

WHAT HOCKEY WANTS: DRAMA, NARRATIVE, AND SPORTS

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Introduction

Like many sports, ice hockey, or “hockey,” as it is known to its players and fans, generates legend, myth, history, biography, autobiography, and other forms of narrative at a furious pace. In, around, and among instances of gameplay, hockey produces dramatic situations which resolve into a variety of public and private narratives. Some of these narratives, such as the stories of an individual game played late at night on a neighborhood rink, are ephemeral and known only to certain players; others are so widely told and acquire such cultural significance that they are memorialized in statuary, feature films, currency, or novels; and some leave traces in the game itself as strategies, traditions, superstitions, play styles, and written and unwritten rules. Hockey is a creature of narrative – it eats it and excretes it

– and yet, somewhat amazingly, it does not require any kind of centralized story department or author to spin its yarns. Rather, like all sports, and to a certain degree like all games, hockey is a set of protocols that propagates and iterates itself by producing the kinds of situations that are worth telling stories about.

Despite this impressive narrative capability, sports like hockey are not frequently mentioned in the discussions game studies and game design communities stage around the topic of narrative. One possible explanation for this relative lack of mention is that the ways narrative manifests in sports may at first glance seem more related to modes of spectatorship than modes of play, and therefore may be considered exterior to the kinds of narrative thought to be more properly “native” to games. It may also be the case that narrative is perceived as simply more central or essential – particularly from a player experience perspective – to things like adventure games, role-playing games, storytelling games, open-world exploration games, and interactive fiction, than it is to sports. Such overtly story-centric games are certainly worthy of consideration. For scholars and designers interested in the poetics, aesthetics, and politics of digital gameplay, it is perhaps understandable that the sweaty world of sports be overlooked. It is also understandable that some researchers will prefer to explore more exclusively digital forms of gameplay insofar as their work may relate more directly to how narrative connects to current trends in technology and communications than to games as a broader category of design. Regardless, eliding sports from the discussion risks depriving us of important ways of speaking about and designing about games and narrative. Understanding the powerful and parsimonious ways in which sports instantiate various forms of narrative, and the ways in which those instantiations can in turn become incorporated into the most basic structures of the games themselves, can provide useful models and metaphors for examining all games as both artifacts and producers of culture.

This paper presents an examination of hockey as a cybernetic system, paying particular attention to the role of narrative. Like all sports, hockey offers opportunities for individuals to take part in dramatic situations that would not otherwise occur. As players, teams, and fans actively engage with these situations, they produce and consume various kinds of public and private narrative. These narratives in turn shape subsequent situations both within and beyond the formal boundaries of the sport. Through a series of examples from hockey and related games, this paper examines how narrative emerges in, around, and among various contexts of hockey gameplay; how this narrative impacts both ludic and paraludic situations; and how it can become encoded in the formal structures of the game itself.

Shaping things

We live in a symbiotic relationship with the artifacts we create. Who exactly is in charge – us, our creations, or some other force that bonds the two – is not always easy to sort out. “We become what we behold,” writes Marshall McLuhan, channeling William Blake. “We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us” (1994, xxi). For example, a hammer is ostensibly a tool that we use to drive nails. The hammer can be said to work for us. But from another perspective, once it has been invented, it is also we who work for the hammer, for we are the ones that manufacture it, spread the news of its existence, and improve it as new hammer-making techniques become possible. By coming to depend on the hammer, we become the means by which the hammer replicates itself and evolves. The hammer does not exist or get better without us. It needs us to survive and flourish as a thing in the world. By being useful to us, the hammer changes us, becomes integral to our cultural processes, and secures its place in the order of things.

Much the same can be said of a sport. To understand how, let us briefly explore what a sport is so as to expose what it offers us

in exchange for its survival. We may formally define a sport as a competitive activity, usually but not necessarily involving some kind of athletic performance, wherein the skill of one player or team of players is tested, through individual contests or sets of linked contests, against the skill of one or more other players or teams of players. More broadly, a sport is a set of rules, procedures, limits, and traditions that gives rise to specific kinds of situations, or opportunities to act. Some of these situations are the direct result of ranging team against team and player against player, and produce the “beautiful plays” (Lowood, 2013), strategic blunders, heroic comebacks, gritty campaigns, chokes, and other sequences we often remember as fans or players. The interpretation and contextualization of these events play central roles in whole genres of public and private narrative, from live commentary and after-the-fact journalistic reportage, to in-game momentum swings and the autobiographical identity constructions of individual players and teams. Other situations are more indirect outgrowths of a sport. These situations can include everything from a beer league player dealing with an injury or a “slump,” to fans discussing strategy on the Web, to Mohawk tribes experiencing changes in power dynamics as the result of a victory in a game of *tewaarathon*. Crucially, the situations and stakes around or “outside” the game can shape the situations within it, and vice-versa. Known in the parlance of live action role-playing as “bleed,” this phenomena is common to all games. As Mia Consalvo notes, “we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply.” Rather, situations of gameplay exist “in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups” (2009, 416).

We interpret ourselves and each other by making sense of our actions through narrative. In the absence of action, there is no story to tell. Sports provide players with a range of unusual and

often very high-tension situations within which to act, and out of this action, players and fans alike may construct various kinds of meaning. Put differently, the objectives, rules, players, mechanics, and dynamics of a sport constitute a shifting field of breaches and imbalances that is the “[trouble] that provides the engine of drama” (Bruner, 1991, p. 16; see also, Burke, 1978, p. 330-335). This “trouble” enables kinds of meaning-making that would not otherwise be possible (or, as in the example of “the little brother of war,” discussed below, would entail reflection on very different and much more destructive forms of activity). As Sartre summarizes, “there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom . . . There can be a free for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determination, of necessity lose all meaning” (1956, p. 621).

Like the hammer’s utility, the capacity of a sport to create dramatic situations can be thought of as a kind of evolutionary survival adaptation – that is, the means by which the activity secures its place in the ecosystem of human attention and energy. Drama is what a sport offers us in exchange for its continued existence. Whether it is the low-stakes drama of the pick-up game, or the high-stakes drama of an overtime National Hockey League (NHL) playoff series, drama is what makes sports interesting and meaningful to players and fans alike. Sports create focused opportunities for us to act and perform – as players, fans, and even as people who don’t like sports at all – and therefore opportunities, for good or for ill, for us to make meaning and to interpret and define ourselves, our peers, and/or our communities. Like other arts, sports are a “creative treatment of actuality,” (Grierson, 1933, p. 8) to borrow from one kind of practice – or a way of “making the ordinary strange” (Jakobson in Bruner, 1991, p. 13), to take from another. The drama of sports resolves into narrative as we make meaning (fabula) out of the actions (sjuzet) we take and/or observe (see Jenkins, 2006).

Further, the greater a sport's capacity to create drama, the more "well-played" it will be: that is, the more narrative it will create, the more widely it will spread, the more formative it will become to the lives of its players and fans, and the longer it will survive. *We shape our sports and afterwards our sports shape us.*

A formula for drama

Hockey is a powerful formula for drama. Consider its fundamental components: a sheet of ice bounded by wooden and Plexiglas walls; armored human beings on steel-bladed boots wielding six-foot-long composite metal sticks; a fire-hardened rubber puck propelled at blindingly fast speeds; a steel-framed net protected by a masked and padded player; and so on. Even before the rules of the game are applied, there is tension in the spectacle, not to mention the simple fact, of such heavily-equipped human beings moving so quickly within a constrained space. While people attending a roller rink or an ice garden will generally take care to move in the same direction so as to avoid collisions, in hockey, at any given moment, each player may be skating – fast and hard – in completely different and potentially opposite directions. The risk of high-speed collision is constant. Spatial awareness is essential. The first piece of advice you will receive as a neophyte hockey player is, "keep your head up."

In love, war, and games, danger and risk are the stuff of drama. It is only when we have something to lose – or, perhaps more precisely, when we are *aware* that we have something to lose – that our actions take on meaning. As is the case with many sports, hockey places us in situations where both failure and injury are distinct possibilities. While physical jeopardy is far from the only source of drama in hockey, any game that involves the swinging of sticks and the shooting of a projectile necessarily invokes danger and violence in both its dramaturgical structure and its broader social function. Indeed, across a multitude of cultural settings, the histories of territorial stick and ball games

like hockey are often explicitly tied to warfare and mortal combat. The Icelandic game of *knattleikr* – a 10th century broomball-like contact sport played on frozen ponds with bats and a ball – was said to be so violent that deaths would routinely occur during the course of play. As the *Grimkelsson Saga* records, during one game between Strand and Botn, “before dusk, six of the Strand players lay dead” (Society for International Hockey Research [SIHR], 2012, p. 23). One of the foundational tales of the Irish mythological hero Cú Chulainn involves his use of a *hurley* (the bat used in *hurling*, the national sport of Ireland and a likely ancestor of both field hockey and ice hockey) to shoot a *sliotar* (the heavy and compact ball used in hurling, equivalent to the hockey puck) down the throat of a ferocious hound. The Mohawk game of *tewaarathon*, the Choctaw stickball game, and the Anishinaabe game later known as *lacrosse*, were highly ritualized games sometimes used to settle disputes between and within tribes. So violent were these games that one 18th century European observer noted, “if one were not told beforehand that they were playing, one would certainly believe that they were fighting” (Conover, 1997). *Tewaarathon* literally means, “little brother of war.”

It is not the purpose of this paper to wholly unpack the tangled relationships among aggression, violence, and hockey. Indeed, numerous scholars have explored – in far greater detail than is possible here – how sports like hockey can be understood as psychosocial analogs (or extensions) of warfare (Sipes, 1973; Keefer, Goldstein, and Kasiarz, 1983; Nickerson, 1995). While the cultural, political, economic, and psychological dimensions of hockey are doubtless of crucial importance in any consideration of the kinds of narrative produced by the game, what is at issue in the present context is not so much a question of kind as it is of means.

To begin to understand how dramatic situations emerge in hockey, consider the dynamics of the *power play*. A power play

occurs when one team must play “short-handed” (that is, with one or two fewer players on the ice) for a limited amount of time due to the assessment of a penalty or penalties. During a power play, the short-handed team will attempt to gain possession and “kill” the duration of the penalty either by icing the puck (that is, by shooting it down the ice so as to waste time, a play that is legal only when short-handed) or by attempting a weak attack. However, because possession can be difficult to maintain when short-handed, penalty-killing teams will often find themselves in situations wherein the opposing team has control of the puck. In this case, the short-handed team will tend to collapse toward the middle of the ice and fall back into their own zone to protect their goal. The attacking team will then attempt to draw the defending team out of position by passing the puck around the perimeter of the offensive zone and by placing their forwards in front of the defending team’s goalie so as to obstruct (or “screen”) her view. As they open cracks in the defending team’s defense, the attacking team will take shots. The very best teams will score on around 20 percent of their (5-on-4) power play chances (Sportingcharts.com, 2014).

A power play creates drama on a variety of levels. At its most visceral level, it creates a situation of heightened danger, as the team with the advantage will often pepper the short-handed team with a barrage of heavy slap shots from the blue line (or “point”) – shots which the short-handed team, assuming they are sufficiently intent on winning, will attempt to block with their bodies. This can produce some of the game’s most dramatic – and unsettling – moments. For example, during a game against the Pittsburgh Penguins in the 2013 Stanley Cup playoffs, Boston Bruins penalty killer Gregory Campbell dropped to the ice to block a point shot from Russian superstar Evgeni Malkin. Malkin’s heavy slap shot hit Campbell on an unprotected part of his right leg, shattering his fibula. Campbell would later receive surgery and undergo months of rehab in order to recover from

his injury (Beattie, 2013). Nevertheless, as the Penguins continued to pour on the pressure, Campbell struggled to his feet and kept playing for over a minute, at one point fearlessly attempting to block another shot from Penguins defenseman Kris Letang.

For Boston fans, Campbell's shot block and heroic (or, depending on your perspective, insane) refusal to give up on the play became one of the key moments of the 2013 playoffs, and fed into the emerging narrative of the Bruins being a tough team looking to go the distance on grit and hard work. For players, the block proved to be a crucial turning point in the game – and ultimately the series. On the Boston bench, Campbell's sacrifice was a source of pride that energized the Bruins as they continued their (ultimately successful) underdog run against the Penguins. As coach Claude Julien remarked, “when you see a guy go down like that and the way he went down and what he did . . . the guys are going to want to rally around that” (McDonald, 2013). Out of the dramatic situation of a power play, then, emerged a story of sacrifice and courage that fed into both the Bruins' own identity construction processes and the enveloping narratives produced and shared by fans.

Of course, not all power plays are created equal. The danger inherent in an NHL playoff game is markedly different from that in a pee-wee exhibition matchup. However, even in the absence of the kinds of physical jeopardy described above, power play situations, like the other situations generated by hockey's ruleset, excel at creating drama. For example, power plays can also produce, amplify, and modulate “scripts” – that is, generic narrative patterns – that challenge competitors to live up to, or break with, various expectations. When these expectations are confirmed or upended, narrative emerges at a variety of scales. At its most basic level, the power play places the short-handed team in the position of being outnumbered, and with that position comes the expectation that they will be scored upon.

Likewise, the power play challenges the team with the advantage to capitalize on a golden opportunity to score. The differential, or lack of differential, between the expected outcomes associated with these roles – that is, the drama that unfolds from a situation wherein the short-handed team is expected to be scored upon while the team with the advantage is expected to score – can change the narrative of the game, conferring a psychological boon to one side or the other. This boon is evocatively referred to in hockey (and many other sports) as *momentum*.

Narrative accrual

All this narrative adds up as a hockey game, season, or career wears on. Like all sports, a game of hockey is more than merely the robotic execution of a set of rules and procedures – it is also a dynamic psychological landscape, the topology of which is determined by the accrual of narrative over time and across multiple contexts. Hockey goalies provide a simple example in this regard. Goaltending is a position of great responsibility that depends on instincts, split-second reactions, and calm under fire. Confidence is an essential component to playing such a crucial position. A goalie who “thinks too much,” second-guesses herself, or otherwise falls victim to her anxiety is a goalie that is going to be scored on – and a goalie that gets scored on doesn’t get to play. For goalies, the stakes are always high: both their own fates and those of their teams depend on them playing well. There is minimal margin for error. A goalie that lets in a “soft” goal must thus take care to let go of the mistake as soon as possible, for if she allows a pessimistic narrative to take hold – for example, that the other team “has her number,” or that she’s “having a bad night” – her confidence can quickly collapse. As with all competitive athletes, aside from physical training and natural ability, the difference between winning and losing for a goaltender lies in her ability to manage and frame her natural inclinations to “story” her play and performance (Douglas, 2009). Further, to return to Consalvo’s discussion of the negotiable and

permeable boundaries of the so-called magic circle, identity processes exterior to the game — such as, for example, a player’s response to a crisis in her personal life — can impact in-game performance, and vice-versa.

What holds true for a goaltender holds true for an entire team. As in all team sports, momentum swings often occur in hockey as certain narratives take hold, leading to individual and team identity trajectories that can sometimes spin out of control. Otherwise excellent teams can have a bad night and suffer a blowout loss, sometimes leading to multi-game “slumps,” while mediocre or bad teams can upset stronger competitors and experience radical turnarounds in performance. In professional sports, negative team identity narratives can become so entrenched that management will sometimes find it necessary to intervene to break the spell, changing personnel or hiring sports psychologists to inject new scripts into a team’s identity structure. Some teams, such as the ill-fated Toronto Maple Leafs, will underperform for decades despite often having reasonably top-notch rosters thanks in part to what is sometimes described as a “culture of losing.” Such teams may resort to desperate measures as they attempt to right the ship. In one notable incident, Maple Leafs coach Red Kelly installed special pyramid sculptures in the team’s dressing room and under its bench in a misguided attempt to refocus psychic energy during a 1976 playoff series (Shoalts, 2013). Of course, such measures tend to only reinforce a narrative of ineptitude. The Leafs lost that playoff series, failing to win the Cup as they had each year since 1967. At the time of this writing, despite being the most valuable team in the National Hockey League — and the 26th most valuable team in sports worldwide — the Leafs have still yet to win a championship since their glory days in the late 1960s (Fox, 2014).

Slumps, streaks, momentum, and myriad other kinds of “storying” are just as integral to youth hockey and adult

recreational leagues as they are to the NHL. While the additional pressure exerted by millions of fans undoubtedly amplifies the hills and valleys of a team's narrative topology, the simple facts of the game having rules, a finite duration, and a quantifiable and valorized outcome (see Juul, 2003) makes drama inevitable. A recreational hockey team can choke. A 12 year-old goalie can get inspired and "stand on her head." Even I, with my lumbering gait and bad aim, once, long ago, had a scoring streak. Regardless of the level of play or its relationship to capital, there is an undeniable commerce among in-game and across-game micronarratives and the larger cultural and psychological contexts of the story of hockey writ large — and of the story of self. As a child growing up in Canada, it is hard to overestimate the role playing hockey had in my own *bildungsroman*: the way I positioned myself both within it and against it, the way I rejected it for a time to explore other identities, and the way I have returned to it in adulthood at least in part in an effort to claim and understand an aspect of my past.

Encoding

Thus far I have discussed how hockey produces dramatic situations; how these situations resolve into narrative; and how this narrative is both a kind of "output" of the play of the game — insofar as stories of what happened during the game may be told after the fact — and a constituent element — insofar as the ways players "story" the play of the game will dynamically shape and define subsequent gameplay situations. In short, I have described hockey as a kind of cybernetic loop, or set of nested loops, wherein the state of the game gives rise to narratives which in turn modify the state of the game, giving rise to new narratives, and so on, across a range of time scales. This loop between state, or situation, and narrative could be cast in terms more familiar to some readers as a feedback relationship between emergent and embedded narrative elements.

What I would like to conclude with is a brief consideration of a third dimension of narrative as it relates to this feedback loop. If the dramatic situations of hockey are the source of its emergent narratives, and if those emergent narratives in turn become embedded in the experience of playing and watching the game, redefining future dramatic situations, then we might ask, what gives rise to hockey in the first place? What gave rise to its rules? When did hockey begin? These questions address a third dimension of narrative, a kind of highly-compressed or “lossy” form – or distillation, or derivative – of narrative we might call *encoded narrative*.

Hockey’s precise origins are murky. Early depictions show dozens of players engaging in what appears to be a relatively formless game played on a frozen swamp or fen (SIHR, 2012). As with association football (or “soccer”), many of the oldest hockey-like progenitor games are “mob” games. *Canmag*, a clear “ur-hockey” candidate and direct ancestor of Gaelic games like *shinty* and hurling, has few rules and allows for an unspecified number of players. Played to this day on the Isle of Man and in some parts of the Hebrides, *canmag* is essentially mob football with sticks: players join a side based on the part of town they hail from, then swarm a ball which they attempt to whack to the opponent’s end zone using clubs, shepherd’s staffs, brooms, or fallen branches. While the evolution of hockey as we know it today implicates a wide range of folk games and sports from both sides of the Atlantic, its deep origins, like those of all games, lie in various kinds of free and unstructured play. On a very fundamental level, hockey is about the pleasure of hitting a ball with a stick, and of struggling against one or more other agents for the control of that ball. In fits and starts, across cultures and time periods, stick-and-ball play evolved from various kinds of *formlessness* to various kinds of *form* — from *paidia* to *ludus*; from *play* to *game*. Like other kinds of institutionalized traditions, the rulesets that

emerged from this branching evolutionary process constitute a kind of narrative.

Unlike many of the games that may first come to mind to early 21st century videogame fans — I am thinking here of digital games whose rules are sometimes (at least as of the writing of these words) literally engraved for all time in optical media — sports like hockey are constantly changing. The same loop that can be observed in the relationship between situation and narrative in a single game can also be seen across multiple games and seasons, and is in fact integral to the evolving structure of the game itself. Consider the NHL's icing rules. During the 1930s, as the financial and social stakes of professional hockey rose throughout Canada and parts of the United States, teams began protecting leads by simply shooting the puck down the ice — a play referred to as “icing.” This tactic would serve the dual purpose of killing time and reducing the likelihood of being caught out of position. However, it made for extremely boring hockey for both fans and players. News reports from the period describe tedious games where one team would take a lead, then proceed to ice the puck dozens of times in an attempt to run down the clock (Klein, 2013). Finally, in 1937, responding to increasingly urgent complaints from owners, fans, and players, the league implemented Rule 81, which states in part:

Should any player of a team, equal or superior in numerical strength . . . to the opposing team, shoot, bat or deflect the puck from his own half of the ice beyond the goal line of the opposing team, play shall be stopped.

(NHL, 2014, rule 81)

Rules accrue in sports traditions in much the same way as case law in legal systems. “Insofar as the law insists on [precedents],” writes cognitive psychologist and legal scholar Jerome Bruner in his seminal paper on the narrative construction of human experience, “and insofar as ‘cases’ are narratives, the legal system imposes an orderly process of narrative accrual” (1991, p. 18).

Rulesets such as the *Official Rules of the National Hockey League* (2014) are complex encodings of a multitude of narratives, and as such become “instruments for assuring historical continuity” (Bruner, 1991, p. 20). The process of this encoding begins with the narration of individual events that take place during gameplay. These narratives become general principles if the things they describe recur often enough. As these principles become more widely recognized in the contexts of status, investment, and attention within which the game exists, they can become “endowed with privileged status” (Bruner) as new elements of the tradition. As in the case of the icing rule, if the general principle amounts to an undesirable game state — from the player experience perspective, the spectator perspective, the owner perspective, some other cultural perspective, or a combination thereof — then a new rule may be created or applied to change the situational architecture of the game. Thus amended, the game’s new ruleset will now give rise to new situations and new narratives, continuing the loop. In the case of icing, while the added rule could be said to have “patched an exploit,” it also produced new and extremely dangerous situations of play. Indeed, some of hockey’s worst injuries were produced by Rule 81, because, in addition to the passage quoted above, the rule states:

For the purpose of interpretation of the rule, “icing the puck” is completed the instant the puck is touched first by a defending player (other than the goalkeeper) after it has crossed the goal line.
(NHL, 2014, Rule 81)

This aspect of Rule 81 led to furious “foot races” as players on both teams would skate at full speed toward the end of the ice in order to be the first to touch an iced puck. Since these “races” would frequently end with players crashing headlong into the end boards, serious injuries were a common occurrence (Klein). Over the decades, most professional and amateur leagues adopted the “no-touch” icing rule so as to eliminate these

dangerous situations, but it took almost 90 years for the NHL to do so. Ultimately overwhelmed by the number of cases of serious injury and the outcry from elements of the players' union, the NHL instituted a "hybrid" no-touch icing system for the 2013-2014 season.

In this manner, the rules of hockey accrue over time as a kind of consequence or distillation of narrative at a variety of scales. This ongoing process begins with the narration of individual gameplay incidents, proceeds through the generalization of those incidents into patterns, and finally ends as those narrative figures are encoded into rules and traditions.

Conclusions

Understanding how narrative works in games like hockey can provide us with new ways to think about and design about ludonarrativity in other game forms, including videogames and tabletop games. Central to this understanding is the idea of games being productive of *situations*. In hockey, the objectives, rules, players, mechanics, and dynamics of the sport create a shifting field of tension-filled dramatic situations. These situations resolve into narratives as players and fans make meaning out of the actions they take and observe, adding to the situational complexity and hermeneutic richness of subsequent instances of play. As this loop plays out over time and across contexts, it can affect the formal structures of the game itself, resulting in rule modifications which in turn give rise to new situations and new narratives – and on it goes. Narrative and situation can thus be seen to exist in a strong feedback relationship with one another. Further, the rules of the game themselves can be seen to constitute a highly compressed "encoded" form of narrative insofar as they provide a kind of historical continuity analogous to that provided by legal systems and other institutions. Beyond contributing to our understanding of sports, this perspective on narrative can

provide us with additional ways of thinking about games and storytelling. Storytelling in games has never been exclusively about what's "in the game" (*pace* Electronic Arts) – rather, it is also, and perhaps most profoundly, about what comes *out* of the game, and how that emergence in turn affects the game itself, its players, and the context within which it exists. This cybernetic relationship, between the dramatic situations of hockey, the narratives it produces, and its rules, is at the heart of how a sport like hockey propagates itself and evolves – that is, it is at the heart of how hockey gets what hockey wants. And what hockey wants is to be *well-played*.

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