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Non-Fiction Transmedia: Seriality and Forensics in Media Sport

Markus Stauff

Abstract

At last year's Tour de France—the three-week cycling race—the winner of one stage was disqualified for allegedly obstructing a competitor. In newspapers and on social media, cycling fans immediately started a heated debate about the decision and about the actual course of events. [They uploaded photographs and videos](#), which they had often edited and augmented with graphics to support their interpretation of the situation or to direct attention to some neglected detail (Simpson; "Tour de France").

Due to their competitive character and their audience's partisanship, modern media sports continuously create controversial moments like this, thereby providing ample opportunities for what Jason Mittell—with respect to complex narratives in recent TV drama—called "forensic fandom" ("Forensic;" *Complex*), in which audience members collectively investigate ambivalent or enigmatic elements of a media product, adding their own interpretations and explanations.

Not unlike that of TV drama, sport's forensic fandom is stimulated through complex forms of seriality—e.g. the successive stages of the Tour de France or the successive games of a tournament or a league, but also the repetition of the same league competition or tournament every (or, in the case of the Olympics, every four) year(s). To articulate their take on the disqualification of the Tour de France rider, fans refer to comparable past events, activate knowledge about rivalries between cyclists, or note character traits that they condensed from the alleged perpetrator's prior appearances. Sport thus creates a continuously evolving and recursive storyworld that, like all popular seriality, proliferates across different media forms (texts, photos, films, etc.) and different media platforms (television, social media, etc.) (Kelleter).

In the following I will use two examples (from 1908 and 1966) to analyse in greater detail why and how sport's seriality and forensic attitude contribute to the highly dynamic "transmedia intertextuality" (Kinder 35) of media sport. Two arguments are of special importance to me: (1) While social media (as the introductory example has shown) add to forensic fandom's proliferation, it was sport's strongly serialized evaluation of performances that actually triggered the "spreadability" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green) of sport-related topics across different media, first doing so at the end of the 19th century. What is more, modern sport owes its very existence to the cross-media circulation of its events. (2) So far, transmedia has mainly been researched with respect to fictional content (Jenkins; Evans), yet existing research on documentary transmedia forms (Kerrigan and Velikovskiy) and social media seriality (Page) has shown that the inclusion of non-fiction can broaden our knowledge of how storytelling sprawls across media and takes advantage of their specific affordances. This, I want to argue, ensures that sport is an insightful and important example for the understanding of transmedia world-building.

The Origins of Sport, the Olympics 1908, and World-Building

Some authors claim that it was commercial television that replaced descriptive accounts of sporting events with narratives of heroes and villains in the 1990s (Fabos). Yet even a cursory study of past sport reporting shows that, even back when newspapers had to explain the controversial outcome of the 1908 Olympic Marathon to their readers, they could already rely on a well-established typology of characters and events.

In the second half of the 19th century, the rules of many sports became standardized. Individual events were integrated in organized, repetitive competitions—leagues, tournaments, and so on. This development was encouraged by the popular press, which thus enabled the public to compare performances from different places and across time (Werron, "On Public;" Werron, "World"). Rankings and tables condensed contests in easily comparable visual forms, and these were augmented by more narrative accounts that supplemented the numbers with details, context, drama, and the subjective experiences of athletes and spectators. Week by week, newspapers and special-interest magazines alike offered varying explanations for the various wins and losses.

When London hosted the Olympics in 1908, the scheduled seriality and pre-determined settings and protagonists allowed for the announcement of upcoming events in advance and for setting up possible storylines. Two days before the marathon race, *The Times* of London published the rules of the race, the names of the participants, a distance table listing relevant landmarks with the estimated arrival times, and a turn-by-turn description of the route, sketching the actual experience of running the race for the readers (22 July 1908, p. 11). On the day of the race, *The Times* appealed to sport's seriality with a comprehensive narrative of prior Olympic Marathon races, a map of the precise course, a discussion of the alleged favourites, and speculation on factors that might impact the performances:

Because of their inelasticity, wood blocks are particularly trying to the feet, and the glitter on the polished surface of the road, if the sun happens to be shining, will be apt to make a man who has travelled over 20 miles at top speed turn more than a little dizzy ... It is quite possible that some of the leaders may break down here, when they are almost within sight of home. (*The Times* 24 July 1908, p. 9)

What we see here can be described as a world-building process: The rules of a competition, the participating athletes, their former performances, the weather, and so on, all form “a more or less organized sum of scattered parts” (Boni 13). These parts could easily be taken up by what we now call different media platforms (which in 1908 included magazines, newspapers, and films) that combine them in different ways to already make claims about cause-and-effect chains, intentions, outcomes, and a multitude of subjective experiences, before the competition has even started.

The actual course of events, then, like the single instalment in a fictional storyworld, has a dual function: on the one hand, it specifies one particular storyline with a few protagonists, decisive turning points, and a clear determination of winners and losers. On the other hand, it triggers the multiplication of follow-up stories, each suggesting specific explanations for the highly contingent outcome, thereby often extending the storyworld, invoking props, characters, character traits, causalities, and references to earlier instalments in the series, which might or might not have been mentioned in the preliminary reports.

In the 1908 Olympic Marathon, the Italian Dorando Pietri, who was not on *The Times'* list of favourites, reached the finish first. Since he was stumbling on the last 300 meters of the track inside the stadium and only managed to cross the finish line with the support of race officials, he was disqualified. The jury then declared the American John Hayes, who came in second, the winner of the race.

The day after the marathon, newspapers gave different accounts of the race. One, obviously printed too hastily, declared Pietri dead; others unsurprisingly gave the race a national perspective, focusing on the fate of “their” athletes (Davis 161, 166). Most of them evaluated the event with respect to athletic, aesthetic, or ethical terms—e.g. declaring Pietri the moral winner of the race (as did Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Daily Mail* of July 25). This continues today, as praising sport performers often figures as a last resort “to reconstruct unproblematic heroism” (Whannel 44).

The general endeavour of modern sport to scrutinize and understand the details of the performance provoked competing explanations for what had happened: was it the food, the heat, or the will power? In a forensic spirit, many publications added drawings or printed one of the famous photographs displaying Pietri being guided across the finish line (these still regularly appear in coffee-table books on sports photography; for a more extensive analysis, see Stauff). Sport—just like other non-fictional transmedia content—enriches its storyworld through “historical accounts of places and past times that already have their own logic, practice and institutions” (Kerrigan and Velikovsky 259).

The seriality of sport not only fostered this dynamic by starting the narrative before the event, but also by triggering references to past instalments through the contingencies of the current one. *The New York Times* took the biggest possible leap, stating that the 1908 marathon must have been the most dramatic competition “since that Marathon race in ancient Greece, where the victor fell at the goal and, with a wave of triumph, died” (*The New York Times* 25 July 1908, p. 1). Dutch sport magazine *De Revue der Sporten* (6 August 1908, p. 167) used sport’s seriality more soberly to assess Hayes’ finishing time as not very special (conceding that the hot weather might have had an effect).

What, hopefully, has become clear by now, is that—starting in the late 19th century—sporting events are prepared by, and in turn trigger, varying practices of transmedia world-building that make use of the different media’s affordances (drawings, maps, tables, photographs, written narratives, etc.). Already in 1908, most people interested in sport thus quite probably came across multiple accounts of the event—and thereby could feel invited to come up with their own explanation for what had happened. Back then, this forensic attitude was mostly limited to speculation about possible cause-effect chains, but with the more extensive visual coverage of competitions, especially through moving images, storytelling harnessed an increasingly growing set of forensic tools.

The World Cup 1966 and Transmedia Forensics

The serialized TV live transmissions of sport add complexity to storytelling, as they multiply the material available for forensic proliferations of the narratives. Liveness provokes a layered and constantly adapting process transforming the succession of actions into a narrative (the “emplotment”). The commentators find themselves “in the strange situation of a narrator ignorant of the plot” (Ryan 87), constantly balancing between mere reporting of events and more narrative explanation of incidents (Barnfield 8).

To create a coherent storyworld under such circumstances, commentators fall back on prefabricated patterns (“overcoming bad luck,” “persistence paying off,” etc.) to frame the events while they unfold (Ryan 87). This includes the already mentioned tropes of heroism or national and racial stereotypes, which are upheld as long as possible, even when the course of events contradicts them (Tudor). Often, the creation of “non-retrospective narratives” (Ryan 79) harnesses seriality, “connecting this season with last and present with past and, indeed, present with past and future” (Barnfield 10).

Instant-replay technology, additionally, made it possible (and necessary) for commentators to scrutinize individual actions while competitions are still ongoing, provoking revisions of the emplotment. With video, DVD, and online video, the second-guessing and re-telling of elements—at least in hindsight—became accessible to the general audience as well, thereby dramatically extending the playing field for sport’s forensic attitude.

I want to elaborate this development with another example from London, this time the 1966 Men’s Football World Cup, which was the first to systematically use instant replay. In the extra time of the final, the English team scored a goal

against the German side: Geoff Hurst's shot bounced from the crossbar down to the goal line and from there back into the field. After deliberating with the linesman, the referee called it a goal. Until today it remains contested whether the ball actually was behind the goal line or not.

By 1966, 1908's sparsity of visual representation had been replaced by an abundance of moving images. The game was covered by the BBC and by ITV (for TV) and by several film companies (in colour and in black-and-white). Different recordings of the famous goal, taken from different camera angles, still circulate and are re-appropriated in different media even today. The seriality of sport, particularly World Cup Football's return every four years, triggers the re-telling of this 1966 game just as much as media innovations do.

In 1966, [the BBC live commentary](#)—after a moment of doubt—pretty soberly stated that “it's a goal” and observed that “the Germans are mad at the referee;” the ITV reporter, more ambivalently declared: “the linesman says no goal ... that's what we saw ... It is a goal!” The contemporary newsreel in German cinemas—the *Fox Tönende Wochenschau*—announced the scene as “the most controversial goal of the tournament.” It was presented from two different perspectives, the second one in slow motion with the commentary stating: “these images prove that it was not a goal” (my translation).

So far, this might sound like mere opposing interpretations of a contested event, yet the option to scrutinize the scene in slow motion and in different versions also spawned an extended forensic narrative. A DVD celebrating 100 years of FIFA (*FIFA Fever*, 2002) includes the scene twice, the first time in the chapter on famous controversies. Here, the voice-over avoids taking a stand by adopting a meta-perspective: The goal guaranteed that “one of the most entertaining finals ever would be the subject of conversation for generations to come—and therein lies the beauty of controversies.” The scene appears a second time in the special chapter on Germany's successes. Now the goal itself is presented with music and then commented upon by one of the German players, who claims that it was a bad call by the referee but that the sportsmanlike manner in which his team accepted the decision advanced Germany's global reputation.

This is only included in the German version of the DVD, of course; on the international “special deluxe edition” of *FIFA Fever* (2002), the 1966 goal has its second appearance in the chapter on England's World Cup history. Here, the referee's decision is not questioned—there is not even a slow-motion replay. Instead, the summary of the game is wrapped up with praise for Geoff Hurst's hat trick in the game and with images of the English players celebrating, the voice-over stating: “Now the nation could rejoice.”

In itself, the combination of a nationally organized media landscape with the nationalist approach to sport reporting already provokes competing emplotments of one and the same event (Puijk). The modularity of sport reporting, which allows for easy re-editing, replacing sound and commentary, and retelling events through countless witnesses, triggers a continuing recombination of the elements of the storyworld. In the 50 years since the game, there have been stories about the motivations of the USSR linesman and the Swiss referee who made the decision, and there have been several reconstructions triggered by new digital technology augmenting the existing footage (e.g. King; ‘das Archiv’).

The forensic drive behind these transmedia extensions is most explicit in the *German Football Museum* in Dortmund. For the fiftieth anniversary of the World Cup in 2016, it hosted a special exhibition on the event, which – similarly to the FIFA DVD – embeds it in a story of gaining global recognition for the fairness of the German team (“Deutsches Fußballmuseum”).

In the permanent exhibition of the *German Football Museum*, the 1966 game is memorialized with an exhibit titled “Wembley Goal Investigation” (“Ermittlung Wembley-Tor”). It offers three screens, each showing the goal from a different camera angle, a button allowing the visitors to stop the scene at any moment. A huge display cabinet showcases documents, newspaper clippings, quotes from participants, and photographs in the style of a crime-scene investigation—groups of items are called “corpus delicti,” “witnesses,” and “analysis.” Red hand-drawn arrows insinuate relations between different items; yellow “crime scene, do not cross” tape lies next to a ruler and a pair of tweezers.

Like the various uses of the slow-motion replays on television, in film, on DVD, and on YouTube, the museum thus offers both hegemonic narratives suggesting a particular emplotment of the event that endow it with broader (nationalist) meaning *and* a forensic storyworld that offers props, characters, and action building-blocks in a way that invites fans to activate their own storytelling capacities.

Conclusion: Sport's Trans-Seriality

Sport's dependency on a public evaluation of its performances has made it a dynamic transmedia topic from the latter part of the 19th century onwards. Contested moments especially prompt a forensic attitude that harnesses the affordances of different media (and quickly takes advantage of technological innovations) to discuss what “really” happened. The public evaluation of performances also shapes the role of authorship and copyright, which is pivotal to transmedia more generally (Kustritz). Though the circulation of moving images from professional sporting events is highly restricted and intensely monetized, historically this circulation only became a valuable asset because of the sprawling storytelling practices about sport, individual competitions, and famous athletes in press, photography, film, and radio. Even though television dominates the first instance of emplotment during the live transmission, there is no primordial authorship; sport's intense competition and partisanship (and their national organisation) guarantee that there are contrasting narratives from the start.

The forensic storytelling, as we have seen, is structured by sport's layered seriality, which establishes a rich storyworld and triggers ever new connections between present and past events. Long before the so-called seasons of radio or television series, sport established a seasonal cycle that repeats the same kind of competition with different pre-conditions, personnel, and weather conditions. Likewise, long before the complex storytelling of current television drama (Mittell, *Complex TV*), sport has mixed episodic with serial storytelling. On the one hand, the 1908 Marathon, for example, is part of the long series of marathon competitions, which can be considered independent events with their own fixed ending. On the other hand, athletes' histories, continuing rivalries, and (in the case of the World Cup) progress within a tournament all establish narrative connections across individual episodes and even across different seasons (on the similarities between TV sport and soap operas, cf. O'Connor and Boyle).

From its start in the 19th century, the serial publication of newspapers supported (and often promoted) sport's seriality, while sport also shaped the publication schedule of the daily or weekly press (Mason) and today still shapes the seasonal structure of television and sport related computer games (Hutchins and Rowe 164). This seasonal structure also triggers wide-ranging references to the past: With each new World Cup, the famous goal from 1966 gets integrated into new highlight reels telling the German and the English teams' different stories.

Additionally, together with the contingency of sport events, this dual seriality offers ample opportunity for the articulation of "latent seriality" (Kustritz), as a previously neglected recurring trope, situation, or type of event across different instalments can eventually be noted. As already mentioned, the goal of 1966 is part of different sections on the FIFA DVDs: as the climactic final example in a chapter collecting World Cup controversies, as an important—but rather ambivalent—moment of German's World Cup history, and as the biggest triumph in the re-telling of England's World Cup appearances. In contrast to most fictional forms of seriality, the emplotment of sport constantly integrates such explicit references to the past, even causally disconnected historical events like the ancient Greek marathon.

As a result, each competition activates multiple temporal layers—only some of which are structured as narratives. It is important to note that the public evaluation of performances is not at all restricted to narrative forms; as we have seen, there are quantitative and qualitative comparisons, chronicles, rankings, and athletic spectacle, all of which can create transmedia intertextuality. Sport thus might offer an invitation to more generally analyse how transmedia seriality combines narrative and other forms. Even for fictional transmedia, the immersion in a storyworld and the imagination of extended and alternative storylines might only be two of many dynamics that structure seriality across different media.

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