Introduction to the Special Issue: New Directions in Fantasy Sports Studies

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How It All Began

<1> In 1989, my uncle invited me to join his rotisserie baseball league. I was thirteen years old at the time, and, already an avid sports fan, extremely excited to play. As the game was new to me, I prepared for the draft by combing through my baseball card collection and ranking players in my notebook at every position. The auction draft was held around my uncle’s dining room table with a handful of his friends, many of whom were armed with the most recent edition of Glen Waggoner’s guide to player value. Each of us bid on players, using funds drawn from our allotted budgets of virtual money, with the highest bid securing that player’s services for the season. The process of rounding out each team’s twenty-three-man roster consumed the vast majority of the day. Throughout the rest of the season, team management and trades were undertaken via phone calls, and official league correspondence, including updated standings, arrived in letters that were typed, printed, and mailed by my uncle, the “commissioner.” In order to follow my team’s performance that summer, I biked to the nearest convenience store every week to buy a copy of USA Today,
which published the statistics upon which rotisserie baseball relied. My team finished in third place that season, and I was hooked. Over the years, my enthusiasm has enticed many friends and family members, including my co-editor, Mihaela, to play what are today most often termed “fantasy sports.” From an obscure hobby that dates back in some form to the early 1960s and that claimed just over 500,000 adherents during my “rookie” year, fantasy sports have grown into a cultural phenomenon that drew more than 57 million North American participants in 2016 (“Industry Demographics”), with that number increasing annually across the continent and around the globe.

New Directions

<2> For those still unfamiliar with them, fantasy sports are games—now usually played via the internet because of the convenience and immediacy it offers—that involve participants constructing their own virtual teams by choosing actual players from real-world sports leagues and pitting them against the teams of other members of their fantasy league. These contests can span days, weeks, a full season, or even multiple seasons. While they vary from sport to sport, from website to website, and even from culture to culture, all fantasy sports are defined by one essential feature: their translation of statistics, derived from the performance of individual players in real-world sporting events, into points that are then used to determine the outcome of virtual competitions. They are most often identified with football and baseball, but are played in association with basketball, soccer, hockey, auto racing, golf, fishing, cricket, rugby, etc. Due to their immense popularity, fantasy sports have had a considerable impact on the broader sports and sports media industries. They attract substantial interest from profitable consumer demographics, particularly from wealthy, educated, white men, and thus generate enormous revenue—$32 billion in 2016, according to the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (“Industry Demographics”). They shape the relationships of fans to players, to sports teams, and to each other, via traditional and new media. In doing so, they influence sports viewership practices and event attendance. Fantasy sports foreground issues of gender and race, while also giving rise to a variety of complex legal questions. They offer insights into different cultures as well as their histories and values. Their significance, in this sense, can be described fairly as multi-faceted, far-reaching, and consequential.

<3> As fantasy sports and their impact have grown, so has the scholarly attention dedicated to them. Much of this research—mainly from communication studies and sports management perspectives—has taken as its focus the origin and development of these games, the motivations and constraints that impact participation in them, their relationship to various forms of media, and their attendant legal issues. However, recent scholarship has
begun to investigate the myriad complexities of fantasy sports from fresh angles and by applying alternative theoretical lenses. Our special issue reflects this emerging shift in fantasy sports research and constitutes an appeal for its continuation and expansion. We draw on disciplines seldom invoked in fantasy sports research, including philosophy, cultural studies, and literary studies. We also incorporate unique approaches from commonly represented fields in an effort to broaden the scope of fantasy sports scholarship and to urge it in new and different directions.

Lukasz Muniowski's article, “Fantasy Sports as Resistance to the Spectacle,” intervenes in an array of debates regarding subjectivity and agency in a brand-driven, capitalist system that transforms individual athletes into commodities and their fans into indiscriminate consumers. Contrary to what might be an expected argument for fantasy sports as yet another pernicious element of the same system, Muniowski asserts that fantasy sports enable and constitute resistance to “the spectacle,” Guy Debord's capacious conception of contemporary mediated, consumerist reality. The society of the spectacle breeds fans who are “invested though idle onlookers of highly produced and highly contrived events,” the author points out. Fantasy sports participants, however, have little interest in teams, brands, or their own status as fans. Instead, they study, care about, and engage with both players as individual performers and the measureable product of their real labor, statistics. Generally their knowledge of even lesser known athletes' skills is far more extensive than that of typical fans. Thus, the relationship of a fantasy sports participant to a player is much more dynamic and, in a sense, genuine, than the media-generated and controlled relationship between a fan and a superstar player turned brand name. Ultimately, Muniowski argues that, because fantasy sports are concerned exclusively with what occurs in a particular game, they resist the spectacle, subverting its “basic ideals of image, advertisement, and commodification,” its privileging of sensation over reliability, of the attractive over the effective.

In “Foucault's Fantasy League: An Examination of Power Relationships in Fantasy Sports,” Michael Dennis offers that “participation in fantasy sports leagues is not merely a hobby or a business model, but rather a form of postindustrial subjectivity under the episteme of our age.” Demonstrating the docility of the subjects produced by fantasy sports, he queries into their engagement in the examination and care of the self, conceptualized by Michel Foucault as practices of freedom. The article highlights some of the major moments that contributed to the game's development and supplies a concise explication of Foucault's notion of power as “a complex strategical situation in a particular society.” Because fantasy sports are about control, they are a fecund ground for the exploration of power relations,
and Dennis commences the exploration on the micro level through the relation between a fantasy team owner and a player on their team. While athletes are perceived by fantasy sports owners as subjects of power, the latter are themselves constrained and produced by the particular discourse and practices of fantasy sports culture. The author suggests that this culture induces participants to see themselves as subjects with mundane, hassle-filled, and insubstantial lives, who are in dire need of what fantasy sports offer—"excitement, thrills, camaraderie, and fantasy." Thus, fantasy these games serve a broader system that diverts the questioning of one's social, political, and cultural conditions to the questioning and treatment of oneself. He concludes that "Fantasy sports exercises an incredible amount of power to produce regimented, disciplined subjects who conform to the constraints placed on them, even to their own detriment."

<6> Taking up issues related to media dependency within fantasy sports, Travis R. Bell, Alexander W. Morales, and Jaime Robb's "Communities of Practice, Media Dependency, and Surveillance: A Virtual Search for Supremacy in Fantasy Football" examines "how technology has shifted the focus of fantasy football participation from its origins in community to an obsession with competition driven by capital and a desire for supremacy." The authors query into the mediated participatory culture of fantasy sports through three foundational elements: community, information, and surveillance. While community sparked the formation of the first fantasy leagues, information (in the form of statistics) advanced it to what it is currently, building participants' dependence on that data and other sports media consumption. This dependence made participants readily available for (and, in a sense, complicit in) surveillance—their own, of their opponents, and of the athletes on their fantasy teams. In their study of fantasy communities of practice, the authors find a hegemonic discourse of top-down control that provokes in the members of these communities a desire for supremacy through competition. To garner this supremacy, a fantasy sports participant must consume more information, which, in turn, benefits the corporations that design the virtual space and control its structure. Bell, Morales, and Robb observe the transformation of the sports spectator into the fully immersed fantasy sports participant, whose self-esteem rises along with their fantasy points and whose fantasy community is defined by the coexistence of solidarity and supremacy. The authors draw on Foucault and Thomas Mathiesen to contend that this participant is disciplined through the enclosure and the design of the virtual fantasy space, including its self-regulatory component that demands conformity.

<7> R. Kyle Kellam narrows the issue of conformity to the rhetorical procedures of fantasy sports, more specifically of the National Football League (NFL). In "The Illusion of Control:
Reinvigorating Colonial Desire through Fantasy Football’s Procedural Rhetoric,” he argues that the relationship between subject (fantasy sports participant) and object (NFL player) operates under colonial logic. Participants who are motivated by the illusion of control, he writes, end up “rearticulating an already troubling relationship that the NFL holds with America’s plantation past.” Kellam draws a parallel between the conception of the black body as a source of white wealth during slavery and the commodification of NFL athletes to which sports media rhetoric is a major contributing factor, since it normalizes the “objectification, commodification and consumption of NFL players for the purposes of entertainment.” Thus, the procedures of fantasy sports that set up participants to make specific choices bespeak a pre-Emancipation ideology, marked by white desire for the possession of black bodies. The basic rules, interactive practices, and processes that teach participants how to be owners, Kellam argues, are premised on the commodification of players. Designed to objectify athletes through statistical enumeration, the game rewards the ruthless business savvy of fantasy participants, rather than team loyalty or emotional attachments. It inscribes participants into a colonial, capitalist logic through the illusory control that it offers. Via Marx, the author suggests that fantasy sports are a cultural commodity with no other usefulness than its popular appeal and an admittedly fetishized existence, though it is practically useful to media and sports corporations.

<8> Michael Davis, Alysia Davis, and Chang Wan Woo approach the rhetoric of fantasy sports from a different angle in “The Trash Talk is No Fantasy: The League as a Representation of Trash Talk in Fantasy Sports.” The focus of their work is hegemonic masculinity in sports. They point to the continuing and, arguably, even increasing promotion of “dismissive and dangerous stereotypes,” from marketing that targets a male audience to a 66 percent male participation in fantasy sports. These virtual games offer a plethora of ways to assert and enhance masculinity not necessarily by winning first place, but by engaging successfully in their bawdy and aggressive trash talk, a pervasive aspect and a defining characteristic of fantasy sports culture that appeals to male fans. Through a careful examination of the main and recurring characters in the series, Davis, Davis, and Woo argue that The League “reinforces masculinity in sports and normalizes behaviors that make sports fandom a male dominated space.” In the series, trash talk is presented as the means through which fantasy sports participants assert their heterosexual, homophobic, competitive, and misogynistic maleness, an essential component for league bonding. The sexual objectification of women, their inscription into the discourse, as well as the use of feminizing language to emasculate characters constitute a prominent aspect of fantasy trash talk and preserve the existence and exclusivity of this masculine space. Ultimately, the
authors contend, the series does not offer "a meaningful social critique" by subverting gender stereotypes and the hegemony of masculinity in sports, but instead reifies them.

<9> This special issue concludes with reviews of two of the most significant publications on fantasy sports to date, Andrew C. Billings and Brody J. Ruhley's, The Fantasy Sport Industry: Games within Games (2013) and Nicholas David Bowman, John S. W. Spinda, and Jimmy Sanderson's Fantasy Sports and the Changing Sports Media Industry: Media, Players, and Society (2016). Both volumes contribute to the formalization and examination of the field of fantasy sports through their articulation of trends, fantasy player demographics and motivations, the origins and evolution of the fantasy sport industry, and changes in fandom and the notion of sports precipitated by these interactive virtual games. As Gregory R. Jones and Andrew J. Ploeg observe, some of the authors of these books look at fantasy sports as a cultural artifact and discern the troubled relationship between sports and realism; others focus on competition and community, gender, identity, and the future of the industry in order to better understand the phenomenon of fantasy sports.

<10> At the intersection between fantasy sports and philosophy, our special issue offers space and occasion for productive interaction that illuminates significant but overlooked aspects of fantasy sports. And we hope that readers will find the articles successful in this. Muniowski and Dennis approach fantasy sports through the works of two prominent contemporary French philosophers, Debord and Foucault, respectively, in order to delineate subjectivity production within the framework of fantasy sports. Though both agree that statistics are at the heart of the relationship between a fantasy sports participant and an athlete on his/her team, their conceptions of the implications of fantasy sports diverge significantly. While Muniowski finds in playing fantasy sports a capacity for resisting the dominant logic of contemporary consumerism, the spectacle, Dennis argues for fantasy sports participation as a normative activity driven by capitalist power relations and argues for the refusal to participate as a practice of freedom. Drawing also on Foucault, but engaging the issue of power via technology and surveillance, Bell, Morales, and Robb suggest that capital and supremacy-driven competition has displaced the community that defined fantasy football participation originally. Like Dennis, they, too, observe the ways in which fantasy sports participants are appropriated and produced by media corporations whose interest lies in revenue and who aim to establish a participatory fantasy culture that they can control through moderation, monitoring, and dependency.

<11> Kellam is similarly inclined to perceive fantasy sports ideology as premised on practices of commodification and ownership. What Bell, Morales, and Robb call the desire for supremacy, Kellam identifies as a colonial desire, a precondition for success in these
games. Unlike Muniowski, who conceptualizes statistics as the real labor of a player as opposed to their image, Kellam finds that the conversion of players into statistics is a form of commodification, which promotes “market logic over human qualities.” From the perspective of Muniowski’s article, however, to appreciate “human qualities” has become tantamount to appreciating a media-generated image that often has little to do with the person that a given athlete is. Despite the differences, both authors acknowledge that playing fantasy sports increases the engagement of a sports fan and particularly their knowledge of individual players. That engagement is not benign, according to Kellam, who refers to the popular sitcom The League, the focus of Davis, Davis, and Woo’s article, as evidence of the colonial desire instigated by fantasy sports due to the reliance of these games on illusory control. Davis, Davis, and Woo take up the claims regarding control, commodification, and supremacy made by Kellam, Dennis, and Bell, Morales, and Robb to examine the “hegemonic masculinity in sport” that the homophobic and sexist banter in the show exposes. As other articles do, theirs calls for a more critical approach to the conceptions and implications of fantasy sports.

<12> In its entirety, our special issue addresses a number of interesting and important questions related to this subject, from reality and authenticity in the highly mediated space of contemporary life to technology’s impact on entertainment and human interaction. The authors brought together in it query into the relations between fans and athletes, media structures and fans, as well as among fans themselves. They caution against pernicious capitalist and colonial logics and seek the possibility for developing resistance practices against them [1]. Still, many questions remain, including: How are fantasy sports conceived of and played within or across cultures? And, why are their platforms and paradigms similar or distinct? What factors contribute to the dramatic racial disparity in fantasy sports participation? How are fantasy sports played in unconventional ways, and to what ends? How do non-traditional fantasy sports differ from traditional ones, and why? What might fantasy sports and their participants become in the next five to ten years? Our hope is that this special issue encourages scholars to continue exploring uncharted areas of fantasy sports studies and that it enriches the field by blazing new paths of its own.

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Note


Works Cited