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Sports as Emergent Storytelling

The Narrative Construction of Road Cycling

Professional road cycling is grounded in *ludus* (structured play), but its reception has long been shaped by narrative (stories). Focusing on the *Tour de France* as a paradigmatic case, this article examines how, since its late nineteenth-century inception, the sport has functioned as a narrative engine: a ludic system that generates storied interpretations. Drawing on cultural and cognitive narratology, the article argues that cycling's narrativization arises not from predetermined storytelling but from emergent narrativity: stories produced by the sport's ludic dynamics, the media ecologies that frame it, and the interpretive activities of commentators and fans. To show this, the article (1) traces how professional cycling historically developed in close intertwinement with the rise of new mass media and narrative mediation, and (2) identifies distinct ludic features that afford the cognitive construction of road races as narratives. It hereby shows how cycling's ludic and medial structures have coevolved, turning athletic performance into shared storyworlds that connect the sport to experiential, social, and ideological meanings.

1. Introduction

Sports are activities rooted in play – or what the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1961) called *ludus*: a sphere distinct from everyday life, governed by shared, arbitrary rules in which players test effort, strategy, and skill. Road bicycle racing, as it emerged in late-nineteenth-century Europe, is no exception. In Caillois' typology of ludic forms, cycling is primarily a mode of *agon* (competition), in which riders and teams deploy fitness, skill, tactics, and technology in pursuit of victory, combined with elements of *alea* (chance), as crashes, mechanical failures, or risky tactical gambits can suddenly reshape a race, and *ilinx* (physical exhilaration), found in high-speed descents or tightly packed sprints.

Yet while these ludic structures define the internal logic of the sport, they cannot fully account for how road racing is experienced and understood by spectators. While races are structured by principles of *ludus*, I argue that for spectators, the reception and experience of the sport have historically been defined by a different mode: that of *narrative*. Examining the *Tour de France* (1903–present) as a case in point, I will argue that from their inception, road races have functioned as narrative engines: events whose main purpose is to generate *stories*. To this end, I will highlight how the sport historically developed in tandem with mass media, which shaped and exploited cycling's narrative affordances. This

narrativity, I argue, is *emergent*: not authored or pre-scripted, but co-produced through an interplay of ludic structure, its mediation, and spectatorship.

2. Theoretical Background

This article contributes to an evolving, interdisciplinary line of inquiry that probes the overlaps between play and narrative. Play and narrative have often been treated as distinct (if not incompatible) modes of experience. The tension between structured play and narrative interpretation recalls the 'ludology vs. narratology' debates of the early 2000s in game studies. Scholars such as Espen Aarseth (2001) and Gonzalo Frasca (1999) proposed that video games should be understood in ludic terms – as systems of play governed by rules, choices, and procedural logic – rather than through the lens of narrative theory, which others, such as Janet Murray (1997), had used to approach games as new media that were reinventing existing storytelling traditions. In the ludic view, a game of chess is a system of procedural rules and actions (turns, moves) with clearly defined outcomes (winning, losing) for players and onlookers to engage with. In the narrative view, the chessboard opens up a storyworld with characters (kings, queens, rivaling armies) and actions (battle, evasion, sacrifice) that form a causal and teleological event-structure. While this binary has since been productively dismantled, the debate has sparked lasting inquiry into how play and storytelling may intersect, overlap, or co-produce meaning (see, for instance, recent explorations of 'ludonarrative complexity' in video games by Caracciolo [2024] and Bellini [forthcoming]).

With this article, I seek to contribute to this line of inquiry by examining how competitive cycling – as a paradigmatic ludic activity – has culturally functioned as a site for narrative construction and reception. While cycling spectatorship is not 'interactive' in the traditional sense, it offers case for what *ludonarrative* may mean in the context of sports, by exemplifying how a ludic structure can serve as the substrate for an inherently narrativized mode of reception. Hereby, I hope to extend the conversation on the narrative dimensions of play, and the playful dimensions of narrative, into the realm of lived spectatorship and sporting culture.

To be more specific, I understand narrative here as described by Marie-Laure Ryan (2006): as a mode of cognitive representation that takes the form of a causally, temporally, spatially, and intentionally connected event sequence. According to Ryan, narratives (whether told, watched, mediated, or remembered) encode information along four dimensions: a *spatial* dimension, meaning that a narrative must depict a world inhabited by distinct, individual entities; a *temporal* dimension, indicating that stories unfold over time and involve noteworthy changes; a *mental* dimension, as stories center on conscious agents who think, act, and respond emotionally to the conditions of the storyworld; and a *formal and pragmatic* dimension, which includes elements such as causal and thematic

connections, a sense of closure, and interpretive significance (Ryan 2006, 8–9). Thus, narrative is not simply an object or artefact, but a *cognitive activity* that can be cued by events, artefacts, signs, or sounds that encourage recipients to infer connections along these spatial, temporal, mental and formal dimensions. I will call this cognitive process, of understanding something through narrative form, *narrativization*, following Monika Fludernik (1996).

In the case of cycling, the sport's narrativization is not incidental, but culturally embedded – that is, actively constructed and sustained by race organizers, media, commentators, and fans alike. Engagement with the sport, I propose, is shaped less by a logical-scientific understanding of its ludic facts and outcomes, than by what Jerome Bruner (1991) influentially called "the narrative construction of reality": a way of making sense of the world through stories that foreground human intentions, actions, and experiential meaning within shared cultural frameworks. The narrative construction of road cycling, I argue is not predesigned (or 'told') in centralized manner, but is *emergent*: it arises out of the interactions between the sport as ludic system, the media ecology that surrounds it, and the cognitive-interpretive activities of spectators and commentators, which together generate stories that shape how the sport is perceived, remembered, and evaluated.

3. Approach

This essay investigates cycling's narrativization through the lens of media theory and cognitive and cultural narratology. To do so, I will focus on the *Tour de France* and its history, as the most famous and paradigmatic bike race, while referring to a few one-day races (such as the Tour of Flanders) as a corollary. Through these examples, I aim to show that the sport's ludic structure has consistently prompted narrative elaboration through two interrelated factors: (1) the *media ecology* within which professional cycling historically emerged, which emphasized its narrative dimensions for commercial or ideological purposes; and (2) the sport's distinct ludic features which provide *affordances* for narrativization. These affordances include what I will call the *ludic intransparency* of bike races: the structural opacity of competition that invites spectators to construct narrative hypotheses, and to engage in transmedial, forensic fandom. I also discuss the sport's moments of *temps mort* and its spatial *mise-en-scène*, as key prompts for storytelling, as well as its affordance for conceptual metaphor, through which the embodied, physical actions of racing become vehicles for abstract meaning.

While I discuss these media-historical and ludonarrative dimensions consecutively for clarity, I argue that they have been historically interwoven and mutually constitutive. A few caveats are in order. First, this article focuses exclusively on road racing (excluding separate disciplines such as track cycling or cyclocross) in its institutionalized professionalized form. Moreover, by focusing on the Tour the France and adjacent races, my primary emphasis is on the sport's history in

Western Europe (particularly France and Belgium), where road cycling developed as both a competitive sport and as a narrative tradition. While the sport has become increasingly globalized, the modes of storytelling, spectatorship, and symbolic investment examined in this study remain predominantly shaped by European historical and cultural practices. This is mainly because the institutional structures that organize, mediate, and commercialize the sport (e.g., race organizers, professional teams, legacy media, the governing body Union Cycliste Internationale [UCI]) are still overwhelmingly concentrated in Europe, reinforcing a Eurocentric (and to a lesser degree, North American) narrative framework. Furthermore, this article focuses primarily on men's professional road cycling, not to universalize its narratives, but to reflect on the historical dominance of men's racing in shaping the sport's competitive structures, archival memory, media narratives, and fan cultures – an imbalance that has, fortunately, begun to shift in recent decades with growing visibility and institutional support for women's racing.

4. The Emergence of Road Racing in a Narrative Media Ecology

To understand cycling's cultural reception, we need to first consider how the sport co-evolved with a media environment that actively shaped the sport and its narrativization. Narrative mediation, I will argue, has formed an inextricable part of the sport's history.

The first bike races grew out of the 'bicycle boom' in Europe and North-America of the late 1800s – an era in which bicycles emerged as a new form of mobility, leisure, and identity. As David Herlihy (2004, 251) describes, safer and more accessible bike designs (with equal-sized wheels, a chain drive, and pneumatic tires) had made the bicycle a symbol of modernity and social mobility, particularly among the middle class. The bike, and the booming industry around it, reconfigured patterns of leisure and transportation, and served as a vehicle of autonomy that offered new freedoms to the middle class.

Races were organized as spectacles as much as they were a sport: often held on closed tracks, horse racing circuits, and later in dedicated velodromes, they were at first short events, catering to mass spectatorship and press attention. The first *road race* is often said to have been Paris–Rouen of 1869, a 123-kilometer race from city to city, organized by the Olivier brothers, who owned a bicycle manufacturing company, and a cycling-themed newspaper, *Le Vélocipède Illustré* (Baudry de Saunier 1891, 102). However, a sustained road racing culture did not emerge until the 1890s, with track and velodrome remaining the dominant forms of competition.

Road racing rose to prominence in an expanding media landscape and amidst a growing public appetite for endurance spectacles. A driving force behind the organization and promotion of road races were newspapers. Not only was or-

ganizing a race a way to associate with the modern interests of the readership; it also offered a way of binding readers. As historian Christopher Thompson (2006, 17) writes, sponsoring races "was both a form of publicity for a paper and a means of creating its sales. Fans seeking in-depth information about a race would purchase the sponsoring newspaper, which offered the most complete coverage." This was especially effective with road races: due to their long-distance nature, fans were only able to witness a fraction of the race on site (if at all), and were dependent on print media for coverage and results. According to historian Eric Reed (2015, 19), in France alone, a "nationwide audience of approximately 150,000 people read cycling periodicals regularly in the 1880s." To conquer this market, newspapers competed by organizing increasingly long and spectacular events. Many of today's major European races were first organized in these years, including Liège-Bastogne-Liège (1892), Paris-Tours (1896), and Paris-Roubaix (1896), in what Reed describes as "major newspaper circulation battlegrounds" (21).

4.1 Narrativizing Cycling: The Case of the *Tour de France* (1903)

From the start, newspapers' interest in cycling was driven by a recognition of its narrative potential. The best-documented case is the now famous *Tour de France*, first organized in 1903 by Henri Desgrange, journalist and editor-in-chief of sports paper *l'Auto*. The idea emerged following a proposal by journalist Géo Lefèvre during a staff meeting on how to rival a competing newspaper, *Le Vélo* (Thompson 2006, 17; Reed 2015, 24). *Le Vélo*, had been successful in organizing highly popular one-day long distance races through France, such as Bordeaux-Paris (a one-day, 572 kilometer race) and Paris-Roubaix (a race over the rough cobbled roads of northern France). In an attempt to draw readers from their rivals, Desgrange and his staff devised a format that would be even more spectacular: a six stage, 2,428 kilometer-long *Tour de France*.

Not only was their *Tour de France* designed to be more demanding and spectacular than any other race, it would also produce a unique form of seriality: a segmented, continuous unfolding of events that mirrored the structure of serialized fiction. Its six (and later up to twenty-one) stages transformed the athletic competition into an ongoing arc of unfolding episodes, to sustain the interest of the readership. This allusion to narrative drama was more than a metaphor: Desgrange's *Tour de France* took explicit cues from narrative fiction, to 'remediate' these in the context of sports coverage. As Christopher Thompson (2006, 98–99) writes,

> No sporting event contained this dramatic uncertainty as much as the Tour de France. The succession of natural obstacles to overcome – most notably the mountains – and the race's division into stages allowed tension, conflict, and suspense, carefully woven into an epic narrative by journalists covering the race, to build over several weeks. Such a narrative, *L'Auto* hoped, would appeal to a public primed by weeks of prerace reporting and accustomed to serialized novels in mass-circulation dailies.

The serialized structure of the Tour, and the media coverage to which it was linked, sought to evoke these narrative qualities, by foregrounding narrativity as described by Ryan (2006, 8) – that is, by creating temporal, spatial, mental, and formal-pragmatic cohesion.

4.2 The Temporal Dimension

Temporally, the Tour was structured as a clear linear sequence with causal connections: it formed a journey from A to B (and back to A), divided into six distinct stages across 19 days. The decision to carry over time gaps into a cumulative general classification gave the event an overarching design best described as *episodic*. Each stage functioned as a discrete contest with its own immediate stakes and events (e.g., the fight for the stage win, the passing through a region), while also contributing to a larger narrative arc (the general classification, later visualized through the yellow jersey for the leader). This weaving of daily outcomes into a sustained storyline created a macro-structure of suspense. As Reed (2015, 30) notes, in the early years, "Desgrange continually revised the race's format to maximize and draw out the narrative tension and to offer more interesting stories that would captivate spectators and readers." This included introducing mountain stages (usually decisive for the general classification) towards the end of the race, so as to keep outcomes uncertain as long as possible, and choices such as having the races finish late in the afternoon, so reports could be written and sent out in time for the morning newspaper, to keep fans updated.

In their reporting style, Desgrange and others also harnessed the temporal logic of popular narrative fiction. As Meir Sternberg (1992) argues, narrative discourse creates effects of *curiosity*, *suspense* and *surprise* through the temporal structuring of information. Desgrange's (1903b) front-page editorial following the first stage of the inaugural Tour vividly illustrates how these strategies were used from the onset:

> Behold, hardly has the first stage of the immense Tour de France journey ended, when already the riders, in a few hours, will line up under the starter's orders to fight the second battle, and, before the second act of this moving drama begins, it is worth noting that the concerns of the sporting public are no longer at all what they were four days ago, before the start from Paris. (translation mine)

With this opening, Desgrange deploys all three effects: he incites curiosity by opening a retrospective gap (what momentous events have occurred during the first stage?); builds suspense by pointing to prospective gaps (where will the drama go next?); and highlights the possibility of surprise through retrospective reversal (expectations held before the start have already been overturned). Such strategies explicitly framed the race, and its coverage, as an unfolding drama.

4.3 The Mental Dimension

The mental dimension of the race's narrativity was generated through the construction of riders and teams as characters with goals, traits, and intentions, and whose suffering and triumphs reporters like Desgrange magnified. The built-in agonistic structure competition generated constant direct or indirect conflicts, with action-structures in the form of attacks, alliances, betrayals, or rivalries. Journalists at *L'Auto* and other media outlets adopted what Reed (2015, 32) describes as "a melodramatic narrative style that transformed the competitions into epic struggles pitting stylized caricatures of riders against one another and against nature." Exaggerations of their actions and achievements were not uncommon, in part also due to the reporters' limited access to the race. In the words of later Tour-director Jean-Marie Leblanc, journalists reporting on early Tours often "had only fleeting perceptions of the race or had reports told to them which were perhaps themselves already exaggerated" (qtd. in Marchetti 2003, 68). Desgrange would describe the cyclists as "wondrous, mythical beings," "giants of the road" ("*géants de la route*") who were engaged in a "grand calvary" ("*grand calvaire*") (Reed 2015, 32). These forms of presentation were aided by the new possibilities of print photography, which, as Thompson (2006, 29) describes, "fueled the era's cult of athletic heroism. The press included dramatic photographs of the racers in its Tour coverage, postcards featuring star racers were sold to the public, and cycle and tire manufacturers placed advertisements in the press and posters along city streets."

Another frequently used strategy included the anthropomorphization of the landscape, presenting the wind, mountains, and other terrain obstacles as adversaries seeking to hinder the riders' progress, thus evoking an actantial narrative structure of hero and opponent, goals and obstacles. From 1907 onwards, this hero-antagonist scheme would be further complemented by the figure of the *vassal* or helper, embodied by the *domestique*: the rider who sacrifices personal success to help their leader. This relational dynamic, grounded in military models of strategy and hierarchy, created further narrative templates of cooperation and tactical interdependence.

4.4 The Spatial Dimension

Paramount to the Tour's narrativity was the race's spatial dimension. From the Tour's inception, the landscape was not merely a backdrop for the action, but a narrative force that dictated the race's action and progression. The route acquired, in the literary terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 84), a *chronotopical* function: an intrinsic interconnectedness of time and space that shapes a narrative's progression and meaning. Key passages such as mountains or cobbled roads served to 'thicken time': not only did they literally slow down the race, but they also invite intensified anticipation, attention, and evaluation, as key moves

would be made here and critical turning points in the general classification could occur. Moreover, the geography soon grew into a means of establishing serial coherence. As Reed (2015, 32) writes, "[p]erhaps as important as *L'Auto's* dramatization of the race was gradual emergence of a self-referential, historical style of coverage, which helped to establish a sense of tradition around the Tour and which embedded the event in the popular historical and geographic consciousness." While the course would change annually from the 1903 edition onwards, repeated landmarks, such as its recurring passages through the Alps or Pyrenees, contributed to the race's recognizable character and continuity.

For fans, the recurrence of key sites and star riders arguably established a *storyworld* that each stage or edition revisited and expanded. As Ryan (2014, 1) writes, in narrative fiction, establishing sequels, prequels, or modifications "provides instant immersion, because the recipient is spared the cognitive effort of building a world and its inhabitants from a largely blank state. The world is already in place when the recipient takes his or her first steps in it, once again." In a similar manner, the Tour's evolving but familiar route soon allowed fans to re-enter a known narrative space annually: one that revisited familiar mountains, cobbled roads, or iconic sites, and reintroduced the stars, their characters, and their back stories.

Moreover, particularly for French audiences, the familiarity of the geography also connected the events to existing cultural narratives of France and its regions. In this sense, the spatial dimension of the *Tour de France* went beyond the geography's direct impact on the racing: it also relied on the affiliation with and allusions to the existing cultural narratives of nationalism and regionalism. As Thompson (2006) writes:

> This extraordinarily varied physical and cultural landscape, and the complex history with which it was imbued, provided the spatial and psychological environment for the Tour de France. Embodying the era's newfound mobility, the racers connected their public to the past as they negotiated an itinerary sprinkled with historic sites that evoked important moments or figures in the nation's life. (51–52)

There was a clear ideological component to the early Tours as 'storyworld': to show France's unity amidst its regional differences. The press coverage was, in Reed's (2015, 33) words, "as much a running commentary on French history and geography as it was a race narrative, with Henri Desgrange's *L'Auto* in the role of tour guide. Desgrange often evoked the literary and military glories associated with the towns and regions traversed by the riders." The race was in many ways a response to the trauma of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the political instability of the Third Republic, the rise of nationalist sentiments, and the accompanying desires for unification. The first Tours often traced the edges of France, almost as if drawing its outline on the map, producing a visual and symbolic act of territorial enclosure and unity. In the decades that followed, the Tour would be used to explicitly mark and commemorate political events. When Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France following World War I, for instance, these regions were included in the 1919 itinerary as a performative act of reunification. Desgrange (1919), in his editorial, celebrated the occasion writing:

'Strasbourg! Metz! It is not a dream! We're going there, home" (translation mine).

The Tour's sense of national unity was reinforced by a shared pride over the performances of star riders. As Thompson (2006, 96) points out, "amid widespread anxiety about national decline, male athletes emerged as symbols of physical prowess and courage." This gendered representation was "reinforced by continual references to its contestants as heroic soldiers and to the Tour as a war that emotional women witnessed from the side of the road or experienced from the 'home front', away from the action" (97). Another social template used to frame the racers was one of *class*. In his editorial introducing the first Tour, Desgrange (1903a) already compared the riders to the sturdy farmers of Émile Zola's novel *La Terre* (1887). Early twentieth-century European discourse would often cast the racing cyclist as a 'hero of labour,' a figure of disciplined endurance and collective virtue. In interwar France, this even led communist media producing counter-narratives, re-imagining the cyclist as the exploited worker, and the race organizers as capitalist overseers, thus subverting the Tour's original framing to make it a parable of class struggle (Reed 2015, 35).

4.5 The Formal and Pragmatic Dimension

In conclusion, in terms of the formal and pragmatic dimensions, the *Tour de France* and its mediation used the formal strategies outlined above to evoke narratives with different functions. Key functions of its narrativization were to provide causal, intentional, and spatiotemporal coherence to the race; to keep readers hooked through narrative mechanics of curiosity, suspense, and surprise; and to heighten the race's perceived meaningfulness and affective resonance for its French audience. The stakes of the race were further raised by the appeal to existing cultural narratives, such as those of nationalism, class, heroism, or masculinity. Thus, while the narrativization of the race was primarily driven by commercial aims, its reporting style and growing cultural prominence came with considerable ideological and political import.

4.6 The Tour as Epic Spectacle

The Tour's new serial race narrative was a success, both commercially and culturally. Commercially, Thompson (2006, 21) describes how

> *L'Autos* daily sales rose to 30,000 during the pre-race build-up in June, and to 65,000 in July during the race itself. By 1913, the paper's average daily circulation had reached 120,000 issues; in July, however, daily sales surpassed 250,000 issues, establishing a pattern of more than doubling the paper's circulation during the Tour.

This explosive commercial success highlights how the Tour not only established a compelling new form of sports storytelling, but also transformed road cycling into a cultural phenomenon for mass media consumption.

Culturally, the Tour's mediated presentation established a lasting public perception of the race as central to French national identity. In his 1957 essay "The Tour de France as Epic" ("Le Tour de France comme épopée," often included in *Mythologies*), Roland Barthes analyzes the race as a modern epic. The Tour, he argues, is less a sporting event than a ritualistic spectacle, infused with symbolic weight: it fuses natural elements, physical ordeal, and moral allegory into a coherent national myth. The riders are not merely athletes, but Homeric figures, avatars of values such as courage, endurance, and sacrifice, enduring a formidable series of trials. "The Tour's geography," Barthes writes, "is entirely subject to the epic necessity of ordeal. Elements and terrain are personified, for it is against them that man measures himself, and as in every epic it is important that the struggle should match equal measures: man is therefore naturalized; Nature, humanized" (1997, 81).

Barthes' analysis shows that this allusion to the literary form of the epic also functioned to veil the Tour's historical and commercial specificity. The epic, as Bakhtin (1981, 48) observes, differs from the novel in that it creates a distance from the present: it transfers its represented world into a valorized past. In the case of the Tour, the race's narrativization as epic serves to render it absolute and timeless, thereby concealing its origins in media spectacle, commercial interests, and evolving political contexts.

The mythic codes that Barthes identified persist in cycling media today. In a critical literature review, Mark Falcous and Matthew Masucci (2020, 13) build on Barthes' approach to show how cycling journalism, popular histories, and (auto)biographies often continue to "convey cycling as characterized by (male) heroic ordeal, sacrifice, epic landscapes, and glory." While some counter-narratives do foreground structural issues, such as doping or the precarity of professional cycling, Falcous and Masucci conclude that "the contemporary cult of cycling fandom and cycling lifestyles rest on secure myths that frame cycling as virtuous, glamorous and praiseworthy" (13).

4.7 Intermediate Conclusion

In sum, road cycling evolved in close intertwinement with print media that sought to captivate audiences through narrative strategies. Its ludic structures were actively shaped to enhance its narrativity and tellability, while narrative coverage worked to elevate the stakes of the racing beyond the self-contained logic of the game. Race organizers were, in effect, in part storytellers: engaged in the race's mediation, and foregrounding its agents, actions, and events in a meaningful storyworld. Many European races from this era continue to this day, and the

Tour de France remains the most important event on the global cycling calendar, and a model example for stage races and other 'grand tours.'

The media environment of road cycling evolved dramatically over the twentieth century, with the emergence of radio, newsreels, television, and online media. Yet, initially, each new medium continued to reproduce elements of the melodramatic narrative style established by the early press. Radio commentators often acted as homodiegetic narrators, describing the unfolding race directly to listeners from onsite – even if their vantage point was often unreliable and limited to a roadside position or the backseat of a motorbike (Valster 2018). Television coverage began in the 1950s, with edited summaries compiled from 16mm newsreel footage. As Hugh Dauncy (2012, 176) writes, "[t]hese 'news-reports' presented each day's riding as a self-contained and immediately comprehensible narrative involving characters and morals, villains and heroes, landscapes and routes, in ways similar to the traditions of written sports journalism […]." In the early 1960s, live coverage was limited to short segments, producing a two-part structure: waiting for the riders, and the race itself. As Fabien Wille (2003, 168–169) observes, "[t]he prelude to images of the race was often the time for lyrical and poetic evocations appealing to the imagination. The journalist would describe the landscape, as the background for the broadcast and the race, the spectators, who sometimes became involuntary actors in the story that we were being told, and the race that we could not see."

This historical perspective raises the question of whether enhanced perceptual and informational access to the race today has altered its narrativization. After all, over the past decades, technological evolutions have granted spectators increasingly more perceptual and informational access to races, reducing their dependence on narrative mediation by reporters. Major races are now often broadcasted from start to finish, via multiple camera angles, with live telemetry and GPS data available. While this presentation remains strongly mediated and framed, it does offer audiences greater interpretive agency in constructing their own sense of how a race unfolds. Yet, I argue, even in this context of enhanced visual access, narrativity continues to structure how cycling is received and understood. This persistence, I will contend, stems from the narrative affordances that are specific to the sport's ludic structure, and to the historical reception practices in which it is embedded.

5. The Narrative Affordances of Road Cycling

Narrativity in road cycling does not originate from a pre-designed story but *emerges*, in part from the media ecology that surrounds it, but also from cognitive and perceptual affordances of the game. In the following, I outline several ludo-narrative affordances that compel spectators and commentators to construct coherence through narrative interpretation. These are, most notably, the sport's ludic intransparency, its transmedial forms of engagement and forensic fandom,

the *temps mort* and location-based narratives of *mise-en-scène* in its broadcasting, and its affordance for conceptual metaphors.

5.1 Ludic Intransparency

In ludic terms, cycling is a complicated sport. Simply put, unlike in many other endurance sports, the strongest rider does not necessarily win. Team dynamics, rider positioning, tactical decisions, and coalitions are a vital part of bike racing. In a typical professional road race (such as the Tour), approximately 175 riders cooperate in around 25 teams. Riders have specific roles, often aimed at supporting a designated team leader with the best chance of winning or doing well in a classification, or at derailing the tactics of other teams, by attacking or neutralizing attacks. Moreover, since drafting and taking turns on the front provide enormous energy savings, any group of cyclists will need to co-operate to hold off competition. As a result, coalitions between competing teams and riders constantly emerge, and can be broken any moment, whenever interests diverge again.

The resulting ludic dynamics are illustrative of many of the concepts of modern game theory (e.g., Mignot 2015). Bike races involve prisoners' dilemmas (cooperation benefits all riders in a group, as it increases their chance of staying ahead, but defection also provides benefits, by saving energy over the others) and signaling games (bluffing or feigning weakness can increase chances of winning, by getting away with doing less work). The racing combines both zero-sum elements (a stage can only have one winner) with non-zero-sum incentives (overall standings, classifications, or team tactics can lead to coalitions that help both parties) and often rewards a mixed-strategy Nash equilibrium (if an attack is predictable, it is easily countered, so randomizing attacks or attacking on unexpected terrain keeps rivals off-balance). For these reasons, bike racing has been described as a blend of chess and a boxing match: tactically demanding as much as it is physically grueling.

For spectators, however, a central feature of road cycling as a ludic system is its *ludic intransparency*: unlike many sports where actions and objectives are directly visible on a pitch or playing field, road racing often keeps the internal logic of competition hidden. Team strategies are concealed, alliances have to be inferred, and individual intentions remain ambiguous to both spectators and opponents. Individual riders may pretend to be fatigued, could collaborate with rivals, or might be reluctant to perform their duties for the team—all within a fluid race dynamic where outcomes depend on both long-term planning and opportunistic improvisation.

The result is that, even when the race is entirely visible, cycling remains saturated with informational gaps. These ambiguities and indeterminacies, I argue, invite viewers not simply to observe outcomes, but also to interpret intentions. Spectators, I propose, fill these informational gaps with narratives: hypothetical

accounts of who did what, when, where, and for what reasons. In his phenomenological account of literary reading, Wolfgang Iser (1972) argued that the gaps in a text – that which a story does *not* represent, or what it leaves indeterminate – shape the activity and pleasures of the reader. A text offers only a schematic presentation of events, which a reader must imaginatively supplement and concretize. Here, Iser suggests, "the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (284–285). While a bike race is not a narrative text per se, its ludic gaps function similarly: they prompt spectators to construct provisional narratives to render the unfolding action coherent and meaningful.

Let us take an example. During Stage 11 of the 2012 *Tour de France*, designated helper Chris Froome appeared to drop his team leader, Bradley Wiggins (wearing the yellow jersey and set to win the Tour) with a sharp acceleration on a mountain finish. The moment prompted extensive speculation: was Froome disobeying team orders, either to elevate his status in the team, to aggravate Wiggins, or to fight for his own position in the general classification? Or was he truly unaware of the struggling Wiggins behind him? The moment became a flashpoint for narrative reconstruction (was Froome loyal or mutinous, strategic or emotional?) that colored the perception of the remainder of the race, and that both riders are asked about to this day (Major 2025). Narrative, here, offers not causal certainty, but interpretive coherence: it allows the unfolding chaos of the race to be understood in human terms.

Fan engagement with cycling, I propose, is largely determined by this activity of filling in the gaps to establish narrative coherence and connections between the (in)visible ludic events. This gap-filling is not limited to the present moment: like the activities of Iser's reader, it involves both anticipatory inferences, imagining potential motives and strategies before they unfold, and retroactive reinterpretations, re-evaluating earlier moments in light of new developments. The meaning of actions may change in light of new outcomes, and a tactical decision that seemed passive at first may later be recast as crucial or cunning. In this way, the act of watching a race is narratively recursive: each stage, move, comeback, or collapse is embedded in the broader interpretive arc that fans and commentators continually (re-)establish. Cycling fans thus act like 'readers' and 'storytellers' at the same time: they constantly adjust their interpretive frame to connect what they saw, what they expect, and what may later become meaningful, and adjust the narrative accordingly.

Narrative is particularly helpful as an interpretive tool because it deals not merely in the (re-)construction of events, but also in making sense of intentions. As Jerome Bruner (1991) argued, a defining feature of narrative is its capacity to represent and reconstruct the internal states of agents – their desires, beliefs, intentions and decisions – even when these are only loosely connected to observable outcomes. "The loose link between intentional states and subsequent action," Bruner writes, "is the reason why narrative accounts cannot provide causal explanations. What they supply instead is the basis for interpreting why a character acted as he or she did" (7). In the context of cycling, this function is

vital: spectators cannot access the riders' minds or read tactics from the playing field only, but through narrative, they construct plausible reasons for why a rider attacked, held back, or broke team protocol.

For this reason, I suggest, post-race commentary, rider interviews, and even speculative fan discussions have become central in contemporary cycling media: they supply fragments of intention and causality that can be woven into a broader narrative arc, resolving, or at least organizing, the ambiguity of action. The resulting narratives can therefore be seen as *emergent*: they are not designed, or intrinsic to the race, but follow from the combination of the ludic action, the media ecology around it, and the interpretive activities of those watching.

5.2 Transmedia Engagement and Forensic Fandom

Today's media ecology of transmedial race broadcasting and online platforms reinforces this narrativization. As race coverage extends across live television, commentators, social media, team communications, data dashboards, post-race interviews, and fan platforms, the act of watching cycling has become increasingly interpretive and investigative. Sal Hagen and Markus Stauff (2021) draw on Jason Mittell's (2015, 267) concept of "forensic fandom" to argue that modern cycling spectators behave much like the viewers of complex television dramas described by Mittell: they piece together fragments of information from multiple media channels, trace motives, decode gestures, and hypothesize about hidden strategies. Much like with detective fiction or serialized drama, the pleasure lies in retroactively making sense of what initially appears opaque, and in debating the plausibility of competing narrative explanations. The ambiguities and intransparencies of racing thus become a source not of frustration, but of narrative pleasure: fans collaboratively fill in missing pieces of the storyworld, or sift through transmedial sources (TV, social media, podcasts, rider data) to fill in the gaps and assemble a coherent race story.

This forensic mode of fandom may also be intensified by cycling's dark past. Doping, race-fixing, and covert negotiations have all, at various points, been commonplace within professional cycling. Historically, for instance, it was not unusual for riders in a breakaway to strike a deal about who would win, and for what price, sometimes involving hidden, mid-race negotiations for cash payments. The sport has also been marked by periodic scandals involving fallen heroes caught doping, or sudden, improbable rises to success that raised eyebrows. Such a history has made fans acutely aware that the spectacle on screen may only partially reflect the true dynamics of competition. This awareness fuels what we may call, in analogy to Rita Felski's (2015, 2–3) notion, a "hermeneutics of suspicion" for sports spectatorship: a mode of engagement by which seasoned fans pride themselves on not being duped by surface narratives. In this view, race narratives need not be simply followed, but are also critically scrutinized, or read 'against the grain,' to uncover hidden motives, interpersonal tensions, or

breaches of sporting ethics. At the same time, some fans and commentators have come to embrace the sport's murky past and strategic intransparency not in spite of, but *as part of*, its dramatic appeal – recasting moral ambiguity and contested truths as elements of its narrative richness (see, for instance, Chevrolet 2011).

5.3 A Time and a Place for Storytelling: *temps mort* and *mise-en-scène*

Another affordance for cycling's narrativization lies in the sport's temporal texture – more specifically, in its abundance of *temps mort*. I borrow this term from film studies, where it is used to refer to moments where the forward momentum of the narrative stalls, allowing space for reflection, atmosphere, or background detail. In cycling, especially in multi-hour broadcasts, long stretches of a race are characterized by a lack of decisive action: breakaways stabilize, the peloton rides at a controlling tempo, and teams calculate rather than act. Nonetheless, these lulls in competition, too, can be fertile ground for narrative elaboration, particularly on behalf of commentators. Deprived of immediate plot developments, their role is typically to fill this 'dead time' with storytelling. Recalling past editions of the race, sketching rider biographies, speculating about team strategies, hypothesizing possible scenarios, providing facts about the surrounding landscape, or references to cycling's broader mythology fill up these stretches of the broadcast. Narration here serves to transform uneventful sequences into sections for the detailing of backstory, the specification of expectations, or retrospection on earlier racing. Hereby, moments of *temps mort* are made an integral affordance for cycling's narrative construction, rather than an interruption of it.

A related affordance lies in road cycling's spatial setting, or what we may call, in a similar analogy to film studies, its *mise-en-scène*. Unlike in sports confined to a static arena or playing fields, road cycling unfolds across real, open geographies. Locations are not just a logistical necessity (something to traverse) or a ludic component (a hill to attack on), but also narrative anchors. Narration about the surrounding landscape, towns, or landmarks is an integral convention of the race reporting.

There is an important commercial component to this spatial emphasis: in most races, local and national governing bodies are key stakeholders. They provide the financial means as well as the necessary support and permissions to close roads that make racing possible. In return, they often expect visibility or branding for their region through media exposure. Former Tour-director Jean-Marie Leblanc describes how the race's media producer "aims to show not only the Tour de France but also the tour of France as a country. In other words, he includes the landscapes and elements which I might call social, sociological and human rather than simply showing a breakaway, a race leader or the peloton – he widens his field of vision to things that he has seen and researched around the route" (qtd. in Marchetti 2003, 68–69). Weeks in advance, a detailed plan is made of what local sites to show, and how to present these to the viewer. Dutch

and Belgian national broadcasting organizations, moreover, create travelling talk shows (*De Avondetappe*; *Vive le Vélo*), discussing the race from daily changing, touristic locations along the route. In this sense, Leblanc notes, "television 'magnifies' the Tour. TV places the race within a decor that is varied, changing, attractive and emotive" (qtd. in Marchetti 2003, 69).

For race organizers, location-based narratives also play a key role in establishing the identity of their event. Since race routes change frequently, sometimes yearly, what provides them with a sense of year-to-year continuity are recurring locations along the routes: landmark roads, climbs, or towns, and the stories connected to these. In Belgium's most popular race, for instance, the *Ronde van Vlaanderen*, climbs such as the Koppenberg or the Muur van Geraardsbergen are more than just strategic obstacles: they are also narrative anchors, imbued with meaning through repeated appearances, media framing, and accumulated historical significance. Documentaries, commentary, and cycling literature continually revisit these sites, recounting memorable stories or decisive moments from earlier editions. Narrative thus becomes a means of connecting past and present. As Bruner (1991, 18) notes, to construct shared realities, narratives "accrue, and, as anthropologists insist, the accruals eventually create something variously called a 'culture' or a 'history' or, more loosely, a 'tradition.'" Cycling fans seem particularly attuned to this narrative continuity and accrual. When the Muur van Geraardsbergen (a cobbled hill at the heart of the town of Geraardsbergen) was removed from the *Ronde van Vlaanderen* by a new race organizer in 2012, fans staged protests against what they saw as a loss of tradition and local heritage (Lion 2011). The climb was reincorporated into the race in 2017, after sustained public pressure, and lobbying by the town of Geraardsbergen.

5.4 Conceptual Metaphors

Lastly, cycling's narrativization is shaped by its affordances for metaphors, which enable its concrete, physical dimensions to be imbued with abstract, storified meanings. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff / Johnson 2003) posits that metaphors are not merely a rhetorical device, but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition. Through metaphor, we understand the abstract, novel, or unfamiliar by reference to the concrete and embodied. This process often relies on image schemas – recurring patterns of bodily interaction with the world such as CONTAINMENT, BALANCE, or the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema. The latter SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, for instance, is derived from our experience with movement through space (moving from A to B) and underlies expressions like "she's on the road to recovery" or "she has reached her career goals," where progress or purpose is conceptualized as a journey. In such mappings, physical experience provides the cognitive scaffolding through which time, agency, and purpose acquire narrative form.

As Charles Forceville and Marloes Jeulink (2011) and Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss (2020, 183–184) point out, the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema seems to be the underlying meaning-generating pattern of many forms of narrative, especially those that take the form of journeys or quests. Moreover, as Mark Johnson (1987) argues, the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema often co-occurs with physical force schemas that shape our understanding of action and resistance. These forces include the traveling entity being driven or pushed forward (compulsion), being hindered by an obstacle (blockage), encountering a power that pushes back (counterforce), needing to take a detour to progress (diversion), being helped through the removal of an obstacle (removal), benefitting from internal or external agency that helps them forward (enablement), or being drawn to the goal (attraction) (Johnson 1987, 45–48). As Mark Turner (1996, 27) argues, mappings like these function as "cognitive parables": small, patterned, spatial and embodied stories that help to structure our everyday reasoning and make abstract concepts intelligible.

In cycling, road races present analogous structures to these familiar embodied and narrative patterns. The SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema does not merely mirror the literal trajectory of a race, from start to destination, but also provides the basis for a rich field of metaphorical projections. After all, in cycling, embodied force dynamics play out concretely in the ludic and physical realities of road racing. A rider drafting in a teammate's slipstream to move into position experiences 'enablement,' while a climb that slows down the peloton provides 'counterforce.' A crash, mechanical failure, or obstructing opponents may represent 'blockage' or 'diversion,' whereas a rider's determination to reach the finish is often conceptualized as 'attraction.' And a domestique sacrificing their own chances to lead out a teammate enacts 'removal,' clearing the path for another's success. These literal race dynamics readily invite narrative schemas: "overcoming the mountain," "clearing the path" for a teammate, or "making one's way back" after a setback, are not merely physical descriptions – they are narrative building blocks that map bodily movement onto culturally resonant stories of human endeavor.

From a cognitive-narratological perspective, conceptual metaphors thus mediate between embodied cognition and narrativization, allowing physical struggle and endurance to be processed as narratively coherent events about characters and their goals, experiences, actions, and obstacles. The uphill struggle becomes a metaphor for adversity, the solo breakaway a symbol of defiance or hope, and the finish line a teleological end point. In his 1957 essay discussed above, Barthes (1997) already observed how commentators, journalists, and fans frequently interpret race action in terms of struggle, agency, character, and moralized actions. Similarly, cycling writer Herman Chevrolet (2011, 47) has suggested that race scenarios can be mapped onto Georges Polti's *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* (1921), underscoring how cycling events often resemble established narrative patterns of conflict, betrayal, rescue, sacrifice, or vengeance. In this way, cycling's embodied metaphors trigger narrative schematization: by mapping sensorimotor experience onto culturally available story templates, they prompt the construc-

tion of plots, protagonists, and teleological arcs that capture one or several riders' experiential trajectories, and make these vessels for meaning.

6. Conclusion

While games are often described as self-contained systems, road cycling illustrates how a ludic structure can also function as an engine for symbolic and narrative meaning. The narrativity that surrounds cycling is not 'told' in the traditional sense (predetermined, controlled, organized), but emerges out of the sport's ludic structure, the media ecology that frames it, and the narrativizing activities of spectators and commentators. This emergent narrativity challenges conventional distinctions between narrative production and reception, by showing how storytelling can arise spontaneously from the interplay of rule-bound systems, their mediation, and our interpretive cognition.

This article has examined the ways in which road cycling forms a site of narrative construction, shaped by cultural practices, cognitive patterns, and media environments. From its early entanglement with print journalism – where serialized race reports turned athletic competitions into episodic dramas – to its contemporary transmedial ecology, cycling's visibility, appeal, and commercial viability have been tightly coupled with its affordances for narrative. Its temporal structure has been used to generate suspense, curiosity, and surprise; its spatial dimension to foster memory and myths; and its agentive ambiguity has invited interpretive engagement on actions, intentions, character, and causality. Historically, these ludic and narrative dimensions have not only coexisted, but coevolved. Road cycling exemplifies how games can give rise to stories, and how stories, in turn, shape play. The result is a ludonarrative hybrid in which athletic performance and storied interpretation unfold simultaneously.

Concepts from cognitive narratology and conceptual metaphor theory help illuminate how road races activate deep-seated schematic structures, such as the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema (the race as a journey with obstacles), or narrative templates (riders as heroic figures), by which spectators map physical movement and ludic action onto human domains of intention and experience. Narrative, in this sense, is not only a way to make sense of the emergent, unscripted and often opaque events of a bike race, but may also allow the race to become readable as a quest, an embodied-cognitive parable, or even a moral tale.

Yet cycling's narrative dynamics are not universal; they also emerge from specific cultural and institutional histories, and are historically and ideologically situated. From its inception in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth-century, road cycling emerged in close entanglement with the commercial and narrative imperatives of the new mass media – first in printed newspapers competing for readership, later through radio, television, and transmedial platforms. Major races such as the *Tour de France* and the *Ronde van Vlaanderen* continue to offer not just athletic competition, but media spectacles deliberately shaped to

generate suspenseful, affectively resonant, and locally embedded stories. These races' embedding in national, regional, and even capitalist ideologies mean that their narrative tropes were never neutral: they also constructed heroic masculinities, moral parables, national pride, or broader symbolic geographies. The practices analyzed here are thus not only cognitive, but also historically and commercially produced, reflecting the sport's development in a specific Western European context where media, commerce, and cultural identity have long coalesced around the act of narrating the race.

Seen in this light, road cycling exemplifies how sports can serve as generative for narrative meaning. Its evolving media ecologies reveal that narrativity is not merely a property of texts, but a cultural practice of sense-making, one that also binds participants, spectators, and institutions. Understanding sport as a form of ludonarrative performance extends narratology beyond fiction, toward the lived and mediated processes through which societies produce stories about actions, values, and collective identities.

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