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FANTASY SPORTS COMMUNITIES ON THE INTERNET: THE
EVOLUTION OF FANDOM IN AMERICAN SPORTS CULTURE

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Jesse James Draper

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**FANTASY SPORTS COMMUNITIES ON THE INTERNET: THE EVOLUTION OF
FANDOM IN AMERICAN SPORTS CULTURE**

By

Jesse James Draper

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

FANTASY SPORTS COMMUNITIES ON THE INTERNET: THE EVOLUTION OF FANDOM IN AMERICAN SPORTS CULTURE

By

Jesse James Draper

The aim of this study is to identify and utilize relevant cultural theory as it relates to fantasy sports as a cultural phenomenon. Fantasy sports are a logical evolution of sports fandom within the context of specialization, quantification, the Internet, and the growing desire for participatory entertainment. By juxtaposing classical and contemporary theory, we can begin to understand the growth of fantasy sports as they are tied to the structural reification of the hegemonic capitalist ideology by communal social activities that simultaneously, counter that ideological domination.

The sanctioned meanings of baseball statistics have historically been inculcated by Major League Baseball through strategic commercial alliances. With the publication of the Bill James *1977 Baseball Abstract*, the meanings of those statistics were openly challenged for the first time, starting what would become a long, hard struggle for linguistic and symbolic capital taking place in multiple “authoritative” annuals, in the broadcast booth, in the print media, and finally culminating within the fantasy baseball community on the internet.

I close the study by situating fantasy sports within popular American culture. The fantasy sports experience is an evolution of fandom in the age of free agency and the Internet. American culture is committed to profiting off of the desires of the consumer, and the consumer clearly desires a stronger and more personal connection to sports. The full impact of fantasy sports on American culture has yet to be realized.

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INTRODUCTION

Heavy with Knowledge: Becoming a Fantasy Sports Guru

Embarrassed, I later realized that what I do in watching football is to call the game myself, like a chess neophyte following Spassky and Fischer and trying to anticipate each move. My eye tries to catch injury, fatigue, or slowness on the other side; intuitively, I am guessing which sorts of plays have not been working; I look for defensive lines of force and patterns of response; I focus my eyes abstractedly, looking for zones not adequately defended. Impossible to do, I know, for one must be on the field to feel the tempo of will and strength, to see how the lines of instinct and tactics are flowing at a given time, to sense the tiny differences that open up unsuspected possibilities. Still, I match my wits with those of the quarterbacks and coaches. During the game, my wife has noted, my palms sweat; impossible to gain my attention seriously. (I playact.) After the game, I am exhausted. Entertainment? It is more like an ordeal, an exercise, a struggle lived through. And not exactly vicariously. (Novak 87)

In 2006, sixteen million adults in the United States, including twenty-two percent of all men with Internet access between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine, played fantasy sports.¹ For the last three years that number has grown steadily at a rate of seven to ten percent annually. Each year the fantasy sports industry generates one to two billion dollars, and is further responsible for a three to four billion dollar impact across the sports industry.² That says nothing of the additional economic impact realized in the information technology industry; including but not limited to, Internet service providers and the hardware and software companies that form the structures upon which that industry is built. These numbers are significant, and yet to date, the phenomenon has received little attention in academic circles. Studies focused exclusively on fantasy sports have primarily been limited to the discussion of legal issues regarding the rights of players as owners of their statistical performance (Bolitho; Massari; Karcher), internet

¹ FSTA Market Study by Ispos, August 2006.

² FSTA Consumer Behavior Study by Dr. Kim Beason, Associate Professor of Park and Recreation Management, University of Mississippi in March 2006.

addiction (Ng and Wiemer-Hastings), gambling (Bernhard and Eade), and gender issues tied to the reification of male dominance in sport (Davis and Duncan). All of those issues are relevant to fantasy sports culture; however, in this research they are typically presented as one-dimensional overgeneralizations of an assumed rather than actual experience within fantasy sports communities. Moreover, such articles fail to address why the industry is growing at such a rapid rate.

Online role playing games, on the other hand, have recently received much attention, particularly in popular culture studies. At the 2007 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Joint National conference, eight panels were exclusively devoted to Digital Games. By way of contrast, there were only three presentations on fantasy sports, placed in only tenuously related panels such as *Composition and Rhetoric*, *Blog and Online Gaming Communities*, and *Realism and Fantasy in Sports*. Many of the themes treated in those panels can be applied to a study of fantasy sports, such as the nature of virtual social interaction in online forums and peer-to-peer competition, as well as the simulated “fantasy” aspect of the games.

In a previous paper on fantasy sports in popular culture, I referred to an article written by George Lipsitz called “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies” as an example of the methodology I hoped to use in my own research. Lipsitz began his article with an anecdote about the great Duke Ellington. In the story Ellington teaches young trumpet virtuoso Clark Terry to learn to listen first: to explore the spaces and silences within the music so that he could understand how to add a meaningful contribution to the music, one that blended with the voices and sounds of the other musicians around him. Lipsitz suggested that “the

complicated relationship between scholarly methods and the popular cultures, political economies, and ideologies of America demand a scholarship capable of adopting Duke Ellington's advice and learning how to do careful and comprehensive listening" (Lipsitz 311). He found that approach increasingly necessary, as "the ever-increasing reach and scope of commercialized leisure has eclipsed both 'high culture' and 'folk culture' artifacts, replacing them with cultural products resistant to traditional methods of criticism" (Lipsitz 311). What Lipsitz then offers as an alternative approach to those traditional methods is an integration of contemporary European theory, which he feels bears an affinity to American popular culture. By making the effort to join the band, to slow down, sit back and listen to the voices around me, it is my hope that my experiences within fantasy sports communities in conjunction with theory drawn from the social sciences might add a meaningful contribution to the music.

Fantasy sports allow fans to invest themselves in the ritual of American sport on a truly participatory level, and true understanding of fantasy sports in popular culture will come from the study of that interaction and the social relationships growing out of it. For this study I have chosen to focus solely on fantasy baseball and football. One reason is because they are the most popular games in American fantasy sports culture, and as such, they offer the largest and most committed communities to study. Furthermore, I have favored fantasy baseball for much of the theoretical content due to the ease with which it structurally demonstrates concepts like instrumental rationality, and because of the important role it has played in the battle for linguistic capital in Major League Baseball. Sociology, anthropology, and linguistics are the fields from which I build my theoretical approach to understanding fantasy sports, primarily because I believe that those fields

offer explanations for the social behavior that I have observed and experienced while studying fantasy sports culture from within as a participant. The application of cultural theory based solely on external observation will only result in the sweeping generalizations and gross inaccuracies like those previously mentioned. While some of those elements are indeed present within fantasy sports culture, they are not nearly as dominant or determinative as some studies have suggested.

In addition to the works I have selected by theorists and social scientists like Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Theodor Adorno, Charles S. Peirce, and Pierre Bourdieu, there are essential works that come from popular culture which prove to be indispensable sources for research. There is much to gain from the tremendous work of writers like baseball scholar Bill James (whose *Baseball Abstracts* have revolutionized the study of baseball), and from what I will call fantasy sports memoir, such as Sam Walker's *Fantasyland* (2006) and Mark St. Amant's *Committed: Confessions of a Fantasy Football Junkie* (2004). The most illuminating texts, however, are the fantasy sports articles that supposedly offer "expert analysis", and the message board discussions and instant messenger logs generated by the fantasy players themselves.

In this study I have tried to answer the following questions: Why have fantasy sports on the Internet proliferated in America in recent years, and what is the impact of that growth on American sports culture? What are the social dynamics within the communities that play these games, and what are the external forces that shape those dynamics? Are fantasy sports merely a product of the valorization of fandom within a capitalist society, or does the open source environment of the message board communities suggest a break from such strict determinism? What is at stake in these

social interactions and in the struggles to define the meaning of baseball statistics? And finally, how do the answers to those questions inform our understanding of American culture and sports in an age of rapid technological development, free agency and performance enhancing drugs? In my attempts to answer those questions, I find myself facing the same dilemma that complicates the process of becoming a “fantasy sports guru”: for every answer I find, new questions arise.

Throughout this text I make use of different conceptions of the “symbol”. In Chapter One, symbols are introduced within the context of Leo Marx’s conception of the construction of cultural meaning as “image(s) invested with significance beyond that required for referential purposes” that are pieced together in narrative as a myth “which embodies the virtually all-encompassing conception of reality—the world-view—of a group” (Marx 86). In Chapter Three, the symbols are discussed semiotically as signs (Marx’s images) “which lose the character which renders [them] as signs” (Peirce 240) in the absence of an interpretant, or one that performs the action of investing the image with greater meaning. I will also discuss Bourdieu’s conception of symbolic power, whereby power is exercised symbolically under a misperception of legitimacy and shared belief (Bourdieu). The unifying action in each of these conceptions or processes is investment of value or significance into something - an object, a statistic, a position of power – that is greater than that which is referentially required. It *means* something significant to hit 35 homeruns in a season, but that meaning is fluid, and can be interpreted or valued in different ways by different individuals with competing claims of linguistic and symbolic capital.

In an effort to ease the theory into the context of fantasy sports communities, I would like to start at the beginning, with the two questions that set the foundation for this study and foreshadow the material covered in later chapters: When, where and how did fantasy sports begin, and what exactly does it mean to be a fantasy sports guru? I have decided to introduce the genesis of fantasy sports with a brief summary of the story of baseball's own origins. The process that institutionally sanctioned Abner Doubleday as the creator of American Baseball in the village of Cooperstown, New York mirrors, in many ways, the process of discovering the origins of fantasy sports and the symbolic power struggles that work together to ascribe value and legitimacy to individuals and symbols that are used to reinforce cultural myths and positions of power. Once a good understanding about the evolutionary ascendancy of fantasy sports in American culture has been established, I will then close this introductory chapter with a discussion about what it means to be a fantasy sports guru, which is drawn in part from my own experiences on the path towards fantasy enlightenment.

Origins

In his remarkable narrative chronicling the origin of Baseball's Hall of Fame, James Vlasich tells the story of an argument over the true origins of the game of baseball between two of baseball's most influential figures at the turn of the 20th century. Albert Goodwill Spalding was a star pitcher in the late 19th century, owner of the Chicago White Stockings, one of the co-founders of the National League, and began publishing one of baseball's first "official" yearly publications, *Spalding's Official Base Ball Guide* in 1877. Henry Chadwick, dubbed "The Father of Base Ball", was baseball's first true sportswriter, statistician and historian. He was the editor of baseball's first published

yearly, *Beadle's Dime Base Ball Player* which began publication in 1860, and took the same position for Spalding's *Guide* in 1881. Chadwick had long argued that baseball had evolved from the English game of rounders, and in the 1903 issue of the *Spalding Guide*, Chadwick wrote an article presenting a history of the game from its inception, which he recognized as 1833, when the Olympic Town Ball Club was formed in Philadelphia. Chadwick claimed the organization of that club was the first documented evidence of an organized evolution from the game of rounders. Town ball, then, eventually evolved into the modern conception of American baseball.

In the 1905 issue of the *Spalding Guide*, Spalding publicly contested Chadwick's version of the origin of the game, arguing that the game was created by a former Civil War general, Abner Doubleday, and that it originated in Cooperstown, New York. Spalding was determined to prove that the game was distinctly American, owing none of its existence to foreign influence. In efforts to establish an "official" version of the origin of the game, and to strengthen the credibility of his position that directly contradicted the position of baseball's most celebrated and accomplished scholar, he created a self-appointed baseball commission to gather the evidence and deliver a final verdict. The Mills Commission—named for its chairman, Abraham G. Mills, the president of the National League at the time—finally sided with Spalding and declared that the game was indeed of distinctly American origin after reviewing what really amounted to, at best, inconclusive evidence that hung on the questionable testimony of Abner Graves, which was forcefully endorsed by Spalding. To counter Chadwick's evolutionary history, Mills argued that even though rounders and baseball employed the same implements, there was no sure sign that one necessarily evolved from the other. Two games developed on two

continents using similar implements, and neither had a rightful claim to “inventing” their use in competition. And so what Vlasich referred to as baseball’s “immaculate conception” was institutionalized as an historical fact (Vlasich 10).

Although it is now primarily accepted that Chadwick’s history is likely the most accurate version, the myth of Doubleday held sway for many years, and if asked today, a great number of fans would still probably recognize Cooperstown as the birthplace of America’s Pastime. And while legitimate questions as to the veracity of the Doubleday story have been raised by new research made possible by the discovery of the original Mills Commission papers in 1999, the Hall of Fame itself is still hesitant to let go of the Commission’s original verdict. One hundred years later, another argument of origins has attracted the attention of many American sports fans, and just like the Spalding/Chadwick debate, this argument centers on claims of autonomous invention. With the explosion of the Internet at the turn of the twenty-first century, participation in fantasy sports has grown exponentially, and while football is the clear industry leader, it is fantasy baseball’s legend of *La Rotisserie Française* that holds the aura of Cooperstown.

Although it seems as if fantasy sports are a relatively new phenomenon, brought on by the technological advances of the Internet, the games were in fact being played way back in the “dark ages” using snail mail, newspaper box scores (Appendix), and a pad of paper. In their fantasy sports memoirs, Sam Walker and Mark St. Amant each offer very detailed and colorful histories of the development of fantasy baseball and football respectively, and so, much of this section simply paraphrases and reorganizes their efforts. Although fantasy football accounts for eighty percent of all fantasy sports participation in the United States, boasting nearly three times the number of participants

as fantasy baseball (12.8 vs. 4.8 million)³, there is a common misperception that fantasy football evolved from Rotisserie baseball, created in 1980 by Daniel Okrent. Furthermore, Okrent has only a slightly more tenable claim as the “founder” of fantasy baseball than Abner Doubleday has as the father of American baseball. So which sport came first and where exactly were these games first played? It is probably best just to say that A.G. Mills’ notion of simultaneous, distinctive origins for baseball and rounders is surprisingly fitting in this context.

The origin of fantasy sports is obscured by the same logistical nightmare that casts a shadow over the authenticity of baseball’s beginnings. In the third chapter of Mark St. Amant’s fantasy football memoir, which is cleverly titled “The Book of Fantasy Football Genesis”, he states that the dispute about the origin of the game lingers “because there’s just no official record” (St. Amant 25). St. Amant immediately rejects the evolutionary argument that ties fantasy football’s origins to Rotisserie baseball, marketing efforts in sports bars by beer distributors, or the “cyber-explosion” of the Internet age. He then proceeds to relate the story, originally reported in an article by Bob Harris and Emil Kadlec for the *2003 Fantasy Football Pro Forecast* (8-14), of how three men with ties to the Oakland Raiders conceived of the game that we now recognize as fantasy football while on a trip for a road game against the New York Titans in 1962. Bill Winkenbach, a limited partner with no controlling interest in the Raiders, is credited for coming up with the idea, which was based on similar games he used to play with baseball and golf in the 1950s. Raiders PR man Bill Tunnell and Oakland *Tribune* writer Scotty Stirling helped him organize the league rules, rosters and scoring. At the end of a long

³ FSTA Market Study by Ispos, August 2006.

night of planning, the foundations were laid for what was later christened the Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League.

The GOPPPL was comprised of eight teams, all of which, according to the original rules, had to be owned by persons either affiliated with an AFL team, involved with professional football as a journalist, or responsible for the purchase or sale of ten season tickets for the Raiders' 1963 season (St. Amant 28). Each team drafted twenty players from either league; however, a maximum of eight were allowed to be brought over from the rivaling NFL. Each week team owners would submit a starting roster composed of two offensive ends, two halfbacks, a fullback and a quarterback (Harris and Kadlec 12). Despite the exclusive membership requirements, word spread over time, and others soon wanted in on the game. The founders had no idea that the game would explode in popularity the way that it did. Scotty Stirling told St. Amant, "We had no idea it would explode into the kind of mania that exists today. Pro football isn't a game. It's a cult. And this stuff (fantasy football) is close to a cult" (St. Amant 29). But the fathers of the GOPPPL were not the only ones to miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime, nor do they necessarily hold a legitimate claim as the inventors of the game.

In *Fantasyland*, Sam Walker (59-60) recounted a story that took place two years prior to the founding of the GOPPPL, in either March or April of 1960, when a research associate in social psychology at Harvard's School of Public Health named Bill Gamson had gathered another group of three men together to try out a game that he had come up with based on baseball. Each man contributed ten dollars, which represented a team budget of \$100,000. The men then poured over Major League rosters listed in a copy of *The Sporting News*, and when one of them saw a player he wished to bid on, he threw a

playing card on the table. This process continued until each man had maxed out his budget. The game was then played by tracking a set of eight statistics, generated by the players they had selected, throughout the season. The team of players that had the best cumulative stats at the end of the season won. Immediately following this account, Walker makes an observation that is incredibly important, and worth citing here in its entirety:

Through a modern lens, this may look like a perfectly normal way for three baseball nerds to spend an evening in April. But in 1960, the whole exercise was thoroughly radical. Baseball was still a rigid *institution*. The old reserve clause bonded players to teams as if they were indentured servants. Fans still wore suits to the ballpark, and owners and managers ruled baseball with baronial authority. It wouldn't have occurred to most people that baseball could be toyed with, the players could be put into the service of your own imagination, or, for that matter, there could be more to being a fan than just buying a ticket and clapping at appropriate junctures. (Walker 60, italics mine)

Walker insightfully points out one of the most significant characteristics of fantasy sports, one that will play an important role in sports culture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century: namely, that fans of the games have played a very significant role in challenging the institutional authority and dominance in professional sports. Fans of the game discovered the lost Mills Commission papers that challenged the Doubleday myth and the origins of baseball; fans of the game have challenged the way players and teams are evaluated and have worked to improve erroneous and inefficient assumptions based on elitist notions of authority and tradition; fans of the game have challenged what

they see as the ridiculous notion that publicly reported statistics should be licensed for a profit.

Gamson's game spread quickly, expanding the following year to ten teams, forcing him to conduct the bidding through the mail. He decided to call it "The Baseball Seminar" in an effort to prevent anyone at the post office from mistakenly coming to the conclusion that he was a bookie. In 1962, the year Bill Winkenbach reportedly invented fantasy football in a New York hotel room, Gamson took a position at the University of Michigan, where the game really took off, growing to twenty-five teams. The game fast became an obsession as "academic conventions became excuses to sneak in ballgames, office hours were canceled in the name of bid preparation..." (Walker 62). The University of Michigan's top social scientists were running regression analyses on baseball statistics in an effort to get an edge on the competition. The game's popularity was indisputable, and in time it spread out from Ann Arbor as players eventually took positions in different locations and began to create sister leagues.

It was a full fifteen years later, on a flight to Austin Texas, before Daniel Okrent expanded upon the game that was introduced to him by Robert Sklar, a noted American Studies scholar, and former professor at the University of Michigan. Okrent had never played in The Baseball Seminar himself, but what he had taken from helping Sklar work up his player bid sheets at his kitchen table in Brooklyn, New York was the notion that this game offered baseball fanatics "a workable excuse to gorge on baseball nearly all winter long" (Walker 65). With that notion in mind, Okrent set himself to the task of refining Gamson's game, tweaking it a bit here and there, until he had worked out the rules and scoring for the game that would become known as Rotisserie Baseball. Using

his Macmillan *Baseball Encyclopedia*, Okrent looked at four years worth of National League East final standings and tried to isolate the statistical contributions that most frequently led to a team's success. He settled on the following eight official categories for the scoring of his game: homeruns (HR), runs batted in (RBI), batting average (AVG), and stolen bases (SB) for hitters; wins (W), saves (SV), earned-run average (ERA), and a statistic that he came up with himself, walks plus hits per innings pitched (WHIP) for pitchers. One important difference between his game and the Baseball Seminar was the institution of roster limits. Walker reports that Okrent decided to limit the rosters because of a response he received in an interview with former Baltimore Orioles manager Earl Weaver, "who had told him that the toughest decision he made every year was choosing which twenty-five players to take north from spring training" (Walker, 65). With the rosters and scoring system set, Okrent introduced his game to a group of friends at the now legendary *La Rotisserie Française*. So while Okrent does not himself have a legitimate claim to the original conception of the game that spawned fantasy sports, surely his version is a natural descendant of the original, right? Not if "Wink" has anything to say about it.

In a side bar of the article detailing Bill Winkenbach's 1962 invention of fantasy football, Harris and Kadlec challenge the claim that Daniel Okrent's Rotisserie baseball was the first of its kind. They clearly had no knowledge of The Baseball Seminar, but if their claims are true, even Gamson was at least two years behind Wink. According to the article, Ed Winthers was a charter member of The Superior Tile Summer Invitational Homerun Tourney (or S.T. SIHRT), which he claims had its inaugural season as early as 1959 or 1960. Harris and Kadlec cite "considerable anecdotal evidence supporting his

claim... the earliest documented evidence... in the form of league correspondence from 1966” (Harris and Kadlec 9). Reminiscent of the manner in which the Mills Commission felt that the circumstantial evidence supporting Doubleday’s invention of baseball was sufficiently authoritative, Harris and Kadlec used what they could piece together to assert authoritatively Winkenbach’s preeminence as the true innovator of fantasy sports.

There will likely never be a commission created for the purposes of establishing the true origins of fantasy sports in American culture, but it seems clear that the findings would prove to be dubious at best. There is no official record for who deserves the legitimate distinction of being named the Father of Fantasy Sports. But what we do have is a string of narratives that offer a picture of a history of simultaneously developed efforts to create a deeper connection to the great ritual of American sport. The unifying characteristic of these stories is a deep love for the games of baseball and football. Fans want more than spectatorship; they want to play the game themselves. For the majority of people, getting into the big leagues as a player was and never will be anything more than a dream. Fantasy sports offer a way for fans, at least on an intellectual level, to get into the game.

Some have argued that “fantasy geeks” have no true love for the game as it was meant to be experienced; that they value team loyalty no more than the greedy prima donna that embodies the destructive commercialization of the free-agency era; that they reduce athletes to faceless quantifiable data, utterly devoid of the beauty, strength and grace that lift the human spirit above the banal existence of corporate culture, to the very limits of physical perfection. However, the fantasy baseball player is no less emotionally involved in the game than any other fan of sports. I believe that the men in the stories

related above would strongly identify with the anecdote cited at the beginning of this Introduction that depicts Michael Novak's feverish emotional investment in a game of football. These men are archetypes of the fanatic, from whom the rest of us regular fans draw our lineage, and their spirit lives on in the gurus that now preside over the rituals of fantasy sport.

Learning to Fish

The process of becoming an "expert", which is synonymous with "guru" within the context of fantasy sports, is really about coming to the realization that there is no such thing. Fantasy sports websites offering tools and advice that provide customers with a "competitive advantage" used to make claims of expertise in some fashion or another. Clearly that cannot be accurate with such a divergence in methods and theory. After all, if such a statement were indeed true, the same websites would win every year in the expert leagues, and that rarely happens.

An important, albeit extended, parenthetical note must be inserted here right off the bat. I originally worded the previous sentence about website's claims of expertise as "*Most fantasy sports websites... clearly advertise claims of expertise... typically on the site's homepage.*" In the process of researching for this project, I typically spent at least two hours a day scouring those websites. I have seen every respected fantasy writer make pains to state explicitly that there is no such thing as an expert. And yet, I was sure that each of those sites had some claim to authority posted on the front page, either in the form of guru or expert, if for no other reason than boosting credibility for the sake of increased sales. As I was writing, it occurred to me that I should be careful to check that fact, and to my astonishment, of the sites that I spent hours perusing only two (Yahoo!

Sports and The Huddle) had the words “guru” or “expert” on the front page in any context. And so even as I find myself in the process of writing, of presenting the research that I have spent the better part of two years accumulating, I am stumbling across new questions. Why did I have that false perception about claims of authority? I believe part of that answer lies in my discussion of the power of symbolic capital in Chapter Three; however, it is interesting to note that even as I claim to know how positions of authority are worked out and justified within the context of fantasy sports culture, I myself am still quite susceptible to doxic notions of who holds that authority that stem from predispositions that subconsciously guide my thoughts and actions. Despite that fact that I have most likely spent just as much time (if not more) researching fantasy sports as any one of the writers at those websites over the last two years, I still associate them on some level with the social status of “expert.”

As I said, many of the most respected fantasy sports writers often make disclaimers within their articles, denouncing the title of expert as a misperception of fact. The only difference between a fantasy guru and the average fantasy participant is time investment. The writers that work for ESPN, Yahoo!, CBS Sportline, Fantasybaseball.com, SportsGrumblings.com, et. al., spend an immense amount of time reading player updates, beat writer columns, valuation theory, game theory, and whatever else they can get their hands on that might give them an inside edge. The secret is total immersion into all things related to the sport. “Knowledge is power.” There are of course some valuation processes that have historically proven to be more accurate, but even the best “draft strategies” are fluid and dependant on multiple variables, like the changing dynamics in the player pool, strength of competition, scoring format, etc. As arguably

baseball's most accomplished scholar, Bill James once said that "baseball is an infinite puzzle. You can never really understand why teams win and why they lose. You can understand a little bit more, and a little bit more, but you can never exhaust the subject" (as qtd. in Gray xiv).

Todd Zola, the Research Director at Fantasybaseball.com, is one of a handful of fantasy sports analysts that probably has a legitimate claim to the title of expert. He has written a couple of articles on what it means to be a "so-called" expert, a phrase that he used to detest, in which he argues that true experts do not claim the title for themselves. A true expert is one who "has earned the respect of his peers within the fantasy community", and one who has "earned respect in the court of public opinion" (Zola, "MIXED"). In an attempt to somewhat humorously demonstrate that argument, he then suggests that the reader take a minute to "Google his name." The results include virtually every major fantasy sports outlet including *Sports Illustrated*, XM Radio, ESPN, and the National Fantasy Baseball Championships. In article for *Sports Illustrated*, Zola quotes the Chinese Proverb "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" ("Surfers" 2). This is, without question, Zola's mantra and the philosophy that has garnered him such a devoted base of disciples. The idea is to learn to do the research, player valuation, and decision making yourself. Most of the questions posted in the forums of fantasy sports sites take one of the following forms: Should I draft this guy? Would you trade x for y? What holes do I have on my roster? The premise behind the fisherman philosophy is that it is better to be able to make your own decisions, backed by research and methodology that you understand and agree with, than it is to have someone else make those decisions for you based on logic that you are

not in a position to question due to ignorance. I spent three weeks in the spring of 2007 trying to create my own set of player projections based on Zola's valuation theories, and while I did have some success with that, the analogy is very appropriate: becoming a successful fisherman takes a lot of time, a lot of patience, and there are infinite ways to catch a fish. The trick is knowing how and where to catch a marlin rather than a bluegill.

As I stated earlier, my intention was to conduct this study from inside the community as a participant. In many ways this work is an ethnography, and like musician Clark Terry in George Lipsitz's story at the beginning of the Introduction, I wanted to get into the community and listen and learn so that I could eventually get out from under Duke's (or in my case, Zola's) shadow and lead my own band. If I am to attempt to make any authoritative claims about fantasy sports communities and the processes that shape their social dynamics, I must legitimize my right to speak for that group. As I will demonstrate later from the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, authority is conferred by the institution that the individual is speaking for, and furthermore, that authority must be recognized by the community within which the individual claims that authority (1991).

In the summer of 2006 I was contacted by Emil Kadlec, who along with being the co-author of the article cited above about fantasy football's origins, is the president of Fantasy Sports Publications, Inc., the largest publisher of fantasy football magazines in America for the last seventeen years. I sent an email by clicking on the generic "ask us" link on the website for the 2006 World Championship of Fantasy Football, which offers a \$300,000 grand prize to the best of over 1,000 participants, inquiring about the possibility of obtaining a press pass so that I could conduct interviews and observations for this project. I was immediately contacted by Kadlec, who sent me his cell phone number in

his reply and asked me to call him immediately. At the time I had no idea who Kadlec was, and certainly had no clue that he was one of the most powerful men in the industry. When I called him up and informed Mr. Kadlec of my intentions, I told him that I had no interest in participating in the contest, and assured him that I was only looking to get an objective perspective on fantasy football's marquee event for an academic study. Kadlec immediately began defending the game, and was worried that I might portray the game as a harmful addiction as others had done. The barons of fantasy sports are clearly concerned with maintaining a reputation as a legitimate business, and as Kadlec reiterated over and over again to me on the phone that afternoon, fantasy sports communities are no different than going to the neighborhood sports bar. Most people go to have a good time, have a few drinks and talk sports. Just because there is a segment of the population that doesn't know when to quit drinking, that does not mean that everybody is an alcoholic. Kadlec had no problem with getting me a press pass to the event and even offered a complimentary room at the hotel—so long as I promised to be objective and fair in my representation of the industry.

Achieving a level of recognized authority among peers within the fantasy community, on the other hand, is a much more time-consuming process. An individual can be viewed as authoritative in three primary ways, though towards the end of my study, my perceived status among community members as a “scholar of fantasy communities” also conferred upon me some authoritative credibility. However, that authority was primarily relegated to the realm of social interaction and community building, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two. The three traditional sources for authoritative legitimacy in fantasy sports communities are: an individual's

competitive record in publicly recognized advanced or expert leagues; holding a position as a writer or analyst for a credible fantasy sports analysis website; or earning the respect of peers by securing a reputation for offering sound advice and analysis by way of public discourse on the community message boards. The most common path to becoming a fantasy sports guru involves a combination, in the reverse order, of all three as part of a progression that serves essentially as an apprenticeship.

My own apprenticeship worked out due to a good deal of luck, as I happened to be in the right place at the right time. In the early stages of my research, I stumbled across a fantasy football website called FootballDiehards.com, which also happened to be one of Emil Kadlec's and Bob Harris's websites. After perusing the message boards for sometime, I came across an announcement by Harris that they were going to host two leagues for site members in honor of Bill Winkenbach and the founders of the GOPPPL. I signed up to run one of the teams and prepared for the draft. The league was an IDP league, or Individual Defensive Player, which is recognized as the most complex and prestigious format to take part in, because it forces team owners to have an extensive knowledge of defensive players in addition to the standard offensive skill players that dominate the headlines. I was new to the format, but after spending hours researching everything I could find on the Internet about defensive players, I was ready to give it a shot. When the draft had concluded, I was contacted by another player in the league who had been paying attention to the moves I had made. He asked if I would consider taking a position as an Offensive Coordinator for a team on another site that employed staffs of five to build teams with a maximum salary cap of \$30 million using a rookie draft and contract system, franchise and restricted free agent tags, and a free agent auction. That

sure sounded like the big leagues to me, so I signed up at GridironGrumblings.com and began working my way up the ladder in the HAFA (Hire and Fire Association) league. The unique draw to this format, about which I will spend more time discussing in Chapter Two, is that the league is economically linked to the forum community on the website. The currency is only a virtual currency, referred to as “Nutbucks”, but with this currency owners can purchase virtual stadiums for their franchises and pay salaries to their staff. Community members can deposit their earnings at the Nut National Bank, where their Nutbucks appreciate at 2% interest; they can open up virtual pubs in the message boards with names like Lassy’s Last Chance, K-Rock Café, and Reb’s Castaway; and they can even gamble with their earnings at one of two virtual casinos, Seizure’s Palace or the NGN Grand.

After establishing myself a bit in the forums, I was introduced to the site owner, John Georgopoulos, who offered me a position on staff writing a weekly article called “The Rookie Report”, in which I would recap the performances of the top ten scoring fantasy rookies during the previous week. Eventually I began adding fantasy related insight to player news blurbs, as well as contributing to preseason preview content. My compensation for writing included a Gridiron Grumblings t-shirt (commonly referred to as “site swag”), \$200 at the end of the year, and a “Staff” designation to my avatar on the message boards. With that public designation, there was a noticeable change in the way my comments were received in the community. When I offered suggestions, forum members began to act on the advice I had given, adding a follow up post with the results of that action looking for additional insight. I had been granted the authority to represent the site, and that authority was publicly recognized in the community. I have since left

my position on staff to concentrate on finalizing my research, but the status I had achieved is still acknowledged on some levels in communication with subscribers on the site. For example, in a recent post in the baseball forums one member asked the community for some trade and draft pick advice, and as I offered my opinions, the follow up questions started being addressed directly to me. The recognition of my legitimacy as an authoritative voice is demonstrated by the individual's decision to take my advice over that of the others who responded. Another sign that I still retain some level of authority is demonstrated by the fact that some forum members ask for my input directly via instant messenger, rather than waiting for a response in the forums.

Am I a fantasy guru? Hardly. Though I perform fairly well in competition and offer sound advice from time to time on the message boards, I still find myself Instant Messaging Todd Zola for draft advice. But I can say with complete sincerity that I have developed a fairly strong understanding of the social dynamics that shape community interaction within the fantasy sports industry. I have participated in those communities from almost every position in the social hierarchy: the newbie, the gamer, the league commissioner, the writer, and the "so-called" expert. The fantasy sports phenomenon has exploded in popular American culture, and there are many reasons to believe that it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. In the chapters that follow I hope to offer plausible explanations for that growth with reference to cultural theory and the social sciences; to shed some light on the dynamics of community interaction and the forces that both encourage and disrupt it; to show how this game that takes place in virtual spaces has had an impact on American sports culture and the power structures that shape it; and finally, to show that fantasy sports are an expression of the era in which we now live.

After years of sitting in front of my laptop, pouring over statistics, chatting about trade scenarios, and trying to soak up all that fantasy sports have to offer, I have become fat, arthritic and lazy. But I can also tell you that in St. Louis, an outfield prospect named Colby Rasmus is going to get more than 450 at bats in 2008, with a solid shot at hitting 20 homeruns and stealing 20 bases. Much like the great spiritual gurus of the East, I have become heavy with knowledge.

CHAPTER 1
The Celebration of the Subjected:
An Explanation for the Growth of Fantasy Sports On the Internet

Investigators of popular culture find their objects of study so implicated in commercial and practical activities, that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the text from its conditions of creation, distribution, and reception. For those engaged in research about commercialized leisure and electronic mass media, the approaches advanced within European cultural theory may provide the only adequate frameworks for exploring and theorizing the full implications of their objects of study. (Lipsitz 319)

A community of individuals with a wealth of disposable income has developed into a Web-based commodified subculture that is growing at a significant rate. While other rapidly growing industries on the Web share certain characteristics with the fantasy sports industry—such as the incredibly lucrative pornography industry, and the social networking available at sites like Facebook and MySpace, which like fantasy sports have both been labeled as dangerously addictive—the importance of studying fantasy sports, and at least part of the explanation for the growth of the industry, lies in the characteristics distinguishing it from those industries. To begin with, fantasy sports do not carry the negative social stigma of pornography, and the addictive qualities of fantasy sports are often celebrated around the water cooler rather than hidden behind locked doors. Furthermore, the personal interaction and community building that take place in fantasy communities are different from the social networking website experience in two very significant ways. First, interaction in fantasy communities is typically motivated by the desire for competitive advantage. While leagues are often comprised of a group of friends utilizing the league as way to stay connected to each other—after college graduation, for example—however, tighter friendships within the group are often exploited advantageously in trade negotiations. Second, the interaction takes place in

forum communities that are governed by a hierarchy of perceived status. While social hierarchies do exist to some degree in communities formed at Facebook and MySpace, they are not as overtly recognized as they are in the fantasy sports communities, nor are they as directly tied to competition. Finally, fantasy sports communities do not suffer from the stigma of “cyber stalking” that is common in both the pornography and social networking industries. One reason for the success of the fantasy sports industry, then, is that it has managed to capitalize on the addictive qualities of similar Web communities in other industries, while avoiding or masking their negative qualities.

The aim of this chapter is to attempt to find a sociological explanation for the rapid growth of fantasy sports on the Internet that is grounded in classical theory. Fantasy sports are comprised of community interaction taking place within a virtual space. That interaction is built upon elements that make up sports culture, including the rules and language that shape the games and the economic system that dominates that culture. In order to understand fantasy sports culture, then, I will incorporate some of the existing scholarship on the sociology of sports, particularly work that draws on the theory of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Theodor Adorno and Georg Simmel.

By juxtaposing the surprisingly relevant theories of Marx, Weber, Adorno and Simmel, I argue that the rapid growth of fantasy sports is due to the reification and legitimization of the hegemonic capitalist ideology. However, this ideology extends into social activity in a context within which utopic potentialities exist in interactive social forms that have the ability to transform the antagonistic nature of conflict into the partnership of a shared struggle in competition. Finally, fantasy sports share many of the ritualistic characteristics of religion, which further add to the explanation for the growth

of fantasy sports communities. Bringing this all together, however, first necessitates a proper understanding of those characteristics of modern sports derived from capitalist culture that are assimilated by the fantasy sports subculture. For these are the characteristics that shape and sustain the fantasy sports experience, which is perhaps best summarized by Adorno's notion of the "Celebration of the Subjected" (Inglis).

Modern Sports According to Guttman

Allen Guttman's *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (1978) was the author's attempt to develop an historical sociology of modern sports, based on the development of seven defining characteristics: *Secularization, Equality, Specialization of Roles, Rationalization, Bureaucratic Organization, Quantification*, and the *Quest for Records*. He offers a basic introduction to Marxist and selected Neo-Marxist critiques of those characteristics, followed by a Weberian interpretation of their social organization emphasizing the transition from traditional to modern society. Guttman's work is an essential primer to the sociological study of modern sports subculture as it introduces that subculture's assimilation of the defining characteristics of the modern, rationalized, capitalist society. By extension, as an assimilation of modern sports, fantasy sports communities also take on those characteristics, though often in more pronounced ways.

Guttman begins building his definition of modern sport by developing a paradigm based on the notion of *play* taken from Roger Caillois's *Les Jeux et les hommes*, "in which the poles of *paidia* and *ludus* provide a scale for the transition from spontaneous play (*paidia*) to regulated, rule-bound games (*ludus*)" (Guttman 10).

Guttman's selected Neo-Marxist critics argue that at the very moment of the transition

from the spontaneous to the regulated, the very idea of “play” is eradicated by the repressive power of the bourgeois class and replaced by the rationalization of labor. In *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* (1978), Jean-Marie Brohm presents that very argument by citing the following statement by Jacques Ellul: “We are witnessing a process whereby playfulness and joy, contact with air and water, improvisation and spontaneity are disappearing: all these things are abandoned in favour of obedience to strict rules, efficiency and record times” (Ellul, qtd. in Brohm 41). While there is no denying the institution of and obedience to rules in modern sports, the notion that playfulness and joy are disappearing is questionable. Perhaps the reason the Neo-Marxists fail to see the joy in sports can be attributed to their disregard for religion. In *The Joy of Sports* (1994), Michael Novak powerfully argues for the existence of spontaneous play within regulated games by stating that “sports flow outward into action from a deep *natural impulse* that is radically religious: an *impulse of freedom*, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection” [emphasis mine] (Novak 19). One key to understanding the growth of fantasy sports in American culture is a recognition that emotional and religious experiences are also a part of the assimilated sports culture. I suggest that perhaps we are underemphasizing the *celebration* of those being subjected.

The most anticipated and celebrated ritual in fantasy sports is the draft, or auction, at the beginning of the season. It is within this ritual that the charge that modern sports lack spontaneity and improvisation can most clearly be refuted. Again, as Sam Walker stated in *Fantasyland* (2006), a significant motivation for the creation of Rotisserie baseball was to develop “a workable excuse to gorge on baseball nearly all winter long”

(Walker 65). This year-round extension of one's favorite sport is another reason for the popularity of fantasy sports. Participants "gorge on baseball" all winter to gain an advantage in the draft/auction; however, each participant has access to essentially the same information, so the edge really goes to the individual that, as the staff at FantasyBaseball.com like to say, learns to "zig when others zag." Even the best strategies for the draft/auction are subject to the unpredictable whims of subjective player valuation and the variations in the way opponents choose to configure their rosters. As such, to be successful one must be prepared to improvise and make spontaneous decisions that result in changes to one's originally intended blueprint for roster construction. It is precisely this unpredictability that provides much of the excitement and joy in the draft/auction ritual. There are of course limits imposed upon the ritual by the rules and structure of the league; however, contrary to Ellul's argument, those limits actually force participants to embrace spontaneity and improvisation. If the Rotisserie baseball player had no salary cap restrictions, there would be no need for "on the fly" adjustments due to fluctuations in the market. The processes of limitation and improvisation are juxtaposed together in a manner that maximizes the excitement and joy produced in the draft/auction ritual. The increasing demand for, and subsequent development of, "mock drafts" on fantasy sports websites attests to the significant role that experience plays in the success of the fantasy sports industry.

At this point it is important to note that within Guttman's paradigm, fantasy "sports" are actually nothing of the kind; as Guttman states, "watching a physical contest is not really very much like engaging in a physical contest. Betting comes closer, but not close enough" (Guttman 8). This distinction can be applied to fantasy baseball,

for example, as some have gone so far as to classify the game as no more than elaborate gambling (Bernhard and Eade). Fantasy baseball is only a sport in so far as it appropriates and utilizes the culture, organization, identities, and quantified results of Major League Baseball. Ellul's critique about losing "contact with air and water" then becomes quite literal, as sports become digital simulacra within the virtual spaces on the Internet. The experience is intended to be ludic by design, appropriating the defining characteristics of society perhaps to an even greater extent than the sport it mimics. And yet, that is perhaps one of the real draws to fantasy sports, as the distinction between the real and the virtual removes the obstacle of physical limitation from participation. Later I will further suggest that this separation from the physical toil of sport could be another reason for the popularity of fantasy sports, as it represents the presence of a utopic potentiality offering the hope of a future liberation from the destructive consequences of antagonistic competition.

Richard Gruneau states that Guttman found the Neo-Marxist critiques selected for his analysis "unpersuasive because they overly value economic determinations, and because they are supposedly guided more by 'ideology' than by 'careful empirical study'" (Gruneau 40). However, this interpretation of the Neo-Marxist critique also serves as one of the shortcomings of Guttman's treatment. While that criticism is clearly valid, it falls short of standing up as a definitive representation of Neo-Marxist thought. In an article intended to "resuscitate what [he] regards to be the genuine critical thread underlying Neo-Marxist sport theory", William J. Morgan suggests that the scholars being cited by Guttman—Bero Rigauer, Gerhard Vinnai and Jean-Marie Brohm—are guilty of ideological distortions that "bastardize" the work of Theodor Adorno and the

other Frankfurt scholars (Morgan 25). It is important to recognize this problem early, because one of the central arguments presented in this chapter suggests that one explanation for the growth of the fantasy sports industry hinges on a proper understanding of Adorno's work.

Guttman did recognize that a model "derived from the fundamental Weberian notion of the difference between the ascribed status of traditional society and the achieved status of a modern one" had clear advantages over Marxist models reduced to economic determinism (Guttman 81). And as I described in the Introduction, the distinction between ascribed and achieved status is a matter of serious debate in fantasy sports communities, particularly with reference to one's designation as a "fantasy sports expert". Class distinctions based on economic status typically end with the digital divide. Once a player has access to the community, economic distinctions shift primarily to the process of player valuation.

More recent scholarship has sought to reexamine the application of classical sociological theory in sports culture by expanding the analysis of those critiques, in an effort to incorporate the previously overlooked subtlety and rich complexity of those original works. Notions of economic determinism and rationalization are of course perfectly relevant to the understanding of fantasy sports; however, as the application of Novak's religious analogy has shown, they cannot fully account for the growth of fantasy sports communities. As such, perhaps fresh interpretations of the classics as applied in recent analyses on the sociology of sports will, if nothing else, suggest a better way to ask the question.

Reexamining the Classics: New Scholarship on the Socialization of Sport

In Richard Giulianotti's recent collection of essays entitled *Sport and Modern Social Theorists* (2004), Alan G. Ingham's opening essay engages the "founding fathers of social theory" by synthesizing Marx's concept of valorization, Weber's concept of rationalization, Durkheim's concept of collective representation, and Freud's concept of repression (Giulianotti 4). I will use Ingham's synthesis of the classical theorists as a model in my own analysis of the fantasy sports community for this study. I have chosen to incorporate the work of Simmel rather than Durkheim and Freud, however, in an effort to address the socially interactive aspect of fantasy sports in a more direct manner. Furthermore, in an effort to expand my application of Marxist theory, I will incorporate David Inglis' essay from the same collection on Theodor Adorno's concept of systemic ideological domination. Adorno's concept is actually somewhat analogous to Ingham's presentation of Durkheim and Freud in its attempt to show the power of a coercive socializing force, so much of Ingham's work proves to be both relevant and readily applicable to my analysis.

Revisiting Marx: Valorization and Adorno's Systemic Ideological Domination

Ingham argues that "the processes of valorization, rationalization, and bourgeois civilization (the processes associated with modernity) constitute the modern forms and relations through which class domination has been made institutionally effective" (Ingham 12). He begins his synthesis of those concepts by discussing the process of institutionalization, and more specifically, how that process informs questions of power and social domination. That process is inextricably linked to the growth of fantasy sports, as the will to dominate is central to success in the game. When one can establish a consistent record of success in league competition—particularly when that success is

achieved against individuals with publicly recognized authority—they accumulate symbolic power that is then actualized within the linguistic exchanges that take place within the fantasy community. That process of institutionalization legitimizes a level of authority conferred upon the individual as a result of that success. With the public recognition of that authority, the individual attains a higher social status within the community, which often provides the individual with the symbolic capital necessary to legitimately dominate message board discussion. Domination, then, is central not only to the process of competition, but also in daily social interaction. The feeling of self-worth that accompanies the recognition of one's contribution to the community as distinctly *valuable* also powerfully contributes to the desire to participate in fantasy sports. I will discuss this process further using Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power and the institution in Chapter Three.

The processes that support the institutional effectiveness of class domination can further be demonstrated as the fantasy sports industry became an extension of the valorization of fandom. Ingham emphasizes that the valorization of sport was dependent upon the creation of a market of consumers, but that previous attempts to use the 'urban-industrial society thesis' to explain its creation were insufficient.

What should be emphasized is how the capitalist mode of production became so naturalized that it influenced production in other spheres (such as sport) and became hegemonic. Thus, in a capitalist society, the valorization of sports would have occurred when conditions were ripe.

Urban-industrialism merely accelerated the process. (Ingham 14)

If we accept the naturalization of the capitalist mode of production as inevitable across the whole of society, then the same process of acceleration must also apply to the

valorization of spectatorship and fandom in conjunction with the development of information technology and the Internet.

I suggest, then, that the fantasy sports industry can be seen as a hybrid of the valorization of sport and spectatorship, as it combines the exchange-value of pleasure received from watching the athletes with the newly created surplus-value generated by the sale of the spectators' ability to interact for profit. In all of this, the fantasy sports participant is willfully reinforcing existent class distinctions as the barons of the sports industry, and even the overpaid superstars that play the game, grow richer with every dollar they spend. Once the fantasy sports industry was recognized as a legitimate source of revenue, major professional sports leagues began investing greater amounts of capital into the promotion of fantasy games, even going so far as to cater broadcast presentations to the fantasy sports community. And as with everything that proves to be profitable within capitalist society, the fantasy sports industry flourished, and continues to do so, as new ways to capitalize on its success are continually being introduced.

In his conception of the valorization of sport, Ingham suggests that when games are transformed into organized sport, the participant's play becomes labor that generates both exchange- and surplus-value, which is realized in the pleasure of the spectators and the profits of the owners. Thus, in the Marxist sense, the participant is alienated from the product of their play. Ingham explains that as play is turned into toil, "sport becomes part of a larger system of domination and exploitation, illustrating Marcuse's surplus repression or 'negative institutionalization'" (Ingham 18). As the process of valorization, or "sportification" as Ingham calls it, finally overtakes the act of play, the external coercion that pushes players to excel turns them into objects of instrumental rationality,

and the dominant capitalist ideology becomes an ongoing process of systemic inculcation.

With fantasy sports, however, it is worth noting that the physical “toil” presented in this argument, does not apply. In fact, one could legitimately argue that it is precisely that separation from the physical that makes fantasy sports so attractive. My inability to field grounders on a gymnasium floor ended my own baseball career at the age of fourteen, but that limitation did not take away from my passion for the game. With fantasy sports, as with video games, the fan can reconnect with the game on a participatory level. But does this alienation from toil, so to speak, offer the potential for something *other*? Is this a different experience within a system that to some extent has the ability to reduce the sacrifices inherent in market capitalism? Nevertheless, fantasy sports participants do have a role in the promotion of instrumental rationality, and by extension, the reification of the dominant capitalist ideology. The player valuation process and the manner in which seemingly innocuous conversations take place for the purpose of securing a competitive advantage in the trade market both show how central instrumental rationality is to the fantasy sports experience. Paradoxically, those experiences provide much of the enjoyment that is partially responsible for the sustainability of the fantasy sports industry.

Fantasy sites offer resources for gathering player and team information, studying game theory and strategy, receiving direct expert advice, and sharing digital “space” for the development of large social communities. The subscriber content is generally purchased as a yearly subscription costing somewhere between thirty and fifty dollars. These sites are recognized as sources of “inside” information, and those who frequently

offer the most accurate inside information have an elevated recognition within the social community⁴. The latent domination of instrumental rationalism rules social interaction as the community works together to develop better methods for player valuation and strategy, so that in the end they can compete against each other in an effort to competitively dominate their peers. These communities can be seen as analogous to, or extensions of Adorno's depiction of sport, which is "designed to reinforce the ideological domination of the capitalist System. Sport itself is not play but ritual in which the subjected celebrate their subjection" (Adorno qtd. in Inglis 85).

The social interactions within fantasy sports communities are social phenomena within which the juxtaposition of Marx's valorization and Weber's instrumental rationalization would seem to render Simmel's notion of detached sociability virtually impossible. Personal relationships habitually represent the potential for the generation of surplus-value as "our humanness is debased through capitalistic processes, encouraging us to objectify the competitive Other" (Ingham 19). As such, I would like to expand Marx's concept of valorization by including an analysis of Adorno's argument that Marx's critique needs to be viewed systemically rather than in the context of outdated notions of class conflict. As has been demonstrated on many levels thus far, many of these critiques often explain the popularity of the fantasy sports industry far more effectively than they denounce it.

In "Theodor Adorno on Sport: The Jeu D'Esprit of Despair," David Inglis frames his essay on Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which he describes as their "vision of the destruction of individuality and freedom in terms of the rise and

⁴ This elevation can be seen as an example of Weber's notion of status as a context within which one can gain power. As the website gains credibility, the influx of customer traffic would then also add to their economic power base.

eventual triumph of ‘instrumental rationality’” (Inglis 83). Inglis is working to counter misinterpretations of Adorno’s position on sports by Rigauer and Brohm, whom he refers to as ‘Neo-Adornians’. Notably, these were the very same scholars that William J. Morgan referred to (in the earlier discussion on Guttmann) as being poor examples of the Neo-Marxist critique as well. Inglis reinforces Adorno’s assertion that the problem of capitalism was not merely a matter of class conflict, but rather it was a systemic problem rooted in the ideological domination of instrumental rationality.

Domination does not so much operate in the service of a particular dominant class, the thesis that Marx had essentially put forward, but operates in the interests of the overall System, a capitalist system no longer based on free competition between individual capitalists, but oriented around the power of big business corporations each with monopolies in particular markets. (Inglis 83)

Every aspect of culture, therefore, is inculcated with the dominant ideology of capitalism. Moreover, individuals within that culture seldom, if ever, have any conscious recognition that they are being coerced by the dominant ideology to behave in a manner that reinforces the system. One very important clarification must be made here. For Inglis, Adorno’s “excessively negative rhetoric” was an intentional use of irony, thereby leaving the possibility for the “utopian element of the object to be revealed,” and it is precisely this utopian element of Adorno’s work that was entirely missed by Rigauer and Brohm (Inglis 90).

An argument that I have already been hinting at throughout this chapter is that the fantasy sports community might contain elements that point to a “potential future characterized by non-domination,” such as the freedom to choose one’s level of

participation, and the potential to satisfy conflict in non-threatening, reciprocally agreed upon contexts (Inglis 91). There are still winners and losers, but the playing field is leveled, offering equal opportunity for success. For example, both Yahoo! and ESPN offer free fantasy sports services, thereby providing those with limited financial resources an opportunity to play. There are also different levels of competition that the fantasy sports participant can choose to take part in, allowing for the enjoyment of competing against individuals with similar skill sets. Perhaps the key to understanding the growth of fantasy sports lies in that potential. As I stated earlier, another plausible explanation for that growth is that as an assimilation of sports culture, the fantasy industry could likewise be viewed by “big business” as a profitable long-term market. Ingham states that “a sustainable industry... requires a quality product to realize exchange- and surplus-values. With the valorization of sport, the rationalization of its means and relations of production would follow. Science/technology and bureaucratic/managerial forms of administration would intentionally be applied to sporting production” (Ingham 21). Each of those characteristics are essential qualities of fantasy sports industry, and so it is clear that the next step in this analysis is to turn our attention to Max Weber and his notions of rationalism and instrumental rationality.

Weber: Instrumental Rationality

Transitioning from the concept of valorization to systemic domination in the previous section, I suggested that the social interactions within fantasy sports communities are a juxtaposition of Marx’s valorization and Weber’s instrumental rationalization; moreover, Adorno’s own interpretation of domination was likewise tied

to the realities of systemic instrumental rationality. Returning to Ingham's sportification synthesis, he introduced Weber's concept in the following manner:

Instrumental rationality is cold, calculative, and conditional, and from a more Marxian reading implies that human beings, as well as physical objects, can be considered as a means to another individual's end. For Weber, instrumental rational action characterizes social action in the material structures of advanced capitalism. Instrumental rationality is the hegemonic orientation to social action in the institutionalization and modernization of the industrial capitalist way of life and thought. It subsumes other forms of social action almost bending them to its will.

(Ingham 20)

Ingham treats Weber's notion of rationalization not so much as a theoretical concept, but rather as a *process* of systemization and standardization. As such, he focuses his Weberian critique of sport biographically as the inculcation of instrumental rationalism becomes naturalized in the individual as he/she moves from spontaneous forms of play, to agonal games, and finally into organized sport. Of primary importance is the moment at which the individual recognizes the body as having an instrumental use in play, in the same way that it does in the labor of work. Ingham distinguishes between two forms of institutionalization: positive institutionalization, which can be understood as the repression of needs and desires necessary to live with others; and negative institutionalization which stems from social domination, or "the power to shape institutionalized life." While Ingham does recognize that institutional socialization can be contested, he emphasizes that "the articulation between dominant institutions is powerful ideologically and influences the ways in which we live our lives" (Ingham 13). Play in its purest state is affected by neither, as pleasure is sought for its own sake, free from all

constraints. When the individual begins to play agonal games, positive institutionalism is necessary to ensure the reciprocity of exchange-value. The use of the body of the individual now becomes *instrumental* as it is used as a tool to achieve competitive advantage within the bounds of a gaming context, which is constituted by a set of mutually agreed upon rules. With the creation of rules and regulations, rationality is introduced as a means to an end.

This is the point within Ingham's developing paradigm at which Simmel's concept of sociability proves analogous, for sociability is likewise contingent upon positive institutionalism, and a level of rationality that governs and guarantees the reciprocity that ensures the possibility of equal exchange-value in interaction. In agonal games, each participant theoretically has an equal share in the potential for victory. As I stated earlier in the Guttman portion of this study, fantasy sports arguably do not go beyond this agonal stage of competition. They are not physical games, but rather intellectual contests. However, that is not to say that they are then isolated from the ideological inculcation that takes place within sports. To be sure, as a product of capitalist culture, fantasy sports assimilate the features of instrumental rationality just the same. The important difference is signified by the absence of physical toil and coerced participation, which implicitly suggests the potential for instrumental rationalism to be implemented for the purposes of non-destructive competition, reducing the antagonistic nature of conflict.

Within sport, instrumental rationalism works together with negative institutionalism to foster an exploitative environment in which individuals find themselves working in excess to avoid becoming expendable. Ingham states that "we

allow our lives to be organized by a cadre of experts and administrators both on and off the field. This ‘scientization’, ‘technicization’, and managerial/bureaucratic organization of our athletic labour is part of Weber’s rationalization process” (Ingham 22). This also supports Guttman’s emphasis on the Weberian notion of achieved status rather than ascribed status, as the individual can only attain status through this process of instrumental rationalism. Within the context of fantasy sports, however, the process of instrumental rationalism is precisely the point, and it is clearly evident in the following selection from an article written by FantasyBaseball.com’s Todd Zola and Rob Liebowitz:

What will follow is a detailed presentation of the theory and mechanics of calculating one’s own dollar values. The method will be applicable to leagues of all types, shapes and sizes. It is customizable to meet any category or scoring requirements. It is more logical and mathematically sound than any method published. (Leibowitz and Zola 1)

The subjection to the systemic domination of instrumental rationalism and the dominant capitalist ideology as it extends into the fantasy sports community is, in fact, one of the primary causes for the celebration. Success in the fantasy sports community is directly tied to the participant’s ability to use instrumental rationality to gain perceived competitive advantages in player valuation and trade negotiations. Fantasy sports thrive in American culture because they are, to their very core, an unabashed celebration of capitalism. However, I have also stated that the theoretical applications to sports as presented by Ingham, Inglis, and Adorno do not always directly correlate with fantasy sports because of the lack of physical subjection. And since the games are played within virtual spaces without physical activity, one more analytical approach should be

discussed in an effort to specifically address the importance of social interaction within fantasy communities.

Simmel: Duality, and the Forms of Social Interaction

Georg Simmel held that society was a process that was “constantly being realized” as individuals symbiotically influence each other through their interactions (Appelrouth and Desfor Edles 245). Simmel viewed the relationship between the individual and society as an interdependent duality, symbiotically linked in the same way that individuals within the society are connected to each other. His sociological method was a process he called “sociation,” whereby he understood the focal point of sociological study to be the form of social interaction, rather than the content. The three forms of social interaction according to Simmel are *exchange*, *conflict*, and *sociability*, each of which are extremely useful for the study of fantasy communities. I begin this section on Simmel by suggesting that his notion of duality is a reasonable explanation for the apparent conflict that arises between what Ingham called positive and negative institutionalization, as they alternately manifest themselves in the social interaction of fantasy sports communities.

Positive institutionalism, as defined by Ingham, refers to an instance of the internal repression of instincts in order to “minimize conflicts with the reality principle that the engagement with others produces” (Ingham 15). Within the context of games, this necessary form of rationalization within social interaction serves to create, and facilitate, the observance of rules or standards set up to allow for the equal opportunity of each participant to receive pleasure from the experience. Simmel’s concept of *sociability* is likewise contingent upon positive institutionalism, though Simmel himself says that

rationalism “finding no content there, seeks to do away with sociability” (Appelrouth and Desfor Edles 270). However, I would argue that sociability does require rationally structured standards to guard against the interference of personal interests. Rules of engagement are necessary to ensure the reciprocity that allows for the possibility of equal exchange-value in interaction. Simmel’s concept of *exchange* as a form of interaction might appear to be a truer representation of positive institutionalization as it refers to notions of reciprocity, give and take, and exchange-values; however, in agonal games, each participant theoretically has an equal share in the potential for victory. There are no such conditions of equity between participants contained in Simmel’s discussion of exchange as a form of interaction. It is important to remember that games offer the participant both use-value in the form of individual pleasure gained from the experience of play in and of itself, as well as the exchange-value inherent in *reciprocal* interaction. And yet, this seemingly innocuous social experience breaks down when the other side of Simmel’s duality asserts its coercive force.

Social interactions within fantasy sports communities are societal phenomena that are also affected by Marx’s process of valorization. Combined with Weber’s instrumental rationalization, Simmel’s notion of sociability becomes virtually impossible. The game upon which all of this interaction takes place is based on the ability to maximize surplus-value by taking advantage of disparities in perceived exchange-value. The process of negative institutionalization destroys sociability as external systemic forces of ideological domination transform all modes of interaction into opportunities to realize a profit. Every conversation within the fantasy sports community is continuously shadowed by ambitious intent, and at the heart of that intent is the interdependent duality that makes fantasy

sports possible. Without the potential for reciprocity, no one would bother to take part in the process of interactive exchange. Positive institutionalization in the form of exchange disguised as sociability works symbiotically with the negative institutionalization of open exchange, or conflict, as participants seek to maximize the accumulation of surplus-value in a social environment utterly inculcated with instrumental rationality. There is, however, one important question that remains unanswered. Thinking back to Adorno and Horkheimer, is there even a shred of latent utopic potentiality to cling to within this dystopic society that is so completely permeated by community sanctioned dominance?

In his discussion of *conflict* as a form of social interaction, Simmel states that “conflict is thus designed to resolve divergent dualisms; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity, even if it be through the annihilation of one of the conflicting parties” (Appelrouth and Desfor Edles 263). Clearly annihilation is not the result we are looking for in our hope to resolve the divergent dualisms of reciprocity and domination; however, the context within which fantasy sports participants are experiencing conflict is a *virtual* one. In such a space, the toil normally associated with the oppression of class conflict is non-existent. There is no physical contact of any kind with one’s adversary. The victories won and the exploitation of others for the accumulation of surplus-value take place in a world of simulacra. While researching Jean Baudrillard and his work on simulations and “the Procession of Simulacra”, it became apparent that perhaps the work of noted American Studies scholar Leo Marx and his notion of symbols and myths as culturally definitive ought to be revisited as it applies to the study of fantasy culture. Marx’s “American Studies – A Defense of an Unscientific Method” defines culture as “a system, or interrelated group of systems, of values, meanings, and goals” (Marx 79). The

framework by which he studies that culture is a careful reading of symbols and myth. “If a symbol may be defined as an image invested with significance beyond that required for referential purposes, then a myth is a combination of symbols, held together by a narrative, which embodies the virtually all-encompassing conception of reality – the world-view – of a group ”(Marx 86). I will develop the significance of symbols within a linguistic context to a greater degree in the third chapter, but for the purposes of the current argument, Marx’s conception is particularly useful. They are not, in fact, all that different, as I will demonstrate later.

Fantasy sports culture can be studied by understanding the cultural systems and symbols that define the “world-view” of the players involved, and the narrative that ties that view together creating the perceived hegemony of those within it. Using Marx’s own “machine in the garden” imagery, one could go so far as to say that fantasy sports culture on the Internet represents what Jacques Ellul might recognize as the apocalyptic fulfillment of that train of thought: man in the machine. Marx noted that “one observation that later proved to be of value was the simple fact that machine images seemed to take on symbolic power to the degree that they were coupled with images of landscape” (Marx 83). With the Internet, specifically in relation to fantasy sports and gaming, the machine has become the landscape. Moreover, I would argue that one of the reasons fantasy communities continue to thrive is precisely because of their connection with the images from the symbolically potent American sports culture.

The machine is sold to the public as a way to make dreams reality, as a way to “get into the game.” The dream is culture recreated in an environment of total control; created in the image of the world as the individual thinks it should exist. Man leaves the

landscape altogether as he steps into the machine. The symbol of the American Dream made real by technology represents for Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra” (Baudrillard 350). By this he meant that the signs of the real (the dream realization represented by the Internet) are substituted as the real itself, creating what he calls the “hyperreal.” The chat rooms, forums and role playing universes on the web that are designed to simulate and facilitate group interaction and social constructs become “real” locations. A man comes home from work everyday and “goes to” his fantasy website, where he spends the next four hours “hanging out” with his friends. Every aspect of social interaction found in a bar or the office is replicated in the forums, invoking very real emotional and physiological reactions by the participants. However, the negative reactions that can often arise out of competition takes place within a landscape that offers the potential for complete anonymity. Conflict can be resolved without facing a “real” adversary, thereby mitigating the stigmatizing effects of public humiliation stemming from defeat.

Now the individuals and objects upon which that simulation is based are very real, and so the reification of dominance is still realized. But the *potential* for a future where games virtually satiate the inevitable conflicts that arise in a society is also a systemic feature inherent in fantasy sports. Morgan offers Horkheimer’s perspective on the potential for the positive social contributions of sport in response to the negatively deterministic misinterpretations of his and Adorno’s critiques:

Horkheimer (Horkheimer 180) speaks of another sense of competition in sport in which one’s opponent is not so much an adversary as a partner in a struggle in which the antagonism between the other and the self disappears. Similarly, Horkheimer (183) refrains from a wholesale

indictment of the rise of spectator sport, noting that there is a deeper, communal form of spectatorship which betrays its partisan, nationalistic façade in which the desire to catch a glimpse of perfection supersedes the desire to see one's own side win. Horkheimer further refuses to deride the claim that the ideal of fair play embodied in the rules of sport positively contributes to the cause of international peace. While acknowledging that this ideal is frequently violated in modern sport, he nonetheless contends (Horkheimer 184) that without this sporting spirit one cannot imagine the existence of fair and peaceful competition between nations. (Morgan 28)

It is clear the Horkheimer felt that sports and spectatorship did indeed contain seeds of hope, and as the fantasy sports industry is itself a combination of the two, there is every reason to believe that it contains those very same seeds of hope, particularly as I have shown, within the virtual environment.

Conclusion: Why Is The Fantasy Sports Community Growing So Quickly?

The aim of this chapter was to revisit the classical theories of Marx, Adorno, Weber, and Simmel in an attempt to analyze fantasy sports culture, and to discover the reason for its tremendous growth over the last few years. As the fantasy sports industry is an assimilated subculture of sports, I decided to use scholarship on the sociology of sports as my reference, using some of the recent scholarship in the field as a foundation upon which to grid my analysis. It is relatively clear at this point that the work of Karl Marx is best used in conjunction with more recent Marxist scholarship that better suits the social context of “late” or “global” capitalism. In this manner, the work of Theodor Adorno proved to be incredibly useful as a means by which I am able to juxtapose the

work of each of the classical theorists using his concept of systemic ideological domination. Additionally, Alan G. Ingham's synthesis of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Freud was ideally suited for this study as his emphasis on valorization and instrumental rationality complemented my application of David Inglis' work on Adorno. And of course Simmel's concepts on the forms of interaction were essential to tying everything back to the fantasy sports community.

I believe we can attribute the explosion of fantasy sports on the Internet first and foremost to the valorization of spectatorship, which in turn led to the rationalization of the structures that support its marketability. Once again, Ingham states that "a sustainable industry... requires a quality product to realize exchange- and surplus-values" (Ingham 21). The websites that host the community forums are continually reevaluating the quality of their content, in a rationalized process of attempting to realize greater surplus-value. In the next chapter, I will present a study of two fantasy sports analyst sites that completely overhauled their Websites in an effort to increase profitability and quality primarily through technological upgrades. Ten years ago, fans would collect baseball cards of their favorite players, thereby objectifying and valorizing the image and statistical output of the players. With the development of the Internet and the popularity of fantasy sports, now producers can sell the exact same use-value at a higher rate of exchange due to savings in the cost of materials, which has ultimately led to a greater maximization of surplus-value.

The popularity of fantasy sports can also be explained by Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of latent utopic potential. The experience allows participants the excitement and challenge of conflict removed from the physical effects and costs of

domination and repression. In fantasy sports one can “do battle” in an anonymous fashion for the fun of it, which ties the explanation to Simmel’s notion of sociability. I made the argument earlier that sociability was next to impossible due to the economic nature of the social interaction in fantasy communities; however, the perception of anonymity offered by the virtual environment ultimately removes the personal stakes typically involved in value-based interaction. So in a sense, the ‘person’ gaining from the introduction of instrumental rationalism into the interaction is nothing more than a simulacrum of the individual staring into the terminal. Now in leagues comprised of friends and acquaintances, there is typically an understanding that exchange-value involves differing conceptions of value. As such, each participant enters into trade negotiations with the recognition that they do so in an effort to maximize their own value.

Finally, we must recognize that as an extension of American sports culture, fantasy sports share the ritualistic and emotional qualities of religious experience. There is something about the attraction to sports that cannot be reduced to theories of economics and utopic resistance. It lies somewhere between myth and symbol. It cannot be rationally explained or justified, as its origins offer little in the form of concrete definition. Americans love their sports with a zealot’s passion. They are secularized rites of worship and devotion, complete with the idols, sacraments and ceremonies that sustain religious faith. Given the elasticity and sustainability of the characteristics that I have offered as explanatory for the growth of fantasy sports, I see no reason to assume that the rate of expansion should slow down in the near future as new participants continue to buy into the opportunity to celebrate their own subjection in the glorious rituals of fandom.

CHAPTER 2

Power In Numbers: Two Fantasy Sports Communities in Transition

The boards are dead as doornails. As implied earlier, we are going to have to fully transition over to www.fantasybaseball.com. Actually, the only thing that has not moved yet are these free boards. Please realize they are free to you but not to us. The hope is everyone moves over, and with the added cache of the fantasybaseball.com URL, we build a community even stronger than we have here now. (Todd Zola “just curious, new boards”)

We are creatures of habit. While clichés often ring hollow, sometimes they are unavoidable, particularly within the superstitious culture of professional sports. Every morning when I launch my Web browser, after initially checking my email, I methodically scroll through my bookmarks:

- Rotoworld Player Updates
- My fantasy leagues (The Pete Rose Hall of Fame, Queen Felix and the Tommy Johns, The Bush League, and The Sports Grumblings Invitational)
- FantasyBaseball.com
- SportsGrumblings.com,
- BaseballProspectus.com
- ESPN.com

After years of performing this ritual every morning, a certain degree of comfort and homeliness has become associated with the Web sites, particularly those with forum communities. Here is today’s two-for-the-price-of-one bonus cliché: Human beings are social creatures.

It is always interesting to look at the list at the bottom of the forums to see who is currently online, a process that often (though not always) sparks an internal monologue

along these lines: “bodhizefa is online! Why hasn’t he answered my post yet?” And with that admission, I confess that my statement in Chapter One regarding a lack of cyber-stalking in fantasy sports communities was not entirely true. Though this is clearly stalking of a different sort. As individuals start getting used to the community dynamic, they typically latch on to a handful of members whose counsel is highly regarded. As a result, an apprenticeship of sorts is formed, though it might be closer to the truth to characterize it as a discipleship. Over time, the different factions of disciples can become more pronounced, particularly within theory and strategy discussions. Typically there are groups of site members that prefer the analysis or conversational style of one Web site staffer over another. Furthermore, there are often long standing site subscribers that tend to draw a significant following as well. For example, one of the veteran posters on FantasyBaseball.com has developed a reputation as the guru of pitching because of his “Annual Tiers of Pitching” post that went up every spring. This year he decided that he did not have the time to pull it off, resulting in multiple posts lamenting the end of an era of greatness. These long standing veterans are the rocks of the community, and are often eagerly sought after for approval and insight.

When a Web site undergoes a transition either due to a corporate buyout or perhaps simply to technologically revamp the site—like FantasyBaseball.com and SportsGrumblings.com, the two sites I have chosen to focus on for this chapter—with very rare exceptions, the staffers are all going to tow the party line by vigorously assuring the community that the “necessary” changes are going to benefit everyone in the end. But the veteran members, those who have been around long enough to develop their own level of symbolic power, are not always thrilled with the changes. They are comfortable

with the status quo. They like knowing where everything is, how everything works, and they definitely do not want to have to change their bookmarks! And though they do hold a significant amount of social clout, when the site owners decide to make changes, they are powerless to do more than make suggestions to ease the transition. In most cases, however, because the veterans were themselves mentored by the staff members in the same way that they mentor the newer community members, they tend to stay loyal, exercising patience during the transition.

The fantasy sports industry thrives on community interaction, and when a community faces dramatic structural and environmental changes, the strength of the community is tested. And while the maintenance of the community's social dynamics are often important to the Web site owner, if the product has been around long enough and the writing is good, it is admittedly not essential to the success of the business, as the strength of the product will most likely bring new members. But to the individual members within the community, particularly when the community is vibrant to begin with, continuity of the social dynamic within the group is paramount. As the changes are implemented, the members of the community observe those members who have been around the longest. They are looked upon with a degree of authority, and as such, they are expected to offer guidance. And it is in the actions and comments of those individuals that one can legitimately gauge just how smoothly the transition is working out.

The two Web sites I will be looking at are direct competitors in the fantasy analysis market. I will say right from the start that this study is in no way intended to promote nor degrade either site. This is merely intended to be a study of the social dynamics within the message board communities at each site as they went through a

major structural transition. Mastersball.com was bought out by FantasyBaseball.com prior to the 2007 baseball season, and as such the forum communities were forced to get used to the functionality of an entirely different Web site. SportsGrumblings.com was originally GridironGrumblings.com, which provided fantasy football analysis exclusively. Around the same time as the Mastersball/FantasyBaseball merger, Gridiron Grumblings owner John Georgopoulos decided to expand his successful football site to include content for baseball, basketball and hockey as well. For the “Grumblers”, the transition involved not only a whole new set of technical bells and whistles, but also the potential that their intimate little community of football junkies might become oversaturated. In the pages that follow, I will discuss how each community dealt with their respective transitions based on personal observation as a member of those communities, and from forum discussions posted by other members of the communities.

The Masters Go Corporate

Mastersball.com was founded in 1997 by Jason Grey and Todd Zola. Rotoheaven.com founder Rob Leibowitz joined the team in 2002 when the two sites merged. In the last couple years, Perry Van Hook and Gary Jennings have also been added to the staff. Adding to its reputation as one of the top fantasy analyst sites in the industry, some of the work from Mastersball had also been utilized by the scouting and operations departments of several Major League Teams. Jason Grey’s outstanding record as a competitor in the nation’s top expert league, Tout Wars, included back-to-back championships. Todd Zola was recognized as a pioneer in the fields of research and player valuation both in the fantasy community and in the baseball community. And Leibowitz was widely recognized as one of the industry’s most skillful writers.

FantasyBaseball.com owner Craig Davis wisely retained every member on the staff when he brought Mastersball into the fold (though Jason Grey has since moved on to ESPN.com). I no longer remember how I found the site, but it was definitely those credentials that pulled me in long enough to get hooked.

I had been a member of the free message boards at Mastersball for two or three years before I finally convinced my wife that paying \$30 for a Platinum membership was “necessary”. Many of the Platinum members often posted on the free boards, as well as the “Forum Funklord” himself, Todd Zola. The insight these guys offered was incredible. They broke down fantasy baseball in the same way that I had seen Brett Favre break down so many inept Chicago Bears secondaries. The intelligence, the confidence, and the accuracy in their analysis were astounding. I squeezed as much free advice as I could from them, hoping that I was not coming across like an annoying 45 year old man screaming for autographs at a baseball card show. I had consistently improved every year in my league since stumbling across that forum, and it was time to take the next step. Conveniently (insert sarcasm here) I joined up either a year too late, or a year too early depending upon whose perspective you took. Weeks after I joined, we were informed that a “big announcement” was coming shortly, and that it would mean great things for us as paying customers. The big announcement turned out to be Mastersball.com’s merger with FantasyBaseball.com.

The boards lit up with questions: Were the staff staying on? Was there going to be any downtime during the merger? Were the message boards going to be ported over? Would we have to be subjected to FantasyBaseball.com’s inferior writers? The panic was not unexpected by the staff, and they were extremely diligent in answering all questions

promptly with confident reassurance. In hindsight, however, even the staff admit the timing of the transition was not well thought out. They waited until just after Opening Day so as to avoid messing with the preseason drafts of the members, but no one foresaw the technical issues that would threaten to bring the usually vibrant user activity in the community to a grinding halt:

Where is every one?

I was wondering the same thing! I hope old threads will be transferred over here!

So I assume all that talk about Mastersball.com surviving because of the dedicated fan base was just talk, eh? Sad, sad day.

Up until about 4 or 5 days ago Mastersball.com and then the FantasyBaseball.com message board rocked. I had been a member for about 4 years but whatever they did certainly sucks eggs big time. I've got Netscape at home and couldn't get to this page. Tried calling using the help number for Infinity something but had to leave a message but they never called back. That was 4 days ago. Makes one wonder whether or not to pony up for the Platinum given the kick in the teeth they've given to those of us who've been coming here for a number of years. Hopefully there was just a SNAFU and things will get back to normal but something tells me this is the NEW board.

Hey Jason/Todd what's going on? ("Where'd every one go?")

Over the next few months, the same issues kept popping up and the frustrations from the Platinum subscribers were mounting daily. The free forums had always been extremely vibrant, and many of the paying customers finally decided to go back to posting there, giving up on the Platinum boards all together. The two veterans that I had latched onto when I started frequenting the boards at the old Mastersball.com site had both settled in on the free boards, so naturally I tagged along. The interesting thing was that the discussion there was as solid as ever. The only instances of a disconnect in community interaction occurred when one of the members started griping about the crossover and the ensuing argument grew personal. Typically, one faction would form backing the member who felt slighted, taking the opportunity of someone else's initiative

to air their grievances. Another faction would rally around the staff, defending the site and suggesting that the grippers either cut it out, or take their money and leave. That was the really interesting part of the whole process: there was always a standing money-back guarantee, but no one took it.

As one of the newer Platinum members, I definitely sympathized with those who felt that what they received with that membership was very different from what was expected. When I made the decision to buy the Platinum subscription, a large part of that decision was based on the assumption that the discussion in the Platinum-only boards would be incredible. My previous experience in the free boards was outstanding, and I was sure that discussion limited to only the most committed fantasy players would blow my mind. In reality, the Platinum subscription is really not about the message boards. While you do get the benefit of having one or two more active staff members trolling the boards, the discussion is fairly comparable to the free boards. The strength of the Platinum subscription was in the tools and articles available. The first time I downloaded their player projections, dollar values, and draft charts into an Excel spreadsheet, I figured I came out ahead in the deal by a long shot. But there were others who could not get over the letdown of the Platinum forums. One particular member has complained regularly since the beginning of the transition over a year ago, and even now when everything is functioning smoothly, he finds something to gripe about. And yet, despite numerous offers to refund his money, he keeps hanging around.

A year after the transition, the General Forum in the Platinum boards had six pages with twenty posts per page just in the first week of the season. Each post had an average of roughly four or five responses. And that volume was much higher prior to

Opening Day when the boards were still being flooded with draft and auction questions. The activity slows down a bit as the season gets going and players settle into their teams, and then as the All-Star break approaches, the traffic will pick right back up as midseason trade discussions heat up. The number of registered forum members has dropped slightly from 5614 members when the Mastersball.com forums were closed, up to the 4990 registered members today on the FantasyBaseball.com forums; but the community dynamic is relatively the same as it was prior to the merger. Any given day, the same five or six veterans drop in and guide discussion, and the newer members are still excited to get their feedback. Even new site owner Craig Davis pops into the discussions every now and then. In one particularly delicate episode, Davis' interaction proved to be extremely wise, and provided a reassuring stability to the community in the face of dangerous allegations from one of the community's most respected veterans.

One of the veteran guys that I had initially followed around when I first joined Mastersball.com years before the merger dropped a rhetorical bomb on the site one morning this past offseason. In his post he charged FantasyBaseball.com with sending an advertising cookie to those with Platinum memberships. He argued that as a long-time IT veteran, he regularly scanned his PC for cookies, and that the only difference from the last time he performed the scan during the previous week when his machine was clean, was his purchase of the Platinum package. He then proceeded to post his email discussions with the FantasyBaseball.com IT guy and Davis. He was incredibly offended at what appeared to be more than reasonable explanations for what had happened. At the end of the post, he then copied in Davis' frustrated offer to refund his money. Apparently

he accepted and decided to post the message as a warning to the other Platinum members, and as a last dig at Davis' credibility.

Two other respected members of the community responded to the post, expressing their sadness for his leaving and mixed responses about the culpability of the Web site. Rob Leibowitz jumped in and announced that the thread was being left up on the board, but that further posts were going to be disabled. As one of the original Mastersball.com staff, Leibowitz expressed that both he and Todd Zola were concerned about the incident, and that they were planning to talk it over with Davis. One of the conditions of the merger had been the Mastersball.com staff's loyal commitment to customer satisfaction, so it looked like this issue could be a cause for dissension between the two parties. But Davis was smart, and allowed himself a full twenty-four hours to cool down before responding publicly to the allegations. And when he did respond, he responded to every charge methodically, line by line with clarity and force. After recapping the events from his perspective, he added the following comment about the customer's right in a manner that clearly demonstrated why he has been able to consistently deliver a quality product while maintaining a loyal staff:

The customer is always right, but verbal attacks on my staff don't fly with me. LET ME BE CLEAR ON THIS... ANYONE WHO COMES AFTER ONE OF MY STAFF MEMBERS AND VERBALLY ATTACKS THEM (especially after they spend time trying to honestly help someone out) WILL NOT BE TOLERATED, NO MATTER WHO THEY ARE. Say what you want about me because I know my history and reputation in this industry and one accusation isn't going to make me crawl into a corner and lament with pity. However, and call me old fashioned, but I take care of my own. I'm protective of my staff and whether it's George or Todd or Rob or Perry or Ryan or Kermit the Frog, NO ONE will be permitted to say this type of stuff about my employees and get away with it, period. ("Did you get more")

Davis closed his post by explaining why the cookie was still an issue, and by apologizing to the member who left the site. His final words were that customer service and integrity

were extremely important to him, and that he was personally available to anyone who still felt uncomfortable. The crisis was resolved, and any questions about the new ownership's dedication to the community were laid to rest. But as will be demonstrated in my next case study, the decisions made by management for the good of the community are not always as readily justifiable.

Trash Talk or Personal Attack: Drawing the Line in Fantasy Football

Trash talk has always played a major role in American sports culture, and with Web-based fantasy football, that practice has turned into an art form. In typical public league play, the message board on the league's homepage gets a fresh coat of trash fairly regularly. In private leagues among friends it happens daily, as the better you know your opponent, the better you know how to publicly humiliate them. Now, not all trash talk is about open humiliation. In fact, some of the best work involves subtle inside jabs to the body, causing damage that only the giver and the receiver can truly appreciate. One of the biggest criticisms in gender based critiques of fantasy sports community interaction focuses on this ability of men to callously berate each other in public settings. And yet, there are limits to the types of attacks that are recognized as socially acceptable. Personal attacks about intelligence and family members for example are generally off limits. But there is always one jerk who was seemingly raised without any sense of tact or social competency whatsoever, and when that guy get going, the other players in the league have to have the ability to shut them out, otherwise the season is lost to senseless alpha male posturing. Now imagine a league that involves staffs of multiple players per team that is rooted in an incredibly intimate forum community. The complications of dealing with that kind of tactless aggression within that context are immense.

SportsGrumblings.com has a very loyal customer base that has formed one of the most uniquely intimate forum communities that I have ever witnessed. The majority of the individuals in the community have been playing fantasy football together for years, and in many cases these relationships track back across multiple Web sites. When the Fantasy Asylum shut down at the end of the 2004 football season, many in the community migrated together from site to site until they finally settled at what was formerly GridironGrumblings.com. In that process they created a virtual currency called Nutbucks, and an economy that fed into the development of the community they dubbed Nut Nation. They also developed a new style of fantasy football which emphasized team effort through the hiring of multiple staff members to fill specific positions with salaries appropriate to their rank. The members of this micro-society are literally and figuratively invested in success of the community. And over the years strong bonds have been formed, resulting in friendships that extend beyond the forums and the rosters. There is the joy of fellowship when children are born, and there is the shared sorrow when tragedy strikes. As such, the unity of the community is closely guarded by its own. And when the actions of one individual fostered the perception of a threat to that unity, even if only by a small minority, swift and absolute action was taken to root out the threat.

There are now three HAFA-style (Hire and Fire Association) leagues at SportsGrumblings.com, HAFA, HOPE, and HEAT, (now referred to as the Tri-Leagues) which are all acronyms that in various ways represent multiple-player staffs, and the ability to hire and fire anyone at anytime. The owners of the teams have to have a significant amount of collateral in the form of the aforementioned Nutbucks, with which they are required to pay their staffs, cover their players salaries up to the \$30 million cap,

and other various expenses associated with ownership. As such, the team owners are typically site members that have been around for a while. For perspective, a typical salary for a general manager's position in these leagues is somewhere between three and eight million. So it takes awhile to get enough capital together to own a team. The site decided to expand to three leagues with the hopes of pulling in some new faces and expanding the community, but what ended up happening instead was a lot of crossover. In 2006 I was simultaneously a GM in HEAT and an Offensive Coordinator in both HOPE and HAFA, which was a very common occurrence throughout the leagues. That kind of involvement demands the ability to communicate effectively with many different personalities, and to work comfortably within multiple competitive philosophies. Needless to say, this is not an ideal fit for someone with brash tendencies, and no self-imposed social filter.

At the beginning of last season, working as the GM for a team in HEAT, I hired a guy to be my Head Coach who had just been fired for personality conflicts with other members on his team. After listening to his side of the story, I read him as being a bit impulsive and very opinionated, but also very knowledgeable and committed to the game. So I rolled the dice and told him that I would handle all of the trade negotiations, while letting him run the team fairly autonomously. And for the most part it seemed to be working out splendidly. I spent half of the time running the team than the previous year, and I felt good about his decisions. About midway through the season he started stirring up trouble on the message boards and in the other leagues, and I found myself having to reign him in and apologize to other members of the community for his behavior. The problem was that he was great with me and the rest of our staff, and he was clearly an

enormous asset for the team. So I brushed it aside and tried to maintain damage control for the remainder of the season.

In the offseason I typically check out entirely, so I had not noticed that our guy was stirring up quite a mess over perceived rule violations. He was accusing other members of the community of conspiring to subvert the rules, so he began working with the commissioner to hammer out the rules in a manner that he deemed clear and concise. However, due to my absence from the site, apparently I was only privy to select information that he would occasionally send to me via email. Towards the end of January I was surprised to learn that my head coach had been banned from all activities related to league play at SportsGrumblings.com. There was no warning and no open consultation with the community. The owner of the site had decided that his public and private behavior towards members of the community had gone well beyond what was acceptable and appropriate for the SportsGrumblings.com community. The banned individual came to me immediately in an effort to show how he had been ganged up on by a very small group of individuals who had the ear of the Web site owner. I made a few inquiries, and what I found, was that the problem was much larger than the banning of one individual. After talking to many members of the community, I wrote the following open letter to the community in an attempt to address some issues that were beginning to seriously effect the quality of the community experience at SportsGrumblings.com, specifically as they related to the Tri-Leagues:

***COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY:
STRENGTH IN NUMBERS***

Over the last year this community began to dissolve. Just as the Sports Grumblings site began to get some real muscle behind it technologically and in terms of content, the very community it is designed to serve started to tear each other apart. And I'm not only

speaking of disagreements between members on message boards and in emails. I'm not talking solely about unprecedented banning. The community and by extension the leagues fell apart for a number of reasons. I believe the most powerful of those reasons can be summed up thusly:

- 1. "Old Boys" exclusivity, cliquishness, and in-breeding.*
- 2. Heavy-handed, dictatorial league management devoid of true democratic representation in decision making.*
- 3. The lack of a way to develop new participants to replace the necessary, regular turnover that happens in fantasy leagues as a result of REAL LIFE.*

In community, we must of course develop friendships, some closer than others. We must eventually develop a group of "elders". But when the representative voice of those groups take on too much power, the risk of the alienation of some and the creation of "insiders" threaten to destroy the fabric of that community.

All fantasy leagues must have a commissioner. All commissioners will at times deal with issues of disrespect, ungratefulness, and scape-goating. But the role of the commissioner(s) is to serve the majority in a democratic institution. When measures are taken that destroy the faith in the process of democracy in a league, dissent is sure to rear its head, and if those measures are not swiftly and properly addressed, that dissent gains momentum based on hearsay, half-truths, and assumption.

In all fantasy leagues, attrition is a natural occurrence. We grow up, we grow old, we reevaluate our priorities from time to time. In a league like the Tri-Leagues, when that attrition is accompanied by a lack of faith in the process, when it is accompanied by a sense of exclusivity, it is terribly hard to keep up with. Sports Grumblings, once again unique and ahead of its time, has failed to see the strength of a system that they already have in place to combat this issue. The strength is the community, and from the community the community must grow. Sports Grumblings has a natural "feeder" source from which, if done properly, it can draw on fresh faces and friends to breathe new life into the Tri-Leagues. The Tuff Leagues are excellent and incredibly enjoyable. They are a proving ground. We ought to use those resources to bring new life to the Tri-Leagues. 3 or 4 years ago I was playing in a league that I thought was tough, and full of excellent players. I thought I had reached the pinnacle of competitive play. Then I found out that Sage and Snurpz were watching me... waiting to introduce me to HAFA... to the Grumblers. This is the cream of the crop friends. There is no better league setup that I have seen, and now others are even trying to copy it. This is the major leagues. I earned my job in the proving grounds at Diehards... the Tuff leagues could and should be utilized in the same manner.

In closing I will say just a bit more, and I will be blunt.

The leagues are falling apart because the system needs a tune up. The community is sick, and infighting is no way to heal it.

The recent banning of one member may very well have been justified, and it is absolutely within the rights and jurisdiction of site ownership to make a decision like that. But the manner in which it happened could have been handled better, and furthermore, whether you supported the decision or not, it was symptomatic and representative of getting away from the strength of this site:

COMMUNITY. (“TRI-LEAGUE MANIFESTO”)

The publishing of that letter prompted thirty-nine responses that dealt with concerns over notions of exclusivity and power suggested by the existence of an “old-boys club”, questions about how to properly get new community members plugged into the Tri-Leagues, questions about Web site owner John Georgopoulos’ apparent lack of forum involvement, and most importantly, how the upgrade of the Web site had taken away many of the things that contributed to the vitality of Nut Nation. Prior to the upgrade, there were forums specifically designated for Nut Nation activity, such as the Nut Nation Bank (where Nut Bucks could be deposited to earn interest), Seizure’s Palace (for those who like to gamble), and Texas Hold ‘Em (where community members played poker together). After the upgrade, some of those features were removed, and those that remained were hard to find. Clearly the community was starting to lose its previous levels of intimacy, and the loss of these community gathering activities was one of the explanations. Another cause was simply the natural turnover that eventually happens with fantasy sports communities. As responsibilities in the real world grow, demanding more time, individuals withdraw from the community. Sometimes it is a temporary seasonal withdrawal, and sometimes it is permanent. With the site transition, and an unusually high and concentrated level of membership turnover happening simultaneously, the community had no plans to account for that.

As the discussions went on, Georgopoulos let it be known that he was indeed monitoring the discussion, but that his other responsibilities with the growing site did not allow him the time to be personally involved. Instead he created three new positions to oversee the issues that had risen out of the discussion. The first was a Chief Rules Officer, whose responsibility was to ensure that the rules of the Tri-Leagues were clearly organized and communicated. The second was a Community Ombudsman, who worked as an intermediary between site ownership and those who wanted to communicate problems with the site. And the final position was essentially a Forum Overseer, whose responsibility was to monitor forum discussion and keep it civil. There is still some disagreement among community members over the manner in which the divisive individual was banned, but it was understood that like it or not, it was well within ownership's right to do what was best for the peace of the community. And the results have borne that out, as the tension that hung over the community has all but disappeared. As the NFL draft approaches in mid-April, traffic on the site is picking up again as the owners and coaches of the Tri-Leagues prepare their rookie draft lists. There is nothing like football season in April to bring a community together.

Conclusion

The common thread that tied the transitions of these two websites together is the significant role that individual members within the community play in the sustenance of the group. There are individuals who hold significant amounts of symbolic power within the community, which is accumulated through a combination of time invested and demonstrated knowledge about the games. These veterans have the power to unite and the power to divide. In the first example, one of the veterans nearly divided the

community during a very sensitive moment in its transition to new ownership. However, stability was restored with a timely statement by the owner that demonstrated the openness and integrity that community members were accustomed to under the previous ownership. Furthermore, his recognition of the rights of the customer and his apology to the offending member within the address both worked to symbolically empower the members of the community.

In the second example, the unity of the community was maintained as well, though in an entirely different manner. Georgopoulos removed the offender with a show of autocratic power, but then stepped back into the background to let the veterans of the community exercise their own symbolic power to restore order. Then in an effort to publicly decentralize some of his authority, Georgopoulos created three positions of power that were filled by veterans of the community who had already demonstrated that they could wield that power with respect and effectiveness. In both scenarios it is clear that the true strength of a fantasy sports community lies in the ability of established members of that community to secure and exercise a level of symbolic power that is recognized by both the community and the owners of the institution. In the chapter that follows, I will show how the ownership and use of language and the instruments of symbolic production play a significant role in the acquisition and exercising of symbolic power.

CHAPTER 3

Stealing Signs: The Battle for Linguistic Capital in Baseball

Baseball statistics acquire the powers of language, which is what makes them so uniquely fascinating... A .296 average doesn't stand for 296 of anything; it doesn't make one think of 296 apples or 296 oranges. Three hundred means excellence; .296 means just short of the standard of excellence. (James "Stats" 102)

Fantasy baseball is a game in which success is defined by the ability to project player performance and the relative value of that performance within the context of a competitive market, whether that market be defined as a player draft, an auction or the mid-season waiver-wire bidding process for free agents. In this way, fantasy baseball directly mirrors Major League Baseball, as the participants that play the fantasy game attempt to think like the general managers that oversee the construction of major-league rosters. As such, fantasy baseball participants are playing a game that is comprised of activities that are closer to the accounting and human resource management of the front office than they are to the games that take place on the baseball diamond. Their success relies not on their ability to hit a curveball, but rather on their ability to efficiently evaluate and allocate resources. However, unlike their major-league role models, they have one significant limitation that is inherent in their valuation process: they have no direct access to the players that they are evaluating.

As he was conducting research for his book *Fantasyland* (2006), Sam Walker did actually have access to the clubhouses and spring training facilities of major-league baseball teams. Some fantasy sports analysts, like ESPN.com's Jason Grey, who have worked or are currently working for major-league teams in some capacity in addition to their roles as analysts also enjoy a great degree of direct access to the players. But the

overwhelming majority of fantasy baseball participants are just fans with Internet access, who may only go out to the park for a few games during the season. As such, the fantasy baseball player has only the statistics recorded in the box scores to gauge a player's value, augmented by the oversaturated and often contradictory analyses of what those statistics mean by fantasy baseball "experts" writing for hundreds of different sources primarily found on the Internet. There are some analysts, like the aforementioned Grey, who have the resources and the time to scout the players in person. But the majority of the fantasy baseball writers on the Internet are part-timers, working for small stipends and "schwag" (autographed player jerseys for example), making their judgments solely from the numbers, just like the average fantasy sports participant. But can one assign a legitimate value to baseball players and their production without actually seeing them swing a bat or throw a pitch? And exactly how does one determine whether the authority granted to any of these "experts" and their statistical interpretations is legitimate? The central question that concerns fantasy baseball players—as well as Major League Baseball scouts, coaches, executives, and writers—in their pursuit of success is this: How does one, as the professional baseball scouts are asked to do, put a "dollar sign on the muscle" (Kerrane 29)? That question has been a matter of dispute throughout the history of professional baseball, as it is currently in fantasy baseball.

In this chapter, I suggest that the sanctioned meanings of baseball statistics have historically been inculcated by Major League Baseball through strategic commercial alliances with the media and the Elias Sports Bureau (official statisticians for Major League baseball since 1919), the standardization of the box score, "officially sanctioned" historical publications, and the statistical standards used as qualifiers for admission to the

Baseball Hall of Fame. As a result, society developed the notion that the absolute understanding of the game lies in the language of statistics, signified exclusively by “baseball men”, the authorities delegated by the institution of Major League Baseball. With the publication of the *Bill James 1977 Baseball Abstract*, the meanings of those signs were challenged from the outside with moderate success for the first time, and a scholarly community of fans known as “sabermetricians” began to take shape, offering new ways of signifying the performance of the baseball player through statistics.

The rise of that community started what would become a long, hard struggle for linguistic and symbolic capital taking place within multiple “authoritative” annuals, in the broadcast booths, in the print media, and finally culminating within the fantasy baseball community on the Internet. While arguments over the value and meaning of ballplayers and their statistical output are not new to the game, no “baseball outsider” has been able to infiltrate and make changes at the very core of baseball culture (the front office) with the success of Bill James, this generation’s most respected and influential baseball scholar. “Sabermetrics” (coined by James in honor of the Society for American Baseball Research or SABR) is defined as “the search for new knowledge about baseball; the systematic study of baseball questions.” (Gray ix) The sabermetric revolution in baseball has succeeded because, as with so many other cultural revolutions, the revolutionaries were able to inspire and empower change by identifying and drawing upon the power of “fiction and drama and poetry” (Lewis 67) latent in the language of statistics.

If, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, the possibility for resistance and change exists only from within the context of the dominant institution and its official language, then one must first learn that language (by entering into, perpetuating, and acknowledging the

system) to change it (Bourdieu 64). And while the official language of the game as it is presented in the box scores still dominates baseball culture, at no time in baseball's history have the fans been as knowledgeable and connected to the game as they are today, which can be credited to the simultaneous risings of Bill James, sabermetrics, fantasy baseball, and the Internet. To get a clear understanding of where that language comes from, and why it continues to prosper among the majority of baseball fans, we need study its development in conjunction with the development of the power structures that shape and control the institution of Major League Baseball.

The Development of the Official Language of Baseball

When the first baseball associations were being formed in the middle of the 19th century, the game was largely controlled by the men who played the game. The first officially recognized professional league, the National Association of Players, allowed anyone who paid the \$10 entry fee and agreed to play by league rules the opportunity to play. In 1876, the stronger teams in the league, frustrated by the inefficient management of some of the other teams in the league, left the Association and formed the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs. With the new league's emphasis on the professionalism of its ballplayers, the power was transferred to the owners of the teams which were now treated as business entities, and a formal league structure and bureaucracy was formed under the direction of the league's first president, William Hulbert (James "New Historical" 11). With the commercialization of the game, the practice of offering players competitive salaries led to the need for placing greater importance on a player's individual contribution to the success of the organization. Even as early as 1861, Henry Chadwick wrote that in order to "obtain an accurate estimate of a

player's skill... it is requisite that all... contests should be recorded in a uniform manner" (as qtd. in Schwarz 6). The game has since been understood by the quantification of the events that take place within the historical context of the games themselves, recorded as statistics that in turn act as signs, or symbols, that in various ways signify a player's value. The designation and analysis of those signs has been a struggle for symbolic and linguistic capital in Major League Baseball since the inception of the box score in 1854. An understanding of how statistics work semiotically as signs, then, is necessary if we are to understand the power structures that have historically shaped and controlled the language and economics of player valuation, both in the major-leagues and in the fantasy sports industry.

The Semiotics of Baseball

No study of the role of signs in language can avoid referencing in some way the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure and his sign-signifier relationship. However, the dyadic Saussurian form of the analysis of signs is insufficient for the purposes of understanding the symbolic meaning in baseball statistics for a number of reasons, all of which stem from the fact that it works from an entirely internal perspective. In *Language & Symbolic Power* (1991), Bourdieu denounces Saussure's semiotics on the grounds that "they ignore the social-historical conditions of the production and reception of texts" (Bourdieu 4). Saussure's sign-signifier relationship fails to explain the relationship between baseball statistics and the actions that they represent, because it cannot account for the possibility of multiple interpretations of their meaning within a social-historical context. More importantly, Saussure's model fails to take into account the levels of authority that must be socially recognized if the interpretation of a sign is to be accepted

as legitimate and accurate. A proper understanding of the semiotics of baseball statistics, then, must in some way recognize what Bourdieu referred to as the “structures of the linguistic market, which impose themselves as a system of specific sanctions and censorships” (Bourdieu 37). In order to do that, we must embrace a semiotic with the ability to grow beyond the limitations of “a strictly linguistic competence, abstractly defined, ignoring everything that it owes to the social conditions of its production” (Bourdieu 38).

Charles S. Peirce, an American logician and philosopher during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also refuted Saussure’s notion of an internally defined sign-signifier relation, asserting that “thought is not immediate perception or undeniable experience of ideas within a self. Thought is in signs that attain meaning through the triadic relation: Object – Sign – Interpretant.” (Peirce 8) The key distinction between the Saussurian and Peircean conception of semiotics, is that for Peirce, a sign is something that stands *to somebody* for something else within a *particular* context. Peirce states that “the interpreter of the sign (i.e., the mind to which a sign stands for an object) is transformed into the interpretant of the sign (i.e. the “proper significate effect” or outcome of the sign (Peirce qtd. in Colapietro 6). The emphasis placed on the interpreter is the essence of Peirce’s semiotic, and it is that distinction that makes it particularly suited to the study of meaning in baseball statistics. One other important characteristic of Peirce’s semiotic is his assertion that the task before both linguistics and semiotics is “ascertaining the laws by which... one sign [symbol, language element] gives birth to another.” For Peirce, the process of semiotics is open ended, and “symbols grow” as they come into relation with new interpretants (Peirce 9). Using this framework, we can begin

to understand the processes by which baseball players are assigned value, as their statistics and physical attributes become signs and symbols that have the capacity to change and grow as different interpretants are introduced within different contexts.

Statistics initially refer to the ballplayer's production directly on the field, for example, when a pitcher is recognized as winning a game with a "W" in the box score. That statistic also works as a symbol, as the win-loss record has long been recognized by the delegated authorities in Major League Baseball as a way to measure the skill of a pitcher. One of the things Bill James hoped to show with his work was the fallibility of that interpretation, by showing how other statistics such as strikeout-to-walk ratio and homeruns-per-nine-innings, serve as a better measurement of a pitcher's skill by removing incidental factors like defense and run-support that are beyond the pitcher's control. The win, as a symbol, then grew as those factors were included in its meaning. By studying the socio-historical contexts within which that symbol was originally generated, and the processes that were involved in legitimizing its interpretation, we can begin to understand why that incomplete interpretation was recognized as accurate for so long. John B. Thompson opens his editor's introduction to *Language and Symbolic Power*, acknowledging that "we are aware that individuals speak with differing degrees of authority, that words are loaded with unequal weights, depending on who utters them and how they are said, such that some words uttered in certain circumstances have a force and a conviction that they would not have elsewhere" (Bourdieu 1).

Processes like the legitimization of the box score format, the systematic codification of a player's physical tools by professional baseball scouts, and the determination of whether batting average or on-base percentage offers a more accurate

representation of a hitter's skills, are processes that can give the interpreted meaning of statistical signs the symbolic power of an official language. Bourdieu described the development and acceptance of the official language of a nation-state in this way:

The subsequent normalization and inculcation of the official language, and its legitimation as the official language... was a gradual process that depended on a variety of other factors, such as the development of the educational system and the formation of a unified labour market. The production of grammar books, dictionaries and a corpus of texts exemplifying correct usage is only the most obvious manifestation of this gradual process of normalization. (Bourdieu 6)

What are the processes by which one's interpretation of a statistic or a player's value is recognized as legitimate, authoritative, and "official" in Major League Baseball? By what qualifications do we judge whether or not an individual is an authority figure in baseball? Perhaps the answers to these questions will present themselves if we stay true to the methods of Peirce and Bourdieu, by studying the socio-historical context within which those processes take place.

When the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs was formed in 1876 with the aim of unifying the labor market and enforcing league rules, the struggle to define the language of baseball had already been going on for at least twenty years. Henry Chadwick was constantly working on new methods to quantify a player's contribution to his team. While the box score initially served as a means to recap the outcome and events of the games, Chadwick felt that their meaning could be much more, provided that they were used correctly. At its inception, the National League officially incorporated a statistic called fielding percentage by which they intended to measure a

player's ability in the field. However, Chadwick found that statistic insufficient because it was based on errors, a measure of how often a player failed in the field, which he argued was much less important than measuring how often a player succeeded. Chadwick's argument fell on deaf ears, and it was about hundred years later before contemporary baseball scholar Bill James once again challenged the value of errors as a means for judging a player's fielding ability. It simply takes watching a game in person, and witnessing all of the other factors that effect whether or not a player can make a play on the ball, to see that often a player has no chance of being in a position to make the play in the first place. As such, raw statistics often need to be reevaluated and contextualized, particularly when judging fielding ability, in the effort to properly gauge the abilities of a ballplayer, and by extension, his value. Furthermore, there is a significant segment of individuals within the institution of Major League Baseball that have developed their own system of symbols—distinct from the statistical record—for the purpose of evaluating the value of ballplayers: the baseball scouts.

Dollar Sign on the Muscle

The wisdom of scouts is not science but lore: literally, what has been learned from experience. Their charts categorizing tools, makeup, and performance look objective enough, but the men who fill them in are the first to admit that they traffic in opinion—personal and hard-won opinion—rather than demonstrable fact. (Kerrane 289)

When professional baseball really started taking shape at the end of the 1870s, there was no minor-league development system in place. In *Dollar Sign on the Muscle*, Kevin Kerrane's chronicle of the history of baseball scouting, he stated that "the normal path to the majors was (1) to be discovered and signed by an independent minor-league team, usually local, and (2) to be sold up the ladder after being seen by a major-league

representative. The problem was that there were so few of these representatives, and until about 1909 none of them was a full-time scout” (Kerrane 5). However, by 1910, Branch Rickey, a former professional catcher and the coach of the University of Michigan’s baseball team, was sending scouting reports of his players to the St. Louis Browns. Based on Rickey’s philosophy of acquiring quality through quantity, the St. Louis Cardinals organization went on to develop the biggest minor-league farm system in the history of the major-leagues, controlling as many as thirty-two teams and 650 players in 1939 (Kerrane 9). With the development of these farm systems, minor-league teams began to be viewed as nothing more than feeder teams for the parent club in the majors. Owners no longer had to compete with their rivals in an open market for players that they previously would have had only limited access to. Why pay for production when you can grow your own? Teams began to employ greater numbers of scouts, who would travel the country and observe players in multiple contexts for longer periods of time. The scouts also worked with the minor-league coaches to develop the players according to what was deemed most valuable to the parent club. As the number of scouts and coaches within organizations increased, it became necessary to develop a unified language, or coding system that could be used to most effectively identify and project the value of the ballplayers.

Statistics were of course already being used to measure the skills of ballplayers, however, the scouts often felt that while statistics could be useful, they were secondary to their own powers of observation. Kerrane describes the elitist notion of the exaggerated powers of observation among contemporary scouts like this:

The dollar sign on the muscle was a code, a fictional vocabulary... It invited a scout to rate each ballplayer—beyond the number grades

assigned to his tools, projected skills, and makeup—by naming a final dollar figure... Fluent use of this code required familiarity with other vocabularies of talent... But most of all it required the first skill of a *baseball man*: knowing how to recognize a ballplayer when you see one. (Kerrane 29)

The clear point of emphasis in that passage, is that the baseball man, or the authorized insider, is alone capable of interpreting the signs that designate a player's value. And moreover, while any sports writer could rattle off statistics, only a true baseball man had the ability to divine the meaning of the object prior to the generation of the sign. In his discussion concerning the sources and effects of symbolic power, Bourdieu argues that the field of symbolic production in which symbolic systems are produced by a body of *specialists*—such as the code and other vocabularies of talent used by scouts—is an autonomous field of symbolic production that produces a division of labor which dispossesses those outside of the institution of Major League Baseball from the instruments of symbolic production (Bourdieu 168-9). The scouts are then referred to as “baseball men”, and their position of authority within the institution is recognized as legitimate by this act of symbolic power.

But the value that the scout designates is a projected value, and as such, the grammar that he uses to describe the speed, power, and even the “face” of the prospect with terms like “tools” and “makeup”, is different from the grammar used to describe the abilities of established ballplayers. The statistical record of the veteran player has more meaning, because that record serves as a history—a narration in numbers—that verifies the legitimacy of the scout's projections within a proven context among peers. The statistics are, in fact, symbols that have grown, in a sense, from the symbols that were

originally signified by the scouts. If, for example, a scout rated a player's speed as a 75 on a 60-80 scale, his valuation would prove to be legitimate if that player ended up averaging forty stolen bases over a number of years in the major-leagues. But have scouts been correct in their valuations consistently enough to warrant the authority and recognition that they have received as "baseball men"?

Undermining Linguistic Capital in the Institution

Bourdieu has asserted that institutions "are not necessarily a particular organization... but any relatively durable set of social relations which endow individuals with power, status and resources of various kinds" (Bourdieu 8). Although society plays a significant role by acknowledging that authority, the power they have in that act of acknowledgement is often forgotten or unrecognized. Eventually their power is replaced with acceptance, which finally leads to what Bourdieu refers to as *habitus*; that is a doxic, internal predisposition or conviction that this power relation, or control over the linguistic and symbolic capital that defines meaning, is just the way things are, with no conscious recognition that there could possibly be any alternative. Armed with the officially sanctioned language of Major League Baseball, scouts and former players of the game wield a tremendous amount of linguistic and symbolic capital. For much of baseball's history, the game's meaning has been defined through box scores, baseball cards and the words of the player's whose achievements fill them. Baseball fans have accepted those meanings for the majority of baseball's history, because they have been educated by the authoritative representatives of the institution of professional baseball such as: the major media outlets that rely on former players for their analysis of the game; Little Leagues which are training grounds modeled after the game; the Baseball Writers Association of

America who hold the authority to elect former players into the Hall of Fame; and the officially sanctioned historians of the game like the Elias Sports Bureau, who act as the true guardians of the official language of baseball. Each of these power delegating social relations that make up the institution of Major League Baseball work together to inculcate the authority of the “baseball man”, and by extension, their sanctioned interpretations of player valuation.

In the last thirty years, however, the legitimacy of those interpretations has fallen under scrutiny, as recent baseball scholars like Bill James have suggested that perhaps the “baseball men” have missed their mark. As Vincent Colapietro remarks in his work on Peirce’s semiotics, “a sign cut off from its future interpretants is a sign denied the possibility of realizing its essence; that is, the possibility of being a sign” (Colapietro 77). And what that means is that at the moment that the interpretations of value by baseball insiders are sanctioned as authoritative and final, the sign is stripped of its potential to be fully realized. For example, fielding percentage is one way to judge the abilities of a player in the field. But if we do not allow for further interpretants of that ability, we become victims of an interpretation that is inherently limited by its subjectivism, which according to Bourdieu “presupposes the possibility of some kind of immediate apprehension of the lived experience by others... that is by itself a more-or-less adequate form of knowledge about the social world” (Bourdieu 11). Is the sign hitting its mark if the “official scorer” charges a player with an error, even though the scorer’s immediate apprehension of the play entirely missed the fact that the player’s inability to make the play was due to an infield shift called for by the manager? Furthermore, are we to assume that one has the ability to properly interpret a sign just because they played the game? In

The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract (2003), James relates that “in early 1890, Cap Anson journeyed to Canton, Ohio, to see Cy Young pitch. He reported that Young was ‘just another farmer’” (James “New Historical” 44). Anson was merely regarded as one of the best third baseman of his era, and Cy Young went on to win 511 games, more than any pitcher in the history of the game. According to James, “what counts is evidence, not the authority of the person making the claim” (Gray 91).

Scenarios like this one undermine the legitimacy of the authority figures charged with interpreting the symbols in the official language of the dominant institution. It is this breakdown that is at the heart of struggle for linguistic capital in the writings of Bill James and sabermetricians, who are dedicated to finding a more accurate understanding of the game of baseball by employing open-ended statistical analysis. James himself has said that statistics cannot tell the entire story, and that they often fail to account for the human element in baseball. However, he also argues that they represent the best tool in the shed, and echoing Chadwick, that they have to ability to be much more than raw signifiers of events on the field.

In *Moneyball* (2004), Michael Lewis writes that “language, not numbers, is what interested [James]. Words, and the meaning they were designed to convey. ‘When the numbers acquire the significance of language,’ [James] later wrote, ‘they acquire power to do all of the things which language can do: to become fiction and drama and poetry’” (Lewis 67-68). James uses the language of statistics to study the world of baseball with an objectivism, that according to Bourdieu, has the power to “elucidate the structures and principles upon which primary experience depends but which it cannot directly grasp” (Bourdieu 11). While Bourdieu and James hold that both subjectivism and objectivism

are inadequate, they recognized that objectivism is, at the very least, less inadequate. In Scott Gray's *The Mind of Bill James* (2006), James offers two caveats about baseball statistics:

First, they are 'not pure accomplishments of men against other men,'
but 'accomplishments of men in combination with their circumstances.'
The second is that when the public's faith in a set of metrics solidifies,
it's tough to break... Misguided faith leads to stubborn repetition of
foolish decisions. (Gray 42-4)

While statistics appear to be the best tool for understanding the accomplishments of ballplayers and the value associated with them, James is careful to recognize that they cannot become symbols with closed interpretations. As Peirce stated, symbols grow. So when faith in the static meaning of static becomes doxic, the statistic loses its ability to accurately signify a ballplayer's value. Furthermore, when the statistics lose the significance of language, they lose the symbolic power inherent in language.

By adopting an open-ended model of semiotics for the study of statistical meaning, James was able to secure linguistic capital and eventually, a degree of symbolic power. Even though James' methods represented a stark contrast, and even a direct challenge to the methods of the "baseball men", he was able to generate support for his ideas on the "inside" because front office men who were saddled with the limitations of playing in smaller markets recognized that by using his methods, they could improve their ability to accurately project player performance and its relative value with fewer resources.

Thanks to the success of *Moneyball*, the impact that James' work had on Oakland Athletics General Manager Sandy Alderson, and his successor, Billy Beane, is well

known in baseball circles. From the time that James published his first *Baseball Abstract* in 1977, he has used statistics as symbolic language to tell the story of baseball, and where he has succeeded in fostering the growth of those symbols, he has acquired symbolic capital that had previously been controlled solely by the “baseball men.” As baseball fans have increasingly recognized that symbolic power, and as a new generation of executives that were weaned on James began to break into the front offices of Major League Baseball—Oakland’s Beane, Boston’s Theo Epstein and Toronto’s J.P. Ricciardi—the institution has been forced to accept the power shift, even as “baseball men” like Hall of Fame second baseman and ESPN baseball analyst Joe Morgan openly fight to resist it. But again, as James noted, despite the protests of those in authority, the evidence is often hard to ignore:

The man who spoke for all insiders was Joe Morgan, the Hall of Fame second baseman, who was in the broadcast booth for the entire five-game series. At some point during each game Morgan explained to the audience the flaw in the A’s (James-influenced) thinking – not that he had any deep understanding of what that thinking entailed. “You have to manufacture runs in the postseason... you sit around and wait for a three-run homer, you’re still going to be sitting there...”

... But the wonderful thing about this little lecture was what happened right under Joe Morgan’s nose, as he was giving it... A few moments later, Eric Chavez hit a three-run homer. And Joe Morgan’s lecture on the need to avoid playing for the three-run homer just rolled right along, as if the play on the field had not dramatically contradicted every word that had just come out of his mouth. (Lewis 271-2)

As demonstrated in moments like these, the tide in the struggle for symbolic power began to shift. Major League Baseball's authority figures were losing their credibility, the linguistic and symbolic capital that secured their status as authorized delegates of the institution. A new generation of baseball fans are recognizing the legitimacy of James' methods, just as the owners in Oakland, Boston and Toronto have done in Major League Baseball. But no one expected those fans to be knocking on the doors of the institution themselves.

The Fight for Linguistic Capital, Fantasy Baseball, and the Intelligent Fan

James spent years in his battle for linguistic capital just trying to get access to the data that was locked up in the databases of the Elias Sports Bureau, the only "officially sanctioned" statistical storehouse for Major League Baseball. Resigned to his status as a baseball outsider, James was forced to rely on the box scores for his analyses. As a result his calculations were occasionally off by a small margin. His frustrations over his ongoing fight with Elias led to the creation of Project Scoresheet, which was officially launched in his 1984 *Baseball Abstract*. The idea was to recruit an army of volunteers that would go to every baseball game throughout the season so as to record all of the statistical information that Elias was wrongfully withholding from the baseball public.

A year later, Dick Cramer, who was himself an early sabermatrician, contacted James looking for investors in a company that he had recently acquired called STATS Inc., a computerized stat service that a few teams were using. James became a five percent minority investor, and his Project Scoresheet project director John Dewan and his wife Sue invested \$30,000 for a thirty percent stake in the company. In time, STATS Inc. became one of the biggest statistical providers in sports, holding contracts with *USA*

Today, Sports Illustrated and ESPN, who chose STATS over the Elias Sports Bureau when they began broadcasting Major League Baseball games in 1990 (Schwarz 180). At long last, fans had access to the statistics that Elias had hoarded for so long. In *The Numbers Game* (2004), Alan Schwarz emphasized the importance of this development as follows: “And in a conscious effort to *not* be the Elias Sports Bureau and to make its statistics openly available, STATS allowed any fan with a computer and telephone to access updated player stats through an early online service for 25 cents a minute. At last, an intravenous stat drip” (Schwarz 177). And with that, James had indirectly played a part in providing the outsiders with unlimited access to the language of the game. Moreover, when the work of James and his fellow sabermetricians began to be applied to the process of player valuation by Rotisserie baseball participants, Major League Baseball was placed in the paradoxical position of trying to defend the sanctity of the institution while catering to a new generation of fans who are invested in the game more than ever before. The battle for linguistic capital was, however, far from over.

In 1995 STAS worked out a deal with Motorola to supply up-to-the-minute statistical updates for NBA games that would be transmitted to a pager-like device called SportsTrax. Subscribers paid \$200 annually for instant access to everything from statistics, scores, and time remaining (Schwarz 183). Now fans not only had direct access to the statistics, but they had it instantly wherever they were during the day. On the one hand, women across the country must have been thrilled that they could get the men away from their TVs. On the other hand, how many weddings were now being interrupted by sudden displays of excited emotion? NBA officials were not impressed, and they acted quickly.

In February 1996, John Dewan received a letter from NBA attorneys demanding that STATS Inc. cease providing that information immediately, on the grounds that they were violating copyright laws, unlawfully appropriating commercial property that belonged to NBA Properties, and that they were in violation of the U.S. Trademark Act (Schwarz 183). Not surprisingly, Seymour Siwoff, the head of the Elias Sports Bureau (the Guardians of Sacred Statistics) had a hand in this as well. Siwoff sent a letter to NBA Properties' vice president of business affairs, William Nix, suggesting that STATS was in violation of the "with expressed written consent" disclaimer used by every professional sport. Dewan, however, was not about to give up on his life's work, and so he prepared for battle in court.

The NBA filed suit against STATS Inc. on March 5, 1996, and on July 19, the judge presiding over the case issued an injunction against STATS and Motorola on the grounds that STATS had taken the NBA's property unlawfully. The lawyer for STATS immediately filed an appeal to the Second Circuit, and that appeal was heard on October 21. STATS was not without support from some very powerful allies in the media, such as America Online, the *New York Times*, and the Associated Press. But the NBA also had the support of all of the other major professional leagues. This was the biggest battle for the control of linguistic capital since the inception of the box score. On January 30, 1997, the Second Circuit ruled in favor of STATS Inc., stating that they were only restating facts that were a matter of public domain (Schwarz 188-91). The institutions of professional sports could no longer legally claim proprietary ownership of the instruments of linguistic and symbolic capital. That decision would prove to be

monumental, and would set a precedent that would impact the fantasy sports industry ten years later.

CBC Distributing and Marketing had licensed player stats and data from Major League Baseball for close to a decade when, just prior to the 2006 season, MLB and the Player's Association decided to consolidate the number of fantasy leagues available to the public by signing exclusive agreements with larger providers like ESPN and CBSSportsline. CBC decided to continue to offer its services without a license from MLB, citing the First Amendment and their right to use material that existed in the public domain. Following the NBA's example ten years earlier, MLB filed suit against CBC, hoping that CBC's appropriation of the statistics for fantasy sports leagues would amount to more than just reporting public fact. In August 2006, a U.S. District Court ruled in favor of CBC, stating that the First Amendment trumped MLB's right of publicity. MLB was unsuccessful in its appeal with the Circuit Court of Appeals, which on October 16, 2007, upheld the original decision of the District Court. In his article covering the case, Eric Bangeman cited this response from the judge presiding: "First, the information used in CBC's fantasy baseball games is all readily available in the public domain, and it would be strange law that a person would not have a First Amendment right to use information that is available to everyone" (Bangeman 1). Twenty-three years after Bill James began the fight for public access to statistics, the instruments for the production of linguistic and symbolic capital now rest securely in the hands of the fans of the games, and one fantasy baseball player was about to show the world of baseball just how powerfully those instruments could be used.

In *Fantasyland*, Walker summarizes the connection between James and the fantasy baseball community as follows: “The two entities fed off each other. Frothing Jameseans took to Rotisserie as a way to let off steam, while Rotisserie leaguers started reading James as a way to get an edge” (Walker 70). What fantasy baseball players sought in the work of the sabermetricians—the good players anyway—was the ability to make educated decisions about a baseball player’s value, by applying methods that dug deeper than the traditional box score. One such fantasy baseball player learned to recognize buying opportunities with pitchers whose market value might have been deflated by a high earned-run ratio that was actually a result of bad defense rather than the deterioration of skills.

College dropout Vörös McCracken was weaned on Bill James as a teenager, and when he joined his first Rotisserie league in 1999, he decided to pull out his old *Abstracts* with the hopes of using James’ methods to evaluate players more accurately. In an effort to find a way to quantify the effects of fielding on a pitcher’s performance, McCracken eventually developed what he called Defensive Independent Pitching Stats (DIPS). Prior to his discovery, sabermetricians were convinced that there was no way to statistically account for luck. DIPS not only offered a way to statistically account for luck in a pitcher’s performance, but it also proved to be a fairly reliable way to project future performance as well. In January 2001, McCracken posted the explanation for DIPS on a the sabermetric Web site baseballprosectus.com. Shortly thereafter ESPN.com ran a story about McCracken’s discovery, and in August of 2002, he found a job offer from the Boston Red Sox in his email. DIPS proved to be fairly useful for Rotisserie as well, as

McCracken won the league three years straight (Schwarz 210-3). Still, there are elements in the game of baseball that cannot be accounted for by statistics.

An astute player will use the quantitative analytical tools (symbols) created by the sabermetricians to generate a relatively strong set of performance projections, grounded in sound logic and historical evidence. From these projections the player will then attempt to select the surest bets to perform at or above their historical averages that can be acquired for the best value. That data then, when used devoid of emotional attachment to favorite players or teams, should provide a risk-averse pool of information from which the player can attempt to build a team of players that will score more points than the other teams in the league.

Another aspect of the game necessary for success, luck, depends more on gut instinct and “scouting” than on empirical data (DIPS withstanding). A fantasy player could use statistical data to attempt to divine breakout rookies for example, but often unquantifiable information like *opportunity* and *potential* tend to be better sources for generating luck. This kind of information can only be gathered through the more traditional avenues of player valuation, like actually watching the games. Walker explains the value of watching games like this: “Instead of running around interrogating people as I had, (Trace) Wood spent his time studying players on the field and trolling for clues that the numbers can’t tell you: whether a rookie hitter is fouling off a lot of pitches or just missing them entirely; whether a struggling young pitcher is on the verge of harnessing his electric slider” (Walker 319).

Fantasy baseball players have become co-participants with the sabermetricians against the authoritative voices of the institution in the struggle for linguistic capital, as

they continually attempt to reinterpret the symbols of baseball statistics to suit their own purposes. And there is evidence that they have been successful in their attempts to acquire linguistic capital, and by extension, symbolic power within the institution. As stated earlier, major league teams are now hiring sabermetricians and fantasy analysts as consultants on player valuation. Bill James himself was hired as a consultant by the Boston Red Sox in 2004, the same year that they won the World Series for the first time since 1918. Ron Shandler of Baseball HQ, which started out as a sabermetric website, but has now shifted completely to offering fantasy baseball analysis from a sabermetric perspective, spent a year working as a consultant for a professional baseball team. Jason Grey of ESPN.com, a graduate of baseball's scouting development program, and a statistician for the Arizona Diamondbacks, continues to offer player analysis to both communities. However, as sabermetricians and fantasy analysts begin to take the place of traditional baseball men as specialists in the field of symbolic production, the division of labor that Bourdieu sites as a necessary product of that process is noticeably diminished. With the success of STATS Inc., and other such public statistic providers, fans are no longer dispossessed of the instruments of symbolic production.

Only by first embracing the symbolic language of the dominant institution, was the opportunity for the acquisition of symbolic capital made possible. And even now, as the evolution of the language is seemingly gaining momentum, fantasy baseball players are constantly reinforcing the official language, as fantasy players ultimately use the new language simply as a means to succeed within a construct that still uses the old language. But for the first time in the history of professional baseball, the fan has access to the instruments of symbolic production and the ability to use that information for the

generation of their own linguistic capital. The baseball outsider now has the potential to be a player in baseball's linguistic market. Furthermore, in the fantasy baseball player we see the evolution of fandom in this new era of sports, that is shaped by greater degrees of interactive participation, unlimited information, and free agency.

CONCLUSION

Purity and Profit: Rotisserie, Steroids, and the Age of the Superstar

Fans from the Me Generation were longing for a level of involvement deeper than just watching the game, and Rotisserie was the stiffest drink at the bar. At the same time, free agency had switched off the gravity that once held teams together. As established stars changed uniforms with greater frequency, fans were increasingly attracted to a game that allowed them to buy and sell players like the commodities they'd become. (Walker 70)

Over the last three years while conducting research for this project, I think I can fairly say without hyperbole, that two out of three articles on fantasy sports printed in major publications like *Sports Illustrated* started off something like this:

You smell like a goat. You're unshaven. You work endless hours in dimly lit caves. You speak a language understood only by others of your kind. You fear women and put prices on men's heads. And legions of enemies long to destroy you. You are, of course, a fantasy baseball geek. (Reilly)

These three play. Your neighbor plays. Your boss plays. Everybody plays. Once the secret preserve of stats geeks, FANTASY SPORTS are now a billion-dollar business. (Ballard)

And so we see that there is another bond that fantasy sports players have the honor of sharing with Bill James and the sabermetricians: they are all geeks. Now in Bill James' case, there may be some merit to that charge, but what is it about new developments in sports culture that turns the institution into the name-calling playground bully from the fourth grade? For the last decade or so, the fantasy sports industry has been fighting against the same "stat geek", "number-crunching nimrod" stigmas that hounded James throughout the 1980s. And quite frankly, many in the industry are more than moderately annoyed.

Don Banks, a sportswriter covering the NFL for *Sports Illustrated*, wrote an article in 2005 about his utter detest for fantasy football and the type of fans that he believes are attracted to the game (Banks 2005). John Georgopoulos, the owner of

SportsGrumblings.com who was also offering fantasy analysis for *Sports Illustrated* at the time, responded to Banks' comments just days after their publication on the September 1st broadcast of Gridiron Grumblings Live, an Internet radio program on the Fantasy Football Radio Network (Georgopoulos 2005). Georgopoulos dedicated the first fifteen minutes of his weekly program to responding to each charge in Banks' ten point treatise against fantasy football, as did Georgopoulos' co-hosts, who made no attempts to disguise their contempt for Banks. Banks had essentially charged fantasy football with glorifying all that is wrong with sports, including individualism, the de-emphasis of the team, and the accumulation of statistics. Georgopoulos admitted that Banks did concede that fantasy football had propelled the popularity of the NFL to levels that have never been reached by any other sport in the U.S. Unfortunately, Banks succumbed to adolescent name calling, by lamenting about the "geek factor" that fantasy was bringing to the game. And immediately after addressing that point on the program, despite Georgopoulos' best efforts to retain a level of professionalism, his co-hosts fell right in line with Banks, responding with their own salvo of childish name-calling, even going so far as to degrade Banks' personal appearance. But their reaction is not all that atypical. Fantasy sports participants can be very defensive about the game about which they are so passionate.

Where does the truth lie then? Are fantasy sports participants geeky number crunchers drawn to a game that they did not get to play in high school? Do they have no loyalty to team sports and local team affiliation? It is a difficult question to answer because there are many layers to such questions. I could have answered yes to all three of those questions and been correct in some contexts. Answering no would have been

equally accurate given a different set of qualifiers. But one thing is certain: writers like Reilly, Ballard and Banks are overreacting with the same hyper-conservatism that prevented the baseball insiders like Joe Morgan and Seymour Siwoff from understanding the genius of Bill James. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, these fantasy sports fanatics represent much more than a geeky fascination with numbers; they represent an evolution of the sports fan in the twenty-first century. In the same way that the “baseball men” sought to discredit the sabermetricians, some sports writers have taken it upon themselves to defend the sanctity of the institution themselves. Georgopoulos and his Gridiron Grumblings Live co-hosts find themselves in a similar battle for legitimacy within the linguistic marketplace of sports writing. It is clear from that these fantasy sports analysts are not only defending fantasy sports as a game, but they are also defending the legitimacy of the symbolic power that they have managed to attain through the same processes of player valuation that NFL writers employ. Whether Don Banks likes it or not, these fantasy sports writers and participants are an essential part of the future of sports culture, and moreover, a microcosmic representation of American culture. But just like any other segment of popular culture, there can be some real loonies on the fringes.

In an article written for *Sports Illustrated* titled “Fantasy World”, Chris Ballard offered some observations from the draft floor at the 2004 National Fantasy Baseball Championship. One of the participants he highlighted was American rock star Meatloaf, who has been a self-proclaimed fantasy addict since the 1980s. Ballard wrote that Meatloaf “once participated in 56 football leagues in a single season” (Ballard 1). But it is not just flamboyant rock stars, arguably predisposed to addictive behavior anyway,

who are caught up in the obsession. Thirty-five year old Greg Olson reportedly spent close to \$400 in 2003, participating in twelve baseball leagues, one hockey league, six basketball leagues and ten football leagues—all of which were part of ESPN.com's Uber tournament, in which participants compete in as many as 33 games over the course of the year—in an effort to be crowned ESPN's ultimate fantasy champion. If there was ever a fantasy sports player that deserved the designation of “geek”, it would be Greg Olson. Olson, as Ballard wrote, “would be renowned primarily—and rightly—for his work on the Mars Rover... [he] has worked with computer vision, mobile robot navigation and terrain mapping techniques to make the Rover more effective” (Ballard 1). Other noteworthy participants mentioned in Ballard's article included actors Michael J. Fox and Vince Vaughn, softball star Jennie Finch, Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino, R.E.M. bassist Mike Mills, and Boston Red Sox Pitcher Curt Schilling, who “while with the Phillies, started a football league and rented out a hotel suite for a catered draft that was announced by Phillies play-by-play man Harry Kalas” (Ballard 1). Three observations stand out in Ballard's account: 1) The obsession is widespread and real; 2) There is absolutely no way to pin an all-encompassing stereotype like “geek” or “number-cruncher” on a demographic group that contained two rock stars, two actors, and three professional athletes, even if you give the scientist who worked on the Mars Rover a little extra weight in the average; and 3) I would suggest that the obsession of these highly successful individuals to play these games hints at the utopic potentialities latent in these games as actors and scientists get a chance to interactively “play” and succeed in games that they may not have had success with in their youth. Nevertheless, that still leaves us without a firm grasp on who these people are and how they are effecting sports culture.

One of the primary problems these mainstream critics are having in their effort identify just who these fantasy sports people are, is that they are not really interested in that question to begin with. Demographic studies clearly show that there are definitely strong indicators of *exactly* who these people are. They are married white men with college educations who own their own homes and make good money (“2006 Fantasy”). It is harder to brush off sixteen million Americans (the number of fantasy sports players) as obsessed lunatics hell-bent on poisoning your games when they look and act just like you. Women have more aptly characterized fantasy sports communities as gendered spaces that celebrate male dominance, because as a reflective subculture of American sports culture, that is exactly what they are. On the other hand, one could convincingly argue that the gendered “locker room” trash talking that takes place on the message boards is a way for men to reclaim some of the masculinity that has been subdued in the “metro-sexual” environment of contemporary American culture, where men are encouraged to look to programs such as Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* for tips on wardrobe construction, cooking, and hygiene. It logically follows that men who have outgrown the locker rooms and practice fields of high school and collegiate athletics would turn to the privacy of Internet sports forums to express part of their masculinity. But if we want to get at the truth of what this phenomenon is all about, we need to further expand our field of vision to include a macroscopic view of the culture we live in.

A Reflection of American Culture

It has long been convincingly argued that the beliefs, attitudes, and social climate of sport culture correlate directly with those of mainstream American culture. It should be of no surprise to anyone, then, that the steroid era in professional sports directly

coincided with the era of Enron, Martha Stewart, and the hanging chad. Americans believe that bigger is better, and over the last decade and a half, cheating was the hippest way to turn a profit. In *The Mind of Bill James* (2006), Bill James offers a commentary on the 1918 Black Sox gambling scandal that is highly apropos of our own times:

"What is rarely mentioned about the Black Sox scandal is that it was merely a part of its time, a time in which corruption was gaining rapidly in American Society... the expulsion of the crooked players was a symbolic cleansing of society... It is so odd that this is remembered now not as the period when governors took bribes to free criminals, but as a time when a few baseball players threw the big game." (Gray 67)

Will the beginning of the twenty-first century be remembered for weapons of mass destruction, corporate scandal, and Florida recounts? Or will it be remembered for BALCO, Barry Bonds, and the Mitchell Report? But there is more that connects sport and culture at the turn of the twenty-first century than scandal. Workers in corporate America are losing the incentive to stay loyal to companies as guaranteed pensions are becoming a thing of the past. With the onset of the free agency era in professional sports, the players' loyalties have likewise shifted to highest bidder with the longest guaranteed contract. Referring back to the statement cited in the first chapter by Alan G. Ingham, "the capitalist mode of production became so naturalized that it influenced production in other spheres (such as sport) and became hegemonic (Ingham, 14).

There have always been larger than life superstars—Babe Ruth, Willy Mays, Jim Brown, Walter Payton, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird—and yet, prior to the mid-eighties, these stars' identities were still very much connected with the teams they played for. Babe Ruth is the Yankees and Yankee Stadium is "the house that Ruth built." The Los Angeles Lakers are Magic and Kareem. As I suggested in the first chapter, we celebrate these athletes with the fervency of religious devotion, turning them into icons, turning the

stadiums in which they play into temples and shrines. With the marketing explosion that sent Michael Jordan into the stratosphere at the end of the eighties, the athlete became bigger than the game. Alex Rodriguez, a lock first ballot Hall of Famer, is now playing with his third team. Will Roger Clemens be a Red Sox, a Yankee, or an asterisk when he goes into the Hall of Fame? Fans of today's game find it hard to commit to buying the jersey of their favorite player when there are better than even odds that he will be playing for someone else when his contract is up. But we buy them anyway, because we love the game and because Americans love to root for superstars. How many chances for redemption has America already extended to the likes of Britney Spears, Michael Jackson and David Hasselhoff? You would think that someone would have pointed that tendency out to Barry and The Rocket before they took the stand. Don Banks' argument that the fantasy participant is guilty of celebrating the individual over the team is not merely a perverted anomaly of fandom; the celebration of the superstar in sports is clearly symptomatic of the very same tendencies long existent in American popular culture.

With the simultaneous development of the Internet and information technology, digital gaming, interactive and reality television, and the ever-mobile superstar athlete, the cultural climate in America over the last decade was primed for the explosion of the fantasy sports industry. While it might be fair to suggest that prior to the Internet, fantasy sports participants could primarily be depicted as overly obsessed fans, the same perception cannot be applied to the participants of today. They are an extension of the culture they live in. Fantasy sports enthusiasts play "reality sports" in the same way that others in America watch "reality TV". They collect fantasy stars on the Internet rather

than baseball cards in a shoebox. They are fans of the game, and they are simply evolving with the games as they truly exist in the twenty-first century.

The Intersection of Fandom, Free Agency and the Information Age

I have frequently stated throughout this study that fantasy sports on the internet are part of the evolution of fandom. There are, however, millions of sports fans that have no experience with or connection to fantasy sports at all. Furthermore, there are a number of individuals like Don Banks who despise fantasy sports altogether. The evolution of fandom that I am presenting here, however, can primarily be understood as the juxtaposition of the commodification of spectatorship with the growing number of knowledgeable, better informed spectators that are a direct result of the information age and the free availability of statistics. The evolution of fandom is a process that demonstrates the valorization of spectatorship as depicted by Ingham in Chapter 1, in which it is argued that “a sustainable industry... requires a quality product to realize exchange- and surplus-values” (Ingham 21). The evolution of fandom in this context, then, is the process by which the fan’s desire for greater levels of interactivity and access to the statistical instruments of linguistic capital in sports culture are valorized in an effort to sustain profitability.

With the development of the Internet, fantasy sports became practically feasible on a massive scale. The only thing limiting their popularity prior to that technological boom was convenience and a market place. With STATS Inc.’s legal victory over the NBA, John Dewan had already secured unrestricted access to the data necessary for scoring the games instantaneously. The technology and databases that created and hosted Web sites not only had the power to supply the data, but they could parse it, tabulate it,

and present it as finished score sheets for fantasy sports leagues. The cumbersome process of tallying up box scores from *USA Today* was forever rendered obsolete. Once the leagues were picked up by major Web portals like Yahoo!, CBSSportsline, and ESPN, the flood gates opened. What better place could there be to advertise an interactive sports game than on Web sites already known for their sports content like ESPN and CBS? And when the sabermetricians started staking out their own territory on the Web, the inevitable cross-pollination of these two mutual beneficiaries of the liberation of statistics was sure to happen. Fantasy baseball players used sabermetrics to get an advantage in game play, and the sabermetricians used fantasy sports as an outlet for their work, which would not gain institutional sanction until almost a full decade later when Bill James' *Abstracts* began filling the bookshelves of baseball executives such as Oakland's Billy Beane.

The other characteristic offered by the Web that these two growing communities shared was a way to express their fandom more fully. Both communities were formed as a direct result of a compulsive love for the game of baseball, and now there was a way to connect with others who shared that passion all over the world. It is not likely that a sabermetrician will have much luck rounding up a group of fellow sabermetricians from around the neighborhood, but there is a fair possibility that there is someone out there with Web access who is running into the same problem. The same principle applies to the fantasy sports participant to lesser extremes. I have been playing fantasy sports for more than twelve years now, and only twice during that whole time did every member of the league live in the same state. In one league I play in, we have members in New Zealand, New York, North Carolina, Connecticut, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Lansing,

and more. And that is one of the most significant features of the fantasy sports phenomenon: the development of close friendships with people all over the world. Just weeks ago when I was in San Francisco for an academic conference, I was able to participate in our league draft with friends on the west coast whom I had never met in person before. But when we got together it was as if we had always known each other because we have talked over instant messenger every day for the ten years that we have been in the league together.

The Internet is of course incredibly vast, and the very idea of contemplating just how much information it holds is mind-numbing. And yet, it is that limitlessness that works to make everything smaller, closer, tighter, more intimately known. My immediate circle of friends includes anyone within ten inches of my face while I am logged into the Internet. As fast as I can type, they can read what I have to say to them. It is really no different from the cell phone, with one very important distinction: with only a cell phone, I would never have met these people. That I have friends in states and countries that I have never been to is a direct result of the perfect cultural storm that brought Bill James, STATS Inc., fantasy sports, and the Internet to fruition all at once. If even one of those elements had been removed, then I would never have met these friends that I talk to every day. And in my non-virtual, immediate circle of friends in Lansing, Michigan, that would mean that I would have no more than four other people to share my love of baseball with, four people that I most definitely do not talk to everyday. Sadder still, I would be the only Cubs fan without cable television in a town that only gets Tigers games on the radio. Fantasy sports have also given me an opportunity to stay in touch with my Cubbies, and the game in general. Moreover, fantasy sports have actually made me a more

knowledgeable fan, enabling me to follow the game with an intelligence and depth of knowledge that otherwise I would never have had.

On the one hand, fantasy sports are another example of the systemic ideological domination of capitalism, as Adorno's "Celebration of the Subjected" is realized in this new incarnation of the valorization of spectatorship. On the other hand, one can argue that the latent utopic potential hinted at by Adorno and Horkheimer exists in fantasy sports communities as that valorization has also led to the redefinition of community and personal interaction within fantasy sports on the Internet. As noted in the previous paragraph, those utopic potentialities only exist because of the relatively simultaneous arrival of Bill James, sabermetrics, fantasy sports and the internet. Even as the valorization of spectatorship in fantasy sports advances the systemic ideological domination of capitalism, the open-source social nature of the forum communities, the fan's acquisition of linguistic and symbolic capital, and the development of lasting friendships across the Web suggest the existence of latent utopic possibilities that in many ways counter that domination.

The arguments that suggest that fantasy sports degrade the game, by glorifying individualism, are ludicrous if for no other reason, because they are diagnosing the treatment for rather than the cause of the disease. Referring back to the quote by Sam Walker at the beginning of this chapter, "free agency had [already] switched off the gravity that once held teams together" (Walker 70). The fact that superstars leave our favorite teams with a great deal of frequency does not in any way mean that we are now going to stop rooting for superstars. Nor does it suggest that if we do continue to root for superstars, that we must suddenly abandon the team of our youth. When I was living in

Chicago at the end of the 1990s, I was enthralled with Barry Sanders. I had grown up on Walter Payton, and when Neal Anderson, Rashaan Salaam, Curtis Enis, Ki-Jana Carter and the rest of the first round disappointments selected by the Bears failed to live up to the legend of “Sweetness”, I fell for Barry. He was the most amazing runner I had ever seen, and I loved the fact that I wound up laughing hysterically every time I watched him play. But my love for Barry Sanders did not replace my love for the Bears, any more than my love for the garlic crust at Hungry Howie’s replaced my love for big fat authentic Chicago deep dish. American culture inculcates the fascination for superstars starting with the first time we watch a television program as children. Why does my daughter have to have a Dora toothbrush? Clearly this is because she has sold out her true love, the Oral-B.

What the critics of fantasy sports too often overlook is the depth of knowledge that this new generation of fan has. In his article against fantasy football, Don Banks argues that “fantasy football transforms average fans into quasi-general managers” (Banks 2). How exactly, is that a problem? An over-simplified analogy to counter Banks’ argument would go something like this: Imagine that Don Banks really likes motorcycles. He grew up riding a 750 Honda Shadow. Because of his love for motorcycles, he decided to become a mechanic, so that he could work on the bikes and get a better understanding of how the parts all work together. During his career as a mechanic, he had the opportunity to work on and ride a Ducati Superbike 1098, and he fell in love with its power and performance. Eventually the owner returned and took the Ducati back. Don was left only with his Honda Shadow. He still loved the bike, but boy was he glad that he had an opportunity to experience a true performance bike like the Ducati. Furthermore,

he now knows much more about bikes, their design, and performance than he ever had before. It makes no more sense to suggest that Banks should not want to experience greatness as it was represented in this analogy, than it does for him to suggest that Twins fans should not get a rush out of watching David Ortiz punish the Yankees. Nor does it make any sense for Banks to suggest that there is something wrong with Vikings fans who know that Gibril Wilson is one fantastic safety.

Fantasy sports fans are simply adjusting to the games that they love as they truly exist in the twenty-first century. Free agency is a permanent fixture of modern sports, and what fantasy sports enable fans to do is to reclaim some level of attachment with these mobile superstars. They get to know the league and how it works, and they begin to understand what kind of manipulation these general managers have to do to get the most production out of limited resources. In one section of *The Mind of Bill James* (2006), Gray sites a portion of the *1986 Baseball Abstract* in which James advocated training professional baseball managers with simulated table games like Strat-O-Matic. However, James knows they (managers) would never agree to such thing because “those games are for *fans*... we’re *professionals*... [who] don’t have anything to learn from these *fans*...” (Gray 126). Clearly the Boston Red Sox might have something different to say about that now that Bill James is working in their front office. Perhaps Mr. Banks would like to tell Vörös McCracken that fantasy sports are a waste of time. Fantasy sports exist on a plane somewhere between the cutting edge of fandom and scientific player valuation. I would much rather watch a baseball game knowing who the players are, and whether or not they are any good. And I definitely do not want to have to rely solely on sportscaster Joe Morgan’s authoritative word to understand the game.

The last significant aspect about fantasy sports that makes them uniquely a product of the times is their highly interactive quality. This has been touched on a bit a number of times already, but its importance really needs to be underscored. With the incredible growth of reality programming and the more recent resurgence of prime-time game shows, the American public are expressing a desire to be more directly and emotionally involved with their entertainment. Fantasy sports satiate the same desires for control and personal investment as these television programs. In the same way that television viewers find themselves rooting for the skinny kid on CBS' *Survivor*, a big part of the fantasy sports experience is picking out sleepers and prospects to root for. Matthew Berry of ESPN.com, otherwise known as the Talented Mr. Roto, recently said that what excites him most now in fantasy is when a prospect that he touted pans out. There is a real adrenaline rush associated with picking the underdog that wins or performs beyond expectations. Again, it is that interactive quality to the experience, a sense (though admittedly false) that we have a hand in the success of the underdog when we choose to support them against the odds.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this study has effectively demonstrated that fantasy sports on the Internet are not just another mindless diversion for sports fans. Nor are they just another way for teenagers to waste time playing video games. We need only look back to the very beginnings of the hobby, at the men who created the games, to see that these were the product of successful, intelligent individuals who were merely looking for more than spectatorship. They wanted to *play* the games themselves on some level. And to those who would suggest that these individuals are merely seeking a more socially

acceptable way to gamble, I ask that they study the history of this game. Gambling is an inevitable consequence of competition, and it has made its way into the fantasy sports industry as well. But just as gambling has no claim to the birth of America's major team sports, neither did it have such a role in the creation of fantasy sports.

As I have demonstrated in this final chapter, the fantasy sports experience is the evolution of fandom in the age of free agency and the Internet. But make no mistake, the essence of the fantasy sports experience is community interaction. These communities thrive because they have successfully found a way to balance the celebration of competition and achievement, with the selflessness of effective collaboration and peaceful coexistence in a society based upon the rules of instrumental rationalization. The accumulation and transfer of symbolic power in the fantasy sports community serve to benefit the community, not just the individual or the institution. Perhaps that will change in the future if the industry grows to the point where Web sites like SportsGrumblings.com and FantasyBaseball.com can afford to employ full-time staffs like ESPN.com. But for the present, many of the most symbolically powerful men in the industry, like Todd Zola, have to hold a day job. Like Bill Gamson, Wink, Daniel Okrent, Bill James and Vörös McCracken before him, Zola devotes his time and energy to proper analysis and sound projections because he loves the game. Just ask Bill James, who thanked Zola himself in the acknowledgements for his *2008 Bill James Baseball Handbook*. Now that the walls of the institution have been cracked, I do not believe there is a real rush to seal them back up.

My own experiences working toward becoming a guru within the fantasy sports industry differ from those of the individuals listed in the previous paragraph in two

significant ways. The first difference is that at the point where I was beginning to gain some symbolic capital of my own, I was forced to “unplug”, as the need for theoretical research began to demand more of my time. In an effort to look at the industry objectively by applying the social theory that was necessary to give balance and depth to the study, I no longer had the time to keep up with the kind of research on players and such that it takes to speak with the authority of an expert in the community. I was still acquiring information that endowed me with a level of symbolic capital and authority; however, it was authority on the social dynamics of the community rather than on game play.

The second major distinction between myself and individuals like Zola and McCracken is due to the way that I think. Zola, McCracken and James think scientifically, drawing enjoyment from the *process* of working in the numbers in a way that a humanities guy like myself cannot. With enough time and effort I can utilize the numbers in the same ways to arrive at my own projections, but I am merely applying the methods and tools that those individuals create. There is clearly a place within the industry for a guy with good writing skills and a love of the games; however, one thing that has been made perfectly clear in the process of researching for this study: there are gurus like Todd Zola, and there are writers like me who steal their shtick.

This work focused exclusively on fantasy baseball and fantasy football, but if you can imagine a competition that individuals would want to be able to experience in the same way as these sports, it is out there. There are fantasy leagues for basketball, hockey, soccer, cricket, golf, bowling, fly fishing, NASCAR, poker, bull riding (yes bull riding), and even Supreme Court decisions. If there was ever an argument against the “stat geek”

designation, I would think that fantasy bull riding would do it. Fantasy sports are here to stay, and they are a central part of the future of fandom, no matter what the context is or what the contest is about. American culture is too committed to profiting off of the desires of the consumer, and the consumer clearly desires a stronger and more personal connection to the games. If submitting player bids via the mail and tabulating box scores by hand could not slow down the inevitable growth of the fantasy sports industry, I can only imagine how faster computers that fit in your pocket will accelerate involvement.

Appendix

Major League Baseball Newspaper Box Score

Sports Section - Lansing State Journal May 3rd, 2007

Late Wednesday

Mariners 3, White Sox 2

CHICAGO		SEATTLE	
ab	r h bi	ab	r h bi
Erstad 1b	4 0 1 0	I Suzuki cf	3 0 0 0
Iguchi 2b	4 0 1 0	Beltre 3b	3 0 0 0
Przyns c	4 0 0 0	Vidro dh	3 1 1 0
Knerko dh	4 1 2 1	Ibanez lf	4 0 1 1
Dye rf	3 1 1 1	Sexson 1b	4 0 0 0
Ozuna pr	0 0 0 0	JGillen rf	4 1 1 1
Mckwk lf	4 0 0 0	Ellison rf	0 0 0 0
Crede 3b	3 0 0 0	Jhijima c	3 0 1 0
RSwny cf	3 0 0 0	YBtcr ss	3 1 1 1
Uribe ss	3 0 1 0	JoLopez 2b	3 0 1 0
Totals	32 2 6 2	Totals	30 3 6 3
Chicago	010 100 000-2		
Seattle	010 001 10x-3		

DP-Seattle 1. LOB-Chicago 4, Seattle 6. 2B-Ibanez (4), JoLopez (2).
HR-Konerko (4), Dye (6), JGuillen (3), YBetancourt (3).

	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
Chicago						
Danks L, 0-4	6	2	3	6	3	2
MacDougal	1	1	3	0	0	1
Seattle						
MBatista W, 3-2	7	1	3	5	2	2
Sherrill	2	3	1	0	0	1
Putz S, 5	1	0	0	0	0	1
Umpires-Home, Rick Reed	First,					
Chuck Meriwether	Second,					
Marquez Third, Tim Timmons.						
T-2:03. A-16,555 (47,447).						

Indians 7, Blue Jays 6 (11)

TORONTO		CLEVELAND	
ab	r h bi	ab	r h bi
Rios rf	6 0 1 1	Szmorc cf	5 0 1 0
Lind lf	5 0 1 0	Dlucci lf	6 2 2 0

D. Rays 4, Twins 3 (10)

MINNESOTA		TAMPA BAY	
ab	r h bi	ab	r h bi
LCstillo 2b	4 1 1 0	Baldelli cf	4 1 0 0
Punto 3b	4 0 0 0	Dukes dh	5 1 2 1
Mauer c	5 0 1 1	Cwfrd lf	4 0 3 0
Mneau 1b	5 1 2 0	Wggntn 3b	5 0 3 2
THnter cf	5 1 3 2	DYong rf	5 0 0 0
Kubel lf	5 0 1 0	Upton 2b	4 0 1 0
Cirillo dh	4 0 2 0	CPena 1b	4 0 1 0
Rabe dh	1 0 0 0	Zobrist pr	0 1 0 0
Tyner rf	4 0 1 0	BHarris ss	3 1 2 0
Bartlett ss	4 0 2 0	Paul c	4 0 0 0
		Nvarro ph	1 0 0 1
Totals	41 3 13 3	Totals	39 4 12 4
Minnesota	020 000 100 0-3		
Tampa Bay	000 010 002 1-4		

One out when winning run scored.

E-Upton (8). DP-Minnesota 2, Tampa Bay 1. LOB-Minnesota 11, Tampa Bay 13. 2B-BHarris (3). HR-THunter (6). SB-Punto (3), THunter (6).

	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
Minnesota						
Bonser	6	6	1	1	4	2
Neshek	1	2	3	1	0	0
Crain	1	3	0	0	0	0
Nathan	1	3	2	2	1	3
Guerrier L, 0-1	1	3	2	1	1	0
Tampa Bay						
Seo	6	7	2	2	1	3
Camp	2	3	2	1	1	0
Stokes	1	1	3	3	0	0
Salas	1	0	0	0	1	2
Reyes W, 1-0	1	1	0	0	0	2

HBP-by Bonser (Crawford), by Seo (Tyner). WP-Nathan. Balk-Bonser. Umpires-Home, Larry Young First, Angel Hernandez Second, Jerry Layne Third, Mark Carlson.

T-3:35. A-9,101 (43,772).

Appendix B

The Rules and Rosters for Standard Rotisserie Baseball

The scoring system, roster sizes, and game rules for Rotisserie baseball can be modified to fit whatever is agreed upon by the league. However, there are a few configurations that have become recognized as “standard” for the most part, and I have listed the details to those variations below.

Player Universe – The first decision made when setting up the league involves which players will be used and by how many rosters. Typically leagues are comprised of **10-12** teams, though, **15** is the standard for the *National Fantasy Baseball Championship*, and as many as **20** have been used effectively. The league must also decide on whether they wish to use both leagues (**Mixed**) or whether they would prefer to be league specific, perhaps limiting the player pool to either the American League (**AL Only**) or National League (**NL Only**).

Head-to-Head Variation – Prior to listing the most common scoring formats for Rotisserie baseball, it should be noted that there is scoring format that has grown very popular in recent years called **Head to Head (H2H)**, which was borrowed from the manner in which fantasy football is played. H2H scoring uses the same scoring categories as Rotisserie, however the aim is to “win” the most of those categories versus a single weekly opponent. The categories are then tallied head-to-head, and the team with the best record for the week (6 categories won to the opponents 4) wins for that week. At the end of the season, the teams with the best head-to-head records are seeded into a playoff format to determine the league champion.

Standard Rotisserie Scoring – An even number of categories are included for offense and pitching. The statistics are tallied up continuously over the season, and at the end who ever has the most points across all categories wins the league. The points are distributed according to rank; so in a 12 Team League, the team with the most homeruns will have 12 points for that category. The next highest total will receive 11 points, on so on down to 1. The goal is to score the most points in as many categories as possible. There are two primary variations to Rotisserie scoring, which make a distinction between the number of categories that should be included for scoring.

4x4 Scoring (Which is recognized as the traditional form):

- AVG** - Batting Average
- HR** - Homeruns
- RBI** - Runs-Batted-In
- SB** - Stolen Bases
- W** - Wins
- SV** - Saves
- ERA** - Earned Run Average
- WHIP** - Walks plus Hits per Innings Pitchers

5x5 Scoring (Which adds Runs on offense and Strikeouts for pitchers)

AVG - Batting Average

HR - Homeruns

RBI - Runs-Batted-In

SB - Stolen Bases

R - Runs

W - Wins

SV – Saves

K – Strikeouts

ERA - Earned Run Average

WHIP - Walks plus Hits per Innings Pitched

Standard Roster Configuration – Standard Rotisserie rosters are comprised of 23 starting positions (14 hitters and 9 pitchers), and anywhere from five to ten reserve (or bench) slots. Three significant notes: 1) Teams two catchers, two additional infielders (one eligible at the corner positions and one eligible at the middle positions), and 2 additional outfielders; 2) there is no positional designation for outfielders (such as left, center or right); and 3) the pitcher slots can be filled with any combination of starters and relievers. The key distinctions between standard Rotisserie and other formats for fantasy baseball are the expanded roster and the \$260 auction salary cap that forces economic efficiency in roster construction. Here is the standard roster format:

C
C
1B
2B
SS
3B
CI
MI
OF
OF
OF
OF
OF
OF
UT

P
P
P
P
P
P
P
P

This format forces a deeper knowledge of baseball rosters, and Rotisserie players fill these slot in various way depending upon their adopted theory of roster creation. **Stars and Scrubs**, for example, is a strategy which favors paying top dollar for superstars and then filling out the rest of the roster with cheap “scrubs” who are easily replaced from the waiver wire. Another popular strategy is the **LIMA Plan** created by Ron Shandler of BaseballHQ.com. LIMA stands for Low Investment Mound Ace, and the premise of the theory is to spend very little on pitching, focusing on cheap players with good skill sets ($K/9 > 6$ for example), thereby allowing the team owner to allocate the majority of his resources to hitting. Hitting is typically a much more stable investment, and so variations of this philosophy are extremely popular.

Appendix C

Fantasy Sports Web Sites

The Fantasy Sports Trade Association: The FSTA was created as an official organization for the promotion of the fantasy sports industry. It was formed after representatives from CDM Fantasy Sports invited a number of other fantasy sports businesses to discuss the pending legislation that could severely limit the growth of the industry. The first FSTA conference was held in 1999.

<http://www.fsta.org/index.php>

League Host Sites: The following is a listing of the websites where the leagues are actually hosted, and where the games are played. Each site has unique interfaces, structural layouts and different levels of customization. Features that determine where an individual chooses to play include cost, available analysis and research tools, ease of navigation, and the ability to customize league settings and scoring.

CBS Sportsline Fantasy Leagues

<http://www.sportsline.com/fantasy>

ESPN Fantasy Leagues

http://games.espn.go.com/frontpage?&lpos=globalnav&lid=gn_Fantasy_Fantasy

MLB.com Fantasy Leagues

<http://mlb.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/mlb/fantasy/index.jsp>

My Fantasy League – League Pages

<http://football8.myfantasyleague.com/2005/home/75402>

Yahoo Fantasy Leagues

<http://fantasysports.yahoo.com/>

Information, Expert Guidance, Online Communities: The sites listed below do not host league play themselves. Rather, they offer sources for gathering player and team news, game theory and strategy discussion, direct expert advice and social communities for networking.

CREATIVESPORTS.com

<http://creativesports.com>

FantasyBaseball.com

<http://fantasybaseball.com/>

FantasyBaseball.com – Forums

<http://forums.fantasybaseball.com/index.php?act=idx>

FootballDiehards.com

<http://www.footballdiehards.com/index-good.cfm>

Footballguys.com

<http://footballguys.com/>

RotoTimes.com

<http://www.rototimes.com/index.php>

RotoWorld.com

<http://www.rotoworld.com/>

SportsGrumblings.com

<http://www.sportsgrumblings.com/>

SportsGrumblings.com - Forums

<http://www.sportsgrumblings.com/forum/index.php>

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