

Finding our marbles

How a YouTube phenomenon can help us rethink sport

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The qualifying race had been good for “Speedy,” the captain of the Savage Speeders. Having finished second, he would start the Marathon in the front row. Even better, his rival, Kinnowin from the O’Rangers, was all the way in the back. Still, Speedy couldn’t allow himself even a moment of ease. Too much was at stake. He was gathering a reputation as the best athlete on the track; this was his chance to cement it. He got into position with a last glance back at Kinnowin. The countdown began, and the fans held their breaths.

I did hold my breath when the countdown started, which earned me the ridicule of my roommates, because Speedy—like Kinnowin and the other competitors—is not a human athlete. He is a marble. He is one of the top stars in Jelle’s Marble Runs (JMR), a YouTube channel created by Dutch marble enthusiast Jelle Bakker. In video after mesmerizing video, marbles face off against each other in a variety of events, vying for gold and the praise of their hyper-active fan base.

As Covid-19 emptied the world’s stadiums of soccer, football, baseball, and hockey, JMR became one of the only venues to still offer a sport—or sport-like—experience. Helped by a primetime mention on John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight*, the channel skyrocketed to YouTube fame: it now has 1,25 million subscribers. It caught my eye too, and as I watched the Marble League 2020 unfold with an excitement that grew increasingly difficult to conceal from my friends, I found myself thinking about the nature of sport.

What is sport? If inanimate marbles rolling downhill can give me the same experience as human athletes, it’s worth considering how sport functions,

how it engages the emotional investment of its audience. How does sport make us feel? And how does it make us tell stories?

JMR is somewhat similar to e-sports like *Dota* or *Counter Strike*, which also push the boundaries of what we think of as sport. But e-sports never triggered the same questions in me. E-sports have the same content as any other kind of sport—a human athlete pushing themselves to a physical and mental performance—but a different form. Instead of watching human competitors run, jump, or kick, you watch their digital avatars move through magical landscapes. Marble racing is the other way around. There is no human element that would identify it as a sport by any conventional definition. But it has all the form of traditional sports, from packed stadiums to referees (also marbles) by the side of the tracks. That is what interests me: when the content is stripped away, the form of sports becomes more visible. JMR is a perfect crystallization of sport *as a medium*, exposing the conventions of the genre with HD clarity.

The videos are produced with spectacular attention to detail. Soaring music builds up suspense. The fan stands are filled with marbles carrying banners of their respective teams, and their chants can be heard when that team makes it to the front. Boxes at the edge of the screen keep track of the athletes' performances down to the millisecond, registering every change in lead, announcing every record broken. There are false starts, photo finishes, even marble injuries, like Momo Momo's infamous accident in 2017. And crucially, the brilliant commentator Greg Woods guides the audience through the emotional ups and downs of each race.

For the fans, those ups and downs are constant, as their favorite teams rise or fall in the standings. I know this firsthand. Silly as it may sound to root for a marble to roll faster, that emotional investment is crucial to the experience of sports in general and JMR in particular. But in turn, that investment rests on a surprisingly narrow band of probabilistic deviation.

Going into the Marathon event this year, I expected my team, the Speeders, to do well, because they often win competitions decided by speed. Going into the High Jump a week earlier, I was anxious, because the Speeders have historically underperformed in that event—just as I feared, they came in last. But that does not mean that I can predict with any certainty how the teams will fare. Upsets and turnarounds happen constantly, and it is that specific balance which generates my investment.

If the results were predictable, I would not care, as there would be no suspense. If the results were entirely random, I would not care either, as I would be unable to form any attachment to the teams based on their prior performance. The teams would have no character, no history. But because the physical structure of the marbles—their relative weight, roundness, and smoothness of surface—makes some outcomes *likely but not given*, I care immensely. I brace myself or hold out hope. Randomness and certainty are equally boring; sport unfolds in the narrow sliver between the two.

This is one reason why marble racing works—it occupies the same band of probability as regular sports. The O'Rangers and Real Madrid are about equally likely to win a match: somewhat. The partial unpredictability creates a specific experience in time, as the audience finds itself caught between past and future. I can look back at previous events to gauge our chances, but I cannot have certainty until the photo finish decides the winner. The viewers are always in the middle of the story, using the past to make uncertain predictions about the future.

This in-between state creates an emotional pitch that mixes hope with anxiety, and that mixture is in itself pleasurable. In *A Treatise on Human Nature*, David Hume compared the pleasures of logic with those of gambling, arguing that both activities rest on an emotional investment in a postponed outcome. We cannot predict in advance how the die will fall, or which argument will prevail, but once our interest has settled on either gambling or philosophy (or both), we are caught:

Our attention being once engaged, the difficulty, variety, and sudden reverses of fortune, still farther interest us; and it is from that concern our satisfaction arises. Human life is so tiresome a scene, and men generally are of such indolent dispositions, that whatever amuses them, though by a passion mixt with pain, does in the main give them a sensible pleasure.

Hume argues that our investment in games and philosophy—and sport—is not lessened but increased by its obstacles. Difficulty creates concern and concern creates pleasure. The “sudden reverses of fortune” may disappoint us in the moment if they cause our team to lose, but they increase our investment in the sport overall, because they fixate our mind on the unknowability of the future, rather than dulling it with repetition.

And from that “passion mixt with pain” comes a singular pleasure: an emotional investment that can bring us out of ourselves, giving us joy, disappointment, and most importantly, an escape from the everyday. Hume goes on to state that “this pleasure is here encreased by the nature of the objects, which ... are agreeable to the imagination.” He is speaking of gambling and philosophy, but the statement applies just as well to the marble universe. If the marbles are anything, they are “agreeable to the imagination”: they are small, round, brightly colored balls, which just enough difference between them to welcome the imaginative projections of their fans.

Every team has its own chant, colors, logo, slogan (#SpeedIsKey), but also its own unique personality and background story. The Green Ducks, for example, were formed when Mallard returned from an exciting marble race to tend to her sick mother. When the mother (also a marble) died, Mallard resolved to honor her by founding the team, which competed for the first time in the 2019 Marble League—and finished in an astonishing second place.

Background stories like these are created by JMR’s vast, vocal fan base, which invests the marbles with meaning and narrative. The difference in personality between the marbles is best reflected in the ongoing rivalry between the two

best-performing teams, the Speeders and the O'Rangers. The Speeders are distinctly French—sleek, secretive, elegant, and effective—and the O'Rangers are just as distinctly American—loud, boorish, excited, and riotous.

The rivalry came to a head in the final event of the 2020 Marble League, the Marathon that pitched Speedy against Kinnowin. For the first half of the League, the O'Rangers seemed destined to triumph, as the Speeders struggled to escape the bottom of the standings. But after a series of upsets, the two were tied, with everyone else far behind. As they headed into the finale, the fans were primed for a legendary showdown between the rivals. And the countdown began, and I held my breath. And yet...

“A legendary showdown between two rivals”: the words feel out of time. It is a grand emotion in an ungrand world. As I tuned in for the livestreamed race, there was Covid-19 raging across the planet, there an economic disaster looming, there was climate change threatening to end us all, there was democracy coming undone. Escapism? Yes, please! To Hume, gambling and philosophy were exciting because “human life is so tiresome a scene,” but today that scene is not so much tiresome as it is terrifying.

And at this moment in history, when escapism seemed more appealing than ever, all sports were cancelled at the same time. Against that background, it's easy to explain the meteoric rise of JMR: more than 20,000 viewers watched live as the Marble League flame was lit in this year's opening ceremony. But that is only the latest twist in a much longer story.

Cultural critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues that sports serve to reenchant a secular world. In the twentieth century, in the aftermath of industrialization and rationalistic philosophy, the Western world was struck what cultural critics call “disenchantment”: a suspicion against all that is deemed irrational; a resistance to rapture and religion; the elevation of thought over feeling and mind over body; and above all a belief that the world operates according to strict, cold, logical, predetermined rules, in which nothing is fundamentally unpredictable.

But as Gumbrecht points out, sports reverse all those trends. When we watch sport, we are captivated by the sight of an unpredictable, physical wonder unfolding before our eyes. Sport give us what Gumbrecht calls as a “secular epiphany,” meaning a rapture that is not religious, but which still fixes our attention on the exceptional performance of a human body. In that sense, sport is the modern version of medieval miracles.

In the otherwise mechanistic, rational world we inhabit, sports create a state of exception, where records are broken and the impossible achieved. In Gumbrecht’s words, sport viewers are “lost in focused intensity”: watching the Olympic games is a glimpse into a world not stripped of enchantment. Furthermore, we experience this rapture not alone but in a community of like-minded fans, who join in like the congregation of a church to create a rare moment of reverence and ecstasy. But now, even that spell has been broken.

Sport has become disenchanted. Covid-19 cancelled all sport events; athletes are testing positive at a higher rate than the general population; and desperate organizers are filling their stadiums with cardboard cutouts. Even when the pandemic subsides enough to allow for sports to return, its conditions will have changed dramatically, in ways that will irrevisibly damage the ability of sport to enchant the world. Teams may be able to play, but packed stadiums will not be safe for several years, hampering the fans’ feeling of a bodily, communal investment in the match.

When fan stands open again, they will do so with an endless set of safety measures. Watching sport will not be an escape from the problems facing our world, it will be a reminder of them. The spell of sport has fallen ill, and sanitizing it will only lessen the magic. We have lost one last way of being “lost in focused intensity.” We may still regain it, as Covid-19 fades from memory—but in the meantime, JMR is a welcome alternative.

Marbles, to me, have reenchanting sports anew. In the JMR world, the stands are still packed, but they are packed with marbles that are blissfully immune to the pandemic. If the Olympic games were a secular epiphany, the Marble

League is a *desperate* epiphany, as we latch on to a rare recreation of our investment in a crumbling world.

Yes, it is silly to root for marbles, yes, it is silly to hold one's breath, but that silliness is only a particularly extreme version of the enchantment that all sport provides. It does take a leap of faith to care about a marble, and that leap is more palpable with JMR than it is with soccer or baseball, because one must ignore the nagging reminder in one's brain (or from one's roommates) that marbles are insensate objects. But all sports require a leap, an irrational investment in unpredictability for its own sake. The difference is that, with hockey or swimming, the leap has become so normal we hardly notice it.

Now, 1.25 million subscribers have made the same leap with JMR, myself included. At first, I rejoiced in JMR's mixture of tomfoolery and professional production quality—then I actually got hooked. By the time the Marathon rolled around, I was, in Gumbrecht's phrase, "lost in focused intensity," holding my breath and rooting against reason.

When the countdown ended and the race began, things went wrong immediately. Speedy fell to the back and stayed there, finishing ninth—six and a half seconds behind the winner, which might as well be eons in JMR, where races are often decided by milliseconds. If Speedy had been human, I would have accused him of hubris; now I'm not sure. My only consolation was that Kinnowin did even worse, so the Speeders garnered enough points to win the League, even as they lost the race. But in a reenchanting world, losses and triumphs often feel surprisingly secondary. What matters is not the outcome, but a collective investment in the uncertainty that precedes it: it is our engaged gaze that, for a moment, reshapes the world.

Five thousand years ago, the Egyptian king Den ran a race, in a religious ceremony known as the *sed* festival. Den ruled in the First Dynasty of ancient Egypt, around 3000 BCE, and though we know little about him, several documents attest to his participation in the *sed* festival. A small ebony label from his tomb shows him in full sprint between two boundary markers. Over the following centuries, the *sed* festival would become a cornerstone of ancient

Egyptian royal ideology—including the ritual of the king running laps in a ceremonial stadium.

The king's race was a way of ritually affirming his rejuvenation. The *sed* festival granted him a new lease of youth, anticipating his endless rebirth in the afterlife, where pharaohs were promised “millions of *sed* festivals.” In turn, the king's wellbeing was thought to represent the wellbeing of his country: if the pharaoh lived long, the land would prosper.

In the neighboring cultures of Mesopotamia, the legendary king Gilgamesh also practiced an early form of sport, but with a very different aim. It is uncertain whether there ever was a real king named Gilgamesh, but stories about him were told from the late third millennium BCE onwards, growing into a long Babylonian poem now known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh had a different approach to sport than Den—for him, it was about winning.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* opens with a description of the hero harassing his subjects with constant athletic contests, including a ball-and-bat game known as *pukku* and *mekkû*. The young men of his city are so exhausted by the king's demands that they pray to the gods for relief. The scene reveals Gilgamesh's character with perfect clarity: he is always excessive and exceptional, he pushes boundaries and breaks norms, he goes further than anyone, and often he goes too far, exhausting himself and everyone around him.

Den's race and Gilgamesh's ballgame are among the earliest surviving accounts of athletic performance, and they represent two of the most fundamental aspects of sport: health and excess. Sport always carries that double connotation—and that double promise. Sport is about exercising, getting fit, renewing our bodies; but it is also about athletes pushing themselves to extremes, setting records, crossing boundaries.

Sometimes, the two collide. Outstanding feats can easily break the athletes' bodies, especially if the pressure to perform leads them to take dangerous drugs. Still, part of the allure of sport is the premise that it is fundamentally good for you, that it celebrates the human body and all that we are capable of.

So sport remains caught in this double definition and the occasional conflict that it produces.

Consider the modern Olympic games, founded by the French historian Pierre de Coubertin in 1894 to emulate the ancient Greek games. De Coubertin gave the games their modern motto: *citius, altius, fortius*, “faster, higher, stronger,” placing the culture of excess squarely at the heart of the Olympic revival. From the beginning, the modern Olympics were linked to the ideal of humans exerting themselves to bring about a better world.

The rebirth of the Olympics also coincided with a culture of health spreading through Europe, memorably captured by the novelist Stefan Zweig in *The World of Yesterday* (1941). Zweig notes that in the nineteenth century, everyone wanted to be older; in the twentieth century, everyone wanted to be younger. The canes, beards and bulging bellies that had once connoted the authority of old age were replaced with a fetish for exercise in the 1920’s. The fashion for swimming, hiking, and biking swept across Europe, and to Zweig, it was a literal breath of fresh alpine air.

The sports of the twentieth century hatched in this historical mood, and was shaped by its ideologies: the culture of health and the culture of striving. The two sometimes merged—as in the inspirational figure of the fit athlete—and sometimes diverged—as in the doping schemes that continue to plague the Tour de France.

But crucially, both ideals were, and continue to be, shaped by the audience. Though the viewers are often neither healthy nor exceptional, we are attracted to the ideals we find in sport: extreme performances and the celebration of the human body. That double allure is one reason we watch sport, and that is no less true of JMR.

I first began thinking about Den, Gilgamesh, and the double ideals they represent when watching the Five-Meter Hurdles of the 2020 Marble League, where the record was reset three times in a single event. In general, new records have been set with improbable frequency in this year’s League: in the Halfpipe, Block Pushing, the Five-Meter Sprint, the Relay Run, and the High

Jump. When a record is broken, a gold banner flashes across the screen and a thrill makes its way down the audience's spine.

In most sports, so many records being broken in a single season would be a statistical aberration. But in the Marble League, it is possible because most of the events are so new: if it is only the third time that a given event takes place, there is a good chance that previous results will be improved upon. The organizers of JMR make sure to reshuffle which events are included in each year's league, in part to favor different teams and so avoid predictability, and in part to keep the events new enough for records to be reliably broken.

This engineering of records is another thing that makes JMR feel like sports. When the marbles outdo old performances, they feel like athletes pushing themselves to do better, not like balls of glass who know not why they roll. The consistent breaking of boundaries makes it easier to project onto these objects an independent will to break boundaries. And that will—that culture of excess—is a key part of what makes sport sport.

JMR thereby reveals what is true of all sports: that the culture of excess is generated more by the audience than by the athletes. Athletes push themselves because someone is watching. A stellar performance means nothing if there is no one there to see it. It is the audience and the athletes together who break records, and that is especially clear in JMR, because the nature of the athletes requires an unusual degree—though not an unusual kind—of audience investment. In sports, whether e-, marble, or otherwise, it is this investment that brings an otherwise meaningless movement to life.

But there is one aspect of JMR that is genuinely unusual in the world of sports: how consistently supportive its audience is. The JMR community has a good claim on being the sanest and safest corner of the internet. The fans are faultlessly kind and unfailingly fun. Every feud is conducted in good spirits; every decision by the organizers is either lavishly praised or passed over in polite silence. The fans regularly thank the marble referees and the marble medics for their invaluable service to the sport.

JMR is not a celebration of the human body; it cannot be. But it is a unique celebration of supportive communities and mental health. We think of sport as a force for good because it promotes a healthy lifestyle, and marble racing has transposed that principle onto the level of community. It feels healthy not because it advocates fitness, but because it leads by example in creating a supportive, understanding, and laughter-prone approach to other people—on the internet, of all places.

Five thousand years ago, King Den ran a race to rejuvenate his earthly body. Today, we need a different kind of rejuvenation. In the midst of a fracturing public sphere and a pandemic that is having a disastrous impact on psychological wellbeing worldwide, we need all sources of mental health that we can get. JMR provides that. By fostering a supportive community, reenchanting a disenchanted world, and creating an investment that mixes pain with pleasure, marble really is the sport for our times.

Which brings me back to that finale of the Marble League. The Speeders lost the race. But they won the League, becoming the first team to do so twice, and so they paraded triumphantly in front of a stadium filled with ecstatic marbled. They were joined on that parade by the runners-up—the O'Rangers, their rivals—and in the last minute of the video, the two teams can be seen dancing around the trophy in a circle, laying their differences aside in a beautiful moment of marble solidarity. And so what, if I, an adult man, shed a tear?