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Game Spirituality: How Games Tell Us More than We Might Think

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In a world that includes such global problems as poverty, war, hunger, greed, and crime we would not be out of line to feel depressed, pessimistic, and overwhelmed by what we encounter every day. Yet we often do not feel this way. In fact, we often find great joy and meaning in our lives. The monotony of our workaday lives is often interrupted or overcome by those activities that speak to us on a deeper level. Religion has filled this void for many people because it gives something transcendent to live for. Games have served a similar role for many people, as well. While we often see games as less serious or at least less transcendental than religion there is reason to believe that games can evoke similarly meaningful narratives that allow us to learn a great deal about ourselves and our world. And games do so often using the same symbolic and metaphorical mechanisms that generate meaning in religious experience.

Many scholars claim that we understand much of the happenings in our world through myth or mythical ideas.[1] Others have argued that we understand much of the happenings in our world through games.[2] In this paper I will explore some of the ways in which the myths created from and through games generate meaning. People experience myths in games very similarly to how they might in religion. I will first explain what myth means in contemporary literature and then show how the very make up of games opens them to a mythical reality. I highlight two ways in particular. I will argue that the inefficiencies within games promote a deep engagement with the world, and this gratuitous nature provides a system for creating myths and actualizing mythical potential.

In this paper I use the term games instead of sports even though most of my examples are of sports. Although I am idealizing sports by using them as examples, the focus of this paper falls intentionally on *games* and myth. Most scholars see sports as a subset of games. I will argue

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that games in general have great mythical potential to humanity, but my examples are of sports because they are among the most popular examples of games and they may be the best way of demonstrating the mythical potential to which I will speak.[3]

Conceptions of Myth

Popular conceptions of myth are largely negative. For instance, we use the term "myth" pejoratively in one way as we speak of commonly held misconceptions. That is, we "debunk myths" or analyze the truth behind the misinformation we generally believe to be true. We also describe myth as the way in which primitive societies attempted to make sense of that which they did not understand. Since they could not accurately predict or control the weather, they tried to appease the rain gods during droughts by performing ritual dances. Since they could not understand illness or injury, they propitiated the gods or elders of their tribes with offerings, incense, chants, or sacrifices. As our societies have modernized we believe that we have taken a more scientific (i.e., less mythical, in our minds) viewpoint to develop what seem to be more plausible explanations of the world.

However, most scholars argue that myth is still a part of our lives.[4] To this day, as the argument goes, we create myths to help us understand the world especially at the macro level – such as theories about the beginning of time and about the galaxy – and at the micro level – including ideas about human genetic make-up and molecular composition. We also use myth in many ways to help us establish and understand cultural views. In the nineteenth century, Great Britain believed that, while many of its colonial citizens could play cricket, only the white, male gentry could successfully captain an elite team in such a strategic, nuanced, and genteel sport.

Many religious scholars have developed broad understandings of myth that promote the value of what is popularly regarded as mere fables, tales, or legends. Instead of seeing them

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simply as ideas that fill the gaps in our knowledge or stories that speak to that which we cannot prove, many scholars believe that they contain deeper meaning. Philosopher Ernst Cassirer argues that "the real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling."[5] That is, myths may not have robust logical coherency or consistency when compared to science or so-called "enlightened thought." Rather, they indicate a deep and discriminative sympathy or general sense about what is good, right, and true – a sentiment of life. In this sense, myths are not just ways to fill in the gaps of our knowledge of the world as we often believe them to be; instead they hold embedded truths that humans perpetuate because they have felt or experienced them.

William James refers to this felt presence within his notion of the "sentiment of rationality." He states, "It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the particular 'senses'," by which we rationally come to understand reality.[6] This felt presence indicates that much of our perception of reality comes from that which we cannot attribute to one or another of our senses.

Part of this sentiment-oriented description of myth is based on the feelings, stories, and culture that get passed down through generations. Religious historian Mircea Eliade explains myth, along these lines, as paradigmatic behavior. He argues that "it is in the myth that the principles and paradigms for all conduct must be sought and recovered."[7] In other words, myths help us understand how we should or should not act in certain circumstances. Historically speaking, mythical figures and personas have influenced much of our perception of ideal behavior. Hercules set the standard for strength and courage; Icarus provided caution against hubris; the apostle Peter was "the Rock," or the disciplined and determined disciple to whom Jesus gave great responsibility; and Gandhi provided the framework from which we understand

the merits of patience and persistence. Even myths as trivial as those related to the compassionate frontiersman Johnny Appleseed or the determined lumberjack Paul Bunyan helped instill an emerging American nation with an identity built around collective values.

In his book on the religious experience of college football in the southern United States, Eric Bain-Selbo argues a similar point that is more specific to games. He claims that "Southerners emphasized and continue to emphasize feeling … in the rituals of college football." Specifically, they had and often have a myth-induced "sentimental orientation" that differs from ordinary "rational discourse" and expresses a general sense of their worldviews in no less real ways. Therefore, Bain-Selbo explains that the way one *feels* about a situation can be very important and meaningful in a person's understanding of the truths embedded in the particular context – American college football, in this case.[8]

Michael Polanyi builds on these ideas by clarifying the value and meaning structure of myths. He explains that a myth is "an expansion of the mind."[9] It is, in essence, something that augments the rational discourse that often marks our epistemological boundaries. As such, Polanyi claims that a myth requires imagination. But this imagination is more than simple daydreaming or child's play. Imagination requires a type of intelligence that can sense or feel connections among things even if those connections are not explicit. It takes imagination to sense the truths that are embedded in such myths as performing a collective dance in the presence of elders to bring rainfall needed to grow crops; Icarus' wax wings melting from his vain and careless attempt to fly too close to the sun; and the belief that our galaxy is one of many throughout the solar system. In a similar way, it takes imagination to sense the truths that are embedded in Pheidippides' run from the Battle of Marathon to Athens in ancient Greece and

collapsing to his death as he delivered a message of victory;[10] or in Muhammad Ali "shocking the world" by knocking out Sonny Liston in 1964.

Learning about these myths and believing them to have embedded truths puts us into an intimate connection with what Polanyi calls the *sacred world* – or that which contains all value, meaning, and reality in contrast to a mundane, profane world. By acknowledging myths, we come to play a part in their perpetuation as meaningful explanations of the world as it is. The manifold creation myths that emerge in cultures around the globe prove that this idea is especially relevant. "He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place," Polanyi reaffirms in a quotation from Eliade.[11] Eliade also explains that "man becomes contemporary with the exploits that the Gods [mythical characters] performed *in illo tempore*" – in that time.[12] Through myth, one is brought into intimate connection with the players of these sacred stories.

It seems that imagination, which Polanyi suggests is so important, is also prone to a system of errors regarding myths.[13] Over the course of time we have come to reject some myths as outdated, erroneous, even laughable and thus Polanyi says that myths are controlled by plausibility. He states that truth in myths "can only consist in their power to evoke in us an experience which we hold to be genuine."[14] As we recite the feats of Pheidippides or Muhammad Ali, we are implicitly expressing our belief that there are embedded truths to be found within these embellished or hyperbolic stories. We want to find these truths because we know and believe in the power of games and of those particular sports moments even though they may include exaggerated elements. They reveal something deep within us that we identify as being truly human. When we can integrate myths to our experiences they become plausible and, hence, accepted. Even the most archaic and outdated myths, to Polanyi, maintain plausibility because

they helped our ancestors understand and become more intimately acquainted with human experiences in some way.

The plausibility of myths depends largely on our ability to integrate them into our understanding of the world. Polanyi believes that we can integrate our experiences in two ways: naturally and transnaturally.[15] The former include our daily experiences of labor, tending to necessity, and instrumentality. They are natural because once we have integrated them, they work for us. We accept their plausibility without having to re-integrate them every time they occur. Eating breakfast at home for nourishment to begin one's day, going to a job to make money, and going for a daily walk in the evening to maintain a particular body weight all fall into this category. Transnatural integrations, on the other hand, include myths associated with our experiences of phenomena that are often non-instrumental such as games, art, and music. These integrations are transnatural because they detach us from our daily concerns. In Polanyi's view, transnatural integrations help us do this in part because of the rituals and ceremonies that surround them. Rituals and ceremonies often prepare us to experience myth and understand its meaning. These preparatory events serve as ways for us to facilitate our entrance into what he refers to as the sacred world.[16]

Although rituals are a common part of religion or religious experience, they also seem to have a direct connection to games. High school, college, and professional American football games, for example, have a great deal of ritual and ceremony surrounding them every weekend in the fall. Pep rallies, scouting reports, mass media pre-game shows, marching bands, cheerleaders, team apparel, and tailgate parties all help us prepare to integrate our experiences of these transnatural mythical events on the gridiron. In essence, they are the gateways into certain transnatural integrations.

Religion and ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell makes this idea explicit as she argues that, "through a series of movements, gestures, and sounds," rituals or ritual events "effectively structure and nuance an environment." While Bell speaks most directly about religious worship or spirituality, it is easy to see how the ritual and ceremony surrounding sporting events "always suggests the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place." As coaches, players, fans, and the media participate in pre-game rituals, they are definitively settling into their roles as coaches, players, fans, and media members. Each role has a place in the game's "particular construction of power relationships, a particular relationship of domination, consent, and resistance." Games seem to embody these relationships as well as any corporate religious worship.[17]

<div align="center">Suits' Conception of Games</div>

Transnatural integrations seem to be part of a different or sacred world. Many scholars who have studied games have argued that they, also, are in some ways different from the rest of our experiences. This argumentation parallels Polanyi's natural vs. transnatural integrations and Eliade's profane vs. sacred world, for instance.[18] Suits, notably, began this discussion as he argued that games are distinct from our workaday world in specific ways and that game-playing constitutes the ideal of human existence. Suits explains that games have four necessary and sufficient characteristics – goals, means, rules, and the lusory attitude.[19]

It is this last characteristic, the lusory attitude, which helps us see how games are transnatural integrations (after all, many ordinary activities have goals, means, and rules). Regardless of the many other reasons one may have for participating in a game, Suits argues that a "game-player" must be in the mindset to accept the unnecessarily difficult means and rules of the game problem or challenge no matter how inefficient they may be. Whereas in our non-game

behavior we generally strive and are rewarded for efficiency, in games we voluntarily accept inefficient means as the challenge to reach an often arbitrary goal.[20] Inefficiency is not the goal, though. Rather it is the vehicle that gives us unnecessary difficulties. Consequently, the lusory attitude that game-players take on that accepts the inefficiency and unnecessary difficulties helps to separate the workaday or efficiency mindset from the mindset we bring to what Eliade and Polanyi would refer to as a transnatural or sacred world – one in which we continually have unique experiences that we must re-integrate into our lives.

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The Gratuity of Games

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Morgan and Kretchmar have described this phenomenon as the gratuitous logic of games. In games, we artificially create problems in the face of which (to a certain extent) "harder is better" and uncertainty is valued more than certainty.[21] However, in our day-to-day lives, making our tasks harder and more uncertain would be counterproductive and, for that reason, absurd. Typically, we want to be as efficient as possible to finish our work duties and chores.

Games are different in that they have inherent inefficiencies. To begin, we never have to play games to survive. That is, while we have to eat, sleep, and work to provide for ourselves and our families, we do not *have to* undertake unnecessary problems except when we (or someone with some power over us like a parent, spouse, or friend) want to experience those problems. When we participate in games, we are simply adding unnecessary challenges or problems to our lives that are already replete with natural problems. Therefore games are inefficient in that they make our lives unnecessarily challenging (albeit more meaningful and interesting, as well).

Next, even when we decide to participate in games (which we often do), there are also inefficiencies in how we structure game problems or challenges. In baseball we direct the pitcher to throw from an elevated mound. This makes hitting harder for the batter because gravity

augments the velocity of the pitches. There is no reason for us to elevate the pitching mound apart from wanting to experience the pitcher-batter relationship that baseball's batting problems present to us. We made baseball this way, we like it as such, and we want to continue with it in this fashion. If we ever find that baseball becomes too easy for either the pitcher or batter, we will change the height of the mound or alter some other inefficient or arbitrary variable until we have a relationship that fits better. Such is the process of gamewrighting – of inventing, modifying, and preserving gratuitous problems.

Similarly, it seems arbitrary to have a basketball hoop placed ten feet above the floor. But this is a height that fosters a healthy degree of difficulty in our shooting. No one has perfected shooting to the extent that it has become too easy.[22] On the flip side of the coin, everyone who has the physical capacity to get the ball above the rim has a chance to make some shots. This is part of the uncertainty that makes basketball a durably attractive problem. We have found a degree of difficulty that seems just right. We preserve that difficulty or inefficiency for gratuitous reasons – that is, just so we can go back to basketball and experience the problem it presents over and over again.

Gratuity, or the underlying logic behind what Suits referred to as the lusory attitude, sets game behavior apart from other behaviors we normally engage in. Two particular distinctions may indicate how this is so. The first distinction is the most obvious. Many things we do in life involve means and ends – including games – but games are different in that they are artificially and often somewhat arbitrarily contrived to be challenging and uncertain. Instrumental activities, for instance, need to be done (with some level of proficiency) in order for us to ensure our survival and so we often want to get them done without any extra difficulty or inefficiency. In

games, on the other hand, we build in difficulty or inefficiency so that we can experience the challenge of overcoming the unnecessary problem.

So in games we have an intentionally suboptimal relationship between the means and ends. However, games are not the only activities that include this type of built-in inefficiency. Some utilitarian activities have suboptimal means or ends just like games. Civil codes such as automobile speed limits or national citizenship tests, and social etiquette such as minding one's manners are similar to games in that they have elements that are artificially or arbitrarily contrived. Simply, these arbitrary activities could be different from what they are, but we have created them as such and we seem to like them that way. In other words, we have created games, civil codes, and social etiquette the way they are for a reason. Our lives would be more efficient if we drove faster, did not express gratitude or other gracious attitudes, and even used thicker bats in baseball, but we have curbed the means or required extra hurdles in these activities for good reasons. We have made pragmatic decisions regarding the amount of inefficiency we believe is best. Suits, when describing the pragmatism in game inefficiency, explains this point that could be taken along with other suboptimal activities as he says, "the decision to draw an arbitrary line with respect to permissible means [or, we could say, required inefficiencies] need not itself be an arbitrary decision … For both *that* the lines are drawn and also *where* they are drawn have important consequences not only for the type, but also for the quality, of the game [or, we could say, civil code, or social etiquette]."[23]

Herein lays the second distinction between game behavior and other activities in which we participate. While games are not our only suboptimal activities, the reason for non-optimization in games differs from that of, say, civil codes and social etiquette. These inefficiencies can be either grounded in consequentialism or in gratuity. The inefficiencies in

games are undertaken *just so one can have the experience thereby produced by the roadblock –* gratuitous inefficiencies. The roadblocks embedded in civil codes or social etiquette are undertaken *to promote safe, healthy, and otherwise helpful behavior –* consequential inefficiencies. When we are told to obey the speed limit we naturally understand the importance of this roadblock – safety. Similarly, when we are told to thank someone who helps us we naturally understand the importance of this (small) roadblock – social civility. However, when we are told in basketball that we are not allowed to step on the out of bounds line we understand the importance of this roadblock differently – it allows us to experience the unnecessary constraints and challenges of the game of basketball.

Thus, there are two kinds of rule-governed inefficiency—consequential and gratuitous. While we may have any number of reasons for abiding by the consequential roadblocks of roadway speed limits or being polite, for instance, the sine qua non is that we are told or taught that the acceptance of these activities will promote greater public safety on the roads or a greater respect for humanity. Accordingly, we might undertake the gratuitous roadblocks of the game of golf for any number of reasons but one of them must be "*just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur*" – the lusory attitude.[24] We abide by civil codes and social etiquette for safety and dignity, but we participate in golf to experience golf's gratuitous challenges.

Although civil codes and social etiquette have some arbitrary elements, we follow their inefficiencies because we want as much *certainty* as possible that we will be safe, healthy, and treated with respect (even though it does not always happen). Although many rules of golf are arbitrary, we follow its inefficiencies so we can experience the *uncertainty* of the artificial challenges of golf – will I play well or not? Can I score par? How will my score relate to those of

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my foursome? These and other similar questions are what draw us in to the game and the uncertainty they articulate is part of the foundation for the meaning structures within our games.

Gratuity accounts for much of the attraction we find in games. We love solving problems or attempting to overcome challenges that are harder than they have to be and, consequently, have outcomes that are not pre-determined. We seem to enjoy the difficulties and attendant uncertainties that make our non-utilitarian games transnatural integrations. Why would we choose to swim across pools, lakes, or channels when boats and rafts are readily available? Why would we prohibit the use of hands in soccer when it is much easier to put the ball in the goal with them? In fact, why should we even go chase a ball for ninety minutes anyway when we could sit at home and watch well paid players do the same thing on a high-definition television? The answer is that in our games we have created gratuitous problems to solve that are attractive and challenging. We enjoy the drama of uncertain outcomes. We do not know if we can overcome game obstacles or not but it is often satisfying and otherwise meaningful to try.

Gratuity demonstrates that games present an opportunity for deep engagement with the world because they fulfill part of our humanity as problem solvers. When we encounter problems, we try to solve them. In the absence of problems, we create new ones. Such is the case with the invention of games. They expand our domain of problems. We have created games for our participation, and we have created them in ways that fit our needs. Games do not have to be the way they are but, as their inventors and sustainers, we like them that way. They allow us to exercise our capabilities more readily. In other words, we have made them practical and accessible. Since we are runners, jumpers, throwers, and thinkers, we have created gratuitous

problems that allow us to run, jump, throw, and think. If our everyday lives come up short on natural problems that require running, jumping, throwing, and thinking, we add to them.

Some scholars have argued that, although humans have been described as *homo ludens* (man who plays),[25] *homo religious* may also appropriately depict natural human impulses.[26] In other words, although we are runners, jumpers, throwers, and thinkers, we are also more specifically spiritual thinkers or religion-seekers. We spend time wrestling with ideas about creation, transcendence, the afterlife, and the supernatural. In this way, we are also solving problems, albeit problems of a different type than many of our games. Clearly, we seek to solve a broad variety of problems in our lives.

Our desire to solve problems is driven by our fundamental desire to escape or to live in what Eliade refers to as "Great Time." "Great" or "Sacred" Time is that at which the Sacred first appears. The primitive groups that Eliade had in mind were concerned with origins and beginnings. They created myths about the Sacred and the first presence of the Sacred that ordered all things. The only things, Eliade argues, that have value, then, are those having to do with the myths explaining the Sacred. For modern groups, the ways to have value are to imitate or re-play (that is, participate in anew) the original value- and meaning-producing mythical events that explained the presence of the Sacred.

Religious worship provides one avenue whereby modern groups imitate mythical events and thereby invoke Sacred or Great Time in the midst of normal, mundane "historic time" (that which occurs during the normal course of history). This is the perpetuation of *homo religious*—people seeking the Sacred, meaning, and value by repeatedly imitating liturgical elements of religion and worship. Games serve the same purpose in our lives. Occasionally, we become bored or discontent with "historic time" and thus try to solve problems or copy the archetypes of

mythical behavior in existing forms of gratuitous behavior—*homo ludens*. We imitate or re-play activities that have great meaning and value in part because of their inefficiency, uncertainty, and difficulty—their gratuity.[27] In essence, games help us transcend our own local time and live *in illo tempore*—Eliade's "Great Time" or, relatedly, experiencing Polanyi's transnatural integrations.

As transnatural integrations in which we continually integrate new or novel experiences of "Great Time" into our existing worldviews, games are experientially connected to myth as a deep engagement in the world at two levels of understanding. The first is that games are myths about human limits in the world. The second is that games have become, or have generated, their own myths.

Games as Myths about Human Limits in the World

Games highlight human abilities in the natural world. Games are gratuitous activities in which we test or challenge the limits of humanity. Ancient wrestling tested the limits of human strength and might. We hear tales of cunning Odysseus wrestling the barrel-chested Ajax, of Jacob wrestling an angel, of Hercules taking down a bull, and of Andre the Giant pinning opponents of all sizes in the World Wrestling Federation. When we wrestle now, we are, in many ways, in the process of determining how strong we are in relation to these and other past wrestling feats. In doing so, we try to push the limits of human strength and power with regards to the lore of wrestling or the benchmarks that have been established by the wrestling community. Within most sporting communities we have accumulated records that have quantified the benchmarks that have been set by the gods of the communities—the myths of that community's Sacred Time.

Games mythologize human limits in the world by fitting both our abilities and our surroundings. By fitting our abilities, games are myths that display those actions of which we are capable. We have built games that are challenging and feature the use of our bodies – two arms, two legs, two lungs, elbow joints, hip joints, opposable thumbs, brains with frontal lobes, and so on.[28] These physical and mental characteristics allow us to interact with the world in certain ways.

Historically, we have used our bodies in a variety of ways. Throughout the course of time, many ancient people used their bodies and abilities prudently – that is, in ways that focused on survival and communication. They prepared and repaired their bodies to carry out work-related duties and develop conventional means of expressing themselves to each other. Ancient gamewrights, on the other hand, utilized human bodies by presenting gratuitous challenges. They threw spears for distance instead of for food, ran for speed instead of away from predators, and wrestled for submission instead of for survival. These challenges allowed us to determine our individual abilities, how we stack up against others, and how we can interact with the world in less-threatening and often more meaningful ways. In other words, in games we began to reveal ourselves to ourselves.

By fitting our surroundings, games are myths that display how we are tied to our location. We have built games that make use of the natural phenomena we encounter such as open fields, water, wood, animals, and wind, to name a few. When we participate in games, we come to understand how to interact with these natural features. Throughout time, we have also done this in different ways. Many ancient people made sense of bodies of water, mountains, and forests by treating them as powerful animate entities that could be dangerous if enraged and provide if revered or assuaged. Ancient gamewrights, on the other hand, made sense of water, mountains,

and forests by presenting gratuitous challenges – arbitrarily or inefficiently racing across them, taking a more difficult route up them, and finding obstacles to overcome while trekking through them. It was no wonder that ancient authors tapped into these activities as they mythologized characters such as Hercules, Odysseus, Gilgamesh and many more. Gamewrights created activities that mythologized human needs, abilities, and surroundings. If we did not have the abilities that we do and if we did not have the surroundings that we do, then we would have constructed different games that fit those other needs, abilities, and surroundings.

Games as Activities with Mythical Potential

The second level of understanding by which games connect to myth is that games have become their own myths. As primitive running, swimming, throwing, and jumping challenges evolved into games with more complex conventions, these new activities took on an intrinsic interest of their own. That is to say, we created games with mythical potential. Our games not only perpetuate the myths of the limits of human powers, but gaming experiences have their own mythical possibilities. Since our well-established and popular games are intrinsically interesting, we often refer to our recent gaming experiences in terms of previous mythologized performances.

Bain-Selbo comments on this process of mythicization by saying that we often assimilate historical personages "to a pre-existing mythical model. For example, stories of the superior strength of an athlete may entail comparison to Hercules." In many cases, when we look at the mythology of a particular community, a multitude of mythical heroes emerge in some sort of hierarchy. As such, Bain-Selbo explains that not all mythical heroes have to be "legendary" figures. Oftentimes, stories about excellent, noteworthy, or in some way admirable feats by

otherwise ordinary people are passed on or circulated and slowly become exaggerated over time.[29]

Games present wonderful opportunities for the mythicization process to develop. Our most popular games have among them what Alisdair MacIntyre calls "practice communities" that help promote the qualities of behavior that are worthy of mythicization or heroization.[30] The leaders or stakeholders in these communities are among those who identify behavior worthy of myth and perpetuate the feats through hyperbolic interpretation and dissemination. Many of our most popular games have extensive media and marketing networks and large and far-reaching fan bases that allow for the often embellished nature and widespread dissemination of myths.

Through the passing down of myths from one generation to the next, we realize a general human tendency to create archetypes out of the lives or stories of exemplary individuals. Many religions facilitate this idea – Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, among others – and many games provide the same types of paradigms. Accordingly, we learn games and practice them by striving to actualize a lifestyle or behavior that has already been achieved by a mythical hero of a particular game – Eliade's paradigmatic understanding of myth. We push toward the finish line with confidence, knowing that others before us have done it from longer distances and with greater speed. We push on in our practice or training sessions because we know that this is what our heroes went through over and over again before they became our heroes.

In many ways, ultra-marathon runner and biology professor, Bernd Heinrich, aptly identifies a vital sentiment in myth-making as he describes his running experiences by saying, "the real reason my high school and college running mates and I saw [our boyhood heroes] as heroes was that we secretly believed we were elementally equal. We were convinced that if we only tried, if we did what they did, then we too would rank among the gods."[31] And who were

these gods? They were idolized athletes, and we mythologize their stories because they are who we want to become. Joseph Campbell describes the "standard path" of these "gods"—heroes who are elementally equal—by saying, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[32] These "boons" often come in the form of inspiration and confidence.

Eliade explains this confidence that myths elicit in those who aspire to match the feats of their heroes as he says, "myth assures man that what he is about to do has already been done."[33] A game player can enter the field or court with the confidence that he is in a position to follow the example of mythical heroes of the past and, in many ways, participate in their activities on their sacred turf – *in illo tempore*. Young baseball players in sandlots dream of being able to "call their shot" like Babe Ruth. Recreational basketball players long for the shooting touch of Steph Curry because that allows them to feel as if they have had an experience with the gods in their world – *in illo tempore*.

Clearly, games have a high potential for developing and perpetuating their own myths. Game participants often find inspiration, training techniques, and behavior models from the myths that have been passed down to them. Yet the mythical potential in games should be understood in a broader context and to a wider audience than just game participants. Those who are a part of MacIntyrean practice communities can become engaged in the mythical potential of their games whether they are participating or not. That is, fans or spectators can facilitate the mythicization process just as easily as participants.

Part of the emotional buildup or the actualization of the broadly experienced mythical potential of games has to do with what Jean Baudrillard refers to as the "spiritual duel."[34] The

spiritual duel in a game is a moment or matchup that we long for and hope to see because it can be so pivotal or so exemplary of the mythical power in games. A spiritual duel occurs because of the anticipation for the matchup when the star right wing meets up with the stalwart left back in football; when an elite performer finally overcomes a personal weakness to win a title; when cross-town rivals meet at the end of a scholastic sports season; and when the ace pitcher meets the homerun slugger in baseball. The buildup for these spiritual duels may occur throughout a player's career or even just within one match. Sometimes these encounters occur multiple times in each game and sometimes they rarely occur, but they embody the climax or the actualization of the emotional buildup that is so characteristic of our most popular games.

The spiritual duel often exists internally. Many films have romanticized the idea of overcoming something within oneself to become a champion. Yet spiritual duels more commonly exist among two or more of our heroes or teams, or those game participants whom we have mythologized. We can watch them throughout each game, but we know that when we see them in a spiritual duel we are likely to see something great happen. That is, we are likely to be in the presence of the next mythicized event. And even though it may not always occur at the end or the ludic culmination of a really close and tightly contested game, it still may be the emotional climax of the game or what most people remember in posterity. And seeing it firsthand gives the spectator an opportunity to connect with the game on a deeply meaningful and spiritual level.

Conclusion

Game activities highlight the naturally occurring world and test human limits. As such, we are drawn to them as myth-making activities. Games also have mythical potential that comes from their nature as gratuitous activities. As we created artificial, arbitrary and inefficient challenges that we voluntarily undertook, we realized that what we were really doing was testing

human limits in the world. And as we did so, we came to hero-ize or mythologize the individuals who have been most successful in these tests.

Spirituality pervades games through the gratuity that is part of their nature. The challenges that are unnecessary and, therefore, chosen for their own sake and the uncertainty of outcomes and performances provides games with a meaning structure that parallels that which we experience in religion or religious worship. We imitate the heroes or gods within certain game or religious communities that help us recognize when we experience Sacred Time—the transnatural integrations that produce our myths. In so doing, we accept the heroes' behavior as paradigmatic or exemplary, and we imitate them in games when we take the same artificial tests over and over again. This cycle continues until we have new heroes who present slight variations on existing paradigms. As this happens, the myths of games are perpetuated and the mythical potential of games grows.

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[1] This claim is based on writings by religious scholars such as Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1987); and Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South,* Mercer Sports and Religion series (Macon GA: Mercer University, 2009).

[2] This claim comes from the works of Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1990); R. Scott Kretchmar, *Practical Philosophy of Sport and Physical Activity,* 2nd Edition (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2005); and William J. Morgan, *Why Sports Morally Matter*, Routledge Critical Studies in Sports series (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

[3] For more on the category arguments between games, play, and sport see Bernard Suits, "Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport," in *Philosophical Inquiry in Sport*; and Klaus V. Meier, "Triad Trickery: Playing With Sport and Games," in *Philosophical Inquiry in Sport*.

[4] Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*; Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*; Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*; and Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 1977).

[5] Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 81.

[6] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, NY: Dover, 2013), 58.

[7] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane,* 102.

[8] Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God,* 100.

[9] Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning,* 120.

[10] The validity of this tale has been heavily criticized by many saying that either the run never occurred or credit has been given to the wrong man. Regardless, the point is that it is a tale that has developed a very meaningful symbolism.

[11] Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 123.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 122.

[14] Ibid., 145.

[15] Ibid., 125.

[16] Ibid., 124.

[17] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 1992), 140, 141, 206. Quotations found in Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 203-205.

[18] Suits, *The Grasshopper*; R. Scott Kretchmar, "The Normative Heights and Depths of Play," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34 (2007); and Morgan, *Why Sports Morally Matter*.

[19] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 41.

[20] Ibid., 86. Suits says that the inefficiency may not be explicit, but there must be an inefficiency "in principle."

[21] Kretchmar, "The Normative Heights and Depths," 7; William J. Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport: A Critique and Reconstruction* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1994).

[22] It could be argued that dunking a basketball is a skill that drastically reduces the uncertainty of being able to put the ball in the basket. I agree that this is the case. In fact, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) banned dunking during much of the 1960s and 1970s because they thought it made the game too easy. Those who can dunk would agree that it is the easiest shot in basketball, but I think it is only different by degree from other shots. The lay-up, for instance, is another very easy shot that has a low degree of uncertainty for trained players. As one moves away from the hoop, the degree of difficulty and, hence, uncertainty, increases.

[23] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 30.

[24] Ibid., 32. Suits adds that while we can have any number of intentionalities when entering a game, one of them has to be the lusory attitude.

[25] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1955).

[26] Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 5. Bain-Selbo also cites Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*; and David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2005) 1.

[27] Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, vol. 1, ed. Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1976), 94-95.

[28] In reality, many people do not have full human capabilities. Therefore, we have made attempts to create new games or alter existing games to better fit this population. Some examples include the Special Olympics and various wheelchair races that accompany endurance sports.

[29] Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 7.

[30] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, *2nd Edition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 187.

[31] Bernd Heinrich, *Why We Run: A Natural History* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001), 81.

[32] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 2nd edition (New York, NY: Princeton University, 1968), 30.

[33] Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols*, 8. While athletes such as Usain Bolt continually push the limits of humanity by doing what no one has done before, these athletes are already gods by the time they have done so. With "immortality" Bolt does not need the road paved for him because he is a god.

[34] Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 2001), 110. (Book retrieved at http://www.scribd.com/doc/7265217/Jean-Baudrillard-Seduction). Quoted in Kenneth Aggerholm, "Falling for the Feint: An existential investigation of a creative performance in high-level soccer," unpublished paper presented at the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport conference in Rome, Italy, Sept. 16-19, 2010.

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