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Why Twitch Plays Pokémon is Important



Twitch Plays Pokémon

Twitch Plays Pokémon is difficult to explain. Deemed a “social experiment” by its anonymous Australian developer, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is a channel on the video game streaming website Twitch dedicated to playing Nintendo’s 1996 *Pokémon Red*. While most streams on Twitch feature a single player, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* allows anyone in the channel’s chat room to participate by parsing commands sent by users. For instance, someone in the chat room types “down” and the in-game character moves down. The premise alone is an interesting experiment and changes the way users interact with each other and play games online.

But *Twitch Plays Pokémon* grew unexpectedly popular after it was put online on February 12, 2014 due to media attention and through word of mouth across all the major internet hangouts. Currently in its fifteenth day,

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indicate that thousands of people are playing this game at once and that tens of thousands of people have consistently tuned in to see how far the game has come along.

The idea of a crowd sourced play-through of a video game with this immense scale of users is unheard of, and will likely be remembered in the history of Twitch and of games in general as a landmark event. This kind of “experiment” could only work with a role-playing game, as its turn-based combat and reliance on slow exploration instead of tricky platforming is ideal for clunky, ultimately uncontrollable movement.

If one does tune in or watch videos of the stream, it truly does have the fascination of a train wreck, yet it also holds the intricacy of brain surgery. Players spam directions, open menus, close menus, and send the in-game character, Red, around endless loops going nowhere. Some players play seriously, hoping to finish the game, while others try to impede progress, tossing items, or even releasing Pokémon so that Red cannot use them. Because of the scale of the user base, there is also a problem with the stream’s lag, which means commands often do not activate when player’s think they will. Simple tasks like opening a menu and using a Pokémon’s skill become an all-day struggle for control and progress, but these moments are what the fanbase enjoys the most. The most memorable parts of the experiment are often the most devastating or absurd. In some ways, this experiment is the video game *Waiting for Godot*, and in other ways, the video game *Apocalypse Now*.

But why do so many users come back to the channel when they wake up, get home from school or work? A few moments of the nausea-inducing,

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In part, the emergent narrative that has grown since the stream's inception has kept a maximum level of hype around the game. Internet memes, backstories, and even religions with roots in Pokémon items have been circulating around websites like Reddit and have added to the hysteria and mesmerizing fascination with the game.

More so than the memes and inside jokes, however, is the will of the players to complete the game. For the average viewer, just tuning in to see how far the stream has gotten in the game overnight is exhilarating, with forum posts exclaiming with surprise just what the stream has accomplished in whatever amount of time. There is something endearing about watching poor Red scramble about schizophrenically, but Red's struggle is not merely his own, but the struggle of the entire internet user base, everyone on Reddit and 4chan, everyone who tweets, everyone who has ever played Pokémon.

Twitch Plays Pokémon is the culmination of the knowledge of the generation of children who grew up in the 1990s, who grew up in the internet age, and it is a stunning interactive visual representation of this knowledge. There has never been such an immense and direct use of applied knowledge, this knowledge of Pokémon, a kid's game, but a defining aspect of a generation, and nonetheless, a game that requires careful strategizing. *Pokémon Red*, which was released in North America in 1998, captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of players, and it is appropriate that the stream is dedicated to the original Pokémon game, the one that ushered in a new generation of games and players in a time when the internet age was in its infantile stages.

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Twitch Plays Pokémon – The addition of the Anarchy/Democracy system

It is equally astonishing and miraculous when the players in the chat devise a plan using game maps and MSPaint drawn coordinates, or put together a plan as decisive as “Catch Zapdos with the Masterball,” and then actually succeed. The stream is pushing the limits of working together over the internet, as well as “trolling” on the internet, as the “trolls” constantly attempt to set back the players who want to succeed. This is the ultimate tug and pull of internet etiquette, a chaotic, strangled allegory for both life on the web and off it. Every user speaks at once, and it is difficult to listen, but somehow the population continues toward a slow progress. One can’t help but recall the words of Sartre, “existence precedes essence” when examining the user’s struggle on such a grand scale.

With the addition of an “Anarchy/Democracy” system programmed into the stream, users can vote for either “Anarchy,” which creates a more chaotic and random game, or “Democracy,” which requires a supermajority in the chat, which allows users to better control the game.

There is something extremely poignant about witnessing the chat when users are trying to switch the political affiliation of the stream, with everyone shouting one or the other, and cursing each other out, while others try to explain nicely and in detail the correct path. Some users take offense to the very notion of the other party, mixing in their Pokémon-religious

In the end, the goodness of the stream's users will persevere and prevail. The deep tragedy felt when the trolls (or possibly random inputs) release a beloved Pokémon such as Abby the Charmeleon or Dux the Farfetch'd across the entire Pokémon community is a thing of massive beauty and passion, energizing the internet, calling them to arms. It may be a kid's game being played across the internet, not a real war, but it has stricken a deep chord with the internet population, part due to nostalgia, part due to the chaotic wonder, and part due to the hope that the stream will complete the game, in all its clunky glory.



Twitch Plays Pokémon – The Helix Fossil is often selected in battle

The flickering chat room has become a Dadaist poem of innumerable proportions, a vast collection of every meme and internet insult ever slung, every piece of Pokémon-related information, and every single input it took to, eventually, beat the game. The emergent narrative and internet memes associated with the event are indicative of contemporary youth culture's defiance: kids on the internet are moving away from the need for corporate entertainment, instead making their own jokes and media, even their own post-modern, slightly sarcastic religions in the place of ones of old. A quick scan of Twitter accounts associated with the event reveals a number of

run by users of the streams, are often more popular than celebrity accounts.

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Twitch Plays Pokémon puts the internet's tenacity to the test. The experiment could have easily fizzled out, or have been completely hijacked by trolls, but it hasn't, and with every input, it nears the finish line. However cynical one may get over contemporary life, the internet age, the loss of beauty and morals, the loss of personal interactivity, this experiment is truly a thing of morality, beauty, and goodness. As the North American players go to sleep, the Europeans take over, then the players in Asia and Australia before passing it back off to the Americans. It is an international event, the Pokémon language a language spoken by all races.

Just as the stream has organized to get through the Team Rocket Hideout, climb the Pokémon Tower, and even catch the legendary Zapdos, they will continue to work together, and when the game's credits roll, there will be a slight rumble across all of the internet, and Pokémon fans, fans of play, will cheer.

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