

Over the last twenty-five years, fantasy sports have become an increasingly prominent form of popular culture. During this same period, fan studies have also become an important strain of media and cultural studies. In what follows, I will consider the relationship between these two phenomena and demonstrate how each can help us rethink the other. In fantasy competitions sports fans assemble imaginary teams of professional athletes that may or may not play on the same “real-life” team and play these teams against others in imaginary leagues. Scoring is based on the statistically quantified real-life performances of an individual “owner’s” team of players. In fantasy sports, in other words, the competition is between fans. As I will argue, the competitive logic and culture of fantasy sports embody much of what fan studies has articulated about both the active, participatory nature of fandom and also the increased sensitivity of contemporary culture industries to it. But I will also show how fantasy participation and the incorporation of fantasy fandom by pre-existing forms of spectacle raise fundamental questions about our investment in worlds defined by their separation from reality, and that fan studies must also confront these questions.

In order to articulate the relation between fantasy and participation that I want to explore, I will focus on a particular variety of fantasy sports—fantasy football—and a book that deals extensively with the connection between football and fantasy: Frederick Exley’s “fictional memoir” *A Fan’s Notes*. *A Fan’s Notes* was first published in 1968, one year after the first documented fantasy football league was founded.¹ Exley’s representation of football fandom does not imagine the kind of participatory culture that would emerge around fantasy sports. Nevertheless, *A Fan’s Notes* is concerned with football fandom as a fantasy of participation and intimacy—terms that have become central to fan studies theorizations of media and fandom. To be more specific, participation—understood here as both the agency of fans in the creation of meaning from texts and also the interactivity and intimacy between consumers and producers as the affective bond between consumers and cultural objects that is constitutive of fandom—are the defining characteristics of what Henry Jenkins has called the “participatory” culture of contemporary media convergence. While Exley, unlike Jenkins, is concerned with the lack of participation in football fandom, his complex understanding of the power of fantasy adds some emotional texture to the discussion of participatory culture. Specifically, the emphasis on fantasy in *A Fan’s Notes* allows Exley to articulate feelings of frustration, passivity, and alienation. These are feelings that are a prominent aspect of fantasy football culture and yet the larger discussion of participatory culture, as it has emerged from a debate in cultural studies over the “activity” of audiences, has tended to minimize it. It is my contention that while the activity of consumers and their increasingly intimate relationships with spectacles are indeed central to contemporary media culture, questions about alienation and commodification remain relevant to any discussion of participation and media.

The affective texture of *A Fan’s Notes* at first appears to be steeped in ambivalence. Football, in *A Fan’s Notes*, appears as both a world apart, into which one can escape, and also as an authentic expression of society’s fundamental, if masked, brutality. The narrator, whose name is also Fred Exley, lives vicariously through his favorite team, the New York Giants, and imagines a special connection between himself and his college classmate and favorite player, Frank Gifford. But he hates himself for what he sees as the passivity of fandom and is resentful of a world where his own talents and achievements will never be valued as highly as those of men who play games. This ambivalence, which blends wild extremes of love and hate, passivity and aggression, is presented as

the narrator's fantasy life. The text is structured as a first-person testimony, and the narrator presents his inner thoughts and feelings for evaluation by the reader.

An ironic tone of testimonial self-examination and an emphasis on football as a fantasy life is established early in the text. In the opening chapter, "The Nervous Light of Sunday," Exley describes his ritualized viewing habits, explaining that he watches the game at a bar in upstate New York that he has selected for its distance from his job as a high school English teacher. This distance is essential, because he needs to feel it in order to express his enthusiasm for the Giants without shame or restraint. He writes:

I spent Friday night and all day Saturday in some sustained whisky drinking, tapering off Sundays with a few bottles of beer at The Parrot, cheering for my team. *Cheering* is a paltry description. The Giants were my delight, my folly, my anodyne, my intellectual stimulation. With Huff I "stunted" up and down the room among the bar stools, preparing to "shoot the gap"; with Shofner I faked two defenders "out of their cleats," took high, swimming passes over my right shoulder and trotted, dippy-doodle-like, into the end zone; with Robustelli I swept into backfields and with cruel disdain flung flat-footed, helpless quarterbacks to the turf. All this I did amidst an unceasing, pedantic commentary I issued on the character of the game, a commentary issued with the air of one who assumed those other patrons incapable of assessing what was taking place before their eyes. Never did I stop moving or talking. Certainly I drove a good many customers away. Most of those who remained had seen the show before and had come back for more, bringing with them the morbid fascination that compels one to stare at a madman.²

This passage is indicative of the rhetorical style and affective structure of *A Fan's Notes* in its entirety. In it, the fan Fred Exley engages in a fantasy that brings him closer to both the game and to his favorite athletes. The space of the football field and the bar in upstate New York merge in his imagination, and he feels himself playing among the Giants.

The representation of an imagined space in this passage indicates that Exley engages with football on the level of fantasy. As the description of his behavior in The Parrot suggests, Exley sees football as a painkiller that inures him to alienation and injustice. His connection with the Giants is a "recompense" for what he cannot find or accomplish elsewhere. The fantasy offered by football is an escape from his dissatisfaction with his everyday life.³ This dissatisfaction stems from his struggle to gain recognition as a writer and his sense that he is unable to live what he calls, at the end of the text, "the contributive, the passionate life."⁴ This sense of alienation extends to all his social relationships. Friends, family, wives and lovers all fail to satisfy his yearning for an authentic connection. Throughout the course of the text, these relationships fail while his passion for and affiliation with the Giants remains.

Later in the text, however, Exley's fantasy of intimacy with the Giants collapses as well, and the experience of separation that he seemed to transcend in the experience of playing among the Giants at the Parrot re-emerges and forces him to confront it as the central problem of his life. This moment takes place after Exley witnesses a brutal hit by Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Chuck "Concrete Charlie" Bednarik on Frank Gifford—this time in person at the Polo Grounds—that knocks Gifford unconscious and puts him out of the game for a year.⁵ After the game Exley gets

drunk and uses racist and homophobic insults to pick a fight with a pair of men he encounters on the street. The use of this invective to incite the conflict is somewhat surprising, as earlier in the text Exley recounts socializing with black and homosexual friends during his time at USC. In a move that is indicative of *A Fan's Notes*' testimonial style, the narrator rationally dissects the underpinnings of his hate speech even as he utters it.⁶ And he ultimately rationalizes his behavior as follows:

I fought because I understood, and could not bear to understand,
that it was my destiny—unlike that of my father, whose fate it was to
hear the roar of the crowd—to sit in the stands with most men and
acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan.⁷

Here, the fantasy of playing among the team that earlier sustained Exley becomes a nightmare. His literal separation from the Giants, the physical manifestation of the inability to participate in the game that is definitive of sports fandom, becomes the metaphor through which he defines his life. The participation and intimacy that he imagined at the Parrot materialize as aggression and violence. The imagery of this passage describes a physical separation of fan and player: fans are in the stands acclaiming others, while players are on the field, hearing the roar of the crowd. In this metaphor, the physical separation of the stadium symbolizes the conceptual division that constitutes spectator sports. Fans are unable to participate in the games they watch. In this excerpt, this inability is linked to spectatorship as a passive position—sitting in the stands and acclaiming others—that ultimately results in aggression.

A sense of latent hostility permeates *A Fan's Notes*. Exley's aggression is in part a result of his internalization of football's competitive ethos. He calls football "an island of directness in an indirect world."⁸ This statement indicates that Exley sees football as metonymic of a social formation that is also defined by competition. He idealizes the game as a distillation of his own social milieu. In his eyes, the competition of football renders both explicit and physical the brutality and conflict that also characterizes his world. This internalization manifests itself in his frustrated desire for fame and recognition as a writer, his intense cathexis on the figure of Frank Gifford, and in his inability to connect with those around him. He cannot bear to be like "most men." *A Fan's Notes* suggests that the narrator's identification as a fan becomes a determinative of all other social relationships. The particular fantasy of participation that his fandom affords becomes the model for his life. Exley's aggression haunts the text throughout. It is only ever latent, simmering below the surface as a loathing he can barely repress.

In this way, Exley suggests the inability to participate that is constitutive of fandom emerges as a general problem for the fan's life. At the same time, however, fandom is also clearly figured in the text as a metaphor. Fandom embodies the feeling of frustration that arouses Exley's aggression, but does not, in fact, constitute or create it. This frustration is part of his world, as an affective dimension of an alienation that is corollary to his dependence on fantasy. Instead of opposing the fantasy-intimacy of sports to the other relationships in his life, Exley sees these supposedly genuine relationships as similar fantasies. He characterizes his relationships with family, fellow fans, wives, and lovers as all based on a kind of performative labor that cannot ultimately overcome his separation from the people in his life.⁹ Ultimately, his persistent, cynical belief that only fantasy can transcend alienation results in the narrator's general sense of disaffection and his inability to live according to the codes of life in the mid-20th century United States.

A Fan's Notes pushes Exley's point about the fundamental power of fantasy to its ultimate ironic

conclusion. The ambiguity between fantasy and intimacy in *A Fan's Notes* is introduced even before the “narrative” of the text begins, in “A Note to the Reader”:

Though the events of this book bear similarity to those of that long malaise, my life, many of the characters and happenings are creations solely of my imagination. In such cases, I of course disclaim any responsibility for their resemblance to real people or events, which would be coincidental. The character “Patience,” for example, who is herein depicted as my “wife,” is a fictionalized character bearing no similarity to anyone living or dead. In creating such characters, I have drawn freely from the imagination and adhered only loosely to the pattern of my past life. To this extent, and for this reason, I ask to be judged as a writer of fantasy.¹⁰

This disclaimer establishes a fundamental ambiguity around the author Exley and the narrator who bears the same name. The disclaimer extends the text’s suggestion that intimacy is based on fantasy to include the relationship between author and reader that the subsequent testimony will establish. Mediating this relationship, of course, is the abstraction of language and the ambiguity of textuality. These are forces that are operative in the emotional paradigm of fandom that Exley describes, but they are not alone in determining its boundaries.¹¹

The irony of Exley’s request to be “judged as a writer of fantasy,” then, is that he figures fantasy as an ineluctable form of mediation that is constitutive of social reality. Fantasy is, in Exley’s view, absolutely necessary for the imagination of real relationships. At the same time, however, he also suggests that fantasy is incapable of transcending its own rhetorical status. Fantasy is always a form of recompense, and the intimacy that it offers is always linked with separation. This tension explains the hostility that permeates *A Fan's Notes*. Even when not physically fighting, Exley’s aggression simmers below the surface and manifests itself as an instance of emotional manipulation that takes advantage of the unreal nature of his real society. His dominant mode is passive aggressive, a feeling clearly expressed through a first-person testimony expressing the sufferings of an unacknowledged genius stuck among the unappreciative masses. This mode is introduced in the disclaimer that begins the text. Beyond the self-abasement (“that long malaise, my life”), and self-aggrandizement (“solely of my own creation”), calculated to attract the reader’s sympathy, there is also the thinly veiled hostility towards the figure of his “wife.” The careful punctuation of his discussion of Patience is a defensive maneuver calculated both to shield and to cut.

In his biography of Exley, *Misfit*, Jonathan Yardley dismisses the disclaimer at the beginning the text as “legalistic prattle.”¹² But the hermeneutic enigma it establishes—the question of authorship, identity and fantasy contained in the slippage between Fred Exleys—is the central problem of the text. By disclaiming the identities of both the narrator and the “characters” in the text, the testimonial voice that binds the text together aggressively refuses to participate in a fantasy of understanding.¹³ At the same time, however, the disclaimer also opens a space for the narrator’s fantasies that intensify the intimacy and immediacy of the text. The passive mood of the disclaimer (“I ask to be judged as a writer of fantasy”) strategically complicates interpretation and judgment, a savvy move for an alcoholic writer with anxiety over his place in the literary world. Passivity, in the context of *A Fan's Notes*, is not simply a structural position. It is a social tactic in which the renunciation of agency acts as a rhetorical weapon. Exley’s participation in football is itself passive aggressive: he uses it as a means of avoiding his responsibilities towards his family and, through his connection with Gifford, holding himself apart even from his fellow fans. The passivity of the

narrator's football fandom is not in and of itself alienating. Neither is it alienation itself. It is a pose he adopts to express his resentment and to separate himself from the impoverished identities—communal and individual—that are available to him.

I have tried to consider *A Fan's Notes* in some detail because it is my contention that the ironic passivity of Exley's fandom resonates with the affective culture of fantasy football and addresses some critical questions about participation and spectacle that are central to the scholarly discourse on fandom. The equation of fandom with fantasy, passivity, and alienation, and the idea that spectatorship is problematically inactive and non-participatory have influenced both the academic study of fandom as well as the commercial interests that seek to commodify fantasy. As I will show, fan studies, as a sub-discipline of media and cultural studies, emerged from a heated debate about the significance and ideological character of popular culture in which earlier critical assessments about the vacuous, homogeneous and passive nature of so-called "mass culture" were challenged by scholars who called for closer attention to the activities of media audiences and consumers and re-imagined popular culture as a site of struggle and contestation.¹⁴ In the context of this debate, the interpretative practices, communities, and cultural production of fans became emblems of activity and participation.¹⁵ For commercial interests, the affective intensity with which fans engage with cultural objects has increasingly been recognized as the basis for a lasting and lucrative consumer relationship, and numerous companies have thus actively begun to encourage and capitalize on forms of participation that go beyond spectatorship. Television programs such as *Lost* and *How I Met Your Mother*, for example, are accompanied by websites that encourage fans to interact—to form virtual communities intended to enrich the television text through speculation and discussion. Similarly, ComiCon, the annual gathering of thousands of graphic novel, science-fiction, and fantasy fans—wherein the fan has the opportunity to interact with the stars and the producers of the very thing that they admire—has become an important press event for Hollywood studios hoping to promote their latest blockbuster.

The result is that the figure of the "fan" has become increasingly central to critical, popular, and commercial discourses of media consumption over the last two decades. In the 1992 study *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, for instance, Henry Jenkins first outlined what he called a "broader discourse about fans and their fanaticism" that pathologizes fans as passive, obsessive and infantile creatures who "place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material" and are "feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture."¹⁶ In many ways, *A Fan's Notes* reflects this tradition: when Exley weeps in the stadium after a Giants' loss, for example, he is chastised for his embarrassingly childish or feminine behavior. By the time of Jenkins' 2006 book *Convergence Culture* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2006), however, the intimacy and enthusiasm associated with fandom had become, if not totally de-pathologized, then at least no longer seen as inappropriate. As Jenkins puts it,

Across the past decade, the Web has brought these consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight; research into fandom has been embraced by important thinkers in the legal and business communities. What might have been seen as "rogue readers" are now Kevin Roberts's "inspirational consumers."¹⁷

In other words, both popular and commercial discourses on the intense feelings and attachments associated with fandom have gone from marginalizing fans for their freakish behavior to seeing that behavior as the model for an ideal consumer-product relationship.

In many ways the history of fantasy football exemplifies both the shifting cultural perception of fandom and the power of fans in 21st century media culture that Jenkins describes. Fantasy football has what might be called artisanal origins—the Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League (GOPPPL), which is commonly considered to be the oldest competition, was created and played privately by a group of executives in the Oakland Raiders organization in 1967¹⁸—but it has transitioned from a hardcore hobby to a thriving economic sector dominated by powerful corporate interests¹⁹ As a recent survey noted, “In 2004, 10 million fantasy football participants spent an average of \$154 each on sports statistics magazines, league entry fees, and assorted draft services.”²⁰ Moreover, this number does not even include the black market economies of casual gambling that often accompanies virtual sports leagues. It is not surprising, then, that the National Football League TM and its media partners have been aggressive in using fantasy participation to promote their brands and products. Not only do ESPN, CBS, and Fox—in partnership with MSN—run their own fantasy football leagues, but the television divisions of these media conglomerates have tailored their coverage to the fantasy sports player-consumer. Pre-game shows feature fantasy experts offering advice and opinion on who to “sit or start” before the games, and the regular pundits and commentators frequently work in references to their own fantasy competitions. ESPN2 even has a special “Fantasy Football Now” program that airs before kickoff on Sundays so frantic owners can make last minute substitutions. During the game, the “bottom line”—a crawling sports news ticker on the bottom of the television screen—issues “fantasy updates” announcing telling statistics from the other action around the league. In fact, this aggressive targeting of the fantasy football demographic has become so striking that Bryant Gumbel, in his capacity as host of *Real Sports* in 2002, complained that the NFL’s coverage was being reformulated for “computer geeks” who barely watched television.²¹

Whether or not one agrees with Gumbel’s derisive view of fantasy football fans, both the comment itself and the shifts in football programming that provoked it highlight the growing awareness by the NFL and its media partners that football broadcasts reach an audience that consumes the game in non-traditional ways. Both this unpredictable consumer behavior and its recognition and incorporation in the norms of official football coverage exemplify the logic of participatory culture as Henry Jenkins initially formulated it in *Textual Poachers* and as he has subsequently developed the concept in his later work. Over the last 20 years, Jenkins’ work on participation has helped create the sub-discipline of fan studies within cultural studies and been a dominant trope in new media studies. As I will demonstrate, Jenkins’ understanding of participation was initially conceptualized in relation to an active/passive opposition that framed his discussion of fandom in *Textual Poachers* and formed the basis of that book’s rhetorical and theoretical intervention. This formulation of fans as “active” and fan culture as “participatory” has definitively shaped fan studies.²² And, as Jenkins’ work has moved from a strict focus on fans to a consideration of the increased intimacy between consumers and media industries—the relationships that are the principal subject of *Convergence Culture*—participation and participatory culture have remained central to his thinking and to the discussions of media literacy and digital democracy that he has helped to define.²³

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins rejects the notion that media audiences can be understood as a homogenous mass. At the core of this contention is an opposition between active and passive that is inherited from his theoretical predecessors. Arguing explicitly against Frankfurt school theorists such as Theodor Adorno, he contends that fans are not passive consumers who automatically swallow whole the meanings of texts. Indeed, Jenkins ends the book with the assertion that while, “fandom does not prove that all audiences are active, it does, however, prove that not all audiences

are passive.”²⁴ Instead of passive ideological dupes, he positions fans of popular entertainment as “textual poachers” that appropriate cultural material for their own purposes and construct their own meanings from the texts at hand. In so doing, Jenkins envisions popular culture as an arena of struggle and conflict. He states, “De Certeau’s ‘poaching’ analogy characterizes the relationship between readers and writers as an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings.”²⁵ The term “struggle” is critical here. It indicates that Jenkins sees meaning as a process of conflict and contestation.

As Jenkins goes on to explain, De Certeau’s concept of the reader as poacher resonates with his own experience as a fan (which he documents in *Textual Poachers*) and with the English-language critical work on television audiences in the field of cultural studies that shaped his experience in the academy. Jenkins lays particular emphasis on the work of John Fiske. According to Jenkins, Fiske’s work challenged what Jenkins calls “material on the ideological positioning of the viewing subject” that had dominated academic work on visual culture in the 1970s and 80s.²⁶ The phrase “ideological positioning” is a reference to the influence of critical Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis on film and television theory of this period. Fiske’s work was at the center of a debate within cultural studies over the politics of popular culture that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s and in which the notion of an “active audience” played a critical role.²⁷ Where “screen theorists” argued that the fantasies of popular culture served to reinforce dominant subjectivities, Fiske (and subsequently Jenkins) turned towards newer paradigms of Cultural Studies, which rejected the concept of interpellation and, instead, emphasized Antonio Gramsci’s discussion of struggle and hegemony. More specifically, Fiske rooted his theorization of resistance and the power of popular pleasures in the work of Stuart Hall, and in particular in Hall’s essay “Encoding/Decoding,” which, he argued, broke with screen theory by introducing “the idea that television programs do not have a single meaning but are relatively open texts, capable of being read in different ways by different people.”²⁸ For Fiske, Hall’s insistence that encoding (or production) and decoding (consumption) are “linked but distinctive moments” figured meaning as a process of struggle and negotiation and thus capable of accommodating the possibility of “oppositional” or “resistant” readings of pop culture texts.²⁹

Jenkins’ theorization of participation also follows Hall’s work, and challenges older understandings of mass culture as ideology and spectacle. *Textual Poachers* suggests that media consumers are not simply passive figures who swallow whole the prefabricated meanings of culture industries. Instead, fans can be active in constructing and appropriating their own meanings from texts, and even produce texts of their own. Furthermore, instead of the alienation that Marxist critics saw as the essence of commodity culture, Jenkins describes an emotionally rich collective life that emerges around the commodity-form: “Fan culture finds that utopian dimension within popular culture a site for constructing an alternative culture. Its society is responsive to the needs that draw its members to commercial entertainment, most especially the desire for affiliation, friendship, community.”³⁰ Though Jenkins sees fans occupying a “position of cultural marginality or weakness,”³¹ the fan cultures he describes nevertheless become the basis of participation. They reflect “both the audience’s fascination with programs and fans’ frustration over the refusal/inability of producers to tell the kinds of stories viewers want to see.”³² Fans, in this formulation, have responded to the prerogatives of the culture industries with strategies and alliances designed to express their own desires and imaginations.

Tracking the impact of this consumer participation becomes the central project of Jenkins’ later work, *Convergence Culture*, even as he expands his focus beyond fans and complicates Fiske’s ideas about “resistant” readings.³³ In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins documents the increased interaction,

communication and intimacy between producers and consumers that has in fact developed in the wake of Hall's work, demonstrating that active and involved fans have become increasingly important to cultural industries. Jenkins details numerous fans' efforts to negotiate with cultural producers over the content and meaning of programs. In his view, these kinds of exchanges, along with other tactics like "spoiling," in which narrative secrets are revealed to the public, thereby damaging potential audience interest, drive culture industries to acknowledge, respond, and incorporate the demands of these seemingly marginal communities into their product via the logic of capital and the market.³⁴ For Jenkins, then, this hegemonic operation is evidence of a negotiation: consumers produce culture of their own, and the industries are increasingly aware of and sensitive to that culture. This negotiation accommodates the interpretative agency that Hall and Fiske helped to define, and is based on communication between consumers and media industries. It is a structure of participation and is thus ultimately democratic in nature. Participation, for Jenkins, is the defining characteristic of democracy, and in *Convergence Culture* we have the opportunity to participate through the logic of the market.³⁵

Consequently, popular culture is neither passive, nor alienating, nor inauthentic; nor is it even truly separate: popular culture sheds virtually all of the qualities that motivate its critique as ideology and spectacle. Indeed, according to this model consumer capitalism does not merely excite and satisfy what Guy Debord called "pseudoneeds,"³⁶ but instead involves the expression, negotiation and satisfaction of the myriad demands that Marxist politics and psychoanalysis-influenced apparatus theory either minimized or struggled to accommodate. Indeed, in this context, the need to form a revolutionary class-consciousness is doubly inappropriate. Not only are citizens not alienated by commodities, but the class identity that would be both the basis and the (idealized) result of revolution is inadequate to the complex experience of social difference. Jenkins' adherence to the Birmingham school hegemony model in *Textual Poachers*, however, does accommodate the possibility that a class identity could be connected with these other kinds of political demands. What is stripped from this theory is the notion that a proletarian revolution would resolve these alternative issues simply via economic transformation. To be clear, this promise—that a class revolution can resolve all social injustice and inequality—remains theoretically possible (as a speech-act, if not a reality) within the framework of hegemony theory. It would simply require the incorporation of all other cultural demands be united under the banner of class-consciousness. And this would have to take place in a cultural and political landscape that, as Jenkins describes, is heavily fragmented and segmented along multiple and conflicting lines of need, identification and desire.

This ideological shift towards participation in the theorization of popular culture has been extremely productive for scholars in fan studies, television and media studies, and cultural studies. It has enabled nuanced readings of pop culture texts and discussions of the interactions between consumers and culture industries that account for historical context, political economy, and polysemy.³⁷ But there is a drawback to the understanding of the politics and pleasures of popular culture that emerges from this theorization of participation. Despite his convincing illustration of the activity of fans and the intimacy between consumers and cultural industries, Jenkins' formulation of participatory culture does not address the persistence of alienation in convergence culture. This alienation manifests itself not as the passivity that Jenkins, following Fiske, critiqued in *Textual Poachers*, but as deeply ambivalent relationships that emerge from the consumption of popular culture.

By contrast, *A Fan's Notes* articulates an intensely ambivalent relationship to popular culture and has a very different understanding of participation than the one Jenkins offers. Where Jenkins sees

alienation as a problem to be overcome through participatory mechanisms, *A Fan's Notes* figures alienation as a fundamental part of social identities and sees participation as a fantasy. The connection Exley draws between participation and fantasy is the basis of the complex, passive aggressive attitude that *A Fan's Notes* describes, and is also the key to the larger question about participation in consumer culture that the text articulates. As I will show, the political possibilities Jenkins finds in participatory and convergence culture are rooted in fantasy, but his imagination of democracy struggles to accommodate the feelings of aggression and antagonism that, as political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues, are an inevitable dimension of the political, or any social formation, which is itself an instance of the political.³⁸ As a result, when Jenkins discusses the incorporation of fan activity by existing forms of spectacle in *Convergence Culture*, he avoids the question of alienation almost entirely.

In addition to bracketing part of the radical question about participation that *A Fan's Notes* tried to bring to bear on popular culture in the first place (namely, what actually constitutes participation in a context where our participatory possibilities are heavily circumscribed by bureaucratic and industrial structures?³⁹) de-emphasizing alienation in this way limits our ability to describe the emotional complexity of the positions that subjects can occupy. This limitation is particularly problematic in the context of fantasy football insofar as fantasy football is a participatory culture increasingly commodified and spectacularized, and that is based upon the positioning of fans according to a logic that structures their affective investments. This is ironic, since the practice of fantasy football—in no few respects—illustrates the agency Jenkins theorizes in and for television audiences. The ludic logic of fantasy football is based upon an alternative form of fandom that goes outside of the basic form of fandom generally associated with the sport. Fantasy competitors describe themselves not only as “players” but also as “owners;” their relationships to their teams are explicitly compared to that of the multi-millionaires and billionaires who are the chief investors and executives that profit from professional athletics.⁴⁰ This ownership structure has a unique implication for the culture of sports fandom. Fantasy teams are often characterized as a rival that undermines the otherwise “natural” loyalty to a particular squad.⁴¹ This sense of conflict for fans is noted in discussions of the GOPPPL and persists in contemporary sports discourse.⁴² Fantasy football encourages a fandom that is bound to individual athletes more than to any specific team. “Owners” select their squad of players from a variety of teams. Scoring is based on player statistics: owners are awarded points (or fractions of points) according to the achievements of their particular players. Who actually wins the “real” game is fundamentally irrelevant to the fantasy outcome. It is commonplace, indeed inevitable, for fantasy football players to cheer for players on rival teams, and even to root for players who on a given Sunday are playing against their favorite “real life” team. In this way, fantasy sports undermine the team loyalty and group affiliations generally associated with sport and promote a broader investment in the league as whole, as it is constituted by a collection of players. In both its artisanal origins, then, and its basis in an alternative “reading” of the game, then, fantasy football embodies participatory culture as Jenkins describes.

But fantasy participation also has a fetishistic dimension that Jenkins tries to disassociate from fandom. The alternative engagement of fantasy football has a great deal in common with conventional football fandom, particularly in the problematically commodified nature of the relationships it encourages. Like all professional sports, the NFL has a history of labor disputes. The most recent was resolved without a work stoppage, but in the past league management has a history of dominating its players. The NFL is exceedingly violent, and though players are well compensated their contracts are not guaranteed, and they are extremely vulnerable to the whims of management and the vicissitudes of injury. Player contracts in the NFL, unlike those in the NBA and Major

League Baseball, are famously not guaranteed, which means that players can be cut and forfeit their salaries if they get hurt or underperform. The virtual ownership of fantasy sports, even more than the actual ownership of league competition, is based upon stars, so much so that the “grunts,” the burly lineman who inflict and suffer so much of football’s violence, are generally excluded from fantasy competition. Fantasy sports undermine the very labor relations that establish that hierarchy by their basic attack on the “team” structure, but they also reinforce the league’s star hierarchy and perpetuate this exclusion, leaving many players stranded in bleak anonymity.

Not only does fantasy football encourage the commodity-fetishization of athletes in a way that raises questions about the stakes of the participation it offers, but also the game itself has been increasingly commodified as spectacle. The NFL’s corporate and marketing strategy over the last 5 years has responded to the ambivalent fandom of fantasy football by attempting to cultivate the broader and more intense association with the league as a whole that fantasy football encourages. The NFL RedZone Channel, for example, which debuted in 2009 is particularly suited to the vicissitudes of fantasy football. The “flow” of the channel, which airs only on Sunday afternoons during the NFL season and is only available through certain cable and satellite providers, is a montage of all the “live” affiliate broadcasts. The channel effectively updates viewers on all the league action being played simultaneously, which enables fantasy owners to watch all of their players easily, regardless of the NFL’s notoriously strict local broadcast television policies.⁴³ The Red Zone network is designed for the neutral viewer who cares about the league as a whole more than any one specific team. For fantasy players, it can be addictive: six consecutive hours of professional football, presented commercial free in a whirlwind of spatio-temporality that both capitalizes on “liveness” and explodes the traditional spatio-temporality of broadcast television. The Red Zone network, which takes its name from fan and commentator jargon for the area inside the twenty-yard lines, even eliminates the slower, irrelevant, or boring parts of the traditionally televised game. There are no two yard runs up the middle, delays for instant replay, or commercial breaks, just a relentless montage of big play highlights that doesn’t even give fans time to get up and go to the bathroom.

The RedZone network is a material illustration of what Gumbel was concerned about when he complained that “computer geeks” were exerting too much influence on the NFL. The channel’s annihilation of the traditional rhythm of a football game and indifference to team loyalty is an obvious demonstration of the decision by traditional spectacles to cater to and capitalize on fantasy fandom rather than stifle or ignore it. In addition, the aesthetic choices that shape the RedZone channel—the crosscutting between games and indifference to the narrative of a particular team—are an effort to spectacularly materialize the “textual poaching” of fantasy fans rooting for their own personal team. Simply put, the channel tries to get computer geeks to keep watching television by giving them no reason to look away from the screen to find the score in another game. In this way, the activity of fantasy is easily repackaged as spectacle.

Both the clearly articulated understanding, on the part of the NFL and its media partners, that fans create their own meanings from texts, and the efforts by these commercial interests to accommodate and incorporate fantasy participation into traditional models of football telecasting, are completely in keeping with the participatory culture that Jenkins details in *Textual Poachers* and *Convergence Culture*, and the incorporation of fantasy participation into spectacle does not render fans inactive. But, as I will demonstrate, the communities that fantasy football creates are vastly different from the communities Jenkins idealizes in those texts. Where his ideal communities are governed by tolerance and consensus, fantasy leagues are based on conflict and encourage feelings of antagonism that are not alleviated by participation. This contrast is, of course, due in part to the differences in dominant

values associated with various fan cultures: where *Star Trek* imagines an inclusive utopia, football is based on violent conflict and machismo.⁴⁴ But the centrality of antagonism and conflict to fantasy football cannot be dismissed as ideological simply because it is incorporated into a structure of fantasy. Such a dismissal would ignore the critical role that fantasy plays in all social relationships and thus miss the scope of the cultural power of sports. In the next section of this essay, I will juxtapose the structure of participation and community offered by fantasy football with what I will show to be Jenkins' liberal political ideals in order to foreground the operative power of fantasy and demonstrate the continued relevance of *A Fan's Notes'* passive aggressive posturing for an understanding of participation in convergence culture.

Jenkins is clear that both antagonism and fantasy are constitutive of his ideal communities. In *Textual Poachers*, for instance, he argues that fan communities are constituted as fantasies defined by their separation from reality. Just as football was a space of social relief for Exley, these communities are a recompense for an alienating society:

Fans, like all of us, inhabit a world where traditional forms of community life are disintegrating, the majority of marriages end in divorce, most social relations are temporary and superficial, and material values often dominate over emotional and social needs. Fans are often people who are overeducated for their jobs, whose intellectual skills are not challenged by their professional lives. Fans react against those unsatisfying situations, trying to create a "weekend-only world" more open to creativity and accepting of differences, more concerned with human welfare than with economic advance. Fandom, too, falls short of those ideals; the fan community is sometimes rife with feuds and personality conflicts. Here, too, one finds those who are self-interested and uncharitable, those who are greedy and rude, yet, unlike mundane reality, fandom remains a space where a commitment to more democratic values may be renewed and fostered. Noncommunal behavior is read negatively, as a violation of the social contract that binds fans together and often becomes the focus of collective outrage.⁴⁵

The imaginary fans in this passage are similar to the narrator of *A Fan's Notes*: well-educated professionals unsatisfied in their work and unable to maintain other relationships in a shallow and materialistic society. But this vision combines the legacy of the "mass-culture" critiques that inspired Jenkins' study with an ideal of a democratic community. These communities function by creating a fantasy-space separate from "economic advance" or competition. In *Convergence Culture*, this point becomes more refined: Jenkins argues that there is a democratic potential in certain cultural forms that is intrinsically linked to their distance from conventional political culture. As he puts it, "elections within massively multiplayer game worlds, parody news shows, Photoshopped images...also have political effects, representing hybrid spaces where we can lower the political stakes (and change the language of politics) enough so that we can master skills we need to be participants in the democratic process."⁴⁶ In other words, just as the "weekend-only world" of *Textual Poachers* fostered democratic values by offering an alternative space where individuals can interact without the competitive ethos of the real world, the democratic potentials he finds in *Convergence Culture* lie in the possibilities of playing at politics, of mastering the complexities of political discourse in environments where the risks and consequences are minimal.

In both these cases, the separation of a fantasy world from the real world enables participation, but only by carefully proscribing risk and conflict. In the ideal fan communities Jenkins describes, democratic values are fostered only by an insistence on consensus and the absolute exclusion of conflict. Any threat to consensus is either marginalized or expelled through “collective outrage,” which is to say, rhetorical violence. Similarly, the hybrid spaces that lower the stakes of politics do so only by ultimately renouncing any actual participation in political discourse. This renunciation of conflict is intended to serve a political purpose: the extension of community based on the incorporation of difference into consensus. In other words, the benefit of participatory and convergence culture is that it should create a more inclusive community simply by extending an offer of participation. Again, participation here is defined as the activity and intimacy of communication. We speak, our voices are heard and tolerated, and so we feel we belong. Eliminate conflict and intolerance, and belonging keeps everyone satisfied. In this regard, both the “weekend-only world” of textual poachers and the cultural forms of what Jenkins calls “digital democracy” are dependent on antagonism as a constitutive outside, since it is the exclusion of conflict that allows these spaces to cohere.

The paradoxical relationship to antagonism in Jenkins understanding of participation is characteristic of a particular kind of fantasy: namely, a liberal ideal of politics. Both the fan communities in *Textual Poachers* and the hybrid spaces of *Convergence Culture* represent the explicitly idealized, potential version of modern media culture that appears from time to time in Jenkins’ rhetoric. But in truth, his examples and discussion often illustrate something other than the harmony these scenarios suggest. In *Textual Poachers*, for instance, participatory culture is said to be “rife with feuds and personality conflicts.”⁴⁷ Similarly, convergence culture is still said to be marked by “old-style politics” that “pump up the ‘negatives’ of a rival candidate.”⁴⁸ As he puts it, “those of us who care about the future of participatory culture as a mechanism for promoting diversity and enabling democracy do the world no favor if we ignore the ways that our current culture falls far short of these goals.”⁴⁹ In many ways, then, Jenkins is attentive to these failures. And yet, his mechanistic understanding of participation still falls into a trap that haunts the liberal understanding of politics as an institution based on consensus. As Chantal Mouffe discusses in her book *On the Political*, this trap is, precisely, the persistence of antagonism that was evident in the “collective outrage” at “noncommunal behavior” in *Textual Poachers*.⁵⁰ Antagonism, she argues, is not a problem to be overcome or eliminated through consensus, but is instead an inevitable result of pluralism. It cannot be eradicated by the construction of a political mechanism because genuinely political relations only in fact emerge over points of contestation between opposing sides whose viewpoints and demands cannot be reconciled rationally. Consequently, efforts to eliminate antagonism altogether end up inciting the very violence they were intended to suppress. So, instead of calling for participatory mechanisms designed to eliminate antagonism and construct consensus, Mouffe advocates for what she calls “agonistic” participation, which she defines as an oppositional relation “where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents.”⁵¹

Fantasy football, of course, is a participatory culture that, instead of bracketing conflict, encourages its participants to compete directly against one another. In this regard, not only does fantasy football satisfy many of the requirements for agonistic participation that Mouffe describes, but it also demonstrates that conflict can be a basis for the formation of communities. Just as there is no rational solution to the “conflict” between the Washington Redskins and the Dallas Cowboys, fantasy opponents have neither desire nor capacity to reconcile their differences with other owners to the satisfaction of all parties. There are winners and losers, and fantasy football transforms the

vicarious competition of the physical game into a direct competition among fans. The importance of community to fantasy has been well documented in both the scholarly and popular press, and is the premise of the FX sitcom *The League*, about a group whose friendship is based on fantasy competition.⁵² A consistent trope in these representations of fantasy community is the notorious jocular intensity of the competition, and its ability to incite conflict.⁵³

The intensity of the agonistic relationships that fantasy football encourages has been an essential part of the game's repackaging as a commodity and incorporation by established forms of spectacle. The NFL's media and marketing strategy over the last 10 years is part of a broader rhetorical tendency to conceive of fantasy football as increasing the intensity of a fan's connections with the game.⁵⁴ The figure of the hyper-passionate fan is central to the marketing of fantasy football. Where Exley saw his emotional response to a Giant's loss as a symptom of his degradation, the NFL now promises that kind of emotional intensity as part of the new experience of the game available through participation in fantasy football. The feelings of alienation and passivity that Jenkins suggested participation alleviates are central to the imagination of the experience. In a series of advertisements dating back to 2007, for example, the NFL has extended a sympathetic offer of redemption to fantasy football owners whose seasons have not gone quite as well as planned. The advertisements promoted a "second chance" fantasy competition, in which users could go to NFL.com and enroll in a new, mid-season competition and, ostensibly, forget about the disappointment of their original fantasy season. All of the advertising in this campaign relies on the pop hit "Bad Day," by Daniel Powter.⁵⁵ The piano-driven melody of the song reinforces the sympathetic message of its lyrics. The commercial actually samples the song's saccharine chorus, fusing the 2nd, full-length refrain with the last line of the song, which of course is a repetition of the chorus's first line, into a totally artificial but more self contained unit:

You had a bad day, you're taking one down
You sing a sad song just to turn it around
You say you don't know, you tell me don't lie
You work on a smile and you go for a ride
You had a bad day, the camera don't lie
You're coming back down and you really don't mind
You had a bad day
You had a bad day⁵⁶

The NFL's advertising ironically pairs this inspirational message with montages of football fans—all of whom are heavily decked out in official team gear and surrounded by official team merchandise—experiencing varying degrees of suffering and frustration.

These NFL.com advertisements showcase intensity, ironically packaging the pathological image Jenkins critiqued in *Textual Poachers* as an attraction. They also figure community as part of this attraction, but make clear that this community is formed from highly ambivalent interpersonal relationships that are based on competition. In the initial ad, a series of male fans mope and look distressed, but are largely accompanied by friends who wear the gear of rival franchises and look on with awkward expressions of sympathy and ironic condescension. The second "Bad Day" ad, which aired in 2008, features a series of fans weeping, wailing or gnashing their teeth in dismay over the fate of their fantasy teams. Some of these fans are in groups, watching games together on television. Others are alone, and are pictured in private moments: a man slowly bangs his head against the wall of his shower, a woman weeps in her car. Captions fade in over these images of disappointment,

indicating first the name of the inconsolable fan's fantasy team and then, after a slight delay which gives each image the rhythm of punch line, the losing record of their team. These names are generally puns related to specific players or franchises, and are correlated to the copious amounts of team merchandise and apparel, from sweat-shirts to shower curtains, that dominate the *mise-en-scène*: Romolicious, Behind the Steel Curtain, House of Cards. Both advertisements end with an invitation for fans who "thought their fantasy seasons [were] over to go to NFL.com" to play again. Here, both of the ads also feature an image of the NFL shield logo, which beats twice, like a heart.

The ironic treatment of fantasy football players in these advertisements echoes the ambivalence of *A Fan's Notes*. The ads simultaneously mock the mania that Exley's narrator experiences and promote the fervor on display as a critical part of the attraction of their game. The captions are potential occasions for laughter or other more venal responses to the fans and their respective objects of desire. "Romolicious," for example, is a blonde, female Dallas Cowboys fan who sits in a car, mascara tears running down her cheeks. Her worship of the Cowboys' star quarterback might inspire sarcasm, mockery or schadenfreude in fans that are less sympathetic to the controversial Cowboys. This ambivalence does nothing to hurt the appeal of the NFL's advertisement. Instead, "Romolicious" indicates the texture of the affective culture of fantasy sports. The name indicates a synthesis of fan desire. "Romolicious" is, after all, a lover of Tony Romo even more than just the Cowboys. Her passion is at once mocked and pathologized. But it is also presented as a desirable dimension of the fantasy experience.⁵⁷

The spectacular intensity on display in these advertisements is linked to the participatory culture of fantasy football. Anecdotally, I can tell you that the advertisements are not entirely inaccurate in their representation of fantasy football's affective power. Fantasy football can be an intensely frustrating experience. "Owners" can agonize over which players to sit or start, only to rue their decision when the player they started performs poorly, while the benched star has a great game. As any unfortunate gambler can attest, the effect can be maddening. As one *New York Times* story put it, losing in fantasy competition can leave fans with the feeling that they have "no one to skewer except [themselves]."⁵⁸ The "Bad Day" advertisements illustrate this masochistic dimension. The weeping fans are not only frustrated with the performances of their teams; they also berate themselves for the decisions they have made that have brought them to this point. This frustration is, of course, a product of their inability to really participate or control the events of the game. The *Times* story is mistaken however, in its suggestion that this frustration is purely masochistic. The frustration of defeat can also often be re-directed at the athletes, who can, as ever, be blamed for their virtual performances. This ambivalence challenges the notion that alienation can be overcome through a mechanism of participation.

In the "Bad Day" commercials, the NFL tries to have its fans both ways, as both fantasy participants and team supporters. The joking names in the second NFL.com advertisement are representation of a common fantasy sports tradition, in which owners name their teams with an eye towards either amusing their league-mates or "talking smack" to their opponents. This is a trend that has become particularly important online, where names are a critical part of the owner's public avatar-identity.⁵⁹ In this case, however, the correlation between the team names and the official NFL team merchandise elides the difference between fantasy and conventional fandom. This elision is a savvy strategy on the part of the NFL, which recognizes that fantasy owners and team fans are overlapping but distinct subjects. Team brands (and merchandise) remain an essential part of the league's business. Die-hard team loyalty is the basis of season-ticket sales, which are a major source of revenue. The league's owners have a commitment to maintaining these brand distinctions and

developing fan bases that return, year after year, to support them emotionally and financially. In these commercials, the NFL seeks to transfer this affective model to a new form of fan behavior calibrated more precisely for media audiences. Notably, none of the fans depicted are watching games in person. Mediation is implied in the distance of the fans from the event, in the representation of acts of televisual spectatorship, and in the inclusion of the jovial fantasy team names. By combining this mediation with a representational conflation of fantasy and conventional fandom, the advertisements figure a new form of fandom. The affective formations that characterized one form of relationship to spectacle—team loyalty—become the model for new behavior.

The ambivalent fandom on display in these ads is central to the affective appeal of sport, which includes the sublimation of antagonism and the excitement of a broad range of emotional intensities. It is on the basis of this appeal that fantasy football can be considered “agonistic”: fantasy competitions stage genuinely irreconcilable conflicts without recourse to physical violence, and only work because everyone agrees to play by the rules. If, as Jenkins argues, fantasy spaces are useful because they lower the stakes of participation, then the agonistic structure of football in general and fantasy competition in particular could be considered beneficial, in civic terms, since it allows individuals and groups to confront each other in passionate winner-take-all conflicts that cannot be reconciled rationally. Such occasions accustom fans to live without consensus. The ambivalence of sport’s cultural niche is critical in this regard: it is simultaneously meaningful and meaningless, frivolous and intense. The “Bad Day” song expresses this ambivalence perfectly. “You had a bad day” means that you performed poorly and suffered defeat, but also that it is only one day, and that suffering is part of the game.⁶⁰

However, Mouffe calls for agonism as a means of channeling people’s fantasies into political relations that stage genuinely hegemonic confrontations capable of transforming relations of power.⁶¹ In contrast, as the “Bad Day” advertisements demonstrate very well, the efforts of pre-existing forms of spectacle to incorporate fantasy sports are an attempt to channel the intensity of participation into familiar commercial relationships. Furthermore, the commodity-fetishistic structure of fantasy participation is oriented towards stasis. The fantasy ownership of athletes (who were already of course commodities) includes the feeling of a privileged personal relationship that is not unlike the one Exley had with Gifford. This intensity is critical to the way in which fantasy participation encourages an investment in the league as a whole.⁶² The passion that was traditionally devoted to a special team or player and the intimacy that was perhaps developed through familial, regional, or other historical affiliations (such as attending school together), is made more available and more fungible through this alternative form of participation. Like the RedZone network, fantasy participation fragments investment and attention in exchange for access to a purer form of competition. This competition—both as spectacle and as participatory culture—de-emphasizes the traditional ideology of sports fandom—namely, team loyalty—and directs attention towards a structure that manages confrontation by holding itself apart: the League.

As in Jenkins’ fan communities, the FX show *The League*, and Mouffe’s discussion of liberal pluralism, however, antagonism not only persists but is returned with interest by the diffusive structure of fantasy football, which disperses affective investment across the league and figures competition in intensely personal terms. This exacerbation of antagonism is due to the fact that the other constitutive element to Mouffe’s agonistic structures, collective identification, is absent from fantasy football.⁶³ Fantasy football is, in this regard, intensely individualistic.⁶⁴ Fans relate to players as individuals, and compete with each other individually. Group identification is de-emphasized,

except on the level of the league, an organization of participating units locked in playful competition. This confederation confuses the oppositional categories necessary, according to Mouffe, for properly political relations: our friends are also our enemies and the “we/they” relationships that emerge are problematic. The “we” of the league as a group has no external “they” to confront, and the collective identity of the competing teams is based only on fantasy.

Fantasy participation sanctions antagonism between individuals, but expresses that antagonism only in terms of abstract competition. This leaves a great deal of ambiguity. The confused intensity of the associations promoted by fantasy football is evident in the discourse on the game. ESPN columnist Bill Simmons expresses this confusing intimacy of fantasy football ownership very well in a 2007 column on former New York Giants running back Tiki Barber, where he writes:

I've never had Tiki on my team, but everyone who has him raves about the experience afterward. You know what he's like? Ever had lunch with someone who ordered a Reuben? You think to yourself, “Grilled rye bread, butter, mustard, Swiss cheese, greasy corned beef—that’s terrible for me, I’m not getting that.”” And then you watch your buddy happily mauling the Reuben and you want to jam a fork in his eye and steal it from him. That’s Tiki Barber. He’s the Reuben of running backs (no offense to Reuben Droughns).⁶⁵

In this passage, Simmons represses the hostility and jealousy he feels towards his “buddy”—a deliberately ambiguous term that captures the combination of intimacy and callous indifference manifested in the imagery of this passage as a whole. This hostility re-emerges, however, in the imaginary moment when he feels the urge to maul fantasy owners that express their appreciation for Tiki Barber’s performances. The aggression he feels is evidence of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of fantasy relationships more broadly, where friends are competitors, and where fans feel a strangely intimate connection with the star athletes they “own.” But the fetishistic equation of Barber and the Reuben sandwich also suggests that this ambivalence does not entirely originate from fantasy sports. There is a latent sense of competition and aggression that was already haunting Simmons’ social world that is in no way banished from the ideal fan community the columnist rhetorically constructs through his columns.⁶⁶

The community of fans that has developed around Simmons, who owes his career to the efforts by culture industries to appropriate fan culture, is a far cry from what Jenkins’ had in mind in *Textual Poachers*. There is very little that was marginal about sports fans to begin with, and the fetishism, envy, and hostility that are evident in Simmons’ discussion are intensified and stimulated by participation. The persistence of antagonism in fantasy football culture recalls both Mouffe’s argument about political ontology and *A Fan’s Notes’* point about the fundamental role of fantasy in constituting the social. Exley uses spectator sports to articulate the problem of alienation. The real value of Exley’s metonym is that it allows him to acknowledge that alienation does not originate in the commodity or the spectacle while still pointing out the power of these structures to place us in relationships that knit us together by exacerbating our separation. This is a point that, as I have tried to show, remains relevant in the era of convergence culture.

But what *A Fan’s Notes* also suggests is that though competition is a flexible and productive means of figuring social interaction, neither this nor any other model can ever totally fix the ambiguity of social relations. The confusing nature of fantasy is also the basis on which seemingly fixed or stable

relationships can suddenly shift and transform. Fantasy permits complex and ambivalent emotional interactions like the passive aggressive encounters staged by *A Fan's Notes*, in which ideological positioning is neither voided nor rendered inoperative, but is instead ironically manipulated. The emotional complexity of Exley's fandom demonstrates that participation cannot be reduced to a mechanism of activity and expression. Participation depends upon a deeper structure of fantasy that permits ambivalence and, along with it, the nuance and texture that defines human relationships. This includes the feeling of belonging to something of which you are not a part, like a football team, as well as the feeling of control over something, like a fantasy team, that is ultimately indifferent to your machinations. *A Fan's Notes* thus reminds us that, even as we take seriously the material power of popular formations to develop political relations, it is important to consider the less tangible role of fantasy.

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Notes

¹ Bob Harris and Emil Kadlec, "A Nod (And a Wink) To the Founders of Fantasy Football", <http://fspnet.com/wink.pdf>, p. 10.

² Frederick Exley, *A Fan's Notes* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 8. For a discussion of fandom and its connection to Henri Lefebvre's notion of "everyday life," see Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Outta This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 148-150

⁴ Exley, 385.

⁵ This hit in a November 7th 1960 game between the Giants and the Philadelphia Eagles, which knocked Gifford out of football for 18 months, was well documented at the time. Gifford's tremendous stardom and Bednarik's notorious posing over Gifford's seemingly lifeless body, which was captured by sideline photographers have contributed to the incident's notoriety. As the narrator points out, this hit marked the beginning of the end of the actual Frank Gifford's career.

⁶ "When I looked into the Negro's eyes, I saw that he was asking *why?* He had heard the terrifying, the unfathomable loathing in my voice; and as intelligent Negroes understand he sensed that that loathing had nothing to do with him or his people, that it rose up from deep disappointments within myself—from my own defeats and degradations and humiliations." Exley, *A Fan's Notes*, 354.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 357

⁸ Exley, 8.

⁹ This is clearest in chapters 6, "Who? Who? Who Is Mr. Blue," which details a long acquaintance with a man who turns out to have been a complete stranger, and 7, "Lament for a Conspiracy," which documents the dissolution of one of Exley's longest friendships and ends with his bigoted violence and self-identification as a fan.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Meghan Sutherland's re-reading of Guy Debord in a recent essay clarifies the problem Exley points to here when she argues that "the reproductive 'accumulation' of spectacles only represents such a threat to Debord because it coincides with the originary production of a social existence that *likewise* depends upon the aesthetic relations of spectacle—the very heart of society's real

unreality’—for its material existence.” See Meghan Sutherland, “Populism and Spectacle,” *Cultural Studies* (26: 2-3): 342.

¹² Jonathan Yardley, *Misfit: The Strange Life of Frederic Exley* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc, 2001), 134.

¹³ For more on this point see the “The Concept of Irony” in Paul De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 163-184.

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins has played a critical role in this paradigm shift but the conversation predates his work. Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1984), for example, focused on the habits of female readers of romance novels and argued that they were capable of constructing counter-patriarchal readings from those texts. Radway’s work drew on a larger history of “reader response criticism” and other theorists of “interpretive communities,” such as Stanley Fish. See his *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). In the context of television studies, both Ien Ang’s and Katz and Liebes’ studies of *Dallas* viewers examined how audiences could interpret the program in ways that were relevant to their own cultural context. See Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. (London: Methuen, 1985) and also Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley’s *Everyday Television Nationwide* (London: British Film Institute, 1978) looked closely at the actual habits of actual viewers. See also *The Audience Studies Reader*, eds. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997); Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). The emphasis on popular culture as a site of struggle is evident in recent Television Studies anthologies such as *Television: The Critical Review*, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, eds. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) and *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, eds. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), as well as in other cultural studies texts such as Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979) and Aniko Boddroghkozy’s *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and Youth Rebellion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001). *Hop on Pop*, in particular, emphasizes a sense of intimacy between consumers and popular culture, draws connections between academics and argues that “understanding the particularity of popular culture alters our glib assumptions that it is formulaic, that it always repeats the same messages, that it always tells the same stories and serves the same interests. Looking and concrete moments of production, circulation and reception helps us to understand the range of possibilities within popular genres and the complex struggles that surround any cultural text.” (Jenkins et al, p. 15)

¹⁵ See *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007); *Theorizing Fandom*, eds. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (New York: Hampton, 1998); Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Suzanne Scott, *Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation* (PhD Dissertation, USC, 2011); Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 10.

¹⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 257. Roberts was, in 2006, CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi, a market research firm.

¹⁸ Harris and Kadlec, 10.

¹⁹ This process was neither inevitable nor technologically determined, but the spread of Internet technology has played a critical role in the expansion of fantasy football participation beyond a hardcore niche and the incorporation of this participation into pre-existing forms of spectacle. See: Michael Serazio, "Virtual Sports Consumption, Authentic Brotherhood: The Reality of Fantasy Football" in *Sports Mania: Essays on Fandom and the Media in the 21st Century*, eds. Lawrence W. Hugenberg, Paul M. Haridakis and Adam C. Earnhardt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 229; Ben Shields, "The Reality of Fantasy Sports: Transforming Fan Culture in the Digital Age," Unpublished Dissertation, Northwestern University. 2008, 57-77; John Ward, "Living in a world of make-believe: The internet has played a huge part in the spread of fantasy sports, says Mark Wallace," *Financial Times* (London UK) June 1, 2002, p. 20; Jon Weinbach, "Wall Street's \$1 Million Fantasy League; Top Financiers compete to Build the Best Pretend NFL Team; Trash Talk on the Chat Board." *Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2008: W. 1.

²⁰ Michael Serazio, "Virtual Sports Consumption, Authentic Brotherhood: The Reality of Fantasy Football," in *Sports Mania: Essays on Fandom and the Media in the 21st Century*, 229.

²¹ Mark St. Amant, *Committed: Confessions of a Fantasy Football Junkie* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 133. Also cited in Shields, "The Reality of Fantasy Sports: Transforming Fan Culture in the Digital Age," 104.

²² See, again *Theorizing Fandom; Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, and Scott, *Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation*.

²³ See Chris Anderson, "The Long Tail," *Wired* (October 2004) [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html?pg=3&topic=tail&topic_set](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html?pg=3&topic=tail&topic_set;); Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007); *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture: Media Education in the 21st Century*, <http://projectnml.org>, by Henry Jenkins, with Katherine Clinton, Ravi Purushatna, Alice Robison, and Margaret Weigl; Dan Gilmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People* (New York: O'Reilly, 2004).

²⁴ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 287.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Evidence of this debate over psychoanalysis, the legacy of Marxism, and the activity of audiences can be found in the anthology *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*, eds. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger, 1989). See, in particular, the first two essays, which stage a "Political Economy vs. Cultural Studies" debate between Mike Budd and Clay Steinman, on the one hand, and John Fiske, on the other. Budd and Steinman's essay, "Television, Cultural Studies, and the 'Blind Spot' Debate in Critical Communications research, critiques Fiske as an American interpreter of cultural studies and promoter of a naïve view of popular audiences. Fiske's rejoinder to Budd and Steinman insists upon the notion that the Frankfurt school and "post-Althusserian ideological theory" figures the people as "in some way, cultural dupes." (22) Fiske's work, particularly in *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), which argued that popular pleasure could be powerful and that the "characteristics of [television's] texts and of its modes of reception enable an active participation in that sense-making process which we call 'culture.'" (19),

Understanding Popular Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) and “The Cultural Economy of Fandom” (in *The Adoring Audience*, edited by Lisa Lewis. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991) all promoted the conception of popular audiences as “active participation.”

²⁸ John Fiske, “British Cultural Studies,” in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled. 2nd Edition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 292.

²⁹ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128. John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 52. See also Chapter 5 of *Television Culture*.

³⁰ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 282.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26

³² *Ibid.*, 162.

³³ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*. Jenkins’ de-emphasis of the “resistant” nature of fandom and fan interpretation is typical of contemporary fan and cultural studies.

³⁴ *Ibid.* The first four chapters of *Convergence Culture*, “Spoiling Survivor,” “Buying into American Idol,” “Searching for the Origami Unicorn,” and “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars” develop Jenkins’ theory of “affective economics,” which is based increased intimacy and interactivity between fans and media industries.

³⁵ In “Encoding/Decoding,” Hall is careful to point out that “polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism,” *Culture, Media, Language*, 134. Jenkins does not discuss pluralism in *Convergence Culture* (though it is discussed briefly in the introduction to *Hop on Pop*, which he co-authored), but diversity of interpretation and expression are, for him, the basis of a democratic ontology that is manifested in the separate but related spheres of conventional politics and consumer capitalism. Jenkins clearly figures participation as the defining characteristic of democracy and, consequently, as a critical link between democracy and consumer capitalism at the end of *Convergence Culture*, where he suggests that “a politics of participation starts from the assumption that we have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities” (p. 260) and argues that “Consumers will be more powerful within convergence culture—but only if they recognize and use that power as both consumers and citizens, as full participants in our culture.” (p. 270). Jenkins’ advocacy for media literacy, which calls for a right to expression, is also based on this democratic conception of participation.

³⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, No Date), 25.

³⁷ See, again, *Hop on Pop* and Suzanne Scott, *Revenge of the Fanboy*. Scott’s dissertation, in particular, concentrates on the ambivalent politics that have emerged around fans in convergence culture in a manner that is relevant to my discussion of fantasy football.

³⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005).

³⁹ It is this problem that Guy Debord calls our attention in *The Society of the Spectacle* and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

⁴⁰ This is particularly perverse in the case of college fantasy sports,” where players “own” athletes whose ability to enter the labor market is restricted. This connection to billionaire owners is also implicit in a *Wall Street Journal* article from 2008. See Jon Weinbach, “Wall Street’s \$1 Million Fantasy League; Top Financiers compete to Build the Best Pretend NFL Team; Trash Talk on the Chat Board.” *Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2008: W. 1. The ownership model is based on the manner in which competitors select their fantasy teams. There are two major styles of team selection: draft and auction. In the first, fantasy owners select players by turn, in the style of the well-publicized professional league drafts that take place during the offseason. In auction leagues, fantasy owners bid for the right to own a particular player, so that certain players will cost more than others. In this

way, auction based leagues force fantasy owners to decide the nature of their market. Some auction leagues begin with a completely open market; others assign minimum dollar values to certain players based upon their expected level of performance. Some even install a “salary cap” to prevent the wealthiest players from accumulating all the talent and skewing the competitive balance of a league. Some auction leagues require fantasy owners to bid actual money for players, which dramatically transforms the risk-reward calculations of competitors, while others require only a standard buy-in and allow owners to bid with virtual bucks.

⁴¹ As Michael Serazio puts it, “In fantasy football, allegiances to the real teams and the other fans of the real team are frayed from the start.” See “Virtual Sports Consumption, Authentic Brotherhood: The Reality of Fantasy Football,” 229.

⁴² See Harris and Kadlec, 10; Dennis Hevesi, “Bindlestiffs and Obsession: Fantasy Baseball in Albany,” *The New York Times*, Tuesday, September 22, 1987, Section B, p. 1, Column 5; Thomas Jr, Robert McG. “Rotisseries League,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1984, Section C, p. 2, Column 3; Kevin Delaney, “Fantasy Sports Drafts AOL, Electronic Arts,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sep 9, 2004. B. 1.

⁴³ The NFL’s contract with broadcasters traditionally mandated that games of local teams be aired exclusively and without direct competition from other NFL games during that time slot. This often has really annoying effects, for example when FOX is CBS is forced to stop showing the finale of a close game because it interferes with the beginning of a local matchup.

⁴⁴ For discussions of *Star Trek*’s utopian politics and the fan communities that form around the show, see Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*; *Science Fiction Audiences Doctor Who, Star Trek, and Their Fans* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 282.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 220.

⁴⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 282.

⁴⁸ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 220.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 293

⁵⁰ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 282.

⁵¹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20.

⁵² See Serazio, “Virtual Sports Consumption, Authentic Brotherhood.”

⁵³ Accounts of the GOPPPL mention the desperation of potential owners who wanted to join, and describe the intensity of the competition as resulting in “divorces” between long-term friends. See Harris and Kadlec, 10. In 2007, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on the Web site “fantasydispute.com,” run by Bill Green, which offered to arbitrate fantasy disputes. The article also cites Matthew Berry, “ESPN’s senior director of fantasy sports and author of the Web site called *The Talented Mr. Roto*, who claims to know “a man who gave his brother a black eye and a concussion over a trade that he felt ripped him off” Adam Thompson, “In Fantasy Land, Sports Judges Hear Imaginary Cases” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2007. This culture draws on the “trash” or “smack” talk that famously takes place on the field or court. There is, of course, a gendered dimension to this that speaks to the difference between sports fandom and the fan communities that Jenkins concentrates on in *Textual Poachers*. Masculinity, in this context, is defined through the ability to not only handle but also embrace conflict and confrontation, and inflicting suffering is part of masculine privilege. Fantasy participation remains a predominantly male activity, though are some indications that female participation in is increasing. According to *The New York Times*, the percentage of fantasy sports participants who were female climbed from under 3% to 15% from 2000-2007. See Abigail Lorge, “In Fantasy Leagues, the Field is Level,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 2007, Section D, Column 6. *The League* also features a female character who competes with men. For

more on sport and gender see Ava Rose and James Friedman, "Television Sports as Mas(s)culine Cult of Distraction," in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Garry Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Serazio, "Virtual Sports Consumption, Authentic Brotherhood." Or, for a somewhat kitschier take that makes a connection between sport masculinity, and cruelty, see Don Ayteo, *Blood & Guts, Violence in Sports* (London: Paddington Press, 1979).

⁵⁴ In a 1984 *New York Times* interview, for example, *Fantasy Football Digest* co-author Tim Kane (who obviously had a vested interest in promoting the game) characterized the "extra dimension of suspense and excitement" that fantasy brings to football as so thrillingly addictive that he would "never go through another National Football League season again without playing this game." Robert McG Thomas Jr., "Sports World Specials: A Team of One's Own," *The New York Times*, August 20, 1984, C2, Column 3.

⁵⁵ The song would probably have been familiar to many listeners; it was nominated for a Grammy in 2007, and the U.S. TV program *American Idol* used the song (in a similar fashion to the NFL) over a montage of eliminated contestants in its fifth season.

⁵⁶ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/bad-day-lyrics-daniel-powter.html>.

⁵⁷ And a not-atypical one: fantasy football is often figured in popular discourse as creating intensely personal bonds between owners and their athletes. For example, another NFL fantasy football league commercial featured a man who, while staring at his attractive wife in a bikini, was in fact fantasizing about Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Petersen.

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_14IC7H0RnA) Similarly, a recent column by Bill Simmons, also of ESPN, was devoted to exploring the fantasy meaningfulness of LaDainian Tomlinson, and he frequently jokes in his columns about that passion or antipathy that arises from fantasy "ownership." Bill Simmons, "The Pretend Legend of Ladainian Tomlinson." http://www.grantland.com/story/_/id/8197963/the-pretend-legend-ladainian-tomlinson. Retrieved August 7, 2012.

⁵⁸ Thomas Jr, Robert McG. "Rotisseries League," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1984, Section C, p. 2, Column 3.

⁵⁹ In many leagues, there is a kind of implicit competition to try and have the cleverest or most biting moniker.

⁶⁰ I wish to thank Cecilia Sayad for calling my attention to this aspect of sports fandom.

⁶¹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 12.

⁶² FX's *The League* is appropriately named. The title comes from a slang moniker for the NFL that was initially coined by NFL athletes themselves, and has since spread to common usage.

⁶³ Mouffe, 19-21.

⁶⁴ According to Mouffe, an emphasis on the individual is one of the key defining tropes of liberal thought. Mouffe, 10.

⁶⁵ Simmons, Bill. "The Sports Guy: Glossary." *ESPN.com*. August 14, 2007.

<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=simmons/glossary>. Retrieved 6/11/2011

⁶⁶ This sense of community is probably most clearly indicated by Simmons' frequent and notoriously lengthy "mailbag" columns, where he quotes e-mails from his readers and responds to their comments and questions. These columns usually end with a signature tagline, "Yup, these are my readers." See, for example: http://www.grantland.com/story/_/id/8266195/olympic-mega-bag-part-2. Retrieved August 22, 2012.