Eastern Illinois University
The Keep

Faculty Research and Creative Activity

Kinesiology & Sports Studies

January 2013

THE REALITY OF FANTASY SPORTS: A METAPHYSICAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS

Chad R. Carlson
Eastern Illinois University, ccarlson@eiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/kss_fac

Part of the Kinesiology Commons

The Reality of Fantasy Sports: A Metaphysical and Ethical Analysis

Chad Carlson
Published online: 16 Apr 2013.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

THE REALITY OF FANTASY SPORTS: A METAPHYSICAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS

Chad Carlson

Fantasy sports have become a major sector of our sport industry. With millions of participants worldwide and billions of dollars generated, fantasy sports have become a fixed part of our sport spectatorship. However, this prevalence has come without much intellectual investigation. Therefore, in this paper I discuss the metaphysics and ethics of fantasy sports. After providing arguments for the consistency of fantasy sports with prominent descriptions of play and games, I compare fantasy sports to other genres of play and games – sports, card games, 'cybersports', and spectatorship. After this juxtaposition, I delineate how fantasy sports are different from their real sport correlates. Fantasy sports are second-order games that are parasites of their real-sport counterparts. The differences between fantasy and real sports change our collective cultural views of the correlating real sports. While much good comes from the popular participation in fantasy sports, there are also drawbacks. That is, while fantasy sports participants tend to be more engaged spectators of sports, they also tend to only focus on particular, sensationalized aspects of the sports to which their fantasy ownership correlates.

The Fantasy Sports Trade Association estimates that more than 32 million adult Americans and Canadians participate in fantasy sports each year. The association's independent research has concluded that, on average, one in every five adult males over the age of 12 in the United States plays fantasy sports. Further, the data reveal that fantasy sports generated $1.9 billion of revenue in 2008. This dollar amount includes fantasy American football, basketball, baseball, golf, tennis, hockey, NASCAR, and wrestling. In all likelihood, when incorporating the popularity of fantasy sports around the world in Formula One, cricket, Australian Rules football, and Association football (soccer), these numbers would become much larger (Schouten 2011).

Fantasy sports are activities in which fans simulate ownership, management, and some coaching aspects of a select group of players in that sport. Participants – also known as fantasy players or owners – compete against other participants by comparing the attendant point values of selected in-game statistics for their chosen players. In Fantasy Basketball or Fantasy Soccer, for example, a fantasy owner drafts a select group of players in the top professional league of these sports. The fantasy owner can then trade, waive, and acquire players throughout the season according to the rules of the fantasy league. A fantasy owner's roster of players, then, accrue points for the fantasy owner through particular statistics associated with each player's performance in games. In Fantasy Football, this is also the case. A fantasy owner will usually draft, acquire, and trade for a group of quarterbacks, running backs, wide receivers, tight ends, kickers, and a team defense. These players – regardless of which actual National Football League (NFL) team for which they play – form the fantasy owner's 'team'.

Fantasy sports, and especially Fantasy Football, continue to enjoy widespread growth and popularity. However, it has come with inadequate intellectual or moral investigation. We expend great time and energy participating in fantasy sports but very little time critically exploring their philosophical merits. With that in mind I intend to analyze fantasy sports from a metaphysical and moral perspective. In doing so I will first evaluate how fantasy sports fit into existing theories of the nature of play and games and how that helps us better understand fantasy sports, play, and games. Then I will present some arguments regarding the ethical implications of fantasy sports and their corresponding real sports. I conclude that fantasy sports, while not actual sports in a metaphysical sense, constitute a category we might call parasitic games in that they spawn from their real-sport counterparts and in some ways alter how we conceive of these real sports. Throughout each section I will use Fantasy Football – American football – as the exemplar because it is the most prominent fantasy sport in America, and it is the one with which I am most familiar. My comparisons between Fantasy Football and actual football will translate from any fantasy sport to its real counterpart.

Fantasy Sports as Play

Sport philosophers, along with scholars from other domains, have described play in any number of ways. I will utilize a few of the more prominent descriptions in the following analysis. Mapping these theories onto the fantasy sport landscape will reveal compatibility and a greater understanding of both play and fantasy sports.

Huizinga's oft-cited definition has given lift to countless studies of play. He broadly describes that play is:

a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (1955, 13)

While this definition has come under scrutiny over the years, it continues to reveal embedded truths about play. Many have found the freedom of play to be among its most prominent features. That is, play is generally understood to be that in which we are free to be creative, make choices, and embrace an experience intrinsically. Others have found within this quotation the poignancy of play as 'not serious, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly'. Our fanaticism toward our favorite sporting teams and players often absorbs us intensely and utterly, and we often lose sight of the fact that it is, in some way, not serious or at least not life threatening. Many fantasy owners are drawn into unhealthy levels of absorption in their 'not serious' fantasy leagues.

Fantasy sports participants might further find application for Huizinga's description of play as 'outside ordinary life' (as the term 'fantasy' would imply) and 'within its own proper boundaries of time and space'. Accordingly, the rhythm of a football season – generally Thursday night, Sunday, and Monday night games with off-field status determinations and transactions occurring in a fantasy league's virtual forum on Tuesday and Wednesday – provides Fantasy Football players with fairly regimented boundaries of time and space.

Fantasy owners and anyone who associates with them might find special truth in Huizinga's words that play 'promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world'. Those who lack an understanding of fantasy sports, do not watch sports, and do not understand the specialized lingo and banter among fantasy owners may experience some social exclusion from fantasy league members during their fantasy seasons.

In contrast, many fantasy leagues present a clear contradiction to Huizinga's claim that play is 'connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it'. Fantasy leagues often include buy-in prices or money set aside for the season's winners. Caillois debated this issue, stating that:

The part of Huizinga's definition which views play as action denuded of all material interest, simply excludes bets and games of chance – for example, gambling houses, casinos, racetracks, and lotteries – which, for better or worse, occupy an important part in the economy and daily life of various cultures. (2001, 5)

Intuitively, it seems like Caillois makes a more compelling case than Huizinga's puritanical views. We often experience the play spirit while participating in activities in which – 'for better or worse' – money or other tangible goods exchange hands.

Clifford Geertz wrote about a culture in which betting games occupy an important part of the economy and daily life. In his study of Balinese cockfighting as 'deep play', he argued that the activity is extremely important and meaningful to the Balinese. 'As much of America surfaces in a ball park, on a golf links, at a race track, or around a poker table, much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring' (1973, 417). Geertz effectively describes the place of gambling on cockfighting and how it promotes play as he says betting 'is a means, a device, for creating "interesting", "deep" matches, *not* the reason, or at least not the main reason, *why* they are interesting, the source of their fascination, the substance of their depths' (1973, 432). Accordingly, gambling is not the central element of fantasy sports that makes them interesting. Becoming a fantasy owner, much like owning a chicken that fights, can be intrinsically interesting. Gambling, then, is a part of fantasy leagues that simply heightens interest in the activity. It is a means for creating more interest or depth in the activity. We often invest more time and effort into games when money – among the most attractive extrinsic rewards – is on the line.

Geertz draws on Jeremy Bentham's concept of 'deep play' when describing the gambling in cockfighting. For Bentham, 'deep play' is that in which the 'stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational … to engage in it at all' (Geertz 1973, 432). And yet cockfighting, fantasy leagues, and other gambled-upon games attract us in a way that we engage in 'deep play' despite Bentham's logically sound arguments against such behavior. Geertz argues that the explanation for this irrationality 'lies in the fact that in such play, money is less a measure of utility, had or expected, than it is a symbol of moral import, perceived or imposed' (1973, 433). In fantasy sports, too, the money wagered to enhance the interest or depth of the activity is less utilitarian than it is a symbol of status. While the money certainly matters (as it seemingly always does), the importance of gambling on these types of activities affirms that 'one's pride, one's poise, one's dispassion, one's masculinity' and, less concretely, the meaningfulness of one's life, are on the line to a much greater degree (1973, 434). 'What makes Balinese cockfighting deep', Geertz argues, 'is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen' (1973, 436).

Geertz interprets the Balinese cockfight as a text by which we can understand the Balinese in particular and humanity in general. What the cockfight 'says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus exampled, that society is built and individuals are put together' (1973, 449–50). Although

Geertz focused on one particular play activity in one particular culture to develop his theory, Caillois seems to have a similar sentiment underscoring his exposition on play in general. That is, Caillois' discussion of play writ large parallels Geertz's on Balinese cockfighting as the former says, 'What is expressed in play is no different than what is expressed in culture. The results coincide' (2001, 64). Therefore each author aims, in Geertz's words, to tell us not 'what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place' (1973, 464).

Within Caillois' social arguments, he describes four categories of play or games that help organize our diverse set of play experiences – chance-oriented (*alea*), competitive (*agon*), simulative (*mimicry*), and vertigo (*ilinx*) (2001, 12). Fantasy sports seem to fit into three of them – all but the latter. Aleatory or chance-oriented play (*alea*) comprises one category. Some of the fate of fantasy sports is out of the owner's hands. Fantasy owners are not real-sports team owners, managers, or coaches and are therefore confined to mere spectatorship once the actual games begin. In his book, *Committed: Confessions of a Fantasy Football Junkie*, Mark St. Amant (2004) admits that he and other fantasy owners understand that their ability to win or lose fantasy games rests largely in the hands of the 'Fantasy Football gods', for it is impossible to predict with much certainty player performances or injuries that affect the outcome of fantasy sports.[1]

However, this is only one aspect of fantasy sports, as St. Amant also extols the role that skill plays in the outcome of fantasy games. This fits within Caillois' category of competitive or agonistic play (*agon*). Fantasy sports are competitive in that one player tries to outdo the others by means of skillful management – along with, of course, the help of the Fantasy gods. It is this competitive aspect that St. Amant claims is Fantasy Football's most alluring facet. While football fans often feed their competitive instincts by living vicariously through their favorite teams and players, Fantasy Football gives fans a way in which they can skillfully use their knowledge of the game to compete actually – not just vicariously – in the world of football. Which players to draft, utilize, trade, acquire, and waive make a difference in the outcome of Fantasy Football matchups. And skillful managerial decisions showing deep understandings of football tactics and player tendencies make a difference in one's ability to win fantasy games.

The competition of fantasy sports is closely tied to the third category Caillois uses to describe play – mimesis or simulated play (*mimicry*) – because the players try to outdo one another by making decisions *as if they were* the managers of an actual football team. Caillois sees a particularly vivid connection between mimicry and competition in sports as he says, 'Great sports events are … special occasions for *mimicry*' (2001, 22). While casual fans and fantasy owners may often be ignorant of this facet of their spectatorship, it is

difficult to deny. Our incessant second-guessing of coaching decisions or our post-game discussions of heroic game-winning moves displays our interest in mimicking particular coaching, managerial, or ownership roles.

Fantasy Sports and Game Metaphysics

Clearly, fantasy sports are inherently compatible with Huizinga's play and include the elements of chance, competition, and simulation found in Caillois' typology of play. Indeed, Caillois' categories of chance, competition, and simulation denote elements of fantasy sports that attract us to them, as Geertz describes, as 'deep play' activities. Some philosophers, however, have taken note that Huizinga, Caillois, and Geertz ambiguously use the terms 'play' and 'games'. These scholars wrote about play and games in similar ways without discriminating between what seem to be two distinct phenomena. They seemed to indicate that the two phenomena constitute the same or at least two similar types of experiences. Yet some scholars have argued that play and games are separate, although also experientially related (Carlson 2011). So as fantasy sports fit within the realm of play, it seems intuitive that fantasy sports also fall within the scope of games. Closer scrutiny of this claim will reveal more about the nature of fantasy sports as games.

Suits offers the gold standard for philosophic inquiries into games. In his celebrated definition he offers four necessary and sufficient conditions, arguing that:

> To play a game is to attempt to achieve a state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (1990, 41)

Fantasy sports, as game activities, include the first three conditions of this definition. The prelusory goal of fantasy sports is fundamentally similar to that of real football. Both football and Fantasy Football, for example, attempt to have one 'team's' players move the ball into a specific area more often than the other 'team's' players. However, the lusory means of these activities are different and produce two very distinct lusory goals. Both of these activities define their permitted means with constitutive rules (which, in the realm of fantasy sports, may vary from league to league and certainly varies from sport to sport). These rules, involving player acquisition, roster sizes, trade parameters, and set-up deadlines, reduce the possible efficiency that a fantasy owner may have in playing the game.

Suits' last condition, the lusory attitude, is unique because it is not a part of the activity as an intended object. Instead it is a part of the intentionality of

the participant. The participant must accept the rules of the game – which may be unnecessary barriers in real life – as necessary constraints that must be heeded in order to achieve the goal of the game. The relative lack of agency in fantasy sports ownership as compared to participation in real sports makes it easy to accept the constraints, thereby taking on the lusory attitude.

The relative lack of agency that fantasy owners have in determining the outcome of their games explains how these activities fit into Caillois' first two categories of games – skill-based and luck-based. In fact, skill and luck play prominent roles in many of our most popular games. Loland describes the nature of these characteristics in sport by explaining that, 'in good sport competitions, there is a delicate balance between the apparently contradictory elements of *agon* and *alea*' (2002, 148). Too much *agon* (skill-based competition) Loland argues, reduces sports to scientific experiments in which what is supposed to happen always does happen. Too much *alea* (luck-based competition) turns them purely into games of chance in which we have no indication whatsoever about what might happen. We like our sports to be somewhere in between these two extremes.

While fantasy sports are not games of pure chance like slot machines or the lottery, they seem to favor chance more than actual sports. In actual sports, Loland notes that advantage generally goes to the more skilled team or athlete. We come to understand sporting contests, leagues, and cultures based on which team is more skilled or has the most capable players. We often acknowledge a 'favorite' and an 'underdog' beforehand because we usually seem quite capable of determining which team is better before the game is played. And yet we know that chance plays a role in each of these contests, even if it does not decide the contest. We understand that 'lucky bounces' and inexplicable 'favor from the gods' resulting in 'upset victories' genuinely factor into the outcomes of sporting events. Sometimes we lament that the better team had an 'off night' or the lesser team 'played out of their league'. Nevertheless, 'That's why we play the game', is the common refrain to proclaim the accepted but secondary elements of chance that can directly affect the outcome of a contest.

Certain sports lend themselves to luck more than others. Skiing is a sport with a good amount of luck because of weather variability. Precipitation decreases visibility; fresh snowfall slows a course down; clear skies and sunlight generally glaze a course, making it faster but increasingly difficult to navigate. One race may offer each of these conditions to different contestants. A variety of cycling and short-track speed skating races, because of all the crashes, also have strong elements of luck. Even the most skilled contestants cannot avoid a crash when it happens through no fault of their own right in front of them; no amount of skill or strategy can control them. On the other end of the spectrum, sports like long-track speed skating, swimming, or sprinting – in which

participants compete in enclosed, isolated, non-interactive, and/or uniform settings – do not involve as much luck.

Along this luck-susceptibility continuum of games, fantasy sports probably fall closer to the side in which luck plays a prominent part. We can envision it being near card games – close to poker or blackjack but not as luck-susceptible as craps or slots. In fantasy sports, as in poker or blackjack, for example, skill and chance seem to affect more equally the outcome. Unlike sports, the hierarchy of skill and chance in fantasy sports, poker, and blackjack is much less clearly defined. In these games, we expect skill and chance to play similarly important roles. Skill can make a great deal of difference, but it can take a participant only so far. Elements of chance also make a great deal of difference, but they do not unilaterally determine victory and defeat.

Within these similar roles of skill and chance, however, there are also important differences. In card games such as poker or blackjack, the chance comes at the front end and skill ensues. A player is dealt a hand randomly and can use skill to do the most work with the hand she is dealt. Fantasy owners, conversely, must use their skill on the front end, with chance following. The skillfulness is in creating a roster that is talented, injury-free, and strategically inclined to defeat one's fantasy opponent. The chance, then, is in the actual sport playing out in the way that the fantasy owner anticipated.

Success in Fantasy Football is based on 'match-ups' – knowing how a certain quarterback will fare against a certain defense as determined by previous performances. Going into the game, this type of match-up will have a 'favorite' and an 'underdog'. The goal is to hedge one's roster to have more favorites playing than underdogs. In this way, the fantasy player is trying to minimize the chance element to the greatest degree knowing that it cannot be eliminated. In Loland's terms, especially considering the vast amount of popular literature geared toward predicting fantasy outputs, the fantasy player wishes to move closer to a 'science experiment' and further away from pure chance.

Therefore, fantasy sports differ in important ways from both actual sports and card games in terms of the roles of skill and chance, even though all three game genres incorporate both elements. Chance, for instance, plays a much greater role in fantasy sports than in their real-sport counterparts because the lusory goals of the two games do not always run parallel. That is, the fantasy owner is often at the whims of decisions made by the real-sport coach – whose objectives are different than and may be contrary to those of the fantasy owner. In card games, contrastingly, we see a more equivalent allocation of the agency in skill and the non-agency in chance to fantasy sports, even though that allocation may be realized differently. A poker player, for instance, has agency in the playing out of the event but no determination in the initial distribution of cards with which to play. A face card is always worth 10, and the card player is

confined to that value when dealt such a card. A fantasy owner has agency in the setting up of the event but no determination in how it actually plays out. He can enter any player on his roster into the game, but he never knows what value that player will produce for him.

With skill and chance as jointly central characteristics of fantasy sports, what is the role of mimesis or simulation – Caillois' third category – in these games? Does simulation play a role that is as central to fantasy sports as skill and chance? Analytically suggesting a difference between two categories, Suits describes games that are goal-governed and those that are role-governed (1990, 91). Football and chess, because the goal is to achieve a state of affairs which concludes the game, are goal-governed. Games with a prominent simulative element such as Cops and Robbers or certain adult theatrical pursuits, because the goal is the continuation of the game within the confines of the simulation, are role-governed. So what does that mean for fantasy sports?

The goals of role-governed games are to either dupe a person into believing that one is actually the role one has taken on (as seen in surprise games, gags, or pranks) or to have another person create 'good lines' (Suits 1990, 111) for a game player to be able to play the role desired (as seen in theatre or a great deal of adult participation in children's games). It seems as though fantasy sports do not include theatrical dupery – no one is trying to convince others that they *actually* manage elite sports teams – but do include the latter goal, at least to an extent. By conducting a fantasy draft, setting line-ups, making trades, strategically moving players, adding free agents, and dropping under-performers, fantasy owners engage in the role playing of creating 'good lines' for each other just so they can act like team managers. They perpetuate each other's interest in simulating management by carrying on as if they were managers, at least in some sense.

However, in role-governed games the goal is the continuation of the game – to see how long one can take on an undisclosed role or continue a script of 'good lines'. Fantasy sports are clearly not of this nature. They are goal-governed games that have a specific end – to score more points than one's opponent by the end of the week's games and by the end of the season. Indeed, it seems as though fantasy owners try to win games throughout the season whether they do the best job in their role of simulating management or not. Good role-playing can help a player win fantasy sports games. That is, thinking and making decisions like a real coach, manager, or owner can help a fantasy owner put together a game plan that best actualizes the fantasy team's potential to win. But good role-playing is not necessary to win the game. One must out-maneuver fellow owners (skill) and/or find favor with the 'fantasy gods' (chance) – central elements of fantasy sports – but it is conceivable that one could win fantasy sports competitions without ever intentionally acting like a real manager (mimesis) or ever wishing to do so. In other words, good

role-playing, or responding to 'good lines', may be helpful in making advantageous trades or selecting the players that give the greatest potential to win, and it might be very enjoyable for the players, but the execution of 'good lines' and response to 'good lines' seems less critical to the outcome of fantasy sports than skill and luck.

Two computer analogies may provide additional argumentation. A fantasy owner could feed all of the past football game data into IBM's 'Watson' and have it pick players based on calculations to maximize points based solely on probability. In this case, no mimesis takes place, but the play occurred. A fantasy owner who independently contracted 'Watson' to do the work would still win or lose fantasy games. Conversely, a fantasy owner could engage in a fantasy sports season against 'Watson', trying to beat the computer in head-to-head fantasy match-ups. In this case, the fantasy owner's strength may be taking account of affect or emotion that the computer cannot comprehend. By contemplating and discussing these 'feelings' about particular players or matchups, a fantasy owner is engaging in mimesis that may or may not help him to defeat 'Watson'.

With the roles of skill, luck, and mimicry more clearly defined in fantasy sports, we might be able to understand them better in comparison to another type of 'virtual' or 'un-reality' game. Hemphill (2005) has argued for the viability of 'cybersports', or those games that are played in a virtual world – on a computer or interactive gaming device. While he notes that sport philosophers seem to agree that sports have an element of physicality that requires some prowess, he posits that 'cybersports' also display similar attributes. In the case of the latter, 'bodily or "manual" dexterity in one medium has a bearing on the actions of an electronic correlate in another' (2005, 202). This bearing from one medium to another comes with a mimetic element – the 'cybersport' participant mimics the role of on-screen athlete in the sport she chooses, all the while understanding that both her skill and luck have a direct bearing on the outcome of the game. Fantasy sports, despite their name and their usual occurrence in an electronic correlate, are different from 'cybersports' because they require no physical prowess.

Yet while fantasy owners need not display any physical prowess like sports or 'cybersports' participants, neither are they without any direct agency like fans – another sporting subset that demands comparison. Fantasy owners are actually playing a game. By setting rosters and lineups for their fantasy teams, they are dictating how they present their teams for fantasy competition – even though they have no agency in real football. A football fan is not actually playing a game – just passively observing. While she or he may be very emotionally vested in the action, the fan is in certain ways once separated from the game action.

Qualitative Differences between Sports and Fantasy Sports

From the previous analysis, it is clear that fantasy sports are different from many other game genres in appreciable ways. While they share characteristics with real sports, card games, 'cybersports', and spectatorship, they are distinct from each of these categories. In fact, fantasy sports may best be described using a new title: parasitic, second order, or derivative games because they find life only by building off of real sports' elements. Fantasy sports are not sports because it takes no physical prowess to win, and yet they are won and lost based on the physical feats of the players in the related real sports. Fantasy Football, for instance, is a game that has been built around American football, but it is not reducible to the latter. While in real football the players compete on the field, in fantasy sports the fantasy players compete in a world that is derivative from the on-field competition. In the following I will describe how Fantasy Football is parasitic on American Football. In doing so I will also describe ways in which the parasite potentially mutates the original organism.

In actual football, for example, the best players and best teams are those who are able to win football games. This is the lusory goal of football: to follow the myriad rules to attain possession of the ball in the opposing team's 'end zone' (and/or to kick the ball through the other team's 'goalposts'), and to prevent the other team from doing so as often or more. For spectators, this is relatively simple to determine – at elite levels, a team is successful if it is achieving this lusory goal (winning games) and is struggling if it is not. In Fantasy Football it does not matter whether NFL teams meet this lusory goal or not. All that matters is how many statistically based points each particular position player scores. So while a normal football spectator may watch a game to cheer for a favorite team, see an exciting player, or simply watch football, a fantasy owner may have a different frame of mind while watching football. Granted, a fantasy owner may watch a game to see who wins but the same fantasy owner will also watch to see how particular players come out statistically in games not involving a favorite team or rival. While any fan may be interested in these data to know how particular players and teams fared and to determine how teams won and lost, this information is of great importance to fantasy owners because it determines whether they reach their own lusory goal – winning or losing a Fantasy Football game.

Thus, while a football fan watches a New York Giants game hoping that, for example, the Giants attain the lusory goal of football by winning, a fantasy owner's spectatorship may be more complex because Fantasy Football's lusory elements germinate from football's lusory elements. For instance, a fantasy player who 'owns' the Giants' quarterback may want the Giants to score a lot of points (part and parcel of the lusory goal in both football and Fantasy

Football) but also may hope that the Giants' defense gives up a lot of points (making the lusory goal of football more difficult) so the game stays competitive. Indeed, if the Giants have a big lead in the second half then they will probably throw the ball much less (a conservative strategy to achieve football's lusory goal) and the quarterback will tally fewer points for his fantasy owner (poor circumstances for a fantasy owner to reach Fantasy Football's lusory goal).

A fantasy player who 'owns' the Giants' wide receiver may also want the Giants to score a lot of points but, again, only in ways that predict a lot of passing. This fantasy owner may hope for a lot of long yardage situations in which the receivers are more likely to have opportunities to catch the ball. On the other hand, a fantasy player who 'owns' the Giants' running back may hope for a lot of short yardage situations that favor handoffs, and for a Giants blowout early so that they will feel less pressure to score quickly and will use their running backs more often. However, if the Giants' lead becomes too insurmountable, they might insert a second-string running back – a scenario the fantasy owner certainly hopes to avoid.

Therefore while the lusory goals, rules, or means in the game of football do not change for those who participate in Fantasy Football, a fantasy owner's lusory goal, rules, and means are at times similar, different, and even incompatible with those of real football. In sum, while football fans want to see their teams win, Fantasy Football owners want to see any number of things happen during the course of a game – with disregard for the principles of sound football, at times – that will allow them as fantasy owners to reach the lusory goal of Fantasy Football.

Ethical Discussion of Fantasy Sports

What are we to make of these changes regarding how fantasy owners watch professional sports? Before starting an ethical analysis of fantasy sports, it is important to give some descriptive background. It has not been proven that fantasy sports have directly corrupted their non-fantasy correlates. That is, to my knowledge there have been no reports of football coaches, owners, or players putting Fantasy Football above actual football by shaving points, throwing games, or giving less than their best effort to appease obsessed or large-pocketed fantasy owners. And, from game theory and financial perspectives, this is not likely to happen in the future. A professional football player is unlikely to make an illegal deal worth potentially thousands of dollars when by doing so he is risking his NFL contract worth millions of dollars and his incalculable reputation. The huge sums of money that players and coaches make, the relatively small amounts of money that victorious fantasy owners usually earn, the fickle blessing of the 'fantasy gods', and the intricate scoring mechanisms

that make fantasy sports so complex make this practice illogical, unreliable, and downright foolish. The potential reward comes nowhere near justifying the risk.

Players are certainly aware, though, that their performances affect the outcomes of countless fantasy leagues. Indeed, Ray Rice, running back for the Baltimore Ravens, tweeted on 4 October 2011 after a particularly poor performance against the Jacksonville Jaguars on Monday Night Football, 'To the fantasy owners, I promise you a better performance next week' (Hensley 2011).[2] However, despite Rice's conscientiousness, there is just too much complexity for the likelihood of fantasy owners to influence a player to throw a game by giving less than his best effort with financial inducements or otherwise. So unlike the 1919 American baseball scandal in which Chicago White Sox players colluded with the mafia to throw the World Series, the 1951 widespread American college basketball point-shaving scandal, the 1971 German Bundesliga scandal in which veterans fixed games, the 1980 bribery scandal in Italy's Serie A, or the much-maligned bout-fixing in Japan's highest level of Sumo wrestling (Guttmann 2004, 183–88), any money wagered on fantasy sports has not trickled down to taint the attitudes of athletes toward winning.

Despite this reality, fantasy owners are capable of going to extreme lengths for victory. Indeed, it is easy to see that many fantasy owners have become obsessed with their game. Based on the amount of media coverage through television, radio, the internet, newspapers, and magazines, and the amount of time that fantasy owners spend on their hobby, it is likely that many fantasy owners neglect their jobs, spouses, children, and healthy autumn activities. This practice seems ethically questionable by itself, but it is not an issue that I will discuss here. This issue is much larger in scope, as it plagues sports participation and spectatorship in general and not just fantasy sports.

With those considerations in mind, I will address the ethical defensibility of how fantasy sports change the way we watch and understand sports. Many ethical arguments in the sport philosophy literature regarding changes to sports or sporting cultures find their foundation in MacIntyre's idea of practices and practice communities. A practice is:

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (1984, 187)

Sport philosophers have identified sports as particular practices and have made arguments encouraging the practice communities to make ethical

decisions with what MacIntyre referred to as the internal goods of these sports in mind.

It does not seem as though fantasy sports have directly affected the internal goods of sports in any negative way. Football, for example, is still about the players and coaches reaching the lusory goal of football (winning games) by following the rules and lusory means of the game. Fantasy Football has not changed that. Football coaches still play the players who tackle, block, pass, catch, and execute plays well so their teams can win.

In fact, it is not difficult to see how Fantasy Football could endorse the internal goods of football because fantasy owners may be likely to spend more time delving into the nuances of football strategies, statistics, and matchups to better understand the relevant enabling skills of the game. In doing so, fantasy owners become more educated and more engaged sports fans while, over time, creating more enlightened sports cultures. Indeed, if the reports that over 32 million people play fantasy sports in the United States and Canada alone are correct, then we can imagine that fantasy sports have done a great deal to nuance the cultures in which their sports reside. Since so many football fans play Fantasy Football, for instance, we can easily see how this activity can have a profound impact on our collective cultural view of football.

Indeed, many facets of this collective cultural view have positive implications. Digging into the statistics, strategic tendencies, and matchups in football certainly create better educated fans. Better educated fans – or those who have spent large amounts of quality time developing their understanding of the game – come to appreciate the game's internal goods and their roles in creating meaningful personal narratives while developing the virtues that football's traditions have inculcated.

With this motivation for the masses of fantasy owners to analyze critically upcoming games, fantasy sports have, to an extent, not only changed our collective cultural views of sports but they have dictated what we believe is important in these games. If millions of people pore over the individual statistics of NFL quarterbacks, wide receivers, and running backs – the main positions according to most Fantasy Football leagues – then it is easy to see how we might view football more in terms of individuals than teams. As Holowchak and Reid have argued, fantasy teams 'are literally just collections of individuals, in the rawest sense' (2011, 101).

The very nature of fantasy sports distorts some of the virtues that the football community, before the advent of fantasy football, developed over time. That is, the lusory goals and means of Fantasy Football differ enough from real football to have ethical ramifications. Fantasy owners distort the virtue of teamwork – a very prominent football virtue and non-existent Fantasy Football characteristic. In real football, we cheer for the Giants, the Bears, or the Packers, for example, to win. The offensive linemen must work together to

provide opportunities for the skill position players to shine; the defensive linemen must plug holes and attract blockers so the linebackers and defensive secondary can make tackles; the special teams units do the best job they can so the offense or defense start in as enviable a position as possible. Clearly, as Holowchak and Reid state, 'statistics fail to capture true athletic excellence – especially in team sports' (2011, 101). In Fantasy Football, though, these attributes only matter in ways that affect the possible accrual of statistics for select individual players. We cheer instead for the individuals we drafted on our fantasy teams to score individual points regardless of the actual NFL team to which they belong. And in some cases, we even root against our players' teams so that our players have the potential to accrue as many points as possible.

Further, fantasy rosters rarely carry over more than one player from season to season, distorting the virtue of loyalty. While many players often change teams in real football, too, the nature of fantasy sports breeds particularly cutthroat methods of fantasy ownership and promotes particularly intense player transience among fantasy rosters. A player is only worthwhile to a fantasy owner if he is scoring fantasy points. There is no room in Fantasy Football for players who are good teammates, good blockers, or good at executing intangibles that help a team win. In an increasingly disloyal culture of team sports, fantasy owners may be among the least loyal as their means for hiring and firing players produces greater commodification of athletes than that which is allowed in the real-sports leagues.

Morgan offers detailed arguments about collective cultural influences and distorted values such as these on sport by building on MacIntyre's idea of practice communities. As the moral maxims of religion lost their luster in the broader American psyche, Morgan argues, people needed something else to fill the void. During the Progressive Era of American history, sports gave people something to help them regain their moral bearings. Great masses of people rallied around sports as one remaining place in culture in which working together as a team mattered, sportsmanship showed class and character, and playing by the rules may not always have resulted in victory but it surely demanded respect. The corruption of this state of affairs in American sport came from external influences, or particular entities that did not value the internal goods of the sports. Morgan characterizes the sensationalism and commercialism that has gained entrance inside the walls of sport as reasons why sport has become only a skeleton of its once morally relevant self (2006, 1–6).

Using Morgan's ideas, it might be clear why some believe that fantasy sports have negatively influenced real sports. In an era in which actual football game action only intermittently interrupts such television distractions as commercials and camera shots of scantily dressed cheerleaders, shirtless die-hard fans, screaming coaches, and players celebrating their on-field successes,

Fantasy Football might be seen as just another way in which our spectatorship of football is being watered down.[3] While fans watch and are enthralled by the sensationalized distractions during games, fantasy owners can find even more to distract them from many of the valued practices in football. No longer do they watch games and value many of the internal goods of football – as fantasy owners they only look for the total yardage and number of touchdowns scored by particular players. No longer do we appreciate or even notice the nuances of a well-executed offensive game plan that keeps the defense on its heels or the way in which a vaunted pass rush pressures the quarterback into making bad decisions. Instead we watch to see how many fantasy points our players score. With Fantasy Football it is possible to see how we might miss out on many of the features that truly help us understand football even though fantasy owners may spend more time than the average fan engaged in football-related analysis. Instead of observing to learn how an offensive line created a solid running game we wallow in disappointment that our quarterback did not get a chance to throw the ball much and gain many fantasy points. Instead of understanding the wise decision to sit a productive running back at the end of a blowout to prevent an injury and not run up the score on an opponent, we are disappointed that the running back will not gain any more fantasy points for us – after all, our fantasy team might not be in a blowout scenario at this point. Running back Arian Foster put words to this utilitarian viewpoint of fantasy owners. After sustaining an early season injury on 28 August 2011, he tweeted, '4 those sincerely concerned, I'm doing ok & plan 2 B back by opening day. 4 those worried abt your fantasy team, u ppl are sick'. This provocative statement was still trending two days later. Therefore, while fantasy owners may gain a greater understanding of and appreciation for the sports in which they simulate ownership, fantasy sports only encourage deeper analysis in particular facets of their sports – and those facets may not embrace many of the games' internal goods or moral values.

Conclusion

Fantasy sports do a lot of good for their respective real sports. They foster more active participation in particular sporting cultures by building parasitic games on the original sport. These second-order games encourage play – a phenomenon that generally increases the player's quality of life. Further, fantasy sports encourage fans to increase their level of interest and analysis while watching individual games and throughout the course of a season. This spectatorship has the potential to become more robust than even the most die-hard jingoist that only cheers for victory for one team. Fantasy sports, at their best, encourage spectatorship to be more active by engaging with statistics, making management-related decisions, preparing a game plan, and generally thinking

about the game more analytically than a normal spectator would while watching for a final outcome only.

However, the parasitic nature of fantasy sports can be problematic. Because the lusory goals of, say, football and Fantasy Football are different, Fantasy Football owners often focus on the football action that helps them win their fantasy games rather than the action that produces an actual winner and loser in the football game. As Fantasy Football becomes more popular, its views, values, and goals parasitically overtake football's traditional social value. Accordingly, we potentially miss some of the internal goods and metaphysically meaningful aspects of our sports through fantasy ownership. We may also be inclined to overlook many of the aesthetics, nuances, and often-undervalued characteristics that make the games morally matter, as Morgan argued. So while fantasy sports are good in the sense that they give us incentive to explore sports and some of their internal goods and challenges in new ways, they also have the ability to distract us from fully embracing many other internal goods that have traditionally made sports so important – and morally relevant – in our lives and cultures.

Notes

1. Using the term, 'Fantasy Football Gods', is St. Amant's (2004) reification of the forces that unpredictably (to the fantasy owner) alter the performances of players on Fantasy Football teams.
2. Rice gained 28 yards on 8 carries (Hensley 2011).
3. *The Wall Street Journal* provides evidence that the ball is only in play for an average of 11 minutes during a 60 minute football game. And football broadcasts generally last longer than 3 hours (Biderman 2010).

REFERENCES

BIDERMAN, D. January 15, 2010. 11 minutes of action. *The Wall Street Journal*. http://online.wsj.com (accessed August 3, 2012).

CAILLOIS, R. 1958/2001. *Man, play and games*. Trans. M. Barash. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.

CARLSON, C. 2011. The "playing" field: Attitudes, activities, and the conflation of play and games. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 38, no. 1: 74–87.

DIXON, N. 2010. A critique of violent retaliation in sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 37, no. 1: 1–10.

FOSTER, A. August 28, 2011. Twitter account. http://twitter.com/ArianFoster (accessed August 3, 2012).

GEERTZ, C. 1973. Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. In *Interpretations of cultures: selected essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz, 413–53. New York: Basic Books.

GUTTMANN, A. 2004. *Sport: The first five millenia*. Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press.

HEMPHILL, D. 2005. Cybersport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 32: 195–207.

HENSLEY, J. October 25, 2011. Offense remains Ravens' super roadblock. *ESPN: AFC North Blog*. http://go.espn.com (accessed August 3, 2012).

HOLOWCHAK, M.A., and H. REID. 2011. *Aretism: An ancient sports philosophy for the modern sports world*. New York: Lexington Books.

HUIZINGA, J. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

LOLAND, S. 2002. *Fair play in sport: A moral norm system*. London: Routledge.

MACINTYRE, A. 1984. *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. 2nd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

MORGAN, W. 2006. *Why sports morally matter*. London: Routledge.

ST. AMANT, M. 2004. *Committed: Confessions of a fantasy football junkie*. New York: Scribner.

SUITS, B. 1978/1990. *The Grasshopper: Games, life and Utopia*. Boston: David R. Godine.

Chad Carlson is in the Department of Kinesiology and Sport Studies at Eastern Illinois University. Correspondence to: Chad Carlson, Eastern Illinois University, Kinesiology and Sport Studies, 2554 Lantz Arena, 600 Lincoln Avenue, Charleston, IL 61920 USA. E-mail: ccarlson@eiu.edu