"No Gods, No Kings, Only Mon!": *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a Case Study in Folkloric Recreation

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Folklore can be created in any space where humans interact, developing to explain natural phenomena or justify social mores. From the earliest days, video games have possessed their own folklore, ranging from rumors (*Polybius*), rules (Final Destination as the "best" *Smash Bros.* stage), or behaviors (the "Nuzlocke Challenge" in *Pokémon*) that serve to develop the culture and behaviors of gamers. The focus of this article is the fashion in which folklore and video games interact in the creation of a new experience, and further inform how learning takes place within a massive multiplayer environment, albeit one with only a single player character controlled by the audience, by utilizing *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a case study. By better comprehending how the game was completed successfully, we can develop a keener understanding of how communal learning processes utilize folklore, and how video game learning occurs outside of the game itself.

On February 12, 2014, video streaming website Twitch played host to a crowdsourced effort to play through 1998's *Pokémon Red*. Users could send commands through the chat room that would be reflected in the game (for instance, typing "right" would cause the in-game avatar to move right, just as it would on a normal control pad, albeit with a slight delay), as well as working out strategies through the chat. Boluk and Lemieux explain that "*Twitch Plays Pokémon* combines a single-player game and the real-time input of a hundred thousand spectators to produce a new type of crowd-sourced, massively collaborative videogame" (66). Within two days, thousands of players had joined in the game, and total views had reached 175,000; within a week, tens of thousands were involved. By the time the viewers reached the end of the game, 1,165,140 players had entered commands with some 9 million unique viewers watching the proceedings across 36 million views, totaling well over 1 billion

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minutes watched (Chase). With no advertisement and no celebrity at the helm, the effort might have faded out within a few days, but instead, it grew over time: it took 391 hours, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds to complete the game in this crowdsourced fashion with total views reaching 17 million, despite numerous setbacks both in-game and out. One million players input 122 million commands in a collective effort to beat an old Gameboy game. Almost immediately after, the community started playing the sequel, building on the community and storytelling that had allowed them to complete the first game and proving successful in completing the more involved and difficult *Pokémon Crystal*.

This paper will approach *Twitch Plays Pokémon* from two frameworks: a folkloric approach examining the creation and spread of memes, and an adaptational lens that emphasizes the development of an ad hoc digital fan community that utilized those memes as a form of storytelling. This means that, while the original videos have been largely lost to time, the sequence of events has been retained, albeit in a repurposed and repackaged capacity. As such, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* provides a valuable case study in how myths develop, even when (in this case at least) they are built upon a well-established media property. To be clear, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* encompasses both the digital game on the Twitch service as well as the larger communal experience that spun out of it. Therefore, I use the term "adaptation" to describe *Twitch Plays Pokémon* because it reflects both a game played far outside of the developer's parameters as well as a transmedia fan response that justified the events (particularly the setbacks) of the game within a folkloric canon. This nevertheless served a crucial function in organizing the effort that eventually beat the game and maintaining the morale of the thousands of players.

The imminent death of the *Pokémon* franchise has been predicted for decades. *Pokémon* was seemingly designed from its inception to be a massive hit. The original game, inspired by series creator Junichi Masada's youthful collection of beetles, had already been a hit in Japan upon release and inspired the creation of an array of ancillary products. The franchise has proven by its very nature quite adaptable, both in the larger media landscape and in terms of how fans have used the property. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is effectively an adaptation of the series, though the anarchic nature of the experience subverts certain elements of how video game adaptations traditionally work. While the term "adaptation" has often been understood to reflect transmedia works (play to film, for instance), Twitch broadly complicates this, effectively turning a given single-player video game

into audience-based experiences that are curated to some extent. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* changes the fundamental experience and control so significantly from the original *Pokémon Red* that it becomes an entirely new experience. Hugo Vandal-Sirois and Georges Bastin argue that "successful adaptations allow (or even force) the target readers to discover the text in a way that suits its aim, ensures an optimal reception experience...adaptations take place on the cultural or pragmatic levels at least as much as on the linguistic or textual level" (26). The creator exercised limited control over the experience beyond a few quality-of-life improvements, but the experience was nevertheless unique from any previous *Pokémon* game.

The authentic *Pokémon* experience is a straightforward turn-based roleplaying game, with an emphasis on collecting Pokémon for both strategic and completion purposes. The series has been a natural space for official adaptations (spawning a multimedia franchise of television series, films, card games, and myriad other spin-offs), but has a unique history of fan-led adaptations, ranging from self-imposed rules (solo Pokémon runs, the Nuzlocke Challenge) to full-conversion mods (*Pokémon Radical Red*, *Pokémon Uranium*). The franchise overall has a unique history in multiple media, proving well-suited to more formal adaptations. This has helped secure it within the nostalgic consciousness that created fertile ground for *Twitch Plays Pokémon.*

The arrival of the first games on American shores in 1998 coincided with a cartoon series, a card game, and a myriad of toys and tie-in products. The property was inescapable, a defining moment for the Millennial generation, and, like many fads, it soon faded into the background. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green write "the computer game undoubtedly arrived first, but it seems that (as with other such phenomena) Pokémon was planned as a cross-media enterprise from a very early stage. Certainly, there were millions of children who might be counted as Pokémon 'fans' who never played the computer games and never will" (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 19). The property never quite disappeared entirely: new games introduced new generations of creatures, the cartoon series continued, and even the card game outlasted many of its contemporaries.

The *Pokémon* video games themselves were certainly key. Functionally, they were fairly simple turn-based roleplaying games (a genre that had grown popular in the 1980s, and remained quite dominant during the 1990s), utilizing a team of captured monsters (up to six, out of a total 150 distinct creatures) with a deep

system of strengths and weaknesses that functioned like Rock-Paper-Scissors dialed up to eleven. The release was divided across two cartridges (three in Japan) that each featured unique monsters that could be traded to other owners, or even put to the test against friends' teams. The games allow social interaction by their design, keeping it theoretically optional, but trading was necessary to acquire certain Pokémon, and player-vs.-player battling was a key aspect of its longevity (it combined nicely with the collecting/customization aspects of the games), as well as that of the identity of the franchise itself (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 23). These traits lend the Pokémon franchise a great deal of spreadability, a concept outlined by Henry Jenkins: “mass content is continually repositioned as it enters different niche communities...as material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms” (Jenkins, et. al 27). Jenkins frames his discussion within memes and blogs, but the larger apparatus of the Pokémon monolith extends considerably further. Fan works define the modern media franchise, be they fan fiction, YouTube responses, or more arcane efforts; Pokémon represents a specific case study where the fan creations have changed the narrative.

These relatively basic elements are the foundation of a full-fledged community. Paul Booth explains that “fans identify with the media object as part of that community's own self-identification and reproduce that fan community by applying the mores and socialization of fandom via other contexts...[fans] literally scribe the community into existence, and write that community into the extant media object” (129-30). The Pokémon fan community is complicated by the sheer variety of media that the franchise exists in, including multiple generations of games and decades of various animated series that are not necessarily adopted across all sections of the fandom. However, the core concept of collecting and battling with cute monsters remained common among the various threads of the franchise and stayed accessible to any fan. Booth argues that distinctions between producer and consumer are reductive in the examination of fan communities, positing that “consumption does not imply destruction” (132-3). Fan creation does not replace the original but functions as an extension of the original, being converted to information that can be shared and dispersed accordingly. The functionality of both fan communities and the Pokémon fandom specifically is more akin to a gift economy than a market economy, relying on social exchange over economic exchange (even in the original *Pokémon Red*, collecting all of the

Pokémon required trading with a friend with the counterpart cartridge *Pokémon Blue*). The digital sphere allows for the easier exchange of ideas, and the recreation of media texts that are more easily shared with fellow fans. The lack of economic gain is a key component of fan behavior, a function of avoiding copyright issues as much as it serves as a marker of the fan’s dedication (Jenkins, et. al, 55-6). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* relies on the original games being enough of a touchstone that at least some of the players are capable of navigating them; while it is conceivable that the Pokémon games could be successfully completed by purely random inputs given a sufficient amount of time, there was a methodology and focus inherent to the player base that kept progress relatively steady.

All video games have an active component in their consumption, *Pokémon* as a franchise complicates the narrative that it is merely a media text to be passively consumed. It functions as something more complex: David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green grapple with the question of what, exactly the property is, contending that is a cultural practice in the parlance of anthropology. They argue “Pokémon is something you *do*, not just something you read or watch or ‘consume.’ Yet while that ‘doing’ clearly requires active participation on the part of the ‘doers,’ the terms on which it is performed are predominantly dictated by forces or structures beyond their control” (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 12, emphasis in original). For some players, Pokémon transcends its digital bonds; it is a video game first, with all the freedom and restriction that entails, but the omnipresence of the franchise for a certain generation and the customization inherent to the franchise allowed for adaptability, particular in the development of interrelated fan communities. As per Booth, “the creation of fan communities and content all exist within this mash-up economy, as cult fans make use of them in order to promote social construction in a manner reminiscent of a gift economy” (130). *Pokémon* is unique in that it is not simply utilized as memes and fan fiction, the typical understanding of textual poaching as outlined here, but has been reconstituted as entirely new properties, ranging from audience-created Pokémon to entirely new games to detailed pen-and-paper roleplaying systems. Furthermore, the *Pokémon* fandom often plays the games with self-imposed challenges and other restrictions, creating variations within the gameplay that create something approaching a new experience.

Twitch Plays Pokémon represents an entirely new way of experiencing *Pokémon Red*, one that combines the basic functionality of Twitch (watching

other people play games) with a unique method of player control. Kevin M. Flanagan explains that "videogame adaptation presents a unique set of design and discursive challenges, since…adapters such as programmers, creative producers, and game designers must translate linear narratives or stable fictious properties into quasi-ludic, player-controlled experiences" (442-3). This framework is especially apt here, as the idea of a player-controlled experience informs much of how *Twitch Plays Pokémon* unfolds, albeit with individual player choices impacting other player experiences, and thus informing the overall nature of the game. Flanagan outlines other key concerns: "as with other intermedial exchanges, the videogame adaptation process must pay particular attention to the affordances and constraints of different media. What is gained or lost in the movement of the rules, characters, and story from the outward realm of physical game world to the relative mystery of a digital space?" (443). *Pokémon Red* becomes a fundamentally different game experience when played on Twitch by the users, subverting both the original game as well as the nature of Twitch as a website: the audience is the player, performing for their own entertainment and in pursuit of their own goals. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* thus creates parallel adaptations: a multi-user online game and the expansive creative response occurring in other spaces (most notably Reddit, but on 4Chan, DeviantArt, Twitter, and elsewhere).

The complication is that the limited scholarly work around *Twitch Plays Pokémon* does not quite offer a clear definition of what it is; Jenny Saucerman and Dennis Ramirez frame the text within a quasi-religious context, intentionally mimicking Christian dogma, and Chris Milando positions this as an example of a new type of video game. I approach *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as an outgrowth of virtual identity and the folk traditions of the internet. The process that unfolds within this text is folkloric (creating a community through shared traditions and lore), in a matter that reflects how the process of socialization informs how video games are played more broadly.

Identity in the original Pokémon games was limited at best. For the first two generations, players could customize the name of the male protagonist only; later games allowed for a choice of genders, but still limited the capacity for players to create reflective avatars. Rather, the customization inherent in the games arose through the choice of the party of Pokémon: up to six monsters chosen from a list of hundreds, each possessing various strengths, weaknesses, and appearances. Players were left to fill in the gaps of personalities and histories of their baseball-

capped avatars, even the larger narratives of the games, aspects that were enhanced in the adaptation into *Twitch Plays Pokémon.* Booth notes "by creating personas of media characters, the fan infuses the character with new characteristics, and the fan/character amalgam becomes a mash-up of both the fictional identity of the fan" (130). The lack of personality for the player character was a selling point of Pokémon, as it allowed players to easily project themselves on a mute protagonist through their in-game choices. This proved advantageous for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*; here, the protagonist became a puppet for the community, subject to a chaotic hive mind rather than a single controller, with those same choices imbued with new meaning. The fact that countless players were able to come together, complete the game, and develop a complex narrative to explain the events that occurred during the run is unprecedented. Individual players were able to act as part of a sort of clumsy hive mind, moving through the game at a slow, if steady pace, overcoming setbacks both minor and major, and learning how to work together within a larger system (and how, in turn, to work against trolls and bots who sought to delay or outright derail progress).

The system effectively democratized and decentralized learning, akin to Guy Merchant's discussion of folksonomy (category-tagging) and digital literacy, with folksomy democratizing the creation and exchange of knowledge among certain communities (247). Merchant is primarily concerned with meaning-making, but the concept of generating knowledge collectively in digital spaces is applicable here. That approach reflects the subculture that developed around *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, with anything resembling leadership dispersed among the collective of players, with outcomes reliant on collective action. Simon Bronner explains that "folk practices can be artistic, such as the creative adaptation of a song or story, but what connects these practices to quotidian behaviors such as choosing a favorite seat and ritually arranging food on a plate is the implicative or phemic messages of activities as the outcomes of traditional knowledge" (16). This was not the same *Pokémon Red* that the players were familiar with, forcing them to rethink strategies and tactics, and even the very timing and order of their command inputs (due to the number of participants, there was a short delay in entered commands actually triggering), but still reflected ingrained behaviors. This creates superstitions around how the players act, reinforced by continued, socially enforced behaviors – pressing up and right to cross a cliff in the game, for instance (Yee 53). The Twitch participants developed a new literacy in learning to navigate this system, with the folkloric behavior a component of that success.

James Paul Gee's research into video game learning emphasizes constructions of identity in those digital spaces. Gee outlines the three identities in the Baudrillardian fashion that exist in the act of playing games as "virtual identity" (the player as the character they control), "real-world identity" (the player in and of themselves), and "projective identity" (the interface and interaction between the player and the character) (48-51). Each of these functions play a role in engaging the player, getting them to become invested in the game world, and view their in-game actions as an extension of themselves. This continuum of identities is useful both in terms of learning how to play the game and relating to the in-world events, with the result being that the player both identifies with their avatar and the choices they make within the game (Gee 53-4). Video games normally inspire players to identify with the characters they control, both to provide narrative thrust as well as emotional resonance, though that process is complicated here. Gee offers a nice summation of this system: "In my projective identity, I worry about what sort of 'person' I want her to be, what type of history I want her to have had by the time I'm done playing the game. I want this person and history to reflect my values, though I have to think reflexively and critically about them" (Gee 51). Constructions of identity in this fashion were a crucial part of the success of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, with players becoming engaged on a less personal level than Gee outlines, with the players being dispersed and sharing control over a single avatar as "the Voices," the "projective identity" key aspect of how the game was played. Chris Milando points out that "*Twitch Plays Pokémon* is not a story about the community giving commands, nor can it be about the avatar's story, as most games are. Both entities are required and present within the narrative, and the causal link denotes that both act together." Moreover, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* inspired activity outside of the game itself, leaning heavily into the "real-world identity of players," and mutating accordingly. The lore became as much a part of the experience as the game itself, appearing as messages in chat, or even complex, distributed strategies (the "Start9" protests).

The focus here is on the first two generations (*Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* and *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal*), due to the direct connections in lore (the community framed the second game as a direct sequel to the first in terms of theme and narrative). The emphasis here is the development of folklore that grew to surround the events that occurred, often by accident, and the formation of a sort of religion out of the proceedings. The sheer influx of commands often meant that detrimental events could occur (though certain trolls were attempting to derail the

game), ranging from invalid commands in a battle to platforming setbacks in the overworld to the permanent deletion of valuable party members. The Reddit-based community constructed an elaborate system of explanations for why these things occurred, blaming (and praising) specific Pokémon and crafting a religion based around an innocuous near-useless Helix Fossil item. The effort reflects a folkloric adaptation of a preexisting media property, where the game itself is less important than the communal actions. Crawford and Rutter explain that "social performances can extend beyond face-to-face communication, as the internet has proved a useful medium for gamers to construct and share gaming solutions, add-ons, updates, and mods, as well as fictional stories or 'fan art' based on gaming narratives" (279). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* represents something entirely new: it is, in its essence, the base game *Pokémon Red*, just played in a unique fashion, a curious challenge that completely changed the gameplay.

Roy T. Cook's "Canonicity and Normativity in Massive, Serialized, Collaborative Fiction" provides a useful framing for how the lore of the game develops. While he discusses collaborative fan fiction universes, the definition he puts forth applies to the process that plays out on Twitch: "massive serialized collaborative fictions are fictions that (i) have proper parts that ordered by nonarbitrary sequences, both in terms of production and reception, in terms of the diegetic ordering of the events portrayed within these fictions; (ii) are too large to be 'absorbed' as a unified whole; and (iii) are authored by more than one individual" (272). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* has proper parts in nonarbitrary sequences in the same fashion that the original games did: while there is some freedom, the overall path of the game is effectively set (there are various gates to progression that require completing Gyms or plot sequences before the game proceeds). The "largeness" of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* plays out within the experience itself: the game is played 24 hours a day, meaning it was not unusual for even a dedicated player to go to bed, only to wake up with a nettlesome challenge overcome, or perhaps progress undone. Cook explains "a fiction is *massive* if and only if it is impossible, extremely implausible, or unlikely that a single person can, or will, experience all parts of the fiction in a manner appropriate for the interpretation, evaluation, and so on of the fiction…the criteria for massivity are explicitly connected to our in-principle, or in-practice, inability to 'master' the fiction all at once – that is, on our inability to reflect on it in its entirety as a unified whole" (271). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is too big to be created (or consumed) by one individual; moreover, the lore itself mixes elements from

Twitch chat, Reddit, Twitter, and other spaces; Reddit serves to formalize the lore elements, but that process grows from other spaces.

James Paul Gee's approach to story in video games is key here, albeit for understanding what *Twitch Plays Pokémon* does as much as what it does not do. Gee defines it as:

> The story line in a video game is a mixture of four things: 1. The game designers' ('authors') choice. 2. How you, the player, have caused these choices to unfold in your specific case by the order in which you have found things. 3. The actions you as one of the central characters in the story carry out (since in good video games there is a choice of what to do, when to do it, and in what order to do it). 4. Your own imaginative projection about the characters, plot, and world of the story. (79)

In contrast to traditional video games, the story of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is much more user generated, though the sheer number of users renders intent nebulous. In this case, the choice of the designers (either Junichi Masuda or the anonymous Twitch streamer) is nearly irrelevant, with the player choices (here coming down to which button to press and when) similarly lacking any real control. Instead, Gee's fourth element – imagination – becomes key to the experience, and a necessary function for organizing and focusing the efforts of the players. Crucially, this element of imagination and elaboration helped to build community

Most significantly, there are a multitude of authors involved: the streamer, the players, the Redditors, and a myriad of others all contribute to the overall development of the narrative, either through their direct chat inputs or through their interpretation of the events: "gameplay can also act as a resource for social performances that are not based exclusively on gaming. In particular, knowledge and information gained from digital gaming can be used to inform conversations or social interactions around other subject matter" (Crawford and Rutter 279). This process echoes the same way that folklore is created, with events being interpreted, responded to, repackaged, and finally shared with a new audience. As Boluk and Lemieux explain, "the folklore of…massively multiplayer online games is captured in logs, screenshots, forum discussions, and, now more than ever, recorded video – calcified forms of metagaming documenting the player-produced narratives and histories" (70). The process here occurs in communal spaces, just as more traditional folklore does, albeit with perhaps somewhat different purposes. Bronner states that "the action of producing or transmitted 'lore' is perceived or constructed as traditional, characteristically through its

repetition and variation, and connotative evocation of precedent" (17). Bronner's definition reflects that the works based around *Twitch Plays Pokémon* fit the function (if not the form) of folklore, with narratives repeating in various forms (primarily image memes and short-form fan fiction, occasionally related to a larger audience through the Twitch chat). Notably, these creations gained a life outside of the forums and game itself, with the phrase "Praise Helix" being adopted into other digital spaces and even appearing in real-life graffiti.

Twitch Plays Pokémon presents a challenge of classification. While the first iteration is based on a ROM of the original *Pokémon Red*, it was functionally a mod, with a specific control scheme programmed in. Mia Consalvo offers a definition: "a traditional view of mods has been that they reshape a player's experience of the original game in some way, usually to offer a player more choices or improve elements of the game (graphical, auditory, and gameplay settings) but to maintain the centrality of the game's world and rules as the primary 'text' for experiences" (178). *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* retains this mod framework, with the game content effectively unchanged, with the altered control scheme impacting the overall experience. Consalvo continues: "removing or de-centering games from what we might think of as their more central position in a game studies analysis demonstrates their contingent nature in the realm of meaning-making—and the contingent placement of any such text. When considering mods, we can see how mods and games work in concert, often with mods framing a game in certain ways, but at other times with games helping to shape what is expressed via a mod" (183). In this case, the control scheme became the story: random luck was given narrative weight. Milando elaborates: "each random act and each chaotic struggle provided fodder for new, creative interpretations. The game served as the community's muse, who could interpret it into something more valuable and entertaining than the gameplay itself." Essentially, this process created a paratext around the game itself, with the experience of the players (particularly the failures and setbacks) and building a collective experience. While individual commands were visible in the chat, along with the user that sent them, there were few attempts to claim credit or assign blame for specific events, as the sheer number of commands typically meant a delay upward of 30 seconds. At times, this necessitated a change in the system; the code was hastily rewritten midstream to allow users to opt for Democracy (chosen commands being voted upon) as opposed to Anarchy (commands executed in the order they were entered), which became a key fissure early on in

the fandom, persisting into subsequent generations. As with all online systems, there were trolls as well who actively sought to disrupt efforts, particularly during the heights of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*, though concerted disruption occurred most prevalently during the fights over Democracy and Anarchy (which involved a voting system, variations on protest votes, and a general preference toward the quasi-randomness of Anarchy).

Anarchy as a format both reinforced the group nature of the game and decentered the individual, a process that Gee discusses around the distribution of video game knowledge within social networks (196-202). Any input could be the action that makes – or more often breaks – the current run, but the sheer number of inputs means that success and failure is communal. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* disputes understanding of how individuals typically function in the online space; John Price, discussing interactions within a Facebook group, states that "hybridized performative identity manipulates formal and informal processes to create a standardized virtual method of presenting yourself to the world. This method of performance in online environments…reimagines the role of informal and vernacular social relationships. In the online environment, folkloric processes are not only linguistic and performative, but reflect and distort 'real world' social behaviors" (41-2). Here, those same performances play out, but they are unlinked from identity; after all, Twitch plays *Pokémon* in this case, not any one individual. Flanagan explains that "videogames adapt, and make into adapters, at all stages of their conception, creation, distribution, and reception. Games are adapted from hypotexts, and the transformation of textual material that results from such a movement invites close analysis. They are adapted to work on different platforms, in response to different technological and genre demands" (454). *Pokémon Red* is a hypotext for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, albeit being functionally the same ROM as the original cartridge, with the Twitch audience ultimately determining how the process is performed. The performance is a function of the input; Red uses the Helix Fossil, performing the action as instructed, which was in turn interpreted by the players as a religious communion. Milando concludes that "this created a symbiotic relationship between the game and narrative imposed on it – the gameplay needed narrative to give it purpose, while the narrative needed gameplay to provide inspiration." To provide a structure to keep community members involved, a narrative was necessary, and the nature of the performance favored a religious reading of the events. The fractured nature of the gameplay

necessitated the construction of these quasi-folkloric narratives as a method for passing knowledge and enforcing a semblance of order.

The lore that grew to surround the events arose out of accidents and misplays like battle and platforming setbacks, as discussed earlier. These might have been chalked up to simple happenstance, but the players (and, by extension, the community based at www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon) began to construct an elaborate system of explanations for why these things occurred, blaming (and praising) certain Pokémon, and crafting a religion based around an innocuous near-useless Helix Fossil item. Saucerman and Ramirez explain that "the Helix Fossil game item cannot not be used in most gameplay circumstances, but due to the game's chaos, there were numerous occasions when players attempted to use it at inappropriate times. This act, which initially occurred due to random combinations of input from the [*Twitch Plays Pokémon*] community, was eventually interpreted by the community to hold significance to the game's protagonist, as if the protagonist were consulting The Helix Fossil" (78). The players crafted an entire religion out of random occurrences within the game, a religion that had little to do in relation to the game itself, or its extensive and well-developed media system. Fan author Michael Stone contends that "the Church of Helix is truly the internet's religion, born in the sea of information and data online. It is a narrative that has surpassed and broken free from its bounds by those who devoted their time and talents to its story" (i). Out of this religion, they created a set of rules as to what actions were okay in-game, and what actions were considered against the spirit of the game itself. The lore itself is dense and expansive, and has been the subject of some limited scholarship, though the event has deeper significance.

As an example, the PC (where players deposit and retrieve Pokémon beyond the team of six) became a site of danger, after several key Pokémon were accidentally deleted, inspiring a "commandment" of "toucheth not Bill's PC, for it is dark and full of terror" (Stone 116). Events conspired to result in a large-scale loss of Pokémon in an event dubbed "Bloody Sunday." How blame was assigned in that event is key: the effort had been the result of an attempt to put the powerful Pokémon Zapdos in the party, the capture of which had involved a great degree of luck and planning; a relevant "commandment" was "thou shall not use a Master Ball on a Tentacool. Or a Rattata. Or any of the sort" (Stone 115). Some players saw the release of twelve Pokémon – including fan favorites "Dux," "Cabbage," and "DigRat" – as emblematic of Helix's disapproval, but a counternarrative took

shape that they were a sacrifice for the good the team, or that the lost Pokémon were agents of the Dome (DigRat, in particular, was viewed as borderline villainous due to an earlier incident in which a mistimed command had set the effort back by several hours). Redditor Mantra-TF, quoted in Stone, wrote "Bill couldn't be happier, his plan succeeded…the results, twelve Pokémon released, now Lord Dome can execute the final part of his plan; he didn't know the details, but when victory arrived, his dreams would come true" (183). The blame was, at least within the larger narrative that developed, not placed on the actions of any specific players, nor on the avatar Red, but on the ineffable machinations of godly Pokémon. The religious component was common to much of the narrative, though the "commandments" outlined by Stone resulted from in-game events and strategies, taking on folkloric undercurrents.

The religious aspect of the Helix vs. Dome was an outlet for setbacks and mistakes, keeping morale strong for a very long (and at times seemingly impossible) feat of beating the game. A lost battle or mistimed ability could be waved away as the influence of the villainous Dome; an extended struggle to win a fight (in which the Helix Fossil was accidentally "used" a dozen times) an attempt to commune with the gods. Milando explains that "it is in the chaotic nature of a Community-Controlled game that the need for a Community-Created Narrative arises. Despite the long, tedious power-struggle for progression, players have continued to play even though progression of the game's plot no longer mattered." The Narrative did have some roots in the chat, but grew offsite, on a specially created subreddit at www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon. This was initially a space for strategizing, with users looking ahead to difficult moments, contemplating paths to the end, and weighing the potential final party of Pokémon. In-jokes and explanations of events soon took on a life of their own, with in-chat jokes developing into full-fledged memes within the Reddit space. Reddit in turn became the main space of battling out the lore: whether the loss of crucial Pokémon or other setbacks were the effort of evil forces (eventually personified by the Pokémon Flareon and the Dome Fossil), how major victories were remembered (including rollicking disagreements over the Anarchy and Democracy control systems), even a very detailed theology centered around the Helix Fossil, taking the shape of Judeo-Christian framed religion: "the TPP community appropriated texts and artwork from Christianity in order to frame their understanding of the chaotic events of the game…these connections to a pre-established framework helped to both strengthen the narrative within the

community, and helped new players understand basic TPP lore" (Saucerman and Ramirez 82-3). The religious styling allowed for accelerated creation of the community and rules, with the lore connecting the broad player base and creating a sense of shared culture.

Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal is notable in that it is nominally a continuation of the narrative/belief system of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*, but that continuation is a subversion. Rather than expanding the belief system, the story that developed was one of overthrowing the old order, which was an element of the original *Pokémon Crystal* (players could fight previous protagonist Red and his overpowered team as a hidden boss at the end of the post-game). The narrative eschewed the overtly religious elements to focus on bringing balance, and freeing Red from the control of the "voices." The system remained broadly the same – inputs from chat caused the avatar to move and act – though the process became somewhat more controlled and organized as the audience from the first version (interested in the novelty of the experience) shrank, with the hundreds of thousands of active players becoming tens of thousands. This contributed to a deeper, more complex lore that helped inform the strategy within the game itself. For instance, when starter Pokémon Feraligator (referred to as "LazorGator") became too powerful (over-leveling the rest of the party to a significant degree), a segment of the player base sought to release him, spamming "tick tock release the crock" into the chat (an event later referred to as the Gator Wars). Efforts to put LazorGator back in the PC over the objections of another segment resulted in the release of a favored Togepi (called "Prince Omelette") and Sentret ("the Admiral"), with users framing these events as a tragic assassination attempt gone wrong, continuing the overarching plot of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* (albeit with the characters recast as villains). There was a practical undercurrent of both moments. Strategically, one overpowered Pokémon makes it difficult to cover weaknesses, and it becomes more difficult to level up weak Pokémon later in the game. The loss of useful Pokémon, on the other hand, was a potentially major setback, though in this case, they were more fan favorites than powerful party members. It did affect a shift toward embracing LazorGator as a figure of leadership and building a party around him accordingly.

Pokémon Crystal is also directly connected to *Pokémon Red*, with an extensive post-game that (re-)explores a condensed map of the original game, culminating in a secret boss battle against the original protagonist, Red. This was quickly framed as a key focal point of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal*, as the

Twitch audience debated whether the endgame should be pursued, even if it meant overthrowing the forces that had led them to success in the first generation. Cook's definition of discontinuity is useful for framing this development: "a discontinuity is fictional information that is in narrative tension to previously established themes, characterization, and so forth" (274). The shift between the two generations that recast Red, Lord Helix, and various other "good" figures from the first generation we quickly accepted and incorporated, even though they ran counter to the emotions of the previous effort. Cook argues that discontinuities can occur in new installments, where narratives and character developments can run counter to the preexisting canon (274). *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* and *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal* exist in clear conversation, even as the characterization changes. The benevolent Helix of the first game became a more oppressive figure in the second game, as did the rest of the party. This shift was participatory, and not entirely agreed upon, with users putting forth different threads and explanations before one thread became accepted as canon, with the audience playing the roles of both creator and fan regarding the text. Cook's statement that "canonicity practices are participatory…canon or non-canon is often the result of a complex interaction between producer and consumer" is especially apt here, with the production of culture becoming accepted as the reality (273). As with the first game, this served a useful function of pushing the players forward, overcoming the new obstacles and pushing toward a fateful conclusion.

Further events served to connect the lore and gameplay. An effort called "Operation Love" was created by Reddit user vikingnipples that emphasized empathy and kindness during the Gator Wars. While this effort was effectively contained to the subreddit, it helped shift the rhetoric and coincided with the evolution of the Eevee ("Burrito") into Espeon, which involved a high degree of friendship. The overarching theme of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal* developed into one of love and peace, overcoming past trauma through friendship and community. The folkloric elements helped the nascent community overcome early challenges but developed into a binding force for the remaining player base. This culminated in a grand finale, with the Twitch channel successfully defeating the hidden Red (modded to include the same team as the end of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*) atop Mt. Silver. Interestingly, this effort concluded after 314 hours, 2 minutes, 55 seconds, over three days faster than *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*, despite *Pokémon Crystal* being a much longer, more involved game than the

original. In part, this was the result of the stronger sense of community and teamwork, of how to utilize tactics and strategies to achieve success, but it also reflects a sense of competition: not only to prove that it could be done, but to overcome the previous generation (and challenge the record of the previous generation of players). As the end game approached, the motto of the effort shifted away from "Praise Helix" and to "No Gods, No Kings, Only Mon," a reference to *Bioshock* (2007), another game that also questioned narrative agency. The goal of the endgame was not simply to win, but to "free" Red from the voices, to undo the influence of the Helix god (and by extension the players), metaphorically reclaiming the previous victory on behalf of the community that remained (as opposed to the million-plus individuals that had entered commands in the first run). As Milando states, "this created a symbiotic relationship between the game and narrative imposed on it – the gameplay needed narrative to give it purpose, while the narrative needed gameplay to provide inspiration." The output of creative approaches died down, in part because the audience shifted away, but it also reflects that the preparation and planning were no longer as necessary for the later iterations.

The result of this was a stronger community that persisted even as overall player and viewer numbers never reached the heights of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* (or even *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal*). The first effort was one of novelty, the sequel was the true challenge; what remained was a core community that has persisted. There have been, as of December 2020, 56 Pokémon games completed, including multiple runs of the mainline games and various fan hacks of the series. The community evolved in such a way that it began to internalize folkloric "truths": the danger of the PC, the praise of Lord Helix, Operation Love lingering in the community, building a narrative around a "battle between gods" that bridged *Red* and *Crystal* was effectively a self-contained narrative. Subsequent *Twitch Plays Pokémon* games also incorporated narratives: a girl overcoming murderous impulses, an innocuous NPC trying to warp history, a police squad avenging a fallen member. Yet these narratives were less involved than the Helix and Dome saga, in part because there were fewer individuals creating less content around the lore as the games proceeded, as the shrinking audiences spiraled down as the series continued. The audience that remained was more experienced and knowledgeable about the games, and the games themselves were more obscure ROM hacks or even custom creations. The folkloric elements – framing the randomness as the result of divine influence, undergirding risky actions with

special significance, imbuing their actions with a communal identity – were downplayed as time moved on, though they were not forgotten. The internet, through Twitch, did what appeared impossible and beat *Pokémon Red*, and then kept going, something that might have been impossible without the folkloric undercurrent.

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