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Watching Sport During Covid-19

At the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic, sport along with most other leisure and entertainment industries, shut down. The initial response of some sports was to fill the gaps in the schedules and appease the desire of their fans by bringing in virtual forms of their sport. There are several examples of this, from Formula 1 which pitted F1 drivers against what might be called 'gamers' in simulated races (Formula1.com, 2020); the virtual Grand National horse race (Keogh, 2020); Skoda and Zwift virtual cycling races (e.g. British Cycling, 2020a, and WomensTour.co.uk, 2020), to elite tennis players playing tennis simulation games (Jurejko, 2020) and elite footballers playing football simulation games against each other (Lynch, 2020). Some of these initiatives were arguably more gimmicks than genuine sporting experiences, for example, the virtual Grand National involved no real humans or horses at all, it was just an AI generated race with simulated avatars; whilst the tennis and football events required very different skills to those required to hit a tennis ball or kick a football in real life. The cycling and F1 events however, were more representative of the skills required for the real thing – cyclists wired up their bikes to the internet to take account of actual pedal power, whilst the F1 drivers sat in replica cars which required the same motor control as the real thing (albeit without the g-force). However, this change was a temporary way to fill the sporting void. As real sport started to return, but without live spectators, there were other attempts to bridge the gap left by the empty arenas and stadiums. The most used was simulated crowd sound broadcast alongside visual footage of live games (Alexander, 2020). Other initiatives were to attach printed photographs or cardboard cut-outs of real fans to stadium seating in recognition of the importance of fan allegiance and identity (Waters, 2020). Yet, despite fans slowly returning to stadiums – socially distanced or via vaccine passports or covid-19 tests - companies recognized that the effects of the pandemic are likely to remain, and are utilizing new technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality, to provide an enhanced experience for the stay-at-home spectator and to allow fans to interact with their players and teams in novel ways (Dixon, 2020).

A consideration of the place that virtual sport might have in the life of sports spectators, during the covid-19 pandemic and beyond, will serve to shed light on the cultural importance of sport and the ways in which it is viewed and followed. That elite sport was recognized as important enough to be given special consideration by national Governments to ensure that competitions and leagues continued even without fans in the stadiums is evidence of this. In the UK, for example, Premiership football was one of the first sports to resume despite the rest of the country being in lockdown, and other 'non-essential' businesses remaining closed, a pattern that continued throughout subsequent lockdowns. That such an emphasis was placed by politicians and the public on ensuring the

consumption of elite sport for the televised spectator at least, demonstrates its value to contemporary society.

Prior to covid-19, the live sports experience was one of spectators being in close physical and emotional contact with one another, celebrating and commiserating, enthralled and entranced, or disappointed and disillusioned depending on the event they were part of. The tactile nature of a sports fan who, in the stadium, pub or sports bar, hugs and kisses those around them in celebration or puts an arm around a shoulder in commiseration, may not return for some time. The phenomenological experience even for the television spectator has drastically changed, as demonstrated by the sensation of watching empty stadiums devoid of sound apart from echoey calls from the players and management on the side-lines. As such, lockdown and social distancing removes some of the fundamental preconditions of human existence in terms of human contact and intersubjectivity of which attendance at live sport events are a prime example.

The question then is what can the covid-19 pandemic show us about the experience of the sports spectator now and in the future? As demonstrated by the huge rise of esports over the past decade, it may be the case that covid-19 has hastened, through its employment of new technology, the direction of travel to a more virtual medium of sports spectating.[1] The examples of virtual sports provided at the outset are illustrative of the fundamental differences between watching live sport played by real humans, albeit on a television screen, and a virtual simulation of sporting contests. The question of 'reality' and its associated phenomenological experience is pertinent here if lockdown exacerbates a change in the very nature of spectatorship, where the 'reality' of the play being watched becomes marginal. This then highlights two aspects for consideration; the intersubjective experience of being a member of a sports crowd and the more attenuated intersubjectivity of watching a real, embodied player in contrast to a simulated or virtual version of a sports event such as those illustrated above. In particular, a consideration of the gap that exists between 'real' sport and its imitation in virtual simulations serves to highlight the diverse values and needs that sport satisfies for spectators. Furthermore, it raises the question as to the degree to which virtual representations can satisfy these needs; do we need 'real' sport at all?

To consider these questions, a broader question about the 'ideal' of sport needs to be answered. As Roberts (1975: 95) notes, pleasure is gained from watching sport when our ideals match the reality: "the pleasure aroused will be proportionate to the degree in which the particular impression embodies the form of the evoked apperceived ideal and is thereby an exemplar of its class." If the experience of watching virtual sport is a poor manifestation of the ideal, then it is unlikely to be attractive viewing. Roberts' ideal presupposes the intersubjective embodiment of real/live sport whereas virtual sport removes that precondition. The question is not just whether virtual sport can offer a reasonable imitation of the old ideal, but also whether it offers an alternative ideal

that is expressive of the spectator constituted through covid-19 and lockdown? Can the spectator in lockdown, watching virtual or real sport, alone in her home, experience an 'ideal' that is as valid and fulfilling as that outlined by Roberts?

The ideal qualities of sport that Roberts invokes may include qualities of the particular competition, game or match and/or the performance of the individual athletes: excellence of skill, creativity, drama, anticipation of victory, or some exceptional athletic achievement (such as a record being broken). Equally, we might want to consider features that are antithetical to good sport: poor skill, mundanity, cheating, death and injury, lack of attainment. In reflecting on the intrinsic values of sport, Kupfer (1979: 359) characterizes a well-played game as entailing "see-saw scoring, the delicate balance between offenses and defenses, the entire rhythm of the game fulfilled in the ending which is, in addition to a terminus, a climax". Similarly, Kreft (2012) has noted that a fundamental aesthetic category for sport is its capacity for dramatic spectacle. The drama of the competition is fundamental to our pleasure as spectators, more so when the stakes are high. It is important to note that a spectator does not simply watch a game, passively absorbing the action. They also attend to and participate in analysis and criticism (both during and after it). The spectator's understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of a particular game will be shaped by their knowledge, not simply of the rules of the sport, but also of its history, and the history of the athlete, team, or club they are watching. More broadly, a given match is likely to be part of a wider, interrelated, series of sporting events. Thus, a game may be significant as part of a league or cup competition; the game will add, in a small or occasionally major way, to the history of a club or the biography of a player. The drama is thus not simply that of a particular game, but potentially of a season or even the history of a club, and much of the pleasure of sport lies in interpreting and contesting those dramas. In addition, the judgements of fans (not least as to how near a particular game approaches to an ideal) will depend upon debates with their peers, as well as upon journalism, television and radio commentaries, and social media comments. This may be why it is much harder, at least in the early days of virtual sport, for spectators to be fully invested in these forms: there simply is less history and past narrative to make sense of current competitive events. Here is a reflection of the very experience of the covid-19 pandemic, whereby societies were seemingly sundered from their histories and traditions, and life was reset. Virtual sport, as a new beginning, might be strangely suitable in a period of such cultural disruption.

From this then, we offer the following outline of a phenomenology of spectatorship:

(1) *modern* sport presupposes the existence of live matches with a live crowd of spectators – initially the only consumption of sport beyond this live spectatorship would be through newspaper reports and then radio commentaries (and possibly highlights in cinema newsreels)

(2) *post-modern* spectatorship develops as the television experience of sport acquires primacy over the live experience; the television viewer is possibility isolated in their own home,

although they may watch at social venues such as pubs; mass media develops to provide critical commentary and analysis (as opposed to mere description), culminating in watchers/listeners' contributions to radio/television phone ins, and then to social media – this post-modern spectator has an experience that is parasitic on live sport, but distanced from it, and increasingly mediated by mass and social media commentary and discussion

(3) *post-human* spectatorship is separated from other spectators, except through social media (including gaming platforms), but also from the physical actions of the players – players' skills are mediated by the virtual representations that they manipulate (so, for example, the controller of a virtual football team may lack the skills that their avatar players perform, although they have other, quasi-athletic skills, that allow them to manipulate the avatars quickly and effectively). The logical culmination of this is where the human element is replaced by AI generating the sporting action (as in a virtual Grand National). The spectator is at once losing an appreciation of live and embodied (modern) sport, but acquiring new forms of appreciation of the virtual manifestation of skill and realization of the drama of the sporting agon.

It may be noted that these changes are driven, in large part, by the adoption of new technologies. The covid-19 pandemic has accelerated, at least for a time, the adoption of certain (virtual) technologies, and as such acts as a social experiment, offering a glimpse of a possible future (of post-human spectatorship), but also thereby an opportunity to assess how satisfying such a future might be.

Mimesis and televised sport

The lockdowns caused by covid-19 not only confined the sports spectator to home, and deprived her of any live/real sport to watch. As noted, some sports attempted to overcome this by facilitating virtual simulations of their sport, to different effect. Whilst the virtual grand national may have been useful in providing the bookmakers with an opportunity for spectators to gamble, the other examples are unlikely to continue, especially when real live sport is available. The dissatisfaction a spectator may experience before a virtual simulation of sport, in contrast to the authenticity (suggested by Roberts' ideal and Kupfer's notion of the dramatic) that is attached to real sport, may not be solely due to the limitations of computer graphics and programming but something deeper, phenomenologically and ontologically, related to the 'thing in itself'. The Zwift cycling events, for example, were not merely a poor simulation with awkward graphics and unrealistic biomechanics, but simply by being a simulation turned the sport into a pale imitation of itself. That is not to say that some form of virtual cycling will not continue to exist and become popular, but rather it loses some of the features that make it our apperceived ideal. An imitation will have what Danto (1981) terms a certain style. This will entail that the imitation selects, according to a subtle but specific code, from all

the real qualities that it may possibility reproduce. Further, the style will serve to highlight certain ways of perceiving. The imitation thus draws our attention, in a certain way, to the object represented. Yet, one does not look upon an imitation with an innocent eye. The gaze is cultivated with certain expectations as to how the world appears. Thus, what is alarmingly realistic to one generation (and Danto (1981) here offers the example of Giotto's paintings as seen by his contemporaries) will appear stylized and mannered to another. This is particularly evident in video games, as the subtlety and complexity of graphics has improved rapidly over a short period. In the early 1970s, Pong was a reasonable imitation of a game of table tennis.

The mimetic success of a virtual simulation thus may be understood to rest, not simply upon how well it reproduces reality, but rather more upon how well it meets the expectations of its viewers. With respect to the post-modern spectator, the focus is placed, initially, upon television spectatorship, and the television viewer is already watching an imitation of a live game. The television cameras will show only a certain part of the pitch or arena at any given moment. Viewpoints will shift, as a director moves between cameras, facilitating changes of perspective that would be impossible for an embodied spectator in the stands. In their analysis of the types and sources of spectating pleasure in televised sports, Duncan and Brummett (1989: 199) note that the televised experience unifies camera shots of plays, replays, spectators, and commentators into an extended visual pleasure of *The Game*: "they are an intensely exciting spectacle unified by the spectator who knows how to connect those glances into a gaze". Television typically also adds a commentary that serves to direct the spectator's understanding and perception of the game but played over the background noise of a live audience or stadium full of spectators. Sports video games, such as FIFA and Madden, have become increasingly able to imitate this television experience and highlights the irony behind the computer games company, EA Sports providing the crowd effects for live sport in empty stadiums during covid-19. That is to say that the expectations of post-humanist spectator are still those of the post-modern television viewer. The style of the video sport is that of television. The difference between being a spectator at a live event and watching on television becomes more acute with the increased use of performance analysis technology that provides statistical information on possession, tackles, historical records, etc. which is embedded into the television viewing experience. In this sense, the phenomenology of the television viewer is more similar to that of the spectator of virtual sport, than the spectator in the crowd at a live event.

In terms of the typology outlined above, the covid-19 pandemic does not merely begin to exacerbate a movement from type (2) to type (3). Rather it highlights certain qualities of the post-modern spectator's experience that are valued (as enhancing the ideal). Beyond the televisual experience, the media event is valued in terms of the possibility to analyze and comment upon sport. Thus, virtual sports enhance the environment for discussion and offer a greater accessibility of the fan to their stars than traditional versions since live streaming, via platforms such as Twitch and

YouTube, allows for a direct and real-time communication channel between the player and spectator, and between spectators (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Despite apparent realism in virtual sport, this does not make it sport as the post-modern values it. A virtual simulation may be understood as an imitation of a live game. The potential for such simulations to meet the needs of sports spectators, and thus to approach their ideal of sport, lies in the capacity of computers and AI to generate sufficiently convincing or appealing imitations that make sense to the viewer. This perhaps highlights some of the fundamental differences between virtual simulations of sports and esports. The virtual examples cited at the outset were deliberate attempts to replicate traditional sports in virtual form and whilst there were clear differences in the appearances of realism they gave, it was still clear to the viewer what they were supposed to depict. In contrast, many of those familiar with traditional sports will find watching many esports games, such as League of Legends, a confusing and meaningless experience, not simply because it involves unfamiliar rules, but because it utilizes a completely different medium.

As we have noted, reality, and not just appearance of reality, is important in sport. The exertions of real, individuated, athletes matter, even if they are only viewed through a television screen, and spectators are as interested in the human stories behind the performance as the performance itself. Only the ultimate purist is interested in the sporting skill alone, whilst it is the emotional attachment to the stories that lie behind individual players, clubs and competitions that provides sporting meaning and value (Tarver, 2017; Hirt et al. 1992). Being a sports fan is to share sporting histories and narratives and to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of teams and athletes (Dionisio, 2008). And whilst there are fan bases attached to esports teams, a fan of the Philadelphia Eagles or AC Milan is not likely to extend their emotional investment onto video game avatars that imitate their teams. Whilst virtual teams could be (and are) sponsored by real teams, and an unfinished real season could be concluded virtually (although this last possibility does intuitively appear to violate the ideal of sport, not least by shifting the outcome of a competition, arbitrarily, from one form of game to another), it is doubtful that a sports fan would attach the same emotion to something that they know is not real. This suggests that a football video game can only fulfill the needs of a spectator deprived of live sport if it is considered to be something other than football – i.e., it is seen as an esport that may happen to resemble ‘real’ sport, but ultimately is played by different people, has different ludic goals and challenges, and thus builds its own history.

The ideal of sport entails an experience of human agon. Sport, by definition, must be a contest involving human players, unlike the AI Grand National which was the outcome of (feasibly) a single human program. It is this agon which provides meaningful sporting experience. Watching a video game of soccer, American football, or indeed rowing, differs from the experience of a real game because it diminishes this possibility. One player will generally control an entire team so in the case

of virtual rowing simulations (for example), the harmonious coordination of eight people striving together that we find beautiful is achieved by AI, and not by individual humans exerting skills, and combining them in a team effort. Similarly, the ability of a cyclist to race down a hill against a camber on a rough road, without falling, is dispensable, even if they have wired their bike up to compete against others. The virtual rowing eight thus brings us back to the problem of the AI Grand National. It is a marvel of computing, not sport.

Live Sport

Lockdowns and social distancing have, crucially, prevented crowds from gathering to watch live sport. Purists and partisans alike may argue that the richest experience of watching sport takes place by being in the sports ground itself; by feeling the mass of bodies drawing breath and exhaling together, cheering and jeering at scores and misses, the stands juddering and benches shaking as the mass of spectators restlessly anticipate the starting whistle. The collective emotion experienced by being with others at a live event that draws upon all the senses and without external distractions is vastly different to the anemic experience of watching sport alone at home, to which the pandemic condemned us. As Mumford (2011) notes, emotions are felt more intensely when with a group than alone,

> "The level of excitement seems to grow as the size of the crowd grows. A thought experiment would seem to confirm this… One may see a very excited crowd supporting a team to victory in front of, let us say, 60,000 spectators. One sees how excited each spectator is as the ball nears the opposition goal. They scream as the ball is shot, they kick out in their seats, vicariously trying to prod the ball home, and their ultimate ecstasy is the goal itself… Now imagine that one such spectator was watching that very same game, from the same seat, but almost alone in the stadium… Would that same person jump in their seat with the same excitement? Would they go quite so crazy when the goal is scored?.. It seems, therefore, that at least a part of the cause of the emotion, and certainly a determinant of its intensity, is the surrounding crowd, of which one is a part." (Mumford, 2011: 102)

Covid-19 turned Mumford's thought experiment into an actual experience. This confirmed Mumford's intuition that it is only through the live – real – experience of sport that we can feel authentic emotions. However, Mumford goes on to suggest that watching live sport on television can induce the same collective emotion if we believe we are still part of a joint activity. This, he argues, explains the paradox of why our emotional experience of sport can never be the same when we are watching a recording even if we are unaware of the result. It also indicates why so much resource was invested in producing realistic crowd sounds for the television spectator whilst watching matches in empty stadiums during the covid-19 pandemic.

Moving from a post-modern phenomenology of sport spectatorship to a post-human phenomenology of sport spectatorship is to illuminate the technologies that change our experience from spectator of real sport, to that of virtual sport. In the near future, developments in virtual reality may be able to replicate some of the experience of being live at a sports event, including exclusive VIP experiences that might seem to enhance the value and authenticity of the experience. Virtual reality for the sporting spectator could mean a seat on the front row, or the team's bench, or even as an official or player themselves. The sporting spectator could watch the game through the eyes of someone else with a particular vantage point: sports could be watched from any perspective imaginable. Moreover, the virtual sport spectator will be able to experience an enhanced version of the post-modern televised spectacle by being able to have the best of both worlds: being in the action, as if a spectator at the game itself, but also with the provision of additional technology, such as in-time analysis, replays and overlays that is an existing benefit to the television spectator (Morse, 1983).

While during a pandemic, spectators might miss live events, in future, the possibilities of virtual sport suggest that becoming a viable substitute for the real thing may not be as far-fetched as may initially suppose. This is to suggest that, just as technology drove the move from modern to post-modern spectator, so VR technology can drive a move from post-modern to post-human spectator – and that responses to the covid-19 pandemic have anticipated that move. The pandemic may be a glance at a future, when live sport could be marginalized, or exist at best as a precondition of television coverage. When we ask ourselves, what do we want as spectators of sport, we come back to those sporting ideals, and crucially to the difference between, and possible incommensurability of, post-modern and post-humanist ideals. The authenticity of live performance, that grounds the post-modern ideal, and which includes beauty, athletic excellence, originality, drama in the richness of experience, may be transformed, replicated and enhanced (if not now, but soon) in virtual mediums. But equally, the loss of the real may be experienced as a profound impoverishment of experience.

Conclusion

The covid-19 pandemic has suspended social practices that we have long taken for granted. It has proved itself to be something of a testing ground, in which we at once explore substitutes for those practices, and come to recognize what we – the post-modern spectator – for so long have really valued. Thus, we have explored, against the demands of the pandemic, certain ways in which virtual sports and AI might approach and diverge from a post-modern ideal of sport, and thus succeed or fail to satisfy the needs of a sports spectator when live sport is unavailable to them. The pandemic may thus have given us a glimpse of a future in which live sport is, at least in part, displaced by increasingly sophisticated forms of video gaming.

Yet, this future is far from perfect. We have suggested a number of ways in which, despite its sophistication, a virtual simulation remains an imperfect substitute for 'real' sport. The loss of the live

performance, even if only experienced through television, appears to reduce the authenticity of the sporting experience. Thus, as a mimetic representation of sport, a virtual simulation will, we have argued, of necessity select from and highlight qualities of the real game. It largely strives to meet (and exceed) the expectations of a post-modern television viewer as to how the game should appear. But, crucially, while neither television nor the video game can successfully reproduce the richness of experience of a spectator's presence at a live game, we have suggested that television sport has, perhaps without our fully realizing it, become the dominant form of sport spectatorship. Yet, even here, the unique experience of the crowd of spectators, retains its appeal. Under a pandemic we begin to appreciate what we are missing. While one can, conceivably, share the experience of collectively watching the same event at the same time in a virtual simulation or on television, the physical experience of the stadium is inevitably abstracted out of the imitation. An intuition of the impoverishment of this post-human experience is perhaps expressed most vividly in the resistance to the inclusion of esports as Olympic events.

The process of mimetic selection may further entail that, while the sports simulation poses ludic challenges to the player, those challenges differ fundamentally from those posed by the real thing. We noted the examples of tennis and football, where the video game player does not need the coordination to hit a tennis ball or kick and head a football – albeit that they will need coordination and fast reflexes to meet the demands that the game does place upon them. Thus, a football video game imitates a televised game, and may offer something of the same experience to the spectator, but does so through very different means. Single players, rather than teams of individuals, contest against each other, and as noted, exercise different skills to those of a 'real' footballer. Such games may still offer something of the sporting ideal in their own terms, in that the players will exhibit skill and even creativity, in the course of their contest with other humans, and may themselves become the focus of a following (so that their biographies take on as important a place in the appreciation of the sport as do the biographies of tennis players and footballers, and the histories of clubs). Nonetheless, the co-ordination of a team, represented in a video game, is achieved largely through AI (and not through a group of individuals striving to weld themselves into a functioning and effective whole) then we are perhaps back at the position of the AI Grand National, where something genuinely and importantly human is missing.

Ultimately, the fact that virtual simulations serve to distance the body of the player from the avatar bodies reproduced on screen may be the most fundamental divergence of the simulation from the sporting ideal. The simulated game player can neither coordinate their skills, harmonious and beautifully, to those of team mates, as in the rowing eight, nor experience the physical vulnerability of the flesh and blood athlete. The virtual game player, however skilled and creative they may be, and even if they are capable succumbing to the temptation to cheat, cannot suffer the same physical failings of the footballer, tennis player, or even rower. Perhaps it is in the demand to empathize with

the athlete, in their vulnerability, that emerged as part of the ideal of sport, that one sees the mimetic limitation of virtual simulations. That there was such a desire to ensure elite sport, in all its fallible and vulnerable humanity, was allowed to resume and continue despite the continued closure of other businesses, demonstrates the financial and cultural value placed upon it, and one that, at the moment at least, is not able to be fulfilled by virtual imitations.

The covid-19 pandemic has thus served as an experiment, offering a taste of a possible post-human future, where virtual representations of sport replace live sport. While the post-human experience may enhance limited aspects of spectatorship, as well as reproducing the drama of Roberts' ideal, ultimately the absence of the live body of the vulnerable athlete undermines the authenticity of the sporting experience. The post-human ideal, however slick and technically complex it might be – however rich in analysis, information, and choice of viewing perspectives – falls short of the sporting ideal. The covid-19 pandemic has, we suggest, shown us a post-human future that we (unreconstructed post-moderns that we might be) would not want to inhabit.

NOTES

1. It is important to differentiate between esports and virtual sports. Esports are a particular category of virtual sports, many of which bear no resemblance to traditional sports. Whilst some esports, such as FIFA or Madden replicate association football and American football, others such as League of Legends, DOTA, Counter-strike and Overwatch can be classed as competitive video games. In this paper, the term 'virtual sport' will be used to designate traditional sports virtually simulated, whilst 'esports' will be used to designate those competitive games that exist solely in the virtual world. The term 'video game' will be used to designate an electronic game that requires a user interface such as a joypad.

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