

Gambling in a Fantasy World: An Exploratory Study of Rotisserie Baseball Games

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to map the social landscape of the burgeoning fantasy baseball gaming phenomenon. This study relies upon two approaches: an analysis of the existing gambling literature to look for useful theory and research applications, and observations of fantasy baseball players to better understand their behaviors. The authors seek to provide an exploratory framework that will aid in the development of future theory and research on these phenomena.

Key words: fantasy baseball, sports, sports gambling

The most recent (2003) Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary contains, for the first time, a separate entry for the definition of the word "rotisserie:"

²*rotisserie* *adj, often cap*

[fr. *La Rotisserie Francaise*, restaurant in New York City where a group of fans began the organization of a fantasy baseball league in 1979] (1980): of, relating to, or being a sports league consisting of imaginary teams whose performance is based on the statistics of actual players < a ~ baseball league >

Introduction

This article seeks to provide an introductory framework for an understanding of "fantasy" or "rotisserie" baseball,¹ a gaming phenomenon that has thus far escaped serious academic inquiry. According to recent estimates, fantasy sports have ballooned into a billion-dollar industry – and one that is growing at a phenomenal rate (Ballard 2004).

What is more, for our purposes here, fantasy baseball play may be considered a form of gambling, with profound similarities to more familiar gambling activities. As in table poker, participants contribute money to the league "pot" before play begins, and then additional monies are added depending on the dynamics of subsequent play. The pot grows, and it is ultimately divided up among the winners at the end of the season/game. The winners (and losers) are determined by the strategic decisions that are made, the skill of the other players involved, and luck – a combination that is noticeably present in many types of popular gambling games. If we broadly define gambling as an activity that risks something of value (substantial amounts of money) on an event whose outcome is undetermined (such as the whims of a professional baseball season), fantasy baseball clearly qualifies.

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¹ In this paper, the terms "fantasy baseball," "rotisserie baseball," and "roto" (an abbreviation for rotisserie) will be used interchangeably.

The Rules of the Game

As the cliché states about table poker, fantasy baseball's rules are deceptively simple, but a mastery of the nuances of game strategy may well consume a lifetime. The rules are themselves part of the fantasy baseball legend, and can be traced to a single moment in the history of the game.

The founding figure of fantasy baseball is Dan Okrent, a prominent writer who will forever be known, despite his status as a *New York Times* editor, as the inventor of the game. In 1987, Okrent concocted the basic rules on a plane trip, and then communicated them to a group of friends at a Manhattan restaurant called La Rotisserie. The idea was that each participant in the league would select an original "team" of baseball players from the Major Leagues, and then use those players' statistics to see who had picked the best team. Though the restaurant has since gone out of business, the name "rotisserie" has stuck (Diamond, 2004).

Whether its participants call their group a rotisserie, roto, or fantasy league, there are two common foundations. First, major league baseball players' current season statistics and performances provide the basis for scoring and determining league winners. The original "4x4" rotisserie rules use four hitting categories (batting average, home runs, runs batted in, and stolen bases) plus four pitching categories (total wins, saves, earned run average, and the WHIP ratio [essentially the number of baserunners a pitcher allows per inning pitched]) (ESPN Fantasy Baseball, 2004).

The second apparent universal is that leagues begin the season with a draft, in which the players that will represent fantasy participants' "teams" (and that will therefore, in many instances, dictate their moods over the course of the six-month baseball season) are selected.

Aside from these fundamentals, the following represent some of the more frequently used rules and league guidelines:

- **A Commissioner.** The commissioner manages the league by establishing league rules and resolving disputes over rule interpretations. Commissioners may also be responsible for publishing league standings (or selecting the Internet service that will do so), ensuring that all fees are paid, and organizing drafts, league parties, and/or award ceremonies.
- **Team Names.** League participants can be quite creative in selecting a name for their fantasy "team." Some use variants of actual major league baseball team names; many create their own unique ones. In our observations, some of the more memorable names included: Stud Bubbas, Hollywood Love Doctors, Parts Unknown, Flying Rearendos, Dr. Terror's Team of Horrors, Ain't Worth Spit, Batsmen of the Kalahari, Wally Wayback & the Popcorn Kings, The Mojo Workers, Minimum Wagers, Darwin's Finches, Silver Slugs, Shaky Alibis, Field Weenies, Fowl Bawlers, Foulic Cymbals, Hit or Myth, Sultans of Squat, Urine Troubles, Bums of Steal, Hand Gestures, The Drunken Cheapskates, Not Ready for Pastime Players, and Grumpy Old Men.
- **Draft.** Teams may physically convene for their draft or they may conduct a cyber-draft online. Players are either auctioned to the highest bidder (in an "auction draft"), or team managers take turns selecting players (in a "straight draft"). Fantasy teams usually consist of players from each of the baseball positions; for instance, teams normally need to draft a shortstop, a second baseman, a first baseman, pitchers, and so on – in the same way that real teams need players to cover each position.
- **The Season.** During the season, teams score points based on how their major league players perform in the statistical categories pre-selected by the league. For instance, to take the simplest example, all of the home runs hit by all of a fantasy

team's players are added, and then players receive points based on this performance (the team with the most home runs receives the most points, the team with the second most home runs receives the second most points, and so on). As is the case in major league baseball, when a player is injured, he may be placed on a disabled list (DL), and another player may temporarily replace him. Teams are typically allowed to trade players (though commissioners may have to sanction these trades, to assure fairness).

- Conclusion of the Season. The season ends when the regular baseball season concludes. At the end of the season, the team with the most points overall (in all of the pre-selected categories) wins the league. Prizes are typically awarded to the top finishers.

Research Approach and Methods

Because this is an exploratory study, the authors relied on methodologies appropriate for an area of study that is in its infancy. Guided by Zikmund's (2003) suggestions that exploratory studies proceed modestly and qualitatively, this study will rely upon qualitative analyses of the behaviors discussed. Specifically, this study relies upon our participant observations as well as a qualitative content analysis of fantasy baseball web sites. The objective of this paper is to introduce these ideas to the academic community, with hopes of providing some exploratory frameworks that will aid in the development of future theory and research on these phenomena.

An eclectic methodological approach is employed in this work – as is at times necessary with activities that take place on the Internet. In noting the challenges of Internet-based social research, Wakeford claims that “there is no standard technique, in communication studies or in allied social science disciplines for studying the Web” and suggests an eclectic approach that “plunder(s) existing research for emerging methodological ideas which have been developed in the course of diverse research projects, and weighing up whether they can be used” (2000, p. 39).

In conducting our analyses, we draw from our extensive experiences as longtime participant-observers: we have collectively played in 42 fantasy baseball seasons dating back for 20 years. While we have not been systematic in our observations over the past 20 years, this experience profoundly informs our commentary here. As outlined by Krippendorf (2004:175), this kind of extensive “familiarity” with the research topic provides a vital foundation for a content analysis.

In addition, because the more frequent medium of communication for fantasy baseball play is the Internet, and because fantasy players are often active on fantasy baseball “bulletin boards,” Internet “postings” from four different fantasy baseball web sites have been analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. This analysis was conducted using guidelines developed by Krippendorf (2004); however, because even this substantial (some would say definitive) recent volume on content analysis lacks a substantial section on the content analysis of Internet postings, we have proceeded eclectically.

Generally, qualitative content analyses involve close readings of text, interpretations of these texts into “new narratives,” and analyses of social and cultural perspectives that inform (more positivistic researchers might say “bias”) these proceedings (Krippendorf 2004, p. 17). This particular content analysis is “text-driven,” an approach that takes advantage of rich and relevant texts in an exploratory manner (Krippendorf 2004, p. 340).

As Altheide eloquently describes it, in conducting qualitative content analyses, it is important to employ an approach that “offers a perspective for analysis of human action in the field and in documents; the key is to reconceptualize the latter as the former and vice versa” (1987, p. 76). Here, relying upon our extensive experience in these fields, we attempt to analyze the “field as documents,” and we seek to analyze these documents as “the field(s).” In this sense, ethnographic sensibilities also inform our work.

On the fantasy baseball sites we studied, postings are conducted anonymously, and they provide insight into the everyday emotions and decision-making processes involved in fantasy play. If each bulletin board “posting” is considered a separate document, in our estimation we examined well over 2,000 documents. On a small number of occasions, in order to clarify themes discussed, the study authors would post questions on the topics at hand.

More generally, this analysis was informed by the conventions articulated by Atkinson and Coffey, who suggest that

...documentary materials should be regarded as data in their own right. They often enshrine a distinctively documentary version of social reality. They have their own conventions that inform their production and circulation. They are associated with distinct social occasions and organized activities. This does not mean that there is a documentary level of reality that is divorced from other levels, such as the interactional order. Documents are used and exchanged as part of social interaction, for instance (1997, pp. 47-48).

Over the course of five months, we recorded our qualitative observations of these postings, developed a series of study themes or “guideposts” (reflected in the headings of this paper), and met frequently to discuss our emerging findings. Ultimately, our methodological approach was iterative, in that each round of analysis was informed by the previous one, and then in turn informed the next one.

Of course, this approach is not without its own limitations. For one thing, the findings presented here may not be applicable in all fantasy baseball settings, and the representativeness of either the authors’ leagues or the bulletin boards cannot be assured (or even determined). However, because our goal was to present a modest and exploratory account of an activity that has not yet been accounted for in the academic literature, we felt that our methodological approach was appropriate. Perhaps in the future more systematic analyses can further expand our knowledge about these settings and these activities.

The structure of this article is as follows: after an overview of the most recent data on fantasy baseball, insights into the cultural components of fantasy play will be discussed. Next, positive consequences and negative consequences of fantasy baseball play will be considered, and finally, suggestions will be made regarding potential trajectories for future research.

Fantasy Baseball as a Mass Phenomenon

To truly understand the sociologies and psychologies of the American sports scene, one must at some point engage the “national pastime,” baseball. In much the same way, to understand the dynamics of fantasy sports one must begin with fantasy baseball. As the prototypical and first fantasy game, the development of fantasy baseball follows a familiar trajectory: this was originally considered an activity for outcasts, engaged by those presumed to be overly bookish and socially challenged (“geeks” more colloquially).

More recently, however, this has evolved into a mainstream activity – and consequently, big, big (gaming) business. According to a recent analysis, a total of \$1.65 billion is spent annually on fantasy sports (Ballard, 2004), but more importantly, these dollar figures reflect a broad demographic shift in participation. Like the Internet itself (interestingly, the tool that has enabled and simplified fantasy baseball’s allure), fantasy baseball no longer belongs solely to an enthusiastic but socially disconnected cult. And just as Internet gaming has forced gambling researchers to rethink any number of assumptions about the ways in which gambling will evolve in the 21st century (see Woolley 2003), so too does

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fantasy baseball challenge some of our conventional wisdom about common patterns of gambling and social interaction.

As other researchers of gambling behavior have noted (Abt, Smith, and Christenson 1985), prevalence and demographic information can provide vital starting points for more complex analyses of gambling activities. However, as some observers have noted, the online and quasi-anonymous nature of fantasy baseball limits our ability to provide accurate estimates of its size (Burka, 1999). Indeed, at this stage, a representative and scientific study of this population would probably be either unfeasible or cost prohibitive.

Nevertheless, estimates of the size and demographics of fantasy sports do exist, and reputable publications cite them. Most recently, a 2004 *Sports Illustrated* article cited a survey of 449 fantasy players (note that these figures include all fantasy sports). This survey asserts that the average fantasy player is 41 years old, with a bachelor's degree and an average household income of \$89,566. Players appear to be overwhelmingly male (93% of the sample) and Caucasian (also 93% of the sample), but these are not necessarily bachelors: the average household size in the sample was 2.4. Most notable, perhaps, was the contention that 15 million Americans participate in fantasy play (Ballard, 2004).²

In fact, these games' growing popularity makes it easy to argue, as we do, that for many players one of the positive consequences of fantasy baseball play appears to be its capacity to encourage social connectedness among (an increasing number of) fellow players. This runs counter to oft-stated assumptions about the nature of gambling and social interaction – specifically, that the gambling games of today explicitly discourage socializing with other players (Putnam 2001).

Cultural Aspects of Fantasy Baseball Play

Cultures of Gambling and Gaming

Over the years, the concept of “culture” has played a central role in the field of sociology. The term itself has been defined in a wide variety of ways and applied to a wide variety of settings; however, in most instances, the term “culture”³ in sociology incorporates the values, norms, symbols, and language produced and deemed meaningful by a specific group.

It is useful here to turn to the work of one of the most thoughtful sociological commentators on gambling behavior, John Rosecrance. What Rosecrance says about the social worlds (Strauss, 1978) of gambling is also true of the social worlds of fantasy baseball:

The major gambling games have all fostered the development of activity-related social worlds. Within these worlds, gambling holds center stage; more accurately, it is the stage. Relationships that develop in these contexts provide the participants with important sources of social interaction (1988, p. 71).

With fantasy baseball, the game serves as the stage, and the developments upon that stage provide material for the players' interactions. We might even extend these dramaturgical metaphors to incorporate Goffman's (1967) perspectives on game settings as a place to demonstrate valued character traits; in this instance, traits such as

2 Nor is this an activity restricted to American players. Anthropologically speaking, a growing variety of cultures are adapting fantasy play to their own national pastimes – from cricket in India to football (soccer) in England (Ballard, 2004).

3 Traditionally, the term “culture” refers to both material culture (the tangible things produced by a group) and non-material culture; however, these distinctions have become predictably murky when applied to Internet-based environments (where “tangible things” are often more difficult to identify). The definitions here are derived primarily from (Hughes, Kroehler, and Vander Sanden, 2002).

competitiveness, sportsmanship, and negotiating skill are valued and revealed through the dynamics of play.

Furthermore, Rosecrance's phrase "activity-related social worlds" is especially appropriate here; posters and participants often discuss the dominance of fantasy baseball in their lives, and how central the game is to their social worlds: "Revvin," for instance, laments that "I can honestly say most of the friends I speak to have something or other to do with fantasy sports. The friends I had that stopped playing kind of faded away."

Rosecrance also distinguishes among sub-types of gamblers, again with striking parallels to fantasy baseball players:

Gamblers can be divided into two broad categories: occasionals and regulars. Although these categories are based to some extent on the frequency of participation, they are essentially self-designated groupings. Regulars would agree that their lives have been changed and influenced by their gambling; occasionals would not. Obviously, within the two categories there are various stages and levels; these general terms can nonetheless be useful (1988, p. 72).

We suggest that fantasy players can also be effectively divided into two similar groups – serious players and casual players. The former group would also "agree that their lives have been changed and influenced" by their play; the latter would not. While membership in these groups can be fluid, these distinctions can provide a useful framework for understanding fantasy baseball play.

In expanding upon these themes, Rosecrance notes that:

Those who consider themselves regular gamblers feel that gambling is an important part of their everyday lives, whereas occasionals view gambling as a recreational diversion. Gambling is conducted in settings that can be considered social worlds. Within these worlds, gambling is the central activity and the main topic of discussion. Gamblers develop continuing relationships with other participants that for regulars often become an important source of social interaction (1988, p. 86).

For serious players, fantasy baseball represents an important part of their everyday lives. They engage in daily rituals to check the performance of their team, to explore trading possibilities with other teams, and to check the standings of the league to see where they stand relative to the performances of other teams.

Furthermore, these activities feed social interaction with other players – as well as with other players in other leagues through Internet bulletin boards. In the next section (on positive consequences of fantasy baseball play), we will expand upon these important sources of social interaction and how they affect players' lives.

Values, norms, and language

Just as specific values, norms, and language exist within the social worlds of traditional gamblers, these components of culture have also developed in fantasy sports worlds. In fantasy baseball, values, or culturally defined standards of "goodness," include sportsmanship, competition, fun, and fair play. Norms, or specific rules that guide group members' behavior, are both dictated by national organizations and adapted to fit local leagues – usually in order to preserve the values discussed above. Within these cultures, probably the most important symbols are linguistic. Fantasy baseball players have developed their own vocabulary, often

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indecipherable to the uninitiated, including terms such as 5x5, H2H, LIMA, and so forth.⁴

Bulletin board posters are vocal when values-oriented debates are introduced to the group. Typically, these offerings outline a series of “don’ts” rather than “do’s,” and involve complaints about behaviors observed in the posters’ leagues. One poster, “Shell,”⁵ complains about attempts “to trade a player who is injured and out for the year to another team who doesn’t (yet) know it” – an apparent subversion of this player’s conceptions of fair play. Other “fair play” complaints reveal a concern about trades offered in good faith, only to be pulled off of the table after the would-be trading partner agrees.

On occasion, norms and values collide in discussions about individual league’s rules and the “spirit of the rules” (i.e., values) behind them. Players regularly seek other players’ counsel when confronted with a challenge to the rules, and the ongoing discussions serve to provide dynamic guidelines and boundaries. One player wonders whether his league should accept a transaction that was filed a mere 22 seconds after the league’s deadline for transactions. “Mister A” responds, quite memorably, that exceptions to these rules are “four-lane on ramps to the trouble and discontent expressway,” indicating support for a strong adherence to the rules as written in these leagues.

Interestingly, many leagues sprout up in work environments, which means that disputes over these matters can spill over into work and everyday life. In a later section, we will address these kinds of negative impacts on work environments (prompting at least one office in Chicago to hang signs that read “No Rotisserie” in company common areas (Wolff, 1995).

A Quest for Metrics

Fantasy baseball players are perhaps the most recent wagerers to engage in an age-old quest to find metrics that the others somehow have neglected; put another way, they seek to discover and employ variables that predict better than those currently used by their fellow players. Many fantasy participants engage in seemingly endless hours of research in an effort to develop a more comprehensive portrait of a performer (i.e., a baseball player) – and his worth.

Once more, the parallels to other “gambling cousins” such as the stock market are undeniable, and indeed, these connections have been commented upon by business writers (Bianco, 2003, Roberts, 2003). In both fantasy sports and the stock market, financial risks are involved, and research is extraordinarily helpful. Furthermore, in both pastimes unforeseen events can positively or negatively affect “performance,” and performance consistency is far from certain. In both “games” expert opinions are available (for a price), and there are appropriate times to buy and sell “performers.” As one fantasy baseball observer recently insightfully opined, with both fantasy play and stocks, “(a) combination of blue chips and undervalued gems in a diversified portfolio is the way to riches” (Cotter, 2004, p. 16). Fantasy baseball, it seems, links a passion for the national sports pastime with a passion for the national business pastime (the stock exchange).

In his work on sports betting, Furst (1974) notes connections between quantitative analysis of sports and sports fanaticism. He observes “a tendency for upwardly mobile ‘white-collar’ workers to apply analytical assessments to a diversity of social phenomena. Sports offer an excellent opportunity for those so inclined to demonstrate their analytical expertise” (52). These tendencies (not to mention these demographics)

4 These terms refer, respectively, to a specific configuration of fantasy play involving five pitching categories and five hitting categories, “head to head” forms of game play, and “Low Investment Mound Ace” strategies, which argue for a sort of “betting the house” on established hitters and cheap pitchers.

5 Names have been changed from the original (and often anonymous) names posted on these sites.

seem to appear frequently among populations of fantasy sports players. For instance, “Marco1260” heaps praise on particular fantasy baseball web site for “teach(ing) me which indicators are important.” “Soulman” concurs by saying that “the numbers used by (the site) are incredible” and raves about their ability “to create a pool of players likely to perform at or above expectations.”

Among aficionados of statistical analysis and baseball, this trend is invariably referenced by citing *Moneyball*, a 2003 book by Michael Lewis that glorified both professional baseball general managers and the appropriate use of improved metrics. *Moneyball* details a professional baseball franchise (the Oakland A’s) and its successful efforts to compete against teams with substantially larger payrolls. The book argues that the A’s general managers accomplish this through a new appreciation for improved metrics in an effort to better evaluate the performance of baseball players.

In an Internet posting, “FinnTenn” summarizes one *Moneyball* theme as follows: “Performance can best be predicted by appropriate quantitative measures of skill and production. I think its message was that traditional baseball circles consistently under/overvalue talent because they don’t have their eyes on what actually makes a player a good contributor and they don’t know how to measure it.” Another key component of *Moneyball*’s story, in which those who run actual baseball franchises are unmasked and heroicized, leads us to our next discussion.

Living the Vicarious Life

Fantasy baseball leagues allow players to engage in what might be called “vicarious participation” upon the hallowed stages of professional baseball. In a world in which many of our recreational games are trending toward the vicarious and virtual, these activities deserve our research attention. Like fantasy camps (an altogether different phenomenon, in which adult participants live out their “fantasies” by going away to a camp where they receive instruction from baseball legends), fantasy baseball allows participants to imagine themselves in a different role – one that is admired by millions of sports spectators in everyday life.

Many who play fantasy sports invoke this “dream” when talking about their participation. One letter-writer to the editor of *Sports Illustrated* described his interest in by saying “I dream of the day that I can get a chance to (play the general manager role) for a pro team” (Lynch, 2004, p. 16). In describing the allure of his fantasy baseball play on a web site, BigEasy notes that “you get to live through the players you own.” While the pursuit of vicarious pleasures through sports spectatorship is hardly a new phenomenon, fantasy sports allows participants to link their individual skills with the skills of professional athletes (as well as the skills of those who manage them).

A Gambling Culture

Whatever the cultural components of fantasy baseball play may be, it is clear that this has become, for many, a gambling culture. As is the case with more conventional forms of sports wagering, many claim to find the game more interesting when money is risked and awarded to the winners. On the web sites, posters brag about substantial amounts of money won from fantasy baseball play. “Jason19” cleverly and cryptically alludes to these potentialities when he claims that his wife became a passionate supporter of his play after he told her “baby, I could win \$xxx (deleted in case IRS is reading).” This statement brings to mind the anxieties gamblers have with reporting their winnings to tax authorities.

“JG5784,” on the other hand, describes a more friendly relationship with his winnings – and his spouse: “I have the typical agreement with my wife – she takes home any and all winnings (less expenses) from my exploits in fantasy baseball. To date that is well over \$20K so she is more than willing to let me watch a little hardball now and again.” While some proceed to marvel at the amount of money that this well-known

poster has taken home, this appears to be a less than spectacular (although certainly atypical) amount for an experienced fantasy baseball player.

Other players discuss more subtle ways that gambling creeps into the fantasy baseball game: “BigPoppa” brags about his league, where “side bets are optional and can be very lucrative!” Meanwhile, “BigEasy” sounds a warning that fantasy baseball “is also a form of gambling for some. I know plenty of big money leagues that award thousands to the winners. Because of that some friendships have been ruined because of an argument regarding roto.” These more problematic consequences of fantasy play will be addressed in a later section.

Evidence is also mounting that suggests that in the near future, large jackpots will entice participants to risk (and win) even more money. One fantasy sports web site offers “Over \$750,000 in cash and prizes” as well as a “\$250,000 Grand Prize” (Grogan Sports, 2004). Another web site, fantasycup.com, advertises “grand prizes” of \$5,000 and \$10,00 for a variety of games (Fantasy Sports Enterprises, 2004). CDM Fantasy Sports, which bills itself as “The Worldwide Leader in Fantasy Sports,” also appears to be a leader in terms of offering large jackpots to fantasy players as well – they advertise “high roller” games in a variety of sports with jackpots exceeding \$50,000 (CDM Fantasy Sports, 2004). As these fantasy games develop, it will be interesting to track the degree to which they will converge with conventional jackpot-based gaming formats – and in a related note, the degree to which they will attract gaming regulatory attention (as yet, it appears that they have attracted little or none).

At the very least, suggestions that the amounts wagered here are trivial appear to be disingenuous. According to the *Sports Illustrated* analysis, by far the largest category of expenditures in an accounting of the billion-dollar fantasy industry is “league entry fees” – fees that are directly tied to the amounts that are ultimately won by skilled (and fortunate) players.⁶

Positive Consequences of Fantasy Baseball Play

In much the same way that the gambling literature is largely devoid of research that attempts to identify the gambling act’s positive consequences, few speak about the benefits of fantasy baseball play. In fact, there is good reason to believe that many players are experiencing a wide variety of positive consequences from their play.

On the cognitive level, it may well be that fantasy players are developing analytical and problem solving skills. While this may sound a bit dubious at first, a recent *Curriculum Review* article raves about the potential for these kinds of statistical games in educational settings (“Fantasy Baseball Activity Leads to Fantastic Math Learning,” 2003). The article cites a pre-algebra course that encourages students to form (and then follow) their own fantasy baseball teams. The course has been administered to 15,000 students, and is hailed as a way to encourage students to embrace math.

Of course, these kinds of benefits are obviously not limited to math students: probabilities, bell curves, operationalization, and measurement are all regularly referenced – directly and indirectly – in bulletin board postings discussing fantasy baseball strategy. In fact, a number of (presumably adult) posters cite an improvement in their analytical skills (or “fanalytical” skills, as they are sometimes called). As we noted in the previous section, sophisticated discussions take place on bulletin boards in an effort to improve upon current metrics and to develop new ones. While these connections with cognitive learning processes may at first sound strange, these learning connections have already been established with other interactive technology-based recreations such as video games (Provenzo, 1991).

Fantasy baseball games also may provide both an outlet for competitive drives as well as an effective extension of “bar room debates” over sports knowledge. Friends

⁶ League entry fees are also devoted in some instances to commissioner fees and party costs; however, what is left over from these fees and “transaction” fees is awarded to the winners of the game.

have long engaged in friendly and not-so-friendly sports arguments grounded ostensibly in their knowledge of the game; fantasy sports, it would seem, serve as yet another way to keep score (Burka, 1999). In addition to providing a scoreboard, fantasy sports games provide *material* – for conversation and connectedness (as well as for disputes and disconnectedness) – in short, for social and competitive interaction.

In fact, the most commonly cited benefits to fantasy baseball play are social in nature. “Tiger2” says that one of the “pros of playing fantasy baseball” is a “surprising bond with all sorts of friends (even a waiter at a restaurant who overheard a conversation about fantasy baseball).” “OK1994” says that playing “creates different friends,” while “BigEasy” likes that players get to interact on message boards like this with people you would never have met otherwise.”

Though it is most often referenced as a negative, there are those who find that their marital relationships are actually enhanced through their joint love of all things fantasy baseball. “Ted” says that “my wife will often be looking through the paper and say brightly stuff like ‘Hey! Orlando Hudson went 4-for-4 last night!’ Because she knows he’s on my squad. She also assigns my team each year a different name. Nomar Garciaparra was the linchpin of both my ‘Funny Names Team’ (with Magglio, Kazuhiro, Dmitri, D’Angelo) and my ‘Big Noses’ team.”

Given these observations, it may well be that Robert Putnam’s (2000) speculations on the potentially positive benefits of the Internet – in which geographically dispersed individuals with common interests can unite in unprecedented ways – can be easily applied to the social worlds of fantasy baseball players. Overall, it seems to us that the primary social benefit of fantasy play is similar in nature: the game can provide a unique form of “connective tissue” for those who participate. As Putnam notes, these kinds of connections can prove valuable:

By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital – tools and training that enhance individual productivity – the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value (2000, pp. 18-19).

At the same time, it is worth wondering, as Putnam does, whether “virtual social capital,” as is observed in fantasy play, “is itself a contradiction in terms” (2000, p. 170). In the future, research may help improve our understanding of whether social capital that is facilitated by the Internet is indeed social capital as it has been conventionally configured – or whether it requires a new theoretical formulation entirely.

Negative Consequences of Fantasy Baseball Play

As might be expected with any mass cultural (and mass revenue) phenomenon, a backlash has developed in response to fantasy sports’ popularity. In responding to a generally positive article in *Sports Illustrated*, one letter-writer invokes a series of familiar sports values in a scathing criticism: “(Fantasy sports) are a plague. Because individual statistical gluttony is the objective, the fantasy player’s rooting interests are perverted (who cares who wins, as long as my guys get their numbers?), and the true virtues of sports – teamwork and sacrifice – are obliterated” (Carney, 2004).

In addition to these alleged perversions of common sports values, a number of negative psychological consequences potentially exist – many of which can also be framed by the existing gambling studies literature. In our observations, we saw at least five of the DSM-IV’s ten diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Of course, it should not be inferred that those who display these tendencies are “pathological” – diagnoses need to be conducted professionally, and are usually determined only when 5 of these criteria cluster together within a relatively brief period of time. Nevertheless, the DSM framework provides an interesting and fruitful theoretical framework for discussion. The following list outlines DSM criteria that may well be present in these settings:

1. *Preoccupation: excessive thinking about the game.* Posters on the Internet are

clearly preoccupied with their team(s): the author of one mainstream article (Burka, 1999) talks about starting his work with the first pitch of East Coast games and then finishing with the last pitch of West Coast games (“I wear out mice during the season the way ballplayers wear out shoes,” he quips). Another article mocks the commitment of the fantasy player thusly: “he wakes up and runs to check out game scores, and he goes to sleep examining atrociously boring statistics” in popular magazines (Wolff, 1995).

2. *Tolerance: needing more where less used to do the trick.* Many posters note that they are playing with an increasing number of teams, and that their fantasy play consumes an increasing number of hours. Several cite this development as evidence that they need to (or at least they are *told* that they need to) cut back on their play.
3. *Loss of control: inability to stop or cut back.* One poster, “JG5784,” alludes to these very sorts of issues: “Just about every August I hit a huge wall where I go to my wife and say I hate baseball and am never playing fantasy baseball again. I can’t wait for the season to end. Then December rolls around and the hot stove reports heat up and the game is on once again.” An introspective poster, “Buck,” adds that “I get to the point where sometimes I worry that it is too much. I try to limit myself to 1 hr a day – not good at it.”
4. *Restlessness/Irritability when stopping:* In an interesting article that appears to be the only academic treatise relating to this topic, Hiltner and Walker conduct an electronic communication analysis of a day in which a fantasy baseball web site went down, thus interrupting their play (1996). Needless to say by now, perhaps, during this episode emotions ran high and many players expressed extraordinary levels of irritability.
5. *Escape: playing to get away from problems.* “ElCapitan” cites this directly saying that a player can effectively “escape from the real world.” BigEasy concurs... for some, it is an escape from real life.” Of course, everyone needs an “escape” from time to time – with addicts, however, this kind of escapism comes at a severe cost (Jacobs, 1988).
6. *Family/work/school problems: playing leads to problems in one’s personal life.* One article interviewed a pained “rotisserie widow” (Wolff, 1995). Another player in a recent article shares the following: “if you ask my wife, I do it too much”, and then proceeds to self-identify as an “addict” (Hiestand, 2002). On the bulletin boards, “Moto” posits that most posters are single, and half-jokingly wonders whether they “were single before they got into roto sports.” BigEasy adds that... it can take away time from friends and family. I am sure some relationships have failed because of it.” Most likely, the majority of fantasy players are like “Idaho3920,” who falls somewhere in the middle: his wife “accepts that its something I enjoy and occasionally obsess over.” A similarly ambivalent poster, OK1994, notes that his play “took a lot of time away from studying,” although he claims that “I probably would have done something else anyway.”

Terms like “addiction” and “obsession” are frequently mentioned in fantasy sports settings.

More generally, terms like “addiction” and “obsession” are frequently mentioned in fantasy sports settings. Indeed, as happens often with any number of problem behaviors from shopping to sex, addiction vocabularies are thrown about casually and frequently – and even, on occasion, affectionately and proudly.⁷ In *Business Week*, reporter Ronald Grover titles

a 1998 article “Confessions of a Fantasy Baseball Junkie,” and proceeds to call himself a “poster child” for the overwhelming time and money investments involved.

⁷ In fact, Gerdy also invokes this affinity for addiction vocabularies by entitling his 2003 book on sport in society *Sports: The All-American Addiction*.

In a revealing commentary, Wolff half-seriously calls fantasy baseball play a “dangerous addiction that feeds on good, old-fashioned male competitiveness and chest thumping” (2003). Others more directly self-label: one Internet poster uses the byline of “addict.” Another poster states with an alarming degree of certitude that “80% of the players in my fantasy leagues are obsessed with the stuff.” JG5784, meanwhile, delivers a bluntly familiar posting: “Hi, my name is _____, and I am a Rotoholic.”

And yet amid all of this intensity, there is a familiar tendency toward self-mockery and irony (required, perhaps, of any reputable postmodern social trend). Players frequently ridicule their own bad luck, their own faltering expertise, their own poor decisions, and their own team’s characteristics. Laughter (of the real and virtual kind) can be induced by referencing a fantasy team’s “clubhouse chemistry” or its intestinal fortitude. Of course, none of these characteristics can exist in any conventional sense in these fantasy worlds, but there is fun to be found in a playful and ironic interaction between the virtual and the real.

Overall, it appears that most players display no serious signs of pathology. In much the same way that the gaming industry has encouraged “responsible gaming” and discouraged play “when the fun stops,” some fantasy players articulate a similar sensibility. It is probably this sensibility that can best convey the normative parameters of fantasy baseball play. “Salmon” claims that ultimately, “roto is supposed to be fun. When it becomes a chore or a heavy obligation I think we lose sight of the point of playing a game. Of course that happens to a lot of people with a lot of different games.”

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this article is to map the landscape of the burgeoning fantasy sports gaming phenomenon, and to provide an exploratory framework that will hopefully aid in the development of future theory and research on these phenomena. As Putnam (2001) says of the Internet, the jury is still out on fantasy baseball, which (again like the Internet) can both bond and bind its participants. In a world in which gambling expansion is taking place at a phenomenal rate, and in which “gambling’s” parameters can no longer be confined within casino walls, considering the act of gambling in any singular way seems less appropriate than ever. Too often, we hear about “the gaming industry,” singular, as if it were easily categorizable into something less than plural. As we begin to contemplate the rapidly evolving worlds of gaming and wagering, fantasy sports play may provide us with a laboratory that is at once cutting-edge and increasingly typical.

For most players, it appears that fantasy sports are a healthy and salutary recreation, in ways similar to those observed by Smith and Paley in their (2001) study of golf wagering – specifically, players “orchestrate their own wagering conditions” (2001, p. 127), the game serves as an outlet for social interaction, and the activity provides some psychological benefits. Of course, it is reasonable to question whether these kinds of social interactions are hampered (or at the very least affected) to the degree they take place on the Internet.

In turning our attention to potential future research on fantasy play, we might wonder about shifts in demographics. After all, in its early days, the Internet was dominated by males (Hiltner and Walker, 1996), only to evolve recently into something more “democratized” – at least as it pertains to the gender variable. Will fantasy play – or for that matter, sports spectatorship – follow a similar trajectory?

Though it is beyond the scope of this exploratory essay to delve into the complex social relationships that have been explored in the men’s lives literature, this is a field that should prove fruitful for future inquiry. Dolgin, for instance, describes “(t)he masculine friendship style – specialized, activity-based friendships filled with impersonal talk and competition” (2001, p. 106) as a simplistic but nevertheless useful framework for men’s interactions in general. Will this provide a productive framework

for an enhanced understanding of this predominantly male social activity?

In conclusion, though some still criticize those who play as “fantasy baseball geeks” (Reilly, 2003), the sheer number of current participants indicate that the very least, fantasy players are hardly “deviant” by any reasonable statistical calculation. This alone makes it worthy of our research attention. More broadly, however, as our understanding of gambling behavior matures, it makes sense to examine “gambling acts” that are not confined within the walls of traditional gaming establishments, in order to more fully understand the complex wagering passions of the masses.

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