

**Fiction Based Religions and their Multiple Functions**  
**The Case of Twitch Plays Pokémon**

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#### ABSTRACT

*Fiction based religions are the product of fan communities that creatively rework narratives of popular culture and formulate them as a pseudo-religious structure (Cusack, 2010). Some of these fiction based religions are Jediism which is based on Star Wars, Matrixism which is based on the Matrix movies, and the Churches of Helix and Dome which are based on Twitch Plays Pokémon. The unique context of the social and spiritual formulation of fiction based religions leads to the investigation of their function, and what they bring to the people participating in their creation, development and use for community and narrative purposes. The framing they receive within the literature can fall under different categorizations which offer different understanding of their function and use. These categorizations come in the form of invented religions (Cusack, 2010), hyper-real religions (Schorey, 2016; Possamai, 2012), New Age or spiritual supermarket (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O'Leary, 1996), Folklore (Hansen, 2009; Gillis, 2011), or even civil religions (Simpson, 1984). Each of these categories offers a different take on the phenomenon. This consideration of the literature raised the following question: To what extent do these fiction based religion fulfill a spiritual function of believing or a social function of belonging? In this research, a qualitative approach was opted for in order to investigate the specific case of the Twitch Plays Pokémon religions. The aim of the research was to define the perspective of participants on the function of the fiction based religion that they are part of, either religious and spiritual, or social and creative. This approach enabled a general classification of the participants that was developed into a more fleshed out typology with the following main categories: Religious convergence, Religious separatism, Non-religious relatability, and Non-religious detachment. These categories best describe the attitudes of the participants towards the religious nature of their fiction based religions, and also showcases the different alternative functions attached to them.*

**KEYWORDS:** Fiction Based Religions, Spirituality, In-group Sociality, Narrative Construction, Cyberspace

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## Introduction

The main focus of this research is the investigation of fiction based religions that appear in cyberspace and are created by and within online communities. Popular culture properties across different media have a strong mainstream appeal, which lead to the formation of dedicated fan communities that celebrate them and engage with their material. Properties such as Star Wars, the Matrix, World of Warcraft, and Pokémon have deeply affected massive amounts of people and became an integral part of their lives, informing their tastes in both entertainment and real life choices. Communities were built around these properties connecting fans together and offering ground for expressing their passion about them. This passion and dedication also lead to the creation of religions based on these properties such as Jediism which incorporates philosophical and spiritual teachings from star wars' Jedi order and reformulate them in ways adaptable to the real world, Matrixism which preaches the teachings of the one and presents reality as multilayered and subjective, and the Churches of Helix and Dome which reimagine fossil Pokémon as gods leading the players through either anarchy or democracy towards the completion of the customized collective run of Pokémon played in Twitch Plays Pokémon.

Twitch Plays Pokémon, or TPP for short, is a unique new way of playing the Pokémon games through the video game streaming service Twitch. While the Pokémon games are designed to be played by one person at a time, only enabling a multiplayer experience by connecting multiple games, TPP completely flips this main mechanic by enabling multiple people to play the single player mode; in fact, it made every viewer of the stream a potential contributor which lead to a highly sporadic but successful experience. The randomness of play and the outlandish scenarios that unfolded led the community that built around TPP to create an intricate narrative lore in which it elevated the experience to a quasi-religious one. The Community gave godhood to certain Pokémon, and divided into factions informed by their style of play and connected to their god of choice. During the first run of TPP, two main religions were formed, The Church of Helix for the Anarchy players and the Church of Dome for the democracy players.

The unique context of these social and spiritual formulation leads to the investigation of their function, and what they bring to the people participating in their creation, development and use for community and narrative purposes. The framing they receive within the literature can fall under different categorizations which offer different understanding of their function and use.

Under the categorization of invented religions, the creation of fiction based religions is reflective of the connection people have to influential popular culture which is expressed through the creative process of transforming those properties into religious institutions that are inspired by them (Cusack, 2010). They are presented as fulfilling the same function of traditional religions although expressed through modern and sometimes opposite approaches which are more relevant to the experienced cultures in which these religions develop (Cusack, 2010). Under the framing of hyper-real religions, they are presented as a simulation of religiosity that uses popular culture as building material to fulfill a reproduction of the religious function. In this simulated versions of religion, the participants are more proactive as they are as much producers as consumers of these structures but still use them to achieve transcendence through mundane means (Schorey, 2016).

When considered as part of spiritual supermarkets and new age spiritualities, fiction based religions are presented as fulfilling individual spiritual needs through a highly specific and personal combination of spiritual principals and fictional narrative usually derived from influential popular culture works (Aupers & Houtman, 2010). This focus on the spiritual substitute the believe in a higher all-encompassing power for a belief in the sacred nature of the self which can be accessed through the formation of highly personalized frameworks of believes which can come in the form of fiction based religions (Aupers & Houtman, 2010). The new age framework further reinforces the idea of the fiction based religions being functionally similar to traditional religion, although giving more space for adaptability through the openness to alternatives and possibilities that is lacking in the self-contained structures of more traditional religions (Hanegraaff, 2000). Furthermore, the new age frame takes in account the use and effect of new technologies and the cyberspace in which they evolve to account for the more irreverent and alternative nature of these religions (O’Leary, 1996).

These fiction based religions can also be seen under other framings such as modern folklore (Mellor, 2004; Gillis, 2011; Hansen, 2009). This categorization draws interesting parallels between the dissemination of technology mediated fiction based religions and traditional folklore dissemination, and brings a sense of community to the practice of these religions which diverges their functionality from being purely informed by a need to believe, and adds fulfilling the need to belong as another central function (Mellor, 2004; Gillis, 2011; Hansen, 2009). Furthermore, this perspective offers more insight on the performative and thus productive side of these religions and the artistic nature of the produced material that make up

their core essence (Hansen, 2009). It also explains the progressive nature through which these structure are formed, adopted, transferred, discovered and readopted by newer participants (Gillis, 2011).

Another framing for these religions is as civil religions, which is a specific adaptation of this categorization which considers popular culture as a driving and organizing force within society that has a deep relevance to people living in modern societies, and thus can be drawn upon to give a quasi-religious meaning to life (Simpson, 1984). Because it compresses all aspect of modern life in specific reinterpretations, it can also enable the experience of catharsis, fantasy, and transcending moral behaviors that are not possible to engage with in real life situations, thus providing an alternative to what traditional religions offer in their own structure (Simpson, 1984).

A final framing that also encompasses the religious aspect of fiction based religions is the disenchantment and re-enchantment model which explains the rise of these new religions as the result of a fragmentation of the old religious monopolies which made religious affiliation relative and open to choice (Patridge, 2002). This lead to a process of re-enchantment through the use of this openness to produce new models of religiosity that are more personally relevant to modern people and that tend more specifically to their understanding and conceptualization of the metaphysical which is expressed more fluently with metaphorical representations built upon influential popular culture narratives (Patridge, 2002).

All these interpretations found in the literature frame the new fiction based religions as fulfilling a mostly religious or spiritual function through their own frameworks, but could it be possible for these religions to drive people more toward experimenting a feeling of belonging rather than a pure fulfillment of needs to believe? To what extent do these fiction based religion fulfill a spiritual function of believing or a social function of belonging? How does the religious aspect of these fiction based religions help people create narratives through which they achieve in-group sociality? How can the religious form be used as a transitional tool for these social connections to be made? In order to account for these alternative possibilities, literature concerning sociality in cyberspace and narrative building is also included within the theoretical framework as well as previous literature that specifically tackles the case study that is focused on in this research.

For this research, I chose qualitative research methods as my research problem tries to determine the personal considerations of participants towards fiction based religions and how they frame their functionality (Heyink & Tymstra, 1993). I conducted ten in-depth semi structured interviews with members of the Twitch Plays Pokémon Community or TPP for short. I used a deductive qualitative content analysis (Atkinson, 2017) to determine the participants' position within the framework of the Twitch Plays Pokémon fiction based religions. I also used other methodological approaches specific to religion within online structures (Bainbridge & Bainbridge, 2007) and more religious driven methodologies (Grant, 2001; Vernon, 1962). I ended up categorizing the participants according to their level of religiosity and their definitions of the functionality of their fiction based religions, either as religious or social and creative with an ironic distance from concrete religiosity.

After tackling the methodology, I present the results under four categories that can be associated to the perspective of the participants vis-à-vis of their position on the religious spectrum and their engagement with the fiction based religions of TPP as well as their perception on the functionality of such religions, these categories are divided in four separated sub sections under the names of religious convergence which groups religious participants that find religious value in the fiction based religions, religious separatism which groups religious participants who find non-religious functionalities to the fiction based religions, non-religious relatability which groups participants who are non-religious but still find personal functions that makes them attached to the fiction based religions, and non-religious detachment which groups participants who are non-religious and have a complete detachment and light hearted connection to the fiction based religions that they consider only as secondary in function to other considerations they have within TPP.

Finally a general discussion concerning the implication of these results is offered which tackles the question of fiction based religion being able to fulfill more than just religious or spiritual functions, which in this case is demonstrated to be the case, in addition to their ability to fulfill the religious part of their functionality. The next section will establish the theoretical framework that informs this research.

## Theoretical Framework

### Fiction Based Religions

As I am investigating fiction based religions, the first thing that needs to be addressed is how the concept is defined by other scholars. Fiction based religions are ambiguous in the

literature and come under different framings and sometimes larger categories, some of those categorizations come in the form of invented religions (Cusack, 2010), hyper-real religions (Schorey, 2016; Possamai 2012), New Age or spiritual supermarket (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O’Leary, 1996), Folklore (Hansen, 2009; Gillis, 2011), or even civil religions (Simpson, 1984). Each of this categories offers a different take on the phenomenon.

Through the scope of Invented religions presented by Cusack (2010), they are perceived as flowing from works of popular culture that are massively known by the public to the extent where they stimulate their creativity and imagination which in turn leads to the creation of those newly invented religions. They appear to be the product of a deep and ever present desire for novelty, which can be achieved through both its consumption and production, and because they offer the opportunity and incentive for both, they inevitably rise to preeminence (Cusack, 2010). Examples of this can be seen in Star Wars where most people are highly familiar with the material, and fans are highly engaged with the fictional universe to the extent where they integrate concepts like the force to their daily life, and adapt fictional ways of life, such as the way of the Jedis to real life, creating Jedism in the process as legitimate religious institution that follows the reworked instructions of the fictional order. The reality of these religions is irrelevant as even awareness of their fictional nature does not stop individuals to find personal meaning in them. Even if they lack the claim of being based on truth that more established religions possess, they still fulfill the same functions of their more traditional counterparts; however, they are looked down upon by these bigger and older movement as well as practitioners and connoisseurs of higher cultural productions (Cusack, 2010). These invented religions, like their counterparts, operate through interacting with the culture that they spawn from, but unlike traditional religions, they “deliberately cannibalize elements of popular culture, engaging in a creative (and often cheeky) dialogue with certain phenomena” (Cusack, 2010, p.73). This can be seen in Matrixism for instance where elements of the narrative such as the one and reality being a simulation are absorbed from the movies and adapted as a scope of perception for the real world, it enables the participants to discuss the nature of reality while still making references to the fictional narrative. They also differ from established traditions and other new movements by rejecting the channels the latter use to get credibility and to disseminate, instead they work in a more niche or underground fashion while keeping a low level of seriousness towards the sacred, and instead engaging through a more irreverent fashion, by doing so, they reject giving any rationalization to their



practices and believes, and engage on a more peripheral and detached way, taking pressure away from their audiences and potential members (Cusack, 2010).

Another frame of reference for fiction based religions is the one of hyper-real religions. The concept which can be attributed to Possamai's (2012) reinterpretation of Baudrillard and that was reported on by Schorey (2016) follows some of the basic assumptions brought forth by Cusack's (2010) *Invented religions*. Schorey (2016) in his report describes them as "the various movements of religion to mobilize popular culture as a central meaning-making resource" (p.95) this description confirms the use of popular culture elements in the production of those religions previously established by Cusack (2010); Furthermore, the hyper-real framework defines them as a "simulacrum of religion" (Schorey, 2016, p.95) meaning that they are similar to traditional religions on both inspirational and belief levels (Schorey, 2016) which again falls in line with Cusack (2010)'s argument of these religions being similar in function to their more established counterparts. The similarities between the two frameworks of invented and hyper-real religions are further evident as the hyper-real framing also emphasizes the lower degrees of seriousness embodied by those religions by pointing out to the profane nature of the materials they are built upon (Schorey, 2016). The two frameworks also seem to share the same suppositions about the dynamics of consumption and production that lead to their creation, with the lens of hyper reality presenting the members of such religions as prosumers who reshuffle useful elements collected from popular culture to create their personalized structures of beliefs and practices; by doing so, they achieve states of transcendence through mundane means (Schorey, 2016). The hyper-real perspective is particularly useful as it enables the achievement of serious investigation of the ironic and absurdist structure of these religions and their members' attitudes by focusing on their effects and mechanics rather than the reality of their narrative elements (Schorey, 2016).

The next framing of these religions comes in the form of Spiritual Supermarkets or New age religions. This categorization is broader as it includes new religions and spiritual movements that do not necessarily draw inspiration from works of fiction or popular culture, but are rather "an apparently incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices [that] draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages" (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p.4). This definition can still include the influence of fiction and popular culture among the titular ideas drawn upon, it also enables the consideration of these religions as a hybrid of sort that can include both elements of fiction

and more traditional religious concept through the consumption\production dynamic previously established in the invented and hyper-real framings (Cusack, 2010; Schorey, 2016). The spiritual supermarket perspective also offers the interesting notion that can best be described as spiritual bricolage, which enables a highly personalized framing of religious or spiritual conceptions that is meant to best suit the specific metaphysical needs of individuals (Aupers & Houtman, 2010) even though the idea is focused on the precise needs of individual prosumers\consumers, it is possible to broaden it to a collection of people who are drawn toward similar interests, and that have similar individual framings. This notion of collective spiritual needs based on similar individual preferences is left aside by Aupers and Houtman (2010) who see it as a distraction from what they consider to be the main focus of those religions, the perception of self as the center of spirituality through the “doctrine of self-spirituality – the belief that the self itself is sacred” (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p.141) I argue that even when considering the self as sacred, the fact that many people hold that notion can only lead to perceiving other selves as sacred through a process of empathic understanding that if one human is sacred, than all people are sacred, which explain “The emergence of a pluralistic spiritual supermarket” (Aupers & Houtman, 2010, p.141).

The emergence of these religions under the framing of New Age is not only a way to create personalized belief system, but through their creation, expresses an opposition towards the ideological status quo of contemporary societies that is perceived by the practitioners of such religions to be flawed or dissonant with their own world views (Hanegraaff, 2000). The people participating in these religions seem to primarily object dualistic polarizations of society that are the driving force behind most institutions of the contemporary world, preferring instead to form a more inclusive vision that incorporates those opposites as part of a greater whole that incorporates them, like two faces of the same coin, eliminating through that process the separation they deem to be artificial and counterproductive; by connecting all aspects into a greater whole, they redefine essential religious and spiritual notions that usually exist in a dichotomist state and instead create a continuity between them, connecting in this action humanity to the divine and nature, and emphasizing on the need to consider the whole essence rather than parts in any process (Hanegraaff, 2000). This leads to a further confirmation of the similar functionality of those religions established by Cusack (2010) while their holistic approach enables them to make connection between their mundane everyday activities with the larger framework of spiritual and philosophical understanding that they produce/consume through their religions (Hanegraaff, 2000). In view of the nature of

contemporary society that is characterized by the fall of religious monopolies, the notion of New Age becomes very broad as anyone engaging in their own reinterpretation of already existing religious conceptions is somewhat participating in the construction of the framework. By shifting from institutional definitions and arrangements, people are engaging in individualistically driven spiritualities, which are an aspect of institutional religion that can exist without the larger organizational framing of the latter. With this shift of interest towards the spiritual aspect of religion, and in view of the plurality of religious movements accessible as sources of construction for new spiritualities, there is no more hegemony of institutions, but rather an explosion of diversity in the creation of mixed systems of belief that include, but are not limited to religious conceptions and systems (Hanegraaff, 2000).

These exponential hybrid reformulations are further facilitated and encouraged by the technological framework of contemporary society, especially through the rise of massively accessible communication networks via the internet. Because of the expansion of use of online platforms, it comes to reason to assume that people started using such platforms to fulfill their need for the religious and the spiritual (O’Leary, 1996) the openness of the online or cyberspace enables the development of the fiction based religion that under the frame of New Age develop dramatic performances that mix different creative and religious resources creating a spectrum of attitudes that go from completely ironic and non-apologetic to more traditionally pious, but nonetheless, just as framed by the notion of invented and hyper-real, they still have a lighter humor and parody driven nature (O’Leary, 1996). As part of the New Age group, these religions, at least in their rituals and practices are less akin to traditional religions, but more so to occult based movements and renewed spiritualities that tend to reclaim control of what traditional religions has framed as pagan or heretic (O’Leary, 1996). This counter traditional approach harkens back to the irrelevance of absolute truth in the message of the religion and the importance of relative truth build upon by the individuals who practice them as previously stated by Cusack (2010), alternative and relative representations of the divine can then be associated to other principles such as “Jungian collective unconscious-[...] this renders them no less worthy of worship.” (O’Leary, 1996, p.802)

Another category under which these religions can be classified is folklore, but not in the general sense, rather through the consideration of folklore that is disseminated through the internet in what can be called cyberspace. The impact of the technology on the forms and ways in which religiosity and spirituality are reached and used is undeniable (Mellor, 2004). This use of cyberspace is made clear when considering the transformative nature of these

religions and how they lead to the expression of personal and even communal values as stated by Gillis (2011), “Any text available online can be reshaped and adapted by interested parties in innumerable ways, and is often used to align itself with the center-value of the group, just like orally transmitted folklore” (p.148). This perspective takes us away from the highly individual focus of previous frames of reference as it emphasizes interactivity and performance that is done through the users’ gathering and shaping of the material. This processes simulate older and less technology driven conceptions of folklore (Hansen, 2009). The performance aspect has an interesting effect as it leads to production that are highly creative and could be even considered artistic as stated by Hansen (2009), “A performative piece stresses the multivocality of symbolic expression and forces viewers to create the major messages that are evoked in the juxtaposition of imagery, sound, and text. A performative piece is artsy.” (p.208). The perspective brought forth by associating fiction based religions to folklore further enables the shift of focus from purely individual to more communal especially when considering one specific side of cyberspace: video games, and more particularly multiplayer role playing games where these folklore aspect lead to a feeling of belonging to the community. This belonging spreads from sharing similar yet specialized lore within the community (Gillis, 2011). These folklore elements are not essentially a product of the games, but happen through their adoption by player who carry them around through communities and games as they move, which provide them with a sense of establishment and reflects their experience, newer players come across these elements and are drawn further in the community as they include them in their own experiences (Gillis, 2011).

A final interesting categorization for these religions is the one of civil religion, a particular framing of the concept developed by Simpson (1984) enables the understanding of the appeal and the emotional drive of popular culture that makes them good material for alternative religiosity. This framing focuses on the contextualization of society that is formulated by popular culture as it chronologically capture the essence of society through the use of archetypes and narratives, these in turn “contain the emotional energy of our collective predicament displaced into cathartic formulations. They distill our fears and express our hopes in a language of primary emotions rather than analysis, an intimacy by association rather than through meaning.” (Simpson, 1984, p.158). This emotional impact is rendered possible through the ability of these productions to engage the consumers in a projection of themselves in the characters and narrative, and thus reaching an emotional and personal understanding. This emotional resonance not only works on helping the consumers to get a grasp of their

immediate situation, but also helps them form a contrasting understanding through time by bringing them back to the past through the stimulation of nostalgia, keeping their current vision of themselves connected with their past preferences and moments of deep significance (Simpson, 1984, p.158). These productions also engage their public therapeutically and psychologically by providing safe environments for a cathartic experience of anxiety driving situations and states, and through the production of super archetypes in the form of the hero, this figure is “a larger-than-life mask for the ego of the viewer or audience member, and he transcends the difficulties through a magical suspension of natural laws. He is us as we would like to be but know we cannot be in the ordinary world.” (Simpson, 1984, p.173). Even if the audience cannot directly relate to this type of character, they provide an idealized version of the self that can be used to fight off the existential dread of the limitations of human life, and stands as hope for and confirmation of the ability of humanity to transcend these limitations.

After considering these four categorizations of fiction based religions it stands to reason to look for what drives their creation and adoption. In addition to the reasons that can be grasped through the use of the aforementioned categorizations, this drive can also be understood through the concepts of disenchantment and re-enchantment developed by Patridge (2002). This point of view, although skewed toward a Eurocentric perspective offers the argument that modernization lead to the decline of traditionally hegemonic religions, especially Christianity and its uncontested dominance over the west (Patridge, 2002). This decline is connected to the mixed ethnic state of the world in general and the west in particular, as more groups establish themselves bringing with them their own native religions and traditions which breaks the uncontested notion of chosen divine revelation that works as unifying social unit, instead, the conception of divinity became diverse and calling for an acceptance of all traditions, trumping the supremacy of the appeal to Christian conceptions as moral and behavioral absolutes (Patridge, 2002). In view of this shift, religion becomes an indicator of origins, group and individual identity, leading to its specifically transcendent nature to be diluted in the lack of consistent and ultimate convention, leading to the rise in importance of other conventions that are more consistent and operationally useful, mainly ones that are less emotional and more rational and analytic. This breaks the idea of a right choice in religion as the coexistence of many traditions together emphasize the importance of choice, which lead to less massive adoption of the same conceptions and ultimately a general disillusion of the all-encompassing importance of religion (Patridge, 2002). In view of this disenchantment towards traditional religions, society engaged into newer forms to rekindle

their interest in the supernatural and metaphysical, among these forms are fiction based religions, especially ones that use popular culture as foundation, these are particularly efficient in producing a sort of re-enchantment because of their reflective and temporally relevant nature (Patridge, 2002). The operationalization and drive of these religion by Patridge (2002) is similar to the ones present in the previously discussed frameworks of invented (Cusack, 2010), hyper real (Schorey, 2016; Possamai, 2012), new age, spiritual supermarket (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O'Leary, 1996), folklore (Hansen, 2009; Gillis, 2011) and civil religion (Simpson, 1984). An interesting way re-enchantment theory consider these religions is through understanding them as ways for religiosity and spirituality to survive in the modern setting, they are expression of notions that are presented as constants of the human social construction, and as time goes, they become less and less distinguishable from traditionally established religions which saw their impact reduced by the disenchantment brought forth by modernization (Patridge, 2002).

Throughout these representations of fiction based religions, it is clear that the literature consider them as modern equivalents to traditional religions which serve the same functions. Even when their members are acknowledged to take them less seriously and more ironically, the claim that they fulfill spiritual if not religious needs stands as a constant in all these definitions and perspectives. In order to find alternative functions to these fiction based religions, other concept related to fiction based religions are investigated starting with community and sociality in cyberspace.

### Community and sociality in Cyberspace

As many if not most of these fiction based religions are produced and consumed online through collaborative means, it is important to take a look at some relevant literature that tackles online community and its dynamics, the two main perspectives chosen for this effect are Coordination and cooperation in online gaming worlds (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010) and knowledge collaboration in online communities (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011) because these perspectives are particularly relevant to the setting of the fiction based religions of interest in this paper: the ones rooted in videogames and which produce a collaborative secondary narrative that is based on acquired and shared knowledge of the material. Two other perspectives are discussed: Network exchange in online community (Faraj & Johnson, 2011) and the politics of online communities (Lau, 2010), but they are tackled less in depth as they provide additional but not particularly central context to the established framework.

The perspective brought forth by Keating and Sunakawa (2010) first points out how the internet and the different technological platforms connected to it have created a virtual space of interaction, also known as cyberspace, where regular means of communication have adapted and new means were created to facilitate collaboration between participants. These adaptations are necessary in the context of video games as participants strive to achieve balance between their individual actions and the communal actions performed in synchronicity with other members while aligning their physical inputs with technologically processed outputs (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010). This coordination is explained through the concept of participation cues which are best described as community developed strategies that bring order in the mass of interactions, they simplify the complexity of the actions that need to be performed through various situations and enable the individual inputs to coherently work associatively towards the achievement of wanted objectives. Through the dissemination of those cues and their adoption, participants are armed with the ability to read the flow of action and predict the needed actions that need to be performed down the line (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010). These cues also seem to appear out of necessity as the shifting context of play creates different temporary roles that the users must adapt to, negating specialization and emphasizing quick adaptability, this is made coherent through the dissemination of culture relative to the general context that offer these necessary cues for adaptation of strategies and types of inputs required (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010). These adaptive aspects of cyberspace and collaborative video games in particular “have created a unique moment for studying how people organize roles and relationships and how they generate coherence across simultaneous, multifaceted fields of participation.” (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010, p.352). This need is particularly relevant when tackling fiction based religions that are created around video games as it guides the interest in the community aspect towards the dynamic and emergence of roles and how these roles and their adaptation by different members are affected by and lead to the creation of spiritually charged narratives and gameplay.

The second communal perspective to be taken in account is the one of knowledge collaboration in online communities (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011). This perspective first describes the members of online community as being primarily brought together by shared interests while their identification is either vague or absent. The rise of these communities is closely attached to the rise of the internet and the bolstering of its social relevance, and their focus is stated to be either on sociality, creativity, or innovation (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011). As one or many shared interests are the center that brings

these communities together, this perspective offers knowledge collaboration surrounding these interests as the driving force that keep them active as this collaboration is beneficial both on an individual and community level. Knowledge collaboration is defined as “the sharing, transfer, accumulation, transformation, and co-creation of knowledge. In an OC, knowledge collaboration involves individual acts of offering knowledge to others as well as adding to, recombining, modifying, and integrating knowledge that others have contributed.” (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011, p.1224) This knowledge collaboration is mainly linked to enthusiasm or passion on both individual and group level as it fuels both of them as it leads to content creation and the formation of a group identity and in-group sociality which in turn bolster the cumulative knowledge of the community over extensive periods of time where it is refined through internal feedback and consolidation (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011). Because of the dominance of anonymity that signifies the irrelevance of personal identity that is not related to the shared interest, the common factor trumps individual specificities and recognition of participants, this in turn leads to Social disembodiment which “refers to the notion that, in an OC, ideas can become independent of their authors and of the context in which they were originally created and shared. OCs allow combination and recombination of ideas unconstrained by conventions of social interaction, shared context, or even a shared set of ontological assumptions” (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011, p.1229). This further demonstrates the importance of knowledge creation over its respective creators as the content grows to become bigger than the people who originated it in a constantly changing chain of reconstruction. This process either leads to a convergence of knowledge, which is not completely generalized among all members of the community, but rather sections of it, and is often partial rather than total, and much more general rather than specific, or it can lead to tensions due to the predominance of passion as a fuel for participation, which can lead to a decadence of internal organization and sociality modes as contradiction and opposition grows out of diverging conceptions about the shared interest and the ways knowledge about it should be developed, this can ultimately result in the seeming fall of the community as seen from the outside, although it might not be as threatening to its sustainability on an insider’s perspective (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011). Understanding the dynamics of this knowledge collaboration in online communities can greatly help to understand how fiction based religions can be created within such communities, especially if either they or their building blocks are the main shared interest of the community.



Even though the anonymity of online community members is most likely, it does not take away from the social nature of the interactions between members as they exchange the knowledge created within in-group networks. The social nature of those interactions comes in certain forms of mediation through the online platform used, but still retains similar goals found in real life social interactions such as “facts, know-how, answers to questions, or social niceties” (Faraj & Johnson, 2011, p.1466). In fact, online communities through their networks tend to streamline and organize those socially driven interactions and create a history out of the different threads that in turn sets standards and precedents within the community and contribute to the creation of its culture through the generated knowledge. (Faraj & Johnson, 2011). Because of the social and technologically driven nature of these participations and interactions within online communities, they create their own system out of expressions of sociality by adapting them to the context in which they are developed creating a custom democracy in which the culture and the technology that transmit it become interdependent, which makes the comparison between these types of sociality and the real life ones limited and not completely adaptable (Lau, 2010). After tackling the literature on community and sociality in cyberspace, narrative construction and its relation to fiction based religions is investigated next in order to define it as a potential functionality of these religions.

### Narrative

Fiction based religions beyond their religious and social aspect also engage in creative processes making them relatable to the works of fiction they are inspired of through the use of a narrative that is made tangible through several works that are adaptable to the online media at hand, and the skills possessed by the members of the community. The use of religious theme in fiction is already a wide spread practice and the religious fiction can be considered to be a genre on its own, so the connection between fiction and religion is already present on the side of the narrative production before being readapted by the prosumers of fiction based religions, this kind of literature “allowed the layman to engage with religious controversies more usually confined to the clergyman or the academic, in a form of discourse hitherto associated with the secular and, to some minds, the profane” (Stevens, 2010, 84). On the readers’ side, the presence of fiction that aboard themes of religion can also help broaden the acceptance of readers, especially young adults, of other religious concept that are not part of their own conception and might even be completely different from their own experience of the religious (Letcher, 2011). This openness to the spiritual and religious in various forms by experimenting it through fiction might also be a facilitator to joining and participating in a

fiction based religion by producing a similar process in which these works of fiction were created, and thus, accessing the same quest for answers taken by the writers of these works, creating through the process a personal and communal experience.

This leads to the examination of narrative construction in cyberspace established by Punday (2000). This narrative construction comes first out of the ambiguity and fluidity of identity, which enables the members to craft personas, avatars, or characters through which they communicate by adapting their real thoughts to sorts of role playing interactions in which the message is presented from the perspective of the persona rather than the real person behind it (Punday, 2000). Even though there is a drive for creativity, because of the scope of participants involved and in a general streamlining effort that tends to make the role playing relatable, very universal social narratives end up taking shape, but they give a meta-commentary that reflects the interconnection between the social and narrative elements of the community (Punday, 2000).

One particularly relevant example of this narrative creation in cyberspace is fan fiction. As the name indicates, this process involves the creation of modified narrative fiction using existing stories as building blocks and is done by fans of those stories. Through these creations, “fans extend storylines, create new narrative threads, develop romantic relationships between characters, and focus on the lives of undeveloped characters from various media” (Black, 2009, p.398). This creative process of narration building has been greatly encouraged by the development of technological means and the creation of dedicated cyberspaces in which communities of people engaging in these activities were able to come together, share their material and exchange ideas while producing more and more narratives. Thanks to the context provided by the technology, the users were able to put their own twist on existing material while actively interpreting its symbolic elements and readapting it to the cyberspace in which it is produced (Black, 2009). Furthermore, these creative processes can be argued to have developed beyond personal works of fantasy which are limited to individually driven inspiration, and instead have become reflective of collective imagination that tackles the day to day concerns of the participants across multiple regions and enables them to construct new possibilities for what constitutes these mundane activities. These processes can lead to the development of social action that transforms the mundane accordingly with the new discovered alternatives developed through the exercise of creating narrative fiction (Black, 2009). Black best defines these processes as “the cross-border movement of cultural, symbolic, and ideological material that 1) influences the identities that

youth construct and enact through their fan texts, 2) affects the languages and forms of literacy of youth, and 3) enables youth to shape and disseminate their own symbolic products” (Black, 2009, p.399). Agency is primordial in these productions as they enable the creation of particular understandings of the global nature of the world through the technologically mediated framework that these cyberspaces provide, these understanding are primarily driven by the individual and in-group framings that are particular to each specific community (Black, 2009).

Because fan produced narratives usually rework existing storyline from popular culture fiction, it’s easy to frame them as parody and satire which give a primarily ironic take on the material. Even while they are used in ironically parodist and satirical ways, this does not mean these fan creations are out to destroy the credibility of the material they are based on, but rather use these formats to make social comments that can be relatable and that engage in a free and accessible way by appealing to humor rather than seriousness (Tosca, 2009).

These narratives address many themes, an interesting one that is quite relevant to the specific research at hand has to do with virtual non-human life forms or digital pets, these fictional creatures are either created or adapted while given enough in-depth characterization that it makes them relatable and subjectively believable through certain systems (Kusahara, 2001). These systems include personalization through naming and interactions which can come either in short term immediate actions, or long term accumulation of traits that are part of the narrative development in which these pets exist (Kusahara, 2001). Another layer that impacts the way these digital pets are conceived is the societal and personal perception that shapes the behavior through which the users interact and construct these digital pets, different possible actions arise depending on these perceptions and can go from considering the digital pets as inferior and subservient to having the same regard for them as one would have for other human beings. Because most of these digital pets are the product of Japanese culture, the cultural perspective on them is dominated by the Japanese perception on pets and digital pets, which tend to be egalitarian as it is morally informed by Buddhist principles that preach the equal value of all life, even when people from other cultures adapt their own perceptions on the matter, they still are informed about this perspective and are often influenced by it in their own interactions and narrative creations (Kusahara, 2001).

Three articles tackled the specific narrative construction in the case of Twitch Plays Pokémon which generated the fiction based religions investigated in this paper. Each of the articles focused on different aspects of the narrative formation, by looking at it from a social

and communal perspective (Lindsey, 2015), a religious and symbolic perspective (Saucerman & Ramirez, 2016), and a Meta-game perspective (Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014). Each of these perspectives are useful to consider when looking for an understanding of how these fiction based religions operate and what kind of appeal they offer to their participants.

The first perspective is focused on the impact of social religiosity and how it influences the community's narrative construction, this links together both the religious and social elements of these religions and connect them to the generation of narrative (Lindsey, 2015). However, this approach tends to streamline and generalize the massive inputs generated by the community in order to offer a unified narrative that lacks the nuances of different sub interpretations offered by factions within the community. This does not take away from the usefulness of such general understanding, but by focusing on all participations as a coherent force that shaped a unified narrative, this research is missing on the variety of interpretations that forms the many sides of this unified story, and through which different religious, social and narrative themes are developed to back different stands on the lore depending on the affiliations of different individuals and groups of users (Lindsey, 2015).

The second research offers a more religiously driven interpretation of the narrative building, and focuses mostly on the parallels with Christianity within the generated story. It uses the presence of these specific religious building block to argue that they create social cohesion within the users as they can all relate to this specific religious perspective; however, by limiting itself to this connection to Christianity, it fails to acknowledge the other religious influences that were used to shape the Twitch Plays Pokémon religions, it also takes away the users who relate to other religious symbolism or who use the specifically Christian symbolic in a non-Christian contextualization that is more relatable to the bigger context of the community (Saucerman & Ramirez, 2016).

Finally, the third research is probably the most relevant as it focuses on the dynamics between the base game narrative and the meta-narrative of users who through their interaction with the game and their unique experience with its narrative build a secondary layer that is interconnected with the process of playing. This circularity is the closest to capture the nature of the process and give a credible explanation behind the development of fiction based religions within the narrative; however, it still considers the players as a hive mind of sort, and does not look into the personal stands that lead into the communal crafting of narrative and the layering of the community into factions with different takes on said narrative (Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014).

All these perspectives give a good general basis for the elements to keep an eye for when investigating the more personal takes the members have on the religious, social and narrative aspects of Twitch Plays Pokémon. The next section tackles the methodology used during data gathering and analysis and offers an in-depth contextualization of the case study: Twitch Plays Pokémon.

## Methods

### Research Design

In this research, a qualitative approach was opted for rather than a quantitative one for several reasons. The aim of the research was to define the perspective of participants in the function of the fiction based religion that they are part of, either religious and spiritual, or social and creative. Because personal considerations and constructions are more important in answering this research problem, the use of quantitative methods would only lead to very general results that combine the perspectives of thousands of users at once, and by doing so, lose the nuances of the individual processes behind these massive outputs, according to Heyink and Tymstra (1993), “‘quality’ refers to the nature of things, rather than to their quantity” (p.293). The interest here is to know how the personal considerations and attributes of members impact their participation in and attitude towards fiction based religions which in turn informs the in-group dynamics that result in the community driven creation and sustainability of these fiction based religions. According to Heyink and Tymstra (1993), “The subjective perception of the environment by the person examined is exactly what qualitative researchers are interested in” (p.294). For that reason, a qualitative approach that is specifically done through in-depth semi structured interviews is more fitting as it enables the analysis of these personal nuances and enables the discovery of sets of personal attitudes that can be extrapolated to the general community.

This approach’s usefulness and function has been greatly described by Heyink and Tymstra (1993) as follows, “The objective is to map out (changes in) the respondent's subjective perception of the environment, and that in his own terminology. Thus, not the researcher's concepts, but those of the person examined are focused on” (p.295). Because of the highly detailed nature of the accounts, it is possible to form a clear distinction in attitudes that is hard to figure out in the more streamlined quantitative interpretation, which can give relevant general interpretations of the overall construction, but fails to keep the detailed nature of individual inputs and attitudes.

In order to derive these relevant indicators from the interviews, I chose to analyze them using a qualitative content analysis which makes it possible “to uncover any underlying meanings that are conveyed through the text” (Atkinson, 2017, p.85). moreover, a deductive approach was chosen more specifically as it is presented by Atkinson (2017), “In this deductive form of qualitative content analysis, the researcher uses categorical frames that have been prepared prior to the analysis in order to examine a text; the goal is to search for elements of a text that can fit within the preexisting categories or frames.” (pp.85-86). This approach enables a good structuring of categories developed through the theoretical framework, and enables the testing of the interviewees output in relation to them, which can help determine their perception of the functionality of the studied fiction based religions. It makes it possible to test the participants perspectives through the categorization of outputs and themes and the level of emphasize given to the proposed categories. Next I offer an in-depth contextualization of Twitch Plays Pokémon by discussing the Pokémon property, the streaming platform Twitch, and how the two came together in TPP.

### The Case of Twitch Plays Pokémon

First the experiment took place on the online video game streaming service Twitch.tv.

According to the official website of the service:

“Founded in June 2011, Twitch is the world’s leading social video platform and community for gamers, video game culture, and the creative arts. Each day, close to 10 million visitors gather to watch and talk about video games with more than 2 million streamers. We invite you to join the millions of people who come to Twitch to stream, view, and interact around these shared passions together.” (Twitch.tv)

The focus here is on creating and consuming content related to video games and other arts while interacting. The service offers a two way stream of communication between streamers and viewers as well as a space that encourages the formation of communities sharing the same interest. In this regard, Twitch is a unique social network with defined content: video games, E-sports, and art, and groups that produce and consume that content while building a sense of community through the chat.

The Twitch Plays Pokémon case study uses the platform in a unique way. While most streams are never directly influenced by the viewers and feature a streamer playing the game, this particular stream flipped this notion by eliminating the streamer and replacing them by a program that enables the viewers to play the game. In addition to using the chat as a mean of community building, it also enabled the viewers to input commands that directly influenced the game, those commands were: up, down, left, right, a, b, start, and select. The program

would then input every typed command through a priority order. This led to a chaotic gameplay that almost stopped the experiment from carrying on, this led to the introduction of the democracy mode which added a needed balance to the game and enabled the successive achievement of demanding and complex tasks, and the successful completion of the final objective. The democracy mode did not put an end to the first chaotic programming, but rebranded it as anarchy, and kept a live counter of vote for either anarchy or democracy. After a set timer runs, the mode that has more votes is the one applied. The second aspect of the democracy mode was applied when voted, it stopped the automatic input of commands, and instead sort them into votes for a selected period, following which the winning command is activated, leading to a new vote for the next command. This new mode was helpful in crucial moments, but was also incredibly slow, creating turmoil within the community, and interestingly enough, leading to the creation of the second most important religion, or rather anti religion in a Christian satanic way linked with the new mode, and reflecting the hate of the established majority towards that gameplay addition.

The second part of the case study to define is the game played: Pokémon Red. It is a Japanese role playing game first developed for the original Nintendo Gameboy and is described in the official Nintendo website as follow,

*“Pokémon Red Version [...] Through exciting exploration, battles, and trades, Trainers are able to access 150 Pokémon. You begin your journey in Pallet Town as a young boy. After a dangerous brush with wild Pokémon, Professor Oak teaches you how to capture Pokémon, and then sends you on your way as a fledgling Trainer. During your journey through Kanto, you must capture Pokémon to record their information in your Pokédex, as well as become a better Trainer by competing in Gyms scattered throughout the region. Once you've proven your mettle as a Pokémon Trainer, it's time to take on the Elite Four, a crack group of Trainers that will put all of your learned skills to the test. Your journey will be far from easy. In addition to the many Trainers and wild Pokémon you'll encounter along the way, you'll also have to be watchful of Team Rocket, a despicable group of Pokémon thieves. Prevent Team Rocket from stealing rare Pokémon and stop their criminal ways!”* (Nintendo.co.uk)

This brief synopsis of the narrative of the game presents us with some and notions of gameplay that involve catching and battling, the challenge is divided into eight gyms with different attributes that require catching Pokémon with specific abilities to clear them, and a very challenging consecutive contest against the elite four which name is not representative of their number; after defeating four bosses, a final battle need to be cleared against the rival character that is encountered from the very beginning and keeps challenging the player throughout the narrative. The secondary subplot involving going against a criminal

organization is also mentioned. All those elements reflect a gameplay that is primarily individual in nature, and offers collaboration as an additional value as stated by Nintendo's website, "You won't be able to catch every Pokémon in either *Pokémon Red Version* or *Pokémon Blue Version*; to collect every Pokémon, you'll have to trade with friends. You can also take your team of faithful Pokémon into battle against your pals to see how well your team stacks up!" (Nintendo.co.uk) In hindsight, the multiplayer aspect of the game is an incentive for players to collaborate using different individual saves in order to complete the main objective, collecting all available Pokémon, with the battle option as a competitive tool to share with friends in real life. The system did not have internet capabilities at the time, so all the focus was built on connecting two consoles with two separate versions of the games.

In contrast of this background information, the experiment known as Twitch Plays Pokémon is unique as it defies the conventions of the two platforms it is using. It goes against Twitch's model by enabling the viewers to play, and it makes the primarily individual experience of Pokémon, its main one player narrative a collaborative effort involving hundreds of thousands of simultaneous players. The progression of the player avatar through the game environment within those constraint appears random and chaotic, and if one is to observe a recording of the experiment with no context, it would appear as some sort of computer error or glitch, even understanding the stakes, it is hard to conceive of the success of such an attempt, but the experiment did succeed. Moreover, the viewers/players were constantly interacting with each other while inputting the commands which is highly likely to have been the reason for their collective success. The chat was also the starting point of the different religions of twitch which were collectively built to include a complex and extensive lore, figures, rituals, and ideologies. It was the main stage for the viewer's interactions and reaction. It is important to note that an additional game mechanic was added to the experiment as it was running. While the experiment started in complete anarchy with the program inputting automatically the first registered command and going through them consecutively with a short delay. This system almost doomed the experiment with certain users inputting commands that would slow the gameplay, and complex tasks that needed precision further down the storyline. The new mechanic introduced was a democracy mode, which accounted anarchy and democracy as commands, keeping a vote ratio on them and enabling the winner to run, when democracy was selected, commands would be voted on for limited time before having the winning command being imputed. The introduction of the mechanic enabled the experiment to succeed, but also created a religious schism within the community the main



first religion, the church of helix, was associated with anarchy, while the new democracy was associated with the church of dome, which god figure was the dome fossil, the one the community did not change. This faction embodied the frustration of the users whose opinions were rejected by the mass. This major development served as central conflict pushing the religious narratives and structures into higher levels of complexity. The next section tackles the data collection process.

### Data collection

I first issued an official request through the TPP reddit page, through which I only succeeded in being referred to one participant who accepted my request. The first interviewee referred me to three more who accepted my request as well. After the fourth interview, I still did not get any more responses from the official request which did not get much up votes and thus remained down the list of threads. At that point, I changed my approach and started looking at popular threads related to TPP religions. After observing the level of involvement of the poster, I sent six queries through direct reddit messages to community members that seemed to be interested. I received two rejections before having three members agree to the interview. The last queried member never answered back. I sent three more queries that were automatically denied. Seeing that this approach was not working anymore, I asked back some of my previous interviewees for additional community members I could ask. Thanks to them, I was able to conduct the three last interviews.

The main reason behind the difficulty of finding willing community members to participate in interviews was because of discomfort with such a direct contact. Most members felt easier communicating through text, and only through DMs. Most of the interviews were about 1 hour long, apart from two outliers that clocked around 25 minutes and close to 2 hours. All interviews were conducted through the discord browser app. The app is similar to team speak and started as widely popular among gamers. The interface is slick and easy to use, and works as a social media platforms with public and private channels. It works as a secondary community hub for the TPP community as well. I tried to get people to conduct interview using the landing thread of the discord community hub, but most answers were similar to the actual chat-log of TPP; sporadic, ironic, and completely dismissive for any serious attempt at conducting a serious interview. I believe that reaction is due to the public nature of the request, which completely contrasted with the laid down style of communication used in the chat.

In total ten interviews were conducted with participants with ages ranging from 19 to 31, composed of three women and seven men from Singapore, Indonesia, the United States, Canada, France, and Germany. Table 1 is a complete list of the participants under pseudonyms and their respective details.

**Table 1: List of Participants**

Names*	Ages	Gender	Nationality	Religious affiliation	Length of interview
Cole	19	male	Singapore	Catholic Christian	01h03min
liz	23	female	Germany	Non religious	00h23min
Damian	21	male	US	Catholic Christian	02h03min
Marth	26	male	US	Agnostic	01h05min
Dane	21	male	Indonesia	Non religious	00h50min
Kate	24	female	Canada	Secular	00h49min
Elsa	22	female	France	Catholic Christian	01h00min
Smith	27	male	US	Atheist	01h01min
John	31	male	Canada	Atheist	01h01min
Bill	26	male	France	Secular	01h01min

\*All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the interviewees

The next section offers the methodology used during the analysis of the data.

### Analysis

I coded each of the ten interviews a first time after transcribing them. I revised the coding after each new interview until the completion of the interviewing phase which came in four consecutive waves. This made the first interviews the ones to receive most of the preliminary coding review. As I reworked the direction of the research, I went over the collective coding and adapted it to my new research goals and literature. Following a deductive qualitative content analysis (Atkinson, 2017), I formulated categories derived from the theoretical framework that related specifically to religiosity, sociality and narrative and connected them to the coded data of the interviews to determine the position of the interviewees with different possible functions and uses of the religions, and how they framed it within their own personal experience. To further reinforce my approach, I used additional analysis methods that are specifically relevant to the study of online communities (Bainbridge & Bainbridge, 2007) which offered relevant pointers on how to approach members of online communities and how to consider their understanding of religiosity within the cyberspace context they occupy.

I also used other methods that are more specific to the study of religion, some of these methods were particularly useful as they enabled the interpretation of meaning as cultural objects or stories and help assess modern trends of religiosity (Grant, 2001) this approach enables an understanding of “how to communicate collective meanings. From this

perspective, there are no absolute truths that symbols can transmit, since all "truths" are socially constructed. Hence, the chief duty of the sociologist is to study how symbolic boundaries are drawn in cultural objects to make shared meanings possible” (Grant, 2001, p.238). Another religiously specific method used helps to determine the use of direct and indirect ways of asking about religiosity and the affiliations of specific interviewees (Vernon, 1962). Through the use of a combination of these methods, I was able to come to a specific categorization and analysis of the data which is informed by the level of religiosity of the participants, and their level of interpretation of the functionality of their fiction based religion, as in experimenting it on a religious level, or on a more mundane socially and creatively driven way. The next section offers the results found following the analysis of the data.

## Results

After analyzing the data, the first typology that informed my later consideration is represented in table 2:

**Table 2: Typology of Users**

	Religious	Non-Religious
Serious	Damian, Cole	Bill, Marth, Smith, John
Ironic	Elsa, Cole	Kate, Liz, Dane, Marth Smith

This division enabled a general classification of the participants that later affected the more fleshed out categorizations: Religious convergence, Religious separatism, Non-religious relatability, and Non-religious detachment which best describe the attitudes of the participant towards the religious nature of their fiction based religions, and also showcases the different alternative functions attached to these fiction based religions. None of the participants uses the Twitch Plays Pokémon religions as they would use a traditional religion even on the same level of functionality established by Invented religions (Cusack, 2010) and to a certain extent New age and Spiritual Supermarkets (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000)., and some of them, (Damian, Cole, and Elsa) are religious in the traditional sense, but all of them present various interpretations of function that are representative of in-group sociality and narrative building that reflect each of their individual narrations and interpretations of

sociality. The categories were built upon the division between religious and non-religious participants which offered dichotomies in the way they perceived religion and its role within society, as well as their attitude towards the fiction based religions of TPP. Some participants demonstrated more personal involvement with the material while others kept an ironic distance. Crossing these major divisions in both believe and attitude lead to the emergence of the typology that informs the discussions of the results. Each of the sections brings together the participants that are falling under the same interpretations, even though some participant demonstrate complex interpretations that can lead to them being part of different categories. The number of people that are religious, all of which are Catholic Christians is relatively low, as only 3 out of 10 participants identified that way, so the sections tackling them goes in-depth in analyzing their perspective on functionality of the TPP religions, but are not as voluminous as the sections tackling the non-religious participants as they form the majority with 7 out of 10 participants. I will first start by discussing the religious participants, beginning with the ones who had most personal involvement with the fiction based religions of TPP.

### Religious Convergence

The first category in which the participants are classified is religious convergence. In this category, the participants are the closest to consider the fiction based religions of TPP as functionally similar to their own religion (Cusack, 2010; Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000) but in the two cases, the participants are still using their own religion as primary source of metaphysical meaning making. The two participants who fall in this category are Cole and Damian.

Starting with Cole, his perspective on the TPP religions was one that had many parallels to traditional religions (Aupers & Houtman, 2010), especially in contextualizing the atmosphere in which they appeared. Cole describes that atmosphere as follow, “we all know that red was the rise of the helix versus the dome religions [...] and then of course there is the whole other mess with the item pantheon, all the other items that when forces that were deemed worshiped, all the heretic blasphemy arguments back and forth, there was in a sense, almost like real religious fanaticism.” This context reflects the presence of real religious association with the fiction based religion through the adoption of certain higher entities and the tensions between different factions that were favorable to specific modes of religiosity (Cusack, 2010; Schorey, 2016). Cole goes forth and discloses the temporary fall and resurgence of these religions which after going through this rebirth phase acquired more

gravitas “in the sixth stream, this is where it gets interesting because the sixth stream is essentially the revival of fossil religion, the fossil pantheon as a whole, because they did not bring just helix and dome, they made amber a lot more important, and expanded the pantheon to include pretty much every single fossil, and that's how the religion developed” (Cole). Furthermore, Cole developed a personal relation to the religions (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000) as it inspired him to produce and participate in the development of the movements through his creative work, “ I was there, that was around the time I started writing, and I would like to say that in a way I kind of helped to, I was one of the people who participated and helped to make the religion into a bigger concept around that time” (Cole). Cole derived his understanding of the structure through which he produced his narrations from previously established religious conceptions, which harkens back to the notion of pick and choose religion introduced in the spiritual supermarket and new age perspectives (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O’Leary, 1996), “it's also similar in a sense that in those polytheistic religions, when you have a creator, often the creator would be the one who stays out of other affairs or what's going on, and believe in the other gods bellow him to do it, it kind of seen in that sense, so in the same way that we have depictions of the streamer, and some of his other helpers” (Cole). When it comes to personal genuine believe, Cole demonstrates some kinship to the Gods of TPP, but is still stopped from acknowledging it completely due to concern with the reality of religion, which undermines the irrelevance of that aspect previously brought about in the literature (Cusack, 2010; Schorey, 2016; O’Leary, 1996), “, I guess, to a tiny extent, there is a tiny, as heretic as this may sound, I guess there is a tiny bit of reverence, if this was actually a real religion, I think I might actually like it, I might actually sign up for it, if it was a real thing” (Cole); However, Cole tends to apply conceptions of his own faith as a Catholic Christian to the construction of the fiction based religions (Aupers & Houtman, 2010), especially when forming the characters of the gods, which he bound to a strict religious morality, “I try to see it, that I'm not writing anything that would basically counteract my catholic values, I'm not writing anything like, this god says go kill people, I think that kind of help to think that what I'm writing is a good thing” (Cole). Ultimately, Cole connects the fiction based religion structure of TPP to a higher personal definition of metaphysics (Hanegraaff, 2000) in which he considers all religions to be representative of the will of a higher power, and by that logic, also considers the TPP religions to be reflective of that higher power, “because I have some belief that all religions, in a sense, are more or less reflections of the same creator, so, I think that if I define to myself that a fictional religion can work in the same way since if I believe all religions are a

reflection of the real god, than, in a sense, even if our TPP fictional was real, it would still be a reflection of the real god” (Cole).

Damian also has a big quasi-religious impression about TPP in general and its religions more specifically. For him the systems to which the religions are connected are representative of the world at large (Simpson, 1984). He describes the experience as follow,

“there is a symbolism between the end goal of beat the game, in the sense of salvation, and anarchy being the mode, the setting of, you know, like the world's anarchy, this is how we come true, this is a symbolic representation of us going through, and um, people took it very very seriously in the form of, it's like, yes, humanity, this is a moment of humanity, I'm witnessing a sense of hope, if we can get to the end, hope is believable”(Damian).

This is representative of his converging perspective that connects the fictional religion to a higher and spiritual if not religious representation of life (O’Leary, 1996). Damian further described the achievement of this heightened state through becoming part of the whole, as in being connected to the mass of other participants in a quasi-religious unity (Hansen, 2009; O’Leary, 1996), “it was being a hive mind, it was like a mob mentality [...], it's doing what is actually happening with the people who you are playing with, and that, we are synchronized, you try to input, and you see like the flow of input, it's like a perfect curve, it goes up, it's when the input hit its peak [...]to me that was magic, that was a spiritual moment, that was like, wow” (Damian). Damian got deeply involved with a specific TPP religion, the church of dome which was represented by democracy, the novelty of what it offered pushed him to deeply adopt it as a symbolic framework (Cusack, 2010), but that was mainly during the first stages of his exposition as the novelty eventually disappeared and he lost his obsession for it. Furthermore, Damian was able to connect his own personal religious experience and his conception of his Christian Catholic faith with the TPP religion as he represented the process of TPP with a Christian metaphor (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000) , “if there was a way to put this in a religious metaphor, I guess it would have to be Christian or, I mean, I guess in a capital Christian kind of metaphor, and I guess in a more broader religious metaphor, it was like, we knew the second coming of Jesus Christ was coming, and it's like yeah, duh, you know, we're gonna beat helix, some of that, we knew the end, we are all cool with that, because it was exactly what we wanted” (Damian).

In this category, both participants were able to converge their conception of religion with the fiction based religion they adopted within TPP (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O’Leary, 1996). They still had more attachment and consideration to their

original religion, but still managed to find symbolic meaning and reconstruct religious concepts within the frameworks of the game and the narratives that was built around it. The next category tackles religious participants who have less personal involvement with the fiction based religions, and instead keep an ironic distance from them.

### Religious Separatism

The second category is representative of the participants who had a primary religious affiliation, and separated the notion of religiosity from the TPP religions. It falls under the religious and ironic categories of table 2. These participants demonstrated the possibility for the fiction based religion to fulfill non-religious functions that are primarily social or creative. The two participants who fit this category are Liz and Cole, the latter demonstrated both convergence and separatism, and his separatist views are brought forth here.

Starting with Cole, his separatist view was mainly driven by his narrative building effort (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009). He gave a great deal of importance to the action of creating fictional accounts based on the TPP religions, and presented this work as purely creative rather than religious (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009), “I started writing stories about the gods, often doing retroactive law where I look at all events and imagine what the gods' influences have been in it, or what role they might have played in events that have already happened” (Cole). This approach is mainly focused on the exercise of creativity and the creation of cohesive narrative. Cole also established clear distinction between fictional representations and their real life inspiration, especially when talking about the streamer who is fictionally represented as the creator deity of TPP, but is considered as a normal individual outside of that framework (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009),

“in real life, the streamer has been known to be kind of a dick to people, (laughs) sooo, I think for a lot of people there is a very clear distinction between, uh, the person and the character, but often in a lot of stories, you often find that the streamer in the form of an arceus with square spectacles would be the one that amber, and the rest of the gods would ultimately report back to, as an even higher order, as the creator, who kind of created them all in a sense” (Cole).

This showcases a clear separation from the notion of religiosity and its conception as pure fictional narrative (Punday, 2000; Stevens, 2010). Cole also demonstrated a clear understanding of the religious elements as fictional, and made it clear that he separates between fiction and reality,

“as a practicing roman catholic who actually just got back from eastern mass, I am well aware that the gods are fictional, I am well aware that they are fictional in a

sense, that they are characters, and I do see them, often when I think about them, I think about them in terms of how a writer would think about characters in a story, how to develop them, how to put them into certain situations, how they would react [...] I'm more or less pretty aware of the fact that there is a line between reality and what we do as fiction" (Cole).

But even with this separation, Cole still has some tendencies to converge the two notion of religiosity and fiction as he tends to identify the fictional metaphysical abilities of the TPP god with a more human experience of life (Letcher, 2011), connecting himself to the divine by doing so (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O'Leary, 1996), "there is something about writing about gods that's always been interesting to me, because you pick something that has so much power, so much infinite ability, that have divine magic, and stuff beyond human understanding, that sometimes they don't even understand, and yet, that's exactly the thing that they can be just as fragile, just as human as we are" (Cole). In short, Cole has shown a mix of both convergence and separatism with the religious nature and functionality of the TPP religions.

The second participant to go under this category is Elsa, and she is clearer in separating the religious functionality of the TPP religions. Elsa considers TPP as a fandom, she gives more importance to being part of the community and participating in the narrative building (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011; Faraj & Johnson, 2011; Punday, 2000) than of actually considering TPP religiously or as close from religion as other participants like Cole and Damian did. Elsa did not want to get too much credit from the narrative building action, but she clearly frames the process as creative rather than religious in her terminology (Punday, 2000),

"the religious aspect, the whole plot with Helix being one of the gods of the game, uhm, that plot was already there, it built up more with time, and don't get me wrong, I participated in the common effort by making some stories about it, but like, I can't get credit for creating it, or even adding something huge to it, I based my stories on stuff that was accepted as canon within the community, I put in some head canon, but I wasn't forcing law, I just tried to flesh it out a bit more" (Elsa).

Elsa was more interested in the evolution of the narrative rather than the religious implication it brought, for her (Punday, 2000; Stevens, 2010), the religious aspect were parts of the story which were creatively reworked through the different iterations of the experience, "it was fun to see how TPP created its own version of those connections, and the gods, helix and dome and even amber were pretty central to it, in the case of helix, he was a force of good during TPP red struggling against the evil ways of dome and guiding the player, but in crystal, the whole thing got a pretty epic twist, the gods were supposedly out of the picture, but they were



in fact used by factions to derail the new player” (Elsa). Elsa further confirms her separation from religiosity within TPP as she gave more importance to her Catholic Christian faith in that sense, and clearly connected the TPP religions to fiction making, and sociality within TPP (Punday, 2000; Keating & Sunakawa, 2010; Lau, 2010) “I think being Catholic is way more important and significant to me, I sincerely believe in God and Jesus, and that he died for our sins, and like being a good Christian and going to church, even if I skip the Sunday service from time to time, but being a Helixian is completely different, it’s a fictional affiliation that I only used when I was part of TPP, it’s like rooting for a team, no matter how much you want them to win, you don’t literally worship them” (Elsa) Finally, Elsa recognized the impact of religion on the creation of the narrative (Mellor, 2004; Hansen, 2009), but still maintained separation as she was certain that the narrative could not work as an alternative for real religion, “I think real religions have an impact on those narratives, and they help make them more complex and appealing, but uhm, they can’t substitute them” (Elsa). Overall, Elsa clearly finds no religious function in the TPP religions, and is faithful to her own classic religion above the fiction based one she participates in, for her, the TPP religions are mainly for narrative creation through which sociality can be achieved, but they are lacking any transcendence or metaphysical significance. Following this, the two next categories will tackle non-religious participants, starting with the ones who have some personal attachment to the fiction based religions of TPP.

### Non-Religious Relatability

In this category and the next, focus was given to non-religious participants which represent the majority with 7 out of 10, the non-religious distinction incorporates different identifications and include participants identifying as atheist, agnostic, secular and non-religious. Even as they define themselves as primordially non-religious, they were able to personally relate to aspects of the fiction based religions, and fulfilled certain functions that were previously discussed in the literature (Punday, 2000; Tosca, 2009; Keating & Sunakawa, 2010; Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011; Faraj & Johnson, 2011). The participants in this category are Bill, John, Marth and Smith.

In the case of Bill he recalled intense personal attachment to certain iterations of the experience as they were exploring a generation of the games that he had intense personal attachment to (Simpson, 1984), “I started getting more and more involved as time was passing, and I think I was playing and interacting the most during the crystal run, with gold and silver, that game is my favorite of the whole franchise, I also love their remakes a lot, so

uhm, when that was happening, I spent hours daily on both the channel and the subreddit, I wanted to experience as much of it as I could” (Bill). He demonstrated high level of involvement with the narrative (Punday, 2000), and offered his interpretation of how the religions were misused in that specific run, and how they should have worked in contrast (Black, 2009), “the lore interprets it as like, a misguided attempt to offer a sacrifice to their gods, either Helix or Dome, but the true Helix would never have wanted such a thing, so it was more the idea of those usurpers of the old religions” (Bill) through this involvement, Bill interprets the will of the religious higher power within the fiction based religion, and demonstrate through his use of terminology like the true Helix, and usurpers a high level of involvement with the material (Black, 2009). In addition to that, Bill experienced through the second iteration of the experience a shift within the major focus of the narrative that still provided personal meaning and relatability (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000) , not to the gods of the fiction base religion, but toward the simple Pokémon that made up the team, this is paralleled to the shift of believe in a higher power towards the believe in oneself that is presented by the framework of new age spirituality (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000) and to the development of real bond with digital pets (Kusahara, 2001), but Bill still acknowledges the religious nature of the narrative by detailing the presence of higher powers (Stevens, 2010, Letcher, 2011), “we got to Lance, He was a beast, his team was full of dragonite and he even had one of the gods, aerodactyl, the old amber” (Bill). Bill seemed to indicate that it is okay to personally relate to religious theme (Simpson, 1984), which is parallel to him relating to the philosophy of believing in one’s Pokémon (Kusahara, 2001), and for him, the only downfall to this process would be the abuse of the principles by the users, “I think religion should be something that is very personal, and it’s alright to have one, and even have a community around it, but just like with real life religions who abuse their power over the believers, I don’t like to see a made up religion have the same effect, it’s fun in the context of TPP” (Bill). He seemed to have developed many personal meaning through his experience of TPP and it strengthened some of his personal believes as well (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000), “I made a lot of amazing friends, and participated in one of the greatest collaborative experiences I ever had, it thought me how to synchronize with others and follow the flow with little to no clear information, and uhm, yeah, it reinforced my already present belief that we can all work together to keep making things better” (Bill). Overall Bill was able to create a connection with the material and a specific position vis-à-vis of the religions that was relatable to his own believes and views (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000), he demonstrated an involvement with the narrative that was reflective of

the religious framing (Stevens, 2010; Letcher, 2011) it had while still not seeing himself as religious, but following his own self-formulated system of belief (O’Leary, 1996).

The second participant is John, who also demonstrated the ability to personally relate to the material (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000) while describing himself as Atheist. Like Bill, he also had a lot of enthusiasm towards the second iteration of TPP, as well as other runs which pushed him to get deeply involved, “I was really into it, like during crystal and the anniversary run, emerald too to a certain extent, I would play pretty much every day, at least for a couple of hours, and if there was something big happening, I binged, uhm, I had a few all nighters playing that I definitely don’t regret” (John). Even though he did not participate in the first run of TPP, John had complete knowledge of its narrative (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011), and was particularly knowledgeable about the religious aspect of it, especially the role of the gods Helix and Dome (Stevens, 2010). He used particularly religious language and imagery to describe that narrative (Vernon, 1962), “two primordial gods, Helix and Dome, were in competition for the faith of the world, red was chosen by helix [...] Dome was heralded by a false prophet, an eevee who refused the way of the water, and chose the burning flames [...] Abby the charmeleon, the first martyr of the helix faith [...] the true prophet of Helix rose in the person of Bird Jesus, the heavenly pidgeot [...] Helix rose from his slumber, joining red in the flesh” (John). However, John was able to relate more personally to the second run of TPP in which his experience as an atheist was relatable to the narrative and the theme of rising up against religion. Even if it is in a rejection of the fiction based religions, John was able to find a reflection of his own religious, or in this case, non-religious experience (Schorey, 2016; Hanegraaff, 2000)., “I am an atheist, so I really like this part of the lore for its symbolic, it manages to capture the ideas of revolt against structures of control such as religion in a really great way” (John). John’s experience of the second run further solidified his anti-religious view and demonstrated his distrust of religious structures (Patridge, 2002), but by doing so, enabled him to formulate his own personal symbolic view of the world through a mantra developed within the game’s narrative (Hanegraaff, 2000; Kusahara, 2001), “AJ came up with a new motto following the encounter, no kings, no gods, only Mons, with these words, he forsake all the gods and legendary Pokémon, and only trusted his regular Mons” (John). Finally, John considered fiction based religion to be similar to real religions (Cusack, 2010; Schorey, 2016), but in his own view which considers all religions as fiction which can bring about symbolic meaning (Simpson, 1984), “in a way, I don’t think there is a lot of difference, the major difference that I can think of is that with

fictional religions, people are still aware that they are not real, and not to be taken literally, so maybe they are better” (John). Overall, he seemed to perceive fiction based religions as superior to real religions because they offer a less constrictive mode of symbolic meaning making (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000).

The two last participants to fall in this category also presented signs of non-religious detachment. Starting with Marth, he mainly identified with one fiction based religion, the church of helix, but was also open to its counterpart (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000), “I was definitely an anarchy guy for sure, but in a way, I definitely was striving for order” (Marth). He had a specific understanding of why the fiction based religions appeared in TPP that was centered around sociality (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011) and how it reflected the religious need that is present in a great proportion of humanity (Patridge, 2002),

“they are probably some structures for how, uhm, this communities come together, how like, the religious aspect comes together, so I'm trying to say as like, I think uh, people want to build community, people want to be able to connect, with one another, uhm, and uh, look at just human beings in general, we have a lot of religious heh, human beings, I don't know if that's innate in humans to be religious or not, but it seems like, a lot of people are religious, so, uh, when building a sort of community or culture, out of a game like this, and wanting to lend it some, uh, some sense of epicness, or grandiosity, I guess it makes sense to appeal, to these, uh, the things in real life that people might consider, like, transcendent” (Marth)

Even while detached from religiosity, Marth was able to connect his personal understanding of human religiosity to how it developed within TPP (Patridge, 2002); furthermore, he used that perspective to personally profit from the attachment people were having towards the TPP religion, and decided to connect his own creative branding to one of the fiction based religions (Punday, 2000; Tosca, 2009), but he still found his decision limited, as he ended up underestimating the evolution of these religions and the number of people who became interested in them (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010), “I created the band name, uhm, you know around that, as Church of the Helix Choir, and the big song that started it off was, praise the Helix, it was all about religious allegory, and uhm, yeah, I think I might have been a little bit short sighted at the time, in terms of like, you know, branding myself, or marketability, because, I didn't know how far the TPP stream would go, and how people would continue to evolve the whole work, and bring in other religions” (Marth). In addition to that, Marth was transitioning from being Christian to Agnostic, and the fictional religions of TPP helped him find a safe way to do engage in the spiritual without having it be too serious or demanding (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000), “it was a safe way, to, to express some of my feeling towards religion I guess, and maybe, even in myself irrational way, it's not like, it's not

saying, all religion is horrible, and if you're religious you're a horrible person, but it was, just kind of a, self-aware, kind of fun I guess, just not taking religion too seriously, not taking oneself too seriously, it was kind of like, a perfect storm, of all the different elements, of how it came together, just the context, the timing” (Marth). Furthermore, Marth believes that religion does not have to necessarily be real to be relevant to the people who use it, and for him, the impact it has is far more important than its actual reality (Cusack, 2010; Schorey, 2016; Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O’Leary, 1996), “I don't think a myth has to be real, to be quote on quote, to be profound and to be life changing, so when we talk about TPP and this mythology that people have created, [...] we're talking about, a mythology that actually has affected and continues to affect people's life, that's really cool, that's really profound, it had a huge effect on my life”(Marth). The TPP religions also offered Marth a positive alternative that lead him to more acceptance and enjoyment of his life, and to build a new and promising new path outside of the confines of his previous religion (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000), “TPP changed my world view because it helped me find, uh, that the outside world, the secular world, whatever you want to call it, wasn't so scary, that there was a big world out there, and uhm, there was people who were gonna listen and would understand, would laugh at what I do, would enjoy what I create, you know validate who I am I guess as a person, without it being in the context or, confines of Christianity” (Marth). All these elements show that Marth was able to find personal meanings and relatable themes within the structure of the fiction base religion which fulfilled his spiritual, social, and creative need during his transition to agnosticism.

Finally, the last participant to be considered for this category is Smith, even while showcasing aspects of non-religious detachment. In this category however, Smith showed a deep attachment to the experience itself by dedicating a lot of his attention to it, “I was pretty obsessed by TPP at that time, so a lot of hours, I don’t know for sure, but I always had the chat and the subreddit open in my browser and whenever there was something cool happening, I’d stick around for it, even if that meant getting little to no sleep” (Smith) He portrayed a deep connection to the crowd and was able to perform synchronicity and acquire a feeling for the massively interconnected play (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010), and he derived meaningfulness from achieving such a state (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011), “it was like, like, connecting to a greater whole, like being part of something bigger, with time, I had a sense of where the mob was going, and how I could impact the course, even by a little, uhm, it didn’t always work out, but when something I wanted was implemented, it was like, pure

joy, like if my inputs in the mass meant something, even with all the chaos” (Smith). He also identified personally with one of the factions, anarchy (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010; Lau, 2010), which is connected to the church of helix, and he showcase pride from the achievement done by that specific group (Gillis, 2011), “catching Zapdos was a pretty big thing for anarchy, it was like, our moment of glory where we showed that even something as complicated and precise could be done with anarchy alone [...] Zapdos was ours, our very own Anarchy Jesus as many call him, I was so happy with how it went, really one of our high points” (Smith). He even connected event performed by his religion of choice to the ultimate success of the run (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010; Lau, 2010; Gillis, 2011), by associating the final actions that lead to victory with a representative of Anarchy, “we managed to get back to blue and beat his ass, with the final strike delivered by our Anarchy Jesus, and just like that, we had won, it was like, one of the happiest moment I had in a while” (Smith). Being Atheist, Smith was able to relate more to the fiction based religion of TPP rather than classical religions (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000), for him, they were more concrete because they were attached to an experience he personally went through by playing the game, “I like the TPP lore, I find it very entertaining, and the plot is way more interesting to me than those dusty old books no one cares about anymore, but that’s because I can relate to it because I played a significant part of the game” (Smith). Smith was able to relate personally also because of his attachment to the Pokémon franchise and the memories he constructed of it growing up, the ultimate point of his experience was felt through accessing that deep nostalgia and reconnecting with the past through elements of the game (Simpson, 1984), “I felt it was the highest the experience could get me, uhm, there was something profound about that encounter on mount silver, like a time resonance, it was like challenging our past selves who went through all of the good and the bad times of the red run, I knew and felt it would never get any better than that” (Smith) By going through those experiences, Smith was able to cement his deep past experience with the one of TPP and was able to complete the arc of starting the game, and confronting a past reflection of himself which brought him to a moment of transcending significance (Simpson, 1984). Following this categorization, the final type of participants to be discussed are the non-religious ones who keep an ironic distance from the fiction based religions.

### Non-Religious Detachment

The final category to be considered is also the one under which the biggest number of participants seem to fit, with five in total accounting for Marth and Smith who also fit the

previous category, as I already stated their perspective within Non-religious relatability, I am starting with them before moving to Liz, Kate, and Dane who are also part of this category.

As part of this category, Marth stated a light hearted and detached reason for his creative endeavor surrounding his involvement with the platform (Tosca, 2009), “I saw the TPP thing going on in 2014, I thought it would be pretty funny to make some songs about” (Marth). He kept personal distance with the phenomenon stating that the initial novelty run out (Cusack, 2010) pushing him to make his own production as means to keep interest (Punday, 2000), “I think initially, there was more appeal, there was some excitement at the beginning, with being part of, the chaos, but I think, rather quickly, I got bored of it personally, and I started working on songs for it” (Marth). He showed further detachment from the community more specifically, connecting his success in reaching them to luck rather than any transcendent structure (Faraj & Johnson, 2011), “I kind of got, um, lucky I think in some ways, in terms of, uhm, having a community, like, I didn't have to go, I didn't have to try very hard, I think, because I think a lot of people just liked the music I was making, [...] I almost felt like I wasn't always completely deeply involved in the community” (Marth). He also connected his creative output to humor and parody (Tosca, 2009) as main drives which took away any pressures or feelings of difficulty, “when writing praise the Helix, uhm, it's funny, uh, it was probably one of the easiest songs to write, because, I think it was, based in equal part, my, just the sense of humor, and being able to parody a situation” (Marth). He further reinforced this attitude of having fun with the concept and keeping it completely detached (Tosca, 2009), which lead him to experiment in different genres of music while still using themes from the experience of TPP religions and narrative, he encountered so much success doing so that he decided to branch out and create completely original music beyond the constraints of TPP and the themes of its religions (Punday, 2000, Black, 2009),

“I just started mixing it up, in genres, kind of let the, the lore that uh, all people playing TPP, and then communicating on the subreddit were coming up with, but uhm, yeah for those first three songs, I think I just tried to keep that, that theme going, that initial idea I had of the Church of the Helix Choir, but uhm, after that man, it was like, sky is the limit, it was just like, I was just constantly trying new things, and I thought, like, hey, a lot of people like these songs, maybe I can continue to like, spin my own brand out into, non TPP songs actually, so, you know, I did a lot of exploration” (Marth)

Marth further disconnected from being part of the community (Faraj & Johnson, 2011) and stated feeling bored by it at this point, he has completely moved on. He kept an open and relaxed philosophy from TPP (Aupers & Houtman, 2010) that prone a less stress driven life

that is affirmed by an inherent knowledge that all will be good regardless of the hurdles on the way,

“it's just a reason maybe to not be so stressed in life, and you know, enjoy living in the moment, and maybe we, it can seem like we imagine all the difficulties and everything, but like uh, ultimately, we're gonna get where we wanna go, it might just take a bit longer than we think, but uh, and, you know accept that there is some roadblocks, some obstacles in the way, some challenges, but you know, maybe we underestimate our ability to overcome, and TPP is, was a great, study” (Marth)

Ultimately, the business oriented perspective of Marth was more powerful than his genuine connection with the TPP religion (Lau, 2010), “I have to be honest, like think about, I'm making music, I'm selling it, I'm making money from it, money was part of the motivation, just to be completely transparent, I mean it's just how it is” (Marth). Which is seen by him as a way to pursuit his ambition to make a living out of his art, and participating in TPP enabled him to get a start in fulfilling that ambition, which further demonstrates his primary detachment from all religious and even primarily social aspects of the TPP community (Lau, 2010).

Smith also presents signs of detachment in addition to his relatability to the TPP religions. First he was completely unable to relate to parts of the experience, especially the democracy mode which he found to be patronizing rather than empowering (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011), “democracy was a cop out, it was like the streamer didn't believe in us, and put on that stupidly boring mode to hold our hands, we didn't need no training wheels” (Smith). He also considers the religion as just fun if considered as fiction (Stevens, 2010), his perspective was more of one that would relate to a meme rather than a religion (Punday, 2000). During the experience, he was detached from major development and only focused on moving to the next part, he was not as enthralled by major religious lore moments as other members (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010), “we got the omanyte in our team, people said it was a miracle, and helix has risen and all of that, but it wasn't too impressive, I guess the simple fact of having him on the team was enough for many to celebrate, but yeah, he was still pretty low leveled” (Smith). When those moments were happening, he was more concerned about the fulfillment of the game and did not get too involved in any kind of celebration (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010). By keeping a detachment from the religious aspect and confirming with his atheist position, he seeks enjoyment in the narrative and social value rather than its symbolic and spiritual value (Punday, 2000; Keating & Sunakawa, 2010), “I don't think they are legit religions either, I don't have to be part of a cult to enjoy a good story and have fun interacting with others” (Smith).



Liz also presented a lot of detachment with the religious aspects of TPP, she was not much interested in predictability or meaning, but more so in the absence of it (Aupers & Houtman, 2010), “the chaos I mean the pure craziness and the high chance for something completely random and unintentional to happen, which is the complete opposite of what you are having when you are playing a Pokémon game on your own, that's what mainly drew me in” (Liz). She kept a personal distance from the religious aspects of the game as she was describing it (Punday, 2000), “when we selected, the um, SS. Ticket all the time, people started to make pictures, and memes, and, not good stories, the first one were mostly ignored, but, comics, pictures, memes, and shortly after, it switched to, uh, well, what is known by now, why it became helix, or how it became a religion of sort” (Liz). She rationalized the interest expressed by the community by presenting religious narrative as common knowledge that rose because of the ability of most participants to recognize it, she further attached the conception of the fiction based religion to chance and a trickling effect (Patridge, 2002), “I think the religion concept was by chance, from the people who made stories, pictures, memes, that it is related to the religion concept that people latch on to it” (Liz). She further attached the religious aspect to humor in the absurdity of the narrative and related it to memes in the way it spreads (Tosca, 2009). She rationalized the nature of the religious narrative to a sort of survival of the fittest among creations which ultimately formed the general story (Punday, 2000). She was mainly affected on a creative level, and is more focused on the development of her skills through TPP than with the religious elements (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009), TPP for her is more of a facilitator for her creative (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009) and social development (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011) than being a center from which those derive.

Kate also mainly demonstrated a perspective of detachment from the religious. She was mainly interested by a few of the first runs, and mostly on a self-expression and general narrative perspective rather than a religious one (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009). She had a very low tolerance to the main platform through which TPP was run, “you know how frustrating it is to keep up with the stream, haha, well, I couldn't bear watching that very slow progression [...], the stream was, just too much, you have the commands, the memes, the emotes, and the trolls, and all of it is moving like a million miles an hour, way too much for any real conversation or exchange of ideas, apparently people still like, uhm, coordinated from there, but I really don't know how they managed it” (Kate). She was particularly open with interactions, and just went with her affinities when attempting to collaborate (Keating &

Sunakawa, 2010), “, if I like someone’s drawing style on the reddit, I would talk to them, tell them about my interest and show them what I write, if I have an idea for a comic or a particular visual story [...] I’m also open to requests from other people, it’s a lot of fun” (Kate). She kept a light hearted interpretation of events that were deemed catastrophically, and put a positive and logically coherent explanation for it rather than embracing the tragedy (Kusahara, 2001), “I mean it was pretty terrible for us, but like, all those Pokémon were released, uhm, I think a positive way to see it is as if they were back to the wild, after all, we did take them from their environment and drove them into our mad adventure, so like all is good” (Kate). She makes a clear distinction in the non-religious nature of the religion by attaching it strictly to the context in which it was developed (Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011),

“as much as I like the TPP lore, I am only interested in it when it’s directly connected with TPP itself, I mean, the religions in the community are there for the purpose of making an interesting story, and that story is exclusively related to the game and the community, but like, I don’t go to people in real life who have no connection to TPP and like, preach the way of old amber to them, it would be like if people playing the regular Pokémon games went out and declared that Arceus is the one true god” (Kate).

Kate strongly identified as secular, and detached religion in general from any supernatural effect, including fiction based religions. Even while considering both of them as not spiritually relevant for her, she still expressed that more established religions have more weight to them than modern fiction based religions, and that they had more established appeal (Patridge, 2002)., “I still think that religions that survived for hundreds if not thousands of years have more weight to them than religions created only a few years ago for the sake of making a nice story to a game, regardless of how much I like the stories or the game” (Kate). Even while being detached herself, Kate understood the relevance of personal choices of belief and how chosen beliefs affect their users (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O’Leary, 1996),

“everyone determines for themselves what’s important and what’s not, uhm, but when it comes to what is real and what is not, well, the TPP religions are only real in relation to the game that was played, and even there, there is a lot of interpretation and head canons, on the other hand, a lot of people believe that their real life religions are real, but it doesn’t really matter if they are based on actual events, or if those events were distorted or even imagined, what matters is what they bring to the people who follow them, real or not, and I guess on that level, the same applies for the TPP religions” (Kate).

Overall Kate was not giving much importance to the religious aspects of TPP, but was rather interested in how the narrative connects to its specific context in which she was able to

produce, collaborate and socialized while not getting personally involved with the religions on a spiritual or relatable level (Punday, 2000; Black, 2009; Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011).

The final participant to fit this category is Dane. He first showcased detachment through “not regularly keeping up with TPP and skipping sections of the game that took too long to complete” (Dane). By doing so, Dane was not getting too involved in the stakes of the gameplay, and framed his input as optional (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010). His interest in the community was present, but very lighthearted and sporadic rather than goal driven, even his narrative creation effort was out of admiration and wanting to participate rather than being driven by the content primarily (Faraj & Johnson, 2011; Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011), “it’s surprising how nice the people who made them are, they actually answer back and stuff, I also loved to read the lore stories, some people are really talented with those, I even wrote a few myself, I can’t really draw so that was easier, uhm, sometimes people would be a little harsh, but never mean” (Dane). He kept a realistic and mechanical attitude towards elements of the lore, while attaching the religious interpretation to others and keeping distance himself from it (Patridge, 2002), “the helix was a main story item, it couldn’t be tossed away, and like, we ended up selecting it a lot in the most random moment, and uhm, it happened so much that a lot of people thought the fossil was calling on to us, so people started like spamming praise helix” (Dane). Even though Dane was affiliating with one of the religions, he still did not want to be framed as such outside of the context of TPP, and even in that context, he still attached the fiction based religions to fun and meme and completely detached from belief or worship (Tosca, 2009), “, I wouldn’t call myself a Helixian in real life, but like, during the game, it was a fun group to be part of, I really enjoyed the anarchy mode and the stories we made to go along with the run, but like, it was more of a running meme, and it was pretty fun to be honest, I played along with the story, but I don’t seriously worship Helix or anything” (Dane). He acknowledged the inspiration that the TPP religions got from real life religions (Cusack, 2010; Schorey, 2016), but he still focused on the use of these elements for the sake of storytelling (Punday, 2000) and completely took away all transcendent value from the experience, “I don’t think they are the same as real life religions, it would be really fun if they were, but uhm, in the end of the day, it’s just a game” (Dane). Overall, Dane showed to be pretty detached from religion as a whole, and even while believing in some higher power, he argued that the intervention of that power was not justified by human life (Aupers & Houtman, 2010), “and I mean, if god is this ultimate being

that created the whole universe, why would they care about our very small personal problems, I think it's nice to believe, but like, people should make their own choices" (Dane), this attitude is at the center of his overall detachment from the religious nature of TPP. The next section offers a discussion of the presented results, how they help resolve the research problem, and what other directions can be taken to study the topic of fiction based religions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

When reconsidering the research question established in the introduction: To what extent do these fiction based religion fulfill a spiritual function of believing or a social function of belonging? The research presented different possible alternatives that were classified within four distinct categories: Religious convergence, Religious separatism, Non-religious relatability, and Non-religious detachment which best describe the attitudes of the participant towards the religious nature of their fiction based religions, and also showcases the different alternative functions attached to these fiction based religions.

It was revealed that participants falling under religious convergence and some falling under non-religious relatability still find a religious or personal spiritual significance in the religions they have created, even while being part of a classic religion or non-religious. These connections are concurrent with framings of fiction based religion that include invented religions (Cusack, 2010), hyper-real religions (Schorey, 2016; Possamai 2012), New Age or spiritual supermarket (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Hanegraaff, 2000; O'Leary, 1996), Folklore (Hansen, 2009; Gillis, 2011), and civil religions (Simpson, 1984). Some of these participants within the religious separatism, non-religious relatability and non-religious detachment categories are not focused on the religious functionality and view the fiction based religions as fulfilling more social (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010; Faraj, Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011; Faraj & Johnson, 2011; Lau, 2010) and creative functions (Stevens, 2010; Letcher, 2011; Punday, 2000; Black, 2009; Tosca, 2009). A major part of the participants, both religious and non-religious attributed the function of fiction based religions to these less spiritual reasons, and presented a detachment from the believe aspect of the fiction based religions, preferring the more social and creative aspects. This answers the question by offering more possibility to the functionality of fiction based religion, but does not take away from the possibility of fulfilling a religious, or more so, a spiritual function.

This research being highly focused on the specific case of TPP religions can offer an outlet for the possibility of research beyond the religious functionality of fiction based

religions. This could lead to a more openness toward mundane functionality of these kind of religions within the literature, which mainly see them as functionally similar or fulfilling the religious function through alternative ways. Through the results found, it was demonstrated that fiction base religions can use religious language and imagery in order to fulfill mundane and non-religiously driven functions for members of the community. The present research, although formulating a typology of other functionalities and uses that members of such communities can attribute to fiction based religions, is not extensive enough to produce a model adaptable to all fiction based religions.

This research being done on one case study limits the possibilities of immediately transposing the model form to other fiction based religions such as Scientology, Jediism, or the Church of the Holy light in World of Warcraft. However, the typology presented here can be used to verify the existence of alternative functions related to in-group sociality and narrative construction in other fiction based religions, by investigating them while taking in account these alternative functionalities. The research gives very personal and individual accounts on functionality, and because of that is limited to a low number of participants, 10, while the TPP community is far larger and the investigation of more participants or a quantitative based analysis could provide other insights on possible functionality of the TPP religions. The people interviewed were willing to participate and opened up while giving their accounts; however, I wasn't able to get to a large portion of the community, especially on the audio chat network discord where I noticed the existence of a very vocal, but dismissive part of the community. It is possible that if interviewed successfully, members that fall within that category could provide even more possible outlooks on the fiction based religion that are more ironic or more involved. However, due to their unwillingness to participate, it is hard to account for the dynamic of such subgroups.

This research is mainly limited by its scope and its high specificity, which offers a precise model of understanding the attribution of functionality to TPP religions, but cannot immediately transpose that model to other fiction based religions without further inquiry and research. However, this model opens up the limitation in research perspective that immediately attributes religious functionality to fiction based religions, and offers the possibility of investigating the more mundane functionalities of these fiction based religions as they develop in online communities. It shifts the focus on fiction based religions from being purely about believing, and connect it to other needs such as belonging and creating.

As we live in a world that is more and more connected through cyberspace and in which popular culture and stories are immensely influential on our lifestyle and world views, it is essential to keep investigating the rise of new forms of sociality that can take a religious form and fulfill a religious function, but also use the religious form to fulfill different functions such as creating sociality between the connected users of cyberspace and enabling the development of creative skills and narrative that can eventually become part of the popular culture tapestry, creating a feedback loop of production and consumption that springs a self-sustaining market of creativity.

Future research can further investigate this circularity and assess the direction in which this culture is moving toward, and how it transitions through different stages while incorporating influential conceptions such as religion. More research can be done on other fiction based religions such as Jedism, Matrixism, Scientology, and others to determine the proportionality of believing and belonging in the functions they serve for their users. Future research can focus less on the religious and spiritual function and investigate further the reasons behind using the religious form for non-religious purposes, they can investigate the impact of fiction based religion on community growth and networking, and on the development of creative skills that can lead to new types of artists which start as members of such communities. More research can also investigate how fiction based religions influence other parts of society through forming a secondary layer of popular narratives that can impact populations and their lines of action. It can also investigate how these fiction based religions are competing for public attention with older and more established religions, even when they fulfill different functions.

As time goes and communication technologies are becoming more essential to our existence, fiction based religions are evolving and adapting to this ever changing cyberspace, becoming more relevant to the general public opinion and more established in the global culture of humanity.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

**Table 1: List of Participants**

Names*	Ages	Gender	Nationality	Religious affiliation	Length of interview
Cole	19	male	Singapore	Catholic Christian	01h03min
liz	23	female	Germany	Non religious	00h23min
Damian	21	male	US	Catholic Christian	02h03min
Marth	26	male	US	Agnostic	01h05min
Dane	21	male	Indonesia	Non religious	00h50min
Kate	24	female	Canada	Secular	00h49min
Elsa	22	female	France	Catholic Christian	01h00min
Smith	27	male	US	Atheist	01h01min
John	31	male	Canada	Atheist	01h01min
Bill	26	male	France	Secular	01h01min

\*All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the interviewee

### Appendix B

Topic list for interviews:

- How did the interviewee discover Twitch Plays Pokémon?
- How much time did they dedicate to it?
- Where they involved with the game or just watching and chatting?
- How much did they interact with other members?

- Where they present before the creation of the church of helix or any other TPP religion?
- What according to them started the religions?
- Where they adept of any particular religion?
- How serious where they about being part of a specific religion?
- Did they use the subreddit?
- Did the TPP religions impact their daily life?
- Did the TPP religions impact their world view?
- Do they still follow the TPP religions?
- How do they organize themselves within the TPP community?
- Did they participate in any following TPP experience?
- If yes, did they bring aspects of the first TPP religions to those?
- Do they perceive TPP religions on the same level as classic religions such as Christianity?
- Do they have different beliefs in parallel that they would like to share?

## Appendix C

**Table 2: Typology of Users**

	Religious	Non-Religious
Serious	Damian, Cole	Bill, Marth, Smith, John
Ironic	Elsa, Cole	Kate, Liz, Dane, Marth Smith