

Ludonarrative Dissonance and Dominant Narratives

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In exploring the place of narrative in sport the first question we must ask is “whose narrative?” Sport is littered with narratives, most plentifully those provided for us by broadcasters, advertisers, and governing bodies such as FIFA and the IOC, as well as journalists and writers. Narratives are also constructed by supporters and casual spectators, and players have their own personal narratives. It is uncontroversial and, I assume, incontrovertible that such narratives serve to interpret the experience of sport at its multitude of levels and for its various participant constituencies. What I shall explore here is the ways in which certain of these narratives can conflict and interfere with each other. To do so, I will borrow a term first coined¹ in connection with video game play experience: *ludonarrative dissonance*.

Ludonarrative Dissonance

There are a number of ways of thinking about what constitutes ludonarrative dissonance in video games, some more straightforward than others, and some more suitable for thinking about how it might apply to sport games. At a basic level, ludonarrative dissonance occurs where the narrative and ludic structures of a game conflict in such a way that the player is “thrown out of the game” (emersion); that is, instead of the player being able to fully immerse in the specific fantasy of the game world as if it was real, its make believe quality becomes explicit as a consequence of the contradiction between the story being told and the means that the player is required by the game to employ in order to advance or, usually, remain in it at all. Thus, the game’s narrative, which motivates the entire ludic structure, tells the player that *b* is the correct behaviour for its main character(s), but doesn’t allow the player to act on that narrative or, more simplistically, one plays the game as a character with a scripted set of traits which are entirely contradicted by the necessary ludic skills that the player has to develop in their character in order to continue that narrative. For example, Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*) claims not to be a killer and weeps over hunting a doe while also becoming a lethal arsenal of murderous options, or Geralt of Rivia (*Witcher 3*) maintains he only kills monsters while the player inevitably has to despatch hundreds of humans before game’s end. For the player, this means playing *as if* you believe the same things the game

¹By Clint Hocking (2007). The term has been discussed frequently since then. Some useful explanations of the term can be found in Juster (2009), Sawrey (2013), and Ballantyne (2015).

“believes” or not playing at all,² or at least as if you believe what the game requires is consistent with what it tells you it “believes”.

As Frédéric Seraphine (2016) points out, part of the problem here is that video game players tend to treat their game-characters as avatars, i.e., as stand-ins for themselves, rather than roles that they happen to control for a time. In this case, the negative response many have to a game’s generation of ludonarrative dissonance is due to a failure to see game-play as “multimodal”³; in other words, players confuse their play-character with themselves rather than recognising that they are taking on a pre-existing role in an other-scripted narrative. If this is a fair characterisation of the situation it suggests that video game play should be understood as an analogue of theatrical (dramatic) play rather than sportive play. In that case, insofar as game players do experience ludonarrative dissonance they are like sport players or film actors who mistake their on-field/camera personas for themselves.

While it is largely impossible, without extensive modification, to play a highly scripted computer game without yielding to its inbuilt narrative structure (depending on how open-world the game is), the place of master narratives in sports and sport games is somewhat more tenuous and definitely more contestable. Sport and sport games can be played without any pre-defining narrative. They can, however, be presented as physical expressions of any number of possible narratives externally imposed or sought internally by individual players—just as any other human activity.

Structurally, no specific narrative is implied in running down a track, paddling a boat, or in attempting to kick a ball into a net in the company of others. Narrative accounts are likely, however, insofar as there are human beings performing these actions. Narrativity is a fundamental tool in our drive to make sense of our experience, both what we do as agents and what we more passively observe.⁴ In that respect, then, sport narrative is, if not inevitable, then as close as can be. What is not inevitable is *whose* narrative becomes definitive of that experience.

Insofar as the story of our efforts and participation is our own, dissonance is restricted to our failures to either meet our own identity demands or our successes in deceiving ourselves about how we meet them. This is not a small field. We can have unrealistic expectations, deceive ourselves about our present abilities, or desire outcomes that can be

²Ballantyne (2015).

³Dunne (2014), quoted by Seraphine (2016).

⁴I do not intend here to presuppose any particular theory about narrativity—other than its ubiquity and its importance in understanding of self and identity; my own views are expressed in Howe (2005), (2008), (2011).

destructive, delusional, or just desperate. But all these dissonances are *cognitive*, even though they concern how we play, and they are or might be *in principle* resolvable. We can continue to play and strive once we find the means to re-frame our self-narrative about our activity in a way that more accurately takes account of the evidence or more effectively gathers our personal resources in order to persevere. This oversimplifies this situation, not least because self-narratives may readily suffer from distortion due to the imposition or perforce acceptance of external narratives. Since we are none of us ideally free, ideally rational atomistic agents, we regularly encounter narrative interleaving of both the enabling and disabling sort.

In principle we can distinguish these but actuality may prove intransigent. Since it is neither practical nor desirable for one's self-narrative to unfold in isolation from all other influences one must be open to alternate narratives than one's own. The advantages of this for knowledge of others and of self cannot be underestimated. But the narratives of others can be imposed outward in ways that prevent authentic ownership of one's narrative and thence one's sense of self. We are not our own sole authors; others are inevitably involved, but how and in what way depends on many more factors than can possibly be detailed here, nor is it my task to do so. What we do need to acknowledge, however, is that any given self-narrative has many versions, even where it is one person who compiles it, and that any given public or social experience will have numerous possible tellings, at least as many as are even tangentially involved in it. All this will be true no matter how we interpret the *interiority* of narratives.

If we were equally ideally and effectively agential in our own self-understandings, it might be possible for each subject of a life to be able to tell a true, unique, and authentic version of their experience of the world that would fit perfectly into its complete concept, in the way that Leibniz' monads are theoretically able to do (*Monadology* §§56-57). But this would be to ignore the circumstance that, unlike monads, we interact, and while certain of those interactions allow self-generated narratives of self to flourish, others tend to distort, crush, or supplant them. "Master narratives", broadly, can be characterised as those that give an overarching meaning to those more restricted ones they encompass. Such higher order narratives pull together or make sense of these subsidiary ones, as, say, the struggle between good and evil, or the search for enlightenment, might inform a series of episodes in a larger work of fiction or myth. Such narratives contribute to our understanding and of ourselves and our world by drawing connections and showing the commonalities of human experience across times and places. But they are not neutral; they have a cultural location and authorship.

Certain kinds of "mastering" narratives can also function as a way of organising the narratives of others in a way that privileges those for whom that narrative is native. Such narratives frequently incorporate tropes of "why we are better than those others" which serve to bolster the self-story of those who are or believe themselves to be in the ascendent. Such narratives require an Other to work. Sometimes that Other is the natural world, or one's own bodily impulses, sometimes it is woman, or an indigenous people, or some other

feared/despised enemy, real or fictional. The task for the dominant narrative is now not only its explicit one but the subsumption of the other within itself, not only as what is explained but so that the other must find their own explanation within it as well.

We can distinguish the kinds of social narrative of concern here in the following way: while the term “master narrative”, or “meta-narrative”,⁵ refers to the organisation of subsidiary narrative elements within the same expression or cultural language, dominant or dominating narratives do this in a manner that crosses narrational boundaries, often in a way that delegitimises an indigenous narrative. Dominant narratives are those that are generally taken as definitive or, at least, are accepted as definitive by those who are in a position to make themselves heard—and thus the dominant narrative may also be one that is widely ridiculed (official narratives frequently fall into this category), though for that to occur the dominance cannot be complete; even colonising narratives may have a window of resistance. Dominant narratives can be further distinguished into at least three types.⁶

Transformative narratives. These can range anywhere between revelatory and distorting but the key is the way in which they alter the incumbent account, whether by opening it up to new and expansive elements or reinterpreting parts of it in such a way that it is rendered inconsistent or unrecognisable. Thus, a narrative is revelatory when someone’s description of an event allows the hearer to understand aspects of that event that they would not otherwise have grasped and thus to change the way they value the activities described and are, perhaps, moved to act in relation to such events. A dominant narrative can distort a subjective or local one in numerous ways but one familiar method is to co-opt a critical or subaltern one for its own interpretive ends, such as, for example, the way in which feminist narratives have been repurposed to advance commercial or political aims of those with little practical commitment to the original standpoint.

Bullying narratives. A dominant narrative is bullying when it is presented by its proponents as the only acceptable candidate for the interpretation of events, and may or may not be concerned about whether it is correct or not. It is externally imposed as a totalising account; basically, “think this way or I won’t listen to you”. It shouts rather than listens. It may be heavily larded with bullshit. It should also be distinguished from transformative narratives on the grounds that, while it may succeed in garnering acquiescence, it frequently fails in persuasion, and thus may fail to be fully integrated in a local narrative, sticking out as an imperfectly accommodated accretion.

⁵These terms and the basic concept are borrowed from Lyotard, though I am not presupposing his larger theoretical stance.

⁶There may well be more, but these will be sufficient for my purposes here. I take the boundaries between these to be somewhat porous: clearly, a distorting narrative may be bullying, and vice versa.

Colonising narratives. The colonising narrative is a variety of false consciousness but with certain characteristic differences. “False consciousness”, as a term originating in Marxist theory, describes a situation in which an oppressed group is so conditioned by institutions and social structures that members of that group fail to understand the extent to which their own interests are elided in favour of their exploitation by those whose interests are more directly supported by the dominant ideology. A “colonised consciousness” is not only false, but doubly self-destructive insofar as it aspires to erase its own narrative in favour of one developed by and for the dominant group and entails a disdain for the “home” narrative of experience that is thereby denied.⁷ Thus, for our purposes, what is to be remarked upon is that the colonised narrative not only fails to recognise that one’s own interests are wrongly discounted, but the subject’s own authentic account of experience is displaced by one that credits the other as superior by virtue of having become dominant. The narrative, then, is not just imposed (in which case it might be more readily resisted), but internalised and made aspirational.

In sum, then, transformative narratives offer an augmentation of the subject’s narrative, though this may be either enabling or distorting, bullying narratives attempt to suppress the subject’s own interpretation of experience, and colonising narratives, by being internalised, displace authenticity of self-understanding.

Dominant Narrative in Sport

How does all this apply to sport? The preceding observations offer us the resources to explain the following: (1) how dominating narratives function in interpreting sport experience for us, and (2) how these narratives can generate not only a cognitive dissonance for players, but further a narrative or ludic disenfranchisement for those players, or for spectators.

Large narratives tend to be disseminated in modern sport to spectators and participants through the media organisations with which sport as a commercial enterprise has formed a symbiotic relationship. This includes broadcast companies, the commentators, writers and reporters, and advertising arms of those companies, independent or ancillary media (radio, news outlets, blog owners), and the numerous vendors advertising through these outlets, all banking upon catching the eye and the income of the interested spectators. We should not forget, where appropriate, sport governance bodies who may have an interest in certain narratives being rehearsed rather than others: FIFA, the IOC, NHL, NFL, UCI, and so on. Players also are on the receiving end of some amount of more directed and specified narrative shaping through coaching and sport management.

⁷I here exploit for my own purposes concepts developed by Marxist theorists such as Lukács and Marcuse, and anti-colonialists such as Fanon, Friere, and others. See also de Beauvoir’s comments on women, pp. 37-8, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1991).

At every Olympics, television viewers are offered up a new collection of “heartwarming” stories, usually following the same tropes, and at every major tournament or world championship spectators are whipped into an emotional frenzy of anticipation, desire for success/vengeance, or just pathetic old jingoism, presumably on the premiss that it makes the sport more exciting and shifts more units of jerseys, beer, foam fingers, etc.

There would be little point in the production of such narratives unless they were likely to be successful, so it would be reasonable to conclude that many do find that such stories satisfy a desire to hear and see them re-enacted repeatedly. As with medieval mystery plays, the familiarity of the story and how it plays out is no detriment to its enjoyment (as any fan of a club known for perpetual also-ran status can attest). It would be unreasonable to suppose that those who participate in these narratives do not find meaning in them. The point argued here, however, is that this may generate, particularly for the *player, competing* narratives of their *own* experience, including those that *deny* their own version. This is of interest because, whereas we might expect there to be different accounts of events external to ourselves, differing accounts of our *own* experience, i.e., its interpretation, especially where the external one is privileged, are more problematic. This is not to claim that all accounts of external events ought necessarily to be equal, or that we can never get ourselves wrong. On the other hand, the erasure of subjective interpretation of experience that takes place under a master narrative is a consequence of one such narrative “winning” in such a way as to be held to negate the reliability of alternate versions.

Public and private narratives, especially as social products, are legitimate objects of discussion, inquiry, and criticism; the erasure of subjective accounts of experience in favour of dominant narratives is, at least, counterproductive in the search for understanding and, in its worse iterations, destructive, prejudicial, and colonising. So, for example, a spectator may watch a game and form their own interpretation of the quality or style of play, the significance of specific game events and of the game as a whole. That spectator may find their assessment echoed by their neighbours, by the pundits, and the broadcasters, or may find themselves wondering if anyone saw the same game as they did. In the latter case, we have the basis for a disagreement about interpretation which could then turn out to be wide-reaching, depending on how precisely the alternate view conflicts with the more broadly socially accepted one.

Suppose now that the alternate viewpoint is that of the player. Here things get more complicated. The player, as in the previous case, may disagree with the accepted interpretation of activities in which they participated. Thus far, this is simply disagreement. However, insofar as the dominant narrative denies legitimacy to the player’s own understanding of their experience, enacted in their own body, the conflict for the player is not only narrative but embodied; it is not outside but interior. This, in and of itself, must present some difficulties regarding epistemic privilege, but let us concentrate on the specifically ludic problem. Suppose further that the player, or other athlete, understands their sport and their participation in it as expressing, say, some set of ludic values ***P(I)***, but it is a condition of

participation that they submerge that set of values to another, $P(m)$, that is in conflict with $P(l)$, in order to be able to engage in the sport and have any chance of pursuing $P(l)$. This is a situation of ludonarrative dissonance.

Example 1: Player A pursues a particular team sport because they understand it as a means of fulfilling and experiencing a set of kinetic-aesthetic values, namely those of cooperative and dynamic movement; the appeal of the sport is in the physical sensation of fluidity in flow through creativity and mutual expression. The team ethos as dictated by the coaching staff and ownership/administration, however, is that only winning is acceptable and that nothing else but ruthless efficiency is to be tolerated, regardless of personal cost, and that each player is expendable in pursuit of this aim. The condition of play is adoption of this mind set and a willingness to follow orders and grind out joyless points. Moreover, while A had always understood themselves as a creative, free-roaming, playmaker, under the influence of the coaching staff A is now made to understand that their primary virtues are as a play-stopping enforcer.

In this case, we can suppose that A had developed an interpretation of self that reflected A's ludic values. Now, A is confronted with both different ludic values and an alternative account of self. A could (i) comply with the prescribed revisions, or retain their original ludic values while either (ii) accepting or (iii) privately resisting the dominant narrative. Thus, depending on the specific details, Example 1 could fit the model of either a transformative or a bullying narrative, as they either use the situation to explore different ways of understanding themselves or encounter a struggle to control the interpretation and use of their embodied experience.

Example 2: An athlete B pursues their career as a quest for personal excellence within the bounds of an ideal of sportsmanship that includes respect for others, for the rules, and for fair play. B progresses well enough to qualify for competition at the top level of their sport and then finds that continuing to do so involves participation in a systematic clandestine doping programme.

Whereas in the first example, A may be faced with either a threat or an opportunity, and may, if the former, retain a private intention to enjoy the moments of creative movement where they present themselves while adhering to the prescribed programme, in the second case B is faced with a more profound self-division. Certainly, the discovery, if it is one, that a loved sport is corrupt presents B with a transformative element to B's own narrative of their sport, but it also forces B to make a decision with respect to it that will require a rewrite of their self-story whichever way it goes. That is, it might be put to B that failure to go along with the system is a betrayal of teammates/sponsors/country (B is not a "team player"), or an insufficiently competitive attitude (B is not willing to "do what it takes" to succeed), all of which suggests a bullying attitude.

In this sort of case, B is being presented with a dominant narrative about what the sport is and what kind of a sportsperson B is, as well as a practical situation that requires an action. What decision B makes is at least in part a consequence of how they reconcile their own self-narrative with the dominant one. Has B, perhaps like A, just been naive about sport and their place in it? Is B's coming to this conclusion an expression of an unwillingness to face conflict in favour of just getting along (and continuing in their sport)? Is B relieved to discover that, finally, they can really get on in their sport because, after all, everyone is cheating and this is the only way to make competition fair? Is B steadfast in the belief that this is wrong and determined to refuse to go along with the programme whatever the consequences?

The interaction of narratives is highly complex and any of these cases could be analysed in terms of a transformative, bullying, or even colonising dominant narrative. With respect to ludonarrative dissonance, where this is understood as being generated by the framework of play, this seems to be relatively lacking in Example 1, though player A may experience a degree of such dissonance insofar as they play a sport in order to have experience *x* and end up with experience *y*. The winning-is-all-that-matters dogma, however, while sometimes hidden, is often explicit and, provided A did not join a team that advocated one while practising the other, we would not have an instance of ludonarrative dissonance here. In Example 2, ludonarrative dissonance is present insofar as the conditions of play require participation in a practice that is contrary to the official story: doping normally takes place under cover of steadfast denial and a mendacious affirmation of sporting ideals of fairness and rectitude, not to mention threats of legal action.

Finally, let us consider one more case where ludonarrative dissonance is more pervasive and destructive.

Example 3: Since beginning their sport as a child, C has responded congenially to the expectations of parents, then coaches and organisers. C has always shown up on time and performed as expected, including all the official presentations, interviews, public speaking events, commercial appearances, and awards ceremonies. C has performed well, perhaps even exceptionally so, in their sport. There have been no scandals that have not enhanced their reputation as an exemplary representative of their sport as defined by the dominant narrative. When retirement comes at last, C feels an immense relief. Years later, C reveals that they actually hated the sport they spent their life in and despite having encouraged their own children to take up the sport was now pleased that they had wanted to do something else entirely.

The degree of self-awareness we attribute to C in this case will affect how we assess the situation. Presumably, their journey through the sporting ranks was not solely an act of ingratiation to others; C must have found some self-satisfaction in the activity of the sport in order to persist and thrive for so long. But something is also wrong here. C has, despite the inward disquiet, taken their sense of self from others and lived out that narrative. This strongly

resembles a colonised consciousness, though one that has, at some point, encountered emersion. A ludonarrative dissonance would have threatened and may have emerged at some point during play, but certainly arrived afterwards. The example is left deliberately vague on this temporal point as we can imagine this dissonance to occur at any stage in the player's career, while they continued to play for the sake of loyalty, employment, family, or not knowing what else to do. It fits a number of possible scenarios as well—not just the decision to continue to play despite the realisation that C has no great love for what they are doing, but, for example, continuing to play up to sexual stereotypes demanded by C's surroundings despite C's realisation that they do not fit them, or hiding an illness or dependence because it has no place in the dominant story about the sport.

This player's life, then, is an extended example of ludonarrative dissonance, as they either must or can only continue to play if they adopt a role that they reject, because they have to play as if they have certain beliefs that they do not and may even reject. Ludonarrative dissonance in video games is irritating and is a result of unimaginative writing; in sport it is potentially quite a bit more serious: C's situation, arguably, is one of decades long exploitation of a human being through deployment of a dominant and colonising narrative that, once internalised, is what gives that person their sense of identity and worth.

Performers and Ironists

Earlier it was suggested that video game players who encounter ludonarrative dissonance do so because they “confuse their play-character with themselves rather than recognising that they are taking on a pre-existing role in an other-scripted narrative” (p. #). This may also be an explanation of the dissonance that sport players may incur insofar as they comply with master narratives that do not entirely fit with their awareness of their own incongruity of experience.

The pervasive demand to perform in sport is frequently not restricted to the field of play. Sport is often compared to theatre because of the dramatic enactment of socially-significant narrative, yet there are a number of important differences for the actors in the two areas. Here, let us consider only one: the circumstance that theatrical performers get to stop performing when they leave the stage in that they are not what they perform. Irony is fundamental to the theatrical conceit; it is not permitted in the athletic performer. While an actor is expected to give their best, most convincing, performance in their role as Hamlet, or Harry Potter, or even as an historical figure, they are acting as someone other than themselves. No matter how much they may draw on personal experience to do so, they are *pretending* to be someone else in order to tell the audience a story, which the audience knows to be a story being told to them by someone who isn't who they pretend to be; their *not* being that person is, in part, the point.

Athletes, by contrast, are not *supposed* to be anyone other than themselves. This

demand overlooks the fact that sport as play is a kind of pretence, a make believe, but the irony presupposed by sport play is considerably more tenuous than that of theatrical performance. It is pretence, but this irony is limited to the convention *to play*, not to the playing, which must be authentic in the literal sense. The playing may be an exploration and trial of the self playing, but this, too, must be deeply essayed. There are, indeed, strong parallels between certain aspects of theatre and sport play but they have critical differences as well. The roles afforded to sportspersons are, in a way, deeply contradictory in that we require a sincerity that denies the role as a role. It would be more accurate to say that sportspersons are given *offices* to which they are sworn to be true, rather than roles that they play. Sportspersons don't *play* roles, they are required to actually *be* those "roles". Of course, players are permitted to do things in games that they are not allowed to do elsewhere, but this point is not about the game-specific movements that the sport makes necessary, but about how players are expected to inhabit them. In one sense, one *must* play sincerely because it can only be oneself who plays, but insofar as how one plays and performs the role of *player* may be a colonised identity, one is displaced from the identity one expresses. In effect, the demand on the player is that they adopt a specific persona and be it sincerely, regardless of whether it is authentically arrived at or not. To the extent that the player is aware of the falsity in their "self"-expression they are alienated from the very sincerity they demonstrate.

Consequently, Seraphine's solution for video gamers is less than satisfactory when translated to sport. He suggests that a possible solution to ludonarrative dissonance is for the sport player to recognise that what is required is that they act out a pre-scripted role, that the player *qua* player is not their own self but a player-character—whom they can without ridicule refer to in the third person. Thus, insofar as the demand is placed upon athletes and players to play out the master narrative, that they "respect the show" and play up to the persona that the narrative has them fill, one irony is denied and one appropriate to theatrical play is inserted. However, one cannot *be* one of these roles without ceasing to be something else. This suggests, then, that what we demand of the athlete or player is that they acquiesce in the colonisation of their narrative—or at least to act that way. While this could perhaps neutralise ludonarrative dissonance, doing so at the cost of, at least, a sort of ludonarrative disassociation seems a high price for sport.

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