

Going global: Fantasy sports gameplay paradigms, fan identities and cultural implications in an international context

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Abstract

This article investigates the cultural implications of the internationalization of contemporary fantasy sports. In particular, it exposes previously unexplored distinctions between season-long North American and European fantasy sports (the two most prominent world markets). In order to contextualize these distinctions, first, this article provides a concise history of both North American and European fantasy sports, delineating briefly the philosophies that shaped them. Second, it examines the contrasting paradigms (i.e., the models by which fantasy sports are imagined, designed and played) of North America and Europe's most popular fantasy sports – North American and European football – paradigms that reflect to various extents the hypercommodification and dehumanization of the athletes involved. On the basis of this examination, the article argues that the two frameworks produce disparate fan identities – that of 'owners' in North American fantasy football and of 'managers' in European fantasy football. Third, it makes a case for three possibilities as to how and why these differences may have arisen. Thus, the article utilizes the differences in the two models as a foundation for its contentions regarding the potential reasons for these distinctions and their cultural significance. This article forms part of the Special Issue 'On the Move', which marks the twentieth anniversary of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Keywords

European football, fan identities, fantasy sports, gameplay paradigms, North American football

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Introduction

One of the fastest growing areas of contemporary culture is that of fantasy sports. In response to what they found to be the absence of a ‘broad’ yet ‘sufficiently concise’ definition appropriate for ‘scholarly research purposes’ (p. 88), Hill and Woo (2011) define fantasy sports as ‘competitions involving individuals who select “teams” of players from a pool of real-world athletes in various sports. These individuals then participate in contests ultimately decided by aggregated statistics that reflect actual performances by their chosen players’ (p. 87).¹ Most often associated in North America with the National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (MLB), fantasy sports are also played in connection with auto racing, basketball, hockey, soccer, Australian rules football, cricket, rugby and fishing, among others. In their various forms, fantasy sports have grown into a worldwide phenomenon with over 57 million participants in North America alone (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2015) – up from 32 million in 2010 (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2015). Continuing to soar in popularity, fantasy sports have now undeniably gone global. As Cassie Werber (2012) writes, while the United States remains the most profitable region, ‘the game’s backers have begun to realize that its home market is now well served, and that the biggest opportunities lie elsewhere’ (n.p.). According to Brian Gainor (2008),

Large opportunities exist for fantasy sports companies to capitalize on integrating fantasy games in foreign markets. And a well-built and scalable fantasy game platform could prove to be very lucrative, leveraging soccer in Latin America/Europe, basketball in China/Latin America, rugby in Europe/Australia, and cricket in India. (n.p.)

The market is not limited to these regions, however, as other ‘important areas for [geographical] growth’ singled out by one industry expert include sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia (quoted in Werber, 2012).

With the worldwide expansion of fantasy sports comes increased diversity within the industry as well, including intriguing variations in how fantasy sports are conceived of and played across cultures. Faced with such unprecedented heterogeneity, scholars are now afforded the opportunity to analyze these variations, their origins and their potential meanings. To that end, this article investigates the internationalization of contemporary fantasy team sports,² a topic that heretofore has been almost entirely neglected in the field of cultural studies. In particular, it exposes previously unexplored distinctions between season-long³ North American and European fantasy team sports⁴ (the two most prominent world markets). In order to contextualize these distinctions, this article first provides a concise history of both North American and European fantasy sports, delineating briefly the philosophies that shaped them. Second, it examines the contrasting paradigms (i.e., the models by which fantasy team sports are imagined, designed and played) of North America and Europe’s most popular fantasy team sports – North American and European football – paradigms that reflect to various extents the hypercommodification and dehumanization of the athletes involved. On the basis of this examination, the article argues that the two frameworks produce disparate fan identities – that of ‘owners’ in North American fantasy football and of ‘managers’ in European fantasy football. Third, it makes a case for three possibilities as to how and why these differences may have

arisen. Thus, the article utilizes the differences in the two models as a foundation for its contentions regarding the potential reasons for these distinctions and their implications.

From reality to fantasy: a brief history

In order to understand the defining features of the two paradigms today, it is helpful to review the rise of North American fantasy sports and to survey the lesser known history of its European counterpart. Although some uncertainty persists regarding the precise inception of fantasy sports, it is widely thought that they evolved from board games, like All-Star Baseball and Strat-O-Matic Baseball, popular in the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s (Edelman, 2012: 4). These games simulated player performance by using probabilities based upon past accomplishments as dictated by the chance outcomes of spinners and dice. Paul Fessler (2012) contends that the country's budding interest in gambling on horse races and speculating on the stock market during the first half of the 20th century also paved the way for their emergence (n.p.). Shaped by these diverse influences, the initial versions of fantasy sports were invented in the early 1960s by William Gamson (baseball) and Wilfred Wilkenbach (football), respectively. In 1960, Gamson, a Harvard sociologist, introduced his 'National Baseball Seminar', a game that tracked player performance in several key statistical categories over the course of an entire season (Anderson and Bowman, 2016: 5). In 1962, Wilkenbach applied a similar concept to North American football, establishing the 'Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League' (GOPPPL) (Anderson and Bowman, 2016: 5). GOPPPL involved a formal draft of players and had an extensive scoring system, making it arguably the first fully developed and organized fantasy league. Regardless of which man truly invented fantasy sports, the contributions of both combined to constitute a watershed moment in their evolution. These games offered fans the opportunity to draft actual players onto their own invented teams and to accumulate points based upon the statistics produced by those players in real sporting events. They thus marked a sea change from simulating player performance to translating real performance into fantasy points.

Building upon this foundation two decades later, Daniel Okrent, an influential member of the New York newspaper and publishing industry, who was introduced to Gamson's 'Seminar' as a student at the University of Michigan, refined the professor's game. He christened it 'Rotisserie League Baseball', after the Manhattan restaurant where its initial participants held weekly meetings (Anderson and Bowman, 2016: 5). Fantasy sports slowly grew in popularity throughout the 1980s, yet they remained for the most part an obscure subculture, mainly because of the tedious work that was involved in playing them. By 1990, the estimated 500,000 fantasy league participants (Billings and Ruibley, 2014: 13) were still forced to pour painstakingly over daily and weekly newspaper box scores, gathering relevant statistics and converting them into fantasy points in order to generate league standings. However, the emergence of the Internet in the mid-to-late 1990s made these statistics instantaneous and ubiquitous, changing fantasy sports forever. In 1997, two websites – Commissioner.com and RotoNews.com – launched and immediately revolutionized the fantasy sports industry (Nesbit and King-Adzima, 2012: 495). According to Nesbit and King-Adzima (2012), 'Commissioner.com was the first to

offer real-time stats, league message boards, daily updated box scores and other features for a price of \$300 per league' (p. 495). RotoNews.com, for its part,

was the first to invent and implement the idea of the 'player note' which offers up-to-date information on the status of each player. It took only 2 years for RotoNews.com to become one of the top 10 visited sports sites on the web. (Nesbit and King-Adzima, 2012: 496)

These websites and the innovations they offered made the games much more appealing to a mainstream audience, considerably reducing the time and effort required to play them. Since then, the immense popularity of fantasy sports websites, such as those hosted by Yahoo!, ESPN, CBS Sports and others, have fueled the industry's development from a niche market into the estimated US\$32b a year business that it is today (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2015).

The development of fantasy sports thus reflects the significance of statistics to real sports in North American culture.⁵ In the mid-19th century, statistics legitimized sports in the mind of the general public, allowing them to mature from children's field games into national pastimes. Newspapers played a key role in this process, with pioneering sports journalists relying heavily on numerical data to succinctly describe on-field performances to readers hungry for such quantification and precision (Thorn et al., 2015: 9). This inclusion by the press, as Thorn et al. (2015) suggest, signaled that sports were a 'serious' matter, 'like business or the stock market' (p. 9). Statistics not only brought North American sports a sense of sophistication and stature, but an air of egalitarianism and empiricism as well. 'In a society that anchors much of its legitimacy in meritocracy and achievement rather than in entitlement and ascription', Markovits and Hellerman (2001) argue,

'value free' numbers denote not only a sense of impersonal fairness but also a clarity of rank understood by everybody, regardless of cultural background and linguistic origins. Numbers are clear to all social groups, convening a sense of universalism and measurability that has provided much-needed clarity to a multicultural society like that of the United States. (p. 50)

With their implications of rationality and objectivity, statistics aligned sports with a particular set of cultural values highly influential in North America for the past 150 years. They helped to knit sports into a cultural tapestry already invested in the interwoven ideologies of modernity and democratic capitalism from which they now seem inextricable (Gorn, 1996: 55).

Although fantasy sports originated in the United States, since the early 1990s, they have become a burgeoning business in Europe as well. In fact, Europe is the region considered by many experts to be the future of the industry, due primarily to the popularity of European football. According to Jeff Thomas, European football 'blows away the [NFL] globally, and as a fantasy sport ... has the potential to be even bigger than fantasy [North American] football is in the U.S.' (quoted in Montague, 2010). This enormous potential, however, belies its modest beginnings. Inspired by the success of fantasy sports in the United States, Andrew Wainstein launched *Fantasy League*, the first European fantasy football game, in 1991 from his parents' house in England with scant funding (Billings and Ruihley, 2014: 145). While *Fantasy League* and games modeled

upon it quickly found an audience, like its North American progenitors, European fantasy sports did not gain mainstream popularity until the Internet boom near the turn of the century. Soon after, the Premier League launched its own official fantasy game, which has grown dramatically every year since. According to Robert Klein, designer of the Premier League's official game, speaking in 2010, 'It is not quite 40 percent growth a year, but the uptake has been phenomenal. We are up to 2 million fantasy managers for the game, playing in 200 different territories around the globe' (quoted in Montague, 2010). In the 2016/2017 season, the *Fantasy Premier League (FPL)* had more than 4.3 million participants.

A far more recent phenomenon in Europe, fantasy sports and particularly fantasy football, James Montague (2010) proposes, have developed more slowly there 'largely thanks to the game being harder to analyze statistically, not to mention a philosophy that sits ill at ease with the necessities of clear-eyed empirical analysis' (n.p.).⁶ Stefan Szymanski agrees, insisting that 'In Europe we talk about the art of football, the poetry of football. There's been a resistance to breaking it down and analyzing it in the past' (quoted in Montague, 2010). Much like beauty, which is commonly thought to resist quantification, 'The Beautiful Game' has long been considered largely unquantifiable as well. Exploits on the pitch are often measured in terms of 'form' and 'class', rather than in hard numbers (as in North American sports), which are deemed insufficient to eloquently articulate the artistry of a player's performance. While this philosophy persists today, it is rapidly changing, with fantasy footballers flocking to websites, like Fantasy Football Scout (2015), that offer extensive analysis of players' influence, creativity and threat, drawn from a myriad of newly collected statistics regarding successful dribbles, chances created, touches in the penalty box, minutes per goal attempt, interceptions, clearances and so on. This change may well be due to increased efforts over the past 5 or 10 years to track European football statistics in a more comprehensive and systematic way (Goodman, 2014) and to the ongoing development of advanced metrics that more accurately reflect the intricacies of the game itself.

North American versus European: two gameplay paradigms

Briefly surveying the development of North American and European fantasy sports thus illuminates historical distinctions between them. However, more germane to this study, it also foregrounds philosophical distinctions regarding the status of statistics in real sports, as well as divergences in the political economies of sports in these cultures. In his study of sport and consumer culture, John Horne (2006) maintains that

the relationship of sport to commercialism has taken on different forms in different sports in different societies at different times. These differences reflect the balance between sport as a form of entertainment and sport as essentially an aspect of education (or a public good). National and international institutions and structures that govern sport have influenced this balance in turn. The two main models of the financing of professional sport are essentially the European and the North American. (p. 28)

The disparities between these two models are symptomatic of their league structures, which Horne terms 'open' and 'closed'. Open, or European, sports leagues allow entry to teams 'on the basis of ability and promotion/relegation between different divisions [as] decided by overall performance throughout a season' (Horne, 2006: 28). This approach reflects, he argues, a 'relationship with educational institutions and principles' (Horne, 2006: 28). Closed, or North American, sports leagues accept only a limited number of franchises based upon their ability to 'attract sufficient local support and hence finance' (Horne, 2006: 28). They are, in this sense, he claims, 'more influenced by the principles of the commercial entertainment industry' (Horne, 2006: 28). Echoing Horne's European/North American political economic distinction in the context of sports, Andreff and Staudohar (2000) describe the European version as a 'Spectators-Subsidies-Sponsors-Local', or 'SSSL', model, indicating its financial structure and emphasis on 'utility maximization' (p. 259). By contrast, they characterize the North American version as a 'Media-Corporations-Merchandising-Marketing-Global', or 'MCMMG', model, which reveals its focus on 'the production of economic surpluses' and 'profit maximization' (Andreff and Staudohar, 2000: 266).

While 'Business and sport have never been entirely unconnected in Britain', or more broadly in Europe, Tony Mason (1988) claims that 'the relationship was not always a straightforward commercial one' (p. 115). One hundred years ago, the 'entrepreneur was not attracted to sport for the profit that could be made out of it' (Mason, 1988: 115). On the other hand, in North America and particularly in the United States, it was the profit maximizers who triumphed over those 'who saw sport as something separate from business' (Mason, 1988: 115). This political economic distinction reflects contrasts between European and North American sporting cultures throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries and thus may help to explain differences in the structure and development of fantasy sports in these regions. However, Horne (2006) asserts that 'professional football in England and more generally in Europe has been undergoing a fundamental transformation' since the 1970s (p. 30), one marked by a shift from 'football *fandom* to football *consumption* as increasingly fans have been encouraged to become customers of the sport' (p. 32). Horne et al. (1999) insist that this shift has become so prominent that Premier League football now epitomizes 'the central features of a modern, high profile sport, as much a mediated spectacle and vehicle for insatiable consumerism as a forum for physical pleasures, cultural affiliation and playful creativity' (p. 48). Although the Premier League – and all other top-flight leagues in Europe – now aligns more with the North American sports model, its fantasy sports equivalent, the *FPL*, I will suggest later, may constitute a form of resistance reminiscent of European sporting culture's once staunch opposition to commercialization. Nevertheless, it is commercialization's ultimate permeating of sport in both North America and Europe that prompts Garry Crawford (2004) to describe contemporary fans as 'consumers' and fan culture 'primarily as a consumer culture' (p. 34).

While the North American philosophy of sport is heavily invested in quantification, the European philosophy has been reluctant to adopt the notion that player performance can be sufficiently represented by numerical data. And, while the North American sports culture has long embraced commercialization, its European counterpart has historically proven less guided by this impulse. I contend that these distinct philosophies and

political economic contexts have led to differences in the gameplay paradigms of their respective fantasy sports, differences made readily apparent through their most popular games – football (i.e., NFL) and football (i.e., soccer). In regard to the former, season-long North American fantasy team sports, with the sole exception of fantasy soccer, share fantasy (NFL) football's basic gameplay paradigm, one defined by the individual ownership of players. Although roster requirements, scoring systems, methods of drafting and so on vary among North America's main fantasy team sports (i.e., football, baseball, basketball and hockey), they have in common a basic investment in the exclusive proprietorship of players, which fundamentally distinguishes them from their European counterparts. In regard to the latter, major season-long European fantasy team sports (i.e., football, cricket, rugby, hockey and even basketball) have almost entirely adopted fantasy European football's gameplay paradigm, one borrowed directly from the *FPL*'s prototypical structure.⁷ The only exceptions are smaller leagues on websites, such as *Draft Fantasy*, *Togga* and *Dugout FC*, which have recently introduced the North American model to fantasy European football with limited success. This study thus focuses on the two most representative, popular, and, arguably, longest standing versions of the North American and European fantasy team sports gameplay paradigms, respectively.

'Owners' versus 'managers': distinct fan identities

While these paradigms diverge in many ways, one of the most significant disparities lies, I argue, in the conflicting identities into which fans are subtly interpolated while playing these games. The most common versions of North American fantasy football allow participants – described notably as 'owners' – to select their teams via a synchronized draft in which players become the sole property of a single owner and team per league. Roster requirements, which can vary from website to website and from league to league, largely dictate the selection of players, as owners must be able to field each week a team composed of a certain number of quarterbacks, running backs, wide receivers, tight ends, kickers and defenses/special teams. Additional players, not to exceed the total roster limit, may be selected from any of the previously mentioned positions and together constitute a team's bench (i.e., a small set of exclusively owned, but temporarily inactive players). Waiver wire transactions (i.e., the dropping of players from a team and replacing them with 'free agents') and trades (i.e., the direct exchange of players from one team to another) are encouraged throughout the season, but, ordinarily, the majority of players a participant selects during the draft will remain his or hers for the duration of the season. Owners then pit their teams of players against one another on a weekly basis in head-to-head competitions, the winners of which are determined by points accrued on the basis of the statistical performance of real players. Fantasy football seasons usually end with a single elimination playoff tournament involving only the top teams in a given league as determined by win/loss record. These playoffs take place over the final two or three weeks of the NFL season, and the owner of the fantasy team that emerges from the tournament victorious is named league champion.

The notion of ownership, I maintain, is therefore a fundamental one in the season-long North American fantasy team sports paradigm. A search of *CBSSports.com* (2015),

one of the most popular fantasy football websites in North America, for example, reveals 52 instances of the term ‘owner’ in the ‘Official Rules’ page alone, and the ‘Rules’ page for *ESPN’s* (2015) fantasy football game includes the word 72 times. Reinforcing just how engrained this notion has become in the North American fantasy sports mindset, Ben Berentson (2000) describes participants as ‘Steinbrenner wannabes’ (n.p.), a reference to George Steinbrenner, formerly of the New York Yankees and one of the most provocative and egocentric owners in North American sports over the past 50 years. The negative implications of this statement aside, I assert that the identity of the fan within this paradigm is established and promoted as that of an owner with special emphasis put on individual participants having exclusive rights to and control over the players on their teams for an entire season. As a pivotal aspect of the game, this emphasis merits further attention and will be explored more fully in the final section of this article.

In his study of NFL fandom and new media, Thomas Patrick Oates (2009) aligns this approach to sports consumption with a discourse that portrays athletes ‘explicitly as commodities and celebrates the imagined “buying” and “selling” of them’ (p. 46). This discourse, which he insists is endemic but not exclusive to North American fantasy football, is characterized by ‘the presentation of athletes as commodities to be consumed selectively and self-consciously by sports fans’ (Oates, 2009: 31). In other words, he contends, ‘Athletes framed by this mode of fandom are positioned as property, often valuable, but ultimately disposable’ (Oates, 2009: 32). Oates continues, ‘In remarkably straightforward and persistent ways, [these] narratives establish the marketplace as the preferred metaphor for engagement, and frame athletes as manipulable commodities to be mobilized by the consumer in pursuit of manly esteem’ (Oates, 2009: 32). According to his argument, the gravity of such ‘ownership’ discourse lies in its cultural consequences, ones that for him mainly include issues of race and gender, but that I suggest could be broadened to include the hypercommodification of North American culture in general and the increasing dehumanization that it entails.

Hypercommodification refers to the drastic acceleration of commercialization in postmodern culture, ‘a condition’, as Edwards and Usher (2002) describe it, ‘where the commodity becomes the culturally dominant and where the dominant commodity form is the image’ (p. 35). Adrian J. Walsh and Richard Giulianotti (2001) maintain that such hypercommodification in sports refers to ‘both the quantitative explosion in the value of sports such as football and to the broader, intensive commodification of secondary, non-play aspects of the game’ (p. 55). They insist that it can be seen in ‘the greater professionalization and global migration of players, the corporatization of clubs, the proliferation of merchandising, rule-changes to draw in new customers, and a general redefinition of the competitive structures and *ethos* of the sport’ (Walsh and Giulianotti, 2001: 53). Season-long fantasy team sports – and I contend that in this sense the North American fantasy football paradigm is particularly culpable – can thus be considered an extension and intensification of this process. Participants are encouraged to treat athletes, who are already thoroughly commodified by the real-world sports industry, as second-order commodities in the fantasy realm, a self-referential and self-ironizing process that obscures any distinction between commodity and non-commodity.

Conversely, season-long European fantasy team sports utilize a very different game-play paradigm, one that I assert places little emphasis upon ownership. There is not, for

example, a single instance of the term ‘owner’ to be found on either the ‘Rules’ page of the *FPL* website (2015/16) or on the ‘How to Play’ page of *Sky Sports Fantasy Football* (2015) (two of the most popular fantasy football websites in Great Britain), though the term ‘manager’ is employed on many occasions. This shift in fan identity from ‘Steinbrenner Wannabes’ to ‘fantasy Fergies and virtual Weiners’ (2013), as Weiner describes them, is a significant one, and one that reflects the divergence of the gameplay paradigms. For its part, European fantasy football is played almost exclusively using a non-draft, salary-cap style format in which managers select players who have been assigned individual salaries based upon their past performance and their projections for the upcoming season. Managers must choose a full complement of players, including goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders and forwards, without exceeding the predetermined salary cap and with a maximum of three players from any one real-world Premier League team. While ‘head-to-head’ style competition is slowly becoming more common in European fantasy football, all participants take part in the ‘classic’ scoring system in which the game does not comprise wins and losses, but rather of the season-long accumulation of points in an effort to climb the overall rankings.⁸ In this system, teams simultaneously compete against the website’s more than 4.3 million other participants, as well as in public or private mini-leagues grouped by rooting interests, nationalities, and/or personal relationships.

Two aspects of the ‘classic’ scoring system, in particular, set it apart from that of North American fantasy football: captaincy and bonus points. Each week, managers select one player from their team to be their captain and the total points generated by that player are doubled. Given the relatively modest amount of points accumulated by players and teams in European fantasy football, choosing the right captain is of critical importance. In addition, at the end of each real-world match, one to three bonus points are distributed among the three players with the most outstanding performances. In order to maximize their scores each week, managers are allowed one free transfer, meaning that they can exchange a player from their team for any other player, providing that they can fit the new player’s salary into their budget. At two different times during the season – once in the first half and once in the second half of the season – managers have the option to play a ‘wild card’ that permits them to transfer as many players as they would like, without any point deductions. Weekly transfers and particularly ‘wild cards’ encourage substantial turnover in team rosters and ensure that teams rarely include the same players for the entire season. Fans in this paradigm, I maintain, are much less similar to owners than to managers who negotiate starting line-ups, transfers, budgets and so on, but do not themselves hold proprietary rights over individual players. While this reframing of fantasy sports participants as managers rather than owners does not exempt athletes from the process of hypercommodification, it does de-emphasize a discourse rife, as Oates (2009) puts it, with ‘disturbing [cultural] implications’ (p. 46), some of which were mentioned above and some of which I develop further below.

Origins, implications and possibilities: a discussion

My argument thus far gives rise to an interesting question: to what can we attribute these distinct gameplay paradigms and the disparate fan identities that they produce? In this

section, I propose three possible responses to this question – one practical, one historical or political and one theoretical. These responses are not, individually or collectively, intended as definitive conclusions aimed at accounting for the myriad variations outlined in this article, but rather are designed to initiate a discussion on a subject that has thus far gone entirely unaddressed in the field of cultural studies.

Response #1: the desire for verisimilitude

The first response argues that season-long European fantasy team sports, similarly to all season-long fantasy sports, simply mirror fundamental features of the actual sport from which they are inextricable. In an effort to attain verisimilitude, European fantasy football websites design their games to reflect more accurately their real sport counterpart. With the seemingly paradoxical goal of ‘fantasy realism’, such websites engineer games in which the virtual increasingly approximates the actual.⁹ In particular, the fluidity with which players change teams in *fantasy* European football arguably simulates the fluidity with which players change teams in *real* European football. Unlike major North American sports, in which players are usually traded along with their current contracts or signed as free agents by new teams only after their previous contracts have ended, European football allows players to transfer from one team to another more readily. A case in point: from the 2007/2008 to the 2013/2014 season, an average of just over 11 percent of NFL players changed teams via free agency; during that same period in the Premier League, an average of nearly 35 percent of players were involved in some form of inter- or intra-league movement.¹⁰

This disparity is largely due to measures taken by the NFL and its teams to restrict player movement in the name of competitive balance, measures that are not available to teams in the Premier League or in other European football leagues. In the case of the NFL, player movement is limited by means of the league’s basic economic structure, which is regulated by an amateur draft, various restrictions on player free agency, a hard salary cap that teams are not allowed to exceed and other economic constraints. In 1936, the NFL instituted an amateur draft through which teams attain exclusive rights to bargain with the players they have selected, thus avoiding bidding wars with potential competitors. Players can also move from one team to another via trade, but the salary cap complicates this process. The combined salaries of the players that a team acquires via the amateur draft, free agency and/or trade, and those that are already included in the team’s payroll, must not exceed the predetermined league maximum. Violations of this hard salary cap can result in voided contracts, lost draft picks and substantial fines. Consequently, it becomes difficult to trade high-salary players or players whose salaries are perceived to outstrip their current value. Such restrictions limit player movement through free agency and via trade. These constraints make it more difficult for players to switch teams during the season or offseason and parallel the more stable rosters of North American fantasy football teams.

In European football, by contrast, while free agency does exist and trades between teams are possible, players usually move from one team to another via transfers, transactions in which teams buy and sell players despite their currently being under contract. Since 1960, such transactions have been forbidden in the NFL (Andreff, 2011: 6). In this

model, the two teams involved in a transfer must first agree on a fee to be paid to the player's new team by his old team simply for the rights to sign him to a contract. Once a transfer fee is agreed upon, the team that now holds the player's rights then negotiates a new contract with the player rather than simply taking over his previous contract (as is common in major North American sports). Transfers, however, can only be performed during specified periods of time. These transfer periods, or 'windows', vary slightly from league to league across Europe, but in the case of the Premier League, there is one in the summer (1 July to 31 August) and one in the winter (1–31 January). The only other procedure available for players to change teams is a loan agreement in which case a player – often a young or underutilized player – is allowed to join another team for a designated period of time. While transfer fees and transfer windows discourage player movement to some extent, given the added expense and the limited amount of time available to make deals, player movement nevertheless remains much easier in European football because players can be bought and sold regardless of their current contract status and without any salary cap or roster restrictions. This open system is safeguarded by the 1995 Bosman ruling, which eliminated most restrictions on player movement, particularly within Europe; abolished quotas for national players (Andreff, 2011: 6); and thus greatly increased the bargaining power of individual players (Roderick, 2012: 9). Perhaps more than any other factor, the Bosman ruling has led to what Martin Roderick (2012) describes as the 'frequent circulation...of players...in the contemporary game' (p. 9). In this sense, it is then plausible to argue that European fantasy football mirrors the roster adjustability made possible by the modern transfer system.

Although this first response offers some explanation for the distinctions between these two season-long fantasy team sports paradigms, it is not wholly satisfactory, in that no matter the extent of the differences between the trade and transfer systems, the actual players involved in either system are singular and can therefore only be a member of one competing team at a time. Even though all fans would no doubt love to have Eden Hazard on their favorite club, the fact remains that there is only one, and this ineluctable individuality cannot account for the infinite plurality of virtual Hazards possible in European fantasy football.

Response #2: the influence of social democracy

The second response focuses on the historical influence of social democracy, a political ideology broadly defined here as the impetus toward governmentally aided, socio-economic equality, which has had a strong hand in shaping Europe over the past 125 years and particularly since World War II (WWII). Declaring social democracy to be 'the most successful ideology and movement of the twentieth century', Sheri Berman (2005) contends that 'its principles and policies undergirded the most prosperous and harmonious period in European history by reconciling things that had hitherto seemed incompatible – a well functioning capitalist system, democracy, and social stability' (p. 20). I suggest that the knock-on effect of social democracy's reconciliatory spirit can be perceived in many of the European gameplay features previously mentioned in this article. While individual player values fluctuate throughout the season according to cumulative manager investment in players (capitalism) to whom they all have equal access

(democracy), the degree to which these values rise or fall is restricted by the rules of the game itself (institutionally imposed socio-economic stability). Moreover, despite its hierarchical structure – that of all teams being ranked according to points accrued in a given game week or throughout the course of a season – the game is nevertheless designed to foster economic equilibrium and equal opportunity through the imposing of a salary cap, the sharing of players and the utilizing of ‘wild cards’, the last of which operate as ‘state-sponsored’ safety nets for those fans in need of points, of wins or of entirely new squads. In this sense, season-long European fantasy football imitates the socio-economic balance, which, Berman asserts, is characteristic of social democracy. On the other hand, season-long North American fantasy football, influenced by what are often considered to be the historically ‘free-market’ proclivities of the United States, insists upon private ownership of players, favors a non-salary-cap system and offers no succor to struggling owners.

However, Jonathan Tjarks (2011) complicates, if not compromises, this second response by foregrounding an incongruity between the two fantasy football paradigms and their real-world counterparts. He articulates the marked distinction between these sports and the broader socio-economic systems that they are often thought to exemplify, when he writes,

In a remarkable bit of irony, the stereotyped socialists of Western Europe root for soccer teams that compete in a ruthlessly free-market system while the supposedly rugged individualists of the American plains root for football teams that share wealth and resources in order to grow the sport as a whole. (Tjarks, 2011)

Tjarks’ point is well-taken, and it is one that finds further support in a survey of recent league success: since the 1995/1996 season, 13 different NFL teams have hoisted the Lombardi Trophy, while only five teams have donned the Premier League crown during that same period. Over the past several years, Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has gradually begun to regulate what Tjarks describes as European football’s ‘ruthlessly free-market system’ through the implementation of Financial Fair Play rules. These rules are intended to ‘improve the financial performance of European club football and to protect its long-term viability and sustainability’ (Müller et al., 2012: 118) by ‘promoting financial stability and regulating the influence of external funding’ (Müller et al., 2012: 136). The objectives of Financial Fair Play, as Müller et al. (2012) state, is to

encourag[e] clubs to settle their debts when due and to maintain or establish financial stability by operating within their means arising from revenues. The latter prevents some of them from having to rely on wealthy individuals to continuously cover their losses. (p. 118)

Failure to comply with these directives over a 3-year period can result in ‘exclusion from UEFA’s prestigious international competitions, the UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League’ (Sass, 2014: 2).

Sanctions for violating such regulations were not fully implemented until the 2014/2015 season, yet their scholarly reception, according to Preuss et al., (2014), paints a ‘mixed picture concerning the[ir] efficacy’ (p. 37). While Financial Fair Play seeks to

level the economic playing field and ensure competitive balance (thus aligning it with the tenets of social democracy outlined above), many scholars contend that in practice, the rules may serve to widen the gap between larger and smaller clubs. In an interesting reversal, then, US 'free-market' enterprise and European social democracy have clearly failed to exert the same influence over real sports as they have over their fantasy analogs. In other words, actual North American and European football leagues *do not* reflect their socio-economic systems, though the season-long fantasy football leagues based upon them *do* to a much greater extent. Such an assertion further weakens the argument that fantasy games – whether in North America or Europe – simply echo fundamental aspects of the real sports upon which they rely. It suggests instead that fantasy sports have no inherent link to any particular gameplay paradigms and that European fantasy football, for example, could just as easily be played using the North American paradigm, one that I believe may eventually prove even more popular and more lucrative.

As well as in gameplay features, the influence of social democracy can also be discerned in the character of European fantasy football message boards, particularly in their tendency to reconcile the seemingly incompatible ideals of individual and community success. Much of the scholarship published on fantasy sports attends directly or indirectly to online communication,¹¹ so I will not spend much time on it here, but what has not yet been adequately addressed is the marked difference between North American and European fantasy websites in this particular regard. The former are often characterized by self-aggrandizement, denunciation and antagonism, while the latter, I contend, are generally distinguished by their collaborative nature and interest in the common good, with fellow managers more readily offering each other team evaluations, recommendations for specific improvements and relevant fantasy news. According to Davis and Duncan (2006), 'The use of strong, aggressive language ... demonstrates the hypermasculine heterosexist nature of [North American] fantasy sport communication, making it a safe house for males to recreate and strengthen hegemony that might not be acceptable in other instances' (p. 255). I do not mean to suggest that North American fantasy sports websites are devoid of collaboration and community. In fact, building upon the major literature thus far dedicated to fantasy sports motivation and consumption, Billings and Ruihley (2014) insist that 'camaraderie' is one of the most significant factors in fantasy sports participation.¹² Rather, I contend that such dynamics are simply more characteristic of their European counterparts, where it is more common for users to assist each other with difficult transfer decisions, to share with each other in-depth player analysis and to protect the general welfare of all managers. Such collaboration reflects the European paradigm's ethos that competition and community need not be mutually exclusive, one that echoes social democracy's balancing of freedom, equality and fairness. For instance, in addition to the boilerplate restrictions regarding online conduct that are found on all the major North American fantasy websites, Europe's *Fantasy Football Scout* (2015) includes on its 'Terms and Conditions' page supplementary regulations for the benefit of its members. The website insists that its users' contributions must be 'civil and tasteful', 'constructive and polite', and that they not be 'mean-spirited'. It also exhorts its users to 'Please be patient' because '*Fantasy Football Scout* (2015) attracts visitors of all ages, with varying degrees of experience and knowledge', and urges them not to 'presume knowledge or react aggressively to those less knowledgeable'. North American fantasy

websites maintain no such rigorous standards for universal social rights. This is not to imply that European fantasy sports websites are an idealized arena for equality, community or socio-economic justice, but rather that the significant differences between the two gameplay paradigms may well be shaped by the political and economic systems upon which they, and the countries from which they arise, are historically contingent. Ironically, however, these systems have clearly failed to exert the same influence over real sports as they have over their season-long fantasy analogs.

Response #3: the resistance to late-capitalism

The third, or theoretical, response proposes that, unlike its North American counterpart, the European fantasy football paradigm constitutes a form of resistance to the cultural logic of late-capitalism, or to what Frederic Jameson (1985) terms ‘postmodernism’.¹³ For my purposes here, this contentious term will be used to describe concentrated global capital, increased wealth disparity and relentless commodification. Jameson (1985) writes, ‘modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process’ (p. x). According to him, the totalization of commodification stands as a hallmark of late-capitalism and, as such, it offers a useful distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Put another way, in the era of late-capitalism, even commodification itself becomes a consumable commodity. While the salary-cap framework used in season-long European fantasy football, with its stock market-like system of player values, is clearly guided by a postmodern cultural logic, there are also mechanisms, by which, I assert, the game attempts to frustrate such a logic. A critical aspect of the European paradigm is that the game’s capital, which encompasses both budgets and, more significantly, access to players, is evenly allotted among all participants, ensuring that every team begins on an equal economic footing. As with season-long salary-cap style formats in North American fantasy football, European fantasy football requires managers to start the season with the same virtual budget (£100m, in the case of the *FPL*), which they use to ‘pay’ their selected players’ salaries. The only financial restriction on player selection is that their combined salaries must fit under this hard salary cap. However, what distinguishes the European model is that managers also have equal rights to players. Perhaps most interestingly, this equality of access enables the sharing of players, particularly the highest scoring and most popular ones, a feature that is at odds with the season-long North American paradigm in which exclusive proprietorship of players is considered an inalienable right of every fantasy team owner. In this sense, while both paradigms overtly commodify players – either by reducing them to mere objects with assigned price tags (European) or by treating them as private possessions to be manipulated at will (North American) – I contend that the European fantasy football framework also actively *de-commodifies* them, reimagining these players not as discrete products to be owned, but as communal resources to be shared. Here, my use of the term *de-commodify* is intended to indicate that player commodification is de-emphasized within the European paradigm, not to suggest that it has been entirely eliminated. Consequently, the game is structured in such a way as to subtly shift fan focus from commodification to community and, in doing so, to resist the cultural logic of late-capitalism.

In the European model, the notion of player value stands in stark contrast to that notion in North American fantasy team sports, in that the more managers who incorporate a certain player into their teams – thus causing the player's salary to rise – the *less* value that player actually possesses. There is, in other words, something of a paradox at work within the game itself. For instance, Tottenham's Harry Kane was the most popular player by the end of the 2014/2015 *FPL* season at 47 percent, which means that nearly half of the managers on the website had him as a member of their teams. His elevated selection percentage was due mainly to the combination of his high total score for the season (second among all forwards) and his reasonable price tag. Although he began the season valued at a mere £5m, his price rose to £6.5m due to the nearly 1.75 million managers who transferred him in over the course of the season. For this reason, those who had the foresight to add him when he became the Spurs' starting striker on 9 November 2014 dramatically increased their overall team value. On one hand, the more managers that selected Kane, the more he was worth from the perspective of player price and team value. On the other hand, the more managers that chose Kane, the less valuable he became from the perspective of climbing the overall rankings – the ultimate goal of the 'classic' scoring system – in that the points he scored each week were equaled by those he scored for every other fantasy team of which he was a part. Incorporating a player like Kane prevents teams from falling further behind those more highly ranked who also selected him, but it does not enable lower ranked teams to gain ground on higher ranked teams. In this sense, Kane's value clearly diminishes. Put another way, even though players are assigned economic values (as they are in North American salary-cap style fantasy football games) and are therefore undeniably commodified, the European gameplay format subverts this hypercommodification by depreciating what would ostensibly be its most valuable assets, thus fostering a sort of economic equilibrium between players and between teams that subverts the logic of postmodernism. It is important to note here that the notion of resistance within the context of postmodernism is a contentious one, the myriad complexities of which have been explored in great detail by many of the 20th and 21st century's most influential thinkers. At the end of 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', Jameson himself briefly ponders whether or not it is even possible. He writes, 'We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic' (Jameson, 1985: 125). While significant responses to this question can be found in the work of Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, among others, Jameson's (1985) own response is that it remains one 'we must leave open' (p. 125).

Conclusion

Together these three responses begin to account for some of the most significant and previously unexplored variations between season-long North American and European fantasy team sports and the distinct fan identities that they engender. While both frameworks imitate to a certain extent the real sports upon which they depend, this imitation does not fully explain the extensive differences in their gameplay paradigms. Fantasy sports, like all cultural artifacts, are historically contingent and hence necessarily shaped

by the political and socio-economic systems of which they are a part. However, despite being inevitably influenced by these systems, fantasy sports can also offer a poignant critique of them, constituting a space of resistance to many of the prevailing logics of our time, including that of late-capitalism. With the global popularity of fantasy sports continuing to grow at such a rapid rate, it is important for scholars to examine the various forms of this resistance and, in doing so, to push the geographical and theoretical boundaries of conventional fantasy sports research by exploring their historical, philosophical and cultural implications. Aiming to address these needs, this article does not seek to position one gameplay paradigm as superior but rather both to offer critical insight and to uncover avenues for future exploration. Such avenues could include further comparative analysis of fantasy sports within and between North American and European cultures or between these cultures and the rest of the world, more comprehensive investigation into the complex relationship of real-world sports and fantasy sports, deeper exploration of the role statistics play in and their significance to real-world sports and fantasy sports, the use of additional theoretical and philosophical paradigms in the study of fantasy sports and many others. In particular, it endeavors to clarify why the season-long North American fantasy football format produces fan-owners – exclusive rights holders to singular commodities by those who are themselves first and foremost consumers – while the season-long European fantasy football framework produces fan-managers – administrators of resources that are not, or are not exclusively, their own.

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Notes

1. In his recent study, John S. W. Spinda (2016) contends that ‘fantasy sports, online [sports video games], and simulation games share a significant number of key similarities’ (p. 26). Participants of each, he argues, are motivated by ‘knowledge acquisition/application’, ‘socialization/comraderie’, ‘vicarious control/management/ownership of athletes’, entertainment and escapism (Spinda, 2016: 26). While these three types of games clearly have an interesting and underresearched relationship, I maintain that fantasy sports are fundamentally distinct from the other two, in that only they involve competitions determined entirely by the statistical production of actual athletes in real-world sporting events. Due to this crucial difference, sports video games and sports simulation games fall outside of the purview of this study.
2. While there are fantasy games based upon individual sports (e.g., auto racing, golf, fishing, boxing, mixed martial arts, surfing, etc.), this study focuses exclusively on those games related to team sports, as the motivations, values and structures involved are more comparable.
3. I use the modifier ‘season-long’ throughout this article to distinguish the games I am discussing here from ‘daily’ fantasy sports contests. As the name suggests, the latter take place entirely within a 24-hour period, rather than throughout the course of an entire sports season. This extreme condensing greatly alters the dynamics, the strategies and even the participants involved. In particular, it dramatically increases the role of chance and blurs the distinction between skill and luck, playing and gambling. For these reasons, ‘daily’ fantasy sports are not included in this study. Additional information regarding this distinctive form of fantasy sports

can be found in Andrew C. Billings and Ruihley (2014), Braig et al. (2013) and Jack Tadman (2012).

4. Throughout this article, I follow Watanabe et al. (2016), Rader and Grundy (2016), Andrew C. Billings and Ruihley (2014), John Horne (2006) and Andreff and Staudohar (2000), among many others, in adopting a North American/European distinction in the field of sports studies. While there are clearly many significant cultural differences between the United States, Canada and Mexico or between all the countries in Europe, I argue that fantasy sports participants in North America and in Europe, respectively, are interpolated into very similar fantasy sports identities.
5. For more thorough analyses of the historical and ongoing significance of statistics to real sports in North American culture, see the full studies by Elliott J. Gorn (1996), Markovits and Hellerman (2001) and Thorn et al. (2015).
6. Watanabe et al. offer additional explanations for the slower development of fantasy sports in Europe and the rest of the world. They suggest that less opportunity to follow player performance in real time, less access to the Internet (i.e., the 'digital divide') and the classification of fantasy sports as gambling in some countries may have hindered their popularity, relative to that of their North American counterparts.
7. In a statement that supports my claim regarding the prototypical structure of the Fantasy Premier League (*FPL*) in European fantasy sports, Watanabe et al. (2016) maintain that

The [Premier League] has been one of the most popular and viewed sport leagues/competitions in the world, and thus has been a natural place to build fantasy sport leagues. It is noted that because of the widespread appeal of the league, as well as the international composition of clubs in the league, that [Premier League] fantasy leagues may be the most common type of league in the world. (p. 45)

8. In this way, *FPL*'s 'classic' scoring system is somewhat reminiscent of the 'roisserie', or 'roto', scoring system still used by many in fantasy baseball today. While both systems can involve the season-long accumulation of points to determine league champions – depending on which variation of 'roisserie' baseball one plays – the 'classic' scoring system is distinct in that it does not require teams to compete simultaneously in a set of discrete statistical categories (a main feature of 'roisserie' scoring systems), is not applied to weekly or head-to-head style formats (as 'roisserie' scoring can be) and is adopted by all of its participants (as every *FPL* team is obliged to play in this way). Moreover, 'roisserie' scoring systems are rarely employed in North American fantasy football and, most relevant to this study, are never used in conjunction with the sharing of individual players, as is the 'classic' scoring system in Europe.
9. In his recent study, Spinda (2016) suggests that 'realism' may be an overlooked motivating factor in fantasy sports participation. He argues that

While some of [fantasy sports' recent] growth can certainly be attributed to the continued demand for fantasy sports in the consumer market, it would also seem quite likely [that] much of this growth has been driven by the demand for more realistic fantasy sports action. (p. 36)

10. The percentages presented here are my own. They are drawn from free agency information available at NFL.com and transfer details posted to PremierLeague.com. The Premier League transfer average includes transactions involving Under-21 players, but excludes player movement via temporary loan agreements, which would have further increased the disparity that I foreground here.

11. To explore fantasy sports and online communication further, see work by Hiltner and Walker (1996), Davis and Duncan (2006) and Hill and Woo (2011).
12. Billings and Ruibley (2014) maintain that

camaraderie in fantasy sport involves several types of relationships and focuses on getting along with others and staying in touch with people. Often, this camaraderie may involve staying in touch with friends from college/university or may be used to create a common bond with coworkers. (p. 21)

13. While the season-long North American fantasy football paradigm may not subvert the cultural logic of late-capitalism in the same way that the European model can be argued to do, Mihaela P. Harper and Ploeg (2011) contend that North American fantasy sports constitute their own form of resistance within a Baudrillardian context.

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