Blending the Real and Virtual:
Activity and Spectatorship in Fantasy Sports

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Abstract

Fantasy sports provide participants with the opportunity to play the role of coach for a team of athletes they select. The better the athletes perform in their real-world competitions, the better the virtual teams they are on will perform. Leagues for fantasy sports started almost 40 years ago and have grown to the point that there are now approximately 30 million participants. Initially using paper and pencil, fantasy sports are now growing rapidly due to the ease of organizing and playing in on-line leagues. The use of computers has changed fantasy leagues from being mostly a group of friends or acquaintances in a local community to potentially being anonymous players from around the world. Newer software is countering the trend towards anonymity with the inclusion of features, such as league newspapers, that provide a greater context surrounding the fantasy leagues. The rhetoric found in descriptions and advertising for fantasy sports emphasizes competition, empowerment, and participation. Looking at the activities of current fantasy sports and the rhetoric surrounding them yields a framework based on their use of real versus virtual action and player versus external control. It is the integration of activity in a virtual game and spectatorship of a real sport that makes fantasy sports a model to explore how other entertainment combining virtual and real world activities may be constructed.

Keywords: fantasy sports, games, virtual communities, on-line rhetoric, spectatorship

Introduction

I turn on the television to watch two teams play a football game and I don't care who wins. I sit on my couch hoping Marshall Faulk, the running back, will be tackled in the backfield but that Kurt Warner, the quarterback for the same team, will throw a touchdown pass. Why? Fantasy football -- because the quarterback is on my fantasy football team and the running back is on my opponent's team.

Fantasy sports are a growing business, largely due to how easy it is now to create and administer a league using free Web technology. What are fantasy sports and what can their success tell us more generally about games and other on-line entertainment?

Fantasy sports put the game player in the role of the coach of a sports team. In fantasy sports, the fantasy coach selects players from the real-life sporting world to be part of their team. Then, every week, the fantasy coach gets points for the performance of the players on their team.

There are many variations in the rules for these games. The coach may have to select some subset of their players to "start" each week and only gets points for those players. Some leagues play such that the winner is the team with the most points at the end of the season. Another variation are leagues where the teams play head-to-head, that is the points for each week are used to determine the winner against one other team in the league.

Fantasy sports have become big business. The Harris Interactive study, as cited in (Zillgitt 2000) and (CBS

Sportsline 2000), estimated that there were around 30 million fantasy sports players in the US as of December 1999, of whom 6 million had played on-line. Given Sandbox has 4.8 million users (Sandbox 2000) and that FoxSports has 1.6 million unique users (FoxSports 2000), this is likely an underestimate. These numbers are likely to increase rapidly as the Harris Interactive study also found that 85% of the fantasy players had access to the Internet and that 10% of all of those surveyed said that fantasy sports were important in their selection of Internet sports site.

With this many players, there are now magazines and television shows devoted purely to fantasy sports. Most major sources for sporting news having their own fantasy sports competitions and have web sites and articles about fantasy sports. Even more general news sources, such as USA Today (2000), have a section devoted to sporting news from a fantasy sports perspective. The FoxSports television channel aired a half-hour show with two commentators providing fantasy football advice on which players were going to do best in the upcoming week.

Another sign of the growing values of fantasy sports is that the NFL Players Association is requesting licensing fees from on-line services which provide fantasy football, arguing that use of the players' statistics is like using their photographs (Newman 1999). A Fantasy Sports Players Association (FSPA) has been "formed to benefit the participants and service providers." It includes more than 45 companies in the fantasy sports area (FSPA 2000). With more licensing requests and laws limiting gambling on the Internet likely to appear, the FSPA may have to become more active in its lobbying for the industry.

This paper looks at fantasy sports as an example of the blending of traditional and digital culture. After providing some background on the history and computerization of fantasy sports, it examines the rhetoric surrounding the games to determine what are viewed as their important characteristics. A framework for talking about games and sports based on these characteristics is then presented. This framework can be used to consider other classes of activities integrating the real and virtual. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential for fantasy sports to change real sports.

History and Transformation of Fantasy Sports

Rotisserie baseball began in 1979 (Colston 1999) and paper-based versions of fantasy football go back to 1962 (Esser 1994). Both of these started as leagues of friends and acquaintances competing in their knowledge of sports (and perhaps placing a wager on the outcome.) Fantasy football began in Oakland and spread out by word of mouth. Rotisserie baseball, due to connections between those who started the first league to those in the media, spread rapidly through publications.

The amount of direct communication required to create and maintain a paper-based league meant that most leagues were community efforts. Players and commissioners had to get together every year for the initial draft. Each week players had to communicate their starting line-ups to the commissioner and scores had to be computed and outcomes shared with all the players.

The networked computer reduces much of the effort of a fantasy sports league. In an on-line league, players may rank players for an on-line draft, statistics are available from various sites on the Internet, and computing scores and results may be automatically emailed to players. In short, the computer removes the need for social organization. This low overhead can lead to low commitment on the part of players, undermining the community-building effects of the activity. For example, one of my fantasy football teams is in a league where I have no idea who any of the other players are, have not exchanged messages with any other players, and probably will not.

Not all on-line fantasy leagues are anonymous. New features are being added to on-line sites that increase the fantasy's scope and promote greater interaction. In the second fantasy football league I participate in,

there is a face-to-face draft and weekly communication among the participants. For example, the commissioner's message, the league top stories, and the interactive poll shown in Figure 1 are all particular to the fantasy football league. They are created by the commissioners or players in the league and provide for a greater context to the game, much as a good dungeon master creates context in role-playing games. The computer still does the drudgery of collecting statistics, computing scores, and enforcing league rules, and this leaves more time for the commissioners and players to engage in more rewarding related activity.
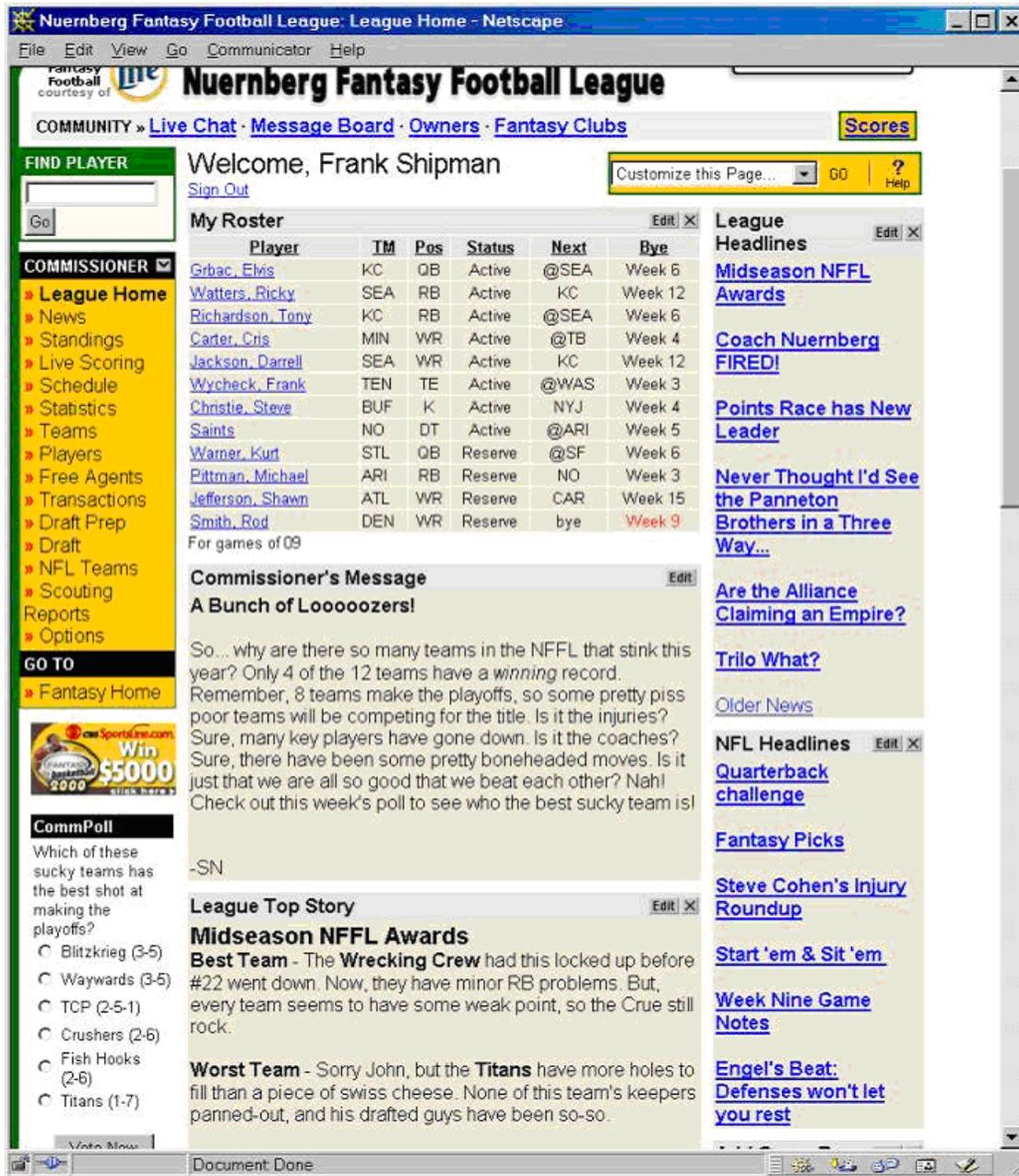

Figure 1. A web-based fantasy football interface.

This sense of community is exemplified by Adam Slotnick of FoxSports.com when he writes of his fantasy sports experiences: "It is tremendously enjoyable and keeps many of us in touch to a greater extent than if the league never existed." (Slotnick, 2000) He goes on to say: "the fantasy sports world is a world that

bonds individuals together into a group with similar likes and dislikes ... a family if you will."

Because of the length of a fantasy game – one sports season, so about six months – there is plenty of time for players who do not know one-another prior to the season to interact and form lasting relationships. Since many leagues exist year-after-year with approximately the same set of players, these leagues can generate rivalries between players competing for the league championship as well as more sympathetic relationships between players near the bottom of their league. Good-spirited razzing is common in the communication surrounding many fantasy sports leagues. An example is the "worst team" award seen at the bottom of Figure 1.

Another feature common to many fantasy leagues is the inclusion real-world consequences, such as awards for the winners or losers. Some of the awards are humorous, such as a dunce-cap trophy for the worst team that would have to be publicly displayed until the next season (Esser 1994). The humorous nature of much of the community activity indicates that fantasy players do not tend to take the games too seriously, although this is not always true. Many leagues have financial consequences – the payment of entry fees and the distribution of these fees to the winners. The inclusion of real-world consequences tends to raise the level of interest and commitment in a game but may hinder the more humorous community actions, as players who are losing money may not be a joking mood.

Rhetoric Surrounding Fantasy Sports

What makes fantasy games so popular? Looking at the advertising for fantasy sports and how the on-line services describe themselves should indicate what they think the attraction of the games is. The rhetoric of fantasy games is frequently one of empowerment and role-playing. It asks the player to imagine himself or herself as the coach, with all the power to make decisions for the team. For example, ESPN describes their fantasy hockey game as follows:

> "ESPN.com's Fantasy Hockey 2001 (FHL '01) is the closest thing you can find to buying your own franchise and becoming the team's manager, owner, and president all in one. All decisions are yours to make." (http://games.espn.go.com/fhl/rules/introduction.html)

This description of the game in terms of the powerful roles that players take on indicates that ESPN thinks this is a major attraction to their game. But is it the feeling of power that attracts players or is it competition. CBS Sportsline's description of fantasy sports indicates they think it is a combination:

> "Have you ever watched a professional sporting event and thought you could do a better job than the people running the teams? Ever wondered what it would be like to be in charge of a team and have star athletes working for you? Fantasy Sports allow you to do just that." (http://sportsline3.commissioner.com/page?page=whatis.html)

There is still the notion of power, as evident in the description of "star athletes" working for the player. This description, which is also trying to entice people unsure of whether they want to play to join, is creating an indirect competition between the player and the real coaches and managers in professional and collegiate athletics. Yahoo uses the notion of competition right up front in this advertisement for a game where the goal is to pick the winners of sporting events.

> "Think you know football? Here's your chance to prove it. Sign up now for Yahoo! Sports' free Pro Football Pick'em contest and show the world just how smart you are by picking the winner in each of this year's regular season games." (http://football.fantasysports.yahoo.com/pickem/)

This direct challenge to potential players to "show the world" their skill emphasizes the public nature of

the competition. The message is that doing well will result in public recognition. The rewards of doing well in the fantasy game are also the focus in CBS Sportsline's description of fantasy sports:

> "In Fantasy Sports, you can be as much the beneficiary of an athlete's performance as the athlete himself!" (http://sportsline3.commissioner.com/page?page=whatis.html)

True, social and financial rewards can be part of doing well in a fantasy league but is the above statement a hyperbole or do fantasy players somehow equate their actions and results to those of the athletes on the field? For the professional athletes likely to be represented in a fantasy leagues, there are large monetary, social, and physical benefits from their sporting activities. Belief in the transfer of benefit from sport players to sport spectators was also considered by Eco's description of watching sports as voyeurism:

> "If sport (practiced) is health, like eating food, sport seen is a defrauding of health. When I see others play, I am doing nothing healthy, and am only vaguely enjoying in the health of others …" (Eco, p. 161)

Eco's emphasizes this indirectness of activity in his notions of "sports squared" and "sports cubed", the watching of sporting events and the watching of people talking about sporting events. The rhetoric of fantasy games emphasizes the notions of control and participation in addition to that of competition but the basic fact remains that fantasy sports are a participatory game related to a spectator sport.

A Framework for Games and Sports

The discussion of computer games and virtual reality and communities has led to the question of what is a game. Juul (2000) presented a definition of when an activity is a game: (1) rules defining the activity's process and goals and (2) the separation of the activity's results from reality. Considering the rhetoric surrounding fantasy sports, perhaps a further refinement of games should emphasize control, participation, and competition.

Much of the literature on computer games has focused on the role-playing, adventure, and action games. This focus is natural in the context of a discussion of narrative (Murray 1997) for these classes of games tend to use stories to tie together the separate challenging actions of their users. The narrative provides information about how to solve the puzzles in an adventure game, where to go next in a role-playing game, and who are the bad guys in an action game. Other classes of games like arcade games, simulations, and strategy games tend to have less narrative surrounding the action. One thing all these games have in common is that they are meant to challenge the player.

Fantasy games are similar to strategy or simulation games where one selects and arranges pieces on a board and watches what happens based on some computational model of interactions between the pieces. Rather than having a purely algorithmic model of how the pieces interact to determine the next state or outcome of the game, fantasy games include the results of some real-world activity. By basing a computer game on the results of actual events, fantasy games create a bridge between real and virtual activities and between player control and external control.

The following framework, shown in table 1, uses these attributes to differentiate between different types of entertainment. The columns in the table differentiate between whether the action involved in the activity takes place in the real world or in the virtual world. As already mentioned, some activities may include action in both the real and virtual world.

The vertical axis represents who is in control of the action. For a sport or game, from the player's perspective, they are largely in control of their own actions. From the spectator's standpoint, no matter how

much they yell they are unlikely to have much influence on the activity. Again, there are clearly levels of control as a soccer player must react to the other players on the field and spectators, particularly when tens of thousands are acting together, can influence the outcome of a sporting event. This lack of control does not mean a lack of immersion, as spectators will yell at the players, coaches, and referees shown on the television, or fidget as if they were playing the computer game themselves. Table 1 gives examples of entertainment activities that roughly fall into each combination of real and virtual action and player or external control.

	Real Action	Virtual Action
Player Control	playing sports	playing games
External Control	watching sports	observing game playing

Table 1: Activity and spectatorship as characteristics of games and sports.

The dimension of player control vs. external control relates directly to Murray's discussion of agency within an activity (Murray 1997) and indirectly to Aarseth's description of the ergodic (Aarseth 1997). When playing a sport or first-person shooter game, the player must perform action (or inaction) in order for the activity to progress. In the case of external control, such as watching sports on the television or in the stands or watching someone else play a video game, the action proceeds regardless of the actions of the spectator. Fantasy sports fall in-between the extremes in both dimensions. When only the on-line game is considered then the player has control and the action is virtual, with the real sport being merely an engine for generating statistics used by the game to determine success. But unlike most game engines, the real world event is a public spectacle whose viewing provides the on-line player with information useful for subsequent on-line activity. Considering the public event as part of the game, there is also real action that is outside the control of the player.

This combination of player control and real action, even though they are at different levels of entertainment activity, is one reason for the success of fantasy games. When playing a sport or a game, a player must be engaged at some level -- they must reflect on the form of the activity in order to take part in it. The engagement for many computer games lasts so long as the player continues to find surprises in the game, and this is different than being able to win the game. Once a player has determined what they consider an "optimum" strategy, regardless of whether they have succeeded in terms of the game or not, they are likely to quit playing. If you play Civilization to completion many times, the addition of new variables will initially make Civilization II engaging, but after a while, it will become less interesting regardless of whether your can beat the computer at high levels of difficulty. Multi-player games can provide surprises through the actions of other players, although they too can become dull once the variety of interactions enabled by the game engine has been fully explored. Fantasy games, by having a "game engine" that makes use of real-world complexity, have the potential to remain engaging for a much longer (perhaps indefinite) period of time.

Effects of Fantasy Games on Real Sports

Playing fantasy sports well requires having up-to-date knowledge of the real world sport. Without knowing who is injured or who is likely to be in the starting lineup each week, a player can turn a good team into a loser. Because of this trait, most fantasy sport players are people who were already somewhat interested in the sport, just not necessarily avid spectators.

Because fantasy sports blend gamesmanship with spectatorship, their success impacts not only the companies providing fantasy sports services but also the original sport itself. Instead of only caring about

the games involving one or two local teams, fantasy players are interested in the results of many games every week. By being indirectly involved in so many games, the spectators of the sport are now more immersed and engaged. This results in a higher number of viewers and thus higher revenue from advertising for the televising networks. As a side note, since spectator interest is also what drives player salaries, attempts to force fantasy sports sites to pay licensing fees, like that of the NFL Players Association, have the potential to negatively impact the players' salaries in the long run.

In the long term, how will fantasy sports affect the real sports? Already, players receive letters and email telling them about fantasy leagues, such as "you were my first draft pick." Requests for greater playing time and more plays designed for specific players are surely part of the current flood of fan mail. This is a reflection of the fantasy players yearning for more control.

Professional sports exist, at least at their current level, because of the spectators. Anything that changes the desires of the spectators has the potential to change the sports themselves. Consider how television has resulted in changes to the rules of the major sports in the United States – television timeouts in professional and collegiate football, shot clocks in professional and collegiate basketball and illegal defense rules for professional basketball are just a few examples. How will decades of growing fantasy sports play change real sports? One example of how it could change current sports practice is to require coaches to publish starting line-ups in time for fantasy players to adjust their starters. Already, the National Football League requires injury reports publishing the likelihood of whether an injured player is going to be ready on a scale ranging from probable, questionable, doubtful, to definitely out.

There are a number of other interesting questions with regard to the relationship between fantasy and real sports:

- Can the popularity of a fantasy game overtake that of the original?

- Are sites that provide real-time statistics on player performance more interesting than the broadcasts of actual games?

- Will it take the place of going, watching, or listening to the sporting event?

- Will it increase or reduce the amount of playground sporting games (by replacing or increasing interest in actually playing the sport?)

- Can it influence individual or team performance on the real field, change the discussion in the real locker room, or at the bargaining table?

Sporting events are just one area for which a fantasy game can be created. Turning a real-world activity into a fantasy game just requires the development of rules abstracting real world events for use in the game. Not all fantasy games need be purely entertainment. There are already fantasy stock markets, where players pick stocks and the outcome of the competition is based on actual stock performance. In this case, players are gaining intuitions about real stock trading while playing the game. It would be possible to create a fantasy congress where players try to predict the outcome of real world legislation or try to create alternative legislation that have virtual votes based on similarities to real legislation. Such a fantasy game could be used in educational settings when success in the game requires knowledge of the curricular topics.

Conclusions

Fantasy sports are emerging as a growing form of on-line entertainment. These games have paper-based histories going back almost 40 years but the move to networked, computerized games have made them

easier to set up and play and changed the character of the games. With the growing number of business interests surrounding these games, there has emerged a greater competition for players. The characteristics of the games viewed as important to game acceptance, as determined through an analysis of the rhetoric in the advertising of sites trying to attract new players, include control, participation, and competition.

A framework for characterizing forms of entertainment has been developed based on the concepts of player control and real-world and virtual action. This framework considers how blending real and on-line action creates opportunities for more engaging and immersive forms of entertainment.

Blending of real and virtual – computer science research continues to make this more and more possible through advances in architectures for ubiquitous computing and the development of mobile devices, virtual reality, intelligent agents, and robotics. Today's fantasy games put players in the role of decision makers, but not real-time players. You can watch a real-time scoreboard for your team but there is little interactivity. As technology enables transferring and processing greater amounts of information in near real time, we can imagine future fantasy games where the player is on the virtual field, competing among and against professional athletes, with the computer providing appropriate handicapping. This vision of future fantasy sports makes the experience closer to actually playing sports, providing for both real action and player control.

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