The Illusion of Control: Reinvigorating Colonial Desire through Fantasy Football's Procedural Rhetoric / R. Kyle Kellam

Abstract: This essay examines the online game of fantasy football as a collection of rhetorical procedures, or programmed processes that present a particular ideology through how the game is played. I argue that the procedures of fantasy football, from the transformation of human action into numeric representation to trading players with other fantasy owners, are processes that bear the marks of its dominant messages: commodification and ownership. This relationship between subject and object operates as a kind of colonial logic, rearticulating an already troubling relationship that the NFL holds with America's plantation past. While fantasy football's procedures invite owners to exercise control over NFL players, gamers soon realize that they have little impact in the outcome of games. Rather than discouraging the fantasy community from participating, this illusion of control rearticulates the bond between the NFL and its fans and rejuvenates a colonial desire.

Bio: R. Kyle Kellam is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Marian University in Indianapolis, IN. He holds his doctorate in Communication (2012) from Wayne State University. At Marian he teaches courses in rhetorical theory and also serves as the Assistant Director of Forensics. As a teacher, coach, and scholar, he brings critical rhetorics into pedagogical practice. Correspondence to: rkellam@marian.edu.

Introduction

<1> In 1962, Oakland Raiders part owner Bill Winkenbach and two sports writers gathered in a

New York hotel room and fleshed out the rules for a new, interactive game: fantasy football.

More than fifty years ago, it's safe to say that Winkenbach could not foresee how his simple idea

would bloom into the industry it is today. What drove Winkenbach to create fantasy football was his love of the game, as well as other fantasy sports like baseball and golf. However, this 1994 description illuminates another motivation: "The man who conceived the idea for fantasy football, and who deserves the most credit for the birth of the game, is the late Wilfred 'Bill' Winkenbach, who was a limited partner with the Raiders (he owned a financial stake in the team, but had no say in its operation)" [1]. Most notable about this description of Winkenbach is that he was a part owner of the Raiders, with financial investments in the team, but *no control over the operation*. Perhaps he wanted more operational control in the Raiders organization but did not have any real influence over the players. So Winkenbach did what he could. He took the statistics and made a game where he could play with them, compete with them, and conceivably, attempt to control them. Fantasy football, as it is currently played by millions every year, remains fraught with the same tension as its origin.

<2> This essay is concerned with the way that fantasy football operates as a colonial rhetoric that positions NFL players as objects and urges gamers to become owners of these players and beneficiaries of their on-the-field production. By colonial, I mean the rhetorical construction and expression of the objectified other through colonial actions and discourse, which includes a desire to possess and control through symbolically violent means [2]. And while this relationship emerges out of white, masculine, and heterosexual domination, it transcends these demographics into a normalized, but sometimes hidden way of thinking and acting. Kent Ono argues, "Since colonialism is generally not apparent, because it is repressed, colonialism persists through traces, markers, or symptoms, all of which register colonialism's continuing presence" [3]. Fantasy

football and other gaming byproducts of the NFL rearticulate the colonial logic already persistent in the National Football League (NFL).

<3>From the practices of team ownership to the discourse surrounding the April draft for new players, black oppression is prevalent and sustained in the NFL. Although blacks are the majority of players, their marginal status keeps many of them off the sidelines or in the front office in positions of power [4]. Over two-thirds of the players in the NFL are black, as compared to less than one-fourth head coaches and zero owners [5]. However, it is not simply that blacks are left out of the owning and management rights. Black athletes are in a perpetual state of possession, whether it is by NFL owners or fans, and this relationship emerges from the United States' colonial history with African-Americans.

<4>The brutal practice of slavery subjugated the black body into an object as it became the physical property of white plantation owners. However, the public policy of ownership was not the only result of slavery. After all, whites did not seek to own blacks simply to strip them of their human rights. Rather, the ownership of blacks was the means by which whites cultivated black *labor*. As Claud Anderson notes, "A slave's life was committed to producing wealth and comfort for white masters" [6]. Thus, the black body became an important possession for whites because of its ability to increase economic growth. As white plantation owners possessed more black slaves, plantation labor production and financial growth increased. Essentially, black persons were reduced to a commodity to be bought, sold, and valued based upon their ability for labor. In fact, in the slavery marketplaces, this is exactly how plantation owners coded the slaves' bodies. Walter Johnson claims, "Gazing, touching, stripping, and analyzing aloud, the

buyers read slaves' bodies as if they were coded versions of their own imagined needs" [7]. Therefore, slavery not only played a central role in creating the public, legal discourse of ownership that is so prevalent in the black-white racial tensions in the United States, but it also established the institution by which black bodies became an object of commodity and desire for whites.

<5>Sporting spectacles have become an integral part of this institution, where black athletes have punished their bodies for not only personal glory, but also the demands of white owners, managers, and audiences. According to Elizabeth Alexander, "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries" [8]. Sports media also describe black bodies through a language that hearkens back to the colonial discourse of the 19th century. Ann DuCille argues that, "professional sports repeats the language, though not the economic conditions of slavery: owners, players—sometimes called properties—buying, selling, trading" [9]. This discourse is rampant in the NFL, one of the key institutions in the "Old Plantation South" of sports [10]. Thomas Oates argues that the NFL draft, in its obsessive and sexualized desire for black bodies, puts black players in the same owned position that was present before Emancipation. He further explains that the draft "serves to reassert the white male power structure by positioning increasingly non-white athletic bodies as commodities and encouraging fans to imagine themselves as potential possessors of these bodies" [11]. With the NFL hierarchy structured as it is, black athletes cannot avoid being owned or commodified, barring advancement for blacks in the NFL and maintaining it as a site where remnants of colonial ideology persist.

<6>As a gaming byproduct of the NFL, fantasy football may utilize the same colonial logics and discourses present in the NFL. Oates argues that fantasy football, along with the NFL draft and the *Madden NFL* videogame franchise, is a form of "vicarious management," or the ways that a mostly white NFL fan base is invited to use various forms of new media to control predominately black NFL players through a context of "racialized androcentrism" [12]. Oates contends that vicarious management "invites audiences to identify with the institutional regimes of the NFL (and the authorities who conduct them) rather than with the athletes" [13]. He goes on to add that "athletes framed by this mode of fandom are positioned as property, often valuable, but ultimately disposable" [14]. Fantasy football discourse even describes players using the language of the marketplace, referring to players as "commodities," "sleepers," "busts," and "lottery tickets." Furthermore, NFL players are often described as "studs," "workhorses," and "bell cows," colonial metaphors that argue players are valuable for their labor and production. Thus, when I label fantasy football specifically as a *colonial* rhetoric, I am referring to a type of discourse that is designed by colonizing whites to distance the non-white subject as a colonial other for the purposes of objectification and commodification. Within a traditional system of colonization, this type of discourse functions to normalize these otherizing colonial logics, which allows the space for violent colonial practices, like slavery, to make sense to both the colonizer and colonized. I am certainly not declaring that the discourses or ideology of fantasy football result in slavery, but rather arguing that fantasy football operates in a colonial logic where the objectification, commodification and consumption of NFL players for the purposes of entertainment is normalized and makes sense to those who participate in the game.

<7> Rather than study fantasy football as an articulation of multiple discourses and ideologies, I seek to understand it as what Ian Bogost would call a persuasive game [15]. To proceed in this way would enable examining fantasy football as a collection of procedures that ask fantasy owners to make *choices* about their own fantasy teams and NFL players. As a persuasive game, fantasy football is unique. Fantasy football does not attempt to create the same virtual experience as the *Madden NFL* franchise which, at its most basic level of game play, asks the audience to become the NFL player and control his actions on the field in simulated contests. Fantasy football also operates differently that other similar videogames like *NFL Head Coach,* because in this game, users are asked to simulate the role of the head coach specifically, making detailed decisions that NFL head coaches make during the off-season, preseason, and regular season games. While the gamer is the owner of the team, the players and statistics are artificially generated in these videogames. In fantasy football, on the other hand, participants are invited to become the owner of actual NFL players and follow the results of NFL contests, but have no control over what these players do on the field in real-time. Their only form of control comes directly through who they choose to own, field in their lineup, place on the bench or disown entirely. From this position of ownership, the fantasy football owners must actively assess NFL players based on their relative value to other players, making them a kind of commodity. This collection of decisions "allows participants to experience the unique social power that predominately White, male owners of professional sports teams possess on a daily basis" [16].

<8> In this work, I explore how the procedures of fantasy football, which restrict the relative choices available to fantasy football participants, argue that those who play fantasy football are owners and the people they play with, NFL players, exist solely as commodities. In playing

fantasy football, participants see the personalized effect that the commodification of players has on their fantasy team through the processes of the game. As a result, gamers, like capitalists, seek to control and manage their commodities, which is most often the driving force for owners to play [17]. Even though owners recognize that the game is a fantasy, by looking at these procedural arguments through their remediated ontology, I argue that it is perhaps the mere illusion of control that reinvigorates the colonial desire.

<9> Bogost claims that just as visual scholars argue that verbal or written rhetorics are unable to explain the unique expression of images (e.g., an image argues "all at once"), visual rhetoric is not fully equipped to explore the procedural and expressive nature of videogames [18]. Even digital rhetorics (i.e., email, blogs, web pages, etc.) do not fully account for how videogames make arguments through programmed processes. Thus, to demonstrate that games such as fantasy football are argumentative, it is necessary to expose how the procedures or the relative choices offered to the player of the game make arguments about the subject or object being acted upon with the game.

<10> While Bogost's work focuses specifically on *video*games, fantasy football is not exactly that. The game occurs predominately online and makes use of programming language that assists in its functional game play, but it takes on procedural qualities that are different than traditional videogames. Bogost contends, "Despite my preference for videogames, I should stress that I intend the reader to see procedural rhetoric as a domain much broader than that of videogames, encompassing any medium—computational or not—that accomplishes its inscription via processes" [19]. Hence, my focus here is not necessarily the procedures that are central to the

way the game is programmed for online interactivity, but rather the primary practices, rules, and processes of the game that existed long before fantasy football was ever an online or "programmed" game. These core rules and steps primarily teach participants how to be owners and how to view players as commodities. As Bogost suggests, "Procedural rhetorics do not necessarily demand sophisticated interactivity" [20]. The procedures I will analyze are socially interactive practices, such as drafting and trading players to other league members, and online interactivity, such as choosing a lineup on a website. I will also consider how the procedures convert NFL players into statistical commodities by utilizing statistics and ranking players. In an attempt to succinctly explain the procedures of fantasy football, I will separate the game into three phases: draft preparation, the league draft, and season management.

<11> The draft preparation stage includes rankings players against others in their respective positions, creating tiers or hierarchies within those rankings and doing practice mock drafts that test this evaluation process. This includes the conversion of NFL players into statistical representations, or forms that can be commodified and manipulated. In the drafting stage, fantasy owners take turns selecting NFL players in their individual fantasy leagues, attempting to capitalize on each player's projected commodity value by not "spending" too high of a draft pick on him. Drafts come in many different arrangements and forms, but primarily rely on the assessment of value and choice. In the regular season stage, characterized by processes of management, fantasy owners make decisions that try to maintain and optimize the commodity value of their teams. These processes include choosing which players to start and which to bench, as well as the adding, dropping or trading of players. In order to bring these procedures to life, I draw from various sources: fantasy magazines, websites, broadcasts, blogs, and my own

experience with playing the game. Finally, while I do not believe that I can extrapolate all the nuances of fantasy football procedures in this project, a cross-section from various media will effectively highlight the colonial spirit of the game.

Procedural Arguments

<12> Fantasy football, if considered as an assemblage of rhetorical procedures, makes some unique, yet troubling arguments about NFL players and the mediated relationship they share with fantasy owners. First, fantasy football argues that players are numerical objects. The computational design of fantasy football takes the very real actions of human beings and converts them into numerical representations, first as statistics, then as points. This process exemplifies what Oates and Meenakshi Gigi Durham call "enumeration," or the practice of converting NFL players into numbers [21]. In fantasy football, enumeration creates a relationship between NFL players and fantasy gamers that solely values statistical production and, thus, commodifies players.

<13> Before each fantasy season even begins, NFL players are evaluated, ranked and placed into hierarchies so that they may be judged on their relative worth to fantasy owners. These fantasy owners will then choose to own or not to own these commodified players in fantasy football drafts based on their perceived value. For example, KC Joyner's Metricmania is "based on comprehensive game-tape breakdown" and reveals "hidden truths." Joyner professes, "These truths can give you a big edge at your draft table" [22]. Joyner describes his Metricmania:

In addition to the raw statistical intel, each positional section contains a few rules of thumb, designed to serve as numerical guideposts when walking the compendium's roads. They detail the threshold a player needs to be considered elite, what figures should be seen as acceptable minimums for backups and, most important, which metrics condemn a player to the draft-unworthy bin [23].

During the fantasy season, these NFL players will be continually evaluated for their worth within the game, which is contingent on the amount of statistics, or on-field production, generated by the NFL player. If these players do not produce enough to maintain their worth, then fantasy owners will disown these players through dismissal or trade. Gamers quickly learn that retaining a player for non-statistical reasons, such as fandom or emotional attachment, will not be rewarded in fantasy play.

<14> Statistics, while not required to play a sport, have become an integral part of the sports industrial complex. While they may function differently depending on the sport, statistics are another informational layer for fans to understand and interact with the game. From a Marxist perspective, statistics are not central to producing the game but rather represent a commodity surplus, a byproduct of the production process. As the NFL and its processes grew more complex over time, the need for more elaborate statistics grew as well, which resulted in keeping track of nearly every facet of the game. Harry Braverman contends that this same process of keeping track of surplus and managing it marks the emergence of two particular industries in modern day capitalism, the financial industry and clerical workers, whose "only function is the struggle over

the allocation of the social surplus among the various sectors of the capitalist class and its dependents" [24]. Braverman provides a more detailed description of these industries:

> Each step is detailed, recorded, and controlled from afar, and worked up into reports that offer a cross-sectional picture at a given moment, often on a daily basis, of the physical processes of production, maintenance, shipment, storage, etc. This work is attended to by armies of clerks, data-processing equipment, and an office management dedicated to its accomplishments [25].

Considering this description, I contend that fantasy football emerges out of this same function of capitalism. Not only did the NFL employ a type of clerical workforce to keep track of its growing body of statistics, but also another industry materialized to capitalize on them.

<15> At its core, this industry's main purpose is to relay the commodity value of NFL players. Magazines and websites full of fantasy "experts" take statistical information from previous seasons in the NFL and convert it into useable fantasy data for gamers. Before the next season begins, these media outlets enumerate, dissect and commodify the players by translating their NFL potential into fantasy value. The players are then put into extensive rankings and hierarchies based on different common point systems. Beyond the print magazines, mainstream networks like ESPN and the NFL Network have already integrated the fantasy game with hour-long shows dedicated to only covering fantasy football. These networks, along with NBC and FOX even weave fantasy updates into their regular Sunday broadcasts, and their websites have expanded to offer fantasy advice along with NFL news and scores. For instance, NFL.com's

Michael Fabiano produces a column each week called "Start 'Em & Sit 'Em," which "is the ultimate look at the weekly NFL matchups and how they'll affect your fantasy team" [26]. In this column, Fabiano provides details on questionable players, and barely mentions the week's "must starts." Fantasy football and its enumerative processes are not just an isolated, fringe sector of the media. Instead, the game has integrated itself within the mainstream as a way to capitalize on its popularity and potential for revenue. More critically speaking, it has made the enumerated identity of the player as ubiquitous as his human action in the NFL community and proliferated the colonial mindset that players are mostly controllable objects.

<16> Another way to look at this relationship between the technology of fantasy football and human action is through the work of both Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Kittler. Benjamin argues in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," that the reproducibility of a piece of art removes the aura attached to the presence of the original piece. As art is constantly replicated, the aura of the original becomes lost [27]. Moreover, Kittler, in his work, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* contends that one's handwriting was connected to his/her soul, as there was something unique and personal about individual styles of handwriting. However, with the invention of printing and the typewriter, people were no longer an integral part of their technologies, as communicating in print became sterile and standardized through these industrial machines [28].

<17> When considering the work of Benjamin and Kittler, I suggest that fantasy football, through its hypermediated, numerical representation, takes the aura away from the human action of NFL players, stripping the excitement of their individual plays, and converts them into a

sterile, reproducible form: statistics. Furthermore, the technological apparatus of fantasy football, through a similar process, takes the soul out of an NFL player and removes his body from the game, allowing the fantasy owner to interact only with his enumerated production. Thus, all NFL players represented in fantasy football are not depicted by their unique physical bodies and distinct styles of play, but rather by the same digitized and enumerated form transmitted in black and white on the computer screen. In other words, fantasy football is programmed to convert players into these simplified numerical objects so that they may be more easily judged in their commodity form by fantasy gamers. Fantasy football's essential design relies on this objectifying enumeration. However, playing fantasy football and engaging in the processes of management, gamers also become oriented as colonizing agents.

<18> The second critical argument advanced by playing fantasy football is that those who play should think and act like owners, not like fans. While fantasy football's enumeration begins the process of turning NFL players into objectified commodities, fantasy football's gameplay experience reinforces this commodification from the moment the draft begins and continues throughout the season. So if the enumeration makes football players into objects, then actually playing fantasy football and engaging in the processes of managing a team asks individuals to take on the subjective position of owner of these objects. Playing the game, owners learn the importance that production has on winning and are invited to use control as a means to reach this success. Those who play fantasy football are asked to think like capitalists. Braverman argues that "Like a rider who uses reins, bridle, spurs, carrot, whip, and training from birth to impose his will, the capitalist strives, through management, to *control*. And control is indeed the central concept of all management systems" [29]. If fantasy football owners can understand the market

logic of the fantasy game by doing research, staying focused on production and thus playing the game effectively, then fantasy football reinforces through its procedures that owners will increase their amount of control and predicted outcomes.

<19> Thinking like an owner includes the starting, benching, trading, dropping, adding, and continual evaluation of players. Throughout the season, the fantasy owner must manage his or her lineup to ensure that the draft value of the player maintains or improves. This process consists of deciding who to start each week based on his projected future performance, which also entails weighing factors like the player's game history and his matchup that week. Also, because some players decline and others emerge, a fantasy owner must always be willing to drop "cold" or add "hot" players or potentially trade these players with other owners based on want and need. Each week, fantasy owners must field a starting lineup based on his or her team of acquired players. Fantasy football owners only receive points for players they put in their starting lineup, so it is important to try and field the lineup that will maximize the point production for each week. Typically, at the start of the season, these decisions are easy because the owner simply starts the players they drafted the highest, or the players with great potential for production and value. However, as the season moves on, these decisions become more difficult because NFL players get injured, do not play certain weeks, underperform compared to reserves, or face tough opponents in a given week. Thus, it is the role of the fantasy owner to constantly decide who holds the highest value and is worth starting based on their ability to generate points.

<20> This commodity logic becomes a kind of discourse between gamers in individual fantasy leagues. When proposing a trade, for instance, one owner might use the logic of the marketplace

to convince the other. If one owner has a lot of running backs on his or her roster, but is missing quality production at wide receiver, then he or she may choose to attempt a trade with someone who is plentiful at wide receiver, but lacking at running back. These trades can become very beneficial for both owners because keeping valuable commodities on the bench at a particular position does not earn points each week. Here is an example of a trade proposal:

> I see that you have three No. 1 receivers but are starting LenDale White at running back. Well, good news: I have a player in Knowshon Moreno who can step in right away at RB2 and keep from giving away points at the position—points that could cost you a playoff spot in such a close division.

> So, here's what I propose: Knowshon Moreno and Eddie Royal for Calvin Johnson and LenDale White. Take a closer look because the trade will make both our lineups much better. Imagine getting Moreno's 20 carries a week instead of White's 10! And imagine what Moreno will do when he faces the Raiders in week 15!

> Look forward to hearing back from you [30].

In this trade scenario, the one player attempts to improve his or her own team value, while making a case for a fair exchange to get the deal done. By playing fantasy football, owners learn that these trades can greatly improve teams that are not generating enough production to win.

<21> By inviting gamers to think like owners, fantasy football argues that players are not judged and evaluated for their human qualities, but solely for commodity value and production. And in playing the game, fantasy owners will typically abide by the procedures that support market logic over human qualities even if, for example, the player has a bad reputation or is well liked

by NFL fans. For instance, a fantasy owner quickly learns that keeping a player in the starting lineup just because they have name value or play on the owner's favorite team will quickly cause the fantasy owner to lose if that player does not *produce points. ESPN Fantasy Football* echoes, "Reputations and names don't always equal huge numbers" [31]. There are examples where owners add or maintain players on NFL rosters for their ability to draw fans into the stadium or by offering mentorship to younger players. In fantasy football, these qualities do not bring any value to the fantasy team because they do not produce statistics and, as a result, they maintain no commodity value. However, fantasy football participants learn by actually playing that there is no place in the game for well-respected players who do not produce; fantasy football procedures do not translate those qualities into production. As an article from *ESPN Fantasy Football* reminds us: "Respect Your Seniors, Just Don't Draft Them" [24]. In this article, the magazine discourages fantasy owners from drafting running backs over the age of 30, because while they may seem like attractive names that are loved by NFL fans, they will give you little fantasy production. Furthermore, it is better to select younger backs that might have less to do with the actual success of the NFL team, but create statistics that will ultimately help your fantasy team. While fantasy owners might glean such information by reading this article, they do not understand the way the game itself specifically argues such a claim without playing and seeing the results. Making these choices within the game helps the fantasy football participant to see not only the NFL player's value within the language of the marketplace, but also the actual effects this has on *ownership* of the players.

<22> Just as positive human qualities like leadership do not affect fantasy football, so called "character issues" do not generally impact the outcome of fantasy games, unless the NFL

punishes the player and he is unable to play. Otherwise, the procedures do not allow for character to matter. For example, NFL quarterback Michael Vick went to prison in 2007 for owning a dog fighting operation. As a result, the NFL suspended him from the league. After Vick rejoined the NFL in 2009, fans hated him, despite his regained dominance. Drafting Vick in fantasy football became a dissonant issue for fantasy owners because he was a valuable commodity, but people did not agree with his personal actions. While NFL fans can choose to not root for Vick on the field due to personal concerns with his character, for fantasy owners, the choice fell on the logic of the marketplace. As fantasy expert Matthew Berry argued, "Here's my argument as to why Vick is not only worth a first-round pick, and not only should be the No. 1 quarterback taken, but should be the No. 1 pick overall. It's actually very simple. If Michael Vick is as good as he was last season and stays healthy all year, you win your league. Period. And he's the only guy you can say that about" [25]. Furthermore, Vick, despite all of the fan hatred and dissonance in drafting him, was on 21.7% of teams that made it to ESPN.com league championship games in 2010 and owned in almost 100% of all leagues [34]. Fantasy football owners wanted to possess Vick's production more than they wanted to "own up" to his character issues. However, the procedures of fantasy football, and their emphasis on commodity value, production rights, and ownership made the choice easy. Drafting Vick, despite his actions, fit with the logic of the marketplace naturalized by playing the game.

The Illusion of Control

<23> Fantasy football, through its enumerative processes, positions NFL players as objects and invites gamers to think like owners with colonial desires to control. These persuasive procedures

are problematic because they open up spaces and practices for a colonial logic in popular discourse and normalize potentially harmful ways of thinking. The reality is that in fantasy football, owners have only a virtual and somewhat passive possession of the production of a given player. Evident in the name "fantasy owner," fantasy football is the mere fantasy of *owning* a football team. The fantasy owner has no control over what an NFL player will do in any given week. Common logic might suggest that this ontology would mitigate the rhetorical processes of fantasy football. However, as I will argue here, it is precisely this procedural illusion that so rigorously remediates and rejuvenates the colonial relationship between subject and object.

<24> Brian Sutton-Smith calls games like fantasy football a "rhetoric of fate," where the gamer is left at the discrepancy of chance [35]. This process somewhat compares to the logic of the actual processes of the NFL. An NFL owner typically has the power to decide who the franchise selects in the draft and what players are expected to be on the field, but he cannot go onto the field and control the results of the game. He must direct his franchise from afar and bear the results of his decisions. From a procedural standpoint, fantasy football works much the same way. Fantasy owners select players in the draft, manage who is on the roster, and make the "tough call" each week concerning the starting lineup. However, they must also idly watch the outcome of those decisions as the real NFL games unfold each week. As many fantasy football owners will express, this is the most frustrating part of the game because the owner can no longer control the fate of his or her team. This is a rhetoric that written or visual forms cannot fully convey in the same way as playing the game of fantasy football does. It takes a fantasy owner playing the game, performing the procedures, to experience the true nature of the passivity.

<25> Ownership in fantasy football is similar to ownership in the NFL, in that the owners must watch the outcome of games, but not actually play. However, one major difference between the two is that the great majority of fantasy owners have no real access to NFL players. In *The League*, a bawdy, but popular sitcom about a fantasy football league on FX, this scenario plays out in an episode from season two titled, "The White Knuckler." Ruxin, a main character on the show, attempts to gain additional control over his team by getting access to Cleveland Browns kick return specialist Josh Cribbs. Ruxin, a Chicago lawyer, is sent by his law firm to hospital to help a child's dream come true through the Make-a-Wish Foundation. As it turns out, the child's dream is to meet his favorite NFL player, Baltimore Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs. Ruxin, however, convinces the child to meet Cribbs instead because he wants the opportunity to find out how many points he is going to score that week. In the end, when Ruxin meets Cribbs, Cribbs catches on to his scheme and ends up giving Ruxin none of the information he is looking for [36].

<26> This episode of *The League* represents the tension of fantasy owners who try to gain additional control over their team. More, it highlights how fantasy football argues that the only control owners really have is the decision of who to own and not to own, who to start and not to start. Just like the capitalistic marketplace, where people buy, sell and trade commodities, there is an illusion of control over what will happen to these commodities. In the end, however, it is all a prediction or a "roll of the dice" based upon research and trends in the market, which aims to reduce risk. Fantasy football relies on this same illusion of control. In the game, owners evaluate and select players, manage them throughout the season, and deal with the consequences of those

actions, but there is no real control in the game itself besides perceiving how much players are worth and then choosing to own or disown them. Control is part of what attracts fans to fantasy football, but there is little control besides the notion of ownership.

<27> Apart from the procedures, the first step in understanding the illusion of control is to return to Marxism to recognize that fantasy football is what Paul Willis might call a "cultural commodity." Cultural commodities, while just as fetishized as other commodity forms, bear their sense of usefulness unlike most general commodities [37]. The fetishized nature of a general form commodity, such as a luxury automobile, conceals the social relations of its production but still bears its usefulness through its fetishism. These commodities could maintain a kind of use-value despite their fetishized existence. Whether it's a Ford or a Bentley, I can still drive it to work. Cultural commodities rely on fetishization, as it is their shared popularity that demonstrates their use. Despite being a product, which includes both labor and capital, a cultural commodity could not be de-fetishized. To do so would give no basis for its existence. However, cultural commodities must communicate use-value to their consumers to maintain a kind of consumptive credibility, placing them in a state of constant contradiction [38]. Willis gives the example of commercialized music. On one hand, commercial music is a fetishized product, because consumers buy it without having any connection to the production of the music. On the other hand, the music itself still requires a sense of community and shared taste, communicated across multiple people, to value it and create a market for its need. We even call such a thing "pop music" because its creation demands mass appeal, but we often criticize it for having little artistic value. The result of this contradiction is not a useful commodity, but rather a commodity form where "usefulness and fetishism [are] so unifyingly opposed" [39]. Thus, the cultural

commodity represents a constant contradiction, or a lack of stability in the commodity form, where it requires usefulness and community to exist, while simultaneously overtly admitting its own fetishized nature.

<28> How does fantasy football operate as a cultural commodity? Fantasy football expresses its "usefulness" by building a broader community around the NFL and increasing NFL viewership and revenue [40]. This is important because not everyone can be a part of the immediate production process of the NFL by being at the game, as even the largest NFL stadium, MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, holds around 82,000 people at full capacity. Also, considering the high ticket prices to enter these stadiums on game day as well as the difficulty in getting tickets, fantasy football allows access to some portion of the NFL for any fan. Most popular hosting sites are free and open to anyone willing to join. The sheer fact that fantasy football has a market of people willing to participate in its activities demonstrates its usefulness as a cultural commodity, because it has no other usefulness besides its appeal to that community and the communication surrounding it.

<29> At the same time that fantasy football communicates its usefulness as a cultural commodity, it also acknowledges its own fetishized existence. The game is not called football, but rather *fantasy* football because it admits its own status as a cultural byproduct of the NFL. The word "fantasy" even bears a childish quality, one far-fetched and imaginary. So a fantasy football owner might have some access to the NFL within the game, but it is clearly not the same as being present at an NFL game or being an NFL owner. Also, what do fantasy football owners own besides the fantasized rights over an NFL player's production? Fantasy football participants

own some stake in the mediated production of NFL players, but they share that ownership with millions of other people. Fantasy football's structure and gameplay clearly differentiate it from the NFL. Thus, as a cultural commodity, fantasy football operates discursively as a double gesture where it demonstrates its usefulness through its connection to the NFL and its fans, but highlights its fetishization by admitting its fantasy.

<30> Fantasy football, through its procedural forms, operates in the contradiction of a cultural commodity, which adds to its illusion and instability as a rhetoric. The game also showcases this contradiction by using particular colonial procedures that rearticulate the mediated relationships between subject and object. In order to see how the media plays a unique role in resituating this relationship, I turn to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's double logic of remediation, which argues that "our culture wants to both multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation" [41]. Remediation itself is the "representation of one medium into another" [42], which "always operates under the cultural assumptions about immediacy and hypermediacy" [43]. Immediacy refers to the attempted transparency of a medium, where the user becomes less aware of the technology, like three-dimensional graphics and virtual reality simulators. Hypermediacy, in contrast, is the logic in which technology admits its own presence and emphasizes process over perception, like the "windowed style" of the World Wide Web.

<31> Fantasy football, as a remediated technology, follows a hypermediated logic in its presentation but falls into an immediacy when observing its effects. Fantasy football owners play the game on the Internet, in a "windowed style," where the primary representation and game play comes through the interactivity between owners and statistics. There are no three-dimensional

graphics and there is hardly anything one might call a traditional "image" in the game. Unlike *Madden NFL*, the representation of NFL players does not come in the form of increasingly realistic graphics and controls that grow closer and closer to a player's human likeness and movement. Rather, fantasy football does not try to be anything more than a game of numbers in its procedures and technological presentation, focusing on process over perception. However, while fantasy football admits its own hypermediacy, those who play the game are still seemingly duped by its mediated game play. The procedures of the game ask fantasy owners to imagine themselves as real owners of NFL players. Simultaneously, there is a sort of recognition that fantasy football owners have no control, because they have no access or real impact on the existence of NFL players; thus, it is an illusion. So in terms of being a cultural commodity in the logic of remediation, fantasy football is always in contradiction, producing a double gesture.

<32> Perhaps one of the reasons for fantasy football's perpetual contradiction resides in the way that the game is not an isolated game space, where all the procedures of the game can be represented within its programming language. Fantasy football's procedures seems drastically different than often-studied videogames like *Grand Theft Auto* [44]. In those videogames, the games designers confined all the relative choices for the gamer within the programming. The gameplay occurs entirely in an enclosed, finite virtual space and accounts for its "possibility space" or the "myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work" [45]. Also, players can explore the space of the game in isolation, being the only subject in their virtual world. The user can control any active agent within the game, while the programming does the rest of the work.

<33> The possibility space of fantasy football, in contrast, utilizes the actions of real people in real spaces to *become* the content. Also, because its game play involves the input of other participants to play (it does not occur in a virtual vacuum), it more closely resembles the also often-studied "massive multiplayer online role playing game" (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft*, whose procedurality must also account for the actions of others in game play [46]. To play these types of games alone would be to not play them at all. Therefore, because fantasy football requires the interaction of multiple people to perform its procedures and has content based in the actions of real players, its procedural rhetoric is far more unpredictable than the rhetoric of virtual videogames. This dynamic alters the limits of a given game's possibility space, thus changing the range of rhetoric that one may encounter, the consistency and frequency of that rhetoric, and who plays a part in the construction of such rhetoric. Games are reducible to their programs, but humans are not. In this way, fantasy football, in its numerical, hypermediated form, represents a modernist tension to use technology and dictate that which it cannot (e.g., human behavior on a football field) and subsequently gives the illusion of control.

<34> Similarly, because fantasy football is a simulated game, but so intertwined with actual people and real events, it would also follow that this type of gaming is even stronger proof of McKenzie Wark's merger between real space and "gamespace." When we play a videogame portraying a character, even if that character is a digitized representation of a real person, we are controlling actions that occur only in imaginary spaces. Even in documentary games like *911 Survivor* or *JFK Reloaded*, our actions occur in a temporal and historical vacuum [47]. But in fantasy football, owners do not play with fictional characters. They instead play with the hypermediated and numerical identities of actual people. What exactly is "gamespace," and what

is real space in fantasy football? What is fantasy, and what is reality? Because it incorporates the actions of humans and exists *within* the social relations of communities of people, the game and its procedural limits resist definition and full representation. At the very least, it rhetorically blurs the line of procedure, play and social relations.

<35> It is tempting to stop there and imply that, on a rhetorical level, fantasy football creates this separation between NFL players and fantasy owner, but my suspicion is that the relationship is not that simple. Instead, I suggest that by looking again through remediation, fantasy football discourse resituates the existing relations between NFL players and their fans. While on a rhetorical level fantasy football takes the aura away from the human action of NFL players through its procedural rhetorics, it simultaneously shifts and rejuvenates the mediated bond between those same players and fans through the context of ownership, making fans more interested in players in colonial ways than ever before.

<36> Remediation plays out in two particular behaviors. First, as suggested by the illusion of ownership, fantasy football owners desperately attempt to control fantasy football outcomes and reduce risk within their matchups. Sometimes, as shown earlier through *The League*, this even includes trying to access the real NFL player to either get some information about or have influence over the player's anticipated performance in the game. While *The League* is fictional, as Mark St. Amant shares, this behavior is very real. He writes, "Back in the old days of Broadway Joe and Dandy Don Meredith, pro football players were typically approached by beautiful women; now, unfortunately for them, it's mostly [fantasy football]—obsessed men" [48]. St. Amant focuses his discussion around Chicago Bears long snapper Patrick Mannelly,

who, as a player with no fantasy value, would constantly get questioned about the production of his fellow teammates owned by fantasy football participants. In the book, Mannelly recalls an incident when a fan at training camp shouted to teammate Anthony Thomas, "I drafted you this year, A-Train, gimme some points, baby!" Thomas reluctantly replied, "I'll try, man, I'll try" [49]. Also, former running back Fred Taylor adds that he would constantly get bombarded with fantasy owners telling him to "play good" for them because they have Taylor in their starting lineups; Taylor admits that he grows tired of hearing it [50]. As these two examples illustrate, while the fan pursues a more personal connection with the player, the player does not feel any more connected to the fan. This suggests that even as fantasy football owners seek NFL players for more control, they still do not have the sort of access they desire nor can they attain it.

<37> The second behavior that demonstrates how fantasy football resituates and rejuvenates relations between NFL players and fans is owners' altered rooting interests. Typically, fantasy owners already watched the NFL before playing fantasy football. Yet, this relationship with the sport changes as the gameplay invites personal investment in more than just one team. Owners now have a vested interest in individual players on a variety of teams, changing how many games they watch per week. As Mannelly explains,

> Fantasy football is probably the best thing going for our sport … It makes someone an instant Falcons fan or Chargers fan if they have, say, Tomlinson or Vick on their team and makes them want to watch more than just their home team's games. It increases viewership, Internet traffic, magazine and newspaper coverage. It's only going to help

the sport out in the long run. Bottom line, fans are the number one thing in the NFL, and

fantasy football is probably the biggest fan interaction we have [51]

As fans of the NFL engage in fantasy football, they also become more interested in particular

players and, as a result, watch more games. Fantasy owners might even wear jerseys of their

favorite fantasy players to their league draft. Sometimes these rooting interests cause a conflict

of interest when an owner's fantasy quarterback is playing against his or her favorite NFL team.

Does he or she root for the individual player to produce, but also root for his or her NFL team to

win? This scenario gets even more complicated if the opposing owner has a player on the fantasy

owner's favorite NFL team. Root for the fantasy player? Root for the NFL team? Root against

the opponent's player, but still root for the NFL team as a whole? In my experience, the answer

to these questions usually relies on the logic of the marketplace and production: Root for all the

players to score as many points as possible so that the NFL team still has a chance to win, while

rooting for the fantasy owned player to score the most points individually. Regardless of the

fantasy owner's rooting interests, playing fantasy football increases the amount of interest in the

entire NFL and its players.

<38> To return to my original point, these two relationships indicate fantasy football's

remediation and its role as a colonial rhetoric. By attending games live and watching NFL

broadcasts, fans already had *mediated* relationships with NFL players before fantasy football.

However, fantasy football also *remediates* this relationship. While the specific rhetoric of fantasy

football operates to remove the aura from the NFL player's human action, on a more cultural

level, fantasy football also shifts and energizes the bond between NFL players and fantasy

owners in both positive and negative ways. At the same time, while fantasy football acknowledges its own hypermediacy in its technological format, it also has effects that are characteristic of immediacy as participants get "lost" in the fantasy of being an NFL owner. Fantasy football is a cultural commodity that communicates its usefulness to its fans, as it is the fans that establish this community of taste around it. However, the game is also a victim of its own fetishism because it is "fantasy" football. Consequently, fantasy football is always making a double rhetorical gesture, caught up in the contradiction of its own existence. Within this contradiction, fantasy football firmly uses control as an illusory device and rearticulates a colonial bond between subject and object. In playing fantasy football and experiencing their perceived lack of control, gamers actually desire more control and the fantasy becomes a backdrop for exercising colonial desire. In this way, fantasy football functions as an active repository of colonial action, surfacing most prominently and teaching most effectively, in the way people play it.

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