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Praise Helix!

Christian Narrative in Twitch Plays: Pokémon

Jenny Saucerman & Dennis Ramirez

Abstract

In this paper, we examine the influence of Christianity on the religious narrative of Twitch Plays: Pokémon. Twitch Plays: Pokémon was a new take on a well-known game by allowing over 100,000 players to control the same character simultaneously, which resulted in the character's chaotic movements and gameplay decisions. In order to derive meaning from the chaos, the Twitch Plays: Pokémon community banded together and developed a sophisticated narrative surrounding the game. This narrative was highly religious in nature. We argue that this sophisticated narrative heavily referred to major religious figures, texts, imagery, and structure in Christianity in order to create shared meaning and experiences of the game among Twitch Plays: Pokémon community members. Having this shared meaning and experiences allowed the Twitch Plays: Pokémon religion to proliferate.

Keywords

Pokemon, Christianity, Helix Fossil, Twitch Plays: Pokemon, TPP, religion of Twitch Plays: Pokemon

1 Introduction

Twitch Plays: Pokémon (TPP) took a well-known video game, *Pokémon Red*, and transformed it into a completely novel gaming experience by allowing more than 100,000 people to take control of the game at the same time. The new gaming experience, and the social interactions that resulted, created a rich community surrounding TPP. A significant portion of the community constructed, recorded, and recited the narrative of TPP. One major component of the community's game narrative was religious in nature. In this paper, we examine the role the real-world narratives from Christianity played in the development of this major component of the TPP metagame. The analysis

presented here is draws from the authors’ participation in TPP, the TPP chatroom, the TPP Reddit board, and most importantly, artifacts created by the TPP Community.

2 Twitch Plays: Pokémon

In order to understand the nature of TPP, it is important to grasp the components necessary for its creation. Since TPP and its community have been discussed in other academic literature (e.g., Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014; Lindsey, 2015), our discussion of TPP and its components will therefore be brief. In order to create Twitch Plays: Pokémon, an anonymous Australian leveraged three different technologies: a video streaming site, previously existing video game, and a command parser. When combined, these three components resulted in a new gaming experience.

2.1 Twitch

Twitch.tv is a website that allows users to stream videogame playing sessions. It is well known for airing e-sport competitions but can be used by anyone to stream their own gaming sessions. A Twitch.tv stream is composed of two parts: a window where broadcasters display their gameplay, and a chatroom where spectators comment on the events that occur.

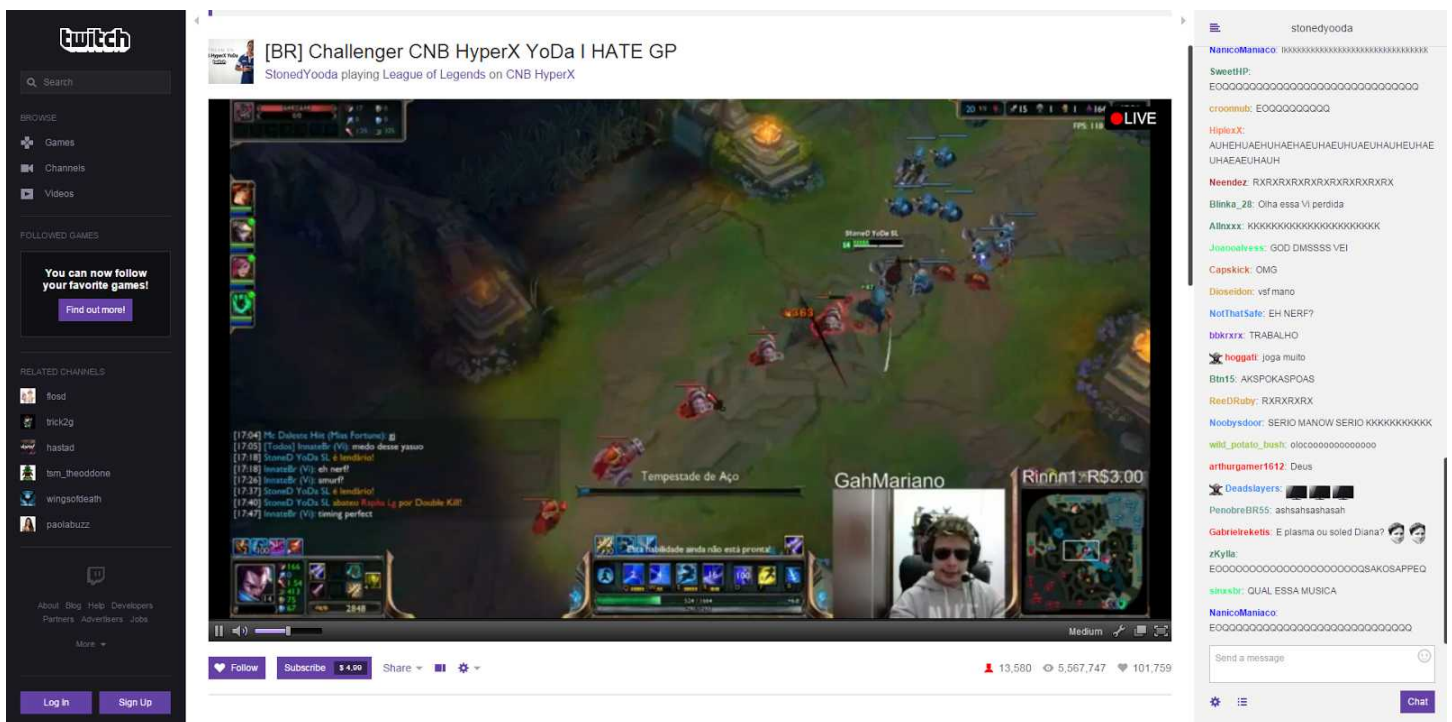


Figure 1: A Twitch.tv gaming session

A typical Twitch.tv session is a passive experience for viewers who cannot influence the game directly. Twitch was used as the platform through which players could access TPP.

2.2 Pokémon Red

Pokémon Red (Gamefreak, 1996), the game used in TPP, was the first installment of the most successful role-playing game (RPG) franchise of all time (Nintendo of America, 2013; VGChartz, n.d.). *Pokémon Red* is an RPG in which players collect and battle creatures known as Pokémon. Players do so in order to earn the title of Pokémon Master within the game. The game has been discussed at length in various academic literature (Tobin, 2004; Allison & Cross, 2006; Kent, 2006) and popular press pieces.

2.3 The Command Parser

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Bots are no strangers to chat rooms like the those used in Twitch.tv. IRC bots are a set of scripts that connect to an internet relay chat as a client, which gives it access to text within the current chat. By parsing chat data, IRC bots are able to moderate chat rooms, provide information, or keep running statistics about the chatroom. In the case of TPP, an anonymous Australian modified code for an IRC Bot to accept predefined commands, such as “up” or “right”, and forward those commands to a video game. By parsing the commands of anyone using the chat during a twitch stream, a new way to play an old favorite was born.



Figure 2: Multiple players entering different commands in TPP (Twitch, 2014)

2.4 Twitch Plays: Pokémon

TPP turned the streaming of *Pokémon Red* into an active experience by allowing users to input commands via chat (e.g., Figure 2). As one could imagine, parsing hundreds of commands a second results in chaos. The protagonist stumbled his way through the game: he spun in circles, attempted to use items at inappropriate times, and generally performed actions no competent player would do (such as naming a member of the team “ABBBBBBK (“). Despite the protagonist’s chaotic movements, there seemed to be just enough consensus in the mind hive to make progress. As a result, the TPP community completed *Pokémon Red* within 16 days.

3 Narrative and Meaning

Typically, games have narrative components which help players interpret the nature of the game world and their role in it. According to Nitsche, narrative “...can create a supportive context for the necessary interpretation and prevent a chaotic and meaningless explosion of possibilities” (Nitsche, 2008 p. 43). In the case of *Pokémon Red*, the protagonist is informed that his quest is to collect as many Pokémon as possible and to become the “Pokémon Master” by battling and defeating eight “gym leaders” and four other Pokémon trainers who are known as the “elite four”. When playing the game normally, this narrative goal is usually met. However, because of the chaotic nature of TPP, the collective players caused seemingly meaningless actions to occur frequently, resulting in a rupture in the game’s traditional narrative. The TPP community constructed a new narrative in order to reconcile the protagonist’s random actions with the game’s own narrative. As the game progressed, players were encouraged by the TPP community to provide input to the developing lore in real time. This process of active reconciliation, we argue, is what caused the religious narrative around TPP to proliferate.

Narrative also serves an important role in meaning making by allowing individuals to reflect on experiences and enabling that information to be transmitted to others. The field of narrative identity research has conveyed the importance of developing narratives from the diverse experiences that make up an individual’s life. Singer argues that “once we have filtered life experiences through the narrative lens, we can make use of the narratives we have created. We can employ stories to raise our spirits, guide our actions, or influence others as a tool of persuasion or rhetoric” (2004, p. 442). Similarly, the narrative that arose from TPP helped to guide the actions of the TPP community (Wankerzz, 2014; Siigari 2014) and raise the spirits of individuals when a particularly tough challenge arose (such as being stuck in the same location for over 24 hours without making progress).

The narrative emerging from the TPP playthrough was highly religious in nature (Magdaleno, 2014). By alluding to Christianity, a majority real world religion, information about the game's significant events could be conveyed in a form of shorthand within the community. For example, if a comparison was drawn between an in-game character and a saint, it could be inferred that the character was good, or at least popular, with the majority of the people playing TPP. More specifically, the TPP community drew upon Christian religious figures, texts, imagery, and structure in order to frame their understanding of the chaotic events that took place within the game.

4 Major Christian Figures

The earliest and most important instance of this occurring during TPP is the worship of the Helix Fossil. 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 TPP community, was eventually interpreted by the community to hold significance to the game's protagonist, as if the protagonist were consulting The Helix Fossil when he, according to the narrative, "didn't know" what to do next (kyacobra, 2014; BLourenco, 2014). The Helix Fossil frequented the screen so often that the TPP community came to view it as an object of worship and guidance (*know your meme*, 2014).

According to one reporter (Barsanti, 2014),

"...the Helix was promoted from 'magic advice giver' to 'messiah,' which is certainly a reasonable leap to make. Cries of 'Praise Helix!' arose from the chat whenever things went well, and it became so integral to the adventure that some people thought bringing the fossil to the Pokémon Laboratory was more important than actually beating the game. After 11 straight days of lugging around a useless rock, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* reached the lab and earned its Omanyte. He was proclaimed Lord Helix, god of anarchy, and there was much rejoicing."

Within this description, the author describes (and seemingly adopts) the terminology used by the TPP community. As TPP continued, terms such as "Messiah", "praise", "Lord", "God", and "rejoicing", which are usually terms used within the context of Christian discourse, were adopted by the community as a way to explain that the seemingly strange pattern of behavior exhibited by the protagonist was not frivolous, but in fact critical to the ultimate goal of completing the game. From

that point forward, the TPP community continued to reference Christianity as a defining structure of interpretation for the chaotic events that occurred within the game.

After the initial allusion to Christianity was established with the Helix Fossil, players of TPP incorporated more aspects of Christian religions to quickly expand the lore of the game. As Joseph Campbell argued with his theory of a *monomyth* (Campbell, J. 2008), the use of common tropes helps make a hero more fulfilling and relatable to an audience. The original *Pokémon Red* game had its share of in-game heroes, but TPP's random events made for a fractured narrative. As a result, the community compared major characters in TPP to figures in the Bible in order to flesh out their perceived major characters while implying complete character arcs. The three important examples of this phenomena can also be found in the Helix Fossil, the Dome Fossil and Flareon, and Pidgeot (otherwise known as "Bird Jesus").

4.1 The Helix Fossil

As previously mentioned, the Helix Fossil played a central role in the religion of TPP. It, however, was not always a kind god. In *Pokémon Red*, there is a mechanic that allows players to remove a Pokémon from the game permanently. "Releasing" Pokémon effectively removes the Pokémon from the game and does not allow the Pokémon to be recovered. The only way to release a Pokémon is use a personal computer simply referred to as the PC, which is also the only way to manage which Pokémon are available for the user to play with. A Pokémon trainer can only keep six usable Pokémon at a time, though they can capture as many as they want, and must use a PC to switch out a playable Pokémon for one they have in storage. This presented a problem to the TPP community because if they wanted to switch or store Pokémon, they ran the risk of releasing, and therefore permanently deleting, an important Pokémon.

Understandably, use of the PC caused apprehension among the TPP community (gingermagician2, 2014). Unfortunately, using the PC was unavoidable during gameplay, and many Pokémon were released during the course of play, leaving the players to determine what happened to them within the narrative of the game. The general consensus at the beginning of the game was that releasing a Pokémon was the equivalent of killing them since they would not be a part of the stream anymore (PatThePirate, 2014; throw_away_account23, 2014; Vmoney1337, 2014). The release of notable Pokémon also spurred debate around what, if anything, occurred once a Pokémon was deleted from the game. Some streamers suggested that the Pokémon lived on in a hypothetical wilderness (bak-chor-mee, 2014; 7ofDiamonds, 2014), mirroring the belief of major religions that promise a version of life after death.-

The most devastating use of a PC resulted in the release of 12 Pokémon. The loss was so significant to the feed that it became known as “Bloody Sunday” (Aeuma, 2014). In an attempt to add a powerful Pokémon, Zapdos, to the party (forthereddits, 2014) the TPP community accessed the PC and proceeded to release 12 Pokémon, including some crowd favorites (Master565, 2014; Main_sShane, 2014). Originally, this mass release was perceived as a slaughter (Juz_4t, 2014) or the aftermath of an epic battle (sizesixteens, 2014). The antagonist in this situation was ambiguous, with streamers blaming the protagonist, the PC (MindEntropy, 2014), a non-player character named Bill (YourMachine, 2014), and even the Pokémon they wanted to withdraw, Zapdos (DrBob3002, 2014), all of which had some connection to the Dome Fossil in the narrative that players had constructed.

It wasn’t long before players began to make explicit connections to the religion, such as interpreting the ordeal as the Helix Fossil (God) demanding sacrifice as was practiced in the Old Testament of the Bible (Jp3ilson, 2014; Leviticus 4:35 English Standard Version). The TPP community concluded that the Pokémon released had died honorably, resulting in the Helix Fossil blessing the players with the addition of an Archangel, Zapdos (carlip, 2014).

4.2 The Dome Fossil and Flareon

As the game progressed, more of the community comparisons of Helix to the Christian representation of God increased. In the game *Pokémon*, the Helix Fossil can be resurrected into a usable Pokémon through the course of a normal playthrough. This in-game feature made the references to the Christian God all the more comparable (UniversityGyno, 2014). The Helix Fossil’s identity as God also allowed the community to define another character as being in direct opposition to the Helix Fossil. The Dome Fossil, the alternative to picking the Helix Fossil within the *Pokémon Red* game, was associated with evil and served as a convenient scapegoat for any ill-executed plans. One instance of this scapegoating resulted in the creation of a Pokémon named Flareon.

During the run of TPP, a badly executed plan resulted in a Pokémon being changed, or “evolved”, into a fire type Pokémon instead of a desired water or electric type Pokémon (Toysrmi, 2014). This was thought to have been done intentionally by trolls, or intentional antagonists on the internet, (micmanguy, 2014) and made the potentially useful Pokémon worthless in the eyes of the majority of the TPP community. Because this change was viewed as a choice against the will of the majority, the event was deemed to have been caused by the Dome Fossil, and Flareon was seen as a “false prophet”.

Flareon's association with the Dome Fossil, and the subsequent, accidental removal of two popular characters (Foxblade, 2014; J4k0b42, 2014), made Flareon a very unpopular Pokémon. Flareon soon served as an antagonist to the community during gameplay by being compared to Satan (MemeTLDR, 2014; redrumthrowaway, 2014). A small contingent of the TPP players did not agree that Flareon was evil and began to expand the character's backstory by painting him as having been misunderstood (Shanigami, 2014). This sympathetic stance toward Flareon much resembled the sentiments of real-world Lucifarians regarding Lucifer within Christianity. The removal of Flareon from the game also helped to expand the mythology, allowing the community to construct the narrative that Good had triumphed over Evil, or alternatively, that Flareon had "died" a martyr (Rob1Ham, 2014).

4.3 Bird Jesus

In most role-playing games, characters acquire experience points in order to make them stronger while also giving them access to special abilities (Schell, 2014). Narratively, this mechanic serves to give the player a feeling of progression throughout the game. Because of the unique way the TPP game was played, one Pokémon grew disproportionately stronger than the others. The difference was so great that players believed they would not be able to make any progress in the game without the use of this particular Pokémon, a Pidgeot (a pigeon Pokémon.) The community found itself relying on the Pidgeot as a "savior" and, because of the Christian allusions during the game, was deemed Bird Jesus (Toysrmi, 2014).

The comparisons of Pidgeot with the Christian Jesus helped the community frame the events in the game in a way that was meaningful to them. For example, Bird Jesus frequently used a battle move known as "Mirror Move" which exactly replicates a battle move used against it. The TPP community interpreted Bird Jesus's use of the move as an implementation of the Golden Rule, which states that one should do unto others as one would want done to oneself (JohnMarkParker, 2014). The Golden Rule is thought to be a sentiment shared by the Christian Jesus (Matthew 7:12 English Standard Version). In addition, the subsequent removal of Flareon, the character who represented Lucifer, was considered in terms of God's banishment of Lucifer from heaven (kalasad, 2014; SpinelessCoward, 2014).

5 Religious Artifacts

The TPP community appropriated texts and artwork from Christianity in order to frame their understanding of the chaotic events of the game. This resulted in an influx of fan-art both on- and off-line. Because artifacts play a fundamental role in the field of Religious Studies (Day, 2004) it is also important to discuss the artifacts produced by TPP. One particular type of artifact – texts – contain many of these aspects of religious artifacts and therefore provide one useful medium through which to study a particular religious group (Beckman, 2006). Perrin (1972) argues that because religious texts share the characteristics of other literary texts, such as “distinct and individual structure(s)”, “thematic concerns”, and “protagonists in a plot”, they should be examined similarly. Given that text was extensively created by members of the TPP community, user-generated text is a useful tool through which to discuss the religion of TPP.

The following prayer, which can be found in the *Pokémon Red Archive* Google doc (TPP, 2014), make the allusions to Christian belief even more salient. Using what is known as “The Lord’s Prayer” in certain Christian subgroups (Kang, 2007; *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979) as a base, the TPP community remixed the prayer to convey a message of Helix Worship. The prayer, as it appears in the *Pokémon Red Archive*, alludes to many events that occurred within the game, as well as objects and characters the TPP community deemed to be important.

Pokémon Red Archive Prayer

Our Helix, Who art in fossil.
 Hallowed be your shell,
 Your evolution come,
 Your will be done
 In Kanto, as it is in Sinnoh,
 Give us this day our daily gym badge,
 And forgive us our start spam,
 As we have forgiven those who pressed down on the ledge,
 And lead us not into the way of the domed one,
 But deliver us from Eevee,
 For thine is the move-set,
 the rare candy, and the SS Anne ticket.
 For ever and ever,
 Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come.
 Thy will be done
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 As we forgive those who trespass against us,
 And lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom,
 And the power, and the glory,
 Amen.

“The Lord’s Prayer” provided a framework through which members of the TPP community could interpret the meaning of events that occurred within the stream. For example, “As we have forgiven those who pressed down on the ledge” refers to the incident in which game progress was impeded by players of TPP who purposefully moved the protagonist off of a ledge, causing the collective to lose hours of progress (Bromigo96, 2014). The players who “pressed down on the ledge”, were considered to have “trespassed” against the TPP community members who wanted to move forward in the game. By replacing the “evil” in the line “But to deliver us from evil” with “Eevee”, the name of a Pokémon in the game, the TPP community identified Eevee as an unworldly antagonist. Eevee is the form Flareon, described above, takes before it encounters an in-game item which causes the Pokémon to change its form. The prayer ends by listing items that were considered to be desirable to the TPP community by replacing “kingdom”, “power”, and “glory” from the original text. These connections to a pre-established framework helped to both strengthen the narrative within the community, and helped new players understand basic TPP lore.



Figure 3: A chapter from the Book of Helix (PhantasRS, 2014)

Other players also created artifacts that mirrored significant religious text. For example, after TPP came to an end, the community came together to produce an entire Bible-like book (PhantasRS, 2014; see Figure 3). This 27 page text did not appear to explain any of the bizarre or chaotic behaviors in the game, but instead served to document the major events, and enrich the lore of the TPP universe. By using the Bible as a framework, the community identified missing pieces of their mythology and attempted to fill them. For example, lacking events that would be considered an origin for TPP, the TPP community adopted the creation myth from the Christian Bible's chapter of Genesis and made it their own. Because the artifact was created after the events of the game, the community also employed more sophisticated narrative techniques, such as the use of foreshadowing, to make the narrative more cohesive.

Over the course of gameplay, players began to use other artifacts such as religious imagery to create meaning from the chaotic events that occurred. This modification of "The Creation of Adam" is only one example of this. In this particular image, "The Creation of Adam", Adam's face has been replaced with Red's, who is the main character of Pokémon Red and thus the main character in TPP. God's face has been replaced with the Helix Fossil, further emphasizing the fossil's status as the Christian God. Other works expressed more complex relationships, such as the community's need to use the PC, but fear of releasing their Pokémon, as is referenced through a depiction of the story of Abraham who is asked to sacrifice his son for God (omerben, 2014; Genesis 22 English Standard Version). Much like the religious texts, these pieces of art were helpful in conveying major parts of the established TPP religion using Christianity as a shorthand for shared meaning making.

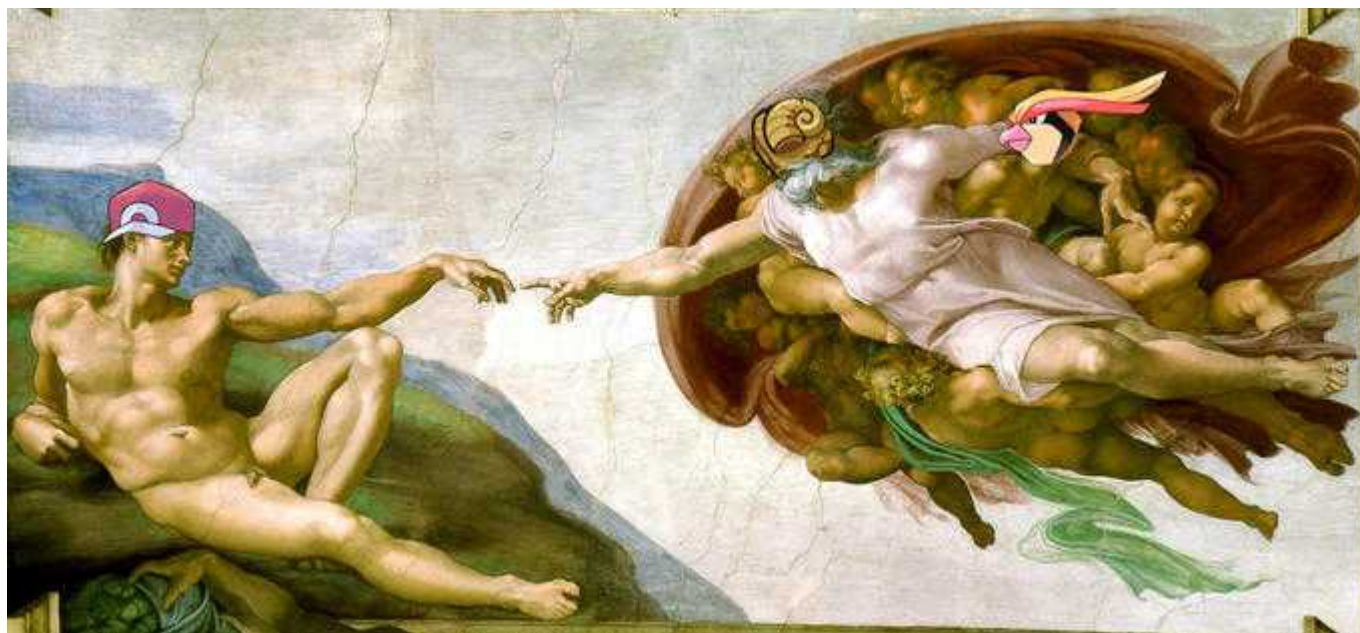


Figure 4: *The Creation of Red* (knowyourmeme, 2014)

6 TPP Religious Structure

In addition to using Christian literature and art for deriving meaning from the game’s chaos, the TPP community incorporated other branches of Christianity to reflect the differing objectives and ideologies of players within the larger TPP religious context. We can observe one visualization of this structure in Figure 5:

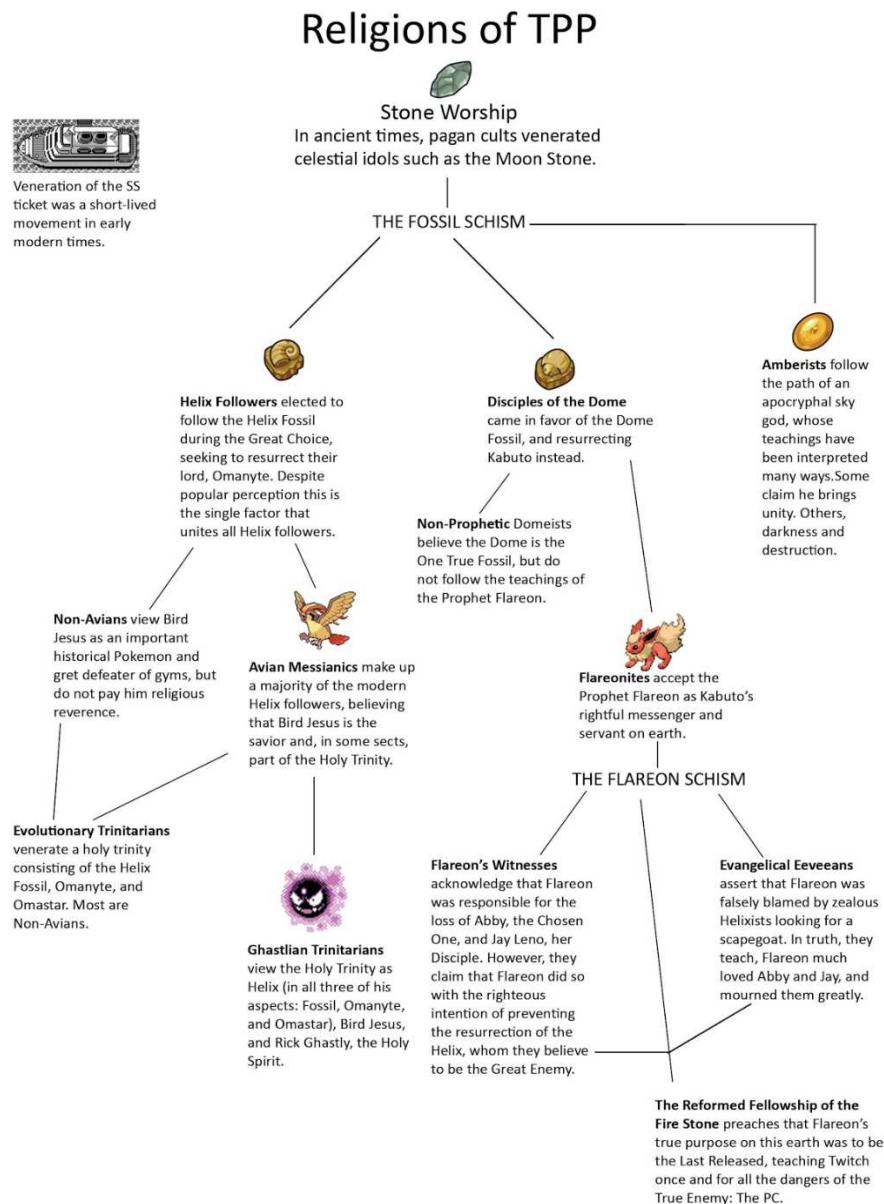


Figure 5: TPP Religious Sub-Sects (American Religion in America, 2014)

The structure of these subgroups are determined by what are deemed “schisms” within the TPP religion. The majority of these schisms closely correspond to Christian subsects, with others reflecting world religions as viewed from a Christian perspective. The “Stone Worship”, for example, serves to explain events that occurred before the worshipping of the Helix Fossil, and appears to refer to paganism, or beliefs that predate modern Judeo-Christian religions. Before the Helix Fossil became an item of worship, a similar item, the Moon Stone, was selected incorrectly in much the same way. Unlike the Helix Fossil, looking at the Moon Stone was considered to be a quirk of the game rather than a religiously significant event, and was only give significance after consulting the Helix Fossil was considered to be a ritual.

At the core of the diagram is “The Fossil Schism” which embodies the major aspects of the TPP religion. There are many ways to interpret the major branches of the TPP religion, but we propose that:

1. The “Helix Followers” branch draws primarily on Judeo-Christian religions and was considered to be moral, or just, because it was associated with defining characteristics of the game (chaos and anarchy) and events that promoted progress. Its subcategories mirror subsects of Christianity.
2. The “Disciples of the Dome” branch was defined by being in opposition to the goals of “Helix Followers” and was originally associated with characteristics that were not considered to be in the spirit of the game such as structured teamwork (democracy), and events that impeded progress. Its subcategories mirror minority Christian sects and religions other than Christianity (aseanman27, 2014).

6.1 Helix Followers

The subgroups within the “Helix Followers” schism relate more closely not to specific subgroups of Judeo-Christian religions, but more closely to specific beliefs within those religious subgroups. Non-avians appear to resemble Judaism's beliefs regarding Jesus' godhood, as non-avians “view Bird Jesus as an important historical Pokémon...but do not pay him religious reverence.” Followers of Judaism similarly do not regard Jesus as a god, but generally consider him to be an important historical figure.

Alternatively, “Avian Messianics” appear to believe in Bird Jesus's divinity. This aligns with majority Christian beliefs regarding Jesus. Within this description, there appears to be a reference to Christianity as a majority religion. The description states that “Avian Messianics” “make up the majority of the modern Helix Followers.” Similarly, in the United States, the majority of the population belongs to a religious subgroup within Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015).

From there, we see two branches off of Avian Messianics. Both are different forms of a Holy Trinity. In Christianity, the holy Trinity consists of the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit (also known in Christianity as the Holy Ghost). The Fossil, or the first mentioned in both of the trinities, likely refers to God. The second of the two trinities, which more closely aligns with Christianity, acknowledges Bird Jesus as a member of the trinity and likely references Jesus. Finally, the Holy Ghost is represented as a ghost Pokémon from the stream (Champie, 2014). This is likely a pun as this particular character did not play a major role within the fiction of the TPP religion.

6.2 Disciples of the Dome



Figure 6: Image Macro depicting the Dome Fossil's break from Helix Followers (FailedCanadian, 2014).

As mentioned above, the Disciples of the Dome Branch is characterized primarily as being in opposition to the main Helix Fossil Branch (Sebulba_Chubaa, 2014; FailedCanadian, 2014). As such, this branch of the TPP religion generally absorbs the parts of the game that the majority of the TPP community found undesirable, such as the creation of Flareon and structured teamwork. Structured teamwork, or democracy, was viewed negatively because it slowed the progress of the game, and limited the random acts that occurred during play. (More on the politics of the anarchy/democracy divide can be found in Lindsey, 2015 and Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014.)

Because followers of The Dome and the Prophet Flareon were the minority of TPP players, we believe these subgroups represent the beliefs of non-majority religions within the US. This interpretation of events is highly skewed towards western belief systems with an othering of non-majority US beliefs under the branch of the Dome Fossil. For example, the “Non-prophetic Domeists” appear to represent Deism (note how closely the word “Domeists” resembles “Deists”.) Just as deists believe that there was a god who created the earth but do not engage in the social practices of any particular religion, Domeists believe in “one true Fossil”, but “do not follow the teachings of the Prophet.” As discussed previously, the Prophet Flareon represented an alternative to the majority belief system under the Helix Fossil. We have interpreted this particular group to represent Luciferianism. The rest of the diagram corresponds with religious sects that have fewer followers, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses (“Flareon’s Witnesses”) and Christian evangelicals. As is evident by the diagram, the mapping of in-game ideals to real world religions starts to break down after the first couple of levels. Some of these connections are tentative and others are simply puns on the names of existing religions. This may be the result of the community’s lack of experience with the different subsets of Christianity, or that the major branches of the religion (Helix and Dome) were enough for the narrative purposes of TPP.

7 Conclusion

Narrative serves an important role in meaning making by allowing individuals to reflect on experiences and allowing that information to be conveyed to others. The TPP community reflected on their experiences of TPP and conveyed that information to others through the use of forum posts, in game chat, and artifacts revolving around their satirical new religion. The TPP community adopted the major characters, narratives, imagery, and religious structure of Christianity in order to quickly develop the in-game lore. As a result, TPP’s religion achieved an impressive amount of complexity given the game’s short duration. Although TPP ran for only 16 days, the sheer magnitude of lore produced during its run and the number of people who were exposed to it, 36 million viewers (Chase, 2014), makes its religion unique and significant.

8 Literature

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