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The Fantasy Sport Industry

Games within games

Andrew C. Billings and Brody J. Ruibley



The Fantasy Sport Industry

Fantasy sport has become big business. Recent estimates suggest that there are as many as 35 million fantasy sport participants in the US alone, spending billions of dollars annually, with many millions more around the world. This is the first in-depth study of fantasy sport as a cultural and social phenomenon and a significant and growing component of the contemporary sports economy.

This book presents an overview of the history of fantasy sport and its close connection to innovations in sports media. Drawing on extensive empirical research, it offers an analysis of the demographics of fantasy sport, the motivations of fantasy sport players and their significance as heavy consumers of sport media and as ultra-fans. It also draws cross-cultural comparisons between fantasy sport players in the US, UK, Europe and beyond.

The Fantasy Sport Industry examines the key commercial and media stakeholders in the production and development of fantasy sport, and points to new directions for the fantasy sport industry within modern sport business. It is therefore, fascinating reading for any student, scholar or professional with an interest in sports media, sports business, fandom, the relationship between sport and society, or cultural studies.

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>List of tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1 Fantasy sport: the game changer	1
2 More than just an excuse to watch sports all day: why people participate in fantasy sport	16
3 Different sports, different identities: player's heterogeneity and fantasy sport play	37
4 The major players: an inside look at the Fantasy Sport Trade Association	61
5 Money changes everything (or does it?): free, low-stakes, and high-stakes fantasy play	86
6 Enough is enough: exiting and burnout of fantasy sport participants	112
7 Projecting the future: pitfalls, opportunities, and the trajectory of fantasy sport	127
<i>References</i>	150
<i>Index</i>	160

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Figures

1.1	In-person draft	7
1.2	ESPN online draft room	8
1.3	ESPN's Top 200 fantasy basketball players for the 2012-2013 season	10
1.4	A fantasy football owner's roster	11
1.5	A fantasy scoreboards providing live updates on player performances	12
2.1	Word cloud of open-ended responses of participants	31
3.1	Geico advertising on ESPN Fantasy Football website	47
3.2	The cast in FX's television show <i>The League</i>	52
5.1	Player profile showing information from multiple sources	94

Tables

2.1	Motivation and scale items used	27
2.2	Mean rank of motivating factors	28
2.3	Comparison of motive means and number of occurrences motive is top of participants' motive set	29
3.1	Top participated fantasy sports	40
3.2	Fantasy sport motivational differences of two-age groups	42
3.3	Fantasy sport motivational differences of four-age groups	43
3.4	General sport consumption and attitudes comparing of two-age groups	43
3.5	General sport consumption and attitudes comparing four-age groups	44
3.6	Fantasy consumption and attitudes comparing two-age groups	44
3.7	Fantasy consumption and attitudes comparing four-age groups	45
3.8	Motivation compared between Caucasian and non-Caucasian	50
3.9	Sport and fantasy sport consumption and attitudes comparing Caucasian and non-Caucasian	50
3.10	Motivational differences by gender (Ruihley and Billings, 2013 MCS)	56
3.11	Fantasy sport motivational differences of favored fantasy sport	58
3.12	Sport and fantasy sport consumption and attitudes comparing favored fantasy sport	58
3.13	Fantasy sport motivational differences of married/unmarried	59
5.1	Demographic differences between free and pay fantasy participants	88
5.2	Motivational similarities and differences of pay versus free leagues	90
5.3	Demographic differences between prize fund league and non-prize fund leagues	92
5.4	Motivational similarities and differences of prize fund leagues and non-prize fund leagues	92
5.5	Other factor similarities and differences of pay versus free leagues	93
6.1	Reasons people quit fantasy sport	115
6.2	Reasons People Quit Fantasy Sport (n=581)	117
6.3	Coded responses for not returning to anonymous fantasy provider NBA league	120
6.4	Rankings of participant motivation	123
7.1	"The future of fantasy sport," according to participants' answers to open-ended questions	129

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We hope everyone who reads this book finds information, insight, and enjoyment in equal measure. We have enjoyed this partnership and have learned from each other, believing the fusion of a sports media and sport management professor offers an eclectic, needed balance to the study of games within games.

1 Fantasy sport

The game changer

To stand out in the modern media landscape, it is not enough to win an Oscar, stage a splashy stock offering, or market a gadget that consumers demand. In virtually every media format, the ultimate goal is the game changer—the one development that promises to alter the way people consume media for the foreseeable future. In cinema, a “tent pole” film holds the potential to impact the box office revenues of virtually every other movie released that year. In smartphones and tablet technology, it’s the “killer app” that suddenly is in such demand; people will upgrade a device or purchase a new platform just to get that alluring application.

All media are either profitably making use of such a game changer, or urgently in search of one. That includes sports media, which have pursued one potential Holy Grail after another. Aspirations have ranged from the overly broad (“The Internet will change everything”) to the optimistically narrow (“Thanks to the 1999 Women’s World Cup, North America will go mad for soccer”).

Meanwhile, a true sports media game changer has emerged. It is fantasy sport, a phenomenon that is largely under the radar yet has participants in the millions and a financial impact in the billions. Though impressive, the numbers are not our primary concern here. Rather, we will explore how this game changer developed, how it is marketed, how fans become engrossed in it—and most of all, why.

Picture a typical American sports bar. Televisions are plastered on virtually every available inch of wall space. A mostly male clientele mingles while cognitively glued to a screen; beer is ever-present and ever-flowing. It is an autumn Sunday afternoon and National Football League (NFL) play is in full swing as eight early games escalate to their drama-packed conclusions.

Some odd scenarios are developing. A fan in a Minnesota Vikings’ jersey suddenly screams with excitement at the bar—though the Minnesota game is at a commercial break. Another fan in a St. Louis Rams’ cap is celebrating as well—but the St. Louis game has not yet started. At a nearby table, a fan appears to be cheering for *both* the New York Jets and New England Patriots. That’s puzzling because those teams are fierce rivals. What is behind these counterintuitive reactions?

Decades ago, one could have posited some logical explanations. Perhaps the Vikings’ fan is enthused about a hometown hero who is doing well for another

2 *The Fantasy Sport Industry*

team, and the Rams' fan might be happy because he just won a bet. But in this scenario, both fans happen to be fantasy football participants with Houston's Arian Foster as one of their prized players—so both are celebrating as Foster scores a second touchdown. As for the seemingly confused bar patron rooting for both the Jets and the Patriots, he's a fantasy football participant as well. He has both the Jets' Mark Sanchez and the Patriots' Aaron Hernandez on his team, so he cheers for both. (He will tell you his real favorite team, however, is the Cleveland Browns.)

This type of scenario unfolds daily in America—not just in sports bars and not just during football games. The reason: fantasy sport. And if the scenarios are complex, defining fantasy sport is even more so because it can take a multitude of forms. A somewhat cynical view of the phenomenon is exemplified by Vongsarath (2012), who labels fantasy sport as “a way for geeks and jocks alike to play out their lost dreams of playing actual sports” (para. 1). That view may have been typical as fantasy sport play emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s, but as it has gone mainstream, friendlier definitions have emerged. *Newsweek* author Starr (2005) offers a simple definition, saying that fantasy sport “uses real players and real stats to create faux teams in faux leagues” (Starr, 2005, para. 1).

As the game has evolved, game variations have proliferated, as has the statistical knowledge coveted by fantasy sport's keenest participants. For many, “fantasy football is not just a game. It's a game based on a game ... an oft-welcome and occasionally needed escape. A catharsis” (Pallister, 2011, p. 3). Virtually a lifestyle for some, fantasy sport for most participants might be defined somewhat facetiously by Gruss (2012), who states that it features people who “draft real players and pit them against each other in statistical battles through imaginary games, only to learn they know very little about sports” (p. E1). Yet, without question, it is essential to many modern sports fans. As the National Football league once tweeted: “Sundays without fantasy football are like a BBQ without burgers. Don't have a BBQ without burgers.”

Operationalizing fantasy sport

An academic definition, the one we will employ throughout this book, comes from Ruihley and Hardin (2011b). They describe fantasy sport as “an interactive team management activity based on statistics accrued by athletes of real-life professional sport organizations and/or college athletics” (p. 233). Within this definition, however, it is important to understand where the line is drawn in terms of what does or does not constitute fantasy sport.

First, let us explore the activities that fit our definition. Representing the majority of play are fantasy leagues in which people pick players from professional sports associations and reconstitute teams that participants believe will be superior—at least statistically—to other teams amalgamated by other participants in the league. In the United States, the most popular of these leagues is, without question, fantasy football (Fantasy Sport Trade Association, 2012a). The far-reaching popularity of American football (23.8 million North American fans participating annually) dwarfs that of the next three most popular sports: baseball

(12.2 million), auto racing (8 million), and basketball (7 million), respectively (Dockterman, 2012). In European countries and most other parts of the developed world, fantasy sport is less evolved, but still a growing entity, with soccer being the primary league in which fantasy players participate. At the same time, many people outside of the United States still find participating in US-based fantasy leagues enjoyable (Montague, 2010).

As fantasy football, baseball and basketball gained popularity, many other forms of fantasy participation became available. These included sports such as golf, hockey, cricket, and auto racing, but also nonmainstream sports such as bass fishing, bowling, darts, and tennis. All of these sports have fantasy correlates involving the same key principles: (a) competing against a relatively limited group of others in the form of a league, (b) repurposing statistics to create some form of fantasy “score” to measure team performance, and (c) incorporating all or the majority of the actual season statistics from that professional association to create a fantasy season in which a winner will be determined at the end.

Meeting the criteria of the first two correlates but not the third are “daily leagues,” which this book classifies as fantasy sport. The same parameters apply, with the exception that a player forms a new team each day; a winner results each night (for sports such as baseball and basketball) or each weekend (in the cases of football and NASCAR). Askeland (2012) notes the impressive growth of daily leagues such as FanDuel. It and other entries such as Daily Joust and 365 Fantasy Sports, cater to a highly involved player who enjoys the process of drafting players even more than watching the season unfold. For the purposes of this book, daily leagues match the established criteria because the leagues still involve the interactive management of a sports-based team using repurposed statistics from real-life athletes involved in major associations (professional or collegiate).

Still, it is worth noting that daily leagues offer less regression to the mean. From a gambling perspective, then, there is a larger percentage chance of luck in daily leagues than in season-long leagues. Such distinctions are being debated in courts, with lawsuits alleging that fantasy sport actually is gambling—an issue we will explore in great detail in this book. Some endorse the opinion expressed by Chad (2012) that “if fantasy sports isn’t gambling, then *Penthouse* isn’t pornographic. Fantasy football is as addicting, if not more so, than betting against the spread” (p. 5B). However, the majority of players and even outsiders regulating the activity parse differences between the two pastimes, especially when noting that stakes are small for the majority of fantasy players—approximately half of whom play for no money whatsoever. As such, the definition used in this book does not include a financial correlate; fantasy sport may involve the exchange of money from losers to winners, yet this does not appear to be a primary aim. As Starkey (2011) notes, “Are fantasy leaguers not gamblers? [No.] But you better believe they crave classified information. Lots of it” (n.p.).

This leads to some clarifications of what does *not* constitute fantasy sport, at least under the definition we use in this book. For instance, when one speaks of “games within games” in the United States, one celebrated example is “March Madness,” when millions of people complete millions of brackets in an attempt to

4 *The Fantasy Sport Industry*

predict the performance of 68 teams in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. This popular event does fit some parameters of fantasy sport. But in March Madness, statistics are not repurposed as much as final scores; team statistics are used to form predictions, but players are not reconstituted into new teams. Thus, while the tournament generates spirited involvement in many an office pool, it does not fit into the phenomenon we explore in this book: how and why fantasy players find immense enjoyment from consistent and long-term participation.

There are several other fantasy-based formats that certainly apply the same principles, yet do not meet the definition of fantasy *sport* as much as fantasy *games*. While we are only focusing our academic analysis on sport-based fantasy games, such ancillary games are worth noting—if only to establish the widespread proliferation of these games as they promote a sense of egalitarian “ownership” of various public entities and ideas. These related activities include:

- *Fantasy Congress*: Participants choose US representatives and senators to populate rosters. In this educational activity, participants are awarded points when legislators introduce bills, have bills passed out of committee, and have bills passed in each house of Congress (“Welcome,” 2012).
- *Hollywood Stock Exchange*: Participants are handed millions in imaginary money to invest in upcoming film projects based on how they think they will perform at the box office.
- *Umpire Ejection Fantasy League*: The purpose of this league is to objectively track and analyze “umpire ejections and their corresponding calls with great regard for the rules and spirit of the game of baseball” (“Umpire,” 2012, para. 1).
- *Celebrity Fantasy League*: Participants pick 25 celebrities with points awarded based on photos featured in magazines. Points also are given for births and marriages, but deducted for rehab stints and arrests (Dockterman, 2012).

Unfortunately, this notion of fantasy gaming also includes some potentially disturbing associations, including:

- *Fantasy Death League/Dead Pool*. Participants draft a team of celebrities and/or public figures with a focus on who might die within a given time period. Points are scored when their picks pass away.
- *Fantasy Reality Shows*: Participants choose contestants on popular American reality shows such as *American Idol*, *The Voice*, *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, *Big Brother*, and *Survivor*. There is even a fantasy game revolving around events on multiple reality shows, with points awarded based on colorful categories such as intoxication, fighting, hot tubs, nudity, and crying. (“Grantland’s Reality,” 2011).

From the benign to the bizarre, the intriguing to the troubling, it is clear that these and many other types of games trace their roots to the origins of fantasy sport. Indeed, fantasy sport has resulted in new ways to consume media, understand public culture, and interact with others in society. The communication surrounding

these types of activities is of particular import, as these fantasy activities involve the owning of something that was not previously regarded as property, typically a person (in this case, an athlete), who is now commodified and, arguably, dehumanized in the process. As Kellam (2012) argues about the rhetoric imbued within fantasy football:

Fantasy football discourse does more than just describe players or detail their achievements within statistical language. Instead, this language performs a colonial function of othering NFL players, maintaining a discourse that positions them as a commodity to be owned, monitored, and consumed by fantasy football participants. (p. 52–53)

Thus, the communicative imperative in understanding the motivations embedding this activity is underscored, with ascertaining the factors that collectively make the fantasy experience compelling (and often addicting) being critical for exploration.

Enduring popularity

Fantasy sport is now mainstream and worldwide, representing a game-changing development in how people watch and consume real-time sporting events. The Fantasy Sport Trade Association (FSTA) reports that as of 2012, 35 million Americans participate in fantasy sport each year. Moreover, they are avid sports fans. ESPN Integrated Media Research (2010) indicates that while the average sports fan consumes approximately seven hours of ESPN media each week, the average *fantasy* sport fan consumes more than *three times* that amount (22 hours and 40 minutes).

For a better understanding of the permeation and impact of fantasy sport, let us consider these two statistics separately. First, 35 million people play fantasy sport in America and Canada. Consider how that number compares to other phenomenon receiving substantial coverage in news and popular culture. For instance, the number of Americans who check their Twitter accounts daily is approximately 14 million (Sonderman, 2012). Almost 25 million Americans own a Nintendo Wii (VGchartz, 2011). Slightly more than 20 million Americans watched the final performances of *American Idol* (Seidman, 2011). As of 2012, 18 million Americans owned an iPhone (Gustin, 2012). Fantasy sport trumps all of these things—and these are just American comparisons. Take into account the millions of people participating in fantasy sport in Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world (discussed more in Chapter 7) and it is clear that this game within games is far from a niche activity played only by statisticians with time on their hands.

Now consider that second statistic: ESPN reported that sports media consumption more than triples if a person participates in fantasy sport. To be clear, we cannot draw conclusions about cause and effect—people do not consume an extra 15 hours of ESPN media each week solely because of their involvement in fantasy sport. However, we can draw conclusions about linkages: if you want to find the greatest sports media enthusiasts, fantasy sport play is the perfect place

6 *The Fantasy Sport Industry*

to look. Sports teams, organizations, and media outlets devote a considerable amount of time and effort finding ways to cause even slight upticks in ratings, interest, and advertising/promotional dollars. Yet fantasy sport, often covertly and with little fanfare, has managed to trump many social media functions, iPad applications, and technological advancements as *the* way to secure sports fans for a multitude of offerings. As Jonsson (2012) notes, “fantasy players have real clout” (n.p.).

The logical counterpoint to this clout is to question the statistics: “If fantasy sport is so popular, why don’t I hear more about it?” The simplest response is that this is an activity whose popularity is matched by its insularity. While the games are incredibly meaningful to participants within a given league, the rest of the world is so clueless about them that fantasy sport is not much of a conversation starter, at least within the most basic level of play. As Gruss explains, “Just as you would not share your adventures in the grocery store or from a pickup basketball game with someone who wasn’t there, there is no reason to talk about fantasy sports” (Gruss, 2012, p. E1). Even with 35 million players in North America, that leaves more than 400 million people who are uninitiated to the nuances of fantasy play. Moreover, to the casual observer, fantasy sport seems to have a steep learning curve (although fantasy sport industry leaders believe the complexity of participation is overstated). Hearing chatter about fantasy sport, many respond like Robinson (2010), who writes: “Fantasy football fans hear me now: I have no idea what you are talking about. Bleep, blurrp, dun-dun is all I hear when you gather and yammer about something Peyton Manning did” (p. D4).

As a result of all these factors, fantasy sport represents a greatly underreported phenomenon; it is mainstream to some and hopelessly esoteric to others. Yet the numbers do not lie and neither does the bottom line: fantasy sport has a financial impact registering in the billions (Wang, 2010). Even popular athletes take it quite seriously. British tennis star Andy Murray keeps his fantasy soccer trophy in front of all his other tennis trophies (Newman, 2012). While US fans continue to flock to the aforementioned mainstream offerings—fantasy football, baseball, and basketball—millions of Americans spend a great deal of time playing games such as fantasy golf, and auto racing. Fantasy participants in European nations find they have clout in the large, mediated world of football/soccer, while continually finding new avenues for growth, such as fantasy cricket and rugby, which now hold their appeal in these nations and beyond. The sports media world has found its literal and figurative game changer.

Processes of play: from draft day to championship games

The basics are the same in all forms of fantasy leagues: take already-occurring sporting events within society and find a way to reconstruct the people acting in the event to predict and perform new assimilated meanings to the existing actions. Leagues are formed in all sizes and formats, but can be subdivided into face-to-face and online leagues. Either type typically requires the participation of 10–12 people (although this can vary), but whether they participate in person or online

alters the interaction and overarching structures substantially. Many face-to-face leagues involve family, friends, or coworkers—people who already live in a fairly close proximity to one another. Conversation can easily take place at work, around the dinner table, or at other social events. Online leagues can include the same close friends and family, but also can involve perfect strangers or “friends of friends” sharing the love of fantasy sport. The interesting aspect of the latter scenario is that the acquaintance may only be built on fantasy activities. Being friends of friends or even strangers, participants really have only one common topic. Whether embarked on with friends or strangers, the fantasy sport experience is typically filled with jovial trash-talking among rivals, fluctuating competitive fates, elaborate information searches, and massive media consumption to see fantasy players perform—not to mention conflicted loyalties when the fates of one’s favorite “real” team and one’s fantasy team are at odds. A typical experience is likely to include (a) drafting of players, (b) lineup generation, (c) searches for information, and (d) enacted competition. Each will be explained in greater detail.

Draft

Drafting is one of the most exciting parts of the fantasy sport experience for most participants because it is where one’s team takes shape (Criblez, 2012). Whether in person or online, the draft is often filled with excitement, socializing, and strategy. In-person drafts occur when all members of a league meet in one location to choose their teams. Some in-person drafts use computers to assist with selection of players, while other in-person drafts are done with pen and paper or on a draft board. Figure 1.1 offers a glimpse of an in-person draft.



Figure 1.1 In-person draft