gamevironments

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Decoding Fantasy Football: A Ludic Perspective[i]

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Abstract

Fantasy sport has risen in popularity in the last decade with the advent of web 2.0. As people from around the world watch sporting events today, the Internet has become an ideal site to instantly disseminate results and achievements for avid fans and followers. This article is an attempt to position fantasy sports in the realm of game studies, drawing from the specific case of fantasy football (soccer in North America). Borrowing from and building on Roger Caillois' classical game typology, this article seeks to arrive at a nuanced understanding of both fantasy sport as a game and the experience it offers to participants. By using an ethnographic approach, based on in-depth interviews and co-playing sessions, this study closely observes participants' in-game performances in the *Fantasy Premier League*. By stitching together information from the interviews with observation of participants' approaches and preferences along with the performance of their teams, this article identifies the key decisions and processes that a player of fantasy sport is part of. By situating fantasy sport in the ludic debate of preparation versus luck, this article offers unique insights into the various ways that players exert effort to succeed at the game. The use of an approach that examines what players do to their fantasy teams enables this paper to examine players' psyches and the interrelated elements of fandom, favoritism and loyalty. Analysis of the data offers insights in to the various practices and approaches of players as well as lays the foundation of new concepts.

Introduction

Fantasy sport is defined by Dwyer and Drayer as an ancillary sport service. They understand it to be a primarily online activity that draws heavily from real world sports statistics (Dwyer and Drayer 2010, 1). By calling it a completely customizable and interactive service, they identify it as a part of every major professional sport (Dwyer and Drayer 2010, 1). Ruihley and Hardin (2011) also consider fantasy sport to be an interactive activity that is based on the accrual of data from athletes' performances in their sport. They consider the activity to be a part of a "sports-focused landscape" where knowledge of the sport, statistical ability, socialization come together in one competitive platform (Ruihley and Hardin 2011, 233). Owing to the service's inherently interactive nature (Dwyer and Drayer 2010, Ruihley and Hardin 2011) and its need to engage with a widespread player base, fantasy sport has found an ideal home on the Internet. Fantasy sport platforms have become extremely popular in the last decade owing to the widening reach of the Internet and the successful rolling out of Web 2.0, as Web 2.0's inherent functionalities natively allow for high levels of interactivity and customizability (Lister et al. 2008).

The annual FSTA (Fantasy Sports Trade Association) estimated the number of players for the service to be at around 59.3 million in 2017 in North America alone (Industry Demographics 2018). With regards to the site of this article's study, the *Fantasy Premier League (FPL)*, it is a service with over 6.3 million players worldwide. The reason for its international popularity is the fact that it draws its statistics from the popular football tournament the English Premier League (EPL)[ii]. Given the tournament and the service's increasingly global prevalence, this article seeks to use it to examine fantasy sport through a ludological lens and situate it in the discipline of game studies.

Existing research and popular media coverage on fantasy sport credit the origin of the activity to three specific individuals. Schwarz credits Harvard professor William Gamson for creating an informal version of the activity by basing it upon professional baseball in 1960 (Schwarz 2004). Newsnet 5's Green cites the formulation of a league by Wilfred 'Bill' Winkenbach on American football in 1962 as the first recorded instance of an organized fantasy sport (Green 2014). Lastly, Farquhar and Meeds (2007) in their paper identify the statistician Glen Waggoner for his league in the 1980s as the creator. While the origins of the activity are open to dispute, what remains certain is its reliance on statistics. Thus, the shift to a digital system with the arrival of the Internet allows the activity to realize its potential and, in the process, become accessible to millions of users worldwide. Today, as predicted by Dwyer and Drayer (2010, 1), fantasy-based activities are available for most popular global sports on innumerable platforms as avid followers of sport vie for the supremacy of their virtual teams.

It is difficult to estimate the size of the global market of fantasy sports, although reports peg the fantasy football market in the USA (American Football and NFL) at around USD 7 Billion in 2017 (Rodriguez 2017). With a steady year-on-year increase in number of players, the global market is also bound to potentially increase across sports (Industry Demographics 2018). Billings and Ruihley also indicate similar trends for the global scale by stating "In virtually all developed and developing nations fantasy sport participation is expanding" (Billings and Ruihley 2013, 147).

The scope of this article is to primarily examine fantasy sport as a game and then by situating it in a ludological frame examine it using a media as practice approach (Couldry 2004). By employing an ethnographic, qualitative research design, this paper allows fantasy sport to be studied in perspectives that vary from the oft used uses

and gratification model. By examining fantasy sport in a dialectics of chance and knowledge this paper offers unique insights on players' practices and approaches towards the game. The use of *FPL* and EPL allows us to use participants' responses and actions to not only examine their levels of engagement but also observe and analyze the personal processes they have developed in this regard.

Fantasy Football in India

Fantasy sport is not new to India and its popularity was first noted in 2004 when there were 750,000 players reported to be engaging with fantasy cricket (Pfanner 2004). This article however, focuses on fantasy football (soccer in North America) based activity in the country, *FPL* in particular. Cricket as a sport enjoys a uniquely dominant position in India and every other sport in the country is constantly vying for second place both in terms of viewership and in terms loyalty (Majumdar and Brown 2007, Majumdar 2003). *FPL* is in a unique position with this regard as it is tied into a competition (the EPL) that is wooing India and China as potential markets. Initiatives by the EPL to further a viewer base in India include scheduling of matches for times that are Asia friendly and the creation of tailor-made TV content. By choosing football and in particular *FPL* over cricket, this study can accurately examine the engagement of the Indian sports fan with a sport-based tournament that is neither played nor governed in the nation they reside. This in conjunction with the strategic airing of sports broadcast content by the EPL allows us to examine how the *FPL* could be a vital element in the creation of an entirely new loyal and dedicated viewer base.

India specific data from the 2017-18 and 2018-19 seasons of the *FPL* (data mined from the India specific league on the *FPL* website, FPL 2019*)* indicates that there were over 200,000 participants in both the seasons (the number is over 220,000 for the just concluded 2018-19 season) – a number that is significant enough to allow for

engagement with the activity to be examined critically. This study draws on the interviews and experiences of nine *FPL* players based in the city of Hyderabad, India to examine players' engagements.

Studying Fantasy Football

To classify fantasy sport as a game, I would like to use the classification suggested by Jaakko Stenros. He defines games either as activities, formal systems or as social constructs (Stenros 2015). Fantasy Sport in its various forms/modes is a predominantly online activity with a detailed and complex formal system that awards its players points depending on sporting outcomes of athletes and the teams they represent. Through this frame, it becomes clear that the rules that govern various fantasy sport activities determine how points are calculated, attributed and earned. Thus, by fulfilling two out of the three classes that Stenros espouses Fantasy Sport can be termed a game. The argument can be further reinforced by using Juul's understanding of games as rule-based systems with variable outcomes where players need to exert effort to achieve a negotiable favorable outcome (Juul 2011). By fulfilling both Juul's understanding and Stenros' classification, fantasy sport falls within the scope of ludological enquiry (Aarseth 2001, Frasca 2013). In fantasy sport, each participant in the game exerts effort to sway the outcome in his/her favor. The player has an emotional connection with their outcome and thus, every manager of a fantasy football team seeks the best possible outcome by putting in as much effort as possible to the highest number of points (Juul 2011).

Given the single natured commitment of most fantasy players to win and seek pleasurable outcomes by accruing as many points as possible, studying this commitment (of players) allows us to interpret fantasy sports using the classical game typology suggested by Caillois (1957). Caillois categorizes gameworthy activities into

four categories, namely: Agon, or activities involving completion which generally have favorable outcomes and where the outcome is changeable by the participants' efforts; Alea, activities where the outcomes are dictated largely by chance and fortune; Mimicry, where the activities involve role-play and imitation; and lastly, Ilinx to describe activities, which deal with elements of vertigo.

Applying such a categorization to fantasy sports, the fact that players constantly strategize and agonize over their choices and decisions, would suggest that the genre lies predominantly in the realm of Agon. However, it is important to recognize that fantasy sports are not a direct game activity. The player's efforts are limited to the decisions they make and the points earned by their teams are entirely dependent on the on-field performances of the athletes they choose. This layer brings in high levels of chance and fortune into the game mix. The format then constantly teeters between the boundaries of Agon and Alea and the challenge of studying fantasy sports as a game lies within this space of ambiguity.

This article uses this ongoing debate concerning Agon and Alea to understand the process of players engaging with fantasy football on a daily basis. By looking closely at how participants acquire knowledge about the sport, how they build their online presence as virtual managers in the global *FPL* arena and in smaller personal leagues, this article focuses on how players strategize to build what they consider the best possible teams, even as they understand that the ultimate outcome must be left to chance.

The various elements of context that dictate how a team is assembled includes factors like a player's personal preferences, the sources of information they rely upon, their gut/instinctive feeling, their intuitive predictions, the teams they support and

follow and their understanding of football as a sport allow for analyzing the engagement of the players from a media as practice approach (Couldry 2004). Couldry's understanding of media as practice looks at what people do to media on a regular/everyday basis and that framework seems apt to study fantasy sports where the game space is reconfigured at regular intervals (Couldry 2004). By examining, what the players are doing to their teams in conjunction with the constant unpredictability of the sport and the *FPL* game mode we are then offered insights into the various aspects that players of fantasy sports consider while making crucial decisions in game.

Method

While most research on fantasy sport is largely quantitative in nature (Ruihley and Hardin 2011, Ruihley and Billings 2013, Billings and Ruihley 2013) this article draws on qualitative data from a pool of participants who were well versed with fantasy football and had prior experience of participation in the *FPL* specific iteration. The use of an ethnographic approach and a qualitative research design allows for an examination of players' psyche, experiences and practices that quantitative research methods and data collection tools like online surveys cannot offer. A special effort was made during the selection process to include participants who had participated in other fantasy sport modes.

For this study a player was defined as someone who had successfully[iii] participated for an entire season's duration in *FPL*. In order to build the participant pool, a snowball sampling technique was used where two participants served as the points of

origin. The use of parallel snowballs yielded a good mix of participants, with veterans who had played fantasy football for over six years on one end of the spectrum and people who had just one year of experience on the other.

All nine participants were male and despite the use of parallel snowballs and a conscious effort, no female participants who participated in *FPL* could be identified. All the nine participants told me that though they had seen women/girls occasionally watch football matches in public settings none of them had ever played with a woman or come across one during their play. The nine participants, despite living in the same city, form a diverse participant pool. Hyderabad, one of South India's biggest cities, has a population over 7 million and like most urban cities has a very diverse population. The nine participants spoke six different mother tongues, hailed from five different states in India, came from various economic and educational backgrounds and were varied in terms of age, livelihoods and aspirations. With regards to *FPL* experience participants were chosen specifically that ranged from one year of engagement with the platform to six years so that the study could glean insights from a broad range of perspectives.

This male-dominated population of fantasy players is in line with the findings of Davis and Duncan (Davis and Duncan 2006). Even the industry numbers from other fantasy sports indicate that less than 10 per cent of players are women (Industry Demographics 2018). Farquhar and Meeds (2007) felt that participants of fantasy sport were predominantly male even more so than in traditional sport; a trend that Davis and Duncan (2006) describe by calling fantasy sport groups *less welcoming* to

women participants. However, Ruihley and Billings (2013) argue that fantasy sport despite the possibilities of ridicule and the second-class treatment meted out to women offer and fulfill a specific need for women participants (Ruihley and Billings 2013, 450).

Upon volunteering for the study, each participant was interviewed and a co-playing approach was chosen (Boellstorff et al. 2012, Deshbandhu 2016). The mix of in-depth interviews and co-playing sessions was specially chosen to examine the difference between what players say they do and what they actually do (Boellstorff et al. 2012). A league with all the participants and the researcher was created prior to the start of the *FPL* season and each player's weekly performances were noted. The subsequent interviews (2 during the season) were focused on the in-game strategy, with interviewees often reflecting on choices and decisions from in-game scenarios.

Across the participants, interviews lasted on average three hours, amounting to roughly nine hours of interaction with each player. Lastly, a WhatsApp group was created for participants to discuss all things related to football, which allowed for real-time discussion about their respective performances. Analyses of the data from the interviews, the league and the WhatsApp group were used to derive the insights described in this paper.

Analysis

The data collected from the interviews, the co-playing/participant observation sessions and the WhatsApp group was integrated and then subjected to open-coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990, Charmaz 2006). The data was disaggregated into three broad themes, namely: squad building and engagement with *FPL*'s rules,

development and use of specific strategies, and the knowledge versus chance debate. After open coding the re-arranged data was further analyzed using axial coding as newer micro and specific themes emerged.

During the process of coding, it was ensured that when data was being re-arranged key contextual cues and other relevant information were not lost. Attention was paid at every stage to ensure that no contextual, background information or experiential markers were left-out.

Participant Profiles

S.No.	Name	Team and Players Supported	Years of playing *FPL*	Focus of Engagement	Remarks
1	Akhil	Real Madrid from Spain and Arsenal from English Premier League	Two	A big fan of *FIFA* the video game. Likes teams which have a beautiful style of play.	In his second full season in *FPL* also his second fantasy football event.
2	Amit	Bayern Munich from Germany and Arsenal, Liverpool from English Premier League	One	Loves to watch fast explosive football.	Spends a lot of time watching the English Premier League for its unpredictable nature.
3	Anabil	A Liverpool fan and a die-hard Steven Gerrard fan. Also supports Barcelona and Lionel Messi.	Six	Watches many matches and plays a lot of football.	A native of Bengal[iv], he claims his love for football is constant. He has been a Liverpool fan since the "magical night" of Istanbul in 2005
4	Bhaibhav	Leicester City from the English Premier League and Real Madrid from Spain. Big fan of Ronaldo, Jamie Vardy and Riyad Mahrez	Two	A healthy rivalry with close friend Prashant's Manchester United and Barcelona	A relatively new follower of football and he began watching football only during the season where Leicester City overcame all odds to

					become Premier League champions in 2016.
5	Kaushik	A Chelsea fan due to the goalkeeping legend Petr Cech.	Four	A fan who watches over a 100 football matches a year!	Kaushik has remained a loyal supporter despite Cech's move to Arsenal and appreciates Chelsea for its defensive solidity and organization.
6	Prashant	A hardcore Manchester United fan he supports the French superstar Paul Pogba wholeheartedly	Three	As a fan, Prashant appreciates skill and technique above all else and consequently supports a host of teams from several leagues	Prashant supports a host of teams from several leagues and is also a fan of FC Barcelona; which helps maintain an unending rivalry with Bhaibhav.
7	Prateek	Real Madrid from Spain and Manchester United from English Premier League. An ardent fan of Ronaldo	Two	Watches an enormous number of matches and also plays a lot of football as well.	Appreciates high quality football over all else.
8	Teja	A Chelsea fan since 2007 when his favorite player Michael Ballack joined the club	Six	A voracious reader of all things football, Teja is one of the three administrators of the online discussion forum Indian Football Forum	A steadfast Chelsea fan, Teja loves banter and is often seen defending his club in conversation or attacking fans of other rival clubs. He also has a lot of merchandise from his club including jerseys, footballs and jackets
9	Varaprasad	Varaprasad is a neutral when it comes to supporting clubs but supports the Premier League's greatest strikers. A player who supports both Agüero and Lukaku[v].	Three	He loves watching and re-watching players as they score great goals	Varaprasad's approach to football is very goal-oriented

Table 1. Participant profiles. A table outlining basic FPL related information of the study's participants.

Building the Fantasy

Motivations of Play

The first section summarily looks at what drives the participants of the study to be part of the yearlong *FPL* process year-after-year and offers us the first snapshots of their ludic engagements with the game mode. All the participants agreed that the reason to be part of a league was to be part of an ongoing contest that added a layer of competition and flair to the regular act of watching premier league football.

> "I have often been asked this question, why do I play FPL and what could the reward be? I honestly have never bothered to check what the reward for finishing first is; we play for bragging rights. To see how we stack up against the rest. Throughout the year we tirelessly select and modify teams; take risks to see how they pan out. I play to see if I am doing better than last year; If I am better than my league mates; where I stand in the world." (Teja, Personal Interview, 21 September 2017)

Teja's understanding of the game mode as a place to showcase his understanding of football and *presence* his skills as a virtual manager (Couldry 2004) is a sentiment echoed by all the participants of the study. Couldry (2004) understands presencing on two levels, the first as a term of convenience for people and groups who through media manage a continuous presence for others and secondly as a whole set of media enhanced ways in which users circulate information and representations of themselves for creating and maintaining a public presence. Most of the participants felt that the unique design of the game mode that showed where they ranked in the world, amongst other managers from their country and fans of their respective clubs were unique ways to interpret their performances.

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"You always want to go up every week, the best thing about FPL is that there is always room for a quick reversal. I play the game to see how high I can finish but also to see if the players I picked in my team were worth picking. When my players do well it shows that I understand the game better than the others who didn't do well." (Kaushik, Personal Interview, 15 August 2017)

All the participants of the study were aware of the fact that they were playing on a global scale and they viewed FPL as a platform to showcase their in-game skill to fellow players worldwide. Kaushik's impetus on picking the right players was a key area of interest throughout the study's duration as when matches went live often Whatsapp messages in the *FPL* group would begin with the simple question "Who had _____ in their teams?" In short, the participants were constantly presencing their virtual managerial skills on a platform where they could be constantly seen, analyzed and dissected. Teja's and Kaushik's motivations of play which were also echoed by most of the participant pool resonates in between the broad motivation categories of competition, social sport and self-esteem that are suggested by Billings and Ruihey (2013, 28-39). However, the element of presencing is something that gives these experiences a newer dimension that needs to be addressed.

Building a Squad

This section looks at what participants considered as key elements for successful play. All the nine participants agreed that the most important element was building the squad for week 1. The rules of *FPL* offer the virtual managers a fixed starting budget, which they must use to select 15 players across positions. The selection process is further complicated by the need for the squad to comply with a set of pre-set rules. With regards to more specific elements of squad selection, the participants were keen to delve into more detailed information and the various strategies they use to pick their teams.

> "When I begin selecting my squad, I always try to select my team in a very unbiased and a very point-centric fashion. I look at stats from the previous year, carefully see their performances, then I try to arrive at a value for investment kinda thing. I look at how many points they got and how much of my budget are they eating into. I then look at filling all possible positions and then look at the fixture list. I always tinker to get just the right mix, it takes usually about 3-4 attempts till I am satisfied." (Teja, Personal Interview, 21 September 2017)

Teja's strategy of carefully picking his team by looking at the average number of points players score and their relative efficiency in relation to cost comes across as very rational and unbiased. However, on the other hand there were participants who felt choices for teams could not be so rational and detached as they built their teams around the various elements that most fascinated them.

> "I always build my teams around strikers, they are the ones who score goals and each goal translates into points. In other words, the better your attack the more points you have. I take a guess on which players are most consistent in goalscoring and after picking them I build the rest of the team around them. Simple." (Varaprasad, Personal Interview, 21 September 2017)

> "I am a Manchester United fan and I begin my process by picking three players from Man Utd. Then I carefully surround them with players who are guaranteed starters as just starting a game gets you points. It is a pity that the rules allow for only 3 players from one team." (Prashant, Personal Interview, 28 August 2017)

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Most participants agreed that they built their squads around a central theme; just as Teja's was built around a value for investment, Varaprasad's strategy was scoring points through goals and Prashant believed that the best players played for his team. The teams so constructed then become reflections of the players who built them and their identity and beliefs.

Rules and Deadlines

Several participants felt that the squad selection stage is the most challenging element in the game and it is at this stage that they most often encounter the rules of the game. All the participants agreed that complying with the rules of *FPL* is non-negotiable.

> "It is impossible to try and cheat or something in this game, the budget is fixed, the rules are set and the team is not even saved if everything is not right. Along with the three-player per team rule, there are limits on number of transfers and then rules for substitutions; everything's carefully monitored. You can make more than the number of free transfers but then each extra change costs points." (Kaushik, Personal Interview, 15 August 2017)

While the rules for team selection are stringently enforced the participants pointed out there are time-based rules as well, which were quite difficult to comply with.

> "The different times of start are often a challenge, there is no way to account for all of the matches and the schedules of no two weeks are the same. Sometimes matches begin as early as Thursday midnight, sometimes all of them are played on Sunday. The premier League scheduling has gone for a toss ever since they have begun to attract Asian viewership. Christmas and New Year are the worst, there is a matchday every two days at times." (Teja, Personal Interview, 02 October 2017)

In order to stay abreast of these strict and varied timelines participants acknowledged using a variety of innovative measures to remain ahead and be ready to make any changes they desired.

> "EPL matches can be a pain sometimes; the first match can be at 2 AM Indian time and it is extremely difficult to stay awake and watch it if it is not something you are interested to watch. I have found a way to sync the EPL calendar of matches with my Google calendar and always make sure to check that. Despite all these measures, I have found fixture schedules to change and it is not exactly a foolproof plan." (Anabil, Personal Interview, 24 December 2017)

There were other ways, in which participants kept track of matches. One that was consistently applied was the use of football specific apps, which sent notifications prior to a match's start along with lineup information. One of the other most popular ways that the participants seemed to have countered this issue with was after the launch of the official *FPL* app. The app was something they seemed to have found useful in terms of scheduling, as it occasionally sent notifications reminding the players about the specific time deadlines.

The participants' individual strategies incorporating the various rules of *FPL* and the various time-based deadlines is indicative of the extent to which they have gone to internalize the rules as well as streamline the various facets of matches being played. Their understanding of the schedule and gaming of the apps' notifications, awareness of when to use the rules to their advantage and their acceptance that the rules of *FPL* cannot be defied is indicative of the fact that the participant pool for the study consisted of an engaged and mature set of players.

Strategy and Information

In the interview sessions that took place after participants had built their squads and internalized the game's rules, the conversation mostly gravitated towards the various strategies they had developed over time for their chosen squads. Most participants had clear ideas and approaches to the game once the season began, and our conversations showed that players consider a variety of factors while preparing for a season.

> "The world of *FPL* is very dynamic; player values change every week depending on their performances and thus budgets and squads always need to be refreshed. The challenge is that if some player was excellent last season, he is definitely going to be unaffordable this season. It was the case with Vardy and Sanchez and I think it will be the same with Salah next year. Expect him to be

12.5-13 million at least. You need to always find a new player to build your squad around every year." (Anabil, Personal Interview, 05 March 2018)

Other participants valued scheduling very highly in their approaches as they always sought the extra edge by looking for matches where results were more predictable and upsets less likely.

"There can be nothing more important than looking at the list of fixtures for a team. You always look at teams that have a series of easier match-ups and then pick players from the teams that are going to have the upper hand. While one-sided matches are not exciting to watch they are very good for the point balance." (Kaushik, Personal Interview, 15 August 2017)

However, some responses suggested that despite easier fixtures, other variables needed to be considered in their strategies, because of the unreliability of fixture lists.

"Fixture lists are well and good but there is also a need to consider how a team is actually playing; elements like the team's form. This season teams like Crystal Palace and West Ham had good squads but they have had the worst possible results. A lot of us built teams around players like Benteke (Crystal Palace) and they have disappointed." (Prateek, Personal interview, 05 October 2017)

"In football, form is everything. There is nothing else that can explain how a team like Leicester won the title when huge teams like Arsenal, Tottenham and the Manchester clubs were in the fray. At that time, they were playing the best football, and no one knew how to counter them. If football is unpredictable than FPL is only a mirror reflection of that. You need a strategy that is open to change and can spot these trends quickly." (Bhaibhav, Personal Interview, 22 October 2017)

With regards to participants' actual strategies for in-game actions and their approaches to making changes especially in response to players performances, the

participant pool offered players of both kinds: participants with a measured approach and those who were very pro-active in their decision making. However, their responses indicated that neither approach was necessarily the better one.

> "I am very patient after I choose my players. Early weeks are indicative of nothing and you need to trust your instincts. I wait at least 2-3 week before I make changes; this approach works most times. But I was also the last person to pick Salah[vi] this season because of this. I kept waiting to see if he was a sure-shot." (Anabil, Personal Interview, 05 March 2018)

> "I always make changes, always see what is new and this is good at times. This season, however has been a poor one, every time I pick someone after they click, they don't do anything for 2-3 weeks. After I drop them, they do well again. I wish I was more patient." (Prateek, Personal Interview, 12 November 2017)

Across the interviews, it appeared that most players of *FPL* were extremely well informed about the happenings in the league. They massively consumed information and were always tuned in. The final set of interviews focused on the various ways the players acquired his information.

> "I am new to *FPL* and this is only my second season, I know quite a bit about the big teams but hardly knew much about teams like Watford, Brighton and Huddersfield. I straight away googled and sought help. I read as much as I could, watched videos on YouTube and identified what were the key things to do. It has served me well so far." (Akhil, Personal Interview, 14 October 2017)[vii]

While Akhil's approach was effective and unorthodox, a lot of the veteran participants of *FPL* had many complex mechanisms in place. They had spent a lot of time streamlining the process and their information about elements of the game was remarkable.

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"I use *Goal, Onefootball* and *FTBPro* for news. I regularly check all three of them. Then after the news I look for information on statistics and from related data. I then use platforms like *Squawka* and *Opta*. Despite all this then I check other info on the *FPL* website. The site itself offers a lot of data; bringing them all together to make decisions is my way of doing things." (Teja, Personal Interview, 22 January 2018)

Most participants agreed that playing *FPL* had made them extremely knowledgeable about the league and they were now aware of players and teams at a level of detail they never expected.

"There are a lot of players I only know today because of *FPL*, players like Ighalo, Deeney, Vardy, Nyom, Hegazy, Albrighton, McCauley and so many more. None of them are stars and many of them are not even known to good football players but we track all of them." (Prashant, Personal Interview, 22 December 2017)

The fact that players have acquired a mastery of the various facets of the English Premier League, its teams and its players make the fantasy model a means of popularizing the main media product, that is, Premier League football. By giving *FPL* players a point-based incentive to compete for and against, the fantasy model is forging a connection and a dedication that mere watching of matches cannot achieve (Deshbandhu 2017).

The Role of Fandom

Throughout my conversations with the participants, one thing that stood out was their dedication towards their teams. Participants like Kaushik, Teja, Prateek and Anabil made sure to watch every match of that their teams played. My observations in co-playing sessions as well as the data from the interviews suggested that they were all watching well over a hundred matches of football across the various top European leagues every year.

I also found all the participants extended their loyalties to their teams beyond watching matches, with their emotional connection translating into financial investments like acquisition of club merchandise in the form of jerseys, posters, footballs and other collectibles. At times during conversations, it was impossible to discern where the role of the avid *FPL* manager ended, and the passionate football fan took over. Thus, it became imperative to question their strategies and decision-making about their football club.

Some of the participants acknowledged that it was extremely difficult for them to separate the two and the fact that they knew so much about one team could work to their advantage.

> "*FPL* is a game where come March all the teams more or less look the same as everyone has the same players who are doing well. In such cases you want as much advantage as possible. I know Chelsea very well and I have followed the career of Tammy Abraham closely, this year he was at Swansea and he got me quite a few points. The fact that I am a huge Chelsea fan gives me that edge at times." (Teja, Personal Interview, 02 October 2017)

As to how their loyalties dictated their team selection processes, most participants felt that *FPL* is supposed to be free of rivalries and prejudices and they need to do everything they can to select the best players as points are all that matter.

> "Man, we need to select the best possible players, being a United fan and not taking players from City (Manchester) is impossible this season. I have players from City who have got me good points and it doesn't matter one bit." (Prateek, Personal Interview, 12 November 2017)

However, not all participants were as convinced with Prateek's logic; some along with club loyalties also embraced rivalries.

"There are two loyalties that we must consider here, first our loyalty to our team and secondly our loyalty to the *FPL* team. I am very lucky that Everton[viii] are not very successful and I don't have to face this choice often. However, when Fellaini was at Everton he was a super-star getting a bunch of points and he was very affordable too. I mulled over the decision carefully for months; it was a very difficult one to make. Eventually I had to get him as my loyalty to the *FPL* team won." (Anabil, Personal Interview, 24 December 2017)

The analysis suggests that questions of loyalty and rivalry often only mattered to players who supported the traditionally big clubs[ix]. Participants like Bhaibhav, who supports Leicester City, felt that he could not really do much if he built his team around players from his club or if he was overly picky. The best quote to succinctly understand how an *FPL* player negotiates with fandom would be as follows.

"Being a Chelsea fan, our biggest rivals are Arsenal and Tottenham. Tottenham, I just can't stand them, but of late they have players like Harry Kane[x] and Eriksen who have been very good. I have no other choice but to take them. While watching the matches, I root for Tottenham to lose but for Kane to score hat-trick; the best of both worlds." (Teja, Personal Interview, 02 October 2017)

Knowledge Versus Chance

The discussions on information and the reliance of the participants on gathering as much knowledge as possible laid the foundation for some interesting perspectives relating to the debate on Agon and Alea. All the participants acknowledged that their performances in *FPL* were dependent on elements of chance and luck. This section of the paper focuses on not only the participants' experiences but also the counter-measures they have developed.

"Luck is huge in football, so it is the same in *FPL* as well. I try to embrace luck as much as possible. If I am lucky my team will do well and if I am not, I deal with

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the consequences. What helps is the fact that I am a Manchester United fan and my team has always been one of the luckiest in the league; the same has translated to my FPL team as well." (Prashant, Personal Interview, 03 March 2018)

None of the other participants were so equanimous about the fact that their performances were open to manipulations by chance and fortune. Most of them agreed that good fortune helped, but if the right strategy was chosen, accompanied with the willingness to take calculated risks, then bouts of misfortune could be overcome.

"Incidents of injury, suspension and poor form are never predictable. *FPL* as such allows you to make one transfer a week or play a wildcard (unlimited transfers for that week) when nothing works. General strategy is to delay the use of a wildcard as long as possible; but when things don't go your way you must take the risk to stay relevant in the game. Similarly, it can also be wise to take a points deduction at times." (Prateek, Personal Interview, 12 November 2017)

Most participants agreed with Prateek's viewpoint. There were some very interesting experiences of conflicts between research, data versus chance and fortune that stood out.

"I read a lot and spend a lot of time weighing up options while making decisions. One such decision was to choose Robert Snodgrass. He was a solid player and a key creative point for West Ham very consistent and thus I chose him for his low cost and high consistency. I was very happy with my decision and then suddenly after a day I see that guy has mysteriously transferred to Aston Villa, a team not even in the Premier League. In all my research there was no indication of a transfer on the cards. I was completely unaware." (Teja, Personal Interview, 21 September 2017)

"The case of West Ham is very interesting, before Christmas they were absolutely horrid, their performance made absolutely no sense. Suddenly they changed their manager, and everything changed, I invested in a couple of

players at that time and they help me get points stealthily as everyone else had forgotten West Ham[xi]. Similarly, Ighalo (Watford striker) was scoring goals for fun and suddenly they all dried up. Half the world had him and his form just vanished." (Kaushik, Personal Interview, 27 January 2018)

Throughout the season, discussions on the WhatsApp group and the interviews often focused on how chance and misfortune could disrupt well-set strategies. Most of the participants felt that the only way to bounce back from such situations was to rely more heavily on research.

"Football has always been a chance specific sport, we need to try and control *FPL* the same way footballers are controlling games. If research, statistics and information are not enough then we need to simply start watching players play. Numbers can only tell you so much, nothing beats watching someone in action. If you can see them play, there is no better way to decide." (Anabil, Personal Interview, 25 November 2017)

Teja's understanding of the Snodgrass situation is a clear indicator of the extremely unpredictable nature of football. While most participants rued or marveled about the impact of luck and chance on their performances, none spoke about a way where they had developed a strategy to harness them. Most participants spoke about their steely determination to research and gather information as the only certain way to play the game. Anabil's belief that the best way to decide would be by watching the players is the eventual objective of a free platform like *FPL* especially in a country like India where football hopes to make inroads in terms of both viewership and followers.

Anabil's and the other participants' decision to seek as much knowledge as possible can be examined better if the knowledge seeking aspect of fantasy games can be likened to the experience of engaging with quiz games. Then the players'

engagement on a weekly basis is then not just about elevating levels of fun (Sutton-Smith 1997), but to use the platform as a means of displaying their competencies and mastery (Koban et al. 2018).

Gamified Viewing

With regards to consumption of mediated content, through the course of the study many of the participants met to watch matches from the English Premier League.

> We all walk towards a bakery by the side of a busy road in Hyderabad in anticipation of the Chelsea versus Manchester City game. The group was abuzz with conversation as the defending champions (Chelsea) were facing off an unbeaten side. As we walk in, the proprietor of the place welcomes us and helps us re-position the seats to our liking. We all quickly huddle inside the bakery on wooden benches, tuning out the background sounds of busy weekend traffic and the strains of Bollywood music as we try to focus on the muffled commentary from a distant flat screen. The air is suffused with the aroma of fresh bread and pastries.

> However, all of it is quickly forgotten as the match kicks off; small glass bottles of soda clink and we begin to watch the action. The match is a low scoring affair but throughout the match the phones are out in full flow as participants observe the action from other matches. The FPL app is open as points tallies are refreshed and discussions on choices and decisions take precedent. For the first time I see the second-screen effect in full blow. (Insights from Co-playing Sessions, fieldnotes, 5 November 2017)

Insights from the co-playing description above are very close to what Nee and Dozier propose in their paper on multi-screen use (Nee and Dozier 2017). The steady use of smartphones to watch how their teams are performing while watching two other teams in action has become a characteristic trait of the *FPL* player. The *FPL* app then becomes a window to matches not being televised/watched, to the performance of other players in the fantasy league as well as it becomes a news platform. Thus, the app becomes an augmented extension to watching televised sport. The *FPL* app can

be likened to the companion apps that are offered by video games today. The use of companion apps is not new to gaming and has been discussed in popular media (Deshbandhu 2017) but the effect of the *FPL* app and the game mode is immense on the participants. For instance, seven out of the nine participants of the study tuned in on a chilly night at 1 AM to watch Newcastle United play Stoke City (one of the most low-scoring fixtures in the EPL calendar) to see how their choice of athletes fared.

Discussion and Conclusion

Work on fantasy sports has been limited in the last decade and there has been very little scholarship from the perspective of game studies. For a game mode that wholeheartedly embraced the facets of web 2.0 like synchroneity, real time alerts and distributed participation, it is surprising that the existing literature is based on uses and gratification approaches and mainly only exists in scholarship from the fields of business and economics. Most of these studies are largely quantitative in nature; the closest study to this attempt is Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock's (2009) work that looks at communities and ownership of fanbases for football clubs. The study presented here, by classifying fantasy sport as a game and by using an ethnographic approach, allows for examining player experience and practices on a much deeper level than what online surveys and quantitative approaches can offer. Thus, it opens up avenues for radical possibilities of interpretation for a deeply engaging and interactive activity.

What makes fantasy sport unique from other games that have been ludologically examined is the unique dialectic process between the elements of Agon and Alea; a process that is shrouded by unpredictability at every stage and a combination that is not offered by other game modes. This article is an attempt to re-position the game mode of fantasy sport in a manner that allows for studying the players/virtual

manager as well as a platform and a place for presencing (Poster 1997, Couldry 2004). By offering these unique entry points this article not only allows to critically examine the *FPL* experience but also offers a window to look at how the participants engage with the mediated football content. Following Couldry's practice approach, this paper presents unique, specific approaches and practices developed by players of the game from urban India, that provide a comprehensive lens to look at what users of fantasy sports do with the game (Couldry 2004).

The potential of this ludic and qualitative approach is further amplified by the fact that we can gain insights into the complex decision-making processes that dictate player decisions in fantasy sports. We are able to answer questions on identity and how the mediated content is streamlined, structured and consumed; but also, where these participants view themselves in the larger frame of the media sports cultural complex (Rowe 2004).

Gamified viewing coupled with the fact that the only way to counter chance and luck in fantasy sport is to put in more research, leaves the audiences primed for high levels of viewership; something that makes the *FPL* experience a vital cog in the EPL's pursuit of dedicated viewers and loyal fans in India. This trend contradicts what Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock (2009) suggest, when they call for the need to stop thinking of the association between sports and media but to think of sports as media (Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock 2009, 101). The findings from this article are more in line with Nee and Dozier who provide evidence that increase in frequency of complementary simultaneous media use can be linked to higher levels of engagement (Nee and Dozier 2017). With this gamified and engaged viewing from the spectators, the second-screen is not a distraction to the mediated content but a means of augmenting viewership interest and reinforcing dedication.

The concept of gamified viewing, one where viewers are offered point-based scenarios and where positive outcomes are incentivized, seems to not only spur high levels of engagement but also has big potential for the future of interactive television. In the 90s and early 2000s, media companies spent a fortune pursuing the dream of interactive television. However, maybe through gamified viewing, the second-screen effect they most feared might deliver on that dream after all.

For an extremely passive game mode that merely represents actual performances from the field, the desire for virtual managers to showcase their deep understanding of the game and their desire to establish presence and compete unlocks a player who is not merely a football fan but a constantly thinking and reflective viewer/consumer. In the process, this means spurring a level of engagement from their viewers that most broadcasters would kill for.

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[ii] The English Premier League is watched in 202 countries worldwide and officially broadcasted in 156 countries. While exact statistics for the number of countries *FPL* players play from is difficult to ascertain it is safe to say it is more than 100.

[iii] As in actively take part in the *FPL* process for the duration of an entire season. Many players in *FPL* from the Indian context actively take part only for a few early months and then seem to lose interest and give up.

[iv] Hailing from the Indian state of West Bengal. Some of India's most glorious football memories come from the Bengali football clubs *East Bengal* and *Mohun Bagan.*

[v] Sergio Kun Agüero and Romelu Lukaku are the star strikers for Manchester rivals Manchester City and Manchester United. A rivalry that divides most football fans, the Manchester derby is one of the most anticipated clashes in world football.

[vi] Mohammed Salah, the Liverpool forward was the best player in the Premier League for 2017-18. With 38 goals and over 330 FPL points he was in more than 70 per cent of the teams by the end of the season.

[vii] At the time of this interview Akhil was top of the league and had one of the best starts possible as he was placed in the top 100,000 players of the 6 Million plus engaged with the game.

[viii] Everton and Liverpool are traditional rivals in what is called the Merseyside Derby. A classic Red V blue match-up, Liverpool play in Red and Everton in Blue.

[ix] The traditional big clubs in the Premier League would include Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal and Chelsea. The last five years have seen Manchester City and Tottenham be included in this discussion as well.

[x] Harry Kane of Tottenham had been the top scorer in the EPL for three seasons in a row until Salah took over in 2017-18.

[xi] Kaushik won the participants' specific league of the *FPL*. The key players that gave him an edge in the final stretch were West Ham's Marko Arnautovic and Manuel Lanzini.