Introduction

Fantasy Sports, Real Sports, and Gender

I just went to the league site to see a beautiful, beautiful thing.
TURF KINGS' BOUNCED FROM THE PLAYOFFS!! ON THE VERY
LAST DAY!!!! SUCK IT, TURF KINGS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
*sniffle*
It’s just so . . . goshdarn purdy

This email, sent to the author from a friend in her fantasy football
league while they both worked in their campus offices, encapsulates
the fantasy sports experience for many participants. Fantasy sports
provide a point of connection for participants who use new media to con-
nect with others—often those they already know—when long workdays and/
or distance make face-to-face interactions challenging. These friends use a
shared language of competitive banter to interact around a common inter-
est, and the discussion that ensues subsequently moves on to other topics,
including work commitments and an upcoming social event. As college pro-
fessors, they spend large portions of the workday in front of their computers,
which means they can check the status of their fantasy sports leagues and
exchange nonwork emails rather invisibly and without consequence. Im-
portantly, what distinguishes this exchange from many other sports-related
interactions is that the author is a woman and her friend is a man. They
play side by side in the same fantasy sport leagues and relate to each other
through their participation, yet they often do so through characteristically
masculine (but rather good-natured) banter. Here, the emphasis is on bask-
ing in the glory of making it to the playoffs—which both of them did—and
celebrating the competitive, collective triumph over another team’s falling
short.

Whose Game? draws on a rich array of data that focus on the perspectives
of individual everyday fantasy sports players to examine these and other
dynamics in the U.S. context. In particular, the book positions fantasy sports
as a new, more engaged and competitive fandom, which simultaneously represents, bolsters, and threatens traditional fandom. Gender is deeply institutionalized and embedded in interactions here, both among and between men and women, and fantasy sports reflect and reproduce dynamics of race and class inequality as well. Moreover, the gender project that fantasy sports represent bleeds into participants’ leisure, work, and family lives, not only providing a means of sports engagement and connection to others but also producing discord, stress, unproductivity, and isolation. We situate these findings in literature and theory on gender, real and fantasy sports, fandom, and digital gaming. Ultimately, *Whose Game?* advances a narrative of privilege in which participants not only construct, perform, are held accountable to, and are impacted by gender but also, at times, contest and potentially transform it.

**The Fundamentals of the Game**

This book focuses on everyday players participating in traditional fantasy sports leagues in the United States. At least two elements of this require unpacking, as they shape what we do and do not argue about the contours of the fantasy sports experience. First, our focus is on traditional fantasy sports leagues (TFS). These involve everyday individuals’—“managers” in fantasy sports language—building virtual sports teams that include real-life athletes who accumulate points based on their performance in actual sporting events (typically, professional men’s football, baseball, ice hockey, or basketball games) over the course of a season. For example, an individual playing in a fantasy professional football league might roster the quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, the running back of the Arizona Cardinals, the kicker of the Baltimore Ravens, the defense of the Denver Broncos, and so on. That manager’s team competes in a league, usually consisting of ten to fourteen teams, in which other managers have selected a different assortment of players for their roster slots.

While earlier, homegrown versions of fantasy sports may have existed, sociologist William Gamson created the first documented version, what he called the Baseball Seminar, in 1960. Many elements of Gamson’s game linger in modern fantasy sports, including a season-initiating draft prior to the opening day of the real sports season during which managers build their fantasy sports rosters. Although in standard league drafts managers alternate selecting players for their teams, participants in the Baseball Seminar rostered their players through an auction-style draft. In auction drafts, managers alternate nominating an athlete for everyone in the league to bid on; each athlete is then rostered on the team with the highest bid. Baseball Seminar managers’ $10 buy-in provided them with a $100,000 budget, reflecting another common element of auction-style draft formats—the amount man-
agers have to spend on players dwindles as they fill their roster slots. Regardless of the draft format, fantasy sports managers may modify their squads as the season progresses by dropping underperforming or injured players, picking up available alternatives off the “waiver wire,” and/or trading players with other league managers.

Gamson’s league focused on baseball, but a group of individuals connected to the Oakland Raiders extended the format to football shortly after 1960. In both cases—and still true today—managers earn points based on their roster of players’ performance in real games. In head-to-head leagues, the season proceeds with the fantasy teams in the league squaring off against one another in weekly matchups. The collective points each team gains through the performance of its athletes—a football team, for instance, may garner one point for every ten rushing yards, six points per touchdown, and so forth—determine who wins or loses the matchup. At the end of the season, those fantasy teams with the best records in the league compete against one another in the playoffs, the conclusion of which results in a winner being crowned.

In 1979, Daniel Okrent fashioned a different version of the game—the rotisserie format, particularly favored in fantasy baseball. Teams in rotisserie leagues accumulate points in various categories over the entire season rather than competing one-on-one with another team weekly. Each fantasy team then receives a ranking for each of the tracked categories (e.g., one could be first in the league for home runs, third in steals, sixth in pitching strikeouts, etc.), which determines the team’s overall standing in the league. This system, rather than head-to-head records, identifies which teams make the playoffs and eventually win the league.

A 1981 Inside Sports article detailed Okrent’s rotisserie league, and with that publicity, participation in fantasy sports began to increase. In 1990, USA Today estimated five hundred thousand people were playing. It is estimated that currently more than fifty-nine million people play in the United States and Canada alone—more than six times the number playing in just 2005. Although football and baseball remain the most commonly played sports (first and second in popularity, respectively), auto racing, basketball, golf, ice hockey, and soccer also capture a portion of the fantasy sports market.

Researchers and industry professionals attribute much of the explosion in fantasy sports participation to the rise of the Internet. In fantasy sports’ early days, Gamson, Okrent, and others had to labor over box scores; compile and calculate scores by hand; research players by watching or listening to sporting events or reading newspapers or magazines; and draft or alter their teams in person or via direct communication with other league members. Now, the modern fantasy sports players who form the basis of our investigation accomplish all of this through the use of fantasy sports platforms and other online services and resources. Moreover, the rise of new and tra-
ditional media allows for a different, more immediate experience for current fantasy sports players. Instead of waiting for the newspaper to calculate their teams’ performance, they can watch fantasy-relevant plays as they unfold on the RedZone channel or MLB.TV app and monitor their teams’ performances in real time on fantasy sports platforms (e.g., ESPN’s Fantasycast or Yahoo’s StatTracker). Accordingly, the game is not only more pervasive but also more immediate and engaging than in its early years.

Recently, daily fantasy sports (DFS) have provided participants another outlet for their fantasy sports interests. In DFS, individuals create their rosters daily and typically compete for money against strangers online. These contrast with TFS leagues in which participants play over the course of an entire sports season with a set of other managers, all or a subset of whom they typically know. Although DFS experienced a rapid rise in popularity after their introduction and remain newsworthy due to legal challenges, TFS are the most popular means of fantasy sports participation. Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) data indicate that 84 percent of fantasy sports players participate in traditional leagues and 63 percent play exclusively in such leagues. Because we are interested in the experiences of typical fantasy sports players and how they unfold over time as they interact with those inside and outside their leagues, Whose Game? necessarily focuses on those in TFS leagues. Unlike those who primarily or play only DFS, TFS participants’ involvement is sustained over the course of a season (and often many years) and framed against the backdrop of existing social relationships. This book thus meets players where they are, which is largely in TFS leagues.

The second and related issue to keep in mind while reading this book is that we are interested in everyday fantasy sports players and what their attitudes, experiences, and interactions can tell us about fantasy sports and how they fit into larger landscapes of sports, fandom, virtual spaces, gender, and social inequality. These players represent a distinct and rather privileged group. The majority are men (71 percent), affluent (more than half have annual household incomes exceeding $75,000), and well educated (50 percent have a college degree or more). They are typically non-Hispanic Whites (approximately 90 percent of players), with those identifying as racial or ethnic minorities rather evenly divided among Hispanic/Latinos, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and Blacks.

Our book builds on a small but growing body of fantasy sports research, much of which explores general motives for playing, consumption, and fandom among participants and their time and financial investments (sometimes linking these investments to other variables such as motivation). This research reveals that individuals are motivated to play for entertainment, social interaction, and competition, or as a diversion from other life matters. Fantasy sports participants, already bigger sports fans on average than nonparticipants, increase and change their consumption of real sports as a
result of their involvement in fantasy sports. Accordingly, fantasy sports players invest sizable amounts of time and money into the hobby and sports more generally.

For further context, this literature reveals not only similarities but also differences between TFS and DFS players. TFS and DFS players both play for entertainment and escape purposes, with entertainment being the predominant factor for all groups of players. Competition motivates those who play TFS (regardless of whether they also play DFS) more so than DFS-only players, while gambling and financial reasons motivate DFS players (including those who also play TFS) more so than TFS-only players. DFS-only and DFS/TFS players consume more sports media than TFS-only players, perhaps in part because DFS, by definition, requires frequent interaction with an electronic fantasy sports platform. There is also evidence that DFS is even more male dominated than TFS. In one study, 34 percent of the TFS players were female compared to only 8 percent of the DFS players. It is likely, then, that the dynamics we uncover with regard to consumption and gender may be intensified in DFS, a less integrated context with more emphasis on media consumption and financial investment.

Previous research has focused on the meaning of these individual demographics and behaviors for the fantasy sports industry more broadly. Scholars typically frame players, their motivations, their experiences, and the presence or absence of particular groups in the hobby in terms of market share, potential revenue, and opportunities for expansion. It is perhaps not surprising that fantasy sports research has taken this industry-focused approach. Estimates are that fantasy sports are a $7.22 billion industry, with more than half of revenue arising from TFS. Sunk costs for fantasy sports materials (e.g., draft kits, access to premium fantasy sports websites, magazines, etc.) alone average $46 annually for players eighteen years and older. Moreover, while the industry has been keen to distance itself from gambling—the FSTA had an entire web page explaining why fantasy sport is not gambling—the hobby typically involves a cash buy-in (70 percent of players pay a league fee), with the most successful teams in TFS collecting the “winnings” at the end of the season. Fantasy sports are big business—for professional sports leagues, those hosting fantasy sports leagues, sports media, and corporations that target or otherwise benefit from fantasy sports participants and their activities (e.g., as venues for draft parties).

While the industry is certainly the backdrop against which any analysis of the topic is set, this book is not centrally concerned with what players’ experiences and interactions mean for the business of fantasy sports. Instead, we focus on how participants’ involvement in fantasy sports is interwoven with their sense of themselves as sports fans and as men and women, how their experiences with fantasy sports reflect and sometimes challenge larger gender structures, and how fantasy sports affect their relationships with
others. We advance an argument that fantasy sport is a space that presents opportunities for diverse and varied interactions between and among men and women while also perpetuating inequities that disadvantage those who are not men, White, and upper-middle class.

The Field of Play: Theory and Research

Sports are a masculine and male-dominated institution. The mean entry age for boys into organized sports in the United States is 6.8 years old, about four in ten boys play on a high school sports team, and 61 percent of boys in grades three through twelve claim that sports are a big part of who they are. Two-thirds of men describe themselves as sports fans, and men represent a sizable proportion of those who watch sports on television—in most, but not all, cases comprising the majority. To be sure, girls and women are not absent from this space. They have been participating in and consuming sports since sports' inception in the United States and have been increasingly doing so over the last several decades, in part because of the greater access to sports that the passage of Title IX in 1972 afforded girls and women. Yet their numbers remain lower than those of boys and men. One-third of girls now play high school sports; the same proportion report that sports are a big part of who they are. Despite notable exceptions such as the Williams sisters and the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, women athletes and women's sports receive far less coverage than men athletes and men's sports. Fantasy sports, too, are heavily dominated by men, with nearly three-quarters of participants being men.

But this book is concerned with much more than the numerical dominance of men in fantasy sports. Instead, we are interested in illuminating fantasy sports as a gendered arena dominated by men and masculinity and how aspects and consequences of play vary by sex and gender. By considering previous research on gendered bodies and interactions, masculinity and femininity, intersectionality, and gender in institutions including traditional sports, we advance an argument that fantasy sports offer unique opportunities for inclusion and transformation while simultaneously privileging well-educated White men and their experiences.

Understandings of male and female bodies as different or even diametrically opposed frame much public and pop psychology understanding of gender. Such conceptions traditionally define gender as a configuration of practices and traits—they could be emotional, behavioral, or attitudinal—that in the United States have historically been envisioned as tied to the (presumed) binary, biological sex categories of male and female. In reality, of course, there is overwhelming similarity in male and female bodies and more variety exists within sex categories than between them. Moreover, research demonstrates that biological explanations for behavior—for example,
the argument that sex differences in hormones are responsible for men’s aggression—are insufficient. Yet beliefs abound that men and women are significantly and essentially different from each other and that naturally occurring sex differences provide the “basis for the social pattern of gender.”

While scholars have long debated and problematized the link between sex and gender, sociologists hold that gender is a social, not biological, reality. Although early thinking focused on a sex roles approach that tied gender to sex categories and produced a set of dichotomous behavioral and attitudinal expectations, contemporary research and theory moves beyond static definitions of gender as something that adheres solely to individuals. Instead, gender is dynamic, tied to social power, and embedded in social institutions and interactions. Such a framework allows us to see how gender is created and re-created in ways that not only reproduce but also challenge traditional patriarchal power, including in institutions such as sports.

To think about gender in this way is to consider not just how it is reflected in individual bodies or actions but also how it exists at the macro level. One way this manifests is in ideological notions of “ideal” masculinity (and femininity). Raewyn Connell theorized a hierarchical gender order built and sustained through cultural consent and institutional legitimation. At the pinnacle of this gender order is hegemonic masculinity, a term used to refer to configurations of practice of dominance, variously defined as including heterosexuality, strength, and stoicism. Although not necessarily a statistical norm in terms of the behavior of actual men, hegemonic masculinity is ideologically and institutionally dominant. It may not be the way most men are, but it is an ideal type signifying the way most men should be. It is also fundamentally relational. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as much by what it is as by what it dominates—subordinated and marginalized masculinities (e.g., gay masculinities) and all forms of femininity, including its counterpart emphasized femininity, which revolves around submission and compliance.

Critics argued that Connell’s early work reified particular categories of masculinity and femininity, and researchers have since embraced the notion of multiple masculinities, documenting and theorizing a host of masculinities across various countries, localized settings, groups, and contexts. Some, such as Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, have explored “hybrid masculinities,” which blend hegemonic masculinity with some elements of marginalized or subordinated masculinities and even some components of femininity. However, because they still claim legitimacy through their association with hegemonic masculinity, hybrid masculinities may obscure systems of power rather than challenge gender (or other forms of) inequality.

To examine gender at the macro level also involves highlighting its embeddedness in social institutions. Cultural ideologies about gender, masculinity, and femininity (as well as race, class, sexuality, etc.) shape how institutions are structured, including the norms and regulations that govern
them. Some institutions, such as the military, involve clear requirements that differentiate men and women (e.g., registering for selective service) while others, such as workplaces, are structured in ways that emphasize gendered expectations (e.g., by offering family leave to women but not to men). In all cases, gendered ideals—often based on real or presumed biological, bodily distinctions—are built into the very workings of organizations, such that these institutions themselves become gendered. The result is that one group—either men or women—is seen as a better “fit” or more deserving of belonging.

While gender is embedded in ideology, culture, and social institutions, it is also constituted and reconstituted in social interaction. Candace West and Don Zimmerman coined the term *doing gender* to refer to gender as a routine and active accomplishment of everyday interaction. Rather than a fixed identity naturally adhering to individuals, gender is a performance wherein we utilize various resources—clothing, behaviors, postures, social settings—to enact the expectations of the sex category within which we would like others to place us. Key to this process is accountability—individuals perform gender with an eye toward how others will interpret their actions, with the goal of being identified as appropriately gendered and thus avoiding negative assessment. While contexts, resources, and means for doing gender vary, gender is omnipresent. We are always accountable to it. And insofar as men are accountable to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, doing gender for men in a patriarchal society involves, according to sociologist Matthew Ezzell, “signifying dominance.” Importantly, gender is not just done in interactions between men and women. Indeed, the recognition of multiple masculinities encourages us to study interactions among men, as these are also key to the simultaneous re-creation of gender and dominance.

Interactions are, of course, embedded in social institutions that make available, facilitate, and allow certain gender performances and practices. Institutions and macrolevel structures also frame the way individuals interpret performances and those involved in them. Sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway argues that gender is a primary cultural frame through which we structure and interpret social life—our identities, experiences, interactions, and institutions. Cultural assumptions about how men and women are and what men and women should do—what Ridgeway refers to as gender beliefs—shape our interpretations of ourselves and others and thus form the backdrop for social interaction. Gender beliefs shape interactions insofar as they prime us to expect certain attitudes and behaviors from others; for example, the expectation that women will be collaborative while men will be focused on their own success shapes our expectations of them in group settings. Ridgeway further argues that the effects of gender beliefs on how individual actors are assessed and held accountable to gender will be greater or lesser based on the presumed relevance of gender in a particular institutional set-
ting. In contexts culturally typed as masculine, gender beliefs will strongly favor men, and according to Shelley Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik’s research, women will be held to higher performance standards in order to gain legitimacy.45

Sports as an institution and interactional space are key for the production, reproduction, and maintenance of gender and the embodiment and perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity. In many ways, sports reify the importance of bodily distinctions, remaining one of the few domains in which we widely accept and valorize sex segregation.46 Presumed physiological differences in male and female bodies legitimize this segregation, and, indeed, the media, the public, and sporting authorities have devoted much time and energy to reinforcing binary sex categories even in the face of biological evidence that defies the reality of such dichotomies.47 The institutionalization of gender in this domain reinforces such sex segregation. The characteristics we associate with sports—competition, dominance, one-upmanship, toughness, physicality, and aggression—are also those that undergird the social construction of masculinity in U.S. society. It is therefore not surprising that dominant cultural ideologies repeatedly reinforce notions that girls and women must engage in athletics separately from boys and men because they just cannot compete with them—regardless of the type of sporting event (e.g., we even segregate board game competitions).

Furthermore, because sports are gendered masculine at the institutional level, athletics are particularly salient for the performance of manhood.48 Sports for many boys and men act as requisite gender training, wherein they come to learn appropriate masculine traits and equate sports participation, knowledge, and success with masculinity.49 Because of the physicality of (most) sports, men and boys deploy their bodies—and are held to expectations that they willingly do so—in the interest of performing appropriate masculinity. Sports effectively provide the resources for doing masculinity, a performance that is very much embodied. By being muscular, physically fit, and willing to use their own bodies as weapons, male athletes receive acclaim and display appropriate masculinity.50 Conversely, coaches, teammates, or the public may label a male athlete who fails to sacrifice his body for the team and “tough it out” after an injury—who, in other words, does not perform hegemonic masculinity—a “girl” or a “wuss.” Such an athlete risks being associated with femininity and subordinated masculinities. Boys, accordingly, learn through sports that they should be aggressive, be mentally and physically strong, and be dominant over others.

The stakes for men and boys are high here—the institutionalization of gender in sports means that gender beliefs are particularly salient. Men thus enter this arena against a backdrop of expectations that their performance will align with traditional masculinity. The gender frame is so powerful that men need not play sports or embody physical ideals to garner masculinity.
points. As Sara Crawley, Lara Foley, and Constance Shehan detail, men who have not achieved athletic success or currently cannot do so (e.g., due to age or injury) gain “vicarious masculinity” through athletic successes of other men (e.g., pro-athletes) and, for some, reliving their former athletic glory. Although most men do not have the bodies or physical capabilities of male elite athletes, all men gain vicarious masculinity by their existence, as maleness in general (and the male body) becomes associated with athletic prowess. Thus, the nonathletic can achieve vicarious masculinity and “bank on positive accountability to masculinity” “simply by having a male body and knowing all the pertinent sports statistics.” Similar dynamics play out in digital gaming. Although they vary significantly in the physicality involved in them and men and women participate with and against each other in virtual domains, digital game culture constructs masculinity and provides a setting whereby men police, perform, and accomplish a manhood revolving around competitiveness, brazen talk, rationality, control, and heterosexuality.

Importantly, sports provide an institutional framework against which close relationships between men—which might otherwise challenge the performance of traditional masculinity—can flourish. Constructions of hegemonic masculinity in the United States are based on heterosexuality, and this intersection of gender and sexuality makes intimate connections among men difficult. Sports, constructed as a masculine domain, can provide “a means of communication and connection” for men—a safe vehicle through which they can both embody hegemonic masculine practices and establish close bonds with one another, even if these bonds are contingent on their athletic performance and/or sports literacy. Thus, some boys (consciously or not) are drawn to sports to become part of an “instant family,” to connect to their fathers, brothers, and other men in the community, regardless of whether these goals are fully realized. Sports are a place where intimate connections to other men and the performance of masculinity are mutually constitutive rather than conflicting.

Girls and women, whose numerical representation has increased dramatically since the passage of Title IX, nonetheless participate in sports against a backdrop that associates sports with men and masculinity. Traditionally framed as lacking the physical aptitude, knowledge, investment, and/or interest to belong and succeed, institutional structures and individual men construct “women as outsiders.” Female athletes are physically set apart from male athletes by sex segregation and conceptually set apart from them through labeling and patronizing behaviors that serve to mark them as women athletes rather than just athletes. When participating in sports, whether as athletes or coaches, women find their competency questioned, their access and roles limited, and their successes dismissed. They are also not taken seriously, are constantly surveilled, and are made to feel unwel-
come in certain sporting arenas. Women of color, in particular, face marginalization both in their sports and in media coverage of them. Digital games and gaming cultures similarly marginalize or erase women. They are frequently absent as characters in games, and even when portrayed or available, they are often sexualized, presented as the objects of violence, and/or relegated to subservient and inactive roles. Women in gaming find they must abide by gender rules, filling stereotyped gender roles both within and outside the games, and face verbal harassment. Gamer-gate highlights the extreme, wherein women not only faced symbolic violence but the real threat of physical violence in response to men’s fears and anger regarding women’s perceived intrusion into a sphere that was until recently deemed men’s own.

Even as sports consumers, “women are ‘Others’ because what it means to be a legitimate sports fan . . . is to be a man, particularly one who conforms to the hegemonic masculinized aspects of sporting cultures.” As fans, women are marginalized partly because constructions of femininity are incompatible with the fervent, aggressive, and often misogynistic and homophobic chants integral to fandom. Women’s assumed inferiority in sports-related knowledge further weakens their authenticity as fans, as do presumptions that sexual attraction to players or desires to build and maintain relationships with men motivate their fandom. Notably, even when men promote women’s sports spectatorship, they do not see women as authorities or “equals in dialogue and participation.” As such, even highly experienced and knowledgeable women report men marginalize and exclude them from sports conversations.

Gender beliefs thus frame women as inferior, and institutional structures support and reproduce such cultural beliefs in myriad ways. Increasingly, though, girls and women assert themselves and seek inclusion in athletic contexts, challenging gender stereotypes in varied and even contradictory ways. Some women push against notions that sports are reserved for men by positioning themselves as just like men and suggesting that those with male bodies must not always or only perform masculinity. Others challenge the stereotype that women are less skilled by making it obvious they are women while proving their worthiness in their sport—they do femininity while also doing athleticism. Some women contest the notion that athletic bodies are necessarily male bodies by posing nude or scantily clad to show off their muscular, performance-based bodies. Still others, such as women who participate in roller derby, play with gender while competing in their sports in ways that both highlight and subvert it, simultaneously exhibiting and embracing masculine (e.g., using their bodies as weapons, being aggressive, wearing injuries with pride) and feminine qualities (e.g., wearing sexually provocative uniforms). In these cases, women call into question the bi-
nary on which the social construction of masculinity and femininity rests. They do gender in ways that blend elements of femininity and masculinity, effectively challenging how gender is institutionalized in sports. In the process, they potentially gain power—individually and collectively—and make changes to this highly masculinized space. As such, some have argued that sports today are increasingly a “contested terrain” in which the contours of gender in bodies, interactions, and institutions may be pushed, redefined, and confused.

The central question in this book is how these gendered structures and processes play out in fantasy sports and their consequences. As inequality scholars, we have marveled at the dynamics of gender as we played and observed fantasy sports and were disappointed to find little sociological research on the topic. Existing work largely operates from a sports management and marketing perspective and typically considers gender only in terms of statistical differences in reported behavior and attitudes between men and women. Brody Ruihley and Andrew Billings, for example, find that, among players, men are more invested in fantasy sports than women, as they average more years of involvement, participate in more fantasy leagues per year, and report spending more time per week on fantasy sports than women do.

Men who play fantasy sports also score higher in their reported sport fan-ship (e.g., identifying as a “big fan” or finding it important for one’s favorite team to win) and their perceived fantasy sports–related knowledge than do women who play. Conversely, Ruihley and Billings find more similarity than difference between men and women in motivations to play fantasy sports, with only two of seven motivations being different for men and women who participate in the hobby (men more frequently reported playing fantasy sports for “enjoyment” and to “pass time”).

In one of the few pieces that focuses on gendered dynamics and processes, Nickolas Davis and Margaret Carlisle Duncan find that men “use fantasy sport participation as a means of reaffirming their masculinity” much like they use real sports. The authors argue that fantasy sports provide a way for men to feel in control, experience power and dominance over others, demonstrate their sports knowledge, and bond with one another in a space that is relatively free from the intrusion of women. Likewise, Luke Howie and Perri Campbell in their study of a ten-team fantasy National Basketball Association (NBA) league in Australia report that such leagues are “masculinized ‘fantasyscapes’ where ‘manly’ men toy with the limits of heteronormative realities” through their use of team names, engage in “typical locker room banter” and trash-talking in online message boards, and bond and socialize with other men.

Our work builds on this by exploring the ideological and institutional constructions of gender in fantasy sports, the configurations of gender practice embedded in them, and the consequences of the sexed and gendered
aspects of the hobby. *Whose Game?* shows how gender manifests in a context that is less physical than real athletic participation but more active than fandom. Here, instead of just spectating and rooting for results as a traditional fan, one is active in guiding the outcome of a virtually played competition. Fantasy sport is also a space in which there is no formal sex or gender segregation. Yet the combatants overwhelmingly make use of male athletes competing in sports occupying the “institutional center” (i.e., football, baseball, and basketball), those which scholars argue are especially important for the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity and from which women have been largely excluded.85

We also tease out how race and class are implicated in this space. Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the concept of “intersectionality” to feminist theory in the late 1980s.86 She argues that a “single-axis analysis,” such as focusing on gender alone, fails to capture and erases the actual experience of individuals who are “multiply-burdened,” such as Black women.87 Instead, she and others, such as Patricia Hill Collins, call for intersectional analyses that unlock how patterns of domination are interconnected with concurrent identities (e.g., race, gender, class, and ethnicity) and translate to “intersecting oppressions.”

More concretely, what intersectional scholars push us to understand is that women and men (or Blacks and Whites, the affluent and the poor, etc.) are not homogeneous groups who experience the same systems of power in the same ways. Intersectionality recognizes that gender operates differently when and because it is interconnected with other forms of inequality. For example, research on media imagery indicates dominance for White men frequently looks like leadership while for Black men it looks like aggression or danger.88 Moreover, the aforementioned expansions of hegemonic masculinity available in hybrid masculinities are largely limited to young, White, heterosexual men—precisely those men whose power allows them to embrace nonhegemonic ideals.89

Intersectional analyses are critical yet largely absent in research on fantasy sports. Some research has examined sex and gender, although, again, this has largely focused on reporting statistical differences between men and women with limited exploration of gendered processes. There is even less attention to race in fantasy sports research and that which exists frequently approaches the topic of Blacks’ nonparticipation from a sports marketing perspective. In one of the few existing investigations, Joris Drayer and Brendan Dwyer found that the dominant reason for nonparticipation among Blacks is their lack of awareness and understanding of fantasy sports.90 Those with an understanding of fantasy sports reported they did not use the Internet or computers for leisure and interpreted fantasy sports as a waste of time, partly because they are not “real.” Some also considered the monetary aspects of the game as a reason not to get involved, as they associated this negatively
with gambling. This work frames Black men’s nonparticipation in fantasy sports through the lens of a loss of market share and pays little attention to whether and how race may interact with class, gender, or other dimensions of inequality.

While we focus on fantasy sports as a gendered arena, what we do more broadly is describe and unpack a case of intersecting privilege. Recall the demographics of fantasy sports players in the United States, demographics that our sample of players mirror—White, class-privileged men (and to a lesser extent women). These individuals are typically professionally employed and have the resources, time, and workplace environments allowing them to play. Being geographically mobile and having busy work and family lives, these people also may be a group with a particular need to find ways to connect with others, something that fantasy sports, as we will document, afford. Thus, it may be little wonder that not just men but particularly White, middle- and upper-class men dominate the space. Yet we argue that it is not just that these men are numerically dominant and enact dominance here but that fantasy sports as an institution privileges attributes—statistical acumen, time for leisure pursuits, competition, power, dominance—that reflect their particular constellation of race, class, and gender.

The Game Plan

We use a mixed and multimethod approach to make our case regarding the gender and general dynamics of fantasy sports, employing quantitative and qualitative data obtained via an online survey and in-depth interviews with fantasy sports players, ethnographic observations at an annual fantasy sports trade conference, and posts on fantasy sports-related message boards and forums. The bulk of this book’s findings emerge from analyses of survey and interview data. The online survey included 396 respondents who self-identify as having played fantasy sports and an additional 57 who answered the survey but indicated never playing. We also analyze forty-seven in-depth interviews with fantasy sports players to gain more detailed information on their views and experiences. More than two-thirds of our players are men, about 95 percent are White, and the majority are upper or middle class (e.g., more than three-quarters have at least a bachelor’s degree). More than two-thirds were between twenty-five and forty-four years old at the time of the survey or interview, and the majority were married (see the appendix for additional details).

We supplement these data with information gleaned from our analyses of posts on public, online fantasy sports chat forums and message boards and from ethnographic observations at an FSTA summer conference. The former allows us to examine what sorts of things fantasy sports enthusiasts
discuss with one another in the anonymized context of message and chat forums. The latter provides us with information on the big business side of the industry and how industry insiders and power brokers think about participants and frame issues in fantasy sports.

With the exception of our observations during the FSTA summer conference, our data focus on everyday fantasy sports players who participate in traditional fantasy sports leagues. Our sample of players mirror typical TFS participants in the United States—White, relatively affluent, well-educated men and women. They also participate in the most popular fantasy sports in this country, all of which employ only male professional athletes—fantasy (National Football League) football, (Major League Baseball) baseball, (NBA) basketball, and (National Hockey League) ice hockey. Because of this, we provide an account of fantasy sports from their perspective and experiences and not from that of other types of fantasy sports players, such as high-stakes TFS players, DFS participants, those playing more fringe fantasy sports (e.g., Women’s National Basketball Association or soccer), or those who are intersectionally oppressed (e.g., Black women). Thus, this book addresses a domain of intersecting advantage, making privilege visible and contributing to the development of a “sociology of the superordinate” as we detail the gender dynamics of a rather ordinary space—fantasy sports—for the typical player.

In what follows, Whose Game? demonstrates that fantasy sports are more than just an inconsequential leisure activity. They affect how we consume sports, our rooting interests, and the nature of our engagement with them. They cultivate, solidify, and complicate social networks, workspaces, and families. Moreover, we argue that fantasy sports are a domain culturally typed masculine in which gender beliefs are reflected and reinforced and through which men and boys signal masculine selves—with both negative and positive ramifications for relationships. Importantly, the space is not just gendered but also classed and racialized. Particular types of men—White, professional, highly educated—dominate the space, and the controlling form of masculinity reflects and reinforces their privilege. Yet we also see opportunities for transformation of the gender order. Gender and women’s subordination are contested. A version of masculinity that is broader than traditional hegemonic masculinity is enacted, and men connect with one another in ways that both reinforce and challenge gender beliefs. Women also employ the hobby, sometimes strategically, to make inroads with men and gain legitimacy in spaces dominated by men and masculinity.

The book begins (in Chapter 2) by explaining how fantasy sports offer a complex and contested version of sports fandom—one that blends elements of traditional fandom with a new, more individualized and less passive form that gives its participants some modicum of control and accomplishment but
that also alters rooting interests and sports consumption. We explain how these processes and related ones, such as roster decisions, are deeply gendered, offering readers their first insights into fantasy sports as a masculine domain and gender project.

Chapter 3 concentrates on how fantasy sports allow men to perform and accomplish what we term *jock statsculinity*. Jock statsculinity combines elements of the masculinity that emerged alongside organized sports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States—a masculinity akin to the hegemonic ideal type that centers on one-upmanship, competition, athleticism, control, and aggression—with a more nerdy and boyish masculinity that involves escaping responsibilities and being strategic, tech savvy, rational, and adept with statistics. This chapter demonstrates how fantasy sports provide aging, socioeconomically powerful White men the ability to “stay in the game” and do manhood in ways that overlap but diverge from that of both traditional sports and digital gaming.

Chapter 4 centers on issues related to women’s participation (or lack thereof) in fantasy sports. We argue that structural barriers and prevailing gender beliefs favoring men and disadvantaging women in sports and society more generally limit women’s full inclusion. Those women who play fantasy sports often feel their gender acutely and, at times, confront men who seem hell-bent on pushing against women’s intrusion. Men question women’s competency and motives, discount their successes, and engage in behaviors that create hostile and intimidating environments. Yet women exercise agency in this space as well, reproducing and resisting traditional conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, often simultaneously.

Chapter 5 elucidates how the White, geographically mobile, professional men and women who play fantasy sports use their involvement to connect to others and how men and women do so to differing ends, to differing degrees, and in differing ways. We demonstrate how both men and women direct their efforts at bonding and networking through their fantasy sports participation toward men. Women, however, seem to use the hobby more strategically than men do. Men rely more heavily on fantasy sports as the means to stay in touch and bond with others, particularly men friends and family members.

Although fantasy sports have the potential to provide enjoyment, improve the sports viewing experience, and forge and strengthen relationships, they also come with downsides, including forgoing other activities and social interactions, experiencing negative emotions, and changing the degree and nature of interactions with others in ways that may strain them. These are the themes we explore in Chapter 6, focusing on the implications of time and emotional investments in fantasy sports for work, family, and social relationships and how men suffer more significant negative ramifications related to the hobby.
Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the main lessons from the book—how fantasy sports offer a new and contradictory form of fandom, how they are deeply gendered but in ways that facilitate new performances of sporting masculinities and femininity, and how they move beyond mere play to influence social relationships, work lives, and families. We also explain where we see the hobby going in the future and review directions for additional research on this complex domain.