



Cyberspace seanchas

GAA sports fans' tweets as oral storytelling,
a case study

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ABSTRACT

Taking the activity of Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) fans across the Twitter microblogging platform as a case study, this article examines GAA fans' collaborative output as a form creative writing that bears resemblance to the Gaelic oral storytelling tradition known as seanchas[1]. Traditionally, Gaelic custom was rooted in the oral transmission of culture in which there was a great reliance on seanchas and the bardic tradition. Web 2.0 technology has provided new modes of dissemination of culturally significant stories across society. Twitter is an example of a platform that enables collaborative production and creative dialogue across communities: it can be viewed as an open mic of sorts that substitutes as the "céilí"[2], a term for a traditional Gaelic gathering. In considering sport as storytelling, this research views fans as both readers and writers of the game and explores the latter in terms of how fans on Twitter collaborate through creative writing in the reinterpreting, retelling, recreating and reimagining of Gaelic games. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, it examines fan-generated narratives with a focus on two key areas: (1) how the growing prevalence of "in-play" discourse enables the production of fanfiction by GAA fans that bears resemblance with the seanchas tradition, and (2) how the reflexive role of fans as consumers and producers results in the creation of sports narratives of cultural authority.

Introduction

Muhammad Ali referred to himself as a poet, unlike fellow boxer Barry McGuigan, who when asked why he was a boxer replied, “I can’t be a poet. I can’t tell stories...” (Oates: 8) There are those who believe that sport gives us stories and those who view sport as story. As Noah Cohen (2019: 10) points out, “sports are real, but they are also flexible narratives subject to the interpretive imperatives of those who read and rewrite them.” Sport and storytelling share key elements such as characters, suspense, plot, conflict and resolution. Sport acts as a lens through which story can be filtered, and Twitter functions as a medium through which that story can be replayed. Twitter enables fans to create and re-create their experience in a literary form. The sports fan on Twitter is simultaneously creative and critical, generating an output referred to by some as “Twitterature”, a term that has moved into common parlance:

Twitterature (a portmanteau of Twitter and literature) is a literary use of the microblogging service of Twitter. It includes various genres, including aphorisms, poetry, and fiction (or some combination thereof) written by individuals or collaboratively. The 280-character maximum imposed by the medium, upgraded from 140 characters in late 2017, provides a creative challenge. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitterature#cite_note-1 [accessed 20 June 2019])

Embracing the size limitations of Twitter posts, fans exercise their interpretive agency at will, layering tweets upon tweets of narrative to produce peer-to-peer threads of story. In her research into the functionality of Twitter microfiction as a tool for the development of storytelling skills, Barnard, (2016: 4-5) found that “full, fully engaging narratives can be contained in tweet-sized fiction.” Fans alternate between being readers of sport to writers of stories about sport. In other words, they are at once producers and consumers of culture or “prosumers”. In the collaborative construction of Twitter sports narratives, fan authors display a readiness to engage in writing as a social product and as a means of creative production. It must be stated that the research is not suggesting that the practice of fan tweeting is indicative of an impulse to consciously produce story, rather that the cumulative effect of this behaviour is the production of that story. Fans

have varying motivations for tweeting, but the willingness to turn to the platform as a live notebook and the readiness to engage with conversations ‘curated’ by hashtags shows that there is intention to be part of a broader dialogue and to contribute content that coheres as threaded stories. Just as the oral storytelling tradition relied on performance in the dissemination of story, fans lean towards the ludic nature of collaborative writing practice to create sports narratives on Twitter. This ludic aspect of creative writing is acknowledged by novelist Jane Smiley who notes that:

For the novelist even more, perhaps, than for the reader, the novel is a game. He enters into a state of mind that is akin to the states of mind of players of other games, a state of flow or presence that feels playful to him even as he is writing of terrible horror... For some authors, the game aspect of novel-writing is the most inspiring, and the author becomes enamoured of the tricks, puns, figures of speech, references to other works, abstract patterns, or insights from other endeavours he has used to structure his novel. (2006: 101)

Similarly, fan authors on Twitter very often employ playful tactics in their use of language, wit, references to other tweets and use of images. The digital revolution has altered the interrelationship between media, sport and fans which, according to Pearson (2010: 84), has led to the creation of “symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and given rise to new forms of cultural production.” Indeed, this participatory media culture has created a new paradigm for fan interpretation and expression (Cohan, 2017: 278). Across social media platforms and through a variety of fan authored material, there exists a networked community at the heart of which the fan has assumed the role of commentator and producer. This new community represents a shift from the pre-internet era in which sports journalists and pundits were the sole providers of sports commentary. According to Rowe (2004: 204), this ‘interactivity’ enables a situation wherein “the passive sports media consumer may become both all-powerful media ‘auteur’ and athlete ‘replicant’.” What we are seeing, therefore, is a mass-cultural exchange in which these new ‘auteurs’ re-narrativize sport fan commentary. As Bruns (2008: 58) argues, we are witnessing a shift from journalistic storytelling practices that “make

sense of the world *for us*” and towards the provision of information that enables us to “make sense of the world *for ourselves*.” According to Peterson-Reed,

Fanfiction writers are not passive consumers of popular culture but instead are fans who want *more* from and who talk back to the media they consume. They are critical of the world and the manner in which it is reflected in the media they love. These writers perform their criticism of their chosen texts in the creative writing they produce. (2019: 3)

Stories rely on formula, and sport is a formulaic cultural product around which stories are made. In discussing the origins of reading American football, Michael Oriard attests,

Formula is central to the art of storytelling, as necessary to popular fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as to the oral cultures of antiquity and the Middle Ages. (Oriard, 1993: 101)

Of course this holds true for sports Twitterature where we see examples of story developing around the usual tropes one finds in sports fiction: the hero and villain, the rise and the underdog, the contested battle, the pain and glory. Clifford Geertz considers that at a symbolic level, sport represents “an image, a fiction, a model, a metaphor.” (2005: 79). Certainly, across Twitter fan narratives, we encounter a recurrence of this.

In Gaelic seanchas tradition, the storyteller or seanchaí would often encourage the participation of the audience when telling or performing a story. Social media platforms such as Twitter have taken over from the traditional venue of the céilí, enabling multimodal participation via text interjections that may be accompanied by photographs and/or films. Keyboard kinship is an alternative to the traditional setting whereby listeners surrounded a seanchaí by the fireside. Digital storytelling technology has enabled a new type of seanchas that exists in this virtual “open mic” space that allows and invites community participation.

Elision of Sport and Literature

This case study is inspired by the author’s personal interest in Gaelic games, and, more specifically, in an interest in the multimodality of sports fan creative practice. This work forms part of a larger,

ongoing body of research. Drawing on sporting and literary traditions, it is clear that there is overlap in how texts and games are read. Sports Twitterature, which is similar to fanfiction, represents a creative expression of popular culture that is created in a live environment in which fragmentary tweets are interpreted and contextualized on a constantly shifting basis. Creative impetus is required on the part of the fan reader and writer in much the same way as the oral storytelling tradition relied on live creation and dissemination of story. The digital practice of “in-play”, live commentary on sports events affords an opportunity to generate authentic, collaborative, interpretations of games through collective creative writing practice. Furthermore, it gives an opportunity for fans to make sense of their own stories through their creative practice. Noah Cohan discusses this self-reflexivity of sport-fan narratives in his book *We Average Beautiful Watchers*. He states that,

Being a sports fan is thus always an autobiographical practice: whether manifested in a text or merely in one’s sense of self, sports narratives and personal identity are inextricably intertwined. Sports fans demonstrate in the manner in which they read, write, and talk about sports the vital role of these games and athletes in providing more than mere distractions from the fans “real” lives. Instead, sports narratives provides a means by which fans can make sense of those lives. (2019: 4)

In fictional narratives and sports games, conceptions of space and time weigh heavily. Games are finite events, and within the bookends of the starting and finishing whistle, the clock ticks loud. Just as a writer might employ certain devices at particular points in a novel or story, for players in a game, tactics are often linked to the clock. At different stages in games, events take on different meanings for fans, and with an open access forum like Twitter at their disposal, reactions are shared immediately. In discussing fan generated blog content, Cohan (2019: 176) asserts that fan authored content has the capacity to embrace “narrative reconceptualization as a way for readers to draw new meaning from the purportedly limited corpus of outcomes and meanings present in sporting events.” The public personal reactions of fans to sports narratives bear resemblance to the public-private duality at the heart of the novel. According to Smiley (2006: 105), “all novels, because

they move repeatedly between action and reflection, are simultaneously about private experience and public events.” In a similar way, fans interpret and reinterpret the transient meanings of sport publicly.

As any game grows more complex, it becomes more abstract and exclusive – in order not to get lost in the subtleties of play, fans have to be highly versed in the rules and the moves of the game and willing to play the game (read the book) over and over to get everything out of it. (Smiley: 95)

Writers of fanfiction actively engage with other members of their networked community through their creative writing practice. Members of the online GAA community make sense of their games via their written expressions, which are at once critical and creative. They exercise their interpretive agency in reading and writing the games according to their own tastes and loyalties in a creative expression of collective identity enabled by the use of Twitter as a virtual notebook.

Contextualisation of the Study: Gaelic Athletic Association

Established in 1884, the GAA is Ireland’s largest sporting organisation. Its founding ethos was to provide an outlet through which Irish games and culture could be promoted and played. This is illustrated in its original name: the “Gaelic Athletic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of National Pastimes”, a name that later changed to the “Gaelic Athletic Association”. This espousal of nationalistic virtue came amid a period in which the popularity of British sports was increasing. Owing to the industrial and transport revolutions of the 19th century, working and leisure time became more regularized for the masses; this led to a sporting revolution in which sport and leisure became a popular means of recreation and cultural activity. At the time of the GAA’s inception, Ireland was under British rule. The founders of the GAA sought to establish an organisation that would offer an outlet to Irish people seeking to engage with their own cultural traditions. More specifically, it sought to promote the playing of non-British sport. The GAA is an amateur sporting organisation that, as the largest sporting organisation on the island, occupies a central role in the Irish sportscape. Amongst the national games that the GAA promotes are hurling and Gaelic football, both of which have been selected for consideration in this case-study. For the purpose

of this research, games featuring intercounty teams (the elite level at which to play) have been chosen for analysis. These games are played as part of the national ‘All-Ireland Championship’, also known as “Craobh na hÉireann”. Craobh is the Irish word for branch and in this case “Branch of Ireland” is indicative of how the GAA championship is considered to be a network that stretches across the country. Interestingly, the concept of the branch as a network bears resemblance to the nexus of connections created by a platform like Twitter.

The GAA Twitter fan community conforms to Benedict Anderson’s notion of an imagined community—a social construct wherein people consider themselves to be a part of a community that is aligned alongside common beliefs and values, a shared history and collective memory (2006:32). Anderson considered there to be great value in literature, prose and journalism, as a means through which culture was disseminated and stories of national significance could be woven into the fabric of the nation. In this case study, GAA fan Twitterature, captures the essence of the shared imagination that is at the heart of the community. The GAA continues to espouse many of the virtues that underpinned its formation, and through play and associated symbolic motifs, perpetuate its nationalistic esprit de corps. Geertz considers sport at a symbolic level to be a “metasocial commentary” of fans, observers and participants (2005: 82). As the practices of singing the national anthem before games, flying the tricolour above Gaelic sports grounds and publishing players’ names in match programmes in both the Irish and English language indicate the GAA is drenched in nationalism. It is because of this strong cultural charge that the GAA community, more than other sporting fanbases in Ireland, is of particular interest as a case study. From a sociological perspective, this participatory tribalism bears its own value as a form of cultural capital. In his introduction to Jimmy Smith’s, *In Praise of Heroes* (a collection of verse on the GAA) Dáithí Ó hÓgáin attests that:

The greatest of all publicity for all games is provided by the followers themselves, by their loyalty to the club and county, by their convivial conversation, by their communal thrill, and by the way they retell in word and prepare in anticipation the vistas of the game. (2007: 2)

Teams	Fixture	Date
Kilkenny v Limerick	Senior Hurling Championship Semi-Final	27.07.19
Wexford v Tipperary	Senior Hurling Championship Semi-Final	28.07.19
Dublin v Mayo	Senior Football Championship Semi-Final	10.08.19
Kilkenny v Tipperary	All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship Final	18.08.19
Dublin v Kerry	All-Ireland Senior Football Championship Final	01.09.19
Dublin v Kerry	All-Ireland Senior Football Championship Final Replay	14.09.19

Figure 1. Games below selected for Twitter archival analysis

For the best part of the last century, a compulsory text on the syllabus of the Irish secondary education system was a biography of an Irish seanchaí named Peig Sayers. This biography, *Peig* (the story of gruelling island life off the coast of County Kerry), gives insight into rural Ireland's customs and traditions. Mention *Peig* to Irish people of a certain age and they will most likely recall clearly (for better or for worse) their exposure to the book. Peig Sayers was described as “one of the greatest women storytellers of all time,” (O’Sullivan: 270-271) and the book is one of the most important Ireland language texts ever published. I mention *Peig* to give a flavour for how central a role seanchas had in Irish society until quite recently. Of course, song is also an important aspect of an oral culture and it is worth noting here the lyrics of Irish folk band Clannad’s song, *Seanchas*, which could be interpreted as guidance on partaking in storied communities on Twitter: “the shortest story is sweetest... a word or two if practising allows it.” Given the short character count of Twitter, this assertion of the value of brevity in oral storytelling is clearly significant in the context of this study : “a nice short story is the best short story.” (Brennan, 2021)

An seanchas gearr, an seanchas is fearr

The shortest wisdom is the best wisdom

An scéal is giorra is milse i mbéal.

The shortest story is sweetest in the mouth

An chuid is lú an chuid is fearr

The smallest part is the best part

Focal nó dhó má thaithníonn lig dó

A word or two if practicing allows it

(Brennan: Ibid, Verse 1)

Methodology

Stories from the 2019 GAA championship represent the main source of the archival analysis. In the classification of “GAA fans”, the assumption was made that the practice of engaging in public discourse around Gaelic games constitutes fan behaviour. In narrowing the target data-set, a number of games from the 2019 Gaelic football and hurling championships were chosen (see Figure 1 below). These were the games with the greatest attendances and highest television viewership figures from the 2019 GAA calendar; therefore, it was taken that they represented the most popular games during the championship and consequently would generate the greatest level of Twitter activity. A total of 3,250 tweets were examined. These represented the tweets that were generated by the hashtag searches carried out. The choice of two sporting codes, Gaelic football and hurling, was made in order to enable the acquisition of information from fans who support one or other code but may not be ‘dual’ supporters.

DATA SOURCE

Datamining was conducted through searches using extensive lists of hashtags within specific date ranges. Examples of those include but are not limited to: #AllIrelandFinal #DubvKer, #Cooper, #KKvTipp, #RichieHogan, #RTEGAA, #AISHF2019. Each date range was for the date of the game and the following day to allow the retrieval of discourse that ensued within the community after the match had ended, capturing the Twitter conversation that took place during the live and post-match editions of The Sunday Game [3] on the game days. Many tweets used a variety of hashtags and were, therefore, in dialogue with numerous threads simultaneously.

Unique tweets performed independently of others but formed part of a greater commentary through the use of a hashtag or term. This significant amount of textual data represented a challenge as it was examined manually as opposed to using an analytic software programme. A digital humanist approach to conducting the analysis was taken as it was considered critically important that the narrative was 'read' and interpreted against the experience of having watched all hurling games in addition to having attended all of the football matches.

The data was collected for each of the selected matches and then assessed with the aim of ascertaining information such as the number of tweets per match, the themes most frequently commented upon and most the commonly used terms. All tweet types including text only and hybrids of text and image and image only were considered as in each case, they made a contribution to the collective stories. This presented a wide nexus of intertextual connections with many hashtags being used simultaneously across conversations. Unique tweets were interpreted relative to the preceding tweets in a thread or threads. This called for a considerable amount of qualitative interpretation and supported the decision to analyse the data in an analogue manner.

Although Tweets are public, on account of copyright the photographs photos have been redacted.

TIME

E.M. Forster defines a story as "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence," (2000: 42). Sport and story share many characteristics: both are rule bound and episodic. However, events on Twitter are read in a reverse chronological sequence. Further, the practice of asynchronous, "in-play" fan commentary means that aspects of a game are picked up on while others are not commented on. This incoherence or lack of curation adds a naturalistic quality to the narratives. Henry James alluded to capturing the imperfect rhythm of life as key to writing a good story,

...strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement, do we feel that we are touching the truth. (2015: 690)

This irregularity creates spaces that calls the imagination to action and recruits fans' narrative agency to fill in the gaps in play or commentary. Often we invent as a mode of remembering and the imagination indulges creatively in fostering new memories or new versions of a memory. The truth may be creatively embellished, and we see this across the GAA narratives analyzed: a goal becomes the best goal ever scored, a foul committed the most heinous attack ever known to man. Conclusions and meanings are drawn from events unfolding on the pitch. In discussing the characteristics of the novel, Jane Smiley posits that, "As with all games, the novel game has many levels of play. The lowest level is, perhaps, simply following the sequence of the story and understanding what happens next." (2006: 93)

It is this inherent unpredictability at the core of sports events that keeps the fans invested in reading them. The collaborative nature of Twitter storytelling allows fan groups to commune in shared consciousness:

While reading (in its broadest sense) may involve a tension in the sense that events will occur regardless of the wishes of the person or audience involved, the person doing sport and the spectator (if there is one) are both witness and recorder so there is a relationship in time, space and language that could be more discussed as an aspect of sporting consciousness. (Hill and Williams, 2009: 130)

The unpredictability at the heart of sport is carried over in the story structure of Twitter narratives, in which we see modular story structures that consist of a collage of collaborative posts and commentary. Of course this is due to the nature of Twitter and sport. The affordances of the platform enable concise posts and the episodic nature of live sport means that the game is revealed on an evolving play by play basis throughout the game. Madison Smartt Bell differentiates between linear and modular stories, noting that the latter are more additive, which is a good summary of how the patchwork of Twitter posts weave a story:

The writer adds and arranges more and more modular units which may be attractive in themselves for all sorts of different reasons, but which also must serve the purpose of clarifying the overall design of the text as a whole... What modular design can do is liberate the



Figure 2 *The good*

writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward. (1997: 213-214)

In its resistance to linearity, this modular story shape can free the writer from restrictions such as chronology and plotting, and, instead, the story gains its shape from the modular tweets contributed by the participant seanchaí.

PLOT

In discussing the overlaps between Gaelic games and sport, Crossan states that “a sports film genre is increasingly recognised in popular and critical culture discourse and is characterised by a number of salient features, including the foregrounding of athletes, sporting events or followers of sport in narratives that depend significantly on sport for plot motivation or resolution.” (2013: 157) We can deduce that GAA fan commentary on Twitter bears some of these salient features, not least of which is the reliance on sport for plot motivation and resolution. Forester (2000: 45) attests that storytelling relies on the “primitive power of keeping the reader in suspense and playing on his curiosity.” He notes that, “mystery is essential to plot” (2000: 42-43). The unscripted, unpredictable arena of sport gives fans and readers of sport a high quotient of mystery, the allure of which keeps fans interested and serves as an impetus for the fans to partake in communal



Figure 3 *The bad* [5]

commentary. Reading Gaelic games can be defined in terms the three-act structure and viewed as taking the key aspects of a traditional story: characters, setting, plot, conflict, resolution. This research used the data taken from Twitter to evaluate the story content.

Case Study

This case study set out to appraise the literary output of the GAA fan community on Twitter in terms of its storytelling qualities. Questions asked interrogated the similarities between selected social media narratives and oral storytelling. For example: are the key aspects of story present in the Twitter threads; do the threads carry sufficient development of story to constitute storytelling?

The format of the content analysis was devised with the poet Philip Larkin’s essay, *The Pleasure Principle*, in mind, specifically the section that sets out three stages for writing a poem which could look like a blueprint for authoring Twitter fan narratives:

...the first [stage] is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional

concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, any time. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it. (2012:1189)

To borrow Larkin's framework, in the first instance we have passionate fans compelled to action, secondly we have Twitter functioning as the forum for creativity and dissemination of voice that is accessible anywhere, anytime, and thirdly we have the collaboration of this online community who engage with the narrative, creating and re-creating in the process.

The data collected was distilled into a number of categories. Initially, data was collated on a game by game basis whereby threads were identified, by hashtags, as being relevant to each of the selected games and, subsequently, these threads were divided into a nexus of sub-threads that could be analyzed and categorized. The aim was to capture as much data as possible, through the creation of extensive hashtag lists.

Tweets were coded into one of 5 categories that emerged from the data, which are explained as follows:

1. **CHARACTERS**–Tweets about individuals or individual behaviour, for example, the behaviour of referees and linesmen, players, managers, pundits.
2. **SETTING**–Tweets with content relating to the meaning, relevance symbolism or importance of the game or event.
3. **PLOT**– Tweets concerning decisions and episodes that arose within the game.
4. **CONFLICT**– Tweets contesting decisions of consequence or key talking points that arise in a game or in the pundit commentary accompanying a game.
5. **RESOLUTION**– Tweets that focus explicitly on the outcome or result of a game.

Tweets categorised as **Characters** include figures 2 and 3 and give an illustration of how the hero/villain dichotomy at play in Twitter narrative. In

figure 2 we see praise for the performance of Dublin footballer Jack McCaffery in the All Ireland Final on 1 September 2019. Conversely, we see examples of backlash at perceived pundit bias such as, "Brolly has lost the plot" (Bradley: Figure 3) that formed a substantial quantity of narrative in the drawn football and the hurling finals, where opinions of the match pundits were perceived as controversial or incorrect.

Henry James's essay, *The Art of Fiction*, goes some way to outlining key aspects of character in story. In referring to the character component of a good story, James shares his thoughts on Walter Besant's comment that "characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life" (James: 161). In this case study, we see examples of this characterisation whereby fanatical devotion towards GAA players emerges via terms of familiarity. Very often players are referred to on a first name basis, as is the case with Dublin's Con O'Callaghan, who is referred to across threads simply as "Con", such is the esteem in which he is held. Many players referred to by their nicknames or by first names only, a characteristic of the fan community's tweets that illustrates the affection with which fans view their sports heroes and anti-heroes.

It was under the code of **Setting** that data showed the greatest use of hybrid texts. This category featured a higher proportion of tweets that included both images and prose. Interestingly, an acknowledgement of existing creative literature ran through content in this category. There were some references to literary works made and some poetry was composed. This perhaps confirms a theory by the American academic Susan Bandy who says that "literature takes us closer to the soul of the game by encapsulating and communicating the feel and atmosphere of sport." (Bandy: 1588) The passion that emerges from the pitch pours onto the page (or screen) in a transubstantiation of sorts. Transubstantiation being an appropriate analogy here given the contemporary status of sport as a civic religion. The disciples of sport write their epistles en masse, reflecting on the game in what is, at times, reverential language (at other times, sinful). Thus, these stories were perhaps especially visually stimulating and poignant, due to the references to literature and the nostalgic respect for place. These were often particularly evocative stories that captured the fever and festivity of a big match days.



Figure 4 *The Literary: Poetry and references to Shakespeare and Beckett*

Tweets coded **Plot** featured a considerable degree of “in-play” commentary in response to play by play aspects of the game. Textually, these were generally the briefest tweets. On the whole, fans who tweeted on plot elements of the game tended to do so in the designated 280 characters or less and did not make multiple posts simultaneously. This meant that the plot stories were generated by a wide variety of authors, a characteristic that illustrates the capacity for broad collaborative practice in GAA fanfiction. Interestingly, the plot point told in the story thread often changed significantly from initial to final tweet, with the thread resembling at some points a game of “Chinese whispers”, in which individual author input did not necessarily follow a path of semantic linearity. Yet, when consumed as a whole story the writing along the thread makes interesting reading with fact often side-lined in favour of a more entertaining interpretation of events. We see variegated accounts of individual events emerge in threads that ebb and flow with the beat of synchronous or asynchronous content being generated.

Throughout and after the finals, **conflict** dominated the narrative. In the hurling match, a red card given to Kilkenny hurler Richie Hogan was widely perceived as changing the complexion of the game: Kilkenny were reduced to 14 men in what had been a closely contested battle. In-match commentary by a former team-mate and RTÉ pundit Henry Shefflin

drew ire from a broad swathe of fans on Twitter. Shefflin disputed the red card and the resulting narrative shows that this was perceived as county bias and, therefore, poor punditry. Similarly, in the first of the two All-Ireland football finals, a second yellow card for Dublin footballer Jonny Cooper resulted at half-time in RTÉ pundits Joe Brolly and former Dublin footballer Ciaran Whelan making comments that disputed the validity of the sending off. Again, the narrative of that game was framed in anti-pundit terms. These stories carried references to prior occasions when controversy arose surrounding match commentary. As well as bringing this historical vein to the stories, they relied heavily on strong language and were framed in anti-hero terms.

Tweets coded as belonging to the **Resolution** grouping eulogized or complained, depending on the fan’s county allegiances. They bear a sense of omniscience in so far as they are tweeted when the result of a game becomes known or appears likely. Imbued with a sense of having endured the entire game, these tweets assert points with a sense of ultimate authority. As such they can be read as a summary of the story of the game. A series of key words from tweets coded in this category were input into a story cloud generator. This helped created visual impressions of the stories that were created and of the recurrent language used in those stories. Each cloud can be read as a pseudo-synopsis of the story of the game to which it relates. Perhaps



the most succinct is that of the football semi-final between Dublin and Mayo in which Dublin executed a superb second-half performance to win convincingly and keep alive their hopes of winning their fifth title in a row (Figure 10 below). It accurately captures the tone of narrative around the game which was one of awe at the power shown by Dublin during that second half blitz.

Fantastic.
FiveLampsLit.
CiaranKilkenny.
Epic.
TitanicBattle.
HistoryIsMade.

Figure 6 SFHC All-Ireland Final Replay

Bloody-Hell!
Catch./My.Breath.
Skilful.Some-Sport!
Brilliant/Match.
What-a-game!
ClassGame!
Unreal.
Genius.
Pure-hurling.

Figure 7 SFC All Ireland Final Replay

DriveforFive.
Savage.
ConO'Callaghan.
Whirlwind.
SecondHalfBlitz.

Fig. 8 SFC All Ireland Final
(Draw and replay combined)

Bloody-Hell!
Catch./My.Breath.
Skilful.Some-Sport!
Brilliant/Match.
What-a-game!
ClassGame!
Unreal.
Genius.
Pure-hurling.

Figure 9 SFHC Semi-Finals

DriveforFive.
Savage.
ConO'Callaghan.
Whirlwind.
SecondHalfBlitz.

Figure 10 SFC Semi-Final

Source: Worditout.com

Conclusion

This paper represents emergent findings and is part of an ongoing programme of research. It has considered whether the growing prevalence of “in-play” discourse enables the production of fanfiction by GAA fans that bears resemblance with the seanchas tradition. GAA fan authored narratives offer a unique aesthetic to the literary representation of Gaelic games. Digital sports fandom situates the fan within the arena of sports commentary in which they make an active contribution. Peterson-Reed (2018: 3) argues that “fanfiction writers are not passive consumers of popular culture but instead are fans who want more from and who talk back to the media they consume.” This research shows that fans seek not only to offer additional commentary to that of the traditional media but to actively reinterpret the games and offer a unique creative retelling as was the case with the sendings off in both the hurling and football finals. This is a democratizing aspect of social media fandom.

Fanfiction, in its ability to provoke fresh and often oppositional interpretations and readings of a text, erodes demarcation between the author and reader, between literary fan and the literary academy and most importantly, between creative writer and the literary critic. (Peterson-Reed, 2019: 2)

As has been shown, the GAA fan becomes both reader and writer of the game through their writing practice on Twitter, offering critical and creative interpretations of the sport in a community of creative practice.

Further, this case study sought to interrogate how the growing prevalence of “in-play” discourse enables the production of fanfiction by GAA fans in a networked community. New digital storytelling platforms enable fan authorship and creative production in response to sport. Stories born on the pitch make their way to the (digital) page through collaborative writing on platforms such as Twitter. Readers of the game become writers of the game and fans retell the story of sport according to their own interpretation and their own side-line/online view. The seanchaí of Twitter generates metafictional fan fiction inspired by activity on the pitch: a true example perhaps, of art inspiring art.

And finally, this research has examined how the reflexive role of fans as consumers and producers results in the creation of sports narratives of cultural authority. Gillis (1994: 3) claims “the core meaning

of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time and space is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.” Through literature and sport, cultural remembrance is reified. As such, the Twitter archives of GAA fans are of significant cultural value; they are documentary artefacts that record the social memory. As Dominick LaCapra said, “The past arrives in the form of texts and textualized remainders—memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth.” (1985: 128)

These texts - in this case, tweets - interact with each other, contesting meaning and creating new interpretations in the process. Between the lines of Twitter narratives and the games they represent sits the recreated story and its significance for fan authors who alternate between roles of avid GAA enthusiasts to witnesses of the game in the ongoing dialectic of “*auteur/replicant*”. This capacity of Twitter (as a platform anyone can join at any point) to embrace shifts between the voices of passionate fans and attentive witnesses bear resemblance to testimonial literature. It enables the recreation of experience and the cultivation of memory. The creative writing produced by this online community is endowed with an ideological purpose in so far as it offers a means through which the authors can interpret the game and, by extension, the social mores of the day. In the words of George Bernard Shaw “Nor should the lighter, but still more important question of the sports of the people be forgotten.” (2017: 69)

In discussing writing, Henry James alluded to the importance of “entering ones notes in a commonplace book” (James: 567) and perhaps there is no more common a notebook than a public platform like Twitter. Indeed, this case study highlights the potential for other fan groups to engage in creative writing practice on Twitter in the generation and telling of story. Digitization has led to a morphing of our private and public spaces. This shift in boundaries is an apt backdrop to the evolving dual status of the GAA fan as *auteur/replicant* in the process of online collaborative creative practice. In the context of this research, we have seen that through collaborative digital creative writing practice an anthology of GAA stories exists on Twitter. And from the threads spun by these creative fan practitioners, a contemporary form of seanchas is made.

End Notes

[1] seanchas, m. (gs. -ais).1. Lit:(a) Traditional law. An S~ Mór, (title of) collection of ancient Irish law-tracts. (b) Ancient history and tradition. (c) Genealogical information. S.a. OLLAMH 1(b).2. Lore, tradition; (act of) storytelling. ~ baile, béil, na ndaoine, local, oral, popular, tradition. De réir seanchais, according to tradition. Tá ~ air, it is known in tradition, in story. ~ na néan, bird lore. 3. (Act of) talking, chatting, seeking information; informative talk, discussion. Bhí ~ fada againn, we had a long discussion. Tá ~ fada air, it is a long story. Bhí siad ag cur do sheanchais, they were inquiring about you. Níor chuir sé an ~ sin orm, he didn't ask me for that information. Ní chuirimid an ~ níos faide, we won't pursue the matter any further. S.a. ANACHAIN, DUÁINÍN 2. (Var:gs. ~a; ~c m) <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/seanchas> [accessed 14 February 2020]

[2] céilí1, m. (gs. ~, pl. -lithe).1. Friendly call, visit. 2. Social evening. 3. Irish dancing session. (<https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/céil%C3%AD>) [accessed 14 February 2020]

[3] The GAA is organised on an all-island basis that includes the six counties of Northern Ireland. Founded before the partition of Ireland, it continued to structure itself as an all-island sporting organisation after the partition came into effect in 1921.

[4] Although new media providers have entered the field, the Irish national broadcaster, RTÉ, remains the popular choice for its radio and television coverage of games– its The Sunday Game programme which has been running for forty years is one of the most heavily viewed programmes across Irish television.

[5] All fan comments pasted in this article (Figures 2-5) have been copied via screenshot from Twitter threads and pasted as they appeared in the thread with username and date of posting visible. In the case of Figures 4 and 5 the photographs have been redacted due to potential copyright implications.

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