FANTASY FOOTBALL AS SPORT AND GAME

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In an issue that aims to explore questions and the relationship between sports and games, I propose that looking at fantasy sports is an important angle from which to explore this relationship. The term fantasy sports can be a broad term if looked at as incorporating elements of fantasy into sport. For example, many of the most popular sporting games, like *Madden* (Visual Concepts Entertainment, Inc., 1993), already form a relationship between sports and game by using recent player data and incorporating that information into a game. One could argue that such a game already constitutes a fantasy sport. Nonetheless, the agency required by players varies considerably in many video games, all the way from intensely participating in virtual sporting competitions like *Madden,* where players can take a weak team and with enough skill dominate competitions, to other videogames where players need to study statistics and make choices for who plays in a match in a text simulation like *Championship Manager* (Domark Software Ltd., 1992). Both games are using data from the sport to then inform gameplay, which is one type of classification of fantasy sports as simulations (Lomax, 2009). This article will focus primarily on another categorization from Lomax's taxonomy for fantasy sports, which he calls "Internet-based leagues" (2009, p. 386).

Internet-based leagues, Lomax states, are run by sports sites or internet companies and provide free content and services for leagues (Lomax, 2009). Nonetheless rather than use the term "internet-based leagues", I will use the term **fantasy sports**. This article aims to provide an examination of one fantasy sport and hopes to demonstrate how social norms and rules within that fantasy sport have allowed its players to shift freely back and forth between thinking of fantasy sports as a game versus a sport, creating an interweave between the game and the sport it is based on.

Fantasy sports typically involve game players predicting which athletes will perform the best in real games in the future. They have been played across at least 19 different professional sports that range from fishing to skiing to sumo wrestling (Lomax, 2009). Each sport has different rules, but many of the most popular ones involve choosing professional athletes from a particular sport to form a new imaginary team. That imaginary team then uses data from real-life competitions to devise a score that is used to compete against another imaginary team. The first fantasy-style game that used this mechanic was devised by Wilfred Winkenbach in the 1950s, where his version of fantasy golf began when fans would each week, draft a team of professional golfers for a tournament and the fan who at the end of the weekly tournament had the lowest number of total strokes for their team for that tournament would win (Baerg, 2009; Esser, 1994; Fantasy Sports Trade Association, n.d.). It has since been adopted across many different sports, including all five major professional leagues (NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL & MLS) and NASCAR in the United States, and has grown from an estimated user base of 500,000 in 1988 to almost 60 million people in the US & Canada (FSTA, n.d.).

In this article, we will be taking a closer look at fantasy football, the most popular fantasy sport played in the US based on number of unique players (Gillies, 2016; Steinberg, 2014; Subramanian,

2013). In addition, I will focus on a single style of fantasy football within one application, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football*, which has the largest market share for fantasy football players (Evangelista, 2015) and has been where I have been playing since 2013. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football*, in tandem with network coverage of the National Football League and auxiliary media sports sites, dance the line between game and sport precisely. Yahoo's app itself does not follow the typical characteristics of what someone would think of when they first think of a video game, as videogames are often filled with graphics or real-time interactions (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). However, fantasy football is a game that is played by the tens of millions of people, matching the player counts of some of the most renowned AAA games. With a game that is so heavily focused on repeated competition with a small social group and one whose game's rules and norms vary from one small community to the next, examining further the sporting mindset within this context warrants discussion.

HEAD-TO-HEAD FANTASY FOOTBALL

While fantasy football has also grown to discuss a variety of different formats, including daily formats and the like, this article will focus further around what is termed a *head-to-head format* for a league. A league is typically anywhere from four to sixteen football fans who come together as a group to compete against one another. Since 2015, I have been a participant in two leagues, one which I'll call the *DJs* and other the *Midnight Owls*. The members of each league act as fantasy football team owners that leverage the present games played in the NFL by drafting current NFL athletes to their imaginary teams for that season. In this article, any reference to the term "team owner" will be in reference to the fantasy football team owners, the people playing fantasy football, while "athlete" will refer to the professional athletes who play for an NFL team. Once an athlete is drafted, they cannot appear on another fantasy team in that particular league. Because each of the team owners take turns picking

athletes from across the NFL, it's often that team owners end up having a hodgepodge of athletes on their rosters from a variety of NFL teams instead of just athletes from their favorite NFL team.

Each week, team owners put their fantasy teams to the test by facing off with another team owner from their respective league. Team owners must pick athletes to start for their fantasy team. Athletes that were started then earn points for their imaginary team based on their statistics from their real football match that week. Points are then scored by the individual's athletes according to rules set forth by the league which determines whether they won, lost, or tied that week. Team owners accumulate a win record based on these matches that translates into standings for the league. These standings are then used to determine who from the league goes to a playoff at the end of the season to decide the season's champion. While champions earn bragging rights, many also often win money or a trophy. In the two leagues that I've played in, the Midnight Owls requires every member to pay $50, with the majority of the money going to the champion, while in the DJs league no money is transferred but the champion gets a trophy. In some leagues, the person who has the worst record also gets some form of punishment or humiliation. For example, in the DJs league, the loser holds on to a satirical trophy of a toilet. Each league also has a commissioner, who is responsible for running the administrative aspects of the league, enforcing the rules and taking on any other responsibilities needed to keep the league functioning.

Fantasy football's head-to-head system is unique in that it places a heavy emphasis on the small number of people that make up each league. While fantasy football is a game with a set of rules and a system that all team owners agree to, it is also closely tied to the sport of football. Members of a fantasy football league often share some social connection and generally develop a stronger camaraderie after participating in this game of weekly competitions (Stark, 2017). For example, the DJs league consists

of a social circle of ten people that I've known for more than 10 years. While this particular social group is geographically distributed, everyone in the DJs group knows every other member of the group, and there is a level of camaraderie that I have with this group that is rare and I wish to continue, similar to that of a DJ crew. The DJs league was started when one member suggested to all of us that way play fantasy football as a way to keep in touch more and share an experience year after year while we continue down our paths in life. I've been playing in that league since 2013, and feel like myself when playing with them. The Midnight Owls group on the other hand is a group of people that I have a stronger desire to impress, the overwhelming majority of which live in the same area that I do. My goal in that league is to earn some credibility and respect with members of that league, to earn some recognition that I am a good fantasy football player. The reason I was invited to play in the Midnight Owls group came up from a conversation I had with one of the members of the Midnight Owls after I began talking with them about my first seasons playing in the DJs league.

FANTASY FOOTBALL'S VARIED EXPERIENCE

The competition and winning in fantasy football is directly linked to the weekly occurrences and surprises that happen in real football matches. This means that your ability to win or lose in a particular week is directly a result of how your selected athletes score against your opponent's athletes. The points your team accrues in a week only matters in reference to your opponent's point total. For example, in week 6 of the DJs league this year, I was very happy that I had earned a score of 142.8, which was the highest score I tallied that season, and based on our league scoring system turned out to be the fourth highest score out of 170 scores that all teams posted throughout the entire 2018 season. Nonetheless, my opponent that week posted a score of 146.26 for the league, which ended up being the highest score that season. This meant that I ended up getting

a loss for the week and my opponent won. Meanwhile in that same week, in another matchup, another league member ended up getting a win with a point total that was almost half of my losing score (73.2), which was the second lowest score that week, and they won simply because they posted a better score than another member, who posted the worst score that week (69.8).

This particular matchup was not only memorable because of the point totals but because of what happened after the results posted. Points are immediately calculated and displayed in real time. With games starting on Thursday and ending on Monday, early on I led by a sizable margin of points, and felt fairly confident that I was going to win. On Monday night, fresh from the final results showing that I had actually lost, my opponent posted on my league's group chat a picture of animated GIF image from *Mike Tyson's Punch–Out!!* (Nintendo R&D, 1987). That image showed the hero of that game, Little Mac, punching every enemy fighter that he must face in order to win the game. After posting the GIF, my opponent then said: "Came from behind this week!" and followed with: "I handled Osvaldo like little Mac handled Soda Popinski". For those who are unaware, Soda Popinski is one of the enemy fighters in *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*. I did not respond until the next day, but another member of our league said "Don't punch Osvaldo. He's fragile". One could argue that there may be a slight tinge of competitive behavior or jostling from the competition, some of which is very overt like this example demonstrates. Nonetheless, there is also an air of covert competitive behavior that may result from some team owners. While my response in chat was just to say that the loss hurt and that I was going to go into hiding, I remember thinking that my priorities shifted. I wanted to win this season more so than before, and so my mindset was more that I needed to get even as my opponent assumed my place at the top. The game was one battle, but I wanted to win the war and become the league champion. The loss motivated me to say I want to win more,

but from an actionable standpoint, there wasn't much extra I did, other than check my phone more often. Now instead of spending 5 minutes a week in that league, I spent 15 minutes, which is not a whole priority shift compared to other sports, but I certainly would pay a lot of attention to my record and my opponent's record, giving myself a pat on the back when I would win a week, but then also saying "Dang-it!" (or something close to that) when I would realize I lost a week. At the end of this 2018 regular season, my opponent ended up as the first seed heading into the playoffs, while I finished in second.

This example highlights the social aspect of what can end up happening in leagues. This version of fantasy football puts you in head-to-head competition, which opens the game up to members actively trash talking the other members of the league, with the goal to intimidate or make fun of others. Whether such trash-talking occurs is heavily dependent on the league one participates in (Seppanen, 2017) but is also seen as a driver for some for fantasy football itself (Stark, 2017). While the overall feeling that I get when playing in the DJs league is more of a casual vibe, I still want to win and there is a bit of trash talking, though all of it is fairly playful. While I don't like or participate in overt trash talking, I feel like I would end up in more playful discussions about the results in the DJs league versus the Midnight Owls. The Midnight Owls is a league where I feel pressure to perform well, but to do so quietly, as I am seeking respect. I was invited to join the league after it had formed and while I know of everyone in the league, I have not had personal conversations with all of those folks, and so in my mind, there is added pressure to demonstrate that I belong in that league, as I want to be accepted by the league's members and recognized as a good fantasy football player. The difference in mindset between the two leagues demonstrates a shift in the norms and mindset that one has in playing what many consider to be the same game. This paper details how shifts in the game itself and the

experiences that people have in playing a competition in small social circles has contributed to having such varied experiences. This experience along with the affordances of the technology, have created an evolving meta-game that in turn could change the football sport itself.

To understand more of this argument, I will first start with providing a historical context of the game of fantasy football from a gaming perspective, and then move to highlighting some of the changes that were made since the original season of fantasy football was completed, and how once technology became part of fantasy football, it aided leagues in a way while still providing them with what they needed to be adopted and for the sport to continue to grow. Once it reached widespread adoption, fantasy football now has an effect on how the sport is consumed. The formal relationship between the sport of football and fantasy football is still in its infancy and could prove to be a symbiotic relationship, one where the sport created a game which is setting itself up to impact the sport.

EARLY FANTASY FOOTBALL

Fantasy football first started in 1968 by Winkenbach, who was part owner of the Oakland Raiders Football organization and two writers from the Oakland Tribune (Esser, 1994). The initial rules followed most of the aforementioned rules of having a draft and a weekly matchup where fictional teams generated points. The way that athletes would score points was on this scheme, "50 points for a rushing TD, 25 points for a thrown or caught TD, 25 points for a field goal, 10 points for an extra point, and 200 points for a kick or interception returned for a TD" (Esser, 1994, para. 18).

The original eight team fantasy league, called the GOPPPL, was formed and consisted of professional journalists, administrators of professional football teams or people who bought or sold many Oakland Raiders tickets (Burton, Hall, & Paul, 2013; Ross,

2016). This meant that the original fantasy teams tended to take the game very seriously from the start (Esser, 1994). The league had to go through their administrative football networks and news outlets to gather data each week on what happened. Then, those statistics would then be calculated each week by hand and tallied by a commissioner, who would then report and send out information to each fantasy league member on a weekly basis (Esser, 1994).

With so much work needed to be able to play, the first group of people that participated in fantasy football had to invest a large amount of time into the game in order to do well. Information was difficult to obtain in an era of no internet and devoid of stories specifically about athletes. Andrew Mousalimas, one of the original team owners of the game discussed in an interview how he would read out-of-town newspapers and sometimes even call those newspapers' offices to get information about who from their local team was hurt and unable to play that week (Ain, 2012; Sugerman, 2012; Wilner, 2015). This means that some fantasy team owners devoted time to gain a competitive edge, similar to how athletes may devote time to practice and improve. Aside from the team owners, commissioners and league statisticians needed to devote additional time. Leagues needed to keep track of fantasy team rosters, which athletes each team owner started that week, and information on individual athlete accomplishments for each game. Once all the data was gathered, then the league statistician and commissioner had to tally and double check each athlete's accomplishments, calculate all scores, write up the weekly report, and to top it all off settle disputes between the different members about disagreements that they had (Esser, 1994).

CHANGES TO RULES IN FANTASY FOOTBALL

In fantasy football, the rules that a league adopts generates the system that the team owners play by. Over the years, leagues have

tweaked the rules and most often the scoring that has been used for fantasy football. Some of the first tweaks were mentioned by Mousalimas in an interview with ESPN:

> "The only trouble with Wink[elbach] was that he didn't want to make any changes to the rules. He was stubborn as hell...In the GOPPPL, a return touchdown was 250 points and a receiving touchdown was 25 points. So I formed a rules committee to update the game. We were the first ones to put in a yardage rule. You had guys [football players] like Pete Banaszak, who would carry the ball four or five times and score two to three touchdowns from the 1-yard line, while you had other guys like O.J. [Simpson], who was running wild, but he wasn't scoring, so he wasn't getting any points. We fixed that." (Ain, 2012, para. 5)

This is a great example of how fantasy football grew out of a sport to become a dynamic game, one that started to branch out by having different rules for each league. In playing the game, I would argue that Mousalimas may have felt cheated, as he may have picked what he felt was the right athlete, but the scoring system he was playing under caused his pick to not be as valued as other picks, whom may be viewed as inferior football players. In this case, instead of retraining oneself to become better under the current rules, or learning the nuances of picking the athletes that would play best under this first scoring system, Mousalimas wanted to change the league's rules. However, as the quote demonstrates, the original commissioner was against the change, so Mousalimas created his own league where he changed the rule and subsequently his own version of the game. While sports do have rule changes, having a governing body allows such rules to be voted on. Change can be slow in a professional sport. For example, there was almost 40 years of controversies surrounding instant replay (Vecsey, 1998) before the MLB decided to adopt the technology in 2008. However, because of how fantasy football was structured in the 1960s as a small group game that grew organically via bars and offices (Baerg, 2009; Esser, 1994), one can argue that each fantasy football league was ultimately

responsible for creating and subsequently adopting its own rules, which made change happen much more rapidly.

Change happened quickly because as people played fantasy football, and experienced success or defeat, different team owners could propose new rules, revise old rules, or start a new league with different rules. With more leagues and each having different rules, I think this has caused even more so an idea that the rules should be tinkered with. In both leagues that I have played in there has been at least one change to the rules in the last few years, and while I have not advocated it myself, I have begun to empathize with how someone might become a strong proponent to change rules around. Since the rules don't feel static and with the change only needing to be agreed to by a small group of people and not an entire sport, people could experience something they feel is unjust, advocate and then implement a change to the way fantasy football is played.

For example, after having played in the Midnight Owls league for four years now, I have started to feel that some of the rules in the Midnight Owls league are unfair. Once the week's games are finished on Monday, team owners are allowed to swap in new NFL athletes that do not belong to any team onto their own roster. If an undrafted athlete had a good week, or if someone got injured, multiple team owners may be interested in trying to add a specific athlete. To help decide who can add the athlete to their roster, there is around a 24-hour window where those athletes are not served on a first come first serve basis but rather by placing a waiver claim to add that NFL player. In the Midnight Owls league, priority for the waivers is based on how often you use the waivers to claim athletes. After the waiver period ends, team owners are allowed to swap in whomever they want until Sunday, which does not affect their priority. The Midnight Owls league is much more competitive than the DJs, as certain team owners in the Midnight Owls often login every week at 1:30am on Wednesday, which is when the waiver period ends to claim

athletes. These owners do this so that they can swap NFL players in without using their priority, resulting in a competitive edge based on the league's rules, as they can see who hasn't been taken and pick up the best of who is still available. I would argue that such a system does not reward fairly the spirit of having to pick people on a week by week basis given a set of information. Having a limited amount of time means that I have to rely on making waiver claims each week to add athletes that I would like, as I risk not being able to add multiple athletes, while others can wait until 1:30am and be the first to pick from who else is still available. This allows them to not use the priority, and then when an important player becomes available, retain their priority to add that player. This type of waiver system has been criticized as not being as fair as alternative systems, like one where you are given a pool of money and bid on athletes that you'd like to add to your roster (Ludwig, 2016).

Since I have wanted to win the respect of the Midnight Owls, I have not and will not advocate to change the waiver system, but I have daydreamed about how nice it would be if this league's rules allowed for team owners to be able to bid on any available athlete and be able to add less important people without impacting their ability to use the waiver system fairly. Nonetheless, the DJs has the same set of rules, and I'm not as bothered by the rules there, which I recognize as being hypocritical. I think the reason for me not being as sensitive is two-fold, one being that I don't think it affects my play and two being that I don't take the DJs league as competitively as the Midnight Owls. The majority of the DJs team owners don't spend as much time in the league, so this feeling doesn't come up as often, unless they are quietly wishing I didn't swap as many athletes. In contrast, I feel that with the Midnight Owls, it has constantly hurt my chances as people that I would like to add have been added by others at 1:30am. This type of viewpoint tends to mirror sport psychology researchers when they discuss fans who have high identification with their team,

internalizing success and externalizing failures (Wann & Dolan, 1994), but instead of externalizing failures by attributing losses to say a referee, I think fantasy football team owners externalize defeat by taking up issue with rules and/or scoring. With early leagues being completely paper-based, rules for fantasy football could be easily changed and open to interpretation. Having ambiguous and volatile rules aligns with modern day notions that people should write the actual rules down in detail to diffuse potential future disagreements (Wenrich, 2018). Typically, rules only needed to be introduced by the commissioner or approved by a small group of league members in order to be incorporated, making them easy to change.

The variety of waiver systems is just one of the many subcomponents that have changed and evolved over the years in each league before any discussion of standardization occurred. Fantasy football was not covered extensively by traditional media until the first fantasy football magazine was released in 1992 (Hruby, 2013). The first known book about fantasy football came out in 1984, *Fantasy Football Digest* (Charpentier, 1984). This book was self-published and aimed to provide a streamlined set of rules based on all of the variations that had been created in each league (Vox Creative, 2017) in addition to providing statistics and projected analysis for individual athletes. Before the mid 1990s, this information was not widely available or easily accessible. Without a standard way to play or set of rules that computers could enforce, leagues organically created their own systems to play the game, and they did, as Martinez-Esquibel writes:

"With so many participants, new ideas sprouted and the scoring started to change. What was originally a TD-scoring league only, the various leagues added yardage and eventually point per reception [PPR]. Keepers were introduced, dynasty leagues were created, a super flex was added (where a QB can be in the flex position), and cutthroat ideas like Pirate leagues were put in place

where the winning team was able to choose a player from his opponent's roster."(2017, para. 5)

While we explained how the yardage component was introduced, each of the terms Martinez-Esquibel discusses, like PPR, dynasty leagues and flex positions are variations that have grown and survived in *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* as options that each league can select. For example, the flex position allows team owners each week to use one of their team spots to start a running back, wide receiver or tight end. The aforementioned sprouting of ideas by Martinez-Esquibel and Yahoo's support of them provides evidence to how central the small-group league is to fantasy football. If there was a sanctioning body that governed the rules, similar to how most sports operate, there wouldn't be this many variations in how to play. While the internet and the release of fantasy football apps like *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* have helped to shape what rules become popular, most apps offer a tremendous amount of flexibility for how the league is scored, which pays homage to how technologies like *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* have aimed to support the leagues instead of fine tuning the game and its rules. This style of play and flexibility is evident in how the game's scoring has changed throughout the years. In the 80s, books were still mentioning the yardage versus touchdown scoring systems, which they referred to as basic and performance point scoring, and had even included a distance scoring system, which gave more points for touchdowns completed from a further distance away (Charpentier, 1989). The point system also differed from Winkenbach's original scoring and demonstrates the evolution that occurred in fantasy football's first two decades.

Even in today's fantasy football, there is no single predominant scoring rubric. Three scoring rubrics have prevailed though: Standard, PPR, and Half-PPR. While the Midnight Owls recently changed to Half-PPR, the DJs play with the Standard scoring system. All three of these scoring systems have been around since the mid-1990s, and all of them use yardage, where 10 yards

gained equates to 1 point in the league. For *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* as well as others, the Standard scoring scheme gives touchdowns the equivalent of a 60 yard bonus (Savill, 2017). The PPR scoring format works similar to Standard scoring, but also gives one point (or the equivalent of a 10 yard bonus) for each reception that athletes catch in football, hence point per reception or PPR for short. This tends to benefit or place more emphasis on wide receivers and tight ends than running backs, who in the late 90s ended up with most of the yards (Savill, 2017) and are thus the most relevant in Standard scoring. With running backs having most of the yards, Standard scoring leagues often place most of their attention solely on running backs (Paulsen, 2014). While some viewed the PPR scoring as more likely to reward athletes with skill (Behrens, 2017), it was a way to change the importance of focusing so much on running backs in Standard scoring. Nonetheless, PPR scoring also tended to over-emphasize athletes who caught the ball but did not move down the field (Paulsen, 2014).

A compromise then between Standard and PPR scoring would emerge. Enter Half-PPR, which provides a 5 yard or half point bonus for each reception. All three systems seem to have their fair share of media coverage and have emerged for the most part as the three most dominant systems in fantasy football. While these are the three dominant scoring strategies, pushes have been made to introduce bonuses for athletes who achieve first downs as well (Behrens, 2017; Paulsen, 2014) or to look specifically at those who have a first down reception in order to not influence running back totals as much (Pasquino, 2017). For the 2018 season Yahoo has switched their default scoring format from Standard to Half-PPR (Yahoo! Sports, n.d.), demonstrating how the technology nudges and suggests the default experience and rules, but still provides the flexibility needed for all leagues to use the rules they'd like.

To help provide a clearer picture of the scoring schemes, let's

provide an in-depth example that follows some of the history around the changes made in the game by comparing one game between two NFL athletes. Let's start with Pete Benaszak, the aforementioned running back that Mousalimas said only scored touchdowns. I found one game from October 26th, 1975 where Benaszak played against San Diego. In that game, he had nine carries for 29 yards, and two touchdowns (Pro Football Reference, n.d.). In the original Winkenbach scoring scheme, that would constitute 100 points for him. In Standard scoring, this would mean that for that game, he would have had the equivalent of 149 yards, or 14.9 points. Contrast that same game to that for O.J. Simpson, who in 1975 won the rushing title and was named NFL player of the year in 1975. For October 26h, 1975, Simpson had 19 carries for 88 yards and 1 touchdown , along with 2 receptions for 16 yards , which would place him in the original scoring with 50 points. With Standard scoring it would be 16.4 points. With PPR, that score would bump up to 18.4 or 17.4 in Half-PPR (see Table 1).

October 26th, 1975 Game stats	Benaszak - 9 carries for 29 yds (3.2 ypc), 2 TD's	Simpson – 19 carries for 88 yds (4.6 ypc), 1 TD, 2 rec for 16 yds
Orig/Winkenbach (1962)	100	50
Basic Scoring (1989)	12	6
Performance Point (1989)	2	9
Standard (Modern)	14.9	16.4
PPR (Modern)	14.9	18.4
Half-PPR (Modern)	14.9	17.4

Table 1. An example of the points scored based on the different rubrics for October 26th, 1975

I can empathize with Mousalimas in this situation, as according to the data and statistics, Simpson would be considered the better NFL player, yet there were situations where Benaszak would score more points or what would feel an almost equivalent amount. The 80s scoring systems provide evidence for the shift in philosophy between valuing yardage, known as performance point, and touchdowns, which was labelled basic scoring. If we

look at modern day scoring systems, 14.9 points for Benaszak would be a healthy amount of points, and compared to 2017's statistics, could easily land Pat in the top 10 running backs on most weeks for Standard and in the top 15 for running backs in PPR. 14.9 points would also be higher than most wide receivers in the Standard format, but PPR would at least place him in a similar situation of being in the top 10. This highlights for many the importance of touchdowns to the game, in the sport of football, it is not exactly known when or who will score a touchdown. Touchdowns provide an element of chance that has persisted with time and predicting who will be the athlete that makes a touchdown an entertaining exercise for fantasy football. Needless to say, I think the changes that have occurred with leagues and fantasy teams are based on the experience and ritual of playing and trying to devise rules that best mimic reality and the effectiveness that the game has.

While having a paper-based game can afford having many changes, it may seem as if software and technology solutions would have difficulty tracking or developing all of the variations that have arisen. Nonetheless, the next section will detail some of the affordances of having a digital version of fantasy football like *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* and how technology has helped its meteoric rise with fantasy players and transformed the mindset that those players have.
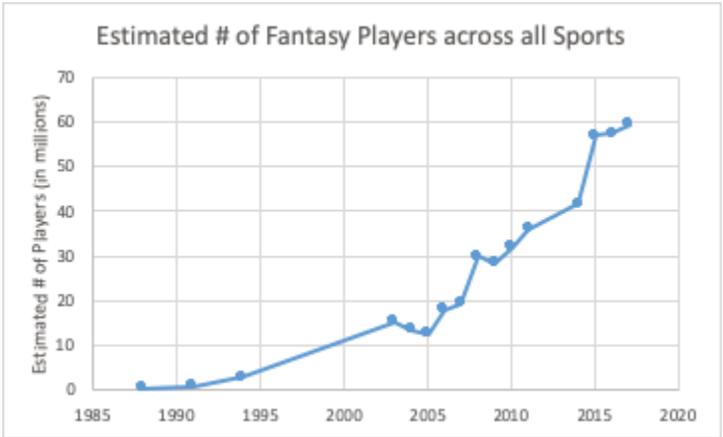
Figure 1: Chart based on data estimates provided by the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA, n.d.)

As Figure 1 demonstrates that the number of players for fantasy sports has enjoyed an impressive rise, I claim that the wider adoption of fantasy football is due to the advances in technology that have made it less time-consuming for commissioners to run a league. While earlier technologies like call-in phone systems did help fantasy owners and commissioners with some tasks, once the World Wide Web became popular in the late 90s, more sites emerged to reduce the time needed to play or run fantasy football (Burton et al., 2013). One such site was *commissioner.com*, which was later acquired by CBS Sports. In a press release from 1998, the commissioner site was touting features such as the providing a site and chat room for the league, the ability to send out weekly reports, draft online, and keep track of stats that are updated after each play in football. At the time, they were offering these features for the price of $99.95 per league (Sportsline USA, 1998). In 1999, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* starting providing similar features to many of the paid sites for free

(Stromberg, 2014), removing more barriers for commissioners. Less barriers and time needed for commissioners and team owners could be a reason for more people to become commissioners and subsequently promote their social circles to join their own league and for that league to be a success. The technology also improved the experience for the people participating in the league, as team owners began having access to athlete stats and news not only on their computers but on phones. This information was provided in real time and updated after each play, which gave team owners up-to-the-minute insights on how athletes were doing. Having a computer system would take away the rule variations that many of the early leagues devised via paper. Nonetheless, with so many different customizations coming into play, it would make sense that the software would allow commissioners to change and adopt rules as they go.

With all the advances in technology, today's fantasy football experience differs from the first leagues in the 1960s. To provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the experience of playing modern fantasy football, I will first discuss the *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* app in its current iteration and then discuss the experiences that I have had in playing fantasy football.

YAHOO! FANTASY FOOTBALL

Yahoo! Fantasy Football has done a good job of catering to all of the historical rules that have been developed over the years. Simply going to the *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* page (*football.fantasysports.yahoo.com*) and creating a new league will provide you with a few options. On the initial page you could select options about how the draft will be conducted, the scoring system, and whether or not to have a flex position. These all have default values so that you could click finish without thinking about it, which would help new commissioners. However, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* also does a great job of catering to experienced

commissioners and leagues. As part of creating a league, commissioners can customize 26 different rules ranging from trades between fantasy teams to playoff seeding to how waivers for new NFL players are processed. League commissioners also have complete customization for how many position players and what positions each fantasy team needs to start for a given matchup including the number of athletes they can keep on the bench. Scoring is also completely customizable, with 84 different options that can be enabled or disabled, each with the option to have the commissioner detail the number of points that are given. Aside from PPR and Half-PPR settings, commissioners have complete control over all point values and whether fractional or negative points should be issued. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* even has the option of providing the aforementioned "first down reception" criteria.

These rule variations and customizations are all aspects that a normal sport or game might not provide, but the customizations are present because of its league-centric roots. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* has leveraged the use of technology to help shape the game in the way that each small league wants, which is well played. The focus is not on the rules per se, but on helping the fantasy teams and league form a unit that can move forward and play together. Having an app that helps offload many of the rule customizations that evolved while helping team owners play the game has helped people like myself be able to enjoy the camaraderie of a league without a heavy investment in time. The next section will go into a deeper dive about my thoughts and how the app helped me keep my involvement low while still inviting me to become more passionate about the sport.

PLAYING FANTASY FOOTBALL TODAY

The DJs league is where I first learned how *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* has made it easy for new team owners to enjoy the game without worrying as much about the logistics. Before joining the DJs

league, I knew nothing about fantasy football. My main goal in playing was simply to keep in contact with the people in this league. In fact, I remember not showing up or participating in the initial NFL player draft, which is a crucial component of the game (Signore, 2013). Because the draft happened virtually, while people might have known that I wasn't present for the draft, they may have assumed that I had placed in all of my votes or setup a draft board a priori, which would have allowed the system to pick for me based on my preferences. At the end of the draft, I not only had a fantasy team, the computer had picked a respectable team for me, one where no one questioned why I picked certain athletes. Up to this point I had done nothing to understand the rules, what I needed to do, or who I should pick, and the app had set me up to be as competitive as possible.

This experience differs from the early in-person drafts, as if you were not there, you would have to designate someone else to draft for you or have some complicated set of rules, or you just may not get any NFL players. Instead of not having any athletes, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* used the information and projections it had developed to draft all of my athletes for me. In addition, it set my starting lineup automatically for week 1 as well. I didn't actually check *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* at all until week 2 of the season. When I finally logged in, I was astonished to find out that I won the first week *despite* not making any choices or drafting any athletes. The feeling of surprise for me quickly changed however, as winning gave me a rush. Even though I really didn't have any input or had made any decisions up to that point, it was the luck of winning the first game that I internalized into the belief that I could be or already was a good fantasy football player. This new belief then changed my stance from merely wanting to keep social bonds to adding the goal of wanting to beat them all in fantasy football while keeping in touch with them. Because the application is handling so much of the work and helping all team owners, it's transforming a game that was

taken very seriously by many in its paper-based days to being a much more casual affair.

At that point my mindset was not that of a sport, but of a casual game, where I hadn't invested much in the thought of winning. Before the second week, I had succumbed to losing and moved on to the goal of playing the game socially. It was the fact that I had won that game, where I transformed my mindset into one where I quietly pursued winning. While having won did cause me to take the game more seriously from that point forward, it's one reason that I think it's enjoyed the popularity it has. Modern fantasy football has increased the chances of people being competitive in the game, making it more accessible. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* provides access to a wealth of information to all team owners with a few clicks or taps. Team owners can even receive reminders if someone in their starting lineup is hurt or has been dropped by a large number of people in completely different leagues. This type of information sharing would not have happened in earlier decades of fantasy football. If folks were missing information, they would be allowed to make erroneous choices that would then be used to make fun of those members and increase the amount of trash talking toward them (Ain, 2012; Hruby, 2013). What the technology has done is made it easier for people to make the core decisions and retain a competitive spirit that one often finds in sport.

Nonetheless, while technology has certainly made things easier for people to play, fantasy football is a combination of skill paired with luck (Getty, Li, Yano, Gao, & Hosoi, 2018). At the very least, some ideas or thoughts on processing football information and statistics would be needed to be able to play competitively. While *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* will draft for you and set your starting lineup for week 1, it won't go any further in making any changes to your team or your starting lineup for the rest of the season. Professional athletes can get injured and new athletes can become rising stars. To win, I needed to make decisions each

week as to who to play and who to add or drop from my fantasy team. Ultimately, I ended up winning the DJs league in my first year, not having drafted any NFL players myself, but I did use a lot of the data that is present in *Yahoo's Fantasy Football* and across the internet to help me decide who to start each week. In 2014, I came in second in the DJs league. In 2015 and 2016, I finished sixth while in 2017 I finished fourth. In 2018 after having the aforementioned week 6 matchup in the DJs league and stating I felt committed to beat my opponent from week 6, I was not able to catch-up to them. They ended the regular season with the most wins, my consolation up to that point was that I had racked up the most total points across all matchups. While that would leave some to be confident about their teams, I was humbled by the fact that I had the 3rd lowest score in the first round of the playoffs, and yet still ended up winning the championship to come in first again in 2018. It's taken a while, but I finally understand there is luck involved, and all I can do is to spend a small amount of time to make an educated guess.

What I think differs with fantasy football compared to other sports is that because you are mostly in small leagues, the amount of time that you need to devote in order to remain competitive can be quite low, compared to playing a sport at an elite level or having played fantasy football in its early years. In a way fantasy football feels more like playing a pickup game of basketball or soccer with some friends who haven't played in a while. It may not take much practice to win or to stay competitive. While I do want to win, I have to weigh that desire with everything else that life demands. What technology today has afforded team owners is a quicker and easier way to look at data to make educated guesses on what to do. While other fantasy sports also have a lot of data at their disposal, fantasy football also benefits from having a weekly schedule. You only need to set a lineup once a week, and depending on your league you may check in one or two more times before the week is over to remain competitive.

With my involvement with two leagues, I have noticed that I have begun to spend a little bit more time playing fantasy football, but my flow for playing in both leagues this past season formed into a routine, where I participate in fantasy football activities 2-3 times a week. During this past season, throughout the week, I sometimes spent my hour-long commute listening to a few episodes of a fantasy sports podcast, listening for names of athletes that could be claimed from waivers. On Monday or Tuesday, I would listen to that podcast and review the stats aggregated by *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* along with other sports sites to look to see if there is an athlete that I should claim off of waivers to replace a poor-performing or injured athlete on my team. Before Tuesday, I spent around 30-45 minutes analyzing and then placing claims on potential waiver candidates, looking at their previous week and history of game statistics, and combining that with articles and analyses by sports writers about that particular candidate's breakout potential or particularly enticing future matchup. The NFL player's game statistics from that season as well as the difficulty of the team's upcoming opponent were the main determinants that I used to evaluate who to claim and who to start for a week. On Wednesday morning, I looked to see which changes were processed and make an initial starting lineup, which typically takes no more than 10 minutes. On Sunday, if time permitted, I checked my starting lineup and made sure that no one is injured. When I was able to watch the games on Sunday that didn't involve my favorite team, I watch games that had my NFL players to see how they did, but I typically used the game to get real-time information on all athletes and who was doing well that week.

While I have become more passionate about football, I also realize my limitations. I am not a football expert. I don't have the eyes nor the angle of analysis that an NFL scout has, and so I need to rely on the statistics and information gathered from multiple sources to make predictions instead of believing that

watching games with my own eyes will make me more accurate. The only time that I think watching has given me some perspective is for receivers or others who I see have some big missed plays, but sometimes that could also be covered via data that is out there. There is a ritual to fantasy football, but the time I spent playing in two leagues ranged anywhere from less than an hour to a few hours if you include watching the games. This is a different level of involvement compared to something like Fantasy Baseball, where games and starters need to be changed on a daily basis. While people can invest the type of time in playing fantasy football that the original teams of the 60s did, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* allows team owners to focus on making simple yet satisfying choices in games of chance, which tend to be incredibly motivating for team owners (Cordova & Lepper, 1996) to compete and have a desire of winning it all without putting in a Herculean effort to do so.

The level of commitment to be successful is not the same with each league either. In the Midnight Owls league I found myself slowly gravitating from having this overarching thought of "I want to be good at this game" to "I want to be an elite player of fantasy football", which is why I started putting in a little bit more time. I feel that more of my attention was focused on the Midnight Owls, since I had yet to win it all in their league (and the monetary investment is stressful for me). Since playing in the league, out of 12 teams I've placed 7th, 4th, 3rd and 6th. While that's not first place, I did place in the top two at the end of the regular season twice, which to me demonstrated that I was at least doing my part in being worthy to be in the league, with a small amount of effort. The small amount of effort that I was making in playing fantasy football not only made me competitive, but also changed my level of NFL fandom. The next section will put this finding in context with details on the effects that fantasy football has had on the sport itself.

While fantasy football is a game that can be played with little effort, the way it has changed how people consume football has caused the NFL to more deeply intertwine the game into its sport. Since its inception, fantasy football has been linked to a deeper appreciation of football, as Hruby mentioned when he cited one of the original documents from the first fantasy football league, "[A]s 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." (2013, para. 40) Hruby also reported on writers that played fantasy football, "Writers who covered the Raiders and 49ers suddenly became NFL and AFL experts. Writers who covered other sports did, too."(2013, para. 57). This linking between fantasy football and a deeper commitment to the sport has also been documented in other modern research as well, which has argued that individuals who play fantasy football are more likely to attend more games on average (Nesbit & King, 2010) and consume all forms and variety of media at higher levels (Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2010) compared to fans who do not play, which one could argue makes them more valuable to the sport as fans.

The NFL realized this and has been making a push to promote more fantasy scores, by mandating stadium scoreboards show fantasy statistics during games (Leonard, 2011). This could also be the reason that not only the NFL but the other major professional leagues have also invested in fantasy sports (Gillies, 2016) and provide statistics on their own sites. Television broadcasts have also been updated in recent years to highlight fantasy statistics as they happen, providing information to football viewers of current fantasy leaders at their respective positions, something that I noticed I would pay attention to when watching. In examining this phenomenon from a personal

level, I have noticed my increased consumption of the NFL as well. Before, I would only pay attention to games that had my favorite NFL team, but over the past couple of years, I've noticed I watch with more interest football games that have my athletes or my opponent's athletes to keep track of statistics and its fantasy impact as it happens. When I went to a NFL game recently for a team that is not my favorite NFL team, I remember being ecstatic on one scoring play because the defense intercepted the ball and ran it back for 50+ yards, almost resulting in a touchdown – I owned that team's defense and remember cheering during the two interceptions, the two fumbles and the safety that the defense generated that day, which luckily for me was the home team. Since teams are made up of many athletes from different NFL teams, it's highly likely that a game will have athletes that impact your fantasy matchup, which provides people who play fantasy football a greater investment in watching football games.

Fantasy football has also transformed the way I talk with members of my leagues. With the Midnight Owls, whenever I see any of the members in person, the first thing substantive topic that we discuss during the football season is fantasy football and how our respective fantasy teams are doing, highlighting any particularly good performances that an athlete had during a particular week. Fantasy football has become so widespread that NFL players themselves have started playing (Associated Press, 2009). With widespread fantasy football still in its infancy, there are many questions that may arise in readers that are left unanswered, such as how fantasy football affects NFL athletes who play, the impending effects that the game and sport will have on each other, and how the trash-talking and involvement in fantasy football affects the mindset and fandom that one has for their own locally based team and of their bonds with their league as a whole. Fantasy football has converted me and others into more rabid consumers of the NFL.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored both the nature, history and evolution of fantasy football, to what it has become today and how it may affect the sport of football itself. Fantasy football is unique in that it focuses on a league, with its origins in leveraging existing social circles and having paper-based rules. This allowed leagues to evolve their own set of rules and scoring systems based on experiences and play, and for the mindset that one takes into each league differing based on the social connections and the norms that each group has. In addition to the leagues, technology has also been an important factor in the evolution of the game and dances a fine line between supporting the league and catalyzing a wider adoption of fantasy football as both a game and a sport. With effects documented and researched, we have slowly begun to see the effects of fantasy football become intertwined with the sport. While there have been reports of disconnects with fantasy football team owners and football athletes (Curtis, 2017; Heath, 2017), fantasy football deserves to be studied in more depth and with respect to the impact it can have on football in the future when looking at games and sport.

Readers were also presented with a first-hand, in-depth view into how the author's mindset has changed and transitioned from game to sport, having started in more of a casual game mindset and moving into a more devoted and committed fantasy football player. However, as I write this and the next season begins, I should provide an update that I have told the commissioner for the Midnight Owls that for the following season, I will not participate in the league. I want my mindset to go back to that of the more casual affair as I want to allow myself to concentrate on other tasks. I will still participate in the DJs league, as that has more of the mindset that I am looking for right now: something where I can be more casual in my play and juggle that desire to be feared in fantasy football with my other responsibilities outside of the game. This transition

back to thinking more about it as a game, is something that is unfinished, and leaves me thinking about whether my ability to play in just one league will be satisfying enough, or whether I will continually bounce back and forth between wanting to think of fantasy football as a sport versus a game.

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