and propaganda as well as organising raids.

In addition to English-language discussions, this server features a Spanish channel with some Spanish-language discussion. The server also featured a list of rules, including "no Jews" and "no communists" as well as offensive terms for Black and LGBTQ people. Another rule instructed users to "be racist WHITE POWER."

In several instances users posted comments about AWD, with some inquiring about how to find AWD's website and others indicating they would like to join the group. One reply to this query recommended the user travel to Russia to join the "RNU". This refers to Russian National Unity, a neo-Nazi group founded by Aleksandr Barkashov in 1990. The group has a paramilitary wing which, in 2014, joined Russia-based forces in the war in eastern Ukraine.

There was frequent sharing of AWD propaganda videos and material on this server, though this conversation largely revolved around general, and uninformed, discussion about the group. Additionally, white supremacist content was regularly shared within this server, including footage from the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks. In one instance, a user shared a video game character they designed on Roblox to resemble Brenton Tarrant, the white supremacist who carried out the 2019 attacks.

Some gaming references were found on this server too, including the efforts to add overtly fascist/Nazi references into Roblox discussed above, though it was not clear that there was any organised effort beyond these three or four users.

Server case study 2
Raiding activity and young people

This server is an extreme anti-LGBTQ space that primarily organises raids on pro-LGBTQ servers and houses white nationalist content. The server has 124 members (at the time of writing), does not require new users to answer any questions to verify their identity or beliefs and only has a small selection of channels.

One such channel, asks users to share details about themselves (optional), with the findings indicating that over two thirds of users listed themselves as male. Members identified their age in another poll, with 13 identifying as 18+. The next most common age was 14 with 11 answers. In another channel, titled Main Stuff, there was shitposting and trolling of LGBTQ people alongside casual references that indicate support for white nationalism.

Users in this server use a channel titled 'Raid Links' to post links to other Discord servers which seem to all be pro-LGBTQ spaces, with the implied intention being that users are encouraged to raid these servers or to join them and post offensive or anti-LGBTQ and white nationalist material. Importantly this case study suggests that gamified online harassment could be a way in which young people are brought into contact with extremist communities online.
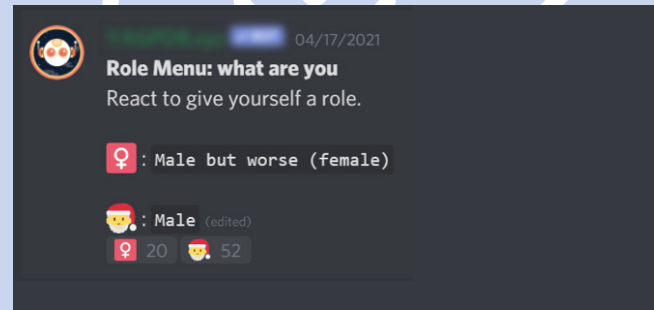

Figure 4: Discord posts showing users posting information about their gender and age

Conclusion

ISD examined the activity and nature of Discord servers that host and post extreme right-wing material and found that racist, sexist, homophobic and antisemitic comments, memes and images, as well as overtly pro-neo-Nazi content are widespread. Yet, in general, this behaviour appears to have more in common with the trolling/shitposting activity often seen on spaces like 4chan or 8kun, as opposed to more committed and strategic forms of extremist activism.

This relatively irreverent activity becomes more concerning when the young ages of users of these servers is considered, especially when combined with the way these servers appear to act as safe spaces for users seeking to discuss and explore the extreme right. This concern is further compounded when the presence of material from proscribed terrorist groups is taken into account, as it suggests that engaging in irreverent and gamified trolling activity may provide a point of connection for younger people with more egregious movements.

ISD did find references to gaming communities and culture but found few signs that suggest these extreme right-wing communities on Discord were interested in targeting gaming spaces for recruitment or radicalisation purposes. Although users on these extreme right servers do appear to be gamers, gaming does not constitute the primary focus their activity when engaging with these extremist communities. When users do discuss gaming culture or content, it primarily to discuss raiding gaming platforms, or to find commonality in an appreciation of online gaming with their peers in-server. Accordingly, rather than representing part of a deliberate recruitment strategy of extreme right communities on Discord, gaming appears to be part of the broader social activity of individual users.
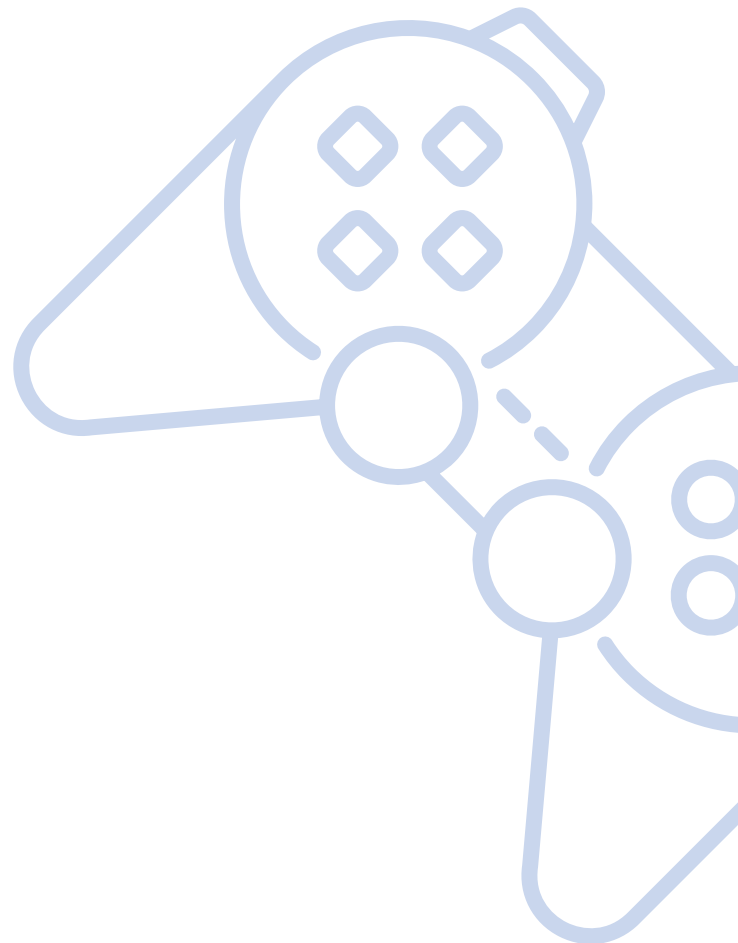
Methodology

ISD used a combination of techniques to identify servers for analysis. We first searched messages from a dataset of over 1,000,000 messages sent on 208 English language extreme-right Telegram channels to identify links out to Discord servers, finding 8 invitation links.[4]

Separately, we used open-source intelligence techniques to scour the web for links to relevant Discord servers. This included scanning a website that is a "public Discord server listing community" and uses tags to index and organise Discord servers. Using a variety of relevant keywords such as "white supremacy," "white nationalism," "fascism," "Atomwaffen," "authoritarian," "accelerationism" and "neoNazism", we found a further 34 Discord server links. Three links to potentially relevant servers were found during our analysis of extreme right-wing Discord servers and were also added to our seed list. Lastly, one Discord link for potentially relevant servers were each found on Instagram, a website for an anti-lockdown protest group, and a Steam community.

In total, our seed list was made up of 49 Discord server links, though upon beginning our analysis, 10 of these links were found to be expired and were removed from the list. Discord server administrators decide the period after which an invitation link for a server will expire, including the option of "never." By default, if no limit is set, these links expire after 24 hours.[5] It's not known if the expired links discovered by ISD were default expirations or expired due a server administrator deactivating the link.

Of the 39 live links, ISD then entered each of the servers and began our analysis. 15 were found to feature no signs of extreme-right material, content or support and were analysed no further after this point. In examining these servers, ISD could not definitively conclude why these servers were tagged with extreme right-wing keywords on the server listing website, so possible reasons include that the tags were added to these servers as a troll or to fool other users, to potentially have a non-extremist server banned by Discord, or in the case of a pro-LGBTQ server, potentially to encourage others to raid or troll this server.

This left ISD with 24 servers that featured evidence of extreme-right support and were analysed further. Of these servers one was found to be specifically designed for UK audiences, whilst the remainder were associated more broadly with English language extreme right activity.

13 of these servers required new users to answer questions to verify their identity or beliefs in various ways. Despite this, it was still possible to examine certain sections of these server for analysis, but where the vetting process required us to answer questions, we did not proceed any further. At no point did ISD engage with or submit content or comments to these servers.

Of the 24 servers, five were found to feature content or comments that referenced video games or gaming culture, whilst the remainder were primarily used for political discussion, the sharing of extremist content, or the coordination of trolling activity.

The largest of the extreme-right servers identified had 367 users, while the smallest had 11 users. The average number of users within these servers was 108.

Endnotes

1.   David Curry, Discord Revenue and Usage Statistics (2021), Business of Apps, 6 May 2021,
     https://www.businessofapps.com/data/discord-statistics/

2.   Kevin Roose, This Was the Alt-Right's Favorite Chat App. Then Came Charlottesville, The New York Times, 15 August 2017,
     https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/technology/discord-chat-app-alt-right.html

3.   Anton Shekhovtsov, Neo-Nazi Russian National Unity in Eastern Ukraine, Blog post, 14 August 2014,
     http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/08/neo-nazi-russian-national-unity-in.html

4.   For an overview of this dataset please see: Jakob Guhl & Jacob Davey, A Safe Space to Hate, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, June 2020,
     https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/a-safe-space-to-hate-white-supremacist-mobilisation-on-telegram/

5.   Invites 101, Discord Support, 30 October 2020, https://support.discord.com/hc/en-us/articles/208866998-Invites-101

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