

15 “Thou Shall Never Use a Fire Stone on Eevee”: *Twitch Plays Pokémon* and the Articulation of Game Brands as Cultural Texts

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Introduction

On February 12, 2014, a developer in Australia using the moniker “The Streamer” launched *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. In this experiment, The Streamer retooled an emulation of the English *Pokémon Red* (Game Freak 1998) to allow collaborative control of the avatar in the game through Twitch. In this novel metagame, The Streamer developed a script to mine commands from the Twitch chat function and process them through the emulator, resulting in spectators becoming players. An event that “shook the world” according to Twitch (2016), *Twitch Plays Pokémon* reenvisioned live streaming, offering it as a site of collective play. This experience was the first of its kind and has since sparked several other “Twitch Plays” of popular titles, in which an uncapped number of participants control a game and this autonomous system serves as the content of the stream.

According to the fan-developed *Twitch Plays Pokémon* wiki, which is found in the subreddit, the first run-through of *Pokémon Red* took 16 days, 7 hours, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds to complete and, at its peak, over 120,000 users were playing simultaneously. Because of the overwhelming number of players feeding commands into the game, the avatar, “Red,” would pace, open up the start menu, and attempt to use items, often during inopportune moments. To provide context for this absurd gameplay, players started a group on the social media site Reddit, where they developed a narrative. The subreddit has since developed to include the archive of the lore in a wiki, which includes the lore, timeline, and selected fan art developed from several *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experiences. What began with a frantic avatar constantly and incorrectly trying to use a Moon Stone, an

item used for evolving certain Pokémon, on a Pidgey, a bird pokémon, during battle became a messianic tale of good and evil.

In this chapter, I situate the gameplay and the collaboratively developed narrative of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as cultural palimpsests of the Pokémon brand. By studying the collaborative play of the game and with storytelling, I locate alternative logics and pleasures beyond fun, winning, and mechanics of playing games, even among a massive number of players. Rather, my study of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* emphasizes alternative pleasures related to games, including frustration, celebration, wonder, and trolling. From this collective gameplay, I consider the opportunities for streaming platforms to develop shared memories and collaborative meaning-making. In my investigation of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, I situate this experiment as a fan-made paratext of the brand, and I argue that video game brands are not static in their messages but rather are dynamic living texts because of the fine balance of coauthored meaning-making. I emphasize that streaming platforms as transformative play spaces for fans to continue breathing life into these cultural texts, making apparent these coauthoring processes between commercial and consumer entities.

I begin with an overview of the Pokémon games and branding to address how the Twitch modifications, allowing collaborative play of *Pokémon Red*, are not in tension with the brand. Rather, through the various applications of seriality, I consider how the Pokémon brand gains traction when activated through fan-created content. I then complicate this discussion by articulating how these modifications disrupted the expected gameplay, opening up avenues to consider alternative pleasures at play. I use the collaboratively generated narrative to discuss some of these pleasures. In understanding the ways that *Twitch Plays Pokémon* exemplifies this symbiotic fan/corporate relationship, I underscore that video game brands are not static in their messages but rather are dynamic living texts because of coauthored meaning-making.

Collecting, Trading, and Serializing

Satoshi Tajiri designed *Pokémon* to reflect a nostalgic childhood activity of collecting and trading beetles. Several design decisions reflect this core experience of collecting and trading (*Time* 1999). To begin, the player sets out on an adventure with one of three starter Pokémon with the goal

of becoming the Pokémon champion by earning eight gym badges and winning the Pokémon League. To succeed, players must develop a well-rounded party of up to six Pokémon by exploring the different areas within the game. These areas have various pokémon, demonstrating an emphasis on exploration as a necessary activity for collecting different creatures. The Game Boy, a handheld console, made it possible to play these games on the go. Colocated players may trade pokémon by using link cables. To date, each Pokémon title comes with version-specific Pokémon; thus, trading must be done if any player wants to collect all the available Pokémon. Distributing various pokémon across different titles highlights how the experience of trading shaped the design of the games; having two games, each with version-specific Pokémon, requires players to seek out and trade with others. Tajiri even considered trading beyond the boundaries of the game, such as swapping physical items or labor for beloved pokémon (Alison 2006, 197). Furthermore, certain pokémon evolve to their next form only when traded. The call to adventure, the considerations of hardware, and some evolution mechanics all emphasize how collecting and trading shaped Tajiri's design thinking of *Pokémon*.

Twitch Plays Pokémon launched nearly sixteen years following the English release of *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* (Game Freak 1996 [Japan], 1998 [US]). Since then, Pokémon has grown into a large transmedia brand across anime, video games, toys, manga, clothing, books, and mobile apps. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) identify how seriality, objects arranged in a spatial or temporal series (177), manifests in computing (177), isolated gaming (180), and commercialism (189). Reading the Super Mario brand through Marc Steinburg's concept of new seriality, "a mode of consumption which is itself serial: a character is consumed in its many object forms, as pieces of a constantly expanding universe" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 100), they unpack how the brand's potency lies in its "multiplication and cross pollination in numerous projects and media experiments" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 190). Pokémon, like Super Mario, gains power in similar ways, as transmedia brands that affect the ways that they structure and repeat in quotidian experiences. While not sanctioned by the Pokémon Company, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* still activates the Pokémon brand, and seriality becomes a central gameplay component. Importantly, the ideologies driving Tajiri's initial design of the game translate into this online experience: collecting and socializing map onto the aspects of collaborative play,

involving strategizing and meaning-making; and exploration provides the premise for the topsy-turvy journey.

The original games for Nintendo's Game Boy used the directional pad to move the avatar or the cursor in menus, A to select and interact with objects and nonplayer characters, B to return, Start to open the menu, and Select to rearrange items in certain components of the menus. The simple material affordances of the Game Boy allows a straightforward approach to the emulated commands. Using the VisualBoyAdvance emulator for *Pokémon Red*, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* relied on a script that mined Twitch's chat log for input commands and delivered them to the game, displayed in the streaming window. In this interface, "a" translated to the A button; "b" to the B button; "up," "down," "left," and "right" to the appropriate buttons on the directional pad, respectively, and "start" opened the menu.

Importantly, in live streaming, this modification blurred the lines between spectators and players, allowing thousands of players to contribute to Red's fate simultaneously. By disrupting the privileged logics of gaming, this modification foregrounds "serialized play," which I define, drawing from Boluk and LeMieux's study on seriality in *Metagaming*, as play experiences in which player actions are algorithmically collected and arranged and then processed according to protocol. Rather than immediate feedback loops, a common feature of game time as Christopher Hanson studies, the game processed commands in the order that players fed them into the chat. Hanson argues that immediacy in games bonds the game's time to our own time, forming an enlivened game centering the player. By activating the game, players become aware of themselves as players. In *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, processing slowed the time between inputting the commands and executing them, thus upsetting the immediacy of the feedback loop. Responding to Hanson, I see how this disruption exemplifies a play space in which players do not get a sense of themselves individually as players, but rather as a collective body enlivening the game together in a carnivalesque assemblage. The community at play called itself "The Hivemind" to address the coalescence of many players into one collective in-game agent, Red. In *Twitch Plays Pokémon* lore, The Hivemind is referred to as "The Voices." As a result of serialized play, tasks that would be simple for individual players, like cutting trees and navigating the ledges outside Cerulean City, proved tedious and even detrimental for The Hivemind. The average time

to complete the main storyline of this title is twenty-six hours (HowLong-ToBeat), and yet it took the collective sixteen days.

Collaborative Meaning-Making as a Method of Play

Having discussed the novelty of the modification in the previous section, I now move to focus on *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as fan-authored, exemplifying fans as creator-consumers. Here, I consider how the disruptive play drove players to make meaning from this experience, locating it through developed lore. These behaviors all point to what Stuart Hall (2001) would refer to as "denotative"; these are literally the actions that The Hivemind performs. Yet The Hivemind transforms gameplay at the connotative level through their interpretations of denotative actions using storytelling and art to create lore. Such narrative development emphasizes the connotative levels of games as playful moments that also reflect back on meaning-making processes of gameplay experiences. For this study, denotation and connotation offer ways of attending to the components that contribute to the meaning-making processes of this serialized experience. I use these contexts to observe the various pleasures at play in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* and the meaning that developed from these interactions. Each reveals a particular feature about the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* phenomenon that contributes to fan elevation of this game as a paratext of the *Pokémon* brand. For this analysis, I focus on the fourth day, during which players released their starting pokémon, a Charmander.

In addition to disrupting the expected feedback loop common in games, serialized play instigated some unusual and tedious avatar behaviors: pacing, giving Pokémon unusual strings of characters as nicknames (such as naming the starting Charmander "ABBBBBBK": nicknamed in the lore as "Abby"), discarding items, listening to Bulbasaur's cry on the pokédex, and trying to use the Helix Fossil, an item that players can give to a scientist encountered later in the game to revive into an ancient Pokémon.

Leading up to the release of Abby, The Hivemind needed a Pokémon able to transport them across water, with a special move, "Surf." Identifying two possible solutions, players opted to chance obtaining Eevee, a pokémon able to evolve (hence the name) into one of three pokémon of different types, in Celadon City and purchasing a Water Stone to evolve it into a Vaporeon,

a water-type pokémon capable of learning Surf. However, serialized play got in the way of purchasing the Water Stone, and The Hivemind spent all of their money buying PokéDolls and a Fire Stone, which evolves Eevee into Flareon, a fire-type pokémon. In addition to missing the mark, Flareon in the first generation games is considered the worst of the three “Eeveelutions” due to its stats in conjunction with its typing. Having failed at obtaining a Water Stone, players decided to store Eevee in the computer to make room for another pokémon. In addition to depositing and withdrawing creatures, a player may use the computer to release pokémon, meaning that they are forever irretrievable and unusable. Because of serialized play, this game feature proved an anxiety-inducing crashshoot for The Hivemind. While trying to deposit Eevee, The Hivemind also released Abby.

This outlines the denotative moment of gameplay experienced by The Hivemind on Twitch. Yet it also provides a key to analyze the development of playing with player-developed narrative connotations, a site in which players become the authors of a storyline. When trying to account for their failed attempt at getting a Vaporeon, players reimagined Eevee as “The False Prophet,” who incites failure in the hellscape that is serialized *Pokémon*. However, this quest ultimately failed, resulting in the loss of money and Abby. Notably, the lore connotes the release of pokémon as death. This narrativization alludes to McKenzie Wark’s (2007, para. 148) argument that narrative is an interface through which we come to understand the allegories and meanings embedded in the code of games. Thus, because of the topsy-turvy game play, the created narrative provides an excuse for the failure to meet the privileged expectations of players and games. Put another way, the collaboratively developed narrative emphasizes the ways in which players engage in making sense of serialized play. Eevee, originally believed to provide a crucial asset to allow Red to continue his journey across water, a “savior” figure who also alludes to the biblical story of Jesus walking on water, betrays Red.

The narrative serves as a mechanism for players to make sense of the carnivalesque games. Dennis Saleebey (1994, 352) notes that “[c]ulture is the means by which we receive, organize, rationalize and understand our experiences in the world”; narratives are a way of presenting and forming meaning from these experiences (353). This approach to narrative in turn must account for different trajectories. Jerome Bruner (2000, 53) therefore proposes two forms of narrative: one that perpetuates a canon and another

that accounts for anomalies. Bruner's two narrative forms are at play in the fan development of an accompanying storyline for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*—specifically, the second form accounts for the reconfigured mechanics turning gameplay into a hectic experience. These micronarratives, operating together to connote meaning from gameplay, incite a larger narrative through which players wrestle with their unexpected gameplay situation. Players use narrative as an alibi to account for the divergence from individualized playthroughs of the game, the disruption of normative feedback loop cycles, and then this informs the developing canon significant to this experience: the lore of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Invoking Saleebey, this process then accounts for the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* narrative reflecting back upon the cultural text that is the Pokémon brand.

The names created by The Hivemind emphasize the underpinnings of this story of good and evil that harken especially to Christianity. The lore of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* involves several key characters in addition to Eevee and the evolved Flareon, dubbed "The False Prophet," the Helix Fossil, "Lord Helix," and Pidgeot, or "Bird Jesus." Rather than developing the religious narrative from the ground up, the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* community deployed established religious iconography to structure their interpretation of the serialized play, allowing their story to become immediately legible as its own cultural text (Saucerman and Ramirez 2016, 88). The mass investment in the storytelling and canonization of the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experience emphasizes the development of fan culture specific to the game.

The alternative pleasures present in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* invite us to look to the other spaces of this experience, not as surrogates to the game, but as powerful spaces of meaning-making. The narrative and fan art reveal the level of dedication of some players to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Not only are they willing to endure the tedious experience of serialized play, but they also actively respond to the game by developing further artifacts representing the collective understanding of the game. Inherent in the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experiment is an interesting take on Tajiri's original design concept behind *Pokémon*: collecting. In contrast, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* minimized collecting pokémon, especially because of serialization and fear of having to use the in-game computer. Rather, the modification emphasizes the collective play among players, to quote Boluk and LeMieux (2017), the "model of a hundred thousand billion fingers" (204). With the gameplay, narrative, and art of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, this group engagement reveals

a greater process of player-engaged meaning-making—indeed, creating a culture—out of the game experience.

“Gamefreak-Senpai Noticed Us”

In the previous section, I analyze how *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was a phenomenon that grew into a subculture of fandom. I now shift my focus to *Twitch Plays Pokémon* in relation to the larger *Pokémon* brand, arguing that the modification acts as a paratext of the brand due to its exposure. I use *Twitch Plays Pokémon* to articulate *Pokémon* as what Yochai Benkler (2006) refers to as “hybrid media ecology,” how multiple producers and audiences interact with each other to create systems of power and responsibilities through media, meaning that the commercial and fan entities invested in *Pokémon* interact with and negotiate the meaning of the brand in complex ways. As such, fans have agency, not merely as consumers, but also as cocontributors or coauthors.

Integral and tricky to articulating the fan agency among brand identities, especially *Pokémon*, is, as Rebekah Willett (2004, 239) identifies, how the *Pokémon* brand draws success from being “‘poached’ by different people for different purposes.” *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is one such example of several different people poaching *Pokémon* as a cultural text. Studying how children use *Pokémon* as a storytelling vehicle, Willett (2004) concludes that this brand “thrives in children’s culture by providing [a] variety of subject positions for children to adopt as they perform and play with their identities in a variety of contexts in their daily lives” (239). This aligns with Boluk and LeMieux’s discussion of Mario as a serialized transmedia brand that is activated across many forms and integrates into, if not reconfigures, quotidian rhythms. The *Pokémon* brand gains similar traction through the varieties of contexts from both corporate and player-made spaces.

By garnering attention, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* yielded effects into the larger *Pokémon* fandom, evidenced by its page on Bulbapedia and the list of the “10 Commandments of *Pokémon*,” the ninth of which is “Thou shall never use a Fire Stone on Eevee” (Lepetit and Jhall 2015), referencing the evolution of the False Prophet. While this sentiment echoes the understanding that Flareon is the worst of the three first-generation Eeveelutions, the framing of this as a “commandment” elevates this from gameplay, harkening to the religiosity that colors the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experience. Such

mingling of this subculture within the larger Pokémon fandom positions *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a fan experience and validates it among Pokémon fans as a text within the fandom. This is significant, as not all methods of conveying fannishness or contributing to a fandom are seen as legitimate (Busse 2013). Rather, this modification was recognized in articles intended for the larger *Pokémon* fandom.

Nintendo and the Pokémon Company have also nodded to *Twitch Plays Pokémon* in their own products. For example, Nintendo used "twitchplay-spokemon" as a promotional code for three cards in *Pokémon Trading Card Game Online* during the 2014 Pokémon World Championship. Lord Helix, the holy deity of the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* lore, has since been more prominent in Pokémon games too. In the French release of *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* (Game Freak 2014), Brawly, the Dewford Town Gym Leader, says [translated], "I discovered the secret of true power by staring at a Helix Fossil for days and days." This is a nod to *Twitch Plays Pokémon* players articulating that Red was seeking advice from the Helix Fossil. In this same game, the chair of Devon Corp, Mr. Stone, sits in his office, which has a painting of an Omanyte, the pokémon rewritten in lore as "Lord Helix," behind him.

There are very curious stakes in Nintendo's nod to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*—ones that speak to navigating hybrid media ecologies as the producers and consumers of transmedia brands. Jenkins's (2008) study of how Lucasfilms navigates *Star Wars* branding showcases the tensions of the corporate-consumer media ecology. Jenkins discusses similar happenings with *Star Wars*, in which fans took advantage of the transmedia elements of the brand to add new meaning to the story; as these fan creations gained popularity, Lucasfilms pushed back and started regulating the *Star Wars* brand more heavily. In contrast to Jenkins's example, when responding to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, the Pokémon Company faced a decision to either push back on *Twitch Plays Pokémon* for copyright infringement or allow it to continue. Either action would cause ripples for the larger brand. Unlike the *Star Wars* brand management, *Pokémon* validated their fans' participation in contributing to the meaning-making of the brand.

On the one hand, Nintendo leverages *Twitch Plays Pokémon* to market itself, articulating the culture developed around this title and pulling those who contributed to it into the larger Nintendo brand. On the other hand, Nintendo thus legitimizes *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a paratext to the *Pokémon* brand—as part of the canon—with this move. Specifically, to understand

these Easter eggs, one must be familiar with *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. So *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is not only relevant to *Pokémon* fans, but it now has bearing on the larger *Pokémon* industry, another point of reference and cultural touchstone of *Pokémon*, in addition to manga, anime, and games.

Twitch Plays Pokémon gained so much public attention that it forced the voices and creations of fans into the spotlight, requiring the larger *Pokémon* brand and Nintendo to heed this player-created phenomenon, destabilizing the industry as the sole contributor of meaning to *Pokémon*. “Convergence,” as Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze (2008, 5) explain, must be understood both as corporate-driven and consumer-driven. From the consumer-driven perspective, fans challenged the ownership of the *Pokémon* brand and experience through the development of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Yet the corporate-driven aspects of convergence here account for how *Pokémon*, as Willett argues, benefits from being poached in consumer creations because these activate the brand, allowing it to further penetrate the day-to-day experiences and rhythms.

Conclusion

In 2014, Twitch was given the *Guinness Book of World Records* designation “Most users to input a command to play a live streamed videogame” because of the 1,165,140 people who participated in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* over the course of the experiment between February 12 and March 1, 2014 (Guinness World Records n.d.). In 2014, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* shook streaming culture, online gaming, and *Pokémon* through an experience that reimaged how one might consider live streaming and play, and who has agency in these spaces. In 2016, Twitch announced the inclusion of a “Twitch Plays” category on the site, citing *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a groundbreaking cultural text as the inspiration. In addition to their promotion of several other “Twitch Plays” games, Twitch formalized the definition for this category as: “1) Autonomously running games that utilize Twitch live streams as the primary mode of content delivery. 2) Interactive experiences that gives the Twitch audience control over ‘player’ actions in the game. 3) Uncapped number of potential participants. No picking and choosing” (Twitch 2016). Notable here is that the popularity of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* not only elevated it as a paratext of *Pokémon*, but also created the foundation for a type of live streaming that inspired an entire style of content.

Importantly, The Streamer envisioned *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as an experiment for crowdsourcing gameplay, but the response from players demonstrates, as T. L. Taylor argues, play as transformative work. Concentrating on the meaningfulness of live streaming as sites of the convergence of leisure and labor, play and work, audiences and producers, Taylor argues that live streaming highlights the transformative nature of play. Here, she underscores the need to complicate how we study commercialized platforms by analyzing how people create experiences and content for their personal fulfillment and for others to enjoy (Taylor 2018, 82). The various ramifications for Pokémon and Twitch reveal *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a transformative site of play. By reimagining Twitch as a platform through which viewers become a united hivemind of players, The Streamer created a space that complicates the how we consider content in live streaming, who creates this content, and what kinds of pleasures are derived from these participations.

The new seriality of Pokémon accounts for its presence and ability to exist as both a corporate brand and beloved player artifact, while it is thriving because of the convergence of the multiple activations by commercial and audience entities. Furthermore, it reveals how the brand translates into a communicative vehicle in corporate-consumer and consumer-as-producer dialectics. At the corporate level, it is a brand that is carefully managed so as to be profitable. However, fans also localize, interpret, and remix the brand. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* gained greater public attention—so much so that Nintendo even leveraged the fan artifact to its benefit, simultaneously elevating this remix to a brand paratext: to understand the Easter eggs, one must be familiar with the lore. This exemplifies the symbiosis of fans and corporate industry in convergence cultures through which both breathe life into, interpret, and preserve cultural texts, brands.

Serialized play transformed both Twitch and *Pokémon Red* from commercial artifacts into a popular and groundbreaking game experience that inspired future developments in live streaming and in Pokémon. Considering new seriality as a mode of consumption, the serialized play of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* disrupted the cadence of how poaching helps brands integrate into the quotidian, instead becoming a moment in which this remix reflected back into the larger brand of Pokémon. As a form of transformative play, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* emphasizes game brands as cultural texts that players consume and coauthor through reflective and interpretive making.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

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