What Fantasy Soccer Offers Game Studies

Christopher A. Paul
Seattle University
Seattle WA, USA
paulc@seattleu.edu

Olli Sotamaa
Tampere University
Tampere, Finland
olli.sotamaa@tuni.fi

Keywords

Fantasy soccer, fantasy sports, fantasy football, English Premier League, luck, skill

INTRODUCTION: FANTASY SPORTS

This thinkpiece suggests that Fantasy Premier League, one of the most popular fantasy sports games in the world, can be used as a lens to look back to the contemporary field of game studies. Fantasy sports games have transformed the ways in which sports are consumed these days, and we believe that Fantasy Premier League offers several points of reference for thinking about games and play in new ways. Following in the lead of Constance Steinkuehler's notion that games are "well defined problems enveloped in ill-defined problems that make their solutions meaningful," we believe that fantasy sports are an exceptional example of a game to study. Based on the incredibly well-defined objective of scoring more points, the ill-defined strategies players use to accrue those points is worthy of study (Steinkuehler 2006). By analysing the game and the enveloping cultural, technological and economic formations we highlight how diverse stakeholders participate in shaping the fantasies provided by Fantasy Premier League.

Typically dated to the debut of Rotisserie League Baseball in 1980, modern fantasy sports allow fans to select active professional athletes and assemble their own team with the aim of proving themselves a more knowledgeable sports fan than others. Notably, fantasy sports are organized in radically different ways depending on the sport and region where the game developed. United States based fantasy games generally follow in the tradition of the original Rotisserie Baseball League, with players selecting athletes through a draft or an auction and with each professional player owned by only one manager in the league.

However, the game that is the focus of this project, Fantasy Premier League, follows in a British lineage of games where players assemble their team with a common salary cap and prices for each professional athlete. Managers assemble their teams with the same set of options, which means that multiple teams could be comprised of exactly the same set of players. Additionally, it gives all managers the chance to compete

against each other and this difference is so significant that prior research claims that these two frameworks produce disparate fan identities (Ploeg 2017).

In the most recent seasons, Fantasy Premier League has exceeded ten million entries and it features substantive support from the professional soccer league that inspires it. The game has created a notable surrounding community of content creators and resources, enabling particularly skilled managers to create a career around dispensing advice about what choices to make and which strategies to follow. And, in line with broader social trends, artificial intelligence models and betting markets are being integrated into the strategies players use to optimize their techniques in an effort to overcome their foes.

HOW FANTASY CHANGES UNDERSTANDING OF GAMES

Game studies could often benefit from looking outward to other forms of play to gain a perspective from outside of the field to look back in on it. Although esports research has gained a degree of prominence in game studies (Taylor, 2015; Witkowski, 2012), fantasy sports remain understudied even though they are quite clearly games. Fantasy Premier League can help us rethink the idea of fantasy in a way that is slightly different from the ones traditionally applied in game studies. We also believe that the game offers several points of reference for thinking about games and play in fresh and original ways.

First, there is the massive growth of the game, both in terms of the number of entries and in the community around the activity. Although it has plateaued over the last few years, expansion and marketing of the Premier League television rights fueled massive growth in the fantasy version of the sport. These developments have transformed the way the game works, changing the balance of what players need to do to attain the same levels of success. Additionally, as the activity grows in prominence, it can support a larger ecosystem of surrounding material, from websites to podcasts to YouTube streamers and coverage throughout sports media. Quite simply, the ecosystem around Fantasy Premier League is worth reflecting on as it moves from the margins to the center of consumption of soccer.

Second, the relative balance of the role of skill and luck is quite interesting in all fantasy sports. What makes Fantasy Premier League an especially compelling case study is that every single player has access to the exact same options at the beginning of the game. That could lead to players emphasizing the role of skill in the game, as it is fundamentally about the choices you do and do not make. However, players often stress the role of luck, particularly as the number of players competing has increased. Growth in the game means that success is more likely to come from fortunate bounces, rather than pure skill. Many players seek to optimize, but they do with the knowledge that they are removed from what is likely to occur. We contend that this acknowledgement of luck and diminishment of skill is an interesting area for games to explore to address problematic behavior in communities around games.

There are myriad ways fantasy sports can inform understanding of games. Fantasy sports are second-order games (Carlson 2013): they are parasites who want to steal the focus from their real-sport counterparts. Fantasy Premier League is a peculiar activity, one that players consistently talk about wanting to quit to preserve their

mental health and enjoyment in watching soccer. But, those tensions that surround the game are fruitful areas for reflection and further study.

REFERENCES

Carlson, C. 2013. The Reality of Fantasy Sports: A Metaphysical and Ethical Analysis. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 40(2), 187-204.

Ploeg, A. J. 2017. Going global: Fantasy sports gameplay paradigms, fan identities and cultural implications in an international context. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 724-743.

Steinkuehler, C. 2006. Why Game (Culture) Studies Now? *Games and Culture,* 1(1), 97-102.

Taylor, TL. 2015. *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming.* Cambridge, MA, USA; London, England: The MIT Press.

Witkowski, E. 2012. On the Digital Playing Field: How We "Do Sport" With Networked Computer Games. *Games and Culture,* 7(5), 349-374.