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The Reality of Fantasy Sports: Transforming Fan Culture in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The Reality of Fantasy Sports: Transforming Fan Culture in the Digital Age

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This dissertation analyzes the transformation of fantasy sports from a deviant, outside-the-mainstream fan culture to a billion-dollar industry that comprises almost 20 million North American participants. Fantasy sports are games in which participants adopt the simultaneous roles of owner, general manager, and coach of their own teams of real athletes and compete in leagues against other fantasy teams with the individual statistical performance of athletes determining the outcome of the match and league standings over a season.

Through an analysis of how fantasy sports institutions are co-opting an existing fan culture, the dissertation seeks to contribute to an emerging body of scholarship on the communication dynamic between fans and media institutions in the digital age. In order to understand this cultural shift within the context of fantasy sports, it focuses on three research questions: What is the history of fantasy sports? Why do fantasy sports stimulate avid and engaged fan behaviors? How do fantasy sports institutions communicate with fantasy sports fan cultures?

The methodology employed in this study combines both an ethnographic approach and textual analysis. Personal interviews were conducted with fifteen decision makers from fantasy sports companies such as SportsBuff, Rotowire, Fantasy Auctioneer, Mock Draft Central, Grogan’s Fantasy Football, CBS Sportsline, and ESPN. In addition, textual analysis of the
communication strategies of fantasy sports institutions as well as an examination of fantasy sports fan behaviors are used to explicate and clarify the fantasy sports phenomenon.

The fantasy sports industry has co-opted fantasy fan culture not only with considerable success but also with important implications for communication research. This dissertation illustrates the processes by which fantasy sports institutions have analyzed their audience and strategically facilitated fantasy fan culture for commercial gain. While institutions have had difficulty in the past managing the mass market commercialization and monetization of grassroots cultural products, the mainstreaming of fantasy sports has resulted in growth across most industry platforms. As a consequence, it serves as a case study for the ways that persuasion functions in today’s communication marketplace where the audience has become a critical player in both the production and consumption of media.
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Chapter One

The Transformation of Fan Culture

ESPN, the self-proclaimed “Worldwide Leader in Sports,” has built a global media empire over the last quarter century that gives credibility to its ambitious slogan. The company has branded ten television networks, numerous syndicated radio stations, a multimedia website, a magazine, a broadband television channel, mobile phone content, restaurants, a book publishing arm, videogames, a travel agency, Monday Night Football, movie productions, and seemingly every other distribution channel available in today’s digital age. As the ultimate gatekeeper in American sports, ESPN’s multiplatform approach has withstood pressure from its competitors and in many ways serves as the media industry’s gold standard for convergence.

Despite its global dominance, by 2006 ESPN was lagging in one critical, rapidly emerging area. The company found itself losing a large and influential fan market to media companies other than theirs, and in the process, it was missing a huge opportunity to capitalize on what was becoming a booming industry. For a company that has historically anticipated and responded to major shifts in the marketplace before anyone else, this was unheard of.

The missing piece in ESPN’s communication arsenal was fantasy sports, the sports statistics game that was increasingly becoming a major popular culture entertainment. At the time, although ESPN had made some preliminary efforts to include fantasy in its operations,1 Yahoo dominated market share and other major companies such as CBS Sportsline and Fox Sports as well as a host of smaller businesses had built formidable businesses.2 As a result, these organizations reaped huge rewards from highly engaged fantasy sports fans, while ESPN was
only in the early stages of exploring how fantasy sports should be better implemented and promoted as part of their brand.

ESPN ultimately reinvigorated its fantasy sports operations for the launch of the 2007 Major League Baseball season. From hiring a star-powered team of fantasy experts, to redesigning the website, to giving fans free access to all its fantasy platforms, the company transformed its fantasy sports business model and began synergizing fantasy across all its media platforms. This was a dramatic shift in strategy that not only marked a new era for ESPN but also further signaled that fantasy sports—the game and the industry—had arrived at the mainstream.

Fantasy sports are now a major sports institution and a popular culture phenomenon. Today, it is estimated that at least 19.4 million people in America and Canada play the game, of which 2 million are teenagers, comprising what has evolved into at least a $1.5 billion industry. Often described as a “marketers dream,” fantasy fans are primarily white, upper-middle class, married males with college educations and professional occupations, spending almost $500 a year playing the game and at least three hours per week managing their teams. With their avid behaviors and fierce loyalty, fantasy fans are arguably the most uniquely engaged consumers in all of entertainment.

The exponential growth and cultural impact of fantasy sports is a long way from the game’s origins in the pencils, papers, and calculators of small local sports fan communities. Fantasy sports began as an intense hobby played by men who seemingly sought camaraderie, a more interactive relationship with professional teams and athletes, and a new way to gamble on sports. The first fantasy football league (the Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin
Prognosticators League) and baseball league (Rotisserie Baseball) began in 1963 and 1980, respectively, and while they generated substantial interest among the participants, only modest growth occurred. It wasn’t until the late 1990s, when personal computers and the Internet were being more widely adopted, that the game began to transform from an amateur gambling hobby into a powerful sector of the sports and entertainment industries. Like most mediated communication technologies, the innovation of a small group became over time something that spread across a mass public.

In the process, the dynamic between the media industry and fantasy fans changed significantly. For much of the game’s history, fantasy fan culture existed outside the mainstream; the game was played away from the view of the rest of society in basements, backrooms, and bars. Fantasy fans were stereotyped as a group of computer geeks, nerds, and stat hounds who participated in a make-believe sports game and were so obsessed that they were often too distracted to care about anything else in their lives. In a mass audience media environment of three-television networks, limited cable offerings, and no Internet, fantasy sports fans were not the type of consumers major media companies, sports properties, and sponsors needed to target, let alone recognize as core audience members.

However, in the face of communication and technological shifts and the fantasy industry’s corresponding growth, mainstream institutions, like ESPN, have adapted their communication strategies to embrace and in some cases promote their involvement with fantasy fan culture. In an era of increasing fragmentation and advertising clutter, engagement is an emerging measurement for the media industry, and because of their devoted and often obsessive behaviors, the large numbers of fantasy fans are now being recognized not as outcasts but as
prized and model customers. According to David Katz, an executive at Yahoo, “We’re seeing significant growth in our ad revenue. Fantasy is driven by the fact that it is, was and continues to be one of the most engaged audiences on the Internet.” After a long and often maligned history, fantasy sports have become mainstream entertainment.

The transformation of fantasy fan culture is the subject of this dissertation. How did this transformation occur? What is fantasy fan culture and how do fantasy fans re-appropriate sports to satisfy their own entertainment agenda? What are the communication and marketing strategies that the industry implements to engage its audience? This dissertation seeks to address these questions and provide a better understanding of how institutions and fan cultures interact in the digital age. Moreover, it seeks to contribute to previous scholarship on fan cultures, which has historically focused on the fans themselves, by analyzing the ways that institutions are co-opting an existing fan culture with significant success.

To begin, the chapter briefly defines fantasy sports, giving the reader the essential elements of fantasy participation to understand the concept. Then, it situates the study within the context of previous media studies research on fans and fan cultures and explains the research questions and methodology. Next, to background the study, it places the fantasy phenomenon into a broader cultural context by examining the current state of the fantasy sports industry as well as the factors in its popularity. Finally, it concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters in the dissertation.

What are Fantasy Sports?
Fantasy sports are games in which participants adopt the simultaneous roles of owner, general manager, and coach of their own teams of real athletes and compete in leagues against other fantasy teams with the individual statistical performance of athletes determining the outcome of a game and league standings over a season. As an illustration of how the game works, consider the example of National Football League (NFL) fantasy football and the ways a prospective participant would go about playing.

The first step is to find a fantasy football league in which to participate. Currently, there are three main options for fantasy sports play. Fans can enter into what is called a public league, which usually consists of people whom the participant does not know. Another option is the private league, an invitation-only community that is organized among a group of friends, family, coworkers, or any combination of the three and played according to the rules established by the website. The final option is to join a commissioner league, which is similar to a private league, but allows one of the participants (the commissioner) to customize the rules in ways that private leagues do not. \(^{10}\) Depending on the website, the participant may or may not pay a fee to participate in any of the three leagues, and in private or commissioner leagues, will in some cases ante money into a pot to award the winners after the season ends, a transaction that takes place offline, “under the table.”

Once the prospective fantasy participant enters into a league, the next step is to build his or her team. To do so, the owner will participate in some type of draft (there are various versions) during which he or she will select an agreed upon number of football players from any team in the National Football League. Although the format of leagues varies, the idea is to select starters and bench players for generally six basic positions – quarterback, running back, wide
receiver, tight end, defense/special teams, and kicker. At the end of the draft, all the participants in the league will have the same number of players on their roster and are limited to that number throughout the season.

After building the fantasy team, the participant must set his or her lineup for the Week 1 games. The number of football players the owner must start at each position depends on the league rules, although a fairly standard lineup is one quarterback, two running backs, two wide receivers, one tight end, one defense/special teams, and one kicker. In setting a lineup, it is generally a good strategy to research which teams the individual athletes are playing against that week and try to predict how they will perform based on factors like home field advantage, injuries, weather, previous performances, and a host of other variables.

Since scoring in fantasy football is based on the statistics that are accumulated from the real football game, official fantasy play begins as soon as the first games of Week 1 NFL kickoff. The aggregation of fantasy points will then determine the winners and losers of the fantasy competition. Under this model, the fantasy emphasis in the real game is on the individual statistical performances of athletes, not whether the real team wins or loses. For example, Chicago Bears quarterback Rex Grossman is more valuable in fantasy if he throws 4 touchdowns even if the Bears lose than if he throws no touchdowns in a Bears win. Although individual player performances can certainly affect the outcome of the real game on the field, many times it is inconsequential in the realm of fantasy.

There are two main scoring formats for fantasy play – head-to-head and rotisserie style. In head-to-head, two fantasy teams play one another, meaning that in a 10-team league there will be 5 matchups per week. In a typical head to head game, the touchdowns thrown by the
quarterback may be 4 points each, yards passing 1 point for every 25 yards, rushing
touchdowns 3 points, sacks 1 point, fumbles -1 point, and so on. Essentially, every statistical
category in real football can be assigned a numerical value. Like in regular football, the team
with the most fantasy points wins each game and team records are organized into standings. In
rotisserie, teams do not play one another individually. Rather, they play against the entire field
each week and earn points based on their league rankings in each statistical category. For
example, a rotisserie-style fantasy football game may measure eight statistics: total scoring,
kicker scoring, total rushing yards, rushing yards average, total receiving yards, receiving yards
average, total passing yards, and passing yards average. The rotisserie-style games reward the
most outstanding statistical performer throughout the season, as opposed to head-to-head, in
which the best team may have an off-performance one week during the playoffs and be
eliminated from championship contention.

For every week of the regular season, fantasy owners will repeat the process of setting
their lineup and playing, which essentially means watching the stats accumulate during the real
games and how they impact the fantasy contests. While there will be winners and losers, poor
fantasy performances are not permanent. Similar to the NFL, owners can cut athletes from the
team and add players off of the waiver wire to replace them. They can also make trades with
other participants in the league. It’s typical for fantasy football players to often spend large
amounts of time preparing for their next week’s matchup during the week by watching the
waiver wire, proposing trades, and setting their lineup.

Fantasy league championships are awarded at the end of the football season, when the
NFL regular season concludes (most fantasy play does not extend into the playoffs of sports). In
head-to-head, there will be a single elimination playoff. In rotisserie, the team with the most accumulated points from their rankings in the various statistical categories at the end of the season wins. If the fantasy participant competed in a commissioner or private league with an entry fee, the winning owner will receive a monetary payout, which can range from a few dollars to thousands, as well as bragging rights among friends. There are also public high stakes games that often award large amounts of money. The World Championship of Fantasy Football (WCOFF), for instance, offers a $300,000 grand prize to its winner.\textsuperscript{12}

Owners can spend the off-season lamenting the failures of their team and preparing for next season. There are some leagues that are called keeper leagues where owners will keep a few or all of their players until the next season’s draft. For the majority of fantasy players,\textsuperscript{13} however, their current roster is disbanded and they wait until the next season’s draft to begin.

In almost every sense, fantasy sports are designed to mirror the business and player personnel elements of professional sports. It is a concept that has proven to be very attractive to millions of fans and continues to increase its popular culture impact. In the process, the dynamic between fantasy fan culture and media institutions is being redefined, offering a valuable site for further communication research, as the next section discusses.

\textbf{Literature Review}

The changing relationship between audiences and institutions is a defining characteristic of the new media marketplace. In part because of the proliferation of new interactive technologies, audiences are increasingly becoming both consumers and producers of media content and have more choice in their entertainment than ever before. As a consequence, the
media industry is struggling to find ways to maintain audience attention and revise their business models and communication strategies to better interact with this newly empowered audience.

Pierre Bourdieu forecasted, to some degree, this change in audience behavior and the resulting impact on the media industry. In his influential work on field theory, he suggests that economics, politics, and other factors influence media content production, particularly of news. Moreover, he argued that an increasingly participatory audience has the potential to transform the media industry, although at the time of his writings, the actions of other media companies influenced the content decisions of companies more than the audience itself. This theory – and its limitations – were examined by Russell, who studied the coverage of French news riots, which included both mainstream and do-it-yourself journalism (DIY), and demonstrated the power of the audience to contribute to and shift the media coverage of a public controversy. It was an early study on this new dynamic and suggested that scholars have not begun to fully explore the interplay between an increasingly participatory audience and mainstream institutions.

Although this cultural shift is relatively new, a useful paradigm in seeking to understand this phenomenon is what McQuail termed “the duality of the audience.” According to McQuail, “The history of mass media indicates that audiences can originate both in society and in media and their contents. People stimulate an appropriate supply, or the media attract people to what they choose to offer.” That is, media can either respond to an existing audience or create one. This typology is particularly important in thinking about how audiences and institutions function in today’s marketplace, as audience access to new media technologies has begun to blur the lines between what McQuail sees as a created and an existing audience.
This dissertation is influenced both by the new audience-institution dynamic discussed by Russell and the duality of audience typology developed by McQuail. Its purpose is to understand the ways that fantasy sports institutions have co-opted an existing audience (not a created one) that is increasingly both a producer and consumer of content. Moreover, the study seeks to understand this newly evolving dynamic by specifically analyzing the interaction between fans, an audience group that is emblematic of the new media configurations, and the institutions that are attempting to communicate with them.

Because of the emphasis on fans and their relationship to media institutions, this study’s primary academic contribution is to scholarship on fan cultures. In this section, previous scholarship on fan cultures, which has emphasized the various cultural practices within fan communities that have historically existed outside the mainstream, is examined. Then, the mainstreaming of fan culture is discussed as well as how this study seeks to contribute to an emerging research area on the interaction between fans and institutions.

Fan Culture Literature

The etymology of “fan” begins with the Latin word “fanaticus,” which translated into English means fanatic. Fan, of course, is a shortened version of fanatic, but in the English language, the definitions differ. Merriam-Webster defines fanatic as “marked by excessive enthusiasm and often intense uncritical devotion” and fan as “an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or a performing art) usually as a spectator.”¹⁶ Although the definition of “fan” is the less intense of the two, most fan culture researchers have been concerned primarily with how fans are
viewed and stereotyped within society in ways that comport more with the “fanatic”
definition. For example, Jenkins articulates the progression of “fan” into its stigmatized form:

If the term “fan” was originally evoked in a somewhat playful fashion and was often used
sympathetically by sports writers, it never fully escaped its earlier connotations of
religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness,
connotations that seem to be at the heart of many of the representations of fans in
contemporary discourse. 17

As Jenkins suggests, fans are often viewed as deviant, and many fan culture studies have
operated from this premise. Seeking to place this perception into perspective, Jenson argues that
most people exhibit fan-like behavior, but the cultural activities with which they engage
determine the acceptability of their practices in society. For instance, whereas people interested
in high culture are often seen as aficionados or collectors, fans are generally associated with the
less socially acceptable products of popular culture, including television shows, films, music, and
sports. 18 To expound on her analysis of fan culture, Jenson categorizes two major types of fans:
“obsessed loner”, like a science fiction geek, and “frenzied or hysterical member of a crowd”,
such as an English national soccer team fan. 19

The tendency for society to stigmatize the behaviors of fan cultures is, according to
Jenson, an issue of social control. Jenson argues, “Fandom is seen as a psychological symptom
of a presumed social dysfunction; the two fan types are based in an unacknowledged critique of
modernity. Once fans are characterized as deviant, they can be treated as disreputable, even
dangerous ‘others’.” However, the two types Jenson cites are not exhaustive of the types of fans that are perceived as deviant. Harrington and Bielby broaden Jenson’s notion to argue that fans in general are negatively stereotyped as being irrationally ensnared by a popular culture product. They write, “By reputation, fans cannot tell the difference between fiction and reality and are consumed with the minute details of make-believe worlds.” According to fan culture scholars, by characterizing and stigmatizing fans in this way, society is defining them as an unofficial audience for popular culture products that exists outside of the mainstream.

Most fan culture research has sought to explicate the reasons for the fan stereotype and reverse this long-held perception. In doing so, Jenkins locates the stigma of fans within a discourse of dominant ideology. He writes, “The stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies.” This viewpoint generally considers that those in power stigmatize fans in order to retain current power relations. Tulloch reinforces Jenkins’s argument, referring to fans as members of a “powerless elite” because they are “structurally situated between producers they have little control over and the ‘wider public’ whose continued following of the show can never be assured, but on whom the survival of the show depends.” For these scholars, this triangulated relationship between the media industry, public, and fans is an important insight into explaining the behaviors of fan culture.

In examining the research on the behaviors of fan culture, three major themes emerge: activity, identity, and performance. Although the themes are not necessarily chronological by design, they do represent an overall evolution of the field of fan culture research. The themes are also not mutually exclusive. That is, fan culture scholars who have studied performance are
inherently interested in activity and identity issues. What follows below is a discussion of some of the three major approaches in fan culture research.

First, the literature on fan activity, the largest and most developed body of research, is concerned with the activities of fans around a particular cultural text. These scholars are interested in discovering the internal functions of fan cultures and examining the ways that media texts are re-appropriated for the creation of alternative meanings. Using de Certeau’s concept of “poaching” as a theoretical grounding, Jenkins argues for “an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture.”

Moreover, Jenkins contends that someone is a fan “not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests.”

A central focus in Jenkins’s work is the production of fan content that is based on the original popular culture product. For example, in his work on Star Trek, Jenkins demonstrates the ways that fans re-appropriate the show through their writing of fan-only literature that usually is a reworking of Star Trek plots. Jenkins contends, “Fan writing can be seen as a tactical response to the ideological contradictions of the original Star Trek episodes, a means of keeping the series ‘alive’ within a constantly shifting reception context.” As an illustration of Jenkins’s theories, these fan cultures reproduce mass media content to create their own meanings, engage in a participatory community to distribute the new messages, and respond through their
production to the dominant cultural hierarchies operating in society. The production of this type of fan content is a recurring theme across other fan cultures.27

As Jenkins’s interpretation of fan writing suggests, the theme of activity is closely tied to theories about resistance and rejection of dominant ideology. Fiske argues, “Fans create a fan culture with its own systems of production and distribution that forms what I shall call a ‘shadow cultural economy’ that lies outside that of the cultural industries yet shares features with them which more normal popular culture lacks.”28 In this area of fan culture research, fans are conceived as producing culture as a group outside the general public as a way to both respond to dominant hierarchies and regain control of their viewing experience.

The second major theme in fan culture research is around identity. Grossberg contends that fans establish, form, and maintain identity through their fanship by arguing that fans “can only be understood in relation to a different sensibility. The fan’s relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of affect and mood.”29 In addition, he observes that fans make an “investment” in a popular culture product and create “mattering maps” around the activity.30 Fans have an emotional attachment to the popular culture product, and this connection to identity in part explains why fans produce content about the product so actively. While many studies have focused exclusively on fan activities, other researchers have begun to consider the role of identity in fan culture, recalling Grossberg’s emphasis on “investment” and emotional connections in the fan culture experience. This focus on identity within fan culture has grown in importance as the introduction of new technologies has stimulated more interaction among people and institutions than ever before.31
An early study of the importance of identity was Radway who argued that women read romance novels as a form of resistance to their social position in everyday life. As active readers of the often patriarchal romance stories, they spent time away from doing what was expected of them as the domestic head and principal caregiver of the household. Reading the novels, Radway argued, was a way to retain a sense of self while being controlled by societal norms, and at the same time, reestablish their identity within this family space. This groundbreaking study spawned other research on female-centered leisure activities, especially in the related genre of soap opera.

A significant move from previous fan culture research solely on activity and dominant ideology was the work of Harrington and Bielby, which investigated the importance of identity using soap fans as their case study. They argue, “We believe that this conception of fan as doer obscures an important dimension of fanship, the acceptance and maintenance of a fan identity.” As an extension of the work on activity, this research takes a more individual methodological perspective. As a result, Harrington and Bielby argue that soap fans tend to allow the programming to influence their identity in everyday life, with their soap fandom affecting their schedules, social relationships, and other media experiences:

Fanship is not always a reactive response by marginalized groups. Quite the contrary. Viewers participate in soap subculture to defend, advocate, and display their commitments to a medium that reflects and comments on what is socially significant to them in their personal lives.
In this way, soap opera fandom constitutes a particular way of life, not necessarily a text through which fans can rebel against society or re-appropriate in the form of fan writing. Instead, their study suggests that soap fans do not outwardly enact their affinity for the programming and that the effect of soap opera on their lives is more internally-driven. What Bielby and Harrington, along with Blumenthal, advocate is an extension of fan culture research into the daily interactions of viewers with their favorite popular culture products to examine more completely how fandom shapes their identity.

Questions about identity have also become more central with the emergence of online communities. Baym also examines the communities of soap opera fans in order to understand the interpersonal communication among them. Baym argues, “In general, we have far too little understanding of the spontaneous interpersonal interaction and social relations that make an audience a community, although these interactions are crucial to being a fan and incorporating mass media into our everyday lives.” In addition, Baym contends her study expounds upon “the use of soaps to develop a community ostensibly around soaps but also functioning as a community in which traditionally female concerns and values are honored.” A principal contribution of Baym’s study is the finding that a fan culture can exist not only to discuss and participate in the soap opera but also to form a distinct community independent of the programming.

The studies in the identity theme de-emphasize the activity component of fan culture research in order to understand the process of identity formation and maintenance around the popular culture product. According to this area of fan culture research, being a fan of a particular popular culture product does not necessarily require the production of content to
demonstrate devotion. Rather, the social relationships with both the product itself and fellow fans are the defining features of these fan cultures.

The final major theme is performance, which considers the ways that individuals in fan cultures act out their fandom or devotion. While previous research into fan culture has considered elements of performance, such as the costuming at *Star Trek* conventions Bacon-Smith chronicles, the combination of an evolution in the field and new media technologies has encouraged researchers to begin asking different questions. As with identity, the concept of performance integrates issues of activity and identity into its research. The two relevant studies cited below examine fan performance within the context of fan cultures and everyday life.

The digital world has multiplied the number of forums to perform, or at least created more opportunities and data for scholars to study fan performances. One example is Lancaster (2001), who focused on the performance of *Babylon 5* fans, especially in a digital environment within a fan culture. Different from fan writing, which is not an enacted performance, Lancaster argues that “…fans create their own personal texts in order to perform, enact, share in, and see scenes that the canonical author never created.” In doing so, *Babylon 5* fans create web pages and play Multi-User Domain (MUD) games on the Internet based on the show, which constitute a technology-enabled fantasy experience that allows the fan to enter into and participate in the show virtually. As a result, Lancaster argues that fans “become high-tech nomads, poaching images and texts as a means to perform in one of their favorite fantasy universes. The spectator becomes the performer.” Critical to this performative perspective is the use of personal computers and the Internet, which support the creation of this fantasy
universe and allow fans to develop their own characters and avatars to perform as a member of the *Babylon 5* cast.

The performance opportunities, however, are not limited to the digital world or specific fan cultures. For example, Hills’s analysis of media-cult fans advances a theory called “performative consumption,” which redefines fans as both a performer and a consumer. For Hills, the body itself is an overlooked site of fan performance with costumes and other appearance factors critical to the fan experience. In his analysis of fan impersonators from the perspective of performative consumption, he writes, “The costumier or impersonator does not only imitate a specific cult icon or character taken from a cult text: he or she embodies the processes of stardom and textuality, self-reflexively presenting the body-as-commodity.” At the same time, Hills makes the point that “performative consumption…also dramatises the fans’ self-absence, blurring moments of the volitional subject (‘master of the text’) and the nonvolitional ‘disciple’ of the text.” This theory integrates notions about dominant ideology and social control but also accounts for individual freedom for the fan to perform within the context of structures. It is also a move away from the passive versus active debate and instead attempts to locate the fan within issues of structure and agency.

The three major themes – activity, identity, and performance – place into perspective the previous research on fan culture. In many cases, fans are viewed as a deviant, outside the mainstream, shadow culture that is of little interest to media industries and the American public. However, as competition and fragmentation in the media industry has begun to set in, forcing companies and advertisers to look for engaged audiences, the position of the fan in society has begun to change.
The Mainstreaming of Fan Culture

While further research into the changing relationship between fans and institutions is still lagging, fan culture scholars are beginning to understand the ongoing transformation of fan culture in the digital age. In the introduction of their edited volume, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington write:

“The public recognition and evaluation of the practice of being a fan has itself profoundly changed over the past several decades. As we have moved from an era of broadcasting to one of narrowcasting, a process fueled by the deregulation of media markets and reflected in the rise of new media technologies, the fan as a specialized yet dedicated consumer has become a centerpiece of media industries’ marketing strategy.”

As they suggest, during this mainstreaming process, marketing to fans has become a critical component of fan culture inquiry. In fact, marketing has been an avatar in redefining the fan as a desired consumer. For example, one of the earliest moves in the marketing literature toward attracting and sustaining fans is the development of the concept of brand loyalty, which refers to the theory and practices to increase the intensity of the consumer-brand relationship. While these studies of brand loyalty do not use the term, the core concept of creating and retaining devoted customers is an important precedent for the current study of fans.

More recently, other researchers in the marketing field have begun to examine fans more specifically. For example, some have begun categorizing sports fans into types, in which the
most desirable are the avid. An example is Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw, who developed five
different types of sports fans: temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional, which
ascended from the lowest level of interest to the most extreme level. There have also been
studies that have positioned the fan as the ideal consumer, such as an analysis of Chicago Cubs
fans, and books that have considered the fan similarly, such as *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary
to People*, *The Power of Cult Branding: How 9 Magnetic Brands Turned Customers into Loyal
Followers (and Yours Can, Too!)*, and *Net Gain: Expanding Markets through Virtual
Communities*. All of these works reflect the repositioning of fans as a desired consumer and
are important markers of the increased attempts by the media industry and corporate America
alike to capitalize on the avid behaviors and loyalty of fans.

Despite the increasing focus of fans in marketing and other disciplines, cultural studies is
still a primary area of inquiry into the changes in fan culture. Interestingly, the scholar who was
among the first to study stereotyped fan cultures is also among the first to identify the increasing
attention fans are receiving from media companies. In his book, *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins
discusses a new era of fan participatory culture based on the increased involvement of media
industries with fan culture. He writes:

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural scholars, myself included, depicted
media fandom as an important test site for ideas about active consumption and grassroots
creativity. We were drawn toward the idea of “fan culture” as operating in the shadows
of, in response to, as well as an alternative to commercial culture…Across the past
decade, the Web has brought these consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight; research into fandom has been embraced by important thinkers in the legal and business communities. What might once have been seen as “rogue readers” are now Kevin Roberts’s “inspirational consumers.”

In the book, Jenkins focuses on three main themes – convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture – and the ways that fan cultures are functioning in contemporary culture. In summing up his research and analysis of the new era of fan communities, he writes, “Powerful institutions are trying to build stronger connections with their constituencies and consumers are applying skills learned as fans and gamers to work, education, and politics.” He ultimately leaves the implications and future of this new relationship unresolved, as he sees the book as a way to report on cultural changes and not as a forum to draw wide-ranging conclusions about the future of fan communities.

While Jenkins makes a foundational contribution to the shift in fan culture studies, there is still more research that needs to be done to explore and analyze institution-fan communication. With the exception of Jenkins’s inquiries, there have been relatively few studies that have focused on how businesses are co-opting fan cultures as a primary component of their marketing strategy. Moreover, the case examples that he does discuss – American Idol, Survivor, Star Wars, the Matrix and Harry Potter – are established entertainment products that are developing strategies to create fan communities, rather than co-opt an existing fan culture.

This dissertation seeks to extend this area of research by looking at an existing fan culture that has been institutionalized by major media companies as well as smaller businesses for
commercial gain. The case of fantasy sports is an avatar of transforming grassroots cultures into prioritized marketing initiatives of major corporations. In addition, there has been a lack of discussion of how businesses and industries evolve from fan cultures. This study attempts to demonstrate how these processes occur and the resulting opportunities and consequences for both fans and institutions.

Fan culture is undergoing a transformation process in which businesses and media companies alike are beginning to embrace it in unprecedented ways. While companies can certainly benefit from the avid behaviors of fans, problems can arise when companies seek to capitalize on what has historically been the fan’s space, a commercially motivated initiative that conflicts with the anti-establishment spirit of fan culture. In this context, communication between institutions and fans has become somewhat of a balancing act in the digital age, as companies try to negotiate how far they can enter into fan communities without permanently alienating them. This dissertation addresses and analyzes this new and complex institution-fan relationship and how the institutions themselves produce and distribute content to engage and grow its fan base. Moreover, it seeks to illustrate the ways that institutions have co-opted an existing fan culture with considerable success.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

As the fantasy sports industry has grown, fantasy fan culture has transformed from a deviant, overlooked group to a highly sought after demographic. By researching and examining the rapidly emerging fantasy sports industry, this dissertation seeks to understand and analyze
how institutions and fans interact in the digital age. In order to accomplish this objective, three principal research questions are addressed.

1. What is the history of the fantasy sports industry?
2. Why do fantasy sports stimulate avid and engaged fan behaviors?
3. How do fantasy sports institutions communicate with fantasy sports fan culture?

These three questions represent a systematic analytical approach to the study of the fantasy sports industry. In order to understand and analyze how institutions and fans interact in the digital age, it must first be understood how the industry evolved into what it is today. Then, the audience with whom institutions are communicating must be analyzed with a focus on why this particular audience plays the game in order to give perspective to the analysis of the communication efforts of fantasy sports institutions. Finally, the communication strategies and tactics fantasy sports institutions are implementing to communicate with fantasy fans are examined. By answering these questions, it is hoped that this research on fantasy sports provides a clearer understanding of the ways that fan-institution communication functions.

The methodological approach by which these questions are answered includes both personal interviews and textual analysis. In terms of personal interviews, with the approval of the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 decision-makers in fantasy sports institutions. They include Kevin Gralen, President of Head2Head Sports, George del Prado, CEO of Fantasy Auctioneer, Alec Peters, CEO of FS Dashboard, Ted Kasten, President of Draft Dynamix, Jeff Coruccini, CEO of Ready Set Go.
Fantasy Sports, Jason Pliml, President of Mock Draft Central, Dan Grogan, Co-Founder of Athlon’s Grogan’s Fantasy Football, Peter Schoenke, Founder and President of Rotowire, John Georgopoulos, Founder of Gridiron Grumblings, Jeff Thomas, President of the Fantasy Sports Trade Association and CEO and Founder of Sports Buff, Danielle Maclean, Product Manager for CBS Sportsline, Matthew Berry, Senior Director of Fantasy for ESPN.com, Nate Ravitz, Editor and Analyst for ESPN.com Fantasy, Matt Walker, Web Designer for ESPN.com Fantasy, and John Diver, Technology Manager for ESPN.com Fantasy.

In the interviews, questions about audience, business models, marketing and distribution strategies, product design, and the communication process were asked to understand and analyze the ways that fantasy institutions seek to not only manage the commercialization of fantasy sports but also grow their businesses in the face of industry challenges. Particular attention was paid to the ways that fantasy sports institutions construct their products and messages to influence their targeted audience, as issues such as pricing, website design, and content were viewed as critical to understanding the communication dynamic between these institutions and the fans.

The dissertation also employs textual analysis as a method of rhetorical criticism. This choice of methodology is influenced by Edwin Black, who wrote,

“In the end, there are no formulae, no prescriptions, for criticism…The only instrument of good criticism is the critic. It is not any external perspective or procedure or ideology, but only the convictions, values, and learning of the critic, only the observational and interpretive powers of the critic…The method of rhetorical criticism is the critic.”

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In this study, the use of textual analysis is intended to help inform this criticism, explicate the phenomenon of fantasy sports, and clarify the ways that institutions and fans interact in the digital age. I analyze the communication strategies and tactics of the fantasy sports industry by analyzing the texts of websites, products, and other communication materials these business use to influence their audience. I also analyze the behaviors of the fantasy sports fans to better understand why fantasy fans are engaged by the activity. In doing so, I look at various accounts of fantasy fan experiences as well as integrate my own personal observation of the games. Along with the historical analysis of the transformation of fantasy sports, the focus on fantasy sports fans and institutions seeks to understand the many dimensions of this media and technology phenomenon.

It should also be mentioned that attendance at the Fantasy Sports Trade Association’s annual business conference in the winter of 2007 added significantly to the data collection. In addition, my experiences playing fantasy sports in several leagues also helped inform the analysis.

In this first part of this chapter, I reviewed the literature, demonstrating the contribution that this dissertation will make to studies on fan culture, and also described the research questions and methodology for the study. The remainder of this chapter is intended to give perspective to fantasy sports and background the rest of the dissertation.

**The Current State of Fantasy Sports**
As the foundations of fantasy sports, football and baseball are not only the oldest fantasy sports but also the most popular.\textsuperscript{52} In the midst of industry growth, however, the concept has exploded and been adapted to seemingly every other sport. Traditional sports like basketball, hockey, horse racing, golf, and tennis have fantasy games,\textsuperscript{53} as do newly emerging sports like NASCAR, lacrosse, cricket, soccer and Arena Football.\textsuperscript{54} Fantasy can even be found in sports like bull riding, bass fishing, poker, and competitive eating.\textsuperscript{55}

The growth of fantasy sports is due in large part to the people who play the game. The average fantasy sports fan is a white, married, upper middle class, college educated, and professionally employed male between the ages of 18 and 49.\textsuperscript{56} This demographic profile is the most valuable in all of entertainment, as the audience, especially the 18-34 segment, has historically been difficult for advertisers to reach. Alec Peters, entrepreneur and CEO of FSDashboard, a new fantasy company, said of the fantasy fan, “It’s a targeted demographic that every advertiser in the United States wants. They’re 18-34 with money to burn on something they’re passionate about. They’re male. They’re upwardly mobile. It’s the dream demographic and they just happen to be playing fantasy sports.”\textsuperscript{57}

The effect of fantasy sports on its participants is also a critical factor in its current growth. The fantasy fan has discretionary income and is willing to spend a large amount of their increasingly narrowing leisure time on the activity. The average fantasy football player, for example, spends about 5 hours a week managing his team online and around another 7 hours per week watching the games on television.\textsuperscript{58} That’s 12 hours a week that the fantasy owner is engaged with the NFL and the accompanying messages of its sponsors. And this is not just a fantasy football phenomenon, as players of other sports exhibit similar behaviors. For example,
Major League Baseball fantasy players spent more than four hours managing their teams in 2006 and an untold amount of time paying attention to the more than 90 games played per week.

While its origin is in sports, the fantasy concept is also being extended into other sectors of popular culture as entrepreneurs seek to recreate the passion in other markets that the game generates among sports fans. There is Fafarazzi, an Internet startup company that has adapted fantasy to the world of celebrities. The competitive premise favors those celebrities who make news – either good or bad – making Britney Spears, for example, the Michael Jordan of fantasy celebrity. There is also Fantasy Congress, in which participants draft their own team of Congressmen and receive points based on how many bills are passed in their name. Senator John Kerry may not have won the presidency, but in this game he’s a fantasy stud. And there is Fantasy Moguls, a fantasy game based on the box office performances of movie studios. The summer of 2007’s Superbad, as an underdog to the blockbuster sequels of Spiderman, Shrek, and Die Hard, provided an excellent return on investment for owners who spent only a small percentage of their $100 budget on the Columbia Pictures film. In today’s new media world, any property can be reconfigured into a fantasy game so long as it can be quantified at even the most basic level.

Still, the concept has exhibited the most growth and potential with sports, leading a host of mainstream media companies, sports properties, and major brands to integrate fantasy sports into their communication and marketing operations. Having access to an elusive, highly engaged demographic is increasingly attractive to businesses trying to sell their products and services in a world of TiVos, mobile phones, and the Internet. Because of the potential rewards of interacting
with this highly sought-after audience, ESPN, CBS, Sporting News, AOL, Best Buy, Major League Baseball, National Football League, and Major League Lacrosse are among the growing list of institutions that have embraced fantasy sports. Moreover, information and analysis about fantasy football can be found weekly in major newspapers across the country such as the *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*.

Mainstream media companies are building their fantasy sports businesses in various ways. Viacom-owned CBS, for example, has become a major player in the fantasy sports industry, not only partnering with an early fantasy sports provider, Sportsline.com, in 1997 and eventually merging with it in 2004, but also increasing the amount of fantasy content it distributes on its mainstream television network. During each game it broadcasts, CBS runs what it calls the “Stat Tracks” so that fantasy owners can receive updates on their fantasy players. In addition, the CBS “Game Track” scrolls at the bottom of the screen that show the real-time scores and statistics of each game, and the NFL Today studio show frequently covers the fantasy implications at pregame, halftime, and postgame of each of its broadcasts.

Major brands, in their roles as sponsors, are also seeking ways to capitalize on the fantasy phenomenon. In an effort to differentiate itself in the mobile phone market, Sprint has signed an exclusive partnership with the NFL, developing a fantasy content service called NFL Mobile that sends text message updates to its subscribers and downloads highlights of the games in real-time. In doing so, Sprint is hoping to gain new subscribers who are looking for exclusive NFL fantasy content as well as benefit from the time users spend interacting with the Sprint network. For Sprint, fantasy is a seamless integration of its mobile phone services. The married male who is out to brunch with his family on Sunday morning and cannot follow the critical injury updates
on pregame television shows needs the technological ability to receive text messages on NFL news and set lineups from the phone. Sprint and other wireless service providers that have sponsored fantasy content are seeking to fill the on-demand information needs of the fantasy fan.

Sports properties, recognizing that fantasy fans are likely their most avid customers, are also capitalizing on fantasy, serving as fantasy contest and content providers as a strategy to engage fans with their brand. The National Basketball Association, for example, hosts fantasy leagues on its website for free and has also hired a fantasy expert, Rick Kamla, who writes articles and hosts fantasy television shows that are broadcast on the league’s network, NBATV, and as streaming videos on the website. As the industry has grown, sports leagues like the NBA are now handling fantasy in-house, an initiative that was not considered viable even a decade ago because of the lack of technology and ambiguity about the game’s relationship with gambling. Today, leagues can no longer afford to avoid fantasy sports.

While the involvement of mainstream institutions has helped popularize fantasy sports, the very companies that built the industry are increasingly under threat. Despite their innovations in communication and marketing, fantasy pioneers like Sports Buff, CDM Sports, and Head2Head are all finding themselves pressed for market share as the mainstream companies expend significant resources to grow their own fantasy businesses. It is quickly becoming an industry of the haves and the have-nots, and despite the enormous growth, there will inevitably be a number of losers, the majority of which will be smaller companies that have historically been the drivers of innovation.

The symbolic example of the industry’s power struggle is the legal battle between Major League Baseball and St. Louis-based CDM Sports. Understanding and anticipating the future
market potential of fantasy baseball, Major League Baseball Advanced Media, the division that manages the league’s digital media operation, bought the digital rights to baseball players from the Major League Baseball Players Union in 2005 for $50 million over 5 years, and it made the decision to limit the licenses sold in 2006 to 7, down from 19 the year before and more than 24 in 2004. As a result, MLBAM was charging about $2 million for a license to only large companies like ESPN and CBS, and refusing to grant a license to smaller ones like CDM. CBC Distribution and Marketing, the operator of the CDM Fantasy Sports website, refused to pay the fee and sued MLBAM, arguing that they had the right to use the statistics, a case on which the Fantasy Sports Trade Association also filed an amicus brief in support of CDM’s position. Ultimately, the case was settled in favor of CDM, a landmark win for the fantasy industry as it allowed smaller companies to coexist with the larger players for the foreseeable future. However, it was only the first battle in what appears to be a long war as MLB attempts to consolidate its fantasy efforts and derive maximum financial benefit from this burgeoning activity.

In addition to the licensing issues, there are questions about gambling that the industry, because of its increasing size and visibility, is now forced to confront. According to the law, fantasy sports are not games of chance; they are games of skill and therefore are not classified as gambling. However, the gambling line of fantasy sports often blurs, as there are some high stakes games like the WCOFF in which participants could win hundreds of thousands of dollars. In addition, many fantasy leagues also take informal bets among owners to award a monetary prize to the winner. While fantasy avoided inclusion in the recently passed Unlawful Internet Gambling Act, which makes playing poker online illegal for instance, the relationship between
fantasy play and gambling has not yet been resolved and it could be a particularly difficult one
given the increased mainstream involvement of not only sports leagues but also major media
companies and sponsors.\textsuperscript{74}

The current state of fantasy sports is marked by massive growth around the idea of
interacting with a highly engaged, valuable demographic, involvement of major mainstream
companies and the resulting transformation of an industry, and the potential legal consequences
that face the industry as it continues to expand. All this confirms that fantasy sports is now a
major and legitimate industry. The next two sections place this growth into perspective by
analyzing important shifts in popular culture and the sports industry and their respective
implications for fantasy sports.

**Popular Culture Trends**

Although the concept of fantasy sports had existed for several decades, it has only been
within the last decade that the game and industry has transformed into a mainstream
entertainment. During this transformation process, the fantasy sports industry has benefited from
a number of changes in popular culture that made the game more appealing to twenty-first
century audiences and institutions. Among the changes that have influenced the growth of
fantasy sports are media convergence, audience participation, and the proliferation of celebrity
content. Each of these popular cultural shifts and their impact on fantasy sports is discussed in
detail below.

*Media Convergence*
Over the last two decades, convergence has become the quintessential buzzword across the media industries. The possibility of consolidating all media into a single system serving all personal and professional needs both invigorated and unnerved media executives and technology buffs alike. While this prognostication has not materialized yet, it does not mean convergence is not here. Convergence is just occurring across multiple devices, rather than only one, and it’s impacting the ways that audiences, particularly fantasy players, are consuming media.

In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins confirms that what he calls the Black Box Fallacy, the idea that all media will converge into a single black box, is not taking form. Rather, he cites a Cheskin Research report describing a convergence situation that is different from a single device phenomenon. According to the report, “What we are now seeing is the hardware diverging while the content converges…Your needs and expectations are different whether you’re at home, work, school, commuting, the airport, etc., and these different devices are designed to suit your needs for accessing content depending on where you are—your situated context.” As a result, audiences now have the potential to interact with media in every environment in which they live through a variety of technological forms.

A 2007 example of the ways that convergence operates in today’s media environment is the iPhone. Combining the mobile phone with the media capabilities of the iPod and the Internet capacity of the computer, the iPhone is an all-in-one portable media device designed to downsize the number of gadgets a person may carry on a daily basis from two (cell phone and iPod—or other digital media player) to one. Early indications of demand for this device were overwhelmingly positive, with sales of an estimated 270,000 within the first 30 hours and an overall pace that would likely reach 1 million iPhones sold in the first quarter, a number that the
iPod took seven quarters to meet. While the number of iPhone users is only a snapshot of the American population, it does suggest that there is a growing interest among people in consolidating media into different devices. Moreover, at this stage of media convergence, iPhone users are not likely to eliminate their televisions or personal computers; the iPhone will complement and coexist with each.

The demand for multimedia devices like the iPhone is emblematic of the media multitasking behavior that defines 21st century audiences. This multitasking issue is particularly relevant with young people. For example, according to a Kaiser Foundation study, the average American between the ages of 8 and 18 is exposed to media 8 hours and 33 minutes per day, during which he or she multitasks using two or more media 26% of the time. In a media environment where audiences demand information and access whatever their location, institutions are responding not only with an increase in the amount of content offered but also developing the distribution channels that will reach audiences in their various “situated contexts”.

As a form of media content, fantasy sports lend themselves to the multimedia convergence that the industry is now experiencing. Fantasy owners are playing a time-sensitive game and need access to information and their teams at work, at home, and on their mobile. For example, satellite television packages, wireless laptops, and smart phones are typical communication tools that fantasy fans use to compete, and each device must deliver to the fantasy fan content such as scores, injury updates, email alerts, trade requests, waiver wire activity, and live feeds of the games themselves. In many ways, fantasy sports and the people that play them are the avatars for media convergence in the digital age.
Audience Participation

A critical change in popular culture is the increasing role audiences play in producing mainstream entertainment. In the past, audience interaction with television or radio programs was limited. A devoted fan of the *Guiding Light* in the 1960s might write letters to the show’s stars or try to appear in the studio audience, but the technology was not available for the fans to interact fully with the plots and the characters. Today, the Internet and mobile phone have not only enabled the media industry to offer new opportunities for audiences to participate but also allowed audiences themselves to generate their own content for public consumption. Audience participation in popular culture comes in several dominant forms – reality television, user-generated content, and gaming – all of which have impacted the popularity of fantasy sports.

The most illustrative example of audience participation in popular culture is reality television, which recasts the audience in ways that are similar to the owner, coach, and general manager roles of fantasy sports. In the first decade of the 21st century, reality shows have been attractive to television networks because of their relatively low production costs and ability to attract strong ratings in an era of fragmentation. By its very nature, the concept calls upon the participation of the general public not only to serve as the program’s talent but also in some cases as the director. For example, in *American Idol*, the most successful reality show during this period, fans themselves are the stars and the viewing public votes via phone or text message for their favorite entertainer, a celebrity-making process that bypasses the traditional entertainment filters of agents and producers and bestows the responsibility on the audience. Following a similar formula, other shows such as *Survivor, Big Brother, So You Think You Can*
Dance, Last Comic Standing, The Ultimate Fighter, Top Chef, Extreme Makeover, and The Real World have been also successful and sustainable television properties in the digital age because of their strategic use of audience involvement.

User-generated content – content that audiences produce and distribute via the Web – is another form of audience participation that has affected fantasy sports. Fantasy sports has benefited from the growth of user-generated content as it is a concept that appeals to active producers and consumers of entertainment content. Because of the proliferation of video and editing software and the corresponding decrease in price of these technologies, fans are creating their own entertainment content that an increasingly worldwide audience can access. YouTube, for instance, is dependent upon people’s willingness to make their own videos and post them on the web, as are other social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and Flickr, on which users build their own sites with photos, friends, blogs, and other interactive media. Moreover, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that there are around 12 million American adult bloggers who are read by an estimated 57 million American adults, and the audience for podcasts, downloadable radio-like shows on the Internet that have existed for only a few years, continues to grow from 7% of Internet users in February-April 2006 to 12% of Internet users in November 2006. This emerging and influential Internet culture is attracting large audiences and forcing traditional media to rethink current business models.

A final driver of audience participation is gaming. Given the increasing popularity of video games, it is not surprising that fantasy sports have grown so rapidly. The gaming industry, which comprises portable, console, and PC games, generated $13.5 billion in U.S. sales in 2006, compared with the $9.49 billion total domestic box office of the movie industry in the
same year, a difference that serves as a powerful example of the changes occurring in popular culture. Consoles like the Nintendo Wii, Sony Playstation 3, and Microsoft XBOX 360, while in competition with one another for market share, are advancing the gaming marketplace in ways that provide players more realism and interactivity in their game experience. In addition, there are several online gaming phenomena in which users create avatars and essentially compete and live in a virtual world. For example, World of Warcraft, a massive multiplayer online game, has about 2 million players in the U.S. and another three million in China, many of whom spend a few thousand hours per year refining their characters and lifestyle within the game. Videogame technology, both with consoles and on the Internet, is enabling entertainment experiences that allow audiences to suspend their disbelief and enter into a digital world where they become an active participant in the construction of their entertainment experience, an expectation that fantasy sports participation meets in a variety of ways.

While the trend of audience participation comes in many forms, the underlying theme remains the same. Audiences are increasingly becoming accustomed to interactive entertainment experiences that enable them to not only become the stars but also play a role in how the drama will unfold. It is a new popular culture model in which institutions first create the structures of the entertainment and then allow the audience to fill them in with their own content and decisions.

Fantasy sports combine many of the audience participation experiences that are now characteristic of popular culture. Fans reconfigure sporting events into their own reality show, during which they decide who their entertainers will be (the players on their team) and, in some cases, become the stars themselves, as expert fantasy players are often lauded for their expertise
and knowledge. They are creating their own content, re-appropriating the statistics of the real games and engaging in discussion and debate on message boards, blogs, and podcasts about their own fan-created sports experience. And they become avatars of owners, general managers, and coaches in their own virtual world, much like they would in any gaming format. With the level of participation in the sports experience that the concept enables, fantasy owners are redefining the stereotypical image of the couch potato sports fan into a media savvy and empowered sports decision maker.

Proliferation of Celebrity Content

As audiences themselves become more involved in the production of content, there has been a concurrent increase in the media’s and public’s interest in Hollywood celebrities. From mainstream television networks to Internet media, celebrity-oriented content is proliferating in unprecedented ways, and in the process, the relationship between the public and highly visible people is changing. This phenomenon is also occurring in the fantasy sports industry where fan expectations for information about sports stars continue to increase.

Celebrity content continues to be a principal driver of readers and viewers in the media industry. Facing a decline in readership, the Los Angeles Times, a long-time respected newspaper, made a decision in 2005 to emphasize celebrity news. The growth in circulation of newsweekly magazines has lagged, while US Weekly, In Touch, and People have driven magazine sales recently. Even NBC News and ABC News were engulfed in a bidding war for an interview with Paris Hilton about her many legal issues in 2007. In the digital age of instant gratification, mainstream media institutions increasingly find themselves distributing celebrity
content to remain viable. Moreover, there is a powerful online celebrity news culture that is emerging, as audiences are constantly in search of celebrity news updates throughout the day.

The explosion of celebrity content does not mean audiences are more star struck today than ever before. In fact, the opposite might be more accurate. The ways that celebrities are covered and discussed in the media suggest that celebrities are not worshiped in the ways they were in previous media generations. In addition to its timeliness in reporting celebrity news, online celebrity news outlet TMZ, which stands for the “Thirty Mile Zone” around Los Angeles and attracts 9 million consistent visitors, has also built its brand on the ways in which it covers celebrities. According to Janice Min, *US Weekly* editor-in-chief, “Five years ago there was so much reverence in the discussion. I’ve seen a shift in the tone. It’s now equal parts reverence and contempt, and TMZ has been able to capitalize on that contemptuous feeling. TMZ pokes fun at celebrity – sometimes gentle, sometimes quite harsh – and to millions of people, that’s more engaging than reading a canned interview.”

Another popular website, Perez Hilton, which has 2.6 million unique visitors from around the world each month, employs a similar celebrity-mocking strategy. These blogs and others reconfigure celebrity gossip into a comical entertainment that treats celebrities not as revered professionals but as often misguided, tragic characters who are the subjects of parodied entertainment.

In today’s culture, celebrities are not just professional performers but real people with dramatic storylines audiences can follow on a daily basis. The distribution channels now exist that enable a more detailed knowledge of a celebrity’s life, simultaneously increasing the popularity of celebrity news and breaking down the historical barriers between audiences and their stars. As entertainment content has proliferated, celebrities are still worshiped in traditional
ways, but they have also increasingly become commodities that audiences discuss, debate, and chide. As a result, audiences have simultaneously become more attracted to and critical of celebrities.

The proliferation of celebrity content has helped create the conditions for the growth of the fantasy sports industry. In a society that is seemingly obsessed with celebrity news and gossip, fantasy sports, with its athlete-centered concept, provides the sports fan with a similar celebrity experience. Fantasy sports websites, like celebrity gossip blogs, distribute information about the intricate details of an athlete’s practice or a trainer’s report to fans that are often interested in every nuance of the athlete’s life. The fantasy sports equivalent of Arizona Cardinals quarterback Matt Leinart going on a date with Paris Hilton to Los Angeles’s The Grove might be Matt Leinart not practicing Thursday and being questionable for the next weekend’s game against Oakland. Fans now demand in-depth information about their stars – whether it’s for idolization or objectification purposes – and are increasingly re-appropriating celebrity news for their own entertainment needs.

Media convergence, audience participation, and the proliferation of celebrity content are among the major trends affecting communication in popular culture. In the new communication world, media is converging, audiences are becoming more active, and celebrity news and gossip is becoming a dominant form of media content. Fantasy sports have been influenced by each of these cultural shifts in important ways. In the next section, the critical trends in the sports industry and their implications for fantasy sports are examined and analyzed.
Sports Industry Trends

The sports industry has experienced many changes over the last quarter century as it has grown into a multibillion-dollar business. Hyper-competition, the business of sports, and the demystification of the sports star are among the many changes that have resulted from this expansion, and in the context of these changes, fantasy sports has grown to become a powerful sector in the sports world. What these trends are and how they’ve impacted fantasy sports are discussed below.

Hyper-Competition

The contemporary sports marketplace is more competitive, fragmented, and globalized than in any other period in the industry’s history. Traditional sports properties like Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and the National Hockey League increasingly find themselves losing market share as newly emerging sports like lacrosse, soccer, NASCAR, paintball, and poker are building sustainable fan bases. Heretofore country-specific sports like cricket, soccer, and American football are expanding into foreign markets and reconfiguring the local fans’ sporting interests. Even high schools are becoming national attractions with sophisticated marketing and promotional operations.

Compounding this competitive situation is the host of other entertainment possibilities ranging from movie theaters, videogames, and theme parks to restaurants, DVDs, and iPods that are vying for an increasing share of the same market. In an entertainment marketplace that is over-saturated with choices, fans must make difficult decisions as to how they will spend their
time and money. As a result, sports and entertainment properties from all sectors find themselves in a battle with increasingly high stakes and guaranteed losers.⁹⁶

In such a crowded marketplace, sports properties are facing a number of challenges in attracting and engaging fans. Sports teams and stars are particularly challenging to sell, as the principal product – the performance of an athlete or team – is often more difficult for the sports decision maker to control than a product like bath soap. Moreover, complaints about the price of tickets, owners not caring about fans, behavior and salaries of the athletes, players leaving town, and the subpar experience at the venue are all issues sports managers are dealing with as the expectations of fans continue to increase. In response to these challenges, sports decision makers have been forced to develop strategies to engage fans in what has now become a 24/7/365 sports marketing universe.

An emerging solution has been fantasy sports. As a sports marketing and communication strategy, fantasy sports have gained acceptance because of the ways that they engage fans. Most fantasy fans are highly involved with the product, educated about all the players, often immune to off-the-field problems, and followers of the entire league, not just their own team, all of which are very desirable fan behaviors. As a result, sports properties and the media companies they sell their rights to are increasing fantasy participation among their fans because of the benefits of the highly engaged customers the game creates. While there is a counter position that fantasy fans abandon their hometown teams in ways that may decrease team loyalty,⁹⁷ leagues are willing to take the risk because of the interest of fantasy fans across the entire league all season long.⁹⁸ For a sports world searching for fans, fantasy sports has become a proven formula and is increasingly
being integrated into sports marketing programs at most levels of competition and in many sports.

The Business of Sports

As the cliché goes, sports aren’t just a game anymore. Multibillion dollar television contracts, multimillion dollar player salaries, global expansion, new media rights, and a host of other management innovations have transformed the sports world into a multibillion dollar worldwide industry. In the process, while there are some traditionalists who lament the degree to which sports have become commercialized, the business of sports has increasingly become a spectator attraction for many fans.

The media coverage of the business side of sports has been a driver of this trend. Mainstream newspapers like the New York Times, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and South Florida Sun-Sentinel have sports business reporters, as do the websites of CNN and CNBC. Television shows like ESPN’s Outside the Lines and radio programs like Bloomberg On the Ball deal frequently with sports business issues. There is even a dedicated trade publication called the Sports Business Journal as well as its sister online publication Sports Business Daily, which serve as the industry’s pulse. All these outlets address the economic, political, and civic implications of sports outside the field of play in ways that give fans access to the behind the scenes operations of sports properties.

Sports properties have also begun embracing the business side of sports as a way to attract fans in the offseason. Some leagues, for example, benefit from news based on the offseason player movement, which includes drafts, free agent signings, trades, and the inevitable
rumors accompanying these transactions. For the National Basketball Association, rumors about draft picks, trades, and free agent signings keep the league in the news during the summertime when Major League Baseball, NASCAR, and the PGA Tour are in the middle of their seasons. In fact, during one survey of the most popular blog topics on the Internet during the summer of 2007, the NBA Draft was the most popular, representing 56% of the blog postings, and the trade rumors of NBA star Kevin Garnett were the third most blogged topic, with 11% of the posting (the murder/suicide story of professional wrestler Chris Benoit was second with 13%). Both NBA topics outdrew Wimbledon, and discussion about Major League Baseball, which was in the middle of its season, did not even make the list. In this sense, the business of running franchises and building teams can often be as popular as the games themselves.

Because of the increased interest in the business of sports, the principal decision makers – commissioners, team presidents, owners, and general managers – are becoming stars themselves. For example, the bestselling book by Michael Lewis, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, chronicles Billy Beane’s, general manager of the Oakland Athletics, efforts and quantitative approach (inspired by statistics legend Bill James) to compete against large market clubs like the New York Yankees. The book offers a detailed introspection of what occurs in a general manager’s office and created a folk hero out of Beane, who became the icon for a new wave of business practices in professional sports. In today’s sports industry, sports executives are now being celebrated for their business acumen and strategic foresight, a phenomenon that gives sports properties, the media, and fans another personality and storyline with which to interact all year round.
The increasing attention around the business of sports has arguably occurred concurrently with the rise of fantasy sports. The examination of the behind the scenes operations of sports properties and the analysis of how the decisions are made, by whom, and under what rationale are attractive to some sports fans, and through fantasy sports, they have the opportunity to activate their sports business interests with their own teams. The trade rumors, draft picks, salary cap, and free agent signings that attract so much interest in the real sports world become personalized in fantasy, as the fans themselves engage in their own trade talk, for example. Moreover, fans often criticize the decisions of team presidents and general managers, saying they should have signed this player or traded that one. With fantasy, fans can make similar decisions in ways that influence their own sports fan experience without having to accept any mistakes in judgment that may occur among those in power. For fans that are interested in these types of sports business issues, fantasy has become the ultimate simulation.

The Demystification of the Sports Star

An unwelcome byproduct of the sports industry’s supersonic growth is the distance that has been created between the athletes and the fans. Ironically, this phenomenon is occurring when audience interest in celebrities across all sectors is arguably greater now than ever before. Stories of the accessibility of athletes in the pre-television days are not only nostalgic of a less industrialized time in sports history but also representative of the influence that agents, sponsors, media rights, and the multimillion-dollar salaries have on the athlete-fan relationship. The days when athletes took the trains to the ballpark and interacted with fans at pubs after the games are
Today, athlete sightings and conversations have become so rare that sports teams have designated specific times for autographs and meet-and-greets with fans.\textsuperscript{106}

In addition to the increasing inaccessibility of athletes, the behavior and actions of a small number of athletes have helped sully the image of professional sports. Stories of performance-enhancing drugs, domestic violence, guns, and prison sentences are more frequently appearing in the press. The Cincinnati Bengals franchise, for example, saw eight of its players arrested in a one-year span from 2005-2006.\textsuperscript{107} In addition, superstar athletes like Kobe Bryant, Lance Armstrong, Barry Bonds, and Michael Vick have been subjects of criminal allegations since 2000.\textsuperscript{108}

Not only do the criminal behaviors of athletes cause problems with fan perceptions, but the access that new technologies provide to athlete lives is also demystifying the sports star. The fact that Alex Rodriguez is captured on a cell phone camera entering a hotel room with a woman who is not his wife or that Anna Kournikova is followed by the paparazzi as if she were Lindsay Lohan are powerful indications that the public and private lives of athletes are on display,\textsuperscript{109} stimulating a form of voyeurism that is now digitized and instantly placed into global circulation for consumers. For a sports star in the digital age, a mistake in judgment can turn quickly into a crisis, and as a result, the public often sees a side of the sports star that historically either did not exist or was simply not covered.

Even if the sports star is well behaved and has a favorable public image, the business of sports, which has the aforementioned positive fan qualities, also works against athlete-fan connections. Since free agency began in 1976,\textsuperscript{110} athletes have exercised the right to test their market value and sign with teams other than the ones that drafted them. The advantage of free
agency is that athletes, as employees, have the flexibility to receive a relatively fair market value that is commensurate with their talent and services. The disadvantage is that athletes rarely stay with the same team their whole careers. As a result, free agency has made it more difficult for fans to become attached to the athlete in ways that they may have in the past with mostly one-team stars like Babe Ruth or Red Grange. In the process, some athletes, who sign with another team via free agency, are seen as disloyal and greedy people who care little about the average ticket-buying, jersey-wearing fan.

Athletes have never been model citizens. Babe Ruth was among the most embarrassing sports star of all time, with his notorious womanizing, eating, and drinking habits shielded from the general public by the journalists who covered him. In today’s high velocity communication world, it is hard to believe that the Babe would be deified in the ways that he was eighty years ago. The current sports star is now playing in a media universe where an increase in reported behavioral problems, the proliferation of new media technologies, and frequent player turnover are affecting the image of the sports star.

In a climate of negativity surrounding the professional athlete, fantasy sports help redefine the relationship between the fan and the sports star. The concept enables fantasy sports fans to overlook possible behavioral and image problems of the players and focus on the performances and the statistics on the field. In his book Fantasyland, author Sam Walker notes, “While I was consumed by steroids and ballpark financing, whatever punch they were drinking had intoxicated them to the point where they could dismiss, if not fully ignore, the game’s systemic problems. While I’d forgotten what it was like to watch a ballgame when you have an emotional investment in the outcome, these people had an emotional investment in the outcome.
As Walker suggests, fantasy sports encourage fans to view the athlete from a perspective that focuses on statistical production, and not necessarily off-the-field or personality issues. It is a timely activity given the current state of the sports star and the fan’s potential desires to reestablish a meaningful connection with professional athletes.

Hyper-competition, the business of sports, and the demystification of the sports star have all conspired to influence the popularity of fantasy sports. Because of these sports industry trends, institutions are beginning to embrace fantasy in response to their own marketplace challenges, and fans are increasingly playing fantasy to make their sports fan experience more interactive. In this section and the ones preceding, the background and significance of fantasy sports the game and the industry were discussed in order to add perspective to the magnitude of the fantasy sports phenomenon. In the final section, the remainder of the dissertation is overviewed.

**Dissertation Overview**

The dissertation is organized into four chapters. Chapter two examines the history of the fantasy sports industry and the ways the game has evolved from an amateur hobby to a billion dollar business. First, the chapter focuses on the critical historical precursors to fantasy sports to demonstrate the influences of other sports-related activities on the fantasy game. Second, the chapter discusses the beginnings of the first two fantasy sports leagues – fantasy football and fantasy baseball – and the ways these leagues set the foundation for the future growth of the
Finally, the chapter addresses the popularization of the concept and the various ways the industry has grown into what it is today.

In chapter three, the focus is on analyzing the fantasy sports fan culture and why fans play the game. Because this dissertation is a study of how the fantasy sports industry interacts with fantasy fan culture, it is critical to address the distinct characteristics of fantasy fans to give context to the analysis of industry strategies and tactics. While there has been research on fantasy sports fan behavior, there is relatively little analysis on why the fantasy fan is engaged to the level that he or she is. To execute this analysis, this chapter discusses whom the fantasy sports fan is, examining secondary quantitative data that offers a snapshot of the typical fantasy fan. After grounding the analysis with a discussion of the current research on fantasy fans, the chapter examines the persuasiveness of the fantasy concept itself and the communication experiences that surround the game. It is shown that fantasy fan engagement is caused not only by the game’s design but also the communication experiences that accompany it.

After analyzing the audience in chapter three, chapter four addresses the ways that the fantasy sports industry communicates and interacts with fantasy sports fan culture. The chapter defines briefly the fantasy sports industry, offering a perspective on the products and services it provides and the players that comprise it. Then, utilizing ethnographic research of a number of fantasy sports companies, six case studies are analyzed to show the various ways fantasy institutions are interacting with fantasy fan culture. Finally, the chapter concludes with a synthesis and analysis of the strategies and tactics that fantasy institutions implement to communicate with the fantasy fan culture. In the end, the chapter demonstrates the ways that fantasy companies communicate effectively with fans by serving as fan culture facilitators.
Chapter five concludes the dissertation. In this chapter, the implications of the critical findings from this dissertation are summarized. Then, possible directions for future research are explored. Finally, the future challenges facing the fantasy sports industry are examined.
Chapter Two

The History of Fantasy Sports

In 1985, Dan Grogan and his brother, Kelly, were invited to participate in a fantasy football league, a game they had heard about but never played. Upon entering the league, the brothers were aware that their fellow owners were an experienced group of fantasy football players, but they felt confident that they would be competitive if they looked at the Street and Smith’s annual preseason football guide and pooled their collective knowledge about the NFL. For a couple of fantasy rookies, this was dangerous thinking.

In the middle rounds of the draft, the Grogans were looking to select a wide receiver and saw Seattle Seahawk Paul Johns’s name still on the board. They were quietly excited that a player of his caliber was available that late in the draft and tried not to mention Johns’s name to preserve what they perceived to be a fantasy football coup. When their pick was up and Johns had not yet been chosen, the Grogan brothers selected him, thinking they just got the steal of the draft.

The reaction of the owners was laughter, not because of their embarrassment about missing on Johns but because of the brothers’ uninformed choice. It turned out that the Grogans drafted someone who was not playing in the NFL that year. Johns had sustained a neck injury the previous year and had played his last game in the NFL, the Grogans were told, an unfortunate fact that not only wasted one of their roster spots but also was a blow to their general managing confidence.¹

The two left that evening resolved never to let a draft snafu like that happen again. As Dan Grogan recalls, “When we finished the draft that night, we said let’s get ready for next year
tonight. Let’s just start tracking this season as best we can so that when next year rolls around we’ll be up on everything.” They began gathering information relevant to fantasy football, and at first intended it for their own use in their fantasy league. “But along the way,” Grogan says, “somebody had found out about this somehow in conversation and right before the draft coming up the next year called me up and said, ‘Gee, I’ll buy that from you because I don’t have anything.’ And that’s what sort of set off the light bulb that, hey, maybe there’s a couple other people out there that want to buy this.”

The Grogans launched the first issue of their fantasy football magazine for the 1986-87 season. Initially, they made personal calls to newsstands to distribute the publication until a publisher in Northbrook, Illinois picked up a copy of their magazine at the Chicago-Main Newsstand in Evanston, Illinois and decided to publish the magazine on a larger scale. After connecting with the organization, Grogan says, “We went from a couple thousand magazines to about 75,000.” Much to the surprise of the Grogans, there appeared to be a market for a magazine format that included complete rosters, fantasy statistics, predictions, drafting strategies, and playing advice, all intended to help readers compete in their own fantasy leagues.

The Grogan’s experience is a snapshot of the transformation of fantasy sports from an amateur hobby to a billion dollar industry. The Grogans first identified a need that they had in their own fantasy sports experience and developed a product to meet it. In the process, because of the emerging interest in fantasy sports and the obsessive demands of fantasy fans for the most sophisticated information, the magazine proved to be useful to thousands of fantasy owners looking for an edge to beat their friends. As the first magazine of its kind, it invented a subsector of the fantasy sports industry, which now includes at least 30 other fantasy magazines, and as a
continuation of the mainstreaming trend of fantasy fan culture, is now published by one of the largest sports publishers in the country, Athlon Sports.\textsuperscript{4}

This chapter explores the history of the fantasy sports phenomenon. The chapter is divided into three sections of fantasy sports history. In the first section, the formation of fantasy sports is examined, with a discussion of the three important historical precedents that influenced the invention of the first fantasy leagues—box scores, trading cards, and sports gambling. In the next section, the invention of the first fantasy football and baseball leagues is discussed. Finally, the last section focuses on the ways that fantasy sports popularized in the marketplace.

\textbf{The Formation of Fantasy Sports}

There are three important historical developments that led to the invention and popularization of fantasy sports—box scores, trading cards, and sports gambling. In this section, I examine these historical developments in detail and demonstrate the ways that they influenced the evolution of fantasy sports to the present day.

\textit{The Box Score}

Henry Chadwick is credited with being the “father of baseball,” but he might also be considered the “father of fantasy.” Born in England in 1824, Chadwick grew up playing runners, an ancestor of baseball, and watching cricket. As a teenager, he moved to Brooklyn with his parents and, as many kids did in that era, began playing baseball, although initially he was not a fan of the sport. In his thirties, after watching what he perceived to be a quality game between two New York ball clubs, legend has it that he had an epiphany about the sport and chose to
devote the rest of his career to refining the rules and promoting the growth of the game. He became a student of baseball, published instructional manuals about the sport, helped make decisions as to the rules, wrote journalistic accounts of games, and defended the sport from gambling charges.\(^5\)

While Chadwick made many important contributions to baseball, in the context of fantasy, his most influential work was as a statistician. Although box scores had existed before,\(^6\) Chadwick reconfigured the cricket scorecard based on his knowledge of cricket in England, into what is now known as the modern baseball box score by the early 1860s.\(^7\) The earliest Chadwick box score, with a grid-like format that resembles today’s, displayed batting, fielding, and “how put out” figures for each player as well as “runs made each inning” for both teams. Interestingly, pitchers threw under handed at the time and pitching itself was seen as only an enabler for the game to be played, thus the pitching component in early box scores was largely nonexistent.\(^8\) Even in its earliest format, the box score was a portrayal of the trends and styles of play in baseball and served a critical organizational function in Chadwick’s goals for growing the sport.

The most instrumental contribution of the box score, not just for fantasy but baseball in general, was that it led to the computation of baseball statistics. It was Chadwick’s mission to make baseball more scientific and elevate it from a boy’s game played on the sandlot to an adult’s sport that required physical and intellectual ability, and he saw the quantification and presentation of individual games of baseball through statistics as a way to accomplish his objective and legitimize the sport. With the numbers that the box scores accumulated, Chadwick was able develop new statistics like hits per game and total bases per game and inspire his contemporaries to develop statistics like batting average and earned run average,\(^9\) both of which
are still among the most widely known baseball player measurements today. Moreover, Chadwick promoted the philosophy that player values could only be determined through statistical analysis. He wrote, “Many a dashing general player, who carries off a great deal of éclat in prominent matches, has all ‘the gilt taken off the gingerbread,’ as the saying is, by these matter-of-fact figures. And we are frequently surprised to find that the modest but efficient worker, who has played earnestly and steadily throughout the season, apparently unnoticed, has come in, at the close of the race, the real victor.”

Introducing a statistical element not only redefined how player values were determined but also created data about individual athletes that fans could intellectualize, interpret, debate, and ultimately apply to fantasy games.

The box score began appearing in a variety of forms in newspapers across the country, and over time the content and organization evolved to reflect new styles of baseball. For example, changes in how baseball was played, such as the shift in team strategy to using more than one pitcher in a single game, influenced the box scores. Descriptions of the games also became more detailed and presented the fan with a perspective on the game that could complement the written story.

While the earliest box scores only listed players outs and runs, by the first few decades of the 1900s, the standard became a five column listing of two offensive stats (hits and at-bats) and three defensive stats (errors, assists, and putouts), accompanied by a paragraph at the end of the box score that showed figures like steals and a few pitching statistics. Then, circa 1958, the Associated Press, in an effort to cut newspaper publishing costs, reduced the box score to four columns – at-bats, hits, runs, and runs batted-in – a format that lasted for several decades. It was also in 1958 that the pitching statistics of innings pitched, hits runs, earned runs, walks, and
strikeouts became the standard performance markers for pitchers.\textsuperscript{12} For baseball fans all over the country, the box score had become a way to relive game action through a statistical representation or to interact with the game in the morning without having to watch it the previous evening.

In addition to the daily box scores, newspapers commonly published every Sunday detailed box scores of the season’s accumulated numbers. For the fans who wanted to catch up during the week and, of course, the fantasy owners who were trying to score their leagues and spot player trends, the Sunday stat sheet became the very reason they would buy the newspaper in the first place. For example, the \textit{USA Today}, in 1982, started publishing a pages-long section in its Sunday paper that listed all of the statistics for the week, of which \textit{USA Today} sports editor Henry Freeman said, “It’s an immediate hook to get people into the paper. It is to the paper what the sun is to Miami.”\textsuperscript{13} For the emerging class of fantasy baseball players and other number-hungry fans, this was a critical innovation for the development of the game.

It is difficult to discuss the box score without mentioning the work of Bill James, who, next to Chadwick, is probably the most influential writer and statistician in baseball history. Born in Kansas, James was a baseball fan who approached box scores in ways that were unprecedented in the past. In 1977, he began publishing the \textit{Baseball Abstract}, which included a host of numerous statistical innovations like runs created, range factor, and defensive efficiency record that redefined the ways that fans and even managers approached the game. James’s work, which was called sabermetrics, was ultimately discovered by Daniel Okrent, a journalist who later invented fantasy baseball. As a statistics hound himself, Okrent was fascinated by James’s breakthroughs and fought for an article he was writing on him to be published in \textit{Sports}
Illustrated. Once the article was published in 1981, it helped the sales of James’s annual *Baseball Abstract* to increase exponentially and created many followers throughout the country.¹⁴

In his early years, James did all of his statistical analysis by tracking the box scores himself, a method that often lead to inaccurate statistics that his critics cited. In order to improve the accuracy of his statistics, he asked the Elias Sports Bureau, headed by Seymour Siwoff and at the time the official statistics bureau of the National League, for their numbers as well as play-by-play information that he needed for more advanced statistical work. Elias ultimately declined, James was furious, and a feud between the two ensued, of which there’s evidence in the form of harsh words from James in the 1984 edition of the *Baseball Abstract*. Also in response to Elias, James developed what was called Project Scoresheet, where he enlisted volunteers all across the United States to track every play on scorecards James had created. The project was met with enormous enthusiasm and continued until a company was formed that developed more sophisticated and detailed statistics, of which James was asked to join and became a 5 percent partner.¹⁵

The name of the company was STATS Inc., an acronym for Sports Team Analysis and Tracking System Incorporated, which became another critical player in the development of the box score. Although the company was founded in 1980, it wasn’t until the late 1980s that it started to build out its statistics operation. Previously it was a hardware and software business that sold its statistics-generating products to individual teams. Then, in the late 1980s, the company began converting itself into a data service that produced statistics that could be packaged and sold to not only teams but also the media and fans.¹⁶ This was a critical decision
in the development of fantasy sports, as it made statistics available via the Internet that media companies could use to build and manage fantasy games and that fans could receive access to for a small fee.

The *USA Today* and STATS Inc. ultimately joined forces in 1990 to create the most detailed box score in history.\(^\text{17}\) The batter statistics were increased from four columns to eight, and statistics like batting average would be updated every day, without fans having to wait for the Sunday paper to receive that information. Also, other types of statistics were added to box scores to cater to the fantasy players as well as sabermetricians. For example, pitcher performance was quantified with statistics such as pitches thrown, groundballs and flyballs hit against, and saves blown. The mission of STATS Inc. and *USA Today* was to satisfy the demand of fans for more statistics, and in many ways, they demonstrated that seemingly anything in baseball could be quantified and of use to fans.

Seemingly simultaneously with the growth of fantasy sports, substantial changes to the box score have occurred in the digital age. STATS Inc. again was at the forefront of this technological change, and in the process, began expanding its client base to Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association. As early as 1994, it began exploring and implementing ways to provide real-time statistical updates to its users. The company signed a partnership with Motorola to distribute real-time statistics of NBA games to Motorola pagers through a service called SportsTrax. The NBA filed a lawsuit against STATS Inc., but STATS won the legal battle, allowing the company to expand its box score and statistic services on the Internet.\(^\text{18}\)
The statistical measurements and game information databases continue to multiply in the Internet-enabled environment, as more sports and statistics are being reconfigured and included into the box score format. For example, the experience of reading a box score is changing with the innovation of the GameTrak system, a real-time box score that is monitored and updated simultaneously with the sporting event. In this form, the box score becomes a live spectator sports event itself that can be combined with watching the event on television or listening to it on the radio. Watching a box score update in real-time on a computer screen or mobile phone is now a legitimate sporting entertainment, as fantasy players, with their need for constant updates, have become a primary market for these new statistics-reporting technologies.

Today, with the proliferation of the Internet and mobile phone content, box scores in newspapers have been condensed to save editorial space and cut costs. Most fans now access more detailed box scores on the Internet sometimes before the morning paper even arrives, making the traditional newspaper box score nearly obsolete. However, without the newspaper box score that Henry Chadwick invented in the 1860s, fantasy sports as a concept may not have evolved in the way that it has. Box scores quantify sporting events, creating the raw data that can be turned into the statistics on which fantasy sports are based. Of similar importance is the trading card, which helped to personalize and humanize the statistics that were compiled from the box score.

The Trading Card

Trading cards promoted hero worship of athletes and were an early indication that fans sought a closer relationship with their favorite sports idols. They were often most popular
among young people, some of whom would memorize the first and last names of every player in a card set and recite the statistics on the back. The cards were collected, traded, and sold, and in some cases, used to play a game that involved flipping the cards to win another’s, similar in concept to marbles. For many young sports fans, the trading card was not only an entryway into the sports world but also encouraged them to watch and follow the sport.

The earliest trading cards, called cabinet cards or “carte de visite,” were developed in the era of the Civil War. These cards were photographs of professional or amateur baseball players and teams that were mounted on cardboard and often used as decorations in homes. Unlike the later baseball cards that were meant to be collected, traded, and sold, cabinet cards served merely as keepsakes.

After the end of the Civil War, Peck and Snyder, a sporting goods company, first adopted the trading card for advertising. Also known as “trade cards,” these cards were used as advertisements for businesses, similar to a flyer that would be handed out to passersby on a street. The front and back of the cards were usually unrelated; the cards showcased a picture of a baseball team such as the 1868 Brooklyn Atlantics or 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings on the front and had the advertisement for a business on the back. In addition to baseball photos, the trade cards also included images of politicians, animals, and entertainers. Collecting trade cards became a popular activity and was ranked as a favorite hobby among Americans by 1880.

Despite Peck and Snyder’s trade card innovation, it wasn’t until the 1880s that companies began mass-producing baseball cards. In the highly competitive tobacco industry, several tobacco companies began inserting cards into their cigarette packages. The cards served as not only an incentive-based sales tool for buying a pack of cigarettes but also to stiffen the package
to keep it from collapsing. The first tobacco company to use baseball cards was Allen & Ginter in 1886. Of the 50 cards in the set, 10 of them were of baseball players, seven were wrestlers, and ten were pugilists. After Allen & Ginter developed this set, other companies such as Mayo Cut Plug Tobacco and Old Judge emulated the strategy in order to differentiate themselves from the competition.

When the American Tobacco Company, a conglomeration of many of the major tobacco companies, was founded in the 1890s, the production of baseball cards halted because there was no longer any competition. By the early 1900s, however, the Federal government forced this tobacco monopoly to disband, causing the independent tobacco companies to once again produce trading cards in order to stand out from their competition. In this era, which has been termed the “golden age,” candy companies such as Standard Caramel Company, Philadelphia Caramels, C.A. Briggs Company, Mello Mints, and Williams Caramel Company, in addition to tobacco companies, began manufacturing some of the highest quality and most expensive baseball cards in history. For example, the Honus Wagner card, which now commands hundreds of thousands of dollars in value because of its rarity and quality, was a product of this era. This golden period of baseball cards lasted until the beginning of World War I when tobacco companies stopped making cards and the country was in a wartime economy.

Baseball card production was inconsistent between World War I and the end of World War II. Because tobacco stopped producing trading cards, which were consumed heavily by the youth market, gum companies such as DeLong, Goudy, National Chicle, Gum Inc., and Leaf dominated the baseball card market. In this era, the baseball cards usually had tips about how to play the game on the back, as the card served as a de facto coach for many young boys learning
It was also the case that because youths were the primary market for the cards, the companies would often try to exploit their young customers. For example, Goudy gum company once advertised a 240 card set, but they really only produced 239 cards, convincing their young buyers to keep buying bubble gum until they completed their set, which by design never happened.

In 1948, the modern trading card industry began, with Bowman Gum introducing its inaugural baseball card set, which unlike Goudy’s was one hundred percent complete. Four years later, Topps Chewing Gum Company released its own set, which contained a Mickey Mantle card that was the most valuable card since the end of World War II. Topps then bought Bowman in 1956 and had a virtual monopoly over the trading card market until 1981, when the Federal government mandated that other companies enter the market to produce only cards, not gum. Over time, Topps expanded the trading card industry to include football, basketball, and hockey cards, but baseball cards were by far the most popular and influential in sports history.

The significance of the trading card to the history of fantasy sports is that trading cards promoted the sports star culture and the corresponding hero worship. Since television access to the players was nonexistent until the late 1940s and 1950s and the chances of running into a player on the street were remote, the trading card was the first medium through which fans could see and interact with their favorite players. They might listen to them on the radio, but the baseball card brought them to life. And the youth market responded by buying and trading thousands of cards.

The trading card also deemphasized the team and placed a premium on individual athletes. While there were team cards, the most important baseball cards were always of the
individual. The star culture had certainly developed in previous generations of sport with Babe Ruth, Red Grange, and Mildred Babe Didrikson Zaharias primary star draws. However, trading cards multiplied the number of sports stars and developed a new channel for avid fans to learn about them.

By providing statistical information on the back, the trading card reinforced the impact of the box score as well. It wasn’t until Bowman Gum introduced its set in 1948 that statistics were included on the back of the cards, and once Topps entered the market, the use of player stats and vital information became the norm for all baseball cards. As Sy Berger, an iconic Topps baseball card designer, recognized, “The kids are in love with statistics. So of course we have to give them what they want.” Collecting trading cards became a spectator sports activity, with the athletes at the center of hero worship and the memorization of players and statistics a competition among kids themselves.

Not surprisingly, trading cards have declined concurrently with the rise in fantasy sports. Prior to the Internet boom and fantasy sports explosion, the trading card industry experienced record revenues of $1.1 billion in 1991, which decreased to $300 million in 2006. Although it may be difficult to prove a direct correlation between baseball card collectors and fantasy sports players, the characteristics of each activity suggest that the rise in one significantly impacted the decline of the other. Where baseball cards encouraged hero worship and the knowledge of nearly every player in every set, so too does fantasy sports as the emphasis is on the individual performance of athletes whom the casual fan may not even know or recognize. While trading cards were collected and traded to make either a financial profit or win pride among friends, fantasy sports fans place bets on who will win fantasy leagues and can receive a financial prize
and peer respect for their participation. And finally, card collectors may have memorized the statistics on the cards, but fantasy sports players not only memorize statistics but also manipulate and reconfigure them to play their own game that is based on gambling—a critical link to fantasy sports.

*Sports Gambling*

While gambling originated in America in state lotteries as early as the eighteenth century,\(^36\) it was not until the emergence of horse racing after the Civil War that betting on sports became a popular practice. Horse racing, initially an upper class pastime of the elite Virginia landowners, became a spectator attraction among all social classes in the second half of the nineteenth century. Tracks such as Saratoga Springs in New York and Churchill Downs in Kentucky were built to accommodate the growing interest, and the number of tracks grew to more than 300 by the 1920s. The sport of horse racing grew rapidly in popularity in the first few decades of the twentieth century because it not only offered beautiful and athletic thoroughbreds but also the chance to make money.\(^37\)

In this era, fans had to travel to the track if they wanted to see the race and make a bet. However, admission costs and transportation fees often were too expensive for lower economic class citizens. To accommodate the demand for horse racing among these groups, “poolrooms,” later called horse parlors or wire rooms, emerged all over the country’s major cities. These were behind-the-scenes operations often in basements or backrooms that provided bettors a place to wager without having to travel to the actual race. In New York City alone, there were approximately two thousand poolrooms in operation during the twentieth century.\(^38\)
The early poolroom operations were enabled by the telegraph, through which racing results from the track were sent to poolroom clerks and then translated for the spectators awaiting results. The innovation and adoption of the telegraph and later the telephone fundamentally changed the practice of horse betting by providing “wire services,” which often included a live call of the races by an announcer, to off-track sites and bookies.\textsuperscript{39} Horse racing fans could now place wagers on almost any race anywhere in the country from a location nowhere near a track. Betting in these rooms became a spectator experience itself and often provided more entertainment than attending the track.\textsuperscript{40} Before television and even radio, poolrooms were among the first sports media fan experiences, serving as the precursor to group viewings of televised sports and the online sports chat room.

While most sports gambling in the earliest years consisted of horse racing, wire services helped expand the betting opportunities to sports other than horse racing such as baseball, boxing, and football. However, a turning point in sports betting was the introduction of the point spread in the 1930s, which created more efficient and profitable bookmaking. Although there is some controversy over who invented the concept,\textsuperscript{41} the point spread was developed to regulate the amount of money bookies could lose. Under the previous system, bettors could place a wager on an uneven matchup such as the Harlem Globetrotters and the Washington Generals, a team the Globetrotters trounced routinely, and win large amounts of money from their bookie. These kinds of matchups made bookies very reluctant to offer the games to their customers, and they would often lose business because of it. What the point spread did was to regulate the amount a bettor could reasonably win by forcing even a heavy favorite to win by a certain amount of points. The point spread set the precedent for fantasy sports, as its eventual public
presence in newspapers made football betting practices transparent, helping legitimize
gambling-based activities as acceptable entertainment experiences.

Oddsmakers popularized the point spread by using the wire services of the telegraph and
telephone. For example, the earliest pioneer of the point spread was a Minneapolis-based
company, Athletic Publications Inc., which distributed virtually all of the point spreads from the
1930s to the 1960s. The company also published “The Green Sheet,” a point spread newsletter,
and it operated until 1961 when the Federal Interstate Wire Act was passed, a law restricting the
discussion of interstate gambling on the telephone.\textsuperscript{42} The Wire Act sought to curb gambling by
attacking the very technologies people used to make and place bets and virtually shut down all
gambling businesses that were heretofore telephone or telegraph-based.

The introduction of television signaled another critical growth period in sports betting.
Television created many new distribution opportunities for sports leagues and teams as networks
sought programming for the new medium.\textsuperscript{43} The operating costs of shooting sporting events
were often low, and networks could command high advertising fees because sports generally
attracted large audiences compared with other programming options. Coupled with the point-
spread innovation, the expansion of the sports industry on television not only allowed the sports
fan to see an increasing number of events in their homes but also expanded the number of events
on which to bet. If a meaningless Tuesday afternoon baseball game was on television, spectators
could now contact a neighborhood bookie, place a bet, and seemingly make the race for last
place between the Brewers and Cubs more interesting.

The increasing number of sporting events on television further industrialized gambling,
and Las Vegas, Nevada began to capitalize on these new opportunities in sports betting as early
as 1974. Although gambling had been legal in Nevada since 1931, casinos were often reluctant to offer sports betting to its patrons because a ten percent federal tax on sports gambling made the profit margin basically non-existent. When the federal government reduced its tax in 1974, the Las Vegas casinos began offering sports betting in all-inclusive sports media centers called sports books. The industry standard was the Stardust sports book, which was a 300-person room with six television sets built by Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal in 1976. Although they were legal, the sports books essentially became an updated and luxurified version of the poolrooms with media-multitasking gamblers watching multiple games and making multiple bets. Sports books became a popular strategy for casinos to create a competitive advantage by encouraging their patrons to stay longer and not wander to other casinos, and as a result, they emerged all over Las Vegas as legalized sports betting continuing to proliferate.

Sports betting also changed when computers were introduced. The avatar was Las Vegas Sports Consultants, Inc., founded by Michael Roxborough, which further industrialized Nevada gaming in the early 1980s by using new technology to compile and distribute sports gambling information across the country. Computer technology enabled Roxborough to organize all the relevant sports information into one database for easy distribution to bookies and bettors. The computer organization of sports betting also created a larger betting rotation. In the past, lines on college football only existed for about 15 to 20 games, and sports bookies and bettors often kept track of scores and statistics on paper. The computer cataloguing service expanded the number of games offered to bettors simply because it could track and handle the large amounts of game information, and made sports betting more convenient and more widely practiced across a number of channels of communication.
The influence of the computer in Roxborough’s operation signaled the eventual emergence of gambling on the Internet. Previously in gambling history, if spectators wanted to place a bet, they had to travel to the legal on-site sports betting establishment or illegally contact a bookie. The adoption of the Internet in the 1990s created another possibility for sports gambling. Bettors could wager on sports from anywhere in the world, and although the Wire Act of 1961 prohibited telephone wagers, it did not apply to Internet gambling.47 Compounding the regulatory problem was that many of the gambling sites existed outside U.S. jurisdiction. As gambling expert Stephen Nover observed, “Politicians think Vegas is the sports betting capital of the world. It’s not. It’s Costa Rica, where most of the offshore book are.”48 Fueled largely by the offshore gaming businesses, gambling on the Internet grew to become a $100-$250 billion per year business by 2004.49 From poker to craps and the NFL and NASCAR, fans could make bets, using their credit card, from their very own home or on any wireless Internet device, a personalized and customized gambling experience that was unprecedented in sports history.

The expansion of gambling on the Internet eliminated the traditional filters of bookies or sports books. Replacing these mediators were third-party Websites that served as the purveyors of sports gambling, through which people, no matter where they were, could make bets with a credit card on seemingly any sporting event in the world. In addition, the introduction of the Internet created even more opportunities for gambling and turned the spectator sports experience into a more interactive one. Betting on which team wins the coin toss in a college football game or how long a baseball game will take to play became possible because of this new digital world of sports gambling. It also enabled the development and distribution of fantasy sports games that
were much easier for fans to play, a contribution that is critical to the expansion of the fantasy sports industry.

The enormous expansion of gambling on the Internet was ultimately halted in 2006 when the United States Congress passed the Unlawful Internet Gambling Act. The legislation prohibited credit card companies from processing payments from any Internet gambling website, including those offshore, effectively cutting off the money source for millions of gamblers across the United States. Fortunately for the fantasy sports industry, fantasy sports were not included in the legislation that banned Americans from playing such games of chance as poker and blackjack or making bets through an Internet sports book. It was contended that fantasy sports were games of skill, not games of chance, and therefore were exempt from the new law. In the end, fantasy sports has been able to enjoy the best of both worlds – the benefits that the Internet had given other forms of betting while also remaining a legal activity.⁵⁰

The history of sports gambling in America is marked by two central themes. First, throughout its history, gambling has experienced substantial growth because of technological change. While an attraction to chance and uncertainty is human nature, each new technology that has been introduced in the marketplace has simultaneously expanded the sports betting opportunities and popularized the activity even more. In the earliest years, without the telegraph, sports betting fans had to go to the track to make the bet. The telegraph and telephone then enabled sports fans to make bets without attending an event. Television impacted the media landscape by creating exposure for more games, which ultimately led to more betting and the rise of the independent bookmaker. And most recently, while computers helped organize and disseminate sports information, the Internet and cell phones enabled fans to make wagers without
a bookie, on virtually any sporting event, at anytime, and from anywhere. While it is now illegal to gamble on the Internet, playing fantasy sports is not, and as a result, the fantasy sports industry still benefits from the factors of access, customization, options, and mobility that helped the online gambling industry grow in the past.

A corresponding theme in gambling history is the increased acceptance of the activity in American culture. Some form of gambling is not only legal in almost all states but is sometimes encouraged by corporate America, with March Madness pools and Super Bowl wagers as obvious examples. It has also become a major form of entertainment as evidenced by the popularity of televised poker. Moreover, lotteries are legal in most states, and 40 states allow casino gambling. Despite its historically deviant associations and the recent legislation, gambling has become a legitimate form of entertainment and business in American culture and stands to continue to affect the ways that people learn and work.

Fantasy sports are a principal benefactor of these two themes. The combination of new technologies and increased acceptance of gambling in society helped set the precedent for the invention and ultimate popularization of fantasy sports. Without new technologies and a tacit approval of gambling, fantasy sports would not have evolved into the phenomenon that it is today.

While the first fantasy sport was not invented until 1962 and the industry itself had not grown substantially until four decades later, there was strong fan interest in statistics, athletes, and betting that fantasy sports operationalized for many of its participants. Without the box score, trading cards, and sports gambling, it is likely that fantasy sports would not have evolved
into the phenomenon that it is today. Although the founders of fantasy may not have been thinking about these precursors when they developed their concepts, the analysis of each is illustrative of the popular sports fan activities that existed before fantasy sports and likely influenced the adoption of the game among other players.

The Invention of Fantasy Sports

While the concept of fantasy has expanded to include versions in a number of different sports, the two earliest leagues were based on football and baseball. Both histories of the first fantasy football and baseball leagues are important events in understanding the transformation of fantasy sports into a popular culture phenomenon.

The History of Fantasy Football

On a rainy evening in October of 1962, three men traveling on a Northeastern road trip with the American Football League’s Oakland Raiders invented fantasy football. Wilfred “Bill” Winkenbach, a limited partner of the Raiders, Scotty Stirling, an *Oakland Tribune* sports writer, and Bill Tunnell, a Raiders public relations worker, allegedly spent a sleepless night in a Manhattan hotel brainstorming rules and formulas for a new type of football gambling game.\(^5\)

Different from previous sports betting that focused on the outcomes of races or games, their idea was to use the statistical production of individual players as the determinants of a new sports gambling game. Winkenbach had previously designed two similar games, one based on the PGA Tour, in which bettors would choose professional golfers and add up their scores after tournaments, and one for baseball, in which bettors would choose hitters and pitchers and
compile and compare statistics, but not in a systematic manner. Drawing upon Winkenbach’s previous experience in designing these other sports gambling games, the three men left New York City with an idea and a proposal to redefine the spectator football fan experience.\(^{55}\)

When they returned to Oakland, George Ross, the *Oakland Tribune’s* sports editor, helped refine the game’s rules so that the league could begin play the following season. In this new game, participants would draft their own team of 20 professional football players and compete against others in a league of eight teams, with the individual statistics of the athletes determining the outcomes. The scoring system in this league gave “50 points for a rushing touchdown, 25 points for a thrown or caught touchdown, 25 points for a field goal, 10 points for an extra point, and 200 points for a kick or interception returned for a touchdown.”\(^{56}\) The statistical totals would be added each week and the team with the highest number of points won. Like the professional league, a commissioner would oversee all of the league operations, which included keeping score and preventing collusion.

In August of 1963, the inaugural season of what was named the Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League (GOPPPL) began. The league consisted of eight teams, with all of the owners either affiliated with the Oakland Raiders or the *Oakland Tribune*. Each owner was allowed to have partners to help him with statistical research and decision-making, but they had to fit the criteria of what was a highly regulated membership. The league’s bylaws mandated that potential owners must be a member of a professional AFL football team organization, a journalist who covered football, or a fan who was involved in either buying or selling at least ten season tickets for the 1963 Oakland Raiders season. For example, the league’s purpose, which is below, reflected the exclusiveness of this men’s club:
To bring together some of Oakland’s finest Saturday morning gridiron forecasters to pit their respective brains (and cash) against each other. Inasmuch as this league is formed only with owners having a deep interest and affection for the Oakland Raiders Professional Football Team, it is felt that this tournament will automatically increase closer coverage of daily happenings in professional football.57

Founder and commissioner Bill Winkenbach was a small business owner who had the technological capabilities to run the league. He used telephones, a mimeograph machine, and typewriters to communicate with the league members and remodeled his office into the league’s headquarters. In addition, each Tuesday, Winkenbach wrote and distributed a newsletter documenting league issues and news from the previous week. Similar to sports betting in wire rooms, Winkenbach served as the bookie and used communication technologies to help coordinate the league’s betting action throughout the season.58

When one of the original participants, Andy Mousalimas, opened the Kings X bar in Oakland in 1968, the game moved out of the private setting and began to popularize regionally in a public environment. Mousalimas modified the rules to include points for the number of yards an offensive player gained and expanded the league to include a number of teams. The first Kings X league draft was in 1969 and by 1972 the bar had five divisions all with different names and significance including the Kings, X, Taxi, Other, and Rookie divisions. In 1974, Mousalimas started an all female division called the Queens division and by the same year, the Kings X divisions had more than 200 participants.59 Mousalimas did not accept phone calls and
required all of his participants to come to the bar to turn in their lineups by the deadline of Friday at midnight. He posted the scores from the league on the walls of his bar, and participants would often show up at lunchtime on Mondays to check the scoring from the weekend and on Tuesdays to see the results after the league’s final game of the week on Monday. The bar became the community center and was an early iteration of today’s online fantasy sports homepage.

The bar launched drafts in other parts of the Bay area and Northern California. The game had become so popular that prospective participants across the country contacted Mousalimas requesting the game’s information and rules. However, in many cases these participants had difficulty instituting the game. According to Mousalimas, “Many groups did not get off the ground because they found the scoring difficult and time consuming.”\(^60\) This fundamental complaint continued to handicap the popularization of fantasy football until the digitization of the game in the early 1990s.

In addition to the social connections the bar promoted, gambling was also a driving force behind the activity. Participants were required to pay entry fees and Mousalimas assumed the role of bookie. During his tenure as Kings X commissioner, Mousalimas avoided publicity from the mainstream media such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* because of their gambling practices. He recognized, “Gambling is anathema in restaurants and bars and I was worried if we received too much publicity the vice squad would shut down the game and penalize the Kings X.”\(^61\) This decision ultimately limited the growth of fantasy football during its earlier years.

Largely because of the difficulty in scorekeeping and the potential consequences of a gambling game, fantasy football remained a regional activity. Although several media members
were members of the early leagues, they were reluctant to publicize the game because of the practical and legal risks. They also didn’t realize the commercial potential of it, since they invented it for their own personal use and not necessarily to industrialize it. It wasn’t until 1979, when another version of fantasy sports was invented, that the concept of fantasy gained momentum and began to spread to a national audience.

**The History of Fantasy Baseball**

Daniel Okrent invented fantasy baseball in 1979, but the history of the game has a direct lineage that begins two decades earlier. In 1960, Harvard sociology professor William Gamson developed “Baseball Seminar,” a game in which he and his colleagues would pick players and assign points to their batting average, RBIs, wins, and ERA at the end of the season, a more primitive version of fantasy. Gamson later exported the game to the University of Michigan, where history professor Bob Sklar taught and became an avid player of the Baseball Seminar, a game that also became known among professor circles as the Assistant Professor League or the Untenured Faculty League. Then, in his 1968-69 American Studies class, Sklar had Daniel Okrent in class, who was exposed to the game and became interested in the subject. Recalling his experiences with Sklar, Okrent said, “So I did have that in mind: The common notion of a betting game among friends based on real baseball players’ performances over the course of a season.”

While exposure to Sklar’s game was an important inspiration to Okrent, another critical contributor to Okrent’s development of the idea was a baseball board game called Strat-O-Matic. Introduced by Hal Richman in 1961, Strat-O-Matic was a statistics based dice game that
corresponded with the actual performance of players in the real game. The game asked
participants to roll the dice and then reference a card to find out whether it was a hit or an out,
moves that corresponded with the statistics of the player in real life. It could be played either
solo or against an opponent, and, like the pros, participants often created teams, ran 162-game
seasons, and generated and maintained statistics. Many people that are now influential in the
baseball world played the game as a kid. In fact, of the 50 high level executives in the sports
world he surveyed, half of them were Strat-O-Matic players.65

For Okrent, his experiences playing the game contributed to his development of fantasy
baseball. He played with his literary agent Dave Obst for five or six years in the 1970s while
living in New York. According to Okrent, “We had rented summer houses on Long Island a
couple of times, where we began to play head-to-head. We had four teams each, selected by
draft, and we’d play hour after hour. We could play twelve hours a day without any problem.”66
However, he decided to move to Massachusetts around 1978, and as a result, he no longer played
the Strat-o-Matic game. Okrent said, “As I had when I was drafting Strat-O-Matic teams, I was
reading the box scores every day, but with no purpose.”67

The combination of his experiences with Sklar and Strat-O-Matic helped inspire Okrent’s
invention. He came up with the idea for fantasy baseball during one of his flights to Texas as a
publishing consultant for Texas Monthly. Similar to GOPPPL, participants in a fantasy baseball
league became the owners, general managers, and coaches of their own baseball team, in which
each participant formed a team of Major League Baseball players. Teams would be made up of
“five outfielders, two catchers, one second baseman, one shortstop, one middle infielder (either a
second baseman or a shortstop), one first baseman, one third baseman, one corner player (either a
first baseman or a third baseman), one utility player (designated hitter in American League Rotisserie League), and nine pitchers.” It would be a points-based game where statistical measures of a player’s performance would be calculated and measured against the entire league over the course of the season. The categories would be “composite batting average, total home runs, total runs batted in, total stolen bases, composite earned run average, composite ratio (the number of walks plus hits divided by innings pitched), total number of games won, and total saves.”  The team with the most points after 162-games won the championship.

Okrent initially tested his idea on his clients at *Texas Monthly*, who were not interested. When he returned to New York, Okrent tried the idea again on his five baseball fan friends at their monthly lunch meeting place—La Rotisserie, a French restaurant in Manhattan. Three of the five accepted his invitation to play, and after contacting Sklar, his former professor, and other friends, Okrent had received acceptances by ten owners, which was enough to form the league and begin the season.

The timing of Okrent’s pitch and ultimate acceptance by several of his friends is also important to the history of fantasy baseball. Throughout the 1970s, Major League Baseball had experienced a number of labor problems between its players and owners that undoubtedly alienated some of its fans. In addition to the strike in 1972, there were also work stoppages in 1973, 1976, and 1980. In many ways, the baseball strikes and all the negative press surrounding the sport were principal drivers in Rotisserie’s growth.

Because of the game’s adopted name—Rotisserie Baseball—the popular myth of fantasy baseball is that its birthplace was La Rotisserie. However, according to Okrent, the official conversation about the game with the league’s owners took place at another Manhattan
restaurant called P.J. Moriarity’s. Regarding the myth of La Rotisserie, Okrent said, “The place meant nothing to us. We never went back there. It had no continuing meaning at all. We should have called the game Moriarity Baseball, and let the publicity from our league keep that lousy restaurant in business instead of the other lousy one.”71 While the group chose Rotisserie almost by default, in retrospect the name seemed a better fit because it symbolized the novelty and quirkiness of their activity.

The first draft was held in a member’s dining room and lasted for seven to eight hours. The players contributed $250 to participate and drafted 22 Major League Baseball players for the 1980 baseball season.72 The draft was an auction format in which the owners bid against one another for the rights to buy a particular player. Of course, the values of some players were higher because of their statistics-producing abilities, meaning that owners had to make decisions on how to allocate their funds to purchase players for their roster. It was the ultimate simulation for fans seeking to have the experience of running or managing their own baseball team.

Okrent served as commissioner, whose principal job was to compute the scores of the games. Like fantasy football, this was a time-consuming task not only because of the math involved but also sometimes because of the difficulty in finding the statistics. For example, during one of the early seasons, Okrent, who lived on Cuttyhink Island in Massachusetts, would go to the only phone on the island to contact Sklar in Michigan to receive the late scores from the west coast. The local newspapers of the New York Times and Boston Globe only had the scores from the east and Midwest in their morning editions, and Okrent had to look elsewhere to fill in his score sheets.73
The early Rotisserie Baseball league also developed its own culture around the activity. Since most of the founding members were in the publishing industry, the league’s community was built in part through writing. One founding member, Bruce McCall, wrote press releases for the league that helped establish community and provided a humorous interpretation of the season. Glen Waggoner, another founding member, wrote newsletters about the league that actually served as auditioning material for other jobs. Waggoner was ultimately offered a job to write for *Esquire* in 1984 after one of the members read his material and liked his writing talent. The writing activity in this league foreshadows much of the communication that occurs in many fantasy sports leagues in the online environment on message boards and email lists.

Other cultural rituals also developed within the league. The league had an end of the year banquet that would crown the winner and recount the events and stories of the season. In addition to winning the monetary prize at the end, Rotisserie players received a shower of the chocolate milk drink, Yoo-Hoo. As an indication of the intensity with which these Rotisserie players approached the game, Mr. Waggoner, when asked to explain the feeling of a Yoo-Hoo being dumped on his head, answered, “It’s a toss-up between a Yoo-Hoo shower and first sex.”

What was distinct about the story of Rotisserie Baseball was the culture that it openly created. These men became involved in a highly exclusive, all-encompassing activity complete with its own language, codes, and rituals, a boys club of sorts for the baseball fanatics. This culture was ultimately attractive to an increasing number of sports fans and, as a result, fantasy communities began sprouting up in many areas throughout the United States.
The stories of the first fantasy football and baseball leagues place into perspective what the games were like in their infancy. They also help in explaining why fantasy sports have become a major cultural phenomenon. While the Rotisserie Baseball league was the only one of its kind in 1980, by the 1981 season, the game started to spread across the United States and its growing popularity residually impacted fantasy football. How the concept of fantasy sports was packaged and communicated to other American sports fans is the focus of the next section, the era of popularization.

**The Popularization of Fantasy Sports**

Fantasy sports underwent many changes in the time between the founding of Rotisserie Baseball and its current state. It has evolved from a primarily fan-run and organized grassroots activity to a cottage growth industry to a mainstream billion-dollar business with numerous sub-sectors. Throughout this popularization period, there have been important technological adaptations of fantasy sports that have enabled its growth as well as the increasing involvement of companies both large and small. The critical events and implications of the recent history of fantasy sports are discussed below.

*The Grassroots Game*

After Rotisserie Baseball was founded in 1980, the owners of the inaugural league worked to publicize and grow the game in the early part of the decade. Most of them worked in the publishing industry and had access to the decision makers and power centers to channel information about the game to prospective players. The *New York Times* published an article
about it in 1980, and CBS Morning News and the Today show also covered the innovation. Rotisserie participant Steve Wulf, now executive editor of ESPN the Magazine, published a piece about the league in Sports Illustrated in 1984. Okrent himself wrote an article in Inside Sports entitled “The Year George Foster Wasn’t Worth $36” that had a target audience of sportswriters, and as a result, they increasingly started playing the game. Perhaps the most significant mass media channel for growing the game was the publication of a book on how to play Rotisserie Baseball, entitled Rotisserie League Baseball. The book was written by several of the originators in 1983 and published by Bantam Books before the beginning of the 1984 season. The appearance of fantasy baseball content in these various mainstream channels legitimized the game as an acceptable, if sometimes misunderstood, activity and served the instructional purpose of spreading information about the game and educating interested fans on how to play it. By 1989, there were 500,000 fantasy sports participants, a number that can be attributed in large part to the popularity of fantasy baseball.

While fantasy football was invented almost twenty years before Rotisserie Baseball, the baseball game was more responsible for initially growing the fantasy sports industry. Although some of its original members were journalists and had access to the sports pages of the Oakland Tribune, the GOPPPL version did not have the same initial mainstream appeal. This gap in coverage and initial popularization was the result of the fundamental differences in how the fantasy football leagues were run compared to Rotisserie Baseball. Some of the earliest GOPPPL games took place in a public forum—a bar—and were regulated and managed by the bar’s owner. The public nature of this gambling activity did not at the time seem suitable for widespread media coverage. Rotisserie Baseball, in contrast, was managed and regulated by the
participants themselves and was not affiliated with gambling in the same ways as GOPPPL was. Rotisserie had the appearance of an amateur activity that was based more on scholarship than gambling and initially seemed more appropriate for mass distribution.

Despite its relative lack of popularity compared to fantasy baseball, fantasy football still had somewhat of a presence in the fantasy space during this early era. For example, a couple of Minnesotans published a 5,000-copy book in 1984 instructing prospective players on how to play fantasy football, a first-of-its kind publication for football. There were also other publications, such as the Grogan’s Fantasy Football magazine beginning in 1986, that appeared in the marketplace that were targeted directly to the fantasy football fan. Ultimately, while fantasy baseball players derived pleasure from crunching the numbers, the statistical emphasis in football was less of an attraction, thus limiting the growth of the game in the early days of the industry.

In this initial era of the fantasy sports industry, the fans themselves, who received their information from the various books and articles written on the subject, ran most fantasy games. It was an exciting new game that engaged fans during the baseball or football seasons and connected them with their friends and family. However, because the fans themselves did all of the scorekeeping on top of the hours of research they conducted per week, playing fantasy was a very time consuming activity, which limited its growth in the pre-digital era. In order for the fantasy sports industry to expand, scoring processes would need to be streamlined in some way. By the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, as computer technology continued to proliferate, entrepreneurs began recognizing the market potential for fantasy and developed products that made fantasy participation easier and ultimately more attractive to a larger number of fans.
The Cottage Industry

By the 1990s, computers had evolved to the point where it became more cost-effective for entrepreneurs and companies to integrate them into their operations. As a result, new fantasy sports companies began to use computers to help solve the problems of scorekeeping that limited industry growth in the previous decade, and both veteran and new fantasy owners increasingly turned to these new services to improve their gaming experience. While baseball helped expand the fantasy sports industry in the previous decade, it was fantasy football in the 1990s, with the help of computers, that catalyzed the industry’s expansion.

The most influential early fantasy football technology was the Franchise Football League (FFL), a software program designed to manage fantasy football leagues organized in bars and provide statistical information on all NFL players and teams. In 1989, the FFL was launched on a national level with its sponsorship by Miller Brewing Company and debuted in 6,300 bars across America. Similar to the formula of Kings X in Oakland, the football league was built around appearances at the bar—Friday to turn in lineups, Sunday to view games, Monday to view Monday Night Football games, and Tuesday to receive the results from that week’s competition. This partnership provided resources to grow the game, a mass media platform to reach the bars across the country, and a more convenient and easier to manage scoring system. It was also a signal that media companies and corporate sponsors were willing to embrace and promote a gambling-based activity, despite the potential legal and ethical consequences of affiliating with the game.

The FFL wasn’t only restricted to the bar environment. Because of the increasing penetration of the personal computer and the Internet, the number of fantasy options for fans
began to expand in this era, as these new technologies enabled them to play at home. For example, with the FFL, participants could play the game away from the bar, and the FFL would load all statistics and results after the week’s games on a computer disk and send them express mail to its league members. This version marked the beginning of a shift of the game’s presence away from the bars and into the homes of fantasy participants, which was an attractive option to players that did not have prearranged community of participants or did not want to play in the bar environment, and they also foreshadowed the future growth of public leagues in the online fantasy sports industry. However, because the penetration of the personal computer and Internet was not widespread, the mainstream popularity of these at-home fantasy games was not possible yet.

In the 1990s, companies began also began generating fantasy baseball statistics with software programs and distributing them through the Internet to personal computers. In addition to STATS Inc., other statistics companies in many parts of the country started capitalizing on the demands of fantasy baseball players for statistical information. For example, SportsBase, introduced in 1991, was an online service that distributed statistics and even provided the owner with information ranging from weather forecasts, injury news, and up-to-the-minute scores and statistics of real time games. Other statistical companies began providing similar services, and by 1993 there were almost 70 companies specializing in providing detailed statistical information for their subscribers, all of which seemed eager to capitalize on technological advancements and the interest of baseball fans in numbers. Although many of these companies did not survive the dot.com failures later in the decade, Rotisserie Baseball, similar to fantasy football, was
becoming an industry as new technology-based companies catered to the sport and helped
spread the game throughout the country.

It was also in the mid-nineties that new dedicated fantasy sports companies began
offering full-service fantasy contests for fans, an innovation that would ultimately save fans
hours of work. Industry pioneers CDM Sports and Sports Buff, founded in 1991 and 1993,
respectively, became leading companies in developing and managing fantasy league technology.
Much of their business was generated through partnerships with newspapers, as they provided
the technology and support for newspaper games in sports sections around the country. For fans
playing through newspapers, they would call in, fax, or mail their fantasy entries to these fantasy
companies and then receive notification of the week’s outcomes the following week. Newspapers would then have the opportunity to build a database for marketing purposes and
increase sales of individual copies to fantasy owners who were playing the game. It was an
imperfect system, but it represented some of the first efforts of companies to capitalize on
fantasy by enabling fans, who may not have adopted a personal computer or were living in an era
of dial-up modem connections, to play the game without having to score it themselves.

Sports Buff in particular is an example of the changes that occurred in this era. Like
many of its competitors, Sports Buff began in the early nineties at a time when the technology
was evolving to the point where it could be effectively integrated into fantasy sports businesses.
However, despite the early modem games that were available, the majority of fantasy play took
place offline. As part of its newspaper game, Sports Buff created an interactive voice
recognition system where fans would call-in their fantasy lineups for the week, a technology that
no other company in the industry had duplicated. As a result, Sports Buff controlled a major part of the newspaper fantasy business from about 1993 to 1998.

By 1999, Founder and CEO of Sports Buff, Jeff Thomas, had built up the company to the point where it was now an attractive and saleable business. In that same year, a company by the name of Internet Sports Network bought Sports Buff as well as four other companies, all of which helped Internet Sports Network establish a near monopoly on the fantasy sports business. The company’s strategy was to accelerate the number of Internet users on their network and dedicated most of their resources to moving people online as fast as possible, abandoning their offline presence in the process. Ultimately, this was a misguided approach, as users at that point simply were not equipped with the technology to immediately move online, and as a consequence, the company went bankrupt about a year later during the Internet stock market crash. Thomas ended up repurchasing his company by 2000.89

The trajectory of Sports Buff is an important indicator of the fantasy sports industry during this cottage industry stage. Thomas built a significant offline business based primarily on newspaper games and its sophisticated interactive voice technology, sold the company to a larger company during the Internet boom in the 1990s, and bought the company back after the strategy of the parent company failed. Ultimately, the marketplace was not ready for the Internet to impact society in the ways that it eventually would.

This stage of the fantasy sports industry was marked by the involvement of companies seeking to capitalize on an emerging activity and the simultaneous integration of technology to make the games easier to play. Despite these important advances, however, the industry still had not attained a critical mass of players that would transform it into a major industry. This
wouldn’t happen until the next phase of fantasy development when Internet diffusion increased rapidly. As Kevin Gralen, president of Head2Head Fantasy sports, a company that has been in existence since the cottage industry stage, said: “Computers made it doable in a centralized way before the Internet, but…it’s just you want to know you won, you don’t want a piece of mail showing up on Wednesday or Thursday telling you, ‘You won,’ you want to know now.”90 In the next stage of the fantasy sports industry, innovations in technology and an increasing number of institutions met this demand and aided in the explosion of the activity’s popularity.

The Mainstreaming of Fantasy Sports

Until the turn of the century, the fantasy sports industry had evolved from a collection of disparate fan-managed leagues around the country to a cottage industry with smaller startup companies providing statistical information and league services. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the fantasy sports industry began benefiting from the widespread proliferation of the Internet as well as the increased involvement of mainstream companies. Moreover, the Internet helped streamline scoring procedures and enable league play anywhere in the world, and mainstream companies, with their robust communication and marketing platforms, generated awareness for this heretofore backroom hobby.

While the mainstreaming of fantasy is a recent phenomenon, there were some early attempts in the 1990s by mainstream outlets to embrace the game. ESPN produced a pay-per-view Rotisserie Baseball show in 1994,91 and the company began providing fantasy games as early as 1995 on ESPN Sportszone, the precursor to today’s ESPN.com.92 CNN/Sports
Illustrated launched a fantasy website called SportSim in 1997,\textsuperscript{93} and CBS bought a controlling interest in the successful online sports news and fantasy game website, Sportsline.com in 1997.\textsuperscript{94} Despite these early mainstreaming initiatives, the efforts of these various companies were largely uncoordinated and resulted in only limited success compared with the current state of the industry. Moreover, the Internet itself was not considered a mainstream medium. At the time, the technology products that would ultimately enable growth had not proliferated, and the larger companies themselves did not see any evidence that major resources should be expended to communicate with an avid, but ultimately small and niche fan base.

A turning point in the mainstreaming of fantasy sports was the introduction of the first completely run and managed online fantasy league in 1997 by \textit{The Sporting News}. The league was the first of its kind because it allowed fans to customize their leagues according to a number of different options. In the past, if fans played fantasy, they had to play by the rules that the company or fantasy sports provider set forth. \textit{The Sporting News} also integrated real-time statistical updates, meaning that fans could check back with the site during and after games for instant updates on their team.\textsuperscript{95} Now, instead of waiting days to see the results, fans received them instantly.

\textit{After The Sporting News’} innovation, several other companies entered into the fantasy space and started to build their businesses in this emerging area. Yahoo began its fantasy sports operation in 1998 with a differentiated business model that would help not only grow the industry but also transform itself into the fantasy industry leader.\textsuperscript{96} The company with its popular Internet search engine offered all of its games for free as part of a strategy to increase
penetration of the Internet and the Yahoo brand. In addition, the company offered up-sell products for fantasy fans who wanted to pay for a fantasy experience with enhanced features. With Yahoo, fantasy fans could now receive the same basic benefits of playing fantasy online but did not have to pay for them. Perhaps more so than any company, Yahoo and its free pricing and up-sell strategy helped grow the fantasy sports industry.

Other companies such as ESPN and its ESPN Sportszone site, Sandbox and its USA Today site, CNN/Sports Illustrated, and CBS Sportsline started following this same formula of facilitating fantasy sports league play. As these media companies began to offer fantasy sports infrastructure, they acted as third party contributors that facilitated fantasy league competition. They did all the scorekeeping, and in the process, reduced the geographic limitations on location and the time commitment required to play. The new technology-enabled version of fantasy sports made it more accessible and appealing to a wider number of players.

In addition to the media company involvement, sports properties started to become involved in the 2000s. The avatar of integrating fantasy into its marketing and communication platforms was the National Football League. At the time, Clay Walker, now president of Fantasy Sports Ventures, was the president of the National Football League Players Association, and he saw an opportunity for the NFL to actively promote fantasy football. Recounting how the NFL considered approaching the fantasy concept during this period, Walker said, “The first thing we should do is all that advertising [inventory] that you get for free from CBS, from Fox, from the broadcast partners, if you can just carve out a little bit, just a little bit [for fantasy football].” The NFL agreed to make space for fantasy football, and the league first ran a series of commercials in 2000 that advertised the virtues of their fantasy football game. The strategy was
to inform fans about the game and that it could be played on their website, which at the time was managed by CBS Sportsline. While this approach was not a failure, it was not nearly as successful as it could have been. As Walker admits, “They used corporate speak, and it was not great.” However, the next year the NFL showcased several of the league’s stars in commercials that sold its fantasy product. Peyton Manning, Michael Strahan, and Priest Holmes had become ambassadors of fantasy football, and in the process, both promoted and legitimized the activity to the millions of fans who watched the NFL on television on Sundays.

The NFL’s early efforts with fantasy not only helped grow its own game, but also seemingly stimulated its competitors to improve their positioning in the fantasy space. By the 2000s, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, NASCAR, and even a team like Manchester United began hosting fantasy sports online. For example, Major League Baseball, as part of its initiative to create Major League Baseball Advanced Media in 1999, moved to integrate fantasy baseball more fully into its digital operations. The new MLB.com launched in 2001 would ultimately operate fantasy leagues and generate and distribute fantasy content to potential owners. In fact, the league felt so strongly about fantasy as a growth area that it sought to monopolize the fantasy baseball market through its steep licensing fees and subsequent court battle with CDM Sports, which it ultimately lost.

In addition to these sports properties becoming involved in fantasy, the role of sponsors, who are seeking access to the highly engaged male fantasy owner, is also important in the popularization and mainstreaming of the game. Major brands including Reebok, JC Penney, GMC, Toyota, DirecTV, and Coke have been involved in sponsoring fantasy games. Best Buy even developed and promoted its own fantasy football game in 2004 to capitalize on the loyalty
of the fantasy fan. Although the game only lasted one year, it marked the seriousness with which major corporate brands were beginning to view fantasy sports in this mainstreaming stage.

While the involvement of mainstream companies has been critical to the maturation of the fantasy sports industry, a corresponding growth area in the contemporary stage of fantasy sports is in the number of entrepreneurs and small businesses that have entered into the fantasy sports industry. After the Internet bubble burst around 2000 and 2001, as evidenced by the chain of events with Sports Buff and its parent company Internet Sports Network, and the market began to recover, a host of new smaller companies entered the marketplace around the turn of the century. Fantasy Auctioneer, Mock Draft Central, Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports LLC, Draft Dynamix are all Internet startups that have formed in the 2000s that fill a niche in the fantasy sports industry.

An example of a niche fantasy product is Protrade, which is a variation of fantasy sports that treats athletes like stocks. The company began in September 2005 as a fantasy football-only service, and by the end of the year had 10,000 users. Instead of drafting a team of athletes as in traditional fantasy sports, Protrade participants are charged with compiling the best “portfolio” of athletes. In addition, athletes can be bought or sold at anytime either during the game or after because the Website constantly updates player values. The formula for Protrade is based on a complex statistical database that defines a player’s “stock” value based how they affect their teams, which is in contrast to traditional fantasy sports where all of the points are awarded based on individual statistical performance; the Protrade system rewards players who impact the outcome of their real team’s games. For example, the formula devalues running backs who often score one-yard touchdowns and emphasizes the receivers or tight ends that may have advanced
the team to the goal line in the first place. As an independent company, Protrade illustrates how fantasy sports have become not only an accepted spectator activity but also one that is now offered in different permutations.

The smaller companies have also carved a niche in the content generation and distribution business. This group in the fantasy sports industry is comprised of both offline and online fantasy sports news sources. These sources offer owners information and analysis about the variety of sports issues affecting fantasy. From injury updates to analysis of decisions about starting lineups, this fantasy sector has become an important medium for fantasy sports players. A company like Rotowire, for instance, playing off the same stock market theme, covers all player news as if they were stocks. Their business model is based not on providing a particular fantasy league product, but aggregating and distributing content. They serve as a portal for fantasy sports information. They tend to read the local newspapers or team websites that have fantasy information and consolidate all the material on their website for the fantasy fan to read and use as a resource in their league play.

The industry is comprised mostly of the larger companies that seek to provide every fantasy product and service and smaller ones that try to differentiate themselves based on their specific product. Although smaller companies often criticize the entrance of the mainstream players, ESPN, CBS, Yahoo, and others have helped promote and popularize the games in ways that would not be possible otherwise. The fantasy sports industry has benefited significantly from the marketing and promotional resources that the major companies have applied to fantasy. On the other hand, smaller companies, like Protrade and others, are the ones that help drive innovation in the industry and generally can implement creative ideas faster than larger
corporations. It’s a tension that has yet to be resolved and will continue to be a defining characteristic of the fantasy sports industry.

While the number of companies in the fantasy sports industry has exploded, the pecking order of fantasy sports has remain unchanged. The sport that is at the core of the fantasy sports industry’s growth was football, which benefited the most from the digital version of the game. The time commitment required to play fantasy football was much less compared to baseball. Players only had to pay attention to their lineups one day a week, whereas playing fantasy baseball was a daily activity. As a result, fantasy football also attracted more casual fans with the digital version, while baseball continued to be a more labor-intensive game for a select group of individuals. The difference illustrates that, in addition to the technology, the games themselves and the social, cultural, and economic incentives that were associated with fantasy play drove the popularity of the games. The disparity still exists today as an estimated 90 percent of all fantasy participants play fantasy football.104

Although football is the most popular sport, it has created awareness for the fantasy concept and helped drive fantasy players to other sports. While football and baseball were the only fantasy possibilities in the past, versions of fantasy sports exist today all over the industry and include basketball, hockey, golf, NASCAR, bull riding, and conceivably any other sport. What was originally a two-sport game developed and maintained by fans themselves has now become a major sports institution that is redefining the sports world. Fantasy sports have now become a full-scale industry comprised of institutions, media companies, sponsors, and participants that provide products and services to the fantasy sports consumer.
Conclusion

In this chapter, the history of fantasy sports through the formation, inventions, and popularization of the game was traced. First, the three primary historical precedents to the invention and popularization of fantasy sports—box scores, trading cards, and sports gambling—were analyzed. Then, the invention of the first two fantasy sports leagues—the GOPPPL and Rotisserie Baseball were discussed. Finally, how the activity popularized after its invention was examined. As this chapter has illustrated, fantasy sports have undergone an extensive transformation to become not only a major sports institution but also a popular culture phenomenon.

In reflecting on his invention, Daniel Okrent once had this to say:

People come up to me and interrupt my life to tell me about their fucking team, as if I could give a shit. There’s nothing more interesting than your own Rotisserie team, and nothing less interesting than somebody else’s. Once a guy followed me into a bathroom—I’m trying to take a dump, and he’s outside the stall talking about the trade he made for Champ Summers or whoever. I feel like Robert Oppenheimer having invented the atomic bomb: If I only had known the horrible things I had unleashed on the world.105

The next chapter analyzes how fantasy sports stimulate the avid and obsessed behaviors that so many of its players exhibit.
Chapter Three

The Fantasy Sports Fan

LI Families.com is a community Website for the citizens of the New York City suburbs on Long Island. Marked by the slogan “Families Helping Families,” one of the site’s purposes is to serve as a forum for residents to chat with one another on the popular message board. Users typically post and discuss a wide range of family and non-family related topics such as recipes, child-rearing practices, weekend entertainment advice, and other everyday issues.

On September 5, 2006, the eve of the 2006 NFL season, one person with the username “spooks” started a new thread titled “Fantasy Football widows” and posted this message, which was punctuated with a happy face icon methodically slamming its head into a brick wall:

Argh, his draft is tonight. I am in such a bad mood already - he has a whole spread sheet he's been working on and all this “research”!

Nine minutes later “bklyngirl” responds, followed by “angelbear217” two minutes afterward, and almost 30 more messages in the span of several hours. The discussion consisted mostly of complaints from wives about the fantasy sports hobbies of their DHs, which, according to the glossary on the Website, translates to “Darling/Dear/Dumb Husband.” There was one post in particular, by “Sneezy,” that crystallized the thread:

My DH is in THREE fantasy football leagues and one fantasy baseball league. Baseball is winding down finally. He had one football draft a few weeks ago, the other two are the
next two nights. He is going to NJ for them. The trophy for one football league, which we have had the pleasure of winning for the last two years, is a gigantic bronze statue of a fat, bald, beer drinking man in a recliner. "Gus" as he is known sits atop a big wood platform; this trophy weighs 27 lbs…He is bringing it to the draft tomorrow. I can only hope that it will be another wife's turn to dust Gus this year. Is it wrong to root against your own husband?²

Sneezy’s experiences are not unlike many other women who have been in a relationship with a fantasy-obsessed significant other. Playing fantasy sports has historically been viewed as a relationship impediment, exemplified by Daniel Okrent’s wife earning the nickname “Long Suffering Betty” for her many years enduring her husband’s all-encompassing hobby.³ Even some women question their significant other’s priorities, as one female laments about her boyfriend’s after-sex tendency to check his fantasy scores: “I can understand if he doesn’t always want to cuddle with me, but why does he want to cuddle with Albert Pujols?”⁴ Since fantasy-playing men will likely immerse themselves in the activity for the duration of the season, single women have often been urged to avoid fantasy owners unless they’re content with a distracted companion.

Given the amount of time they spend on the activity, it’s not surprising that some fantasy players often cause dysfunction in their relationships. Typical fantasy owners think about their teams 40 minutes a day and spend a total of 4 hours and 35 minutes and 4 hours and 18 minutes on managing their baseball and football teams, respectively, a task that includes changing their lineups, doing research, proposing trades, adding and dropping players, and communicating with
other members of the league. Add in the time spent watching games, which for a fantasy football fan can number almost 7 hours of television viewing, and the result is a highly engaged sports fan who is seemingly singularly committed to the sport, the game, and his fantasy teams.

This chapter analyzes the avid and engaged behaviors of the fantasy sports fan. First, the profile of the average fantasy player is overviewed briefly to provide context for this analysis. Then, the fantasy concept itself is examined to illustrate the ways in which the fantasy fan becomes engaged through the game design. Finally, the communication experiences that the game engenders are analyzed to illustrate the importance of the communication that occurs within fantasy leagues to the fan engagement levels. This chapter demonstrates that fans connect to fantasy sports not only because of the game but also the communication experiences that surround it.

**Who is the Fantasy Fan?**

Before the digital age, when fantasy baseball was the most popular game, fantasy sports suffered from an image problem. Rotisserie Baseball players, who spent days dissecting box scores, traveling to see Spring Training games, and analyzing minor league baseball players for the next sleeper picks, were often the targets of terms such as geek, nerd, and stat hound. As Dan Grogan, co-founder of the *Grogan Fantasy Football* magazine observed, “The perception of playing fantasy was that geek perception. And nobody wanted others to know they were doing this on the side.” These secretive, numbers-obsessed men ran counter to the mainstream sports culture and had reputations that were closer to science fiction buffs than Johnny football stars.
Even as fantasy football became more popular, fantasy sports fans still were stigmatized in many ways. For example, an HBO *Real Sports* segment on fantasy football aired in 2002, during which the fantasy football players of the World Championship of Fantasy Football (WCOFF) in Las Vegas were profiled for their obsessed and avid behaviors. A centerpiece of the segment was someone at the WCOFF event dressed up as a wizard as well as comments, some from the founder of Rotisserie Baseball, which disparaged the activities of fantasy football players. A few days after the segment, Bryant Gumbel, the host of *Real Sports*, remarked in an interview, "The big problem is this fantasy football. You have the NFL catering to these computer geeks who would rather watch a game at their computer than in front of the TV. So now, the networks have to cater to people with an attention span of five to ten minutes." While the HBO Sports segment is only one example, it does illustrate a negative sentiment about fantasy sports that was prevalent even as late as the 2000s.

This image eventually began to change as casual NFL fans increasingly started playing fantasy football online, particularly with mainstream outlets. These fans were not necessarily attracted to the statistical minutiae of football but were looking for ways to enhance their involvement with the sport. Peter Schoenke, president of Rotowire, has seen the industry transform throughout his career and contends that the influx of fantasy football players helped initiate the changing perception of fantasy fans in society. Of fantasy football players, he observed, “They were just fans of football and they were not playing it to be rebellious or different.” Their intentions were based largely on entertainment needs, a positioning that on the surface was different from early fantasy baseball players and resulted in greater acceptance of the idea among a larger audience. As the fantasy sports industry continues to grow, the image of
fantasy owners is changing from an undesirable, rebellious geek to the most knowledgeable, highly sought after sports consumer in the marketplace.

Part of this image transformation is related to the increased marketplace awareness of fantasy sports and the types of people who play it. The Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) reports annually on the demographic profile of the fantasy fan both to provide its members valuable information about its audience and to help re-brand fantasy as a legitimate sporting entertainment. As the industry continues to collect and distribute the first systematic data about who plays fantasy sports, the media and public have begun to learn more about the fantasy sports institution and previous questions about who actually plays fantasy are being answered.

While the perception of players in the past centered on young nerds and geeks, the reality of the situation – and the image that the FSTA is trying to communicate – is that fantasy fans are relatively normal males between the ages of 18 and 49 who have time and money to spend on the activity. According to the 2006 FSTA report, the average fantasy player is a 41-year-old, married, white male who lives in a household of 2.5 people, has a household income of $94,748, graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree, and is employed in a professional occupation. This demographic profile is beginning to move fantasy fan culture from a fringe activity to the center of popular culture as sponsors, sports properties, and media companies have begun to recognize the value of reaching and engaging this previously elusive market. It is fair to say that fantasy sports would not receive the same kind of mainstream acceptance if another demographic group were playing the game.
Fantasy fans are attractive to the media industry and companies not only because of their demographics but also their engagement with the game, which is evident in several ways. One is the frequency of play. In the fantasy world, when people participate, they play a lot and not just in one league. The average fantasy sports owner competes in 3.8 football leagues and 2.9 baseball leagues over the course of the season. This tendency for fantasy owners to play in multiple leagues makes it more likely, for example, that their knowledge of and exposure to the sports property – and related advertising – will increase. Since every draft is different and fantasy players aren’t likely to have the exact same team in each league, playing in multiple leagues encourages the fantasy sports fan to monitor league news more systematically to stay informed about not only his 3 or 4 teams but also the teams of his competitors. As a result, the overwhelming majority of fantasy participants tend to learn more about professional athletes by playing fantasy, because the amount of time they spend preparing and playing the game often has the residual effect of increasing fan interest in the real professional teams and the league as a whole.

Another measure of engagement is the duration of fantasy play. Fantasy fans not only play the game intensely, but it also often becomes a preferred way of watching sports. For those fans who try and like fantasy, they tend to continue playing it for the foreseeable future. For example, the average fantasy baseball and football players have been playing for 9 and 10 years, respectively. Moreover, as an illustration of the loyalty of fantasy fans, 86% of fantasy owners agree that they see themselves still playing fantasy sports in 10 years. The relatively high retention rates are another indicator of the influence the games have on participants and the long-term affinity fans develop for the concept.
In addition to these statistical measurements of audience engagement, the fantasy fan has been a subject of intrigue for the popular press, resulting in numerous anecdotal accounts of the avid and obsessed behaviors of this enigmatic subculture. For example, within the first decade of the twentieth century, at least three popular books have been published, *Fantasyland: A Sportswriter’s Obsessive Bid to Win the Most Ruthless Fantasy Baseball League* by Sam Walker, *Committed: Confessions of a Fantasy Football Junkie* by Mark St. Amant, and *Why Fantasy Football Matters: (And Our Lives Do Not)* by Eric Barmack and Max Handelman. All three books operate from the same premise of chronicling the inner workings of fantasy leagues and have their own dramatic interpretations of the ways that fantasy sports ensnare participants. For example, Barmack and Handelman, in *Why Fantasy Football Matters*, cite religious devotion as an analogy to fantasy sports participation. After describing the rituals of groups like the Hopi Indians and Islamic fundamentalists in anticipation for a new beginning, they write:

Fantasy football tribes are equally devoted to rituals. They take time and require deep spiritual commitment. A fantasy football fanatic must be completely dedicated to the season. There’s no half-stepping or wavering. You’re either all-in or all out...We prepare for the season. We dance over hot coals. We sing and we chant, our spears jutting skyward. We’re girding for battle. For our annual rebirth.

Investigative work in newspapers and magazines has also focused on reporting the idiosyncratic behaviors of fantasy leagues. Headlines such as “Rotisserie Leaguers Too Distracted to Jeopardize Civilization,” “Fantasy Sports Becoming an Online Obsession,” and
“Barbarians in the End Zone” seek to attract attention to the alternate universe of fantasy sports and expose the nuances of the participants’ culture. One journalist’s account, in particular, took the approach of diagnosing the behavior of early fantasy baseball players:

It's a disease called "Rotisserieitis" that strikes them each spring and lasts until October. It consumes their summer, driving them to spend considerable money and time to go to spring training, phone baseball teams across the country to inquire about injured players, take extra trips during the season to ballparks in Baltimore and other cities, and buy dozens of baseball books. They crouch in bed, waiting for the thump of the morning paper against the front door so they can read boxscores; some set the alarm for 2:30 a.m. to watch ESPN's "SportsCenter" and find out how their ace pitcher did in a West Coast game.

The metaphors of religion and disease are appropriate in the above two excerpts given the near universal experience that fantasy sports players have with the game. Like a disease, the game has many side effects, including compulsions to check scores, addictions to certain Websites, and the multi-sensory sensation one has while simultaneously watching as many sporting events as possible. As an activity that engenders these kinds of behaviors, “Fantasy Fix” has become a common title for fantasy media content, implying that the game does not afflict one person but the millions of others who call themselves fantasy owners.

The media is not the only outlet discussing fantasy sports fan behavior. As the activity continues to grow, seemingly everyone in American society knows someone who plays fantasy
sports and the obsession that goes along with it. Jeff Thomas, of Sports Buff and the FSTA said, “Within a week, we couldn’t go by walking through a mall or sitting in a restaurant without hearing somebody talking about their fantasy team.” Perhaps the most convincing indication that fantasy sports are now mainstream, people are beginning to understand the behaviors of fantasy fans and, in some cases, actually consider them somewhat normal.

The effects of the activity, reported not only in industry studies and the popular press but also through word of mouth, offer a descriptive account of the sometimes bizarre and obsessed behaviors of fantasy sports fan. While knowledge about the inner workings of fantasy leagues is increasingly well known, why fantasy fans – almost universally – are obsessed with the game in the ways that they are has not been considered systematically. Previous research on this question includes only the quantitative measurements of the FSTA and an exploratory qualitative study on male fantasy players, which will be discussed later in this chapter. While these studies have been important foundational work, it is also important that the fantasy fan be considered from a rhetorical and communication perspective. The analysis in the remainder of the chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways that the concept of fantasy sports and the communication experiences that surround the game are the principal drivers of fantasy engagement. To begin, the concept from which these behaviors stem is explored.

**The Fantasy Concept**

Merriam-Webster defines fantasy as “the free play of creative imagination.” The concept of fantasy sports, while clearly not an activity that only takes place in one’s head, is at its very core an exercise in fantastical thinking. The game enables participants to build their own
imaginary sports team and compete against other fantasy teams with the individual statistical performance of athletes determining the outcomes. Converting the sports fan into an active participant in the sporting event, the fantasy game reconfigures sports fandom into an experience that focuses on athletes and is highly involving and connective.

The concept itself has four critical persuasive elements: vicarious experience, scholarship, gambling, and customization. All four components of the concept serve to engage fans and drive their avid gaming behaviors. The ways in which these four elements connect with fans are analyzed below.

**Vicarious Experience**

Fantasy sports are built on the vicarious, as they simulate a situation that only a select few will experience in their lifetime. Historically, the barrier of entry into the professional sports arena has been high. Aspirants had to be either a talented athlete, who could then move into coaching and personnel work after their careers were over, or a very wealthy person, who could buy and manage their own team. Since the average American is neither, fantasy sports provide an opportunity for fans to role-play positions that they’ll likely never possess. For the middle manager, lawyer, or professor, who’ve played or followed sports since they were children, the concept enables them to manage a team based on their vision, without having to confront real game issues like multimillion dollar salaries, players unions, league revenue sharing, and the egos of athletes, coaches, and management.

The desire of fans to manage their own team is driven largely by the discourse sports generate. Whether it’s on the professional or high school level, sporting events invite criticism
from the fans about the ways that “their” team is being managed. For the sports fan, games and events are not just mechanical exercises of wins and losses. They are often accompanied by analysis of why a team wins or loses, how the team was put together, or what kinds of game strategies the coaching staff implemented. Since fans do not have control over those decisions, they can be found screaming at the television, criticizing team choices among friends, posting comments on Internet message boards and blogs, or calling into talk radio programs in an effort to express their feelings and participate on some level with the team.

Call-in radio shows have historically been a forum that sports fans frequently use to articulate their thoughts and beliefs about their teams. For example, Zagacki and Grando demonstrated how fans of the Louisiana State University Tigers football team would call into radio programs during football season to help deal with losses and other anxious feelings about their position as fans of college athletics. As a medium, “Sports talk shows, in particular, open a public space where the ideas and attitudes of ordinary people seem to matter, enabling the fans and broadcasters to share dramatic interpretations about the relationship between sport and society, whether or not these interpretations correspond to reality.” Analyzing the calls of a number of LSU sports fans, the authors demonstrated that one of the fans’ only ways to establish a connection with the team is through the medium of the talk radio show and the community that the show establishes.

While sports talk radio is a prevalent medium for these fan communication exchanges to occur, this finding can also be broadened to other sports fan experiences. As spectators, fans sit in the stands or watch on television as relatively inactive audience members. They cannot call into the coach and recommend a play, they do not participate in recruiting trips, and they are not
involved in the decision making of the athletic department. While the role of the home crowd is often discussed as an important component of team success, by and large there are very few opportunities for the fan to get close to the action on the field or receive insider access to the decision makers of a sports franchise. Thus, fans must look elsewhere to justify their involvement in sports and engage in discussions with other like-minded people. After all, when a football game is over, fans do not sit down with the offensive coordinator of their favorite team and brainstorm how to get their star running back 30 carries next game. In addition to sports talk radio, call-in television shows, letters to the editor, and team conventions have historically provided a forum for fan interaction. Today, the fantasy sports concept, which enables fans to emulate the very people they often criticize, has developed another and arguably more involved way to interact with the sports property.

The fantasy sports concept does not necessarily ameliorate all the fans’ concerns about team decisions on the field, but it does channel their feelings and frustrations into a concrete activity. According to Daniel Okrent, the fantasy concept appeals to “anybody who believes that he or she can run the team better than the real people doing it. In our hearts, we’re all general managers.” The general manager concept has even more relevance in today’s *Moneyball* era, when people who have no professional playing or coaching experience are being hired to make personnel decisions for a professional team. Theo Epstein, star Red Sox general manager, exemplifies this new general manager, as he was a Yale graduate well versed in statistical analysis but never played professional baseball in his life. For the average sports fan, who sees a person with no playing experience becoming a major figure in the sports world, it humanizes the general manager position and makes it appear more attainable to someone without
professional-level athletic skills. The fantasy concept serves as not only a forum for sports fans to experience vicariously the role of a general manager but also as a simulation for fans to test and refine their own management skills.

In the United States and across many other parts of the world, sports hold a unique position in society. They are private enterprises – owned and operated as businesses – yet they also take on many of the same qualities of a public good. They’re covered in the free media, discussed among residents on the train or in corporate boardrooms as icebreakers, and used as symbols of the character and identity of the city in which they play. All of this communication occurs against the backdrop of what has become a multi-billion dollar global industry with only a small number of power brokers and billions of global fans who have very little involvement in the decision making process.

The experience of managing a team through fantasy sports is a vicarious role-play that reinvigorates fan involvement in the increasingly inaccessible and outsized sports world. In the past, while the general manager of their favorite basketball team in real life is making poor decisions in free agency and trading away the team’s top young talent, fans had to endure the negative effects of these management decisions for as long as it took for them to be resolved. Today, with fantasy sports, fans can build, manage, and follow their own team of league-wide athletes, and while they still may be disappointed with the decisions of their favorite basketball team, fantasy can certainly help lessen the impact.

In the context of sports spectatorship, the overall strength of this concept is its ability to restore control to fans in their sports entertainment experience through a vicarious simulation.
However, in order for this experience to be enjoyable and satisfying for the fan, he or she must do their homework to compete.

**Scholarship**

Sporting events spawn expansive data ranging from individual and team statistics to historical trends and records, all of which fans interpret, analyze, and debate as part of their fandom. In baseball, for example, athlete performances are measured through categories such as batting averages, runs batted in, fielding percentage, and errors, and all-time records like total home runs, consecutive games played, RBIs in one season, and consecutive hits are hallowed numbers in the sport’s history. Even in less statistically detailed sports like soccer or hockey, a host of contextual information such as the athletes’ hometown, college, or previous professional teams, and the historical record of team performances, rivalries, or management decisions add dimensionality for the sports fan. These various data sources help redefine the sporting event into a rich text of discourse-generating information.

Because of the emphasis on statistics and information, sports have become a popular source of so-called useless information. While sports knowledge may be valuable in water cooler situations, knowing that Detroit Pistons point guard Chauncey Billups averaged 7.2 assists in the 2006-07 season usually does not help lawyers argue a case or plumbers fix a clogged shower. In most cases, the hours fans spend on sports and the information and knowledge they accumulate goes relatively unapplied.

An exception is sports trivia, a test of factual, if insignificant information. It could also be called, “Who Knows the Most about Sports?” The game is based on the memorization of
starting lineups, box scores, colleges attended, win-loss records, or any other piece of information that can be used to beat out friends. It can be played really at anytime or in any setting ranging from the pickup basketball courts and bars to living rooms and golf courses.

The problem with sports trivia is that there are few opportunities to systematically test one’s knowledge. With the exception of board games, Internet trivia games or the occasional sports game show that ESPN airs, it is difficult to measure trivia performances over the long-term and compare them with other competitors. Groups of friends could theoretically sit down in a room and tally scores based on correct answers to questions, but the trivia concept itself is better suited for an informal setting than an institutionalized format.

In contrast to trivia games, fantasy sports activate the fan’s inventory of sports information, enabling fans to channel their knowledge into a competitive and organized activity. The fantasy concept by its very nature calls upon participants to use their sports intelligence in order to be successful. Peter Schoenke, president of Rotowire, observes, “Fans are interested because at the end of the day they’re following sports, they have all of this sports knowledge and they really don’t have anywhere to use it. If you watch your team a lot or you know a lot about baseball because you’re a big fan of it, how do you use that information?” Fantasy sports offers fans an outlet that combines both the accolades of knowing the most about sports with the competitive aspects of implementing strategies and tactics. As Schoenke adds, “And also it’s a great way to compare that knowledge to their buddies and enjoy the game a lot more.”

It is not just general sports knowledge that the fantasy fan is putting into practice. The fantasy concept requires players to learn more about the athletes and the sport and develop a set of fantasy-specific skills such as the ability to interpret the meanings of various statistics, predict
performances, and analyze the various real-life team matchups and how they’ll affect the fantasy outcomes. These skills are different from predicting whether a team will win or lose, as the focus is on individual athletes. For example, injuries, weather, and matchups against particular teams can be factors in the individual performance, and the fantasy fan must take into account these and other issues when making their drafting or lineup decisions. While luck and gut instinct can be involved, the fantasy fan often needs to adopt a player-centric mentality in order to be successful consistently, a perspective that requires research, analysis, and a strategic approach to playing the game.

The analytical approach that some fantasy fans apply to the game is similar in method to Talmudic Scholars, who spend lifetimes analyzing the texts of the Talmud. Fantasy sports fans view the events themselves as texts that require interpretation for fantasy implications, much like Talmudic scholars search for meanings within their religious readings. Moreover, specific doctrines within the Talmud illuminate a close relationship between the literature and fantasy sports participation. For example, economics scholars Ohrenstein and Gordon have analyzed the economic theory implications of the Talmud and found that Talmudic Scholars’ demonstrated foresight with their treatment of economic concepts such as profit and loss, uncertainty, and risk. In fantasy, owners view finding sleepers, players with the potential for excellent value compared to their draft position or auction price, as an intriguing challenge and the key to winning a fantasy competition. Confronting issues like profit and loss, risk, and uncertainty are built into the game’s design.

Given the demographic group that plays fantasy, the influence of scholarly skills on the competition is an essential component of its attractiveness. As college graduates with
professional occupations, fantasy sports enables these fans to apply their research, analytical, and predictive skills to an activity based on their sports fan hobby. Moreover, most of them are no longer in peak athletic condition and therefore cannot compete at the same level in sport as their younger years. The fantasy sports concept provides them a competitive outlet that tests their intellectual rather than athletic skills. In the draft, on the waiver wire, and with trades, the fantasy fan’s smarts are on display for the other members of the league to commend or criticize.

While the scholarship component is a critical appeal of the concept, if the participants that studied the most always won, the game’s appeal would likely be minimal. It’s the uncertainty of the outcomes that also helps generate fan interest and keep the target audience engaged.

**Gambling**

The next persuasive element of the fantasy sports concept is gambling, which is an activity well known for its addictive qualities. Those that gamble on sports literally invest in the outcome of a sporting event, creating an incentive for them to watch and participate regardless of whether their favorite team or athlete is playing. Sports lend themselves to gambling as fans can place wagers on the full slate of a day’s games, giving the fan a reason to watch regardless of the matchup. Placing a bet on an NFL game, for instance, can heighten interest in the event, even if the game is between two of the worst teams in the league.

The fantasy sports industry is hesitant to use the term gambling to describe its activity. Gambling, after all, is considered to be a game of chance, whereas fantasy sports are largely known as games of skill. Jason Pliml, president of Mock Draft Central contends, “Because I’ve
been able to consistently finish in the top two or three in almost every fantasy league I’m in, there obviously is skill involved…otherwise, I’d be randomly all over the place, and I’m not.”  

Compared with slot machines, craps, or other casino games, fantasy sports participants have more control over their fortunes, while in casinos the odds favor the house. At this point, the legal opinions in American courts also support this perspective.

Despite the industry’s reluctance in using the term, elements of gambling are built into the concept’s design – money in some leagues, pride in all leagues. The first is the ante required to participate. Fantasy sports participants typically pay an entry fee at the beginning of the season, a portion of which is awarded to the winner and perhaps even the second and third place finishers at the end of the season. In the classic sense, the fantasy player is spending money, which may be a significant sum depending on the league, to win the competition and assuming substantial risk to play, as an owner will only have a ten percent chance of winning in a ten person league.

The ante also comes in a form other than hard currency – intellectual capital – which is gambled in much the same way as dollars. By entering into a fantasy league, participants are pitting their knowledge of sports and strategic decision-making skills against the other members of the league. Because the decisions of each team are transparent to the rest of the league, management transactions and team performance are fair game for scrutiny and criticism. Many times in leagues comprised of groups of friends, losing intellectual capital, which translates into respect and bragging rights, is more damaging than the $20 or $30 paid at the beginning of the season to participate.
Whether it’s real money, intellectual capital, or both, the uncertainty of the concept also affects the fan in ways similar to gambling. As a real-time activity with an unknowable outcome, participants are making an educated guess on how individual athletes will perform, investing in the statistical potential of a set of athletes in any given league. While a fantasy gamer can be equipped with in-depth information and sophisticated analytical skills, the sporting events must be played and the statistics accumulated before the winners can be determined. In fantasy, no amount of preparation and analysis can guarantee player performances, and after owners set their lineups for that day’s games, their competitive fate is determined by the action on the field, which, unlike video games, they cannot control. New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, while a consistent statistical performer in fantasy football, will inevitably have games during which he underperforms or gets injured, leaving the fantasy fan without the ability to make the necessary adjustments.

The fantasy version of betting is arguably even more intense than traditional sports gambling. Fans are not simply picking a team to win; they are betting on their team. In fantasy where owners are not just betting their money, but also putting their intelligence on the line, the effects of gambling are compounded by the personal attachment fantasy fans have to their team. Fantasy teams reflect one’s identity in ways that picking which team will win in traditional gambling games do not.

Finally, gambling in fantasy sports has a delayed payoff. Most fantasy league prizes are awarded at the end of the season, requiring fantasy fans to be strategic in their approach for a number of months and make season-long projections on their players. In fantasy, there is less risk than in traditional sports gambling, as fans have the protection if they make a personnel
mistake in the draft or free agency. For example, if one team makes a poor trade in fantasy hockey, it is unlikely that this one move will ruin the entire season for the participant; there are still 10 other players on the team and a host of other personnel possibilities for the rest of the season. As opposed to gambling on one day’s games, playing fantasy sports is a long-term activity, giving the participant the freedom to make a few mistakes without major consequences.

Although fantasy sports are not considered legally as gambling, the concept does include some of the critical elements of the activity, which contribute to developing the avid and obsessed behaviors of the fantasy fan. The final persuasive component – customization – pulls together all three of the elements discussed above.

**Customization**

Customization is the final persuasive component of the fantasy sports concept. With the emphasis on athletes’ individual statistics, fantasy sports create a fan experience that is different from the more traditional conceptions of sports entertainment, where wins and losses of real teams drive fan satisfaction. In fantasy, the fan builds his or her own custom sports team and competes in a league where the conventional understandings of sport do not apply in the same manner. For example, in the traditional game of baseball, two teams of nine players compete against one another, and the team that scores the most runs wins. In fantasy baseball, wins and losses are determined not by intangibles like team chemistry or a hustling mentality but by the accumulation of individual numbers like WHIP. It’s a concept that encourages the fan to view sports from a personalized perspective – watching their own team of athletes play – that runs counter to the mainstream mass audience sports experience.
The concept asks fans to view the sports world in a way that de-emphasizes team performance. In a fantasy basketball game on CBS Sportsline, for example, there is a weekly column titled “Basketball Planner” that includes a section on “Five Teams with Favorable Matchups.” The description of the section states:

The following five teams have the best matchups for the upcoming week. That doesn’t necessarily mean they will post the best Fantasy stats, but if you’re looking for a one-week start or are trying to make a difficult decision between two players to use, lean toward players from these teams.\(^{32}\)

The advice from the CBS Sportsline expert makes no prediction of whether the teams will win or lose. The focus here is on how individual players on the five teams will perform statistically against their opponents. For example, a team the expert suggests is the Atlanta Hawks, one of the worst teams in terms of wins and losses in the NBA that season.\(^{33}\) However, because of their opponents’ personnel and offensive or defensive strategies, members from the Hawks team are predicted to accumulate positive statistics. As this example suggests, fantasy sports promotes analysis of sports in ways that reconfigure the traditional conception of sports fandom, keeping fans interested even in teams that are underperforming.

The game also offers a customized experience because it enables participants to make transactions that not only ignore certain league rules but are also simply unrealistic in professional sports. “The Mailbag,” which is a common fantasy content forum where a fantasy
sports expert answers questions from fantasy owners, demonstrates this point. In this example, the question posed to the NFL expert Michael Fabiano is:

“I have a friend who lives and dies with the Seattle Seahawks and he loves Shaun Alexander, who I happen to have in our league. He has offered me Frank Gore, Hines Ward and Alge Crumpler in exchange for Alexander, Javon Walker and Heath Miller. I think the move improves me at wide receiver and tight end, so should I make the deal?”

In the real world of the NFL, this trade is impossible, as all these players are on different teams. Moreover, there are other variables such as the player’s contract, player positions, and fit on a new team that have to be factored into any trade. In fantasy sports, on the other hand, participants own players from multiple teams and can trade them without logistical consequences. These unrealistic rules reframe the sporting event as a customized experience that allows the participant to create all-star teams with player combinations that may satisfy certain fan curiosities to see how so-called dream teams of athletes would perform together.

The customization of fan experiences with fantasy sports is also evident in the representation of sporting events in the online form. Through most online fantasy sports providers, fans can monitor their teams with game tracking technology. In an eight team fantasy basketball league, for example, the game tracker webpage tracks the scores of all four games for the league during each week’s period, and owners can follow the scores from their own matchup and the others around the league, as scores are updated in real time simultaneously with the NBA game. In this format, the basketball game is reconfigured into a spectator experience that tracks
numbers accumulating on a computer screen. The players’ points, rebounds, assists, steals, blocks, and turnovers totals are changing constantly as the actual games progress. Although this fan experience can be combined with watching a game on television or cell phone or listening to it on the radio, the game is reinterpreted through the fantasy sports competitions, offering another lens to view the sporting event that focuses on individual athlete performance and the fantasy participant’s own team.

The experience that fantasy sports offers fans is critical in an era when the entertainment industry is moving toward customization. That audiences can sign on to YouTube or scan hundreds of television channels and make entertainment decisions from a wide range of options is a trend that the concept of fantasy sports reinforces. Rather than passively following one’s favorite team, fantasy fans create their own sports experience in tandem with the real sporting event but with different rules and interactions. As a result, fantasy fans become the writers, actors, producers, and directors of their own sports entertainment in ways that blur the lines between fiction and reality.

In summary, the concept of fantasy sports has four critical persuasive components – vicarious experience, scholarship, gambling, and customization – each of which contributes to the avid behaviors of fantasy fans. However, the persuasiveness of the concept itself is only one principal driver in the engagement of the fantasy fan. Playing fantasy sports is as much about the game as it is about the communication experiences that surround it. In the next section, these communication experiences and the ways they influence the avid behaviors of the fantasy fan are analyzed.
The Communication Experience

Fantasy leagues are highly communal social networks often consisting of groups of friends, family, and co-workers. They are generally formed by word of mouth; one person invites a couple people to play, who then spread the word to others who may be interested, and so on until the league collectively feels comfortable with the size and personalities of its members.35 While public leagues certainly exist, the private, invitation-only fantasy leagues have historically made up the majority and are the focus of this analysis.

Another characteristic of fantasy sports communities is the gender of the participants. In the past, the number of fantasy sports fans has been overwhelmingly male, with women comprising only about four to eight percent of the participant base.36 As fantasy sports have become mainstream, while the percentage of women playing the game has risen, fantasy sports league participation is still primarily a male-dominated communication phenomenon and represents an important site for communication inquiry.

For the male-only fantasy sports communities, it is not just the game that is compelling the participants to become highly engaged but also the communication and social experiences that the activity engenders. That only 56% of fantasy winners in 2006 received cash for their achievements is an important indicator of the impact of other factors on the fantasy experience.37 In this section, I analyze the communication practices of fantasy sports fans from both a community and individual perspective and then examine the case of the fantasy draft, the seminal event of the fantasy season. By examining both the community and individual level as well as how these practices operate in the draft, the impact of the communication around fantasy games on fan engagement is demonstrated.
Community Building

Fantasy sports are a common activity around which community interaction can be ignited or reignited. The game is a form of communication content that does not require disclosure of personal feelings, yet still has the potential to bond men together, and because of new communication technologies, it can reconnect men with their friends, families, and co-workers anywhere in the world. In addition, it can maintain those social connections throughout the sports seasons. In this sense, fantasy sports serves as a mechanism by which community can be established and built for men in both their personal and professional lives.

Because of the overwhelmingly male composition of fantasy leagues, studies of interpersonal communication among men can be used as a resource in reading and analyzing fantasy sports communities. The prior research on the communication of males among small groups has indicated that men tend to form relationships and establish closeness by participating in common activities. This is in contrast to women, who commonly establish closeness by personal talk. For example, Mellstrom studied how men communicated, interacted, and formed bonds around technologies such as motorbikes and cars. The men used these common activities to build relationships and sustain them through the passion generated from their work with these technologies. Much of the prior research on this topic shows that men are not likely to bond by spending time chatting; there must be some common activity around which communication interactions can be stimulated.

The desire for men to form exclusive communities with one another is not unprecedented. For example, Robert Bly, author of *Iron John: A Book about Men*, has for decades been a leader
of the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement. He has served as an icon for male empowerment and spirituality and in the past has organized all-male retreats into the wilderness away from women and the stresses of the workplace so that men could reconnect with their masculinity. Other examples of men’s movements include Pro-Feminist and Promise Keepers, which also provide forums for men to bond with one another.

Since the fantasy fan is predominantly male, fantasy sports participation helps foster male-only community interaction by keeping groups of friends or families connected. The advancements in communication technologies enables leagues to form regardless of geographic location, meaning that many groups use the fantasy league to keep in touch with one another. It’s not uncommon for a fantasy player to participate against all men in three or four leagues, each comprised of people whom he knew from high school, college, and current or former jobs. These leagues even become a ritual of the participant’s life. For example, one man uses his annual fantasy football leagues to reconnect with friends, family and former co-workers living in Tennessee, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Indiana, Las Vegas, Nebraska, Japan, and Sweden. He notes, “We haven’t really talked since January. Now I’ll get an update on how people are doing. It's nice because you're able to communicate with a large group of people, and you don't have to devote a huge amount of time to calling them.” In the age of the Internet, fantasy sports are establishing closeness among the participants that in many ways are a new form of male bonding and communication.

The connections among males that fantasy sports establish are common outcomes in other leagues, with some stories of these tight male communities often being celebrated in the popular press. For example, New York Times reporter Tyler Kepner has played in a fantasy
football league with his friends since 1991. As Kepner writes, “The numbers are fun, but the purpose of the league is something we never imagined in 1991. The continuity and tradition give us a reason to stay connected, wherever we are. I have never wished to redraft each year, or to include team defense, or to pay hundreds of dollars for the privilege.” In this example, as with other fantasy leagues, fantasy participation serves a nostalgic purpose, reconnecting the participants with childhood memories and upholding a social tradition not unlike Thanksgiving Day.

In this fantasy fan culture, the social attraction of being a part of a community is a principal driver. In fact, the number one cited reason for fans joining fantasy leagues is to play with their friends. This highly social activity allows the fantasy sports league to serve a variety of purposes: connect or reconnect groups of friends and establish closer and stronger bonds among the group. For example, the CRAS fantasy football league was created by a member seeking to stay connected with his college friends as well as his family. CRAS stands for the Coach Randy’s All-Stars, a reference to Randy Walker, the now-deceased football coach of the Northwestern Wildcats, the commissioner’s alma mater. The league is comprised of fellow Northwestern graduates, people who are friends with Northwestern graduates, and various family members of the commissioner and other members. CRAS is a vehicle through which the participants maintain and build out their community, and without the league, it is likely that the friends and family would interact less with one another.

The same connective qualities of fantasy leagues on the personal level are also operating in the professional sphere. As fantasy sports become more accepted into the mainstream, they are increasingly moving into corporate America as an effective community-building and
networking tool. This increasing presence of fantasy in corporate environments, where preexisting relationships among coworkers often do not exist, demonstrates the ways that fantasy sports can connect its participants.

This was not always the case. For most of fantasy sports history, there has been a resistance to the idea of fantasy sports in the workplace. The argument against fantasy in the workplace is that owners are so ensnared by the game that they fail to concentrate on their jobs during the day and instead are managing their teams, resulting in a loss of productivity. This lack of productivity is quantified annually by employment consulting company Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., which indicated that companies could lose $1.1 billion per week in productivity during the 2006 NFL season because of fantasy football. That number was based on their estimate that workers tend to spend an average of 10 minutes per day managing their teams at work. As the prior research on fantasy participation indicates, as well as anecdotal observation, 10 minutes per day is an overwhelmingly low estimate, meaning that the loss of productivity could very well be more than the $1.1 billion per week figure.

Despite the Challenger, Gray & Christmas study, which has received questions about its methodology, companies and employees are increasingly recognizing the positive effects of fantasy sports on community building and networking. In 2006, 53% of fantasy players agreed that “fantasy sports is a positive influence in my workplace,” up from 36% in 2005. And 61% of owners agreed that “fantasy sports participation increases the camaraderie among employees at my workplace,” up from 40% in 2005. As these two statistics indicate, fantasy sports are gaining acceptance as a way to bond people with seemingly no relationship and build community among people who otherwise might not interact.
The connective effects of fantasy football in the workplace have even spawned a book about the subject titled *Fantasy Kick: Leverage the Networking Opportunities of Fantasy Football to Give Your Career the Kick It Needs* by Michael Henby. The author claims about fantasy football, “It creates relationships with people who may not normally have a relationship with each other. Maybe you’ve got one guy in marketing and another person in operations. It enables them to step outside their normal work structure and create a relationship that may not have existed before.” According to Henby, fantasy football can also be used as a networking tool. He developed what he calls “The Networking Dynamic of Fantasy Football,” in which he explains, “If one puts more efforts into their networking efforts, it will not only help their career, but it will also help their fantasy football team.” Whether the theory has any merit is less important than what the author is using fantasy football to explain. The connective and community building quality of fantasy sports make playing the game more than just about winning but also moving upward in various workplace communities.

Moreover, playing fantasy sports in the professional world is now becoming an important part of one’s personal brand. As Dan Grogan has observed, “It’s almost a badge of honor to play fantasy football now, to be a member of a league…I worked at a company too. There was one fantasy league. The CEO was in it, all the top management, and people thought if you’re in that league you’re sort of buddy buddy.” Particularly in the professional environment, fantasy sports participation can be related to one’s identity, meaning that the leagues that one plays in and how they perform reflect on their personality and how they’re known in the corporate world.

In both the personal and professional space, fantasy leagues connect the male participants in ways that other activities do not. The league structure creates private spaces where only these
men can interact, a virtual clubhouse with its own rituals of behaviors. In this way, through
the competition and communication around the game, the men establish a closer sense of
community. How this community is established through interpersonal communication is
discussed next.

*Trash Talk*

The communication that occurs within fantasy leagues is also an important site for
analysis. Like any community, there are specific languages, codes, and social cues that develop
within these groups of males, often creating separate worlds and identities around which the
participants interact. Fantasy leagues offer a space for interpersonal communication among men
that is shielded from other people, resulting in a boys club dynamic that is a major contributor to
the engagement of fantasy fans.

In fantasy leagues, the communication among men occurs mostly online through message
boards and email lists. If members want to propose a trade, spark controversy within the league,
or start a conversation about current issues in professional sports, they can post to the board and
their message is available for the rest of the members in the league to read. There are no
restrictions on the numbers of messages one can post, and the activity on the message boards on
some days may be so intense that emails can outnumber actual work-related issues.

The practice of communicating on message boards is generally termed “trash talk,”
which also refers to the banter that takes place in real sporting events. The topics of trash talk
can be about the game itself and one another’s teams, but in many cases, it shifts to personal
issues and histories among the groups. Typical trash talk statements might be in the spirit of
“Your team sucks” or “Your girlfriend is ugly.” However, trash talk can be even more graphic, such as, “I got you this week. I’m gonna beat your stacked team with my pussy team. I’m gonna bite your ear off and eat your children. Remember when Evander had two ears????” The community building potential of fantasy sports may seem somewhat ironic because of the trash talk that takes place on some fantasy league message boards. However, given the way males communicate, meaningful interaction is usually occurring despite the often offensive comments.

Trash talk serves a variety of purposes: It can stimulate discussion, show signs of affection or distaste for one another, signal the insecurity of a participant, bond the league together or divide it apart, and provide more entertainment than the actual game itself. However, in the context of this study, there are two main functions of trash talk that are important to consider: Trash talk enables men in fantasy leagues to reestablish their masculinity, and it imports athletic competition into the online space, serving as a form of a rhetorical battle.

First, trash talk in fantasy leagues helps men act out and reestablish their masculinity in a private space. A characteristic of male communities is that the participants develop a language that is specific to the group and often emphasizes profanity and reinforces traditional gender roles as a way of communicating. For example, Benwell illustrated how the men’s magazine has become a popular medium for communication among men because it creates and validates a form of masculine identity. Benwell specifically examines language in letters to the editor in which profanity and insults are used to not only formulate masculine identities but also establish social bonds. In addition, Greenbaum analyzed the dramatic representation of masculine communication in writer David Mamet’s play and film *Glengarry Glen Ross*. In the analysis of
Mamet’s work, Greenbaum demonstrates the ways that the male characters use language that denigrates women to communicate with one another. She writes, “The misogynist language that permeates the drama, and the vilification of women, or more precisely, the essence of women (since women do not actually appear in the play), serves to heighten the play’s binary oppositions between culturally defined notions of masculinity (both trait and normative perspectives) and femininity.”

Both Benwell’s and Greenbaum’s work are examples of the ways that males, when in a private setting, communicate with one another often using profanity, insults, and misogynistic language.

Many of the same male communication behaviors are evident in all-male fantasy sports leagues, where participants are provided a forum to act out their masculinity. For example, in one of the few academic studies of fantasy sports participation, Davis and Duncan did exploratory research on fantasy sports leagues, examining the trash talk on the message board for several leagues. They concluded, “that participants did indeed use fantasy sport participation as a means of reaffirming their masculinity.” Moreover, they write, “It became clear that through the harsh, sexist vernacular used by participants in the league on message boards and common interaction, as well as the nature and relative paucity of female participation, fantasy sport leagues have become a site for reinforcing traditional gender roles in a patriarchal domain of American society – the sport domain.” For the authors, who consider the question from a sociological perspective, the need of males to establish and assert their masculine identity is a major contributor to fantasy sports fan engagement.

As a result, the chance to trash talk among male league friends is often a primary attraction for fantasy participation. In explaining why he developed the concept for his
company, Draft Dynamix, founder Ted Kasten recounted, “I had started a league with buddies that I grew up with and we sort of lost touch over the years. We were in different cities all over the country and we used fantasy football to get back in touch, talk football, talk trash, be guys.” Here, Kasten is equating talking trash with being a man and demonstrating that it is a dominant means of communication. In addition, companies have begun emphasizing trash talk in their advertising messages to attract male players seeking camaraderie and a bonding experience. For example, on bodogfantasy.com, this pitch is made: “Get everything you need to challenge your friends, stay on top of the latest stats, and trash talk your way to fantasy sports glory.” As in Kasten’s comments, talking trash is positioned as a central component of fantasy participation and suggests to the customer that he will have the opportunity to participate in an active, guys-only culture while playing the game. For both fans and companies, talking trash as a way to act out masculinity is an essential component of fantasy sports participation.

The second major function of trash talk is that it imports athletics into the online space, serving as a rhetorical competition among the participants. Trash talk has always been evident in real sports. Players on all levels from recreational leagues to the pros have historically used it as a form of intimidation, motivation, camaraderie, bravado, and/or taunting. In athletic competitions, when a basketball player is shooting free throws and an opponent makes a comment about his mother or when a football player guarantees a victory before a game, that can be qualified as trash talk. In short, any comments about opponents that are perceived as negative are generally regarded as trash talk.

While fantasy sports is of course a non-physical competition, trash talk still occurs in fantasy leagues, but often with a different objective than in the real games. Because of the
posting activity, the message board has become an important site for further competition among the members in a digital community. In this sense, the space for debate reenacts the competitive performances of athletics, where playing skills are being replaced by the ability to think, write, and argue in the online space. It is an extension of the competitive nature of athletics to a “talking trash” forum that has different rules of play but arguably no less emphasis on winning. A “real man” in fantasy sports is someone who can criticize other members of the league and defend himself in rhetorical battles. As a result, fantasy sports have become a vehicle for male communication and a place for males to act out competitive desires through their argumentative performance.

In this sense, trash talk becomes an art form where the participants assume the roles of critics and performers. For example, offering his perspective on the practice, New York Times reporter John Woods writes, “The best trash talk, in my view, is layered and nuanced. And it doesn’t focus only on your opponent’s team. It picks apart your opponent. The idea is to create a shock-and-awe-scale blizzard of nonsense, and the goal is to make your opponent drop his hands from his keyboard in exasperation.”Interestingly, Woods makes no mention of the actual fantasy competition itself, as under this model, trash talk becomes another competition that is independent of the fantasy sports game and has its own set of rules and expectations.

An example of the rhetorical competition element of trash talk in the online space is the debate between team Meat and team How Now Brown Cows in the Coach Randy’s All Stars fantasy football league. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I was a member of the league, but rarely engaged in communication on the message board.) In this example, Meat was the college friend of the commissioner’s and How Now Brown Cows the commissioner’s brother. The debate
initially started over Meat’s exceptional record four weeks into the season, which he made known to the entire league through a message post with the subject “Meat on Top.” After a few other posts touting his superiority, How Now Brown Cows responded with ad hominem attacks, invoking comments about Meat’s occupation, relationships with females, and current living status. Meat then retaliated, and a series of emails ensued with both participants responding to one another’s arguments with counter-arguments. Eventually, the commissioner of the league adjudicated the performance with an analysis of the two debaters and concluded that How Now Brown Cows was the winner.57

The charges and counter-charges that took place in this debate had little to do with the game of fantasy football or the sport of football in general. If it were about the competitive performance of each team, there would have been no argument, as at the time Meat was undefeated and How Now Brown Cows was at the bottom of the standings. However, although the Cows were a terrible team, his argumentative skills on the message board helped compensate for his lack of wins in the league. And for the rest of the league members who read the competition as it unfolded, they awarded bragging rights to How Now Brown Cows for his efforts.

Rhetorical competition can also come in other forms. In commissioner leagues, which are customized by one person and on an invitation-only basis, some members take the responsibility to write newsletters or post weekly awards. For example, in the CRAS league, the commissioner released weekly awards that both praised and ridiculed the league’s performers. The standard weekly awards post would include the following categories: most valuable player, least valuable player, best decision to start, worst decision to start, and the JJ Redick “Shocker of
the Week.” In each of the categories, the commissioner would select a winner (or loser) and offer his perspective on the selection. For example, in one post he writes:

LVP - Joseph Addai and Deshaun Foster, Twisted Sisker – Johnny and I must have spent a combined 18 hours talking about the CRAS playoffs while I had nothing to do at work and Johnny was planning what to wear to the Law and Order Holiday Party. Perhaps Johnny should have spent less time yucking with me and more time coaching up his running backs. His [running backs] stunk worse than the sausage squad after a burrito Saturday. Maybe Addai and Foster spent too much time on [his company’s] terrific number one hit website www.hornymanitee.com (I'm not making that up - at least [the] website).58

Aside from illustrating the amount of time the commissioner and others spend on fantasy football, this award also makes fun of Johnny for being neglectful, calls back to an inside joke among the participants with the sausage squad mention, and also references Johnny’s job at the time. In one section of the post, the commissioner creates a dialogue that fosters communication among the owners and calls back to past memories of the group’s interactions. In fact, several times throughout the season, the weekly awards stimulated enough controversy that other owners wrote their own version. It is this kind of content production that engages the members of the league in an ongoing dialogue about the performance of one’s teams, which then leads to the resurfacing of past jokes and current updates. Moreover, it also turns into another site of
competition, as some of the members often rewrote the weekly awards or wrote their own version to give themselves a voice in the discussion.\textsuperscript{59}

The concept of trash talk is interestingly enough an almost universal concept in fantasy sports. In fact, as part of the mainstreaming of the games, media companies deliberately build into their websites areas where trash talk can occur. For example, for the 2007 fantasy football season, ESPN had “Smack Boards” and “Smack Cards” with which owners can use to talk smack, a euphemism for trash.\textsuperscript{60} Ultimately, the popularity of trash talk is not incidental to the digitization of the games. It is far more convenient and perhaps permissible to make disparaging comments on a message board where there’s no face-to-face communication.

In the context of fantasy engagement, interpersonal communication among men, which occurs in the form of trash talk in fantasy leagues, is significant because it demonstrates another persuasive factor of the communication experience around fantasy sports. As discussed in this section, trash talk serves two primary functions: it enables men to reestablish their masculinity in a private space and imports athletics into the online world. This interpersonal communication element helps fuel the avid and obsessed behaviors of the fantasy fan. As an illustration of how communication operates not only on the interpersonal level but also the community level, consider the case of the fantasy draft in which owners participate before the fantasy season begins.

\textit{The Draft}

In \textit{Knocked Up}, one of the hit summer movies of 2007, Pete’s wife, Debbie, suspects that he is cheating on her with another woman. His secretive behavior, coupled with frequent
nighttime meetings that he claims are part of his job as a music producer, compel her to follow him one evening to what he says was a concert of a potential client. As it turns out, Pete lied; he went to a suburban house in the Los Angeles area, an act that was beginning to confirm his wife’s suspicion. But as she broke into the house, seeking to catch him in the act, she found him not with another woman, but with a number of other men in a cramped room, with paper strewn about and a flip chart in the center, participating in their annual fantasy baseball draft. For Pete, he viewed fantasy baseball as the only time in which he could be away from his wife, children, and job and telling his wife about the hobby would defeat the activity’s purpose of creating a separate space that belongs only to him.61

Although Pete’s situation is a dramatization of fantasy sports participation, it does reflect the importance of the social component of fantasy sports participation as a central driver in its popularity. Particularly for the male who fits the average fantasy sports fan demographic profile, fantasy sports serve as a social outlet that combines both competition and male interaction and usually takes place within a private setting. In many ways, fantasy sports leagues have become another iteration of boys clubs and fraternities.

The symbol for the social experiences that surround fantasy play is the draft, the most important day of the season in almost every league. When fantasy participants were asked what was the best part of the fantasy sports season, the draft was the second favorite moment, next to winning the championship.62 It is a day when fantasy owners choose their teams for the upcoming season and the hopes for every fantasy franchise’s future prospects are high.

Before discussing the social experience component of the draft, the background on how it works is important to note. The formats of drafts vary. The most popular is the traditional snake
or serpentine draft, which is similar to the drafts the major professional leagues use to add new prospects. Depending on the sport and the number of players needed for each team, fantasy owners select one player for each round, with the only difference from professional leagues being that the first pick in the first round will receive the last pick in the second round. This is unlike the NFL, for example, where the Oakland Raiders picked first overall in 2007 but also had the first pick in the second round. Another popular draft format is the auction, which is designed to simulate free agency spending and salary cap rules and restrictions. Owners are allotted a certain amount of money and the athletes are auctioned among the league. This draft requires owners to manage their imaginary salary cap number and make decisions with monetary constraints similar to real-life general managers. In both formats, drafts take a long period of time to complete, lasting anywhere from three hours to all day to several weeks.

In the context of fantasy play, the draft is critical because it usually determines how the team will perform in the season. If an owner has a poor draft, it is likely that the team’s record will suffer for at least the first few weeks of competition. Although there are ways to improve a team during the year such as adding and dropping players, a very unsuccessful draft usually means a difficult season. Understanding the importance of the fantasy draft from the perspective of the game, many fantasy fans find themselves preparing for the draft for hours doing research on past statistical trends, off-season transactions, and performance projections.

In addition to the importance of the draft to the performance of fantasy teams, the social experience that it fosters is also a principal driver of its appeal. Because it is the day when owners construct their teams, the draft requires the participation of all members of the league.
As a result, it’s usually the only time during the season when all of the members of the league are together in one place, either physical or virtual.

As the fantasy season’s seminal participatory event, owners often build social gatherings around the draft. Some leagues view the draft as an opportunity for a reunion, making the event an annual excursion to Las Vegas, New York, or any other destination that would be classified as a vacation. For example, the World Championship of Fantasy Football, the fantasy version of the World Series of Poker, hosts drafts every year in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Orlando, where thousands of participants turn the event into a weekend-long party. Smaller scale gatherings among hometown friends in the basement of one of the owners are also common, as are workplace drafts at local bars or restaurants. Steve “Dr. A” Alexander, a fantasy expert, writes about the meaning of what the drafts are to some participants, “There’s nothing better than getting 12 guys together to suck down beers, talk trash, and try to put together a winning team.”

As this comment demonstrates, drafts are typically guys-only events, similar perhaps to bachelor parties, and a sanctioned time of year when the fantasy-playing audience can be away from their other responsibilities.

In the new virtual world of fantasy sports, drafts also take place on the Internet, increasing the possibilities for people to participate in leagues regardless of their geographic location. As a result, software products such as Mock Draft Central, Draft Dynamix, and Fantasy Auctioneer have been created that leagues can use to not only prepare for the draft but also host and manage the draft for their league. Moreover, all of the mainstream companies offer online drafts. The advantage of the Internet draft is that it allows people to draft online and still have similar social experiences, without the party atmosphere of course. In most online draft
applications, users see everything that is transpiring in the draft in real-time and participate almost as if they’re in the same room with one another by talking in a chat room. These Internet applications have been developed to support constant, real-time communication with the various members of the league, and help to recreate the offline drafting experience for leagues with members that are often separated by thousands of miles.

While the ritual of the draft as an exclusive gathering and community-building event is important, the other component in the social experience of the draft is the debate and strategy that takes place during the event. Because men usually communicate around shared interests or a common activity, the draft enables participants to engage in a social experience based on the selection of players for one another’s teams. It places the owners into reasonably pressurized situations where their moves and decisions are available for fellow owners to praise or criticize, and, seemingly inevitably, certain picks, strategies, or comments become inside-joke material for the league going forward.

The concept of the draft, by its very nature, stimulates communication and interest among the participants. As an example of the entertainment elements of the draft, the National Football League Draft for the real league can offer some insight. The NFL Draft has become an entertainment event full of stars, action, and drama without any football even being played. Set in New York’s Radio City Music Hall, fans sell-out the stands, wear their favorite team’s jersey, and cheer and boo draft decisions as if they were at a real NFL game. And the fans watching on television at home, who have historically outnumbered the average audience for the NBA playoff games and MLB regular season games, join in on the criticisms as if they’re watching American Idol.65
The NFL draft is successful in attracting fans in part because of the discourse that it generates. The draft centers on the unknowable, as teams, draft experts, and fans will not see the results of the picks for another four months at least (when the season starts) or, more likely, two to three years. This uncertainty leaves every pick open for debate and speculation without any evidence proving anyone wrong, including the fans. It is the one time of the football season when every team, including the worst, has hope that it can turn its fortunes around for the future.

The appeal of the fantasy draft is similar, but arguably more engaging. As Jason Pliml observes, “If people will sit around and watch a draft happen on tv, you’ve got to be kidding me. If you can actually participate in it, how much better is that?” While Pliml is of course biased, as his business is a draft company, his point suggests that fantasy drafts allow audiences to actively engage in their sports entertainment in a way that simply watching a draft on television unfold does not. Moreover, not only do fantasy fans become the same general managers and team presidents that are making the decisions on draft day, but they’re also interacting with an event that is built on speculation. No one will know the results of their picks until the games start, giving each fantasy fan the illusion that they have the potential to win the league. Drafts by their very nature are interactive and give fans little evidence that suggests that their team will not be competitive.

An illustration of how the draft serves as a social experience for male owners is an NFL fantasy commercial for the 2006 season. It was the draft of a fantasy league taking place in what appeared to be the prototypical suburban home of the average fantasy fan. All the men were sitting around in the living room when it came to the pick of an overly-eager, self-esteem-compensating owner. He announced confidently that with the fifth pick in the sixth round he
was taking Cincinnati Bengals wide receiver TJ Houshmandzadeh, admittedly a difficult-to-pronounce name but one that the man embarrassingly butchered several times. However, anyone with knowledge of the NFL understands how to pronounce his name, so the humor comes from this man’s inability to pronounce it after multiple tries, which included “TJ Who’s Your Mamma,” and the ways that he makes a fool of himself in front of his fellow owners. He’s an easy target, as his fantasy faux pas is not only ridiculed by other members of the room but also positioned as one of the memories of the inevitable stupid moments from draft day. If this were a real league, the mispronunciation incident would probably be a source of ridicule for the rest of the season. In many ways, this commercial places into perspective the importance of the draft as an entertainment event and the communication dynamics that operate during it.

In summary, the fantasy draft is engaging because of three factors. One, performing well in the draft is critical to having a successful fantasy team. Two, the draft is a social event that builds community and provides a forum for men to reconnect and often relive past memories. Three, the strategy involved generates discourse and debate among the participants about topics that will not be resolved until the games actually begin, providing many opportunities for participants to trash talk about their respective teams. In many ways, the draft is not only the seminal event for the participants but also the most representative of the major communication themes operating in fantasy sports.

In this section, the community building and interpersonal communication elements of fantasy sports participation were analyzed to demonstrate the importance of the communication experiences that surround the game. It was also shown how these communication practices
specifically function in the context of the draft, the defining moment for many fantasy sports leagues. In the end, because these groups are highly communal, the communication that takes places among groups of friends, family, and co-workers and the culture that is created as a result of fantasy sports participation are critical drivers of fantasy fan engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to analyze the avid and engaged behaviors of the fantasy sports fan. It was shown that the game has rhetorical characteristics – vicarious experience, scholarship, gambling, and customization – that contribute to fantasy fan avidity. In addition, the communication that occurs in fantasy sports leagues was analyzed from both the community and interpersonal perspective to demonstrate how fantasy sports foster interaction among male fantasy owners. Ultimately, the engagement of fantasy fans is not only caused by the game itself but also the communication that it generates.

The fantasy owner is an empowered audience who views and interacts with the sports world in ways that differ from conventional sports spectatorship. These fans play a game that reappropriates real athletes for their own personalized sports experience, meaning that if Seattle Mariners center fielder Ichiro Suzuki is on their team, they are likely to support him, even if they do not regularly follow the Mariners. Moreover, when fantasy fans communicate with fellow owners about sports, they are talking about their own teams, as opposed to their hometown professional team, with which they have little relationship other than the city in which they live. By playing the game, the fantasy sports fan enters into a communication world that simultaneously reflects and changes the experience, and as a result, fantasy participation
activates fans in ways that reframe sports spectatorship, allowing them to define and make choices as to their entertainment experiences.

The fantasy fan represents a new type of consumer in the digital age, one that adopts the roles of both audience and communicator. As an audience, the owner plays the game on a website, reads fantasy advice, and watches the events themselves unfold. As a communicator, the owner not only participates in message board activity but also generates content as a primary decision-maker in the fantasy game. These fans interact with the game and with one another across a number of media platforms and constantly interchange their roles, resulting in an actively engaged participant in both media and popular culture.

For institutions seeking to communicate with fantasy fans, they are charged with managing the dual communicator and audience roles that owners increasingly adopt. How the fantasy sports industry attempts to respond to this challenge and others and connect with the fantasy market is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter Four

The Fantasy Sports Industry

Although it had been in existence for eight years, the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) did not host its first major business conference until the winter of 2007. In the past, members of the advisory board as well as a few entrepreneurs gathered informally to network and discuss issues going forward, but there was never a large-scale effort to reach out to an emerging group of people working or interested in the industry. After a meeting of the board in 2006, the organization made a decision, by a narrow vote, to host a conference in Chicago the following year.¹

The 2007 conference was unlike anything the organization had ever experienced. More than 220 people from around the world traveled to the event for the opportunity to meet one another, network, and form partnerships to generate new business. Members of the mainstream media came to cover it. And researchers were there to find out how the industry works. At almost all times throughout the one and a half day conference, the main ballroom was packed, the break area was cluttered with event sponsors showcasing their products, and the lobby was filled with people in conversations and negotiations. “It’s night and day from what it was in the past,” said Jeff Thomas, president of the FSTA.²

The bustling conference symbolized in many ways the rapid transformation of fantasy sports from a fringe amateur game to a billion dollar industry in only a matter of years. In search of ways to capitalize on the exploding industry, entrepreneurs and mainstream companies attended as well as fantasy pioneers who had been in the business since the beginning. It was a dynamic of which Jason Pliml, one of the old guard, observed, “It’s very interesting to be the old
guy when I’ve only been in the industry for 5 years. It just goes to show how new and quickly evolving it’s been. It’s a very much infant industry grown up very fast.”

The evidence of the industry’s maturation was everywhere. Mark Tobias, president of Pantheon Software, gave a presentation on how the FSTA needs to begin viewing itself as a brand and organizing all of the companies in the business into one voice. Glenn Colton, lead lawyer of the amicus brief filed on the FSTA’s behalf in the CBC Distribution and Marketing vs. MLBAM case, updated the organization’s members on the progress of the case. And Matt Lederer, marketing manager for Sprint, participated on a panel discussing his company’s commitment to integrating fantasy into their marketing strategy.

Despite the many reasons for optimism in the industry’s growth, there was still an unresolved tension that was palpable throughout the event. While the involvement of mainstream companies and brands had helped expand the fantasy marketplace, smaller companies appeared increasingly threatened by the distribution and marketing power of the major players. Moreover, the mainstreaming process and how it would ultimately affect the customer base of empowered fantasy owners was still a critical, unanswered problem that underlay the conference proceedings.

This chapter examines the rapidly emerging fantasy sports industry and analyzes the various ways it communicates with fantasy owners. First, the industry and the various sectors that comprise it is defined. Then, the specific challenges that face the fantasy sports industry in communicating with fans is examined. Next, six case studies of how fantasy companies are seeking to meet those challenges and connect with fantasy fans are examined, including an extended analysis of how a mainstream company, ESPN, is communicating with the fantasy fan.
Finally, the research is synthesized and an analysis of effective communication and marketing in the fantasy space is offered. Ultimately, it will be demonstrated that the fantasy sports industry plays the role of a facilitator of fan culture rather than an exploiter of fan culture, a positioning that not only gives fans an illusion of control in the communication interaction but also helps institutions manage the increasing commercialization of fantasy sports.

**Fantasy Products and Services**

The fantasy sports industry consists of businesses offering a wide range of differentiated goods. Generally speaking, however, the industry’s products and services can be divided into two main categories: contests and content.

Fantasy sports businesses that run contests provide fans the technology that manages league play, building websites that allow fans to play the game on the Internet. They aggregate all the statistics, keep score for the league, maintain the standings, support drafts, and enable owners to make transactions including trades and adding and dropping players. These contest services are often available in a business-to-consumer version, meaning that fans play the game directly on the company’s website, as well as a business-to-business variation, as the company may run a contest for another website that does not have the technology to do so. For instance, the *USA Today’s* fantasy website is operated by Sandbox.com, a fantasy sports contest provider. This sector of the industry can be viewed as the analog to game designers and producers in the videogame industry.

Content providers are the second category of businesses in the fantasy industry. Companies in this sector generate editorial, statistical, or analytical content designed to help
fantasy owners perform better in their leagues, a service that is seemingly in constant demand from owners. Fantasy sports are a predictive game, in which the owner must be adept at making predictions which players will have individual statistical success in order to do well in their leagues. In response, the content sector has emerged to help fantasy fans with making the most reasonable estimated guesses on whom to start. That fantasy sports is an inexact science has created an opportunity for fantasy companies to enter into the market and offer advice to owners who are seeking all the information possible to make their decisions. Moreover, the general sports news is usually not sufficient for fantasy players, as the fantasy spin on coaching changes, injuries, weather, defensive matchups, trades, and other factors is often critical to improving the fantasy owners’ chances of winning. Businesses that have reconfigured real sports news into fantasy news have found a market for their information.

While the contests and content sectors of the industry have generally been separate, the involvement of mainstream companies has in some cases resulted in the merging of the two. Major players like CBS Sportsline, ESPN, and Yahoo, as well as sports properties like the NBA and NFL have become both contests sites and content providers, combining every component of fantasy play onto their own website, although often doing so ineffectually with some of the specific services. As a consequence, the industry is now defined in part by smaller companies who fall into the sectors of either contests or content and larger companies who encompass both. This forces the smaller companies to work to perfect their niche within each sector and the larger companies to try to retain quality across all their fantasy platforms.

This small company/large company dynamic is a familiar one in many industries and the strengths of the big players will continue to be the weaknesses of the smaller ones, and vice
versa. No matter what the size of the company, however, there are industry-wide challenges that face any business seeking to connect with the fantasy fan culture. In order to understand how the six companies that are analyzed in this chapter communicate with fantasy fans, it is important to first add the context of the specific problems that face the industry.

The Problem of Engaging Fantasy Fan Culture

Fantasy sports fans represent a potentially profitable opportunity for companies to capitalize on their avid and engaged behaviors. The amount of time and money they spend on the activity is attractive not only to businesses that run games or provide content but also the advertisers who are seeking access to such a valuable demographic. However, connecting with the fantasy fan culture is not as simple as entering into the market with some type of fantasy product. The fantasy industry faces a number of challenges in its attempts to connect with fantasy fan culture.

To begin, fantasy companies confront an issue that is familiar to businesses in other sectors: how to commercialize fan cultures. As a fan-developed concept with a culture that has historically existed outside the mainstream, fantasy sports have gained in popularity through the application of new technologies and the involvement of mainstream companies, but in the process, the game has become a commercialized activity. The increasing institutionalization of the game runs the risk of alienating core fans and undermining the anti-establishment spirit of the activity. After all, the fantasy industry is communicating with an empowered fan that is the “owner” of a franchise and plays in his own league with his own friends. Strategies that question this empowerment may force the fan to move his fantasy sports experience to another outlet.
The outside-the-mainstream origin of fantasy sports might also limit the potential of the industry’s growth. For much of its history, fantasy sports fans have suffered from an image problem not unlike *Star Trek* fans or Dungeons and Dragons players; they were viewed by some as nerds, computer geeks, and stat hounds who misunderstood the rituals of being a sports fan. To expand the fantasy market into other areas, the industry would have to be mindful of this perception and seek ways to change the image of the fantasy fan into a somewhat normal person. It would also have to convince casual sports fans that playing fantasy sports was actually an entertaining activity. This strategic orientation to fantasy has implications not only for the fantasy business to attract new participants but also for it to generate awareness of the activity’s potential to sponsors. Transforming fantasy sports into a legitimate and cool entertainment would help the industry continue to develop.

In addition to the image problem, the fantasy sports industry must also confront the issue of generating more revenue from the fantasy fan culture. This may seem to be an obvious challenge, as common sense for most emerging industries says that businesses must look for new ways to make money. However, because the game is a fan-developed concept, some fantasy fans are not used to paying for fantasy services. As George del Prado, founder of Fantasy Auctioneer observed, “A lot of these fans who are super engaged, I’m talking they’ll spend 7 to 10 hours a week playing the game, and yet they’re so cheap when it comes to the game.” Moreover, this refusal-to-pay situation has become a familiar one, as audiences have come to expect that Internet content is free and that any company charging on the Internet is violating the principles of the World Wide Web. From downloading music, to sharing movies, to free web content on mainstream media sites, asking people to pay for goods and services provided on the
Internet is increasingly difficult. After all, if they’re used to receiving free content, why would they willingly start paying for it? For the fantasy industry, this means finding ways to extract revenue in unconventional ways.

The revenue problem becomes particularly acute when too many fantasy companies offer similar products and services. Like most maturing industries, fantasy sports finds itself in a situation where many companies are, on the surface, producing similar experiences for fantasy fans. As a consequence, differentiation has become critical for fantasy companies seeking to connect with a customer base. Seemingly every fantasy website has content for the fantasy owner, but it’s often difficult for that site to stand out if it does not do something different from its competitors. On the content side, for instance, how many ways can you say that Alex Rodriguez is not playing tonight? As Kevin Gralen of Head2Head notes, “It’s at such a point now, we hear from our players, it’s not hard to find information, it’s hard to find good information.”

A successful product will ultimately spur imitation, but those companies seeking to survive will have to differentiate their businesses, especially as the mainstream companies enter into the marketplace with the ability to offer a variety of fantasy sports experiences.

Finally, the general issue of product growth is a factor in the problem of communicating with fantasy fans. During the explosion of fantasy sports, fantasy football overwhelmingly became the most popular game. Although baseball is a distant second, its participation numbers are healthy compared to other sports. The growth challenge for fantasy sports therefore is twofold. One, convert the existing critical mass of football players into not only baseball participants but basketball, hockey, NASCAR, or other sports, making them not just fantasy
football players but fantasy sports players. Two, attract new fans to fantasy sports, either to
the other underrepresented sports or to football, which can serve as a gateway to the other sports.

Of course, every fantasy company faces a different degree of problems. In the next
section, the specific problems and solutions for six different fantasy sports companies are
examined.

Case Studies of Fantasy Sports Communication

To understand how institutions in the fantasy sports contests and content businesses seek
to engage fantasy fan culture, six case studies based on ethnographic and analytical approaches
are analyzed. The case studies include Head2Head, Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports, Grogan’s
Fantasy Football, Fantasy Auctioneer, and Mock Draft Central. In addition, an extended case of
ESPN Fantasy is also discussed.

These six companies were chosen because they are a representative sample of the product
types in the fantasy industry. Head2Head is a smaller contest company seeking to develop its
niche and survive amidst industry growth. Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports is a new media content
provider that offers paid advice to fantasy owners. Grogan’s Fantasy Football is a traditional
print magazine attempting to remain viable in the digital age. Fantasy Auctioneer is a specialty
content product based on auction-style drafting that helps fantasy leagues execute these events
more conveniently. Mock Draft Central is another drafting company that offers a differentiated
drafting product from Auctioneer. Finally, ESPN combines both content and contests and is an
example of how a major media company is seeking to capitalize on the trends in the fantasy
industry. In total, the analysis consists of two content providers – one new media (Ready Set
Go) and one traditional media (Grogan’s); two draft companies – one for auction style (Fantasy Auctioneer) and one for snake drafting (Mock Draft Central); and two contest providers – one for the small niche players (Head2Head) and one representing the major media companies (ESPN). It is intended that these six companies serve as a fair representation of the fantasy sports industry.

Each case study considers how these companies communicate with the fantasy sports fan. Questions about audience, business models, marketing and distribution strategies, product design, and the communication process were asked to understand and analyze the ways that fantasy institutions seek to not only manage the commercialization of fantasy sports but also grow their businesses in the face of the aforementioned problems. While each of the companies has different approaches to communicating with their customers, there are similarities in the role that they play in interacting with their fans, which is demonstrated after the case studies are completed. The first case to consider is Head2Head.

**Head2Head**

Head2Head is a contest site, providing infrastructure to its users for fantasy play. The company has games for a variety of sports including baseball, football, basketball, and golf, and specializes in the salary cap format, which asks competitors to build their teams with a set amount of fictional money. Customers pay to play at Head2Head and, in addition to the infrastructure, receive customer service and other league support. As a primary service provider, Head2Head is the technology that facilitates and supports fantasy participation, or as Kevin Gralen, president of Head2Head views it, “We’re really the activation for the passion.”
The company was founded in 1994 before Internet usage increased. Like other fantasy companies, the founder, Bill Reinking, started it because he was a player and wanted to create a product for a need that he thought existed. Originally, it was a newspaper-based game; a local business sponsored the game in the newspaper and fans would enter their teams. The company would then communicate with its fans through mail, telephone or fax.

The major shift in strategy began in 1997, when the company moved more of its operations onto the Internet. While the popularity of the site was limited in the early days of the Internet, it marked the start of the growth period that not only Head2Head would experience but also the entire industry. Ultimately, its popularity as an online fantasy destination increased as more potential customers adopted the Internet and the World Wide Web became easier and more efficient to use.

In its current business operations, Head2Head targets a sports fan looking for a challenging but potentially less time-consuming activity. The company is casting a wider net, trying to attract customers to what it positions as a quality experience. In assessing this targeting strategy, Gralen says, “I view the fantasy fan not as the younger guy who’s kind of a stats nerd, but we have a real broad base of…that 40-year-old who’s a professional who does this for entertainment and isn’t sitting around staring at stolen base averages.”

Head2Head targets the segment of fantasy fan culture that is perhaps fans of a baseball team and would like to heighten their experience with the sport but not to the point where fantasy involvement will change one’s life, although that is often difficult to avoid.

To appeal to this segment and differentiate itself from its competitors, Head2Head has emphasized its product development strategies. One of the issues facing fantasy is reversing the
geek image of the activity, and this is especially important for Head2Head, which attempts to appeal to a broader group of casual sports fans. In doing so, the company seeks to create awareness that the games are not as complicated or statistically intense as they appear. In explaining this rationale, Gralen observes, “A lot of the reasons why people complain about baseball fantasy versus football is there is so much statistics and so much information out there it’s intimidating.”

While some in the industry contend that the differences in difficulty between baseball and football are largely myths, the communication problem does exist, and Head2Head has sought to develop a product that appears simpler to use and more intuitive. According to Gralen, they “try to simplify our games so that you don’t need to know exactly what WHIP is to participate in baseball.”

The specific product that Head2Head has developed and promoted is its salary cap game, which attempts to differentiate the company from many of its other competitors. Although the degree of difficulty in playing a salary cap game is arguably no less than playing a draft-style game, it is a concept that on the surface suggests that it’s easier to use and the learning curve is shorter. Gralen admits, “In appearance, you can engage a consumer if you say all you have to do is pick 10 players [in a salary cap game] instead of 27 [in a draft-style game] and I have to draft them and be online at the same time.” It’s a concept that not only may appeal to the 40-year old professional who’s looking for new ways to interact with sports but also has the residual effect of attracting the veteran fantasy player who might be bored with the draft-style game and is looking for another challenge.

Since Head2Head is a smaller company and offers a differentiated product experience from major players such as CBS Sportsline and Yahoo, the company has made a strategic
decision to charge for their service, even as the major players in the industry are moving
toward a free pricing strategy. “Our belief was we viewed that there was a position for a quality
provider – a paid quality provider in a market that was going to free,” Gralen says. “Even
though we all know it’s not free you pay for it because you’re going to get blasted with
advertising or whatever.”15 For the fantasy fan who is looking for customer service and support,
Head2Head positions itself as a value-based experience with personalized customer attention that
the larger media companies do not usually offer. If a league member has difficulty with the
website, he can call the toll free customer service number, an amenity that Yahoo Fantasy, for
example, simply does not provide.

In addition to product and pricing differentiation, Head2Head is implementing a strategy
on the basis of distribution. Although the company does still have a significant newspaper-based
business, the storefront of the company is its website, and the company has made efforts to
communicate to its target markets through a sophisticated and professional website. Gralen
emphasized the importance of the site’s appearance in his company’s strategy during the earliest
days of online fantasy sports: “When I came into the company a few years ago, one of the
concerns I had about this market was the appearance was not very professional…websites [were]
text based, crummy looking, [and had] lots of stats.”16 At the time, the mainstream media
companies had not begun systematically developing and promoting their fantasy sports
operations, and the fantasy sports industry in general was still in its earliest stages. The
competition had not developed to the point where website appearance and services were
recognized as a key differentiator.
Gralen and Head2Head were a first-mover in redefining the role of the fantasy website in the industry. After all, if fantasy sports were going to be considered as a legitimate industry and a platform for big brands and others sponsors to invest in, the websites would need to be transformed to meet the expectations of the Internet commercial world. Gralen sought to develop a website that was “cleaner, simpler, more professional.”

The current website attempts to accomplish those objectives, while also promoting its main points of differentiation. The design is a simple three-column format that showcases its main product – the games – in the first two and an advertisement in the third. The site is also accompanied by visuals of not only sporting events but also a friendly-looking, younger female wearing a headset who represents the customer service component of the company. A headline news section, announcements, and a poll make up the remaining sections of the Head2Head homepage. Moreover, the website highlights its differentiated product a the top-center-right of the page with the message “Real Competition, Big Payouts, and Member Rewards. The stuff you won’t get with free games.” With their site, the company attempts to add value to the fantasy experience by producing and managing games that are different from traditional fantasy sports experiences.

Head2Head has transformed from a newspaper-based fantasy contest provider to an Internet company that has attempted to differentiate itself with product, pricing, and distribution strategies. Despite the advances the company has made, they are competing in a crowded marketplace and trying to communicate their value to prospective audiences. As Gralen observes, “Our real challenge isn’t about operations, it’s about awareness. We do not try to
appeal to millions of people…But making people aware that Yahoo isn’t the only answer to fantasy football [is the challenge].”

In summary, Head2Head is a small, niche company that has developed a differentiated product – a salary cap game – and added customer service and website refinements in order to survive in the marketplace. In the process, it has attempted to communicate with fans by delivering a fantasy sports experience that is fairly priced and provides fans a return on their investment. Being upfront about the cost and the accompanying premium services helps the company not only earn credibility from fantasy fans but also generate revenue from Internet users who have historically been reluctant to pay for content.

Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports

Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports LLC is a new media content provider specializing in fantasy player predictions. The company has developed a special algorithm that generates personalized predictions for a fantasy owner’s team. Its primary business is targeted to consumers, but it also has a business-to-business operation, serving as a content distributor for the NFL Players Inc., AOL Sports, and Sprint. The objective of the company, as stated by co-founder Jeff Coruccini, is, “We basically want to help people win. And that’s the coolest thing in the world when somebody calls us and says, ‘Man, you helped me win my league.’” This objective, which positions the company not as a money-seeking exploiter but as a credible advisor with the owner’s best interests in mind, is the critical component of a communication and marketing strategy that is exemplified by the slogan, “We Crunch the Numbers, You Crush the Competition.”
The partners in the company began developing the algorithm in 2002 and launched the business in 2004. According to Coruccini, “The algorithm is a predictive application that factors in not only statistical analysis but comparative analysis with regards to how a player has performed against a specific team, against a specific player. We take it to that level.” The algorithm is designed so that fantasy fans can plug their players into the system and it offers them advice on what players to start, which to trade, and who to add.

Ready Set Go has launched two versions of its software: fantasyfootballstarters.com and fantasybaseballstarters.com. In the football version, the company offers four different applications – the draft analyzer, the trade analyzer, the team analyzer, and the lineup analyzer – that are based on the algorithm. In baseball, there is the Line-Up Analyzer and the Pitching Analyzer. In all of the applications, the idea is that the fantasy fan can input their rosters and receive advice on what to do based on Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports’s research formula. For example, if a fantasy football player were weighing a trade of San Francisco 49ers running back Frank Gore for Cincinnati Bengals wide receiver Chad Johnson, the trade analyzer would offer a prediction on how the trade would affect the owner’s team. The software industrializes the role of owner’s research assistant in the early GOPPPL leagues, and in doing so, enables fantasy fans to play the game without having to understand sophisticated statistical analysis.

The targeting strategies of Ready Set Go are multi-dimensional. The most obvious target are novice fantasy players who want to learn how to play and do not want to embarrass themselves in a league with their friends, so they look to the site for its predictions. There is also the segment of experienced players that are seeking a second opinion on their own predictions and intuitions and like to compare various data sources before they make a final lineup or trade.
decision. In the end, however, Ready Set Go is attempting to appeal to every segment of fantasy sports participation from beginning to intermediate to advanced. According to Coruccini, “Actually the ideal customer is a fantasy sports fan. Somebody that is looking for a source of information and wants to have access to it anywhere and anytime.” The Internet enables a broad targeting strategy like Ready Set Go’s, which allows the company to make their content available and the user to customize it in ways that fit their orientation to the game.

The fantasy fan can interact with Ready Set Go’s algorithm in a couple of ways. The more traditional way is the fan logs on to the website and plugs in the information manually to receive advice. As of now, users of this service visit the site 3 to 5 times per week. The second emerging way is that the website technology proactively makes the predictions for the fantasy owner. As Coruccini describes it, “One of the things we’re rolling out with technology now is an intelligent alert, where we will actually go in and look at your roster and if we see that you don’t have one of our waiver wire wonders, we’ll send you an alert saying, ‘Hey, here’s a player you might want to pick up.’” It is a distribution strategy that is consistent with the company’s business objective to serve as a trusted advisor of the fantasy owner who does everything but make the final decision on team issues.

This decision process represents a fundamental communication component of the company. There is no way of resolving predictions until the games are played, making them a dynamic topic to debate and, in the process, demonstrating the value of a third-party company in the fantasy experience. “Our predictions generate a lot of discussion,” Coruccini says. “Some people are going to go with them, some people aren’t. Part of the fun is people even challenging whether or not our predictions are accurate.” By creating their own predictions, Ready Set Go is
initiating a discussion among its customers about what decisions they should make about their team. However, in order for this strategy to retain credibility, Ready Set Go does report on the success and failures of their predictions. “We are one of the few companies that measure our performance throughout the season with different competitors,” according to Coruccini. “We will actually compare what our actual results were to their results.”

He claims that more often than not, the algorithm performs favorably compared to its competitors.

In summary, Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports has built its business on providing fantasy sports predictions. Because fantasy fans often seek as much information as possible before they make their decisions, there appears to be a never-ending demand for the kind of fantasy sports information that the company offers. Moreover, the company positions itself as a resource for the fan with the expressed purpose of helping them win their leagues, rather than as a greedy business seeking to make as much money off the fantasy owner as possible. The content is fully customizable and designed to add value to the fantasy fan experience by saving owners the time that it takes to do in-depth research.

Ultimately, Jeff Coruccini is hoping that these strategies differentiate his company from the competition and keep the business viable in the face of increasing industry consolidation. Reflecting on his company’s model, “One thing we have learned surprisingly is the fantasy fan is a loyal fan. They are not impressed with ESPN, CBS Sportsline. Whatever little cheat sheet, or wherever they get a good source of information, (a) they’re going to continue to go there and (b) they’re not going to tell very many people about it.”

While Ready Set Go’s content may create loyalty among many of its users, there is a paradox in this thinking. If the service thrives on being less known as others, will it maintain its critical differentiation as more people begin to use
it? Does it only have value if the user base is small? These questions could affect not only Ready Set Go’s strategy but also other companies that rely upon specialized content that seek to provide owners an edge.

Grogan’s Fantasy Football

Dan and Kelly Grogan published the first fantasy football magazine in the history of the industry in 1986. Today, there are almost 30 fantasy football magazines not only vying for market share in the print business but also competing with the Internet and mobile applications that provide fantasy fans with up to the minute news and information. How does a traditional media player remain viable in the online fantasy sports world?

In today’s marketplace, Grogan’s Fantasy Football is still a relevant magazine, but in order to compete with new media content, they’ve had to make changes to the way they do business. Emblematic of the challenges they face is their production schedule. According to Dan Grogan, co-founder of the magazine, “We go to press in late May. The printing process takes several days. And the distribution process takes several weeks. So you’re really not out until late June, early July.” This creates a difficult situation, as the magazine is covering fantasy football, a game that is dependent upon real-time information and statistics. Every year, there will be the inevitable injuries in training camp or exhibition games or late offseason trades or rookie holdouts that will alter the implications of some of the magazine’s content after it goes to press. Thus, offering less time-sensitive content and differentiating the magazine from fantasy websites have become principal business objectives for the publication.
To solve these problems, the Grogans focus on developing content about topics that are not dependent on real-time information. “One thing that we have done is try to focus on things that still have relevancy in August, and that’s strategies,” Grogan says.\footnote{30} For example, in their 2007 Fantasy Football season preview, he wrote an article titled “Target Drafting: A Gutsy, But Sensible Way to Approach Draft Day,” which outlines a draft preparation strategy.\footnote{31} The positioning of this article and others like it calls upon the longtime expertise and accumulated credibility of the Grogans as a trusted name in the fantasy business to help advise the fantasy owner. While strategy content is not the only component of the magazine (Grogan acknowledges that “not every player is going to get injured either during the course of the summer months, so we know that a lot of our players analyses still hold up.”\footnote{32}), it is critical to attracting readers in the digital age.

In addition to making strategic decisions on content, the Grogans also focus on the way the content is presented. Since they are communicating with a fan base that is empowered as owners and ultimately has the final say on what to do, the writers seek to have a conversation with the owner. In doing so, they try to offer sophisticated, value-added advice. In explaining the writing philosophy behind the content, Grogan says: “I try to write to them as if I’m talking to them. That’s how fantasy seems to work.” Moreover, his strategy in articles Grogan says, “I want to make it hard-hitting, and really exclude a lot of the fluff. Because of the Internet, anybody who wants to get into this business can do it overnight just about anymore.”\footnote{33} The goal is to develop conversational, direct, and credible pieces for the fantasy owner to use and interpret however they want.
Consider the example of the “Target Drafting” article published in the 2007 edition.

In it, Grogan writes:

The concept is called Target Drafting. It’s basically using the same evaluation approach you take with your first-round pick and applying [it] to each of the next several rounds. We know that first-round pick can be an agonizing decision, and unless you have one of the top three selections, you know what mental contortions you go through with that initial pick. “Is this guy really better than that guy?” … “Well, if so and so takes this guy at five then maybe I’ll get either this guy or that guy” … “But if I take him at six, what should I do in round two?” Sound familiar? That’s why the target drafting approach is better. You’ll focus your efforts on your most likely options and have the added ability at peeking at the ensuing rounds to plan your next steps.34

In this excerpt, Grogan is trying to convince the reader that his approach is not only useful but also worth the $6.95 it costs to buy the magazine. Rather than tell the owner that what he’s been doing all along is ineffective, he builds his argument by identifying with the reader’s situation. The dialogue he uses does in fact illustrate a familiar dilemma that fantasy owners face, and it demonstrates his empathy for the owner’s position as well as his credibility to advise on the topic. Ultimately, whether or not the reader agrees with the magazine’s advice, it is designed to involve the reader and stimulate new thinking about the way to approach fantasy ownership.
As this example suggests, the content in the magazine seeks to educate fantasy players and make them more of a participant in the analytical process. Grogan notes, “We really place an emphasis on educating our reader to fantasy football because I don’t think everybody really quite gets it.” For example, the magazine rated Tampa Bay Buccaneers running back Cadillac Williams very high in 2006, encouraging fantasy owners to draft him and perhaps other people on his team, like his quarterback and wide receiver because of the residual benefits his rushing yards and touchdowns may add to the value of his teammates. In the 2006 season, however, Williams suffered an injury, causing him to miss a majority of the season and his fantasy value to become nonexistent. In response, the Grogans received a number of complaints from customers because they felt that the magazine offered faulty advice.

In this situation, there was nothing that the Grogans could do to predict Cadillac Williams’s injury or the effect of it on his teammates. “Had [Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback] Chris Simms not gone down, had the offensive line done better, football is such a connected thing, players are so dependent on one another.” The challenge then becomes educating the players that athletes are interdependent in fantasy football. Moreover, Grogan says, “We place a real premium on doing that in a subtle way. Not coming out and saying you don’t know this, but you should know this.” As this example illustrates, the Grogan magazine understands the ownership role of fantasy sports participants and seeks to communicate the content in ways that is audience-centered. Since traditional print media does not have the instant feedback and participation mechanisms like websites, it is critical for the magazine to develop content that rhetorically involves the reader in ways that meet their new media expectations.
While the magazine is still the centerpiece of their business, the Grogans have also launched a website that is designed to complement their print business. Run on the server of their parent company, Athlon Sports, the Grogans Fantasy Football website seeks to enhance the magazine content by accounting for the latest news and trends in football. For example, they make a guarantee to their users that they will constantly update their cheat sheet, a single page document that lists the top fantasy athletic performers in rank-order, in the days prior to the start of the NFL season. It also allows fans to customize their cheat sheets to correspond with their league scoring system. This strategy seeks to tie both the magazine and Internet content together for multi-platform fantasy football advice.

In the end, despite the business’s growing Internet presence, the critical driver for the Grogans is their name recognition and the quality of the magazine. While the website offers real-time updates and interactive experiences, fans can find similar technological amenities on other company websites. For the Grogans to remain successful in the new media age, their content must continue to capitalize on their credibility and add value to the fantasy fan’s drafting experience. It is a dilemma that all media companies face, charging for an offline product that people can get for free on the Internet. Like the New Yorker, which is branding its writers so that people develop long-term relationships with them, the Grogan’s most promising strategy to keep its magazine viable is to view themselves as brands and seek to capitalize on the equity in their names.

_Fantasy Auctioneer_
Started in 2003 by George del Prado, Fantasy Auctioneer is a product that fantasy owners can purchase that will help make it easier and more convenient to run and manage an auction-style draft. Like many entrepreneurs, del Prado found out from personal experience that there was a market need for this kind of product. He said, “About four and a half years ago (August 2002), one of the guys in my fantasy football league couldn’t make it to the auction and he had made the playoffs a year before and I kind of figured we should try to get him to participate. So I started thinking that there’s got to be an online software that facilitates this auction process.” It turns out, there wasn’t, so del Prado, a business school student at the time, invented one.

The auction concept is similar to what one would expect at a car or antique show: the athletes are put up for sale and auctioned off to the highest bidder. The only difference is that fantasy owners must work within a fixed amount of money – a salary cap – and cannot outspend in total the other members of the league. In a typical fantasy baseball league, owners are given a $250 hard salary cap, but how they divide up and allocate that money is their decision. A popular auction strategy, for example, is called studs and duds, in which the owner overspends for quality players like Alex Rodriguez and Albert Pujols and then fills out the roster with lesser-known, potential sleeper picks. The idea behind auctions is that they give the owner a more realistic simulation of what general managers might experience in trying to compile the most talent in the most fiscally effective way.

In addition to building a differentiated product, Fantasy Auctioneer implements an emerging Internet marketing strategy – the up-sell. The foundation of this approach is to offer free content, something users have become accustomed to on the Internet. In describing the
amount of complimentary information, del Prado says: “We set up a free demo that people
can watch right on our homepage…We also give away a lot of free public auctions. And we give
out free articles. For example, the average auction values, realistically we could charge for
that.” The strategy here is to attract users to the site by giving them an experience that mirrors
downloading free music from large file-sharing sites or reading free articles on mainstream
newspaper sites.

The company also distributes its content for free onto other major websites, increasing
the awareness and recognition for their brand. According to del Prado, “On a weekly basis,
we’ve grabbed auction results and distributed to any fantasy website out there that will publish it.
Yahoo is publishing it. So is ESPN. Sports Illustrated did an article on it and a whole bunch of
other sites.” By maximizing the distribution of their free content on other major sites, Fantasy
Auctioneer is participating in a form of unpaid advertising with the hope that people will visit
Fantasy Auctioneer and eventually become customers.

Once Fantasy Auctioneer attracts owners to their site with the free content, the company
seeks to convert these visits into sales of their base product. This product, which enables private
leagues to run and manage an auction, is priced at $30, which amounts to $3 per person in a ten-
team league. According to del Prado, “The reason for that is we made the decision over the first
2 or 3 years that since it’s a new software and technology, our strategy was…just like with any
new technology, we want[ed] to get as many people using it as possible.” While the company
charges a minimal fee for its base product, it still fits in with an overall up-sell strategy that has a
number of price points.
After owners purchase the base product, they will find that some of the key components that make the drafting experience better are left out, but can be purchased for an additional fee (thus, the up-sell). The thought process of the customer may be that since they have already spent very little money for the product in the first place, why not buy the add-ons if they will improve the experience? As del Prado explains, “For 10 or 15 dollars, we’ll give you a bunch of tools to analyze the auction data in real time.” And the result is “our potential revenue for one league goes from 30 bucks to if we charge 10 dollars per person for a 10 person league, it goes to 130 bucks.” It is an up-sell model that Yahoo has implemented very effectively and serves to ease the customer into an unfamiliar pay-for-content relationship on the Internet.

The future issues the company faces center on capitalizing on the model that they’ve implemented. At this point, they have a monopoly on the product, and they need to capitalize on this opportunity. Because of the combination of free, basic, and up-sell products, the traffic to the site has increased to the point where del Prado is “happy with our growth.” He says, “Ok, this traffic is increasing significantly, now we really have to start thinking about how we’re going to monetize this increased traffic. Certainly advertising is one thing. Over the next 12 months, that’s a big strategy of ours.” This means convincing larger brands that by reaching the numbers of users on Fantasy Auctioneer’s site, they will be communicating with a highly engaged audience that is increasingly willing to spend money, even on the Internet.

In summary, Fantasy Auctioneer is an example of a draft company that has implemented a communication strategy – the up-sell – centered on convincing audiences to buy online products. This kind of approach allows the company, who is seeking to capitalize on a historically fan-only activity, to first demonstrate its value to the audience through free content
and then subsequently charge for it once customers have begun to trust them. In contrast to simply seeking to exploit customers by charging high prices for the content, Fantasy Auctioneer is attempting to increase the penetration of its technology through a more audience-centered strategy.

*Mock Draft Central*

There are generally two types of fantasy drafts: Auction-style, as in Fantasy Auctioneer, and the more popular form, snake or serpentine-style, as in Mock Draft Central. Started in June 2002, Mock Draft Central is a serpentine-style draft company seeking to capitalize on the importance of the draft to fantasy play. In doing so, they have developed software that enables fans to practice their drafting strategy before the games begin as well as run and manage drafts for individual leagues. With this product, the company is an example of how a vital, offline event has been institutionalized into the online, commercial space.

The demand for a service like mock drafting is based principally on the impact of the draft on an owner’s team’s performance during the regular season. Founder Jason Pliml emphasizes the draft as crucial to the owner’s team and that “if you have a bad draft, good luck recovering.”

The product is positioned to prepare fantasy owners for their real drafts through simulations that help them experience the intensity of the decision-making process. It also allows them to get a sense of where certain players are being drafted without the lasting consequences of making the wrong decision in a real draft.

The product is targeted to two main fantasy segments. The first is veteran fantasy players, who uses the software to plan their drafting strategy and see in what rounds the players
are getting drafted. “In addition to running drafts and mock drafts,” Pliml says, “People can actually look at reports that are generated from that, whether it’s average draft position or trend reports showing players going earlier or later.” Such a service is useful to the fantasy owner who is looking to determine the value of a particular player. For example, they might see that a player of the caliber of quarterback Eli Manning is consistently being drafted in the 4th round. With that information, they can plan for him being available in that round, or if they really want to draft him, can take him with their third pick. Mock Draft Central is designed to give the fan insight into all the potential draft possibilities.

The second main segment is the opposite of the veteran, experienced fantasy fans – the novice. According to Pliml, “They typically have done it one year, get just totally brutalized in their leagues, and they want to get better. They want to learn players, they want to not be embarrassed next year.” This segment typically uses the service as an educational tool so that they’re prepared for the next time they are in the pressure situations and are forced to make decisions on players that will inevitably be scrutinized by the league members. In addition, a microsegment is women, who are increasingly participating in fantasy sports. “A higher percentage of women on average come to our site because they want to learn,” Pliml says. “And they want to know the players and they don’t want to look stupid in front of their boyfriend/husband/coworkers/whoever they’re in this with.” For these newcomers, Mock Draft Central serves as a practice site before they enter the trash-talking realm of draft rooms.

To differentiate between these various segments, Mock Draft Central has developed a system called coach karma, which symbolizes the level of experience of the various users. According to Pliml, the system is in place “so that people who are really serious will draft
against people who are really serious. And people who are novices, they get to draft against more novice people.” Appealing to multiple segments, the company has built a product that can be customized to the individual skills of each user.

While the software is the foundational product, Mock Draft Central also seeks to position itself as a content provider. However, they do not cover all aspects of fantasy sports, just the specific news related to drafting, a strategy that maintains their differentiation in the marketplace. According to Pliml, “We basically say if we’re going to write articles, it’s going to be about your draft day or the players you’re going to take on draft day.” They also offer player comparisons and a podcast that covers much of the same information but in an audio format. In addition, there’s a message board on which users can debate the rankings and suggestions of the site and the ideas of one another. There are even some subscribers who sign up not for the draft service but just to receive the draft-related content the site produces. All of this is designed to brand Mock Draft Central as the source for drafting and draft content.

The pricing model of Mock Draft Central is three-tiered and seeks to account for the various users and content the site provides. There are subscriptions, which are valued at $2.99 a month and $23.99 a year. In somewhat disbelief, Pliml says, “People actually pay us money either on a monthly or annual basis to access all of our content, do unlimited mock drafting, and various other little things that are available to premium members.” The company also offers a limited number of free subscriptions, of which 10 percent upgrade to the premium service, according to Pliml. The second way they generate revenue is through advertising on the site. The third is through licensing. “We license both our average draft position data and also our technology to run league drafts for other sites.” This model is similar to Ready Set Go and
Fantasy Auctioneer in that it focuses on the up-sell for consumers and has a business-to-business component as well.

Although Mock Draft Central has branded itself as the draft authority, their major problem going forward is commodification. A question they must continually ask and answer is: What happens when everyone else has the same information? In response, Pliml suggests, “It’s an arms race of sorts. I did an expert draft/celebrity draft at the FSTA conference, and there were 12 teams, including myself. There were four teams at the table using our average draft position information, and I’m thinking how do I compete with myself?” It could be debilitating for a company when all of the players in a draft are using the same information and as a result, knowing the Mock Draft Central information no longer gives the owner that competitive edge. It’s a double-edged sword that these fantasy content companies face. They want to continue to grow, but if they do, the value of their information to fans may diminish since more of their fellow competitors will have access to it as well.

Mock Draft Central is an example of a company that has institutionalized a core component of the offline fantasy experience. In the pre-digital era, the draft for each league only occurred once a year, and fans had no way of easily preparing for the event. Today, with Mock Draft Central, fans can participate in one of the best days of the fantasy season anytime they want, testing their strategy while also deriving entertainment from the experience. With both their software and content, Mock Draft Central has been able to brand themselves as the center for drafting, and in doing so, they have transformed one of the best days of the fantasy season into an all-year-round business venture.
The previous cases have focused on how individual, smaller companies that have developed their business expertise in one area of fantasy sports. Head2Head as a contest provider, Ready Set Go and Grogan’s as content providers, and Fantasy Auctioneer and Mock Draft Central as draft companies. In this last case, how ESPN, a mainstream media company, is institutionalizing all aspects of fantasy sports play from the draft and contests to content production and distribution is examined.

For purposes of background, the ESPN Fantasy department is located within the ESPN.com operation of the company. There are essentially two major groups within the department: technology and editorial. The technology group designs and implements all of the games and ensures that they are working efficiently. The editorial group is in charge of developing the fantasy content that will be posted on the website and distributed across a variety of ESPN media platforms.52

Fantasy at ESPN had historically been viewed as a less important platform compared to the traditional ESPN.com content and the other distribution channels of the company. While the company certainly supported fantasy, it wasn’t until around 2006 that ESPN decided to revamp its fantasy strategy. They were in the process of losing many potential fantasy customers to competitors such as Yahoo and CBS Sportsline, so the company decided to make a strategic shift in 2006 to transform their fantasy operation into an integral component of its operations. As John Kosner, senior vice president and general manager of new media at ESPN, stated clearly, “Our goal is to be the unquestioned No. 1.”53
A principal component of the transformation was the hiring of Matthew Berry, also known as the Talented Mr. Roto, to serve as senior director of fantasy for the company. Berry had previously built a successful independent fantasy website called the Talented Mr. Roto, a fantasy content site that ESPN also bought out as part of the Berry hire. He was known as a fantasy guru, a whiz kid who seemingly knew everything about fantasy and could offer sound advice to his audience of fantasy owners. In addition, Berry was a fantasy sports insider, playing in the most prestigious fantasy baseball league called Tout Wars, which was chronicled in Sam Walker’s *Fantasyland*.

The Berry hire was also a strategy to reverse the prevailing image of fantasy sports. If it were to be successful on a mainstream platform like ESPN, the image of fantasy as an activity for nerds and geeks would have to be transformed, and Berry would ideally serve as an icon for the modern fantasy player. Outspoken, knowledgeable of popular culture, and photogenic, Berry, as the face of ESPN Fantasy, would demonstrate to uninformed or skeptical sports fans that fantasy is a game that “cool” people, like Berry, play. Moreover, his persona represented the ideal target market of 18-34 year-old, college-educated males, as his communication style fit with the tone of ESPN’s trademark sarcasm and hip attitude. It was this star-powered strategy that initiated the changes ESPN was hoping to make in order to gain market share in the fantasy sports industry.

To build the credibility of the new ESPN Fantasy operation, particularly with veteran fantasy players, the company also hired many of Berry’s colleagues while he was at the Talented Mr. Roto. Christopher Harris formerly wrote for him on his website, Nate Ravitz co-founded Rototimes.com, another credible, independent fantasy organization, and Ron Shandler, the
immortalized fantasy baseball expert, publishes the famously detailed BaseballHQ and is an owner and the dominant player in the Tout Wars league in which Berry participates. Hiring all insider, grassroots fantasy experts was critical to managing the transformation of fantasy into a commercialized activity. Conversely, if ESPN decided to prioritize fantasy, another possibility would have been to use its current analysts for the real games like Tom Jackson for football or Peter Gammons for baseball. However, this approach ran the risk of losing the respect of the fiercely loyal fantasy sports audience. In the end, the company chose a hiring strategy centered on a grassroots organization that was intended to not only convince core fantasy owners to play on ESPN but also give ESPN Fantasy the credibility to attract new ones.

Revamping the fantasy editorial team was only one component of ESPN’s fantasy transformation. Enhancing the fantasy contests was also important to the process. ESPN Fantasy offers contests in a couple of different formats. There is the standard game that ESPN manages and determines the rules of competition. This version is available for both public and private leagues. While the standard game is an important foundation for ESPN, an emphasis in the ESPN Fantasy transformation is the commissioner product that is fully customizable. With this product, fans can customize the rules and scoring according to their preferences. So, for example, if they want to play fantasy football with only individual defensive players (IDPs) instead of team defenses, they can. Both versions are available for fans to play not only fantasy football but also fantasy MLB, NBA, and NHL.56

In addition to these full-season games, ESPN also offers minigames, which are short-form fantasy games. The minigame is designed to give the fan the experience of playing a fantasy style game without the major time commitment required to play in a fantasy football
league, for instance. The idea is that the minigames can serve as a gateway experience to playing the longer-form games. The minigames include the Baseball Challenge, Stock Car Challenge, Best Ball Challenge (golf), ESPN Poker Club, Bass Fantasy Fishing, and AFL Pick ‘Em. At the other extreme of minigames is the Uber challenge, in which participants compete across a number of fantasy games, with their performances accumulating points over the course of the seasons. The ESPN fantasy player with the most points across the games wins a prize. It is like the decathlon of fantasy sports.57

With a new editorial staff and a full arsenal of contests, ESPN Fantasy set the foundation for its new launch. The timing of ESPN’s strategic shift meant that the 2007 fantasy baseball season was the game that would be the first implementation phase of their transformation. The editorial division was prepared to offer fantasy owners an unprecedented amount of advice and analysis. And the technology division had built a game that fans could not only play a standard version of but also customize the rules and scoring in whatever manner they chose. Like every year, there were also minor adjustments to the gaming experience that were made to improve the product over the previous season.

Another major change for the 2007 fantasy baseball season was the decision to offer fantasy content and contests for free. The idea was that the free strategy would increase the attractiveness of the site and help undercut some of the competition, like CBS, who had charged for its services in previous years. Going free also potentially made ESPN more competitive with Yahoo, who does not charge for its basic product but sells other services like a game tracker that enhances the experience. ESPN would offer all the basic amenities including the game tracker
free and other products that Yahoo up-sells its customers in order to differentiate itself from Yahoo and others. In addition, it also sold a premium fantasy content product for $30.\textsuperscript{58}

An extensive marketing and advertising campaign accompanied the new free strategy. An advertising agency that the company works with developed a campaign based around a rock opera. New fantasy expert Matthew Berry, baseball experts Peter Gammons and John Kruk, and professional baseball players Bronson Arroyo, Gary Sheffield, and Joe Borowski participated in an over-the-top rock opera about the virtues of playing fantasy baseball on ESPN. The slogan “ESPN fantasy baseball is free. And it rocks”\textsuperscript{59} had two major objectives. One, announce the change in ESPN’s pricing strategy to free, a move that ostensibly sought to attract more customers to its site. Two, demonstrate that fantasy was not just a game for geeks and nerds. Combining fantasy sports with rock music was intended to illustrate the transformation of fantasy into a cool activity.

The initial results of ESPN’s transformation for the 2007 fantasy baseball season were positive. The numbers of users had increased by three times over the previous year, which resulted in more traffic on the site and a larger audience base for selling advertising to the fantasy demographic.\textsuperscript{60} By all accounts, the new emphasis on extensive fantasy content and a customizable game that was also free was working.

Despite the company’s best intentions, however, the fantasy baseball season did not sustain its early run of success. On April 1, 2007, MLB Opening Day, a technical error developed with ESPN’s fantasy baseball game that did not allow owners to make player transactions or monitor their teams through live scoring, both of which are critical to playing fantasy sports.\textsuperscript{61} In response, ESPN was forced to fix the glitch while the season had already
started and lost a number of customers in the process, although the number of customers they lost was not released to the public. It was a tough start to what was a promising reinvention strategy.

ESPN Fantasy Content

Despite this early crisis, there are critical assets of the company on which ESPN Fantasy is planning to capitalize in the short- and long-term. While the company continues to invest in solidifying and improving the technology, the most important strategy to the growth of the fantasy department is the use of the company’s multiple platforms to promote its fantasy content. In an industry where most of the larger companies are moving toward free, customizable games, the key differentiator will be content, and with ESPN’s television, print, radio, Internet, and mobile presence, it is attempting to win market share by generating and distributing fantasy content across as many of its platforms as possible.62

To demonstrate how ESPN is emphasizing fantasy content, consider the example of a typical day at ESPN Fantasy, April 19, 2007. The ESPN Fantasy team comes into the office in the morning and reviews the big news and fantasy implications from the night of games before. On April 18, the major fantasy stories were Chicago White Sox pitcher Mark Buerhle throwing a no-hitter, Seattle Mariners pitcher Felix Hernandez getting hurt, and Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Brett Myers being converted from a starter to a reliever. What ensues is a day full of analysis of these and other issues across a number of ESPN’s distribution channels.

The first stop was to record the Fantasy Fix podcast. It is a daily show hosted by two of the ESPN Fantasy experts, which on this day were Matthew Berry and Nate Ravitz. The format
consisted of a discussion of the previous evening’s news, a mailbag segment, and the fantasy forward, during which the experts make a few predictions on standout performers for that evening’s games. In the first section, which also makes up the largest portion of the podcast, Berry and Ravitz discussed the three major storylines – Buerhle, Hernandez, and Myers – and offered their own perspectives on each of players. The podcast is a medium that lends itself to informal discussion among the participants, so the hosts posed questions for one another and offered their perspectives on each of the issues. For example, on the topic of Hernandez, Berry asked Ravitz what he would advise owners to do, and Ravitz suggested that they take a wait-and-see approach. He offered the evidence of his own personal experience in an expert league where one of the owners traded Hernandez for what Ravitz perceived as very little in return. This kind of interchange took place during all of the segments of the Fantasy Fix, giving it an argumentative and interactive quality that was designed to not only offer listeners advice but also engage them in the discussion.

After the podcast recording, the next content item was the daily Fantasy Focus video. This product is a 5- to 10-minute video that is streamed not only on ESPN.com but also as wireless content. Fantasy content is particularly in demand for wireless because many of the media rights agreements with sports properties do not include provisions for wireless distribution. The program included several segments focusing on the previous evening’s news, advice on strategy, and looking forward to that evening’s games. Not surprisingly, the topics discussed in podcast were recycled, but the way they were presented differed. The Fantasy Focus was more of a professional and packaged production, where the talent wore suits and performed as if they were on *SportsCenter*, but the experts, particularly Berry, tried to maintain
the same conversational and advisor style of the podcast. Although there was less of an interactive component than in the podcast, this medium still allowed the experts to help fantasy owners make their decisions.

Later in the day, Nate Ravitz participated in the third fantasy content piece on ESPN News, the company’s 24-hour news network. The segment in which he appeared was “Fantasy 350,” a portion of the program that examines fantasy news and updates at 3:50 pm daily. As in the Fantasy Fix and the Fantasy Focus, Ravitz commented on the major news stories of the night before, but new information broke during the day that he addressed while he was on-air. Brandon Wood, a Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim phenom, was rumored to have been called up from Triple A, a transaction that, if true, could be valuable for fantasy players if they pick him up. In his analysis, Ravitz stressed that he did not know for certain whether the call-up had occurred, but he was working off information from reliable sources that it could happen soon. As a result, fantasy owners should be prepared to acquire Wood if and when he was added to the roster, he said. ESPN News is generally the testing ground for ESPN television content, as the channel, because of its 24-hour focus, has a greater need for constant content than the company’s flagship program, SportsCenter, and also tends to draw a smaller audience. It also serves as an important outlet for fantasy content.

The day of the fantasy content also includes the publication of articles on the ESPN Fantasy website by several of its fantasy experts. For example, Berry maintains a daily blog called the TRUM, an acronym for Thoughts, Rumblings, Useless Information, and Musing. For his entry on April 19th, he not surprisingly returned to the major storylines, but sought to differentiate and add his own personality to the content by opening up with this:
Here’s the hilarious part. Not only was Mark Buerhle’s no-hitter not the top story last night, it wasn’t even the second biggest story. First, of course, was Sanjaya’s dismissal from “American Idol.” It was deserved, of course. Not since K-Fed dumped a pregnant D-list celeb for a then hot Britney has a no talent been thrust into the spotlight the way he was. And I am being harsh when I say he’s a no talent, because he does have some talent. Like a hot sister. Why didn’t she make the show?63

Berry and the other ESPN Fantasy experts were obviously not the only people reporting on the fantasy implications of the major storylines on April 18th. A fantasy fan can receive basic information on fantasy news from any website that distributes fantasy news content. In order to build a readership, fantasy experts must not only offer sound advice, which Berry does, but also develop their personality in their writing, which Berry attempts to do in this example. The reference of Sanjaya and American Idol attempts to broaden Berry’s appeal as not only a fantasy expert but also an entertaining daily read. Moreover, the fact that he seemingly is plugged into popular culture differentiates him from the fantasy geek stereotype. By passing off the previous evening’s fantasy baseball news as not the “top story,” he makes light of the importance of fantasy sports, and in the process, demonstrates that fantasy players can, in fact, be interested in things other than WHIP.

The final fantasy baseball content appears that evening on Baseball Tonight, the nightly baseball highlight show broadcast on ESPN or ESPN2. As part of the company’s fantasy emphasis, the program implemented a new fantasy component to its highlights starting in the
2007. The typical Baseball Tonight format consists of the game highlights and then a scoreboard screen showing the box score, which now included a component called “Fantasy Impact,” where the producers would choose a particular player’s statistics to showcase. According to Jay Levy, the decision to include this new feature was based on his goal to provide the fan with as much information as possible. Although at the time he was unsure about the effect of the “Fantasy Impact” component, it does represent ESPN’s continued attempts to promote fantasy across all of its platforms.  

The podcast, video package, ESPN News appearance, and Baseball Tonight emphasis represent only one day of ESPN Fantasy content production. Over the course of the baseball and football seasons, Matthew Berry has frequently made appearances on SportsCenter to offer fantasy advice, and the company has aired a dedicated hour and a half SportsCenter Special on the NFL fantasy football season. Moreover, ESPN the Magazine publishes a fantasy draft guide for football, baseball, and basketball prior to each season and a regular set of fantasy columns in every edition. As these traditional and new media examples have illustrated, ESPN Fantasy places a premium on generating a wide range of fantasy content and tailoring it to the company’s various distribution channels.

The ESPN Website

Like most fantasy companies, however, the cornerstone of ESPN’s fantasy business is ultimately the website. In addition to the importance of all the other distribution channels, the website – the storefront of ESPN – is critical to the transformation. ESPN web designer Matt Walker led the website redesign project. The old design of the Website was cluttered and often
difficult to navigate. As a result, the user’s teams were difficult to find. Also, all the content was in one section, and there was no real differentiation between it. Moreover, there were relatively no pictures of players or columnists and it was mostly text based. For a company seeking to redefine its fantasy operation, the website had to be dramatically redone to meet the expectations of ESPN.com users and differentiate it from its competition.

A critical factor in any web design is the resolution of Web images. Websites must be built on what is called average resolution, an agreed upon measurement of the available content, speeds of downloads, and the power of a user’s computer. In the past the resolution was about 200, which restricted a lot of web design. Today, the average resolution is about 800 or 900, which meant that ESPN could do more with its website in general and the Fantasy portion of the site specifically.

Because of the increase in resolution, the ESPN.com website was redesigned in 2006. A major innovation was the addition of a third column of content, as part of the widening of the webpage that the increase in average resolution produced. The third column was the new home of the video player, which streamed video 24 hours a day ranging from game highlights to the “SportsCenter Minute,” a 60-second digest of the hour-long sports digest show. Interestingly, as part of the redesign, the Fantasy tab was moved from the far right on the old design to the far left on the new design, reflecting the company’s major interest in building the fantasy operation.

After the ESPN.com template was redesigned, ESPN Fantasy had a model from which to work. The objective of ESPN Fantasy was to transform the site from a text-based experience to a personality-driven, content-heavy fantasy portal. According to Walker, the idea was to develop
a site that the novice fantasy player could understand clearly. He mentioned that if his 60-year-old father did not understand the site, then that’s a problem. This targeting strategy reflected ESPN’s overall goal to increase its market share in part by attracting new fantasy players.

Walker also considered the site of Yahoo, ESPN’s chief competitor. As he noted, ESPN and Yahoo are very different products. Yahoo is more bare bones and minimalist, whereas ESPN is sleek and sophisticated. In the redesign, Walker wanted to maintain the differentiation because if they became more like Yahoo, then the company would lose the assets of its identity. Interestingly, upon looking at the NCAA Bracket Manager for the Yahoo March Madness game, their header was moving more in the general direction of ESPN, and away from the traditional Yahoo style. Yahoo’s move argued for a design that emphasized ESPN’s look and feel even more.

After considering the possibilities, Walker and ESPN Fantasy implemented a redesign that focused on several core ideas:

*Star Power.* To execute the company’s strategy of using content as a differentiator, the new ESPN Fantasy website emphasizes the star power of its fantasy experts. With a marketing strategy that emulates sports teams and leagues, Matthew Berry, the Talented Mr. Roto, is prominently featured with his picture and daily blog on several of the main tabs on the Website. There is also a component of the homepage that provides the user access to the other fantasy columnists and personalities ranging from Ravitz to Harris. Previously an anonymous website, the new fantasy homepage promotes the personalities of its experts as if they are real sports stars.
Multimedia. As a primarily text-based homepage, the old Fantasy site was far different from other homepages on ESPN.com. To contemporize the fantasy site so that it is consistent with the rest of ESPN.com, the fantasy homepage integrates all of the multiple media experiences that the company offers. There is now an area on the page exclusively devoted to streaming video where ESPN Fantasy users can watch, for free, their favorite star-powered fantasy personalities offer their analysis on a daily basis. During baseball season, for instance, segments available to watch include “Sixty Feet, Six Inches” and “Uncommon Thievery,” content that examines fantasy pitchers and base stealers, respectively. It is a customized, video experience that an ESPN.com user has become accustomed to expect and that differentiates the site from its competitors.72

User-friendliness. The previous website made it difficult for users to navigate the website in order to manage their teams, a simple but critical problem. The new website has an application where all the games are located on the right column of the website, and it lists whatever games the player is involved in currently, and the others that the user isn’t playing. The application keeps all of the game possibilities in front of the user, so as to not only give them easy access to their own teams but also show the games that are available and could be played. It organizes all of the games for the user and is a subtle reminder of all the games ESPN has available.73

Headline story. On the old site, the fantasy articles were difficult to differentiate. In this new version, the main component of the homepage is the headline story that dominates the screen upon opening it up. At its most basic level, it adds visuals to the website in ways that the previous one didn’t. More importantly, it showcases the daily content that the Fantasy team
produces and gives the homepage many of the same qualities that the homepage of ESPN.com has.\textsuperscript{74} A lead story with analysis from its various columnists calls attention to the fantasy content the team is producing and helps legitimize fantasy content as a form of journalism.

\textit{Look and Feel.} The new website was designed to look and feel cleaner and simpler. For example, the previous site did not have borders on each part of the content. In the new version, each area of the website is separated from one another, making each one stand out on its own. This measure was in direct response to the clutter of the previous homepage, on which each section was adjacent to one another as opposed to broken out separately.\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{Community.} Finally, the site tries to create a community around its content. There is a daily schedule on the site that tells the user what content is going to appear and at what times. This approach is similar to the successful SportsNation component of the ESPN.com site, where the company’s columnists deliver content at specific times during the day and create forums for users to log on and interact with it. The strategy is ideally suited for a homepage, literally creating a fantasy home where content is distributed on a daily basis to its loyal community of readers.\textsuperscript{76}

In many ways, the ESPN Fantasy website redesign crystallizes the transformation strategy the company has implemented. It showcases the list of credible fantasy stars it has acquired. It offers fantasy content in a number of different platforms – podcasts, streaming video, articles, and blogs. It emphasizes the inventory of games it has developed. And it was designed so that it would conform with and reinforce the ESPN.com homepage.
ESPN Fantasy is a case study of how fantasy sports communication and marketing occurs in a major mainstream media company. The company is faced with the challenges of not only attracting existing players to its site but also converting its large audience base of sports fans into fantasy owners. Through a variety of strategies, many of which were discussed here, ESPN is hoping to become the top fantasy sports company in the industry for the foreseeable future.

As these six cases demonstrate, the communication and marketing strategies fantasy companies employ to address the problem of engaging fantasy fan culture are many and varied. The next section synthesizes and places these approaches into perspective.

**Facilitating Fan Culture**

The dynamic between institutions and fans is changing dramatically in the digital age. In the past, fans and their obsessive behaviors were often dismissed and ostracized by mainstream culture as abnormal and deviant. In addition to the literature on fan culture, there have been examples of excessive fan behavior in popular culture such as Robert DeNiro’s character in the film *The Fan* and the obsessed fan that shot Roy Hobbs in the book and film *The Natural*. Today, as brands and advertisers alike seek to “cut through the clutter” and communicate with an engaged audience, fans are increasingly valued as among the most prized audience groups in all of entertainment, encouraging many companies to find ways to develop long-term customer relationships with them.
The problem is that fans are savvy consumers and are generally aware of the intentions of institutions to exploit their culture for marketing and communication purposes. As fans often see it, companies care only about money, and customers are simply a means to an end. Therefore, any entrance of the company into the fan culture runs the risk of backfiring, as fans may view the institution’s involvement as a threat to the authenticity of the culture and to its very existence.

Despite significant involvement from mainstream companies, this has not been the case in the fantasy sports industry. In every interview conducted for this study, the fantasy executive was asked whether he or she felt any pushback from fans as a result of the mainstreaming of their culture, and in each case, the answer was no. According to their experience, the industrialization of fantasy offered enough value to fans that they were generally unaffected by the commercialization effort. As a result, the fantasy industry as a whole serves as an example of how to communicate effectively with fan cultures and, in the process, use fans strategically to help grow the market.

The fantasy sports industry has been able to commercialize and expand fantasy fan culture by serving not as an exploiter of fan culture, but as a facilitator of fan culture. In the inevitable power struggle between institutions and fans, the industry has sought to enable the fan experience and add value to fantasy leagues through technology and information. In exchange they receive the fantasy fans’ attention and engagement as well as their control in running the games. This positioning also has the advantage of creating brand loyalty, as fantasy businesses are merely helping fans play the game with more ease, while also making it appear that fans still retain the majority of the control in their experience. It’s a classic barter situation: the institution
says, “If you agree to be our customer, we guarantee we’ll improve your fantasy experience.”
This is much different from an institution saying, “We’re coming into your culture, seeking to
extract every ounce of commercial potential, and you’re going to like it.”

Although the facilitator of fan culture positioning appears genuine in its pursuit of
meeting the demands of fans, persuasion is still occurring under this model. At work here is an
emerging persuasive method operating in the digital age that bestows an illusion of control upon
the customer. Jenkins hints at this new model in an analysis of *American Idol*. He argues,
“*American Idol* offers up a fantasy of empowerment—‘America’ gets to ‘decide’ upon the next
Idol. This promise of participation helps build fan investments, but it may also lead to
misunderstandings and disappointments as viewers feel that their votes have not been counted.”
In this instance, the promise that fans can participate is a persuasion strategy, but the credibility
of the communicator suffers when the strategy is exposed after the corruption of the voting
process.

A similar phenomenon to the “fantasy of empowerment” in *American Idol* is occurring in
fantasy sports. Fans are empowered as owners, general managers, and coaches of their own
team, but because they are playing on a commercial website instead of with pens and paper
among themselves, they accept the institution’s persuasive pitch to play the game on their site
and as a result become beholden to the institution. This, of course, is not to argue that
institutions dupe fans into playing on their site, but that fans are willing to exchange control of
their experience for a more efficiently run and managed league.

There is a difference, however, between Jenkins’s *American Idol* example and other fan
cultures. In *American Idol*, the institution is implementing what he terms the “fantasy of
empowerment” in order to create fan culture, while in the case of fantasy sports and other Internet fan communities, institutions are seeking to co-opt established fan cultures. As a result, an alternative understanding of institution-fan communication is needed to better analyze how institutions commercialize the grassroots-grown fan cultures.

This perspective views institutions as fan culture facilitators and fans as willing participants in trading some of their control. As the cases analyzed in this chapter suggest, this dynamic operates in a number of the communication and marketing strategies various fantasy businesses implement.

From the contests side of the industry, institutions serve to facilitate fan culture by creating games that are either fully customizable or present a differentiated experience. ESPN, as a mainstream player with plenty of resources, has the capacity to develop games in which the fan can determine all the rules, scoring, and other regulations, effectively positioning itself as simply the technology to help commissioners run their leagues more efficiently on the Internet than manually. For companies that do not have the technological flexibility, like Head2Head, they facilitate fantasy play by offering a niche game in which they specialize. In exchange for the control of running the leagues of fantasy fans, institutions offer the value added of what communication technologies can provide to the fantasy experience, ultimately saving the fan time and the frustration of having to keep score by themselves.

In terms of businesses that provide content, they help facilitate fantasy play by generating information and advice for fantasy players in their quest to win fantasy championships. They position themselves as resources that fantasy fans can either agree or disagree with as they make their own decisions about their teams. Ready Set Go Fantasy, for example, sees itself as
initiating a dialogue between itself and its customers about what the best fantasy decisions are. The interactive nature of the content, which benefits from the fact that fantasy is an inexact science and is based on predictions, meaning that until the games start there are no wrong answers, is also a critical factor in the role of the institution as facilitator. And content providers tend to offer advice with careful consideration of how they communicate with the fan culture, as the Grogan’s example of target drafting indicated. In the end, fantasy content institutions view themselves as generating as much information as possible for fans, and then allowing them to customize it and use it in any way that fits their needs and goals.

Finally, a critical factor in how fantasy institutions manage the commercialization of fan culture is through pricing. The challenge of pricing in an Internet marketplace is particularly difficult because consumer perceptions of value vary widely. As a response to this challenge, Shapiro and Varian, in their book *Information Rules*, propose a model called versioning. They write, “[Versioning] means offering your information product in different versions for different market segments.”79 This strategy enables online retailers to broaden their base of potential consumers while also maintaining a set of core products.

As this chapter demonstrated, fantasy sports institutions have implemented versioning in a number of ways. For example, while many companies have charged for their services in the past, there is an increasing movement in the industry to charge little to nothing for fantasy products. Stimulated in part by Yahoo, who has never charged for its basic service and as a result has built its fantasy site into the most popular fantasy property, other main competitors such as ESPN and CBS Sportsline have gone free as well. Although certainly driven by competition, the free strategy also helps institutions deliver value in exchange for control, and in
the process, avoid appearing like exploiters of fan culture. Under these free models, of
course, the numbers of advertisers on the site subsidize the cost, but often this level of
commercialization is something to which audiences have become accustomed. Another pricing
model is more conventional: companies charge for premium services. These companies tend to
offer other customer service amenities that larger companies cannot and seek to reward the
customer by not bombarding them with advertisements when they’re on their site. And this price
consciousness is also evident with content providers, who often seek to make their content
available for free first in order to demonstrate its value to the customers and then charge for it
after customers understand its value. This strategy also helps to increase the penetration of the
technology. In the end, these various pricing strategies – free, fee but no advertising, and free
trial – seek to establish trust between the fan and the institutions that are seeking to capitalize on
the activity.

It is too often the case that entrepreneurs and companies identify a fan culture, invade it,
and subsequently watch fans reject the institutions’ efforts. Thus far, small and mainstream
companies alike in the fantasy sports industry have by and large not only avoided alienating core
fans but also have grown the industry to almost 20 million participants. Critical to this
transformation was the industry’s role as a facilitator of fantasy fan culture, as opposed to
seeking to exploit it. In the now mainstream fantasy industry, the fan may have ceded control of
some of his fantasy power, but in most cases, he feels as if he still is the owner. As long as this
continues, the fantasy industry will retain customers.

Conclusion
In this chapter, the fantasy sports industry and the ways that it communicates with fantasy fan culture were examined and analyzed. First, the industry was briefly defined. Then, the problem of communicating with fantasy fan culture was overviewed to provide context to the specific cases discussed in the chapter. Next, six case studies of fantasy businesses – Head2Head, Ready Set Go Fantasy Sports, Grogan’s Fantasy Football, Fantasy Auctioneer, Mock Draft Central, and ESPN – were analyzed to understand how each is solving the problem of communicating with fantasy fans. Finally, the implications of the research were discussed, specifically the ways that the fantasy sports industry has commercialized and grown fantasy fan culture by serving as facilitators of fan culture.

The challenge of communicating with fan cultures is not unique to the fantasy sports industry. Seemingly every day, there are new fan cultures that emerge on the Internet that are ideal markets to which institutions can sell products and advertising. However, in the age of email, blogs, podcasts, mobile phones, and other new information technologies, an institution’s fan communication strategy could result in more harm than good if the entrance into the culture is not accompanied with an understanding of the fans’ needs and rituals. On the other hand, if done effectively, like in the case of fantasy sports, it can offer institutions access to an engaged fan base that can be both profitable customers and loyal brand ambassadors. While the case of fantasy sports does offer important findings for the ways institutions and fans communicate in the digital age, the industry still faces challenges in the future. These implications and challenges are addressed in the final chapter.
Chapter Five

Fantasy in the Future

“So what you’re saying is Tom Brady wasn’t the first pick off the board just because ladies think he’s cute?” Amber Wilson, host of CBS Sportsline’s online video fantasy football show, asked fantasy expert Jamey Eisenberg. In an episode where the picks from the inaugural CBS Sportsline all-female fantasy football league draft were analyzed, Eisenberg concluded that women were, in fact, just as smart as men when it came to building a fantasy football team.

The purpose of the video was to debunk the myth that women could not play fantasy sports. It was a strategy, if overstated at times, that signaled the industry’s attempts to attract to fantasy football the other half of the American population that has not yet played the game. During the expansion of the fantasy sports industry, the numbers of women owners have been stagnant over the last several years, comprising only a small percentage of total fantasy players. However, given the sheer amount of non-playing women, there are real opportunities with the female market as the industry seeks to continue its growth.

Because of the potential, the industry is beginning to consider ways to increase female participation. One strategy is to encourage women to play fantasy sports on their own. For the 2006 fantasy football season, for example, Prilosec OTC managed and promoted a fantasy football league only for women. The game was designed to not only create a female-only space for fantasy play but also educate women about the sport of football. It was also a natural sponsorship tie-in for the NFL and Prilosec in their attempts to reach the female audience.

Others are focusing on including women into the traditional all-male leagues. Noting the importance of invitations in fantasy participation, Adam Grossberg, president of Interactive
Sports Marketing suggests, “If you got one [woman] out of every invite you extend, that’s obviously a huge opportunity just by encouraging people to invite more friends, particularly female players.” In fact, this strategy may be the most promising, as beating men at their own game could be a primary attraction. WFAN radio host Lori Robinson contends, “Not only am I representing myself, and I’m very competitive and always want to win, but it’s a sense of pride. I’m representing women, and I can’t come in last or in the last few because that would just be embarrassing.”

That the fantasy sports industry is beginning to consider women, the very people who were often subjected to their significant other’s fantasy obsession, as the next frontier in its growth is a symbol of the changes the game has undergone over the last half century. This dissertation has sought to place those changes into perspective and research and analyze how a formerly grassroots game has been commercialized in the digital age. In this last chapter, I reflect on some of the implications of this study for communication research and analysis, discuss the limitations of the study and future research possibilities, and finally explore some of the challenges the fantasy sports industry will face going forward.

**Implications for Communication Research**

Fantasy sports is a topic at the intersection of popular culture, media, and technology. As a result, the findings of this dissertation have implications for several areas within the fields of communication studies and media, technology, and society.

The first area to which this dissertation speaks is media institutions, as it considers an emerging trend that has been relatively understudied in media studies. For decades, fan culture
research has focused on the fans themselves, arguing that fan cultures are deviant, exist outside the mainstream, and are certainly not valued by the industry itself. Today, however, as media institutions continue to search for avid customers in an age of hyper-competition, fans and their behaviors are increasingly accepted as part of the mainstream. By examining an industry that is co-opting a fan culture, this dissertation sought to analyze this new fan-institution dynamic operating in fantasy sports.

Unlike many attempts by companies to commercialize fan cultures, the rise of the fantasy sports industry by and large did not alienate its customers. In fact, the reverse occurred in most cases. The industry grew in part because of the application of new technology, which enabled the popularity of the concept, as well as the involvement of mainstream companies. In Chapter 4, it was concluded that the fantasy sports industry has been able to manage the transformation of the game from a grassroots activity to a billion-dollar business by serving as a fan culture facilitator rather than as an exploiter of fan culture. In the process, many businesses in the industry have implemented fan-centered strategies and developed and distributed products and services that cater to the empowered fantasy owner in ways that added value, as they see it, to their experience.

For the field of media institutions, generally, and fan culture, specifically, the fantasy sports industry provides insight into the ways that institutions can communicate effectively with a fan culture, and in the process, capitalize on the avid and obsessed behaviors that fans of many popular culture products have been known to exhibit. In order to retain customers, these fantasy companies needed to demonstrate the benefits of their involvement in the culture in exchange for the fan’s control and, in some cases, money. This type of communication dynamic, which
involves give-and-take between the fans and institutions, may become more prevalent in institutional communication with fan communities.

The move of companies toward more customer-centered marketing strategies is not groundbreaking; companies have been going the “extra mile” for decades in order to build customer loyalty and communities. What makes the fantasy sports industry different is that these institutions face a communication situation where fan expectations are in conflict with good business practices. Since fantasy sports is a fan-established concept, institutions seeking to co-opt the fan culture must do so without appearing institutional if they want to communicate effectively with these fans. Whereas companies have often tried to create new fan cultures through various strategies, fantasy sports businesses are charged with commercializing established fan cultures that have historically functioned without any third party involvement. How the industry has managed this commercialization process by serving as a facilitator of fan culture represents another model for institution-fan communication.

Second, this study has implications for rhetoric. Fantasy companies face the rhetorical situation of communicating with an empowered and active audience. In many cases, these fans have predetermined expectations of what they want their experience to be like, and because they are playing a game that enables them to become an owner, general manager, and coach, they often assume greater power in their sports experience than an audience in a traditional media environment. In addition, they are also adopting and interchanging the roles of both communicators and audiences in their fantasy sports experience. They are the communicators as evidenced by the large amount of trash talking that takes place on the site as well as their role in playing the game. They are also an audience, as they watch the real sporting events unfold and
how they will affect their teams as well as read the various content that fantasy websites provide them. Where does the fantasy sports institution fit into these communication situations? How does the institution persuade the audience under these circumstances?

These questions have implications for rhetoric, particularly when considering that the roles of communicator and audience are essential to the interactive process of playing the game. A lens through which to view this complex communication dynamic is the concept of persona. The classical concept of persona “encourages rhetoricians to think of the ‘I’ created in a speech or writing as something constructed by the speaker or writer.” It refers to the implied rhetor in the communication interaction. Rhetorical scholars have also developed other conceptions of persona. For example, Black innovated from the original concept of persona what he termed the “second persona,” which accounted for the role of the implied auditor in the creation of discourse. In addition, building on Black’s contribution to rhetorical theory, Wander developed the “third persona,” through which he sought to account for an audience in a communication situation that is excluded from the discourse and is objectified. A significance of the third persona is that it creates scholarly space for ideological criticism and enables criticism of a polysemous discourse.

Although these persona concepts are important in examining many communication interactions, communication in the online fantasy sports environment fosters another version of the communicator-audience relationship. Because the fantasy sports Website is interactive and the site producers and users mutually construct it, users adopt the roles of both rhetor and audience and interchange them in a variety of ways. In this online context, another type of persona is emerging that could be termed the multi-personae, which accounts for the ways that
audiences are both users and producers of the communication text. In response, institutions must be able to communicate with an empowered audience who actively produces its own entertainment content. As this dissertation has demonstrated, companies that facilitate fan culture can communicate effectively with these increasingly active fantasy owners.

The third discipline within communication research that this dissertation speaks to is technology studies. Much of the discussion surrounding the popularity of fantasy sports has been about the effect of technology on the industry. While the personal computer and the Internet were critical to the growth of fantasy, the popularity of the concept is by no means solely dependent upon these technologies. In contrast, when examining this communication phenomenon from the perspective of science and technology studies, fantasy sports is a technology-enabled concept in which the user has played a critical role in the adoption and development of the game technology.

Technology studies scholars that examine the role of the user in technological change have focused on demonstrating the power of the user in contributing to technological design and adoption. For example, Orlikowski argues that technologies are not stable and rather continuously exist as “technologies-in-practice,” meaning that the ways that people interact with technologies can impact technological change. Moreover, she advocates a model in which users enact the structures of a particular technology rather than one where structures emerge from the technology itself. Other scholars such as Douglas discuss how users appropriate technologies in ways that are unintended. Douglas focuses on the amateur technology practices of males and the radio, illustrating the importance of exploring the formative years of an over-determined technology. Whereas some scholars may argue that the technology itself (the telephone,
television, Internet) is the source of social change, these and other scholars seek to understand how technologies are adopted and developed and the role of the user in this process.

The discussion in chapter 2 on the history of the fantasy sports industry is consistent with this literature. The stories of the early founding leagues demonstrated that the obsessed behaviors of fans in the offline game might differ little from what fans experience today. While there is no way to measure the avidity of fantasy players in an offline world of 25 years ago versus the players of the online world, it is reasonable to assume that the game still had a similar effect on the players, meaning that the technology was not the sole determinant of the game’s subsequent popularity. The technology streamlined scoring procedures, allowed people from anywhere in the world to join leagues, and decreased the amount of time people had to spend on the activity, and as a result, these technological advantages contributed to the game’s growth. However, without the users of the fantasy concept in the offline world, the current fantasy technology would not have been developed or adopted so rapidly in the ways that it did. Such a conclusion adds further evidence in support of research that focuses on the role of users in technological design and distribution.

Fourth, there are implications for interpersonal communication. For interpersonal communication researchers, this study analyzed in chapter 3 why fantasy fans were engaged at such high levels with the game and found that fantasy fan engagement is not only a result of the persuasive elements of the game itself but also the communication that takes place in and around it. For the target demographic, many of whom are married and have professional occupations, the fantasy league becomes an adult version of a boys club or fraternity where wives, children,
and job stresses rarely enter. It is literally a test tube for interpersonal communication among males.

Male communication was evident in a number of areas within fantasy league participation. That fantasy leagues are used as vehicles to keep groups of males connected from around the world is an important indication of male communication at work. Moreover, the nature of the communication that takes place in the leagues themselves, which has been termed trash talk as a reference to real athletic competition, creates a gendered space where men can take out aggression, use sexual jokes, and in some cases disparage women to bond with one another. While some of the comments made in fantasy league message boards are entirely irreprehensible, they do serve as a good example of male communication and the ways that this private space contributes to the amount of time men spend playing the game. As a result, fantasy league participation fills a void for the target demographic by providing males a space where only they are allowed and the rules for communication between one another are fairly relaxed compared to their other personal and professional communities. In a society where work and life demands increasingly infringe upon people’s time, fantasy leagues have in many ways become refuges for the men who play in them.

Finally, the study has implications for companies themselves. The issue of companies seeking to capitalize on fans will not be going away anytime soon. The avidity with which fans consume products as well as their loyalty makes them extremely valuable to the media industry. Moreover, if fans are treated poorly, they are often the ones who care enough to start a protest or an online rumor disparaging the quality of a product. For both the loyalty and crisis factors, fans will continue to be a communication priority for companies in the age of the Internet.
The questions then become: How do you deal with fans? How can you turn fans into brand ambassadors? What is the best way to empower fans without giving up too much control? This dissertation has demonstrated the ways that not only fantasy sports fans think about their activity and interact with one another but also how institutions are approaching this fan culture. Ultimately, as the industry has grown during the mainstreaming and institutionalization process, fantasy sports have been a relatively successful example of a commercialized fan culture, and it stands as a best practice example for the ways that companies in other sectors may approach high risk, high reward fan cultures.

For media institutions, rhetoric, technology studies, and interpersonal communication, as well as the corporate world, fantasy sports offers a case study of how persuasion and communication are operating in a highly competitive multi-platform media environment. It is hoped that this research on how a fan culture has been co-opted and the strategies that institutions have implemented to interact with fantasy fans will move conversations about communication, media, and technology forward.

Limitations and Future Research

Like all studies, this dissertation had limitations. In chapter two, which focused on the historical transformation of fantasy sports, personal interviews, historical documents, and secondary sources were used to place the growth of fantasy into perspective. Although the chapter was intended to be comprehensive, there are details about the fantasy industry that will inevitably be omitted.
In chapter three, which was an analysis of the fantasy sports fan, personal interviews, textual analysis, secondary sources including statistical industry data on fantasy demographics and behaviors, and informal observation were used to understand fantasy fan avidity. This particular analysis may have benefited from ethnographic research of fantasy fan cultures, but because of time and already available knowledge from other sources, this approach was deemed unnecessary for the scope of the current project.

In chapter four, the analysis of fantasy sports institutions’ communication strategies, personal interviews, observation, textual analysis, and secondary sources were used to examine six case studies of fantasy communication. The six institutions are a representative sample of the various products and services that the fantasy sports industry offers its fans. The selection of these six companies as opposed to others is an inherent limitation to the study. Moreover, because of problems of access, only one major media company was analyzed in detail.

In light of these limitations, there are questions that were outside the scope of this dissertation that could be addressed. Future research should occur not only in fantasy sports but also the interdisciplinary area of popular culture, media, and technology.

*Fantasy Sports Research*

While this dissertation offered an analysis of fantasy fan behavior, more research needs to be done to better understand the various ways that these fans connect with the activity. As arguably the most avid and engaged audiences in all of entertainment, increased knowledge of this fan group would serve as an excellent case study from which to extrapolate lessons about engagement.
A multiple-method approach would be ideal for better understanding the fantasy sports fan. Of course, statistical research that continues to survey the changing demographic characteristics of fantasy fans and asks probing questions about their motivations for playing are important. In addition, ethnographic research on fantasy fans would also answer questions about how these cultures are formed and function. Studies in which researchers serve as participant observers could yield in-depth understanding about fantasy engagement.

While traditional quantitative and qualitative measurements will help answer questions about fantasy fan culture, another potential research method is to perform biological and cognitive research on fantasy players. For example, related research on videogames indicates that males are biologically predisposed to videogame addiction because of the release of dopamine. Are there similar biological factors that trigger fantasy fan engagement? Moreover, brain research into the cognitive processes involved in fantasy sports participation is also a potential avenue to explore. What occurs in the brain when a fantasy fan is thinking about the game or making decisions? These types of methods may help communicators understand how engagement is stimulated physically and mentally and how researchers can better utilize it.

A related research topic is examining other demographics and their relationship to fantasy sports. Because fantasy sports is a highly male activity, little is known how other demographic groups such as women, young people, and ethnicities would interact with the game. Does it generate engagement only among males? Or does the persuasiveness of the concept extend across all demographics? Moreover, what about the cultural issues surrounding fantasy sports participation? Is the popularity of the concept ideally suited to a culture like America? How would fantasy sports participation fair in a different political and cultural climate? These
demographic and cultural questions can help develop a better understanding of the phenomenon of fantasy sports participation.

A way to determine the effects of the game on people who have never played before could be through an experiment. Groups of fantasy novices could be asked to play the game over the course of the season, and various measures of their engagement could be taken such as the amount of time they spend watching sports, the knowledge about sports they accumulate, and how often they think about their teams. Such an experiment would seek to understand whether the concept’s effects are relatively universal across other demographics, ethnicities, and cultures or whether they are specific to the 18-49 year old male.

Finally, in addition to research on fantasy fans and the fantasy concept, further inquiry into fantasy institutions is necessary. This dissertation studied a sample of fantasy companies and the growth of the industry between 2006 and 2007. However, like most fast-growing industries, communication strategies and tactics will change and audiences will develop different preferences and expectations. The subject of fantasy sports institutions would be well served as a longitudinal examination of how communication and marketing in the industry continue to evolve.

In addition to these specific fantasy sports research areas, there are also broader questions at the intersection of popular culture, media, and technology that the findings of this dissertation generate.

*Interdisciplinary Research in Popular Culture, Media, and Technology*
Of primary concern is the need for more research on the interaction between institutions and fans, specifically with regard to the issue of how companies are institutionalizing fan cultures. What are companies in the film, music, and television industries doing to effectively capitalize on fan cultures? What strategies and tactics are they implementing to commercialize fan cultures without alienating them from their brand? How are organizations adapting to meet the demands of fan cultures? With online communities multiplying and increasing in power, how institutions communicate with them will continue to be a defining issue in the media industry.

In addition to examining the industry side, research into fans themselves would provide insight into the mainstreaming of fan culture. What are the responses of fan communities to particular commercialization tactics? At what point does a culture become too commercialized? Has the threshold of fans’ tolerance for mainstream involvement increased in the digital age? These questions are to suggest that fans play a role in the mainstreaming process and that their behaviors and attitudes are especially fertile areas for future research.

Another potential research avenue is on the fantasy concept itself. While the aforementioned research into the concept of fantasy sports is important, the role of fantasy in today’s marketplace is an interesting question for researchers. This topic is particularly timely given the increasingly participatory audiences in fan cultures. Why is the fantasy concept persuasive, and how are industries operationalizing fantasy into products and services? Moreover, what are the communicative qualities of fantasy in popular culture, and what do fans receive from fantasy experiences? Fantasy as a marketing and communication concept is not
limited to fantasy sports and can be investigated in the context of other entertainment experiences.

As this dissertation demonstrated, the fantasy of becoming a general manager was particularly appealing for the 18-49 year-old male fantasy demographic. While the analysis of fantasy fan behaviors provides insight into the ways that this demographic connects with products, more research could be done on this demographic. After all, as the most important demographic for advertisers, these males could be studied from both a fan and industry perspective. What are the key emotional appeals that connect with this audience? What marketing strategies are effective? What constitutes the male 18-49 culture? As a defining challenge for popular culture industries, both qualitative and quantitative examinations of this demographic and its various segments, such as the 18-34 year-old males, would help answer questions about entertainment's most elusive audience.

Finally, a defining feature of the fantasy fan is his media multitasking behavior. As the active-passive continuum has increasingly been eliminated from academic discussion, audiences are now media multitasking in unprecedented ways. This dissertation touched upon the ways that fantasy fans use multiple media to receive as much information on their teams as possible. However, media multitasking – and how institutions are seeking to understand and address it – is an ever-changing and provocative area of future research. Studying this behavior in the context of gaming, for example, could yield insights on how multitasking affects media consumption across various platforms.

As an interactive popular culture product that fosters an engaged fan base, fantasy sports are a useful starting point for future research in communication. There are promising topics in
fantasy sports as well as the general area of popular culture, media, and technology that can reveal new findings on the dynamic institution-fan relationship. This relationship is an issue that should remain at the forefront of research as new media technologies enter the marketplace and audiences increasingly become more interactive and involved in the production of their own entertainment content.

In this section, I have outlined directions for future research. In the next, the specific future issues that face fantasy sports are discussed in detail.

**Future Issues in the Fantasy Sports Industry**

Although the concept has been in existence for at least four decades, the contemporary billion-dollar fantasy sports industry has literally grown up overnight. From pens and paper to computers and mobile phones, it has evolved into a powerful sector of the sports world with almost 20 million North American participants. Despite its supersonic expansion, the industry, like others that have grown very quickly, is now maturing and, as a result, faces critical issues that will likely affect its future. Six of those issues are examined below.

*Issue 1: Gambling*

Fans pay money to play fantasy games with CBS Sportsline, ESPN, WCOFF, Sports Buff, and many others, and receive cash prizes, sometimes several hundred thousand dollars, if they win. How is that not gambling? It is a question of which seemingly every person in the fantasy industry is aware and must continue to find answers to for the foreseeable future.
For now, the law is on the side of the fantasy sports industry. The Unlawful Internet Gambling Act excluded fantasy sports from the list of banned activities, as it is considered a game of skill, not a game of chance. While the poker constituency, which was included in the Act, will continue to lobby that it should not be subjected to the law, it does not appear that fantasy will be affected in the near future. However, this does not mean the industry should not be concerned with the gambling perception. In order to continue to disassociate itself with gambling, it must continue to emphasize the gaming emphasis of its leagues, promote the fact that it is a game of skill, and encourage lawmakers and lawyers to play the game.

While the industry appears safe from the gambling laws, the potentially most damaging problem with gambling may arise if fantasy sports gets too close to the action on the field. In the NFL, for example, there are an emerging number of professional athletes who publicly compete in fantasy football leagues. Tampa Bay linebacker Cato June participated in a fantasy football draft on SportsCenter’s fantasy football draft special in 2007, and the NFL Players Association even held its own televised draft among current NFL players in the same year. What happens if one of these players begins altering his performance to help his fantasy team? While there has been no evidence of this occurring yet, leagues may potentially face an issue in the future with fantasy sports influencing the product on the field. In addition, if the winning stakes for fantasy sports on various websites become so high, that could also become a red flag to the Federal government about the degree to which fantasy sports is a gambling activity. As a result, how they manage this gambling issue as it relates to the players themselves and the increasing stakes will be critical in the future.
In most of the interviews conducted for this study, gambling was cited as a major issue facing the industry. Along with this challenge, fantasy executives also cited licensing as an essential issue.

**Issue 2: Licensing**

Licensing refers to the purchasing of the rights to use player and team images and statistics in fantasy games. The sports property, like it does for television networks, sells these rights to a media company, which, in the case of fantasy, is a business interested in using the information to run and manage a fantasy contest. It is a way for sports properties to control their image while also generating revenue from the activity.

The issue with fantasy licenses is the autonomy with which sports have in granting them. As the industry has grown and sports properties themselves recognize the profit potential in fantasy, some sports properties are looking to extract maximum value in this market. The situation that represents this licensing approach is the MLBAM vs. CBC Distribution and Marketing case that ultimately favored CBC, which was a major victory for smaller companies. They could now use the statistics without having to pay a licensing fee.

Despite this win, the issue is far from resolved. Major League Baseball, the NFL, the NBA, and seemingly every other sports property would probably prefer to reduce the competition in the fantasy marketplace to themselves and a few of the major fantasy players like CBS Sportsline, ESPN, and Yahoo, who can afford the large sums of money they will charge for the licenses. As a result, smaller companies may eventually be squeezed out of the marketplace.
because either they will not be offered a license from the sports property or they simply will not be able to afford it.

Until the MLB case, the fantasy sports industry did not have to confront issues with significant economic impact. The model of facilitating fan culture was successful in part because mainstream players were involved, but they didn’t seek to cannibalize the market. What MLB is attempting to do with its lawsuit is a direct threat to this model, and if the league is ultimately successful in its case appeals, it would likely spell the end of the communication dynamic between fantasy fans and institutions that has been developed over the last decade. MLB would then likely be viewed as exploiting fantasy fan culture for its own monetary gain and effectively eliminating smaller players from the industry. As a result, this could create a halo effect on other mainstream companies, and ultimately alienate the very fans who have helped grow the industry over the years.

Not only would this issue likely significantly change the industry, but giving more power to the large companies might also stymie innovation in the industry, as the smaller businesses find themselves with increasingly shrinking market share and resources.

**Issue 3: Innovation**

The David-versus-Goliath competitive battles that are beginning to emerge in the fantasy industry may threaten innovation in ways that could significantly impact the industry’s heretofore successful growth model. Many smaller companies consider the involvement of major media institutions as a double-edged sword. On the one side, they’ve helped grow fantasy sports. On the other, their efforts may eventually force out smaller businesses, which may
inevitably result in the loss of innovation. The argument is that smaller companies have more creative freedom to develop the ideas that will drive the industry in the future, and without them, the industry is doomed to fail.

If this argument is correct, the challenge going forward then for both small and large companies is to find ways to work together to effectively exchange ideas and form partnerships. As Jeff Coruccini says, “My big challenge right now is competing with the big boys. And I don’t mean competing against them. But for me to convince them that it makes sense to work with us.”\(^{11}\) In many cases, major companies are co-opting their ideas from the smaller ones, and it would be difficult for the industry to sustain itself if it eliminated all of the smaller competition.

For the smaller company, the innovation challenge also means that it must continue to develop and perfect its niche. It is unrealistic that many smaller players will be able to aggregate contests and content to compete with the larger media players, meaning that the successful smaller companies will focus on differentiating their particular contests or content. In the end, an industry is often its healthiest when the smaller companies are creatively producing and working together with the larger players.

Since the beginning, the fantasy sports industry has had a relatively peaceful coexistence with the smaller and larger companies. While the smaller companies obviously would prefer that the ESPNs of the world were not involved, it was inevitable that major players with huge resources would seek to enter into the lucrative fantasy sports business. However, it would be wise for the larger players to continue working together with the smaller companies not only for innovation purposes but also to retain the grassroots ethos of fantasy sports that has been critical
to the industry. If the larger players force out the smaller ones, it may result in the major companies losing credibility from fans, as they obviously and transparently take the fans’ game completely out of their hands.

The innovation problems discussed here are inherently related to the growth issues that the industry now confronts.

Issue 4: Growth

The growth issue for the fantasy sports industry is twofold: Increase the number of participants as well as the involvement of major brands as advertisers. On the participant growth challenge, the majority of fantasy sports participants play fantasy football and baseball. For fantasy to continue to grow, it must not only convert the critical mass of football and baseball players into other sports, but also attract new participants to other sports. Currently, the fastest growing sports in fantasy are NASCAR and golf,\textsuperscript{12} and capitalizing on these sports and others would enable the industry to be more balanced going forward.

In addition to the growth of participants in the US, the fantasy sports industry has an opportunity to increase the number of international fantasy participants. Fantasy sports are a predominantly North American activity, but there are a number of emerging opportunities for international expansion. A sport like cricket, for instance, with its heavy emphasis on statistics much like baseball is a natural extension for fantasy. Perhaps more challenging because of the lack of statistics (but no less potentially lucrative) is the continued development of soccer (or football), as tapping into the passionate fans of the world’s most popular sport could be the next
fantasy growth area. Moreover, promoting American fantasy sports in markets such as Asia and Europe is also a major opportunity.

The second growth challenge is to continue to generate awareness of fantasy sports as a valuable advertising and marketing platform. Ted Kasten, founder of Draft Dynamix, argues that a major challenge is “getting the big media companies like ESPN, Yahoo, and Sportsline as well as their sponsors and brand advertisers to understand that the fantasy sports participant consumes more content online than just about any other.”¹³ In some cases, because fantasy is a relatively new platform, decision-makers in companies may not be aware of the activity and its potential, meaning that they first have to be educated about it before they invest in it. While fantasy sports have begun attracting interest from mainstream brands, the industry has only scratched the surface of its sponsorship potential.

While both the participant and sponsorship goals appear to be realistic for the industry, the growth of the industry may result in some unintended consequences such as commodification.

**Issue 5: Commodification**

Is it possible that the growth of fantasy sports is actually counterproductive? As we’ve seen in this dissertation, an entire sector of the fantasy sports industry has arisen to help owners win their fantasy leagues. Fantasy content, as it is known, is designed to offer player projections, analysis, research, and any other tool that might be useful in fantasy decision making. The industry executives who run these various content companies know that quality content will
always sell, and, naturally, they seek to become the reliable source for any and all fantasy players to visit for advice.

On the surface, this seems like a value-added to the fantasy experience. Fans don’t have to spend the time doing the research; it’s already done for them. In the past, before fantasy was an industry, owners had to crunch the numbers themselves, travel to spring training for scouting, and find their own industry sources for injury tips. Today, companies do all the work for fans, and all they have to do is log onto a website to get their predictions.

But what happens when all the fans have the same information? What happens when advice on potential sleepers is distributed on every ESPN platform? Do they no longer become sleepers? The game of fantasy sports is based on fans having information and analysis that no one else has, and as fantasy becomes more of a business and institutionalized as a mainstream entertainment, the information itself runs the risk of becoming commoditized. At a certain point, the appeal of playing in a game where everyone knows the answers may end up harming the industry more than helping it.

While this unintended consequence should be of serious concern to the industry, a final issue that it faces revolves around the health and social effects of playing fantasy sports, a problem that may also threaten the industry in the future.

**Issue 6: Health and Social Effects**

Among the industry and even in this dissertation, it has been argued that fantasy sports fans are not only the most engaged audiences in sports but also in all of entertainment. With numbers that support these claims, fantasy businesses have become eager to sell to advertisers
access to this engaged demographic who seemingly spends a large portion of their leisure and even working time playing the game. It’s no longer a surprise to hear when a fantasy fan is wholly immersed in the activity; it has become a legitimate and often celebrated form of entertainment.

Despite the recognition that fantasy fans receive for their loyalty and devotion, is there a point at which fantasy involvement becomes too much? When children, for example, play fantasy, they’re likely spending more time inside thinking about their lineup strategy or making trades than actually playing the real sports outside with their friends. While there is a counterpoint that playing fantasy sports can have educational and intellectual value, the fantasy sports industry runs the risk of developing fans that may encounter physical and/or mental health problems such as obesity or addiction because of the game. As a result, playing fantasy may become nihilistic rather than simply entertainment.

In this context, the industry must also face the consequences of the increasingly blurring lines between entertainment and work. In the past, these two spheres of life were by and large separated from one another. Today, we have a host of new communication technologies that can entertain audiences while at work as well as content, such as virtual games, that can immerse audiences into a life-encompassing role. The fantasy concept itself, which bestows a sense of ownership on the fan, allows fans to adopt that role in every moment of their lives; they literally become an owner of their own team and can be thinking about what trades to make, who to add, and who start wherever they are, including the workplace. Significantly, we are also beginning to see fantasy sports being embraced in the workplace as an excellent platform through which to bond co-workers and build community. It is not overstated to say that fantasy sports represents
another change in the relationship between entertainment and work and that there may be consequences that the industry faces resulting from the time and money that its players spend on the activity.

Fantasy sports isn’t in the only entertainment that faces these health and social issues. In a society where obesity levels are extremely high and media continues to dominate lifestyles, the videogame industry has received pressure over the last decade from interest groups and the government to help promote physical activity and social well-being. While fantasy sports produces an avid and engaged fan that is very attractive to marketers and advertisers, the industry, like the videogame business, must be prepared to deal with the physical/mental health, social, and ethical issues that are related to addiction as the game continues to becomes more mainstream.

The fantasy sports industry is now facing issues on a scale that it has never been forced to confront. Gambling, licensing, innovation, growth, commodification, and health and social effects represent the major issues fantasy businesses face as the industry evolves into a mature stage. How the industry addresses these challenges will ultimately influence the viability of the fantasy business going forward.

**Conclusion**

In hindsight, the transformation of fantasy sports from a grassroots game into a billion dollar industry was inevitable. As soon as the concept was invented, fans seemed to gravitate toward the game. Then, when companies began applying new technologies like the personal
computer to the activity, another generation of fans became loyal owners. Finally, once mainstream companies integrated the game into their operations and the Internet proliferated, the number of new owners, general managers, and coaches in the sports world exploded.

Throughout the industry’s many changes, the one constant has been the fantasy game itself. Fantasy sports immerses fans in the statistical minutiae of sports, forces them to agonize over injury reports, and often redistributes loyalties from their favorite team to their fantasy team. It bonds together friends and breaks off romantic relationships. It turns meaningless games into meaningful ones. And, perhaps most importantly of all, it makes being a sports fan more fun. For many fans, playing fantasy sports is an all-encompassing, addicting test of sports knowledge, strategic thinking, and wit.

Despite the temptation, I decided not to play fantasy baseball in 2007. If I did, the completion of this dissertation probably would have been delayed by several months.
Chapter One


9 La Monica, “Fantasy Football…Real Money.”

10 CBS Sportsline, for example, in 2007, offered three products: Football Commissioner, Free Fantasy Football for both public and private leagues, and Fantasy Football 2007, a public league that charges a fee and awards cash prizes. See http://sportsline.com/fantasy.


13 The most popular keeper league sport is baseball, in which 43% of fantasy owners played in 2006, compared with 37% in football, 14% in basketball, and 11% in hockey. All of these numbers fail in their respective sports to make up the majority. Kim Beason, “2006 Fantasy Sport Behavior Consumer Report: Phase One Report” (presentation, Fantasy Sports Trade Association Winter Business Conference, Chicago, IL, February 21, 2007).


19 Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology,” 11.


22 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 17.


24 Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 23.


26 Henry Jenkins, “‘At Other Times, Like Females’: Gender and Star Trek Fan Fiction,” in Tulloch and Jenkins, Science Fiction Audiences, 197.
30 Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?” 57.
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38 Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*.
40 Lancaster, *Interacting with Babylon 5*, 132, 149.
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43 Ibid.
50 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 22.
52 91% of fantasy sports fans played fantasy football once in 2006, and 61% played baseball the same year. The third most popular sport was basketball, which 38% of fantasy fans played. Beason, “2006 Fantasy Sport Behavior Consumer Report.”
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91 Maurice Jones-Drew.


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