

# THE STORY OF BONEHEAD MERKLE

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*Appraising the Fictional Component of Sports*

DR. RORY SUMMERLEY

## ABSTRACT

Many games feature fictional worlds that inspire acts of make-believe or encourage us to willingly suspend our disbelief. Sports however, such as baseball or rugby, have no explicit fictional world whatsoever and yet there may still be things we can learn from them via analysis of their narratives. This paper takes on a provocative discussion of the fictional component of sports and how this might be understood. This essay takes on the case study of 'Merkle's Boner', an infamous baseball play that catalyzed a change in the game's ruleset, to stimulate a discussion on how seemingly non-fictional games still have much to say on how game fictions are understood or supplemented by game audiences. How stories, such as Merkle's Boner, are reflected by journalistic reports of the event, folksong and through the rules of the game itself give us insight into how fiction is generally understood within games of all types. By defining the structure of fiction in games generally, the paper then examines how the stories that sports generate can be understood using Lisbeth Klastrup's term 'player stories'. The precedent of famous sporting moments or stories is significant and a given sport appears to be more than just abstract scorekeeping and professionally sponsored play. Indeed, it is argued that these games are ripe for

narrative analysis given the role that fiction plays in the sporting mindset.

Games seem on the face of it to be very different to stories and to offer opposing satisfactions. Stories do not require us to do anything except to pay attention as they are told. Games always involve some kind of activity and are often focused on the mastery of skills, whether the skill involves chess strategy or joystick twitching. Games generally use language only instrumentally (“checkmate,” “ball four”) rather than to convey the subtleties of description or to communicate complex emotions. They offer a schematized and purposely reductive vision of the world. Most of all, games are goal directed and structured around turn taking and score keeping. All of this would seem to have nothing to do with stories. —Janet Murray (1997, p.140)

Baseball, it is said, is only a game. True. And the Grand Canyon is only a hole in Arizona. Not all holes, or games, are created equal.—George Will (1990, p.294)

#### MERKLE’S BONER

In the 19th century, with the advent of modern sports, games began to take on a more prominent place in popular culture. The development and invention of association football, baseball, basketball, American football, test cricket, and rugby led to spectator sports that remain some of the most popular games on the planet. However, fiction is not integral to these multiplayer games. Tomlinson (1999, p.8) argues that modern sport is nothing more than a media package to entertain audiences; it is a socializer that no longer even requires play except by professional athletes. In the case of sports, it becomes abundantly clear how out of place a fiction might be when players are physically colliding with one another or making judgments about the physical world around them in order to play. The games themselves apparently contain no explicit fictional worlds, presenting highly abstract ludic achievements such as scoring runs, goals, or touchdowns as a core focus. The presence of other players calls to mind the prominence of reality. It is

hard to enter a fiction when you are physically interacting with another flesh and blood human.

While most competitive multiplayer games are not generally associated with fiction, they do possess something of a mythic potential that leads us to scrutinize the status of stories that players themselves create that may be external to the game as a text. This is true of both physical sports and video games. Lisbeth Klastrup terms these player-focused narratives ‘player stories’ (2008, p.143) as opposed to the embedded narratives that games independently portray through their fictional information. These stories are more of a player-reported record of a specific in-game event that is later narrativized. Likewise Watson (2015) has noted games, such as ice hockey, that do not feature explicit fictions yet do still present opportunities for stories to emerge: ‘Like many sports, ice hockey... generates legend, myth, history, biography, autobiography, and other forms of narrative at a furious pace. In, around, and among instances of gameplay, hockey produces dramatic situations which resolve into a variety of public and private narratives’ (Watson, 2015, p.106). This intersection between reality and fiction is something characteristic to multiplayer games in which the stories of players overtakes or substitutes the fiction that would normally be found in many single-player games. Multiplayer games (including physical sports and video games (especially e-sports, multiplayer video games, and abstract video games)) might possess a somewhat fictional quality that, this paper argues, is not an insignificant part of the sporting mindset. Perhaps it is the facilitation of player stories that warrants exploration in the discussion of fiction and multiplayer games. Is it possible that the stories multiplayer games generate, despite being a matter of actual historical record, can be considered a type of game fiction?

As historically-located, narrativized gaming events, typically found in multiplayer games (although not exclusively), player stories generally live and die with the communities that play

and spectate games and are not completely part of a game by themselves. Player stories can be observed in various famous sporting events: great plays, unlikely outcomes or reversals of fortune. Gay Talese's recollection of Joe DiMaggio's play, during an August 1965 pre-game exhibition, captures this process of narrativization as an example of a player story itself:

The banner had been held by hundreds of young boys whose dreams had been fulfilled so often by Mantle, but also seated in the grandstands were older men, paunchy and balding, in whose middle-aged minds DiMaggio was still vivid and invincible, and some of them remembered how one month before, during a pregame exhibition at Old-Timers' Day in Yankee Stadium, DiMaggio had hit a pitch into the left-field seats, and suddenly thousands of people had jumped wildly to their feet, joyously screaming – the great DiMaggio had returned, they were young again, it was yesterday. (Talese, 1966)

DiMaggio's storied career is notable for a consecutive hitting streak (games consecutively played with at least one base hit) of 56, a record still held today. Even though he is a retired player in the above account by Talese, his successes stimulate the continuing enjoyment of that same narrative of DiMaggio for older fans who remember tense games within his record-breaking streak. A streak where DiMaggio would go hitless and then make a similar hit to left-field. Talese's retelling is soaked in nostalgia and personal affect but the written words themselves stand alone as an example of a player story. It is not just for communicating Talese's personal response to this event (although it does this as well), it enriches the baseball spectator's understanding and enjoyment of the game beyond the records and rules themselves. Alan Tomlinson says of narrativized retellings of sporting moments such as Talese's: 'Sport has the capacity to do this sort of thing to people, to offer them unforgettably intense and meaningful moments' (1999, p.50).

Players of these games become tied to these events causing a rapid mythologizing that, despite technically being separate from the game, plays a central role in the appreciation of that game.

Player stories are considered so integral to some multiplayer games that achieving impressive records in a sport has been suggested, not without seriousness, as a form of immortality (Guttman, 1988, p.8). When Watson remarks that ‘Hockey is a creature of narrative – it eats it and excretes it – and yet, somewhat amazingly, it does not require any kind of centralized story department or author to spin its yarns’ (2015, pp.106-107). The sentiment Watson reflects is that games and their players automatically generate narratives not to fill a void left by the absence of fiction but because this narrativization is a necessary part of the game. To understand ways in which video games engage with fiction it is worth a brief examination of player stories in traditional games as has been suggested by Watson (2015, p.121).

Baseball would seem like an unlikely candidate for a discussion of game fictions but the presence of player stories in multiplayer games leads us to consider if those multiplayer games that have no fiction are being prematurely overlooked. Entertaining the idea of baseball having a fiction or at least parts that function like fiction is, I argue, useful as it may reveal things about games we might not have considered by excluding seemingly non-fictional works. Do spectators and players of these games understand them better through fiction? How much of a game is really fiction? What might the fiction of multiplayer games tell us about how fiction functions in other types of games? I would like to answer these questions by examining the importance of socially-shared player stories and plays that are significant to the history of a game or sport. The example from baseball I am about to discuss is noteworthy as it informs us as to how player stories form a core part of the game experience despite the lack of a

fictional world. One famous example from baseball is ‘Merkle’s boner’.

On the 23rd of September 1908 a play, that has since been extensively documented and retold, was made during a game of baseball between the New York Giants and the Chicago Cubs (Anderson, 2000, p.172-173; Fleming, 2006, pp.244-245). At the bottom of the ninth inning the game was tied. The New York Giants had one last chance to score a run. With Moose McCormick on third, Fred Merkle on first and two outs, the current batter (Al Bridwell) needed only to hit a single for McCormick to score the game-winning run. Bridwell did so and the game appeared to be over. As Anderson (2000) notes, it was common for fans of the era to enter and exit across the playing field and, not wanting to be mobbed by fans (angry, drunk or elated), baserunner Merkle headed back to the dugout after leaving first base. Although the rule was rarely enforced at the time, the ‘force-out’ rule, or rule 59 as it was known at the time, stated:

One run shall be scored every time a baserunner, after having legally touched the first three bases, shall legally touch the home-base before three men are put out; provided, however, that if he reach home on or during a play in which the third man be forced out or be put out before reaching first base, a run shall not count. *A force-out can be made only when a baserunner legally loses the right to the base he occupies* and is thereby obliged to advance as the result of a fair hit ball not caught on the fly. [Italics are my emphasis] (Spalding’s Guide, 1908 In: Anderson, 2000, p.160)

This rule was remembered by Johnny Evers, a member, of the soon-to-lose Cubs who appealed to the umpires that because Merkle had not touched second base he could still be forced out, which the Cubs did attempt. The umpires (Hank O’Day and Bob Emslie) upheld the rule which drew the game to a tie. The rule is now prominently enforced in modern baseball as rule 5.08 (a)(EXCEPTION 2), rule 5.08(b) Comment and rule 5.09(b)(1 and

2) Comment which specifically describe hypothetical cases that mirror the Merkle game (Lepperd, 2017, p.37, 44; Lepperd, 2018, p.37, 43-44).<sup>1</sup> As night games were not played in the 'Dead-ball' era of baseball, the game did not go to extra innings. A replay was not played until October 8th that same year to resolve the tied game and decide the winner of that year's pennant race. The Cubs won that replay 4-2 (Anderson, 2000, pp.173-183).

Since this play, Merkle was dubbed 'Bonehead' or 'Bonehead Merkle' in reference to the play coming to be known as a 'boner' – a foolish mistake. Merkle was stereotyped as an idiot despite being an educated man and a skilled player. He would suffer harassment for the rest of his life, both on and off the field, for an unfortunate mistake. Since then this story has been examined with scrutiny by sports writers and historians. Players debated the fairness of the umpire's ruling which some argue was a necessary sacrifice in order that rule 5.08(a)(2) be enforced to avoid any future disagreements. The event has since been

1. In baseball rule 5.08 (a)(EXCEPTION 2) specifies that: 'A run is not scored if the runner advances to home base during a play in which the third out is made... (2) by any runner being forced out;' (Lepperd, 2017). Rule 5.08(a)(EXCEPTION 2) was not commonly enforced until the opposing teams in Merkle's game, and a few other games in 1908, demanded the umpire enforce it (Anderson, 2000, p.180). The rule is now commonly enforced to avoid a repeat of Merkle's Boner. There are also addenda to account for events such as the runner abandoning the bases or the crowd rushing the field which would prevent a base-runner from touching the bases. Rule 5.09b (1) and (2) Comment (Rule 7.08(a) Comment) specifies that: [block quote] Any runner after reaching first base who leaves the base path heading for his dugout or his position believing that there is no further play, may be declared out if the umpire judges the act of the runner to be considered abandoning his efforts to run the bases. Even though an out is called, the ball remains in play in regard to any other runner. This rule also covers the following and similar plays: Less than two out, score tied last of ninth inning, runner on first, batter hits a ball out of park for winning run, the runner on first passes second and thinking the home run automatically wins the game, cuts across diamond toward his bench as batter-runner circles bases. In this case, the base runner would be called out "for abandoning his effort to touch the next base" and batterrunner [sic] permitted to continue around bases to make his home run valid. If there are two out, home run would not count. (Lepperd, 2017) [block quote] To clarify in cases where the field is swarmed by fans (as was the case in Merkle's play) Rule 5.08(b) comment states: [block quote] An exception will be if fans rush onto the field and physically prevent the runner from touching home plate or the batter from touching first base. In such cases, the umpires shall award the runner the base because of the obstruction by the fans. [block quote]

recorded as one of baseball's most famously controversial stories and has even been immortalised in folk song (Brodsky, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, in Fleming's (2006) collection of news stories published at the time, flavorful biases are prevalent in both defense and condemnation of the Merkle play. One such report that narrativizes the actions of the Chicago team in an unflattering light reads:

Directly after the argument on the field, which was brought about by Manager Chance and his fellow players developing that old yellow streak of claiming victories they can't win on the field, Murphy saw his opportunity to make a claim for yesterday's game on a cowardly technicality. Manager Chance and his players in fact incited a riot, and but for the fortunate presence of hundreds of New York's "finest" there would have been a serious riot.

Merkle did make a run for the clubhouse to escape the onrushing fans, as is the habit with the Giants, but he turned after going only a few feet and broke for second. Hofman did return the ball, but it went far over Evers' head, hit Tinker in the back and went on to Kling. Merkle was then on second with Mathewson, and as Evers, Tinker and Pfiester all rushed towards second, Matty, according to his own story, to which he will take an affidavit if such a ridiculous act is necessary, took Merkle by the arm and said: "Come on to the clubhouse; we don't want to mix up in this," and both Matty and Merkle left base together.

Chance was frantic; he rushed up to both Umpires O'Day and Emslie in the endeavor to make them listen to his

2. One extract from the folk song 'Bonehead Merkle' reads: [block quote]They dubbed him "Bonehead" Merkle!They made up Merkle wordsOne might "pull a Merkle"and "to Merkle" became a verbSome would yell "touch 2nd, Bonehead"when he stood on firstLittle kids yelled "moron"and the older kids much worse (Brodsky, 2000) [block quote]



unsportsmanlike claim, but both those officials waved him away and said, according to bystanders and players, “We didn’t see anything that warrants your claim or protest that Merkle didn’t run to second. He was there last we saw.” And these were the words of both umpires, as hundreds will swear to. (New York Herald, 1908 in: Fleming, 2006, p.250)

This example contradicts the eventual outcome of the game which was officially called, by Emslie and O’Day, to a tie (Anderson, 2000; Fleming 2006, pp.243-255). After the official result was called many lamented Merkle’s play, specifically characterizing him as unintelligent:

...If he would only remember to run to second base when it is required – which reminds us of a man who had a thousand dollar back and ten-cent head [a reference to the cash value of a professional player at the time]. (New York World, 1908 In: Fleming, 2006, p.246)

...But McGraw had enough of Merkle the day before [the day of the Merkle play] and called on Tenney for his brains. A one-legged man with a noodle is better than a bonehead. (Bagley, 1908 In: Fleming, 2006, p.255)

Every storyteller is using fiction to help understand what is really happening with this rule. Is it fair? Is it in the spirit of the game? Does it make for an exciting story for its own sake? The response, through narrative, seems to settle on Merkle being a key dramatic figure around which a rule dispute is expressed. A foolish youngster who must be sacrificed in order that similarly scandalous debates about the enforcement of the force-out rule not be repeated. Baseball historian Lawrence Ritter remarks on the narrative discourse of the 1908 baseball season which sums up the unusually dramatic situations and their later narrativization succinctly:

If the expression “Truth is stranger than fiction” did not originate in 1908, it should have. Because not even the most imaginative of storytellers could have dreamed up what actually happened that memorable year as the Pittsburgh pirates, New York Giants, and Chicago Cubs schemed and clawed their way in quest of the elusive National League Pennant. (Ritter in: Fleming, 2006, Foreword)

Although biases for either the Cubs or the Giants are clear in the reportage of the day, the official word on the ruling by the National League (likely swayed by a similar case in an earlier game involving the Pittsburgh pirates and Chicago cubs discussed below) appears to be what secured consistent enforcement of the force-out rule as well as Merkle’s lasting reputation as a ‘bonehead’. In sports journalist Keith Olbermann’s foreword to Anderson’s work, he passionately defends Merkle as a victim of circumstance where the ‘...never-enforced arcane baseball rule...suddenly began to *be* enforced...’ [Olbermann’s emphasis] (Olbermann in: Anderson, 2000, xi). Fear of a repeat of Merkle’s boner led to widespread enforcement by umpires under the National League, guaranteeing that players made for a base regardless of the outcome of the batter’s hit. It should be made clear that there were games prior to Merkle’s Boner where this rule could have been clarified which makes the Merkle game distinctive given the similarity to the hypothetical case in the related the rule description. Anderson (2000, p.161) notes that the enforcement in the Merkle game came nineteen days after a very similar play by first baseman Warren Gill (Pirates vs. Cubs – September 4<sup>th</sup> 1908). Arguably the rule should have been enforced in this case to avoid establishing a controversial precedent in which official rules were routinely ignored. Sports historian Bill James sums up this risky state of affairs writing ‘It is in principle most dangerous to have rules on the books which are not enforced, or have one

set of rules written down and another acted out' (James, 1988 in: Anderson, 2000, p.161). It is the Merkle Game specifically that the modern force-out rule's comments seem to refer to which would make sense given the greater fame of the Merkle play. Despite opportunities (in prior games) to clarify the force-out rule by then-national league president Harry Pulliam (Anderson, 2000, pp.91-92, 161, 179), Merkle broke the camel's back and became the unfortunate human sacrifice. What, if anything, does any of this have to do with fiction?

#### THE PLACE OF FICTION AND NARRATIVE IN SPORT

When discussing how a sport might constitute a game fiction, it is worth establishing some basic structural reference points for discussing game fiction generally. A tool I would like to employ to this end, is the concept of 'fictional information' and 'significant information' as discussed by Summerley (2018, pp.72-74) in the context of games. The theory is similar to Juul's (2005) assessment of games as 'Half-real', being made up of 'real rules' and 'fictional worlds' but re-examines the nature of fiction and structural elements unique to games. Fictional Information is defined as 'information that pertains *only* to the fictional world of a work (in short, its fiction)' and significant information is defined as 'information that relates only medium-specific meaning that is not otherwise fictional' (Summerley, 2018). In the case of games, fictional information relates to fictional statements made by the game and significant information would constitute the rules, goals, situations and materials (or anything else that is specific and 'significant' to the medium of games) that is not a case of fictional information. Summerley suggests that the two types of information work cyclically to reinforce each other in cases where fictional consistency is achieved in a given medium. Furthermore, any medium can also communicate fictional information alongside significant information (which may be why the discussion of fiction in games has centered around a dualistic interpretation between fiction and rules (a

medium-specific quality of games) as discussed by Juul (2005), Aarseth (2014) and Murray (1997)).

Fiction (as distinct from fictional information) is a little harder to define. There is an agreed understanding of what it means in most cases but for the sake of this discussion it should probably be pinned down before misunderstandings accumulate. Walton (1990) encountered similar difficulty in his examination of definitions that oppose fiction to reality, non-fiction or truth. He uses it quite broadly and interchangeably with the term 'representation' and links it closely to imagination. It is not restricted to literary fictions and includes all forms of depiction. Ultimately Walton does not settle on a definition as the very word is so ambiguous that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to come to an agreeable definition that is not incredibly vague or restrictively narrow. One thing Walton does focus on is the idea of fiction as possessing the function of '*servicing as a prop in games of make-believe*' (Walton, 1990, p. 91). This is to say that fiction is simply an anchorage point from which the audience's imagination may develop a 'game of make-believe' which, in practice, can be as simple as viewing a painting and imagining (making belief) that its depictive content exists in a fictional world.

Fiction's function, as Walton notes, can differ greatly depending on the context it is presented in and for what purpose its audience seeks it out.

What counts as fiction will depend on how its maker intended or expected it to be used; or on how, typically or traditionally, it actually is used; or on what uses people regard as proper or appropriate (whether or not they do so use it); or on how, according to principles, it is in fact to be used (whether or not people realize this); or on one or another combination of these (Walton, 1990, p91).

As is clear from this quote, defining fiction becomes a muddy task. I understand it to be identified in much the same way Walton's representations are defined: as a prop in a game of make-believe. To put it succinctly (but by no means conclusively) fiction is information that is constructed by an author for the sake of imagination by an audience. Fiction cannot exclusively be classed as 'what doesn't exist' or 'what is made-up' as this envelops many orbiting, but very tangential, discussions. A fiction can have both factual truth and relate to our own existence e.g. one could easily make a statement in a fiction that 'George Washington was the first president of the United States of America' which is both true inside and outside of the fiction and relates to a situation that once existed. Despite difficulties in pinning down what constitutes fictional status, Walton argues that fiction is not in opposition to reality. Many games (especially multiplayer games) often blend fiction with 'reality' given that a real player is often directly narrativized or interacting with fictional entities (1990, p.102). The fictional information of a game is therefore a prop in a game of make-believe – simply an imagination aid.

Following on from this, we might ask: can the hypothetical example described in the modern force-out rule, that asks the player to imagine a similar game to that of the Merkle game, be said to be an instance of fiction which forms a core part of the enjoyment and understanding of the game of baseball? The function of baseball's rule 5.08(a)(2) is to help the player (or spectator) of baseball understand, through narrativisation, its rules in a way that moves beyond a dry, systematic description of the rules. Merkle's boner serves as a good way of explaining a rule, by example, but the nature of the record of accounts of the Merkle game suggests a story or parable that is also a matter of historical document and incorporates elements of both. To be specific, the significant information in Merkle's Boner consists of: the rules of Baseball; the goals of the competing teams (to

win the game and ultimately the National League Pennant); the time of day and location the game was played at; and the players, tools and supporting staff used to play and keep track of the game. The fictional information then consists of those things that cannot be said to fall into the above category and that help us imagine the situation: characterizations of the teams, their players (especially Merkle) and their fans; the conflict brought about by the disputed rule; the interference of fans on the field; the tragic fate of Merkle; and the narrative order and flavor of the information above.

As I have said before, sports and other multiplayer games do not, at first glance, seem to possess a fiction. However, player stories like Merkle's give games an aspect of engagement which cannot really be said to be composed entirely of score-keeping and game mechanics. Player stories are not abstract records but narratives that enrich our understanding and enjoyment of games. Under Walton's definition of fiction, Merkle's play and other player stories can be considered props in understanding a game's significant information through imagination. Echoes of similar events can be found in all sports and multiplayer games which do not necessarily portray explicit fictions. Much like how multiplayer and abstract games do not *require* fiction to be played, player stories are not *required* to enjoy a game. Yet, there is a desire, a common motivation, by those that play and watch these games to generate, remember and enjoy them not only for their mythic quality but also to enhance their understanding of the game. In this way, player stories function analogously to fictional information that helps communicate functional rules. Player stories help us understand a game through more than purely 'the rules'. Merkle's Boner is credited as being one of the reasons for a major rule change that still affects baseball today (Anderson, 2000). Would rule 5.08(a)(2) be more understandable in raw, legalese form as it exists in the MLB rulebook or is it more helpful to imagine the Merkle game to help dramatize

the rule? Watson details a similar example in ice hockey. 'Icing', a tactic that proved effective in maintaining control over the opposition but boring for spectators, led to its own rule change after it became a narrativized phenomenon: 'News reports from the period describe tedious games where one team would take a lead, then proceed to ice the puck dozens of times in an attempt to run down the clock (Klein, 2013). Finally, in 1937, responding to increasingly urgent complaints from owners, fans, and players, the league implemented Rule 81...' (Watson, 2015, p.119). As Allen Guttman notes in his examination of the human element in baseball 'rulebooks...seldom adequately reflect the norms that regulate play' (1988, p.74) meaning that the authority of the rules is co-dependent on the actual cases where player stories cause edge cases to occur. Merkle's boner, as indirectly referenced by rules 5.08 and 5.09, negotiates the stories of the game towards consistency with its ruleset.

This idea of using narrativization for instrumental ends is not unheard of. Due to their rituals and drama Johann Huizinga (1949, p.173) argues the pomp of the courts of law, with their wigs, formalities and contests dictated by rules, are no exception to identifications as performed fiction (1949, p.76). Bruner (2002) reflects this observation in his own discussion of the importance of narrative in legal battles. Defendants and accusers take turns literally telling narratives that help their case (Bruner, 2002, pp.12-13). Even though the stories told in the court of law are about what factually happened Bruner emphasizes the need for stories to be told a certain way to make for a persuasive case or even that narrativization helps comprehension of a past series of events. In fact, legal precedents are often invoked in the form of narratives to uphold a disputed rule, much like how Merkle's Boner is remembered when enforcing rule 5.08(a)(2) in baseball. Of course, actual legal cases do not usually make for exciting reading and Bruner makes the distinction between legal narratives and what we would traditionally think of as fiction.

This is important if we are to see how player stories fit into the spectrum of fiction. Legal narratives deal with the actual, banal records of events that took place which, when compared to literature (as Bruner does (2002, pp.60-61)), lack the virtual, figurative and speculative qualities we usually expect of fiction. Much like how rules accrue in response to player stories over time Bruner notes how legal precedents are set with respect to prior cases that are narrativized. 'Insofar as the law insists on [precedents]...and insofar as 'cases' are narratives, the legal system imposes an orderly process of narrative accrual' (Bruner, 1991, p. 18 cited in Watson, 2015, p.119). The feedback loop of player story and game rules bears similarities to the way in which game fiction helps explain game functions and vice versa.

Rules and player stories form a 'chicken and the egg' cycle in the formation of many competitive multiplayer games. Watson describes ice hockey 'as a kind of cybernetic loop, or set of nested loops, wherein the state of the game gives rise to narratives which in turn modify the state of the game, giving rise to new narratives, and so on, across a range of time scales' (Watson, 2015, p.117) and so ice hockey can be understood as a confluence of its significant information and (comparably) fictional information. Games present situations and situations are a part of significant information which is given proper dramatic context when fictionalized or narrativized in player stories. Watson's cybernetic feedback loop argues that in games 'narrative and situation can thus be seen to exist in a strong feedback relationship with one another' (Watson, 2015 p.121). Thus, player stories help create a holistic understanding of these games that isn't located purely in abstract rules.

I use the case of Merkle because it is a well-known historical event but it must be said that the way in which people narrativize games is not always so exceptional or extreme. Merkle's Boner is a famous example but many mundane examples exist between friends and families who fondly remember an unlikely play or



a particular player's skill or good fortune that informs understanding and enjoyment of the game in the present. Watson notes that 'Slumps, streaks, momentum, and myriad other kinds of "storying" are just as integral to youth hockey and adult 116 recreational leagues as they are to the NHL' (Watson, 2015, pp.116-117). Player stories can range from superstitions about clean balls to a player's tendencies to 'jump in' to the way a player celebrates a goal. Watson even argues that narratives can 'take hold' in the form of internal psychological crises such as perceiving that one is 'having a bad night' as a player or that one needs to 'get their head in the game' (Watson, 2015, p.115). Player stories in sports (traditional sports and e-sports) from *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory, 2001) to baseball to *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike* (Capcom, 1999) to ice hockey have been noted as the core appeal of these games despite the lack of traditional narratives within these games (Innuendo Studios, 2015; Brooks, 2013; Watson, 2015; Cravens, 2014). I bring up examples from the realm of video-games, not to make the arbitrary connection to game studies as a field (concerning these types of games as a storytelling medium), but because these multiplayer games are aligned to the sporting mindset, being e-sports themselves. Ian Daskin argues of *Super Smash Bros. Melee* player stories that these 'stories feel true' and that 'competitive smash is built out of stories' (Innuendo Studios, 2015). Entire documentaries about competitive multiplayer games can be dedicated to specific player stories such as the infamous forfeit by Greg 'IdrA' Fields during an important *Starcraft 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) match (Sutak, 2016). Fiction and narratives are, in a sense, a part of the contest.

## CONCLUSION

In a webcomic by Brooks (2013), it is argued that we believe in player stories because they are pure distillations of chance occurrences informed by the context of play. Brooks claims they are *both* real-life and fiction. They are compelling for this reason

but are often interpreted as fictions because they seem 'unreal'. The stories are compelling because nobody could have predicted them, there is no author scripting the events of player stories and when read retrospectively it can be hard to remember that these are factual accounts of what happened. Many player stories avoid the conflict between the author and player that so often leads to ludonarrative dissonance because the 'author' in these cases is understood as a combination of physics and fate narrativized by the community of the game after a play happens. Yet this 'author' still provides us with events that stimulate the imagination to narrativize them and thus our definition of fiction seems to hold true here. The conceits and shortcomings that lead to conceits in authored fictions are not present in player stories as they are partially guided by ludic systems which, by their nature, are not predictable and feature no traditional author when the game is in play. Thus, player stories are an instance of fiction that can be said to include reality as a co-author, the designers and players of the game being the other co-author. When we are asked to imagine Merkle's boner to help understand the force-out rule, we are engaging with a fiction that has its genesis in the reality of a specific situation of Baseball.

While scholars such as Eskelinen (2001) make a clear separation between abstract goals and stories, the actual cultural output of competitive game consumption leads not just to records of goals but narratives that frame those 'goals'. They are not so separate. Players and spectators fondly remember these narratives and they have significance for more than just the significant information at play. Their 'reality' is almost incidental. My arguing player stories as functionally analogous to fiction is not to downplay the historical outcomes of such events (Merkle, only 19 years old at the time, was unmercifully blamed long after the event and the play allegedly contributed to national league president Harry Pulliam's suicide in 1909 (Anderson, 2000, p.xxiv)) but is meant to show how fiction manifests in sports

and competitive multiplayer games, an arena that rarely receives consideration for discussions as fiction. An additional layer of enjoyment is present in the game, through player stories for which there is a common desire to create and propagate. As Watson remarks: 'a game of hockey is more than merely the robotic execution of a set of rules and procedures – it is also a dynamic psychological landscape, the topology of which is determined by the accrual of narrative over time and across multiple contexts' (Watson, 2015, p.115). Stories in sports only live on because of the collaborative cultural preservation that surrounds multiplayer games where a common motivation for fiction is present. The understanding and enjoyment of sports (and other multiplayer games) is more than records of abstract score-based competition. Merkle's boner shows that understanding and enjoying sports through a lens of fiction reveals more than a purely ludological analysis of games that might be prematurely understood as abstract or multiplayer. Narrative analysis is certainly useful for many games which feature explicit fictional worlds but it should not be forgotten that games that do not feature explicit fictional worlds, such as Tetris, Chess, hockey, or baseball, are just as pregnant with fiction and are ripe for analysis.

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