

# Researchers studying fantasy baseball and 'competitive fandom'

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Sixteen million adults played fantasy sports in 2006, spending an average of just under \$500 a year and generating an economic impact of more than \$1 billion a year, according to the Fantasy Sports Industry Trade Association. The majority of those first began playing the game offline and spend about three hours per week managing their teams, according to the trade group.

Erica and Rich Halverson aren't just spending the summer running their fantasy baseball teams. The University of Wisconsin-Madison assistant professors are also studying fantasy leagues, including their own, in a new research project aimed at understanding how both expert and novice players approach the game and what it can teach us about how people learn.

Fantasy baseball is the ultimate model for a game type Erica Halverson, an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and

part of the GLS program, calls "competitive fandom," a rapidly growing area of interactive participation for people who are passionate experts in a given subject or field. "You name it and there's a fantasy version of it," she says.

There's already Fantasy Congress, where players earn points for how many bills their team of legislators introduce and pass; Fantasy Survivor, a companion to the hit TV reality show; and Hollywood Stock Exchange, where fans trade "securities" to predict how well a movie will do at the box office or how an individual actor's career will fare.

But sports reign supreme in this genre and fantasy baseball does it best, Erica Halverson says. And the game - where players have access to huge amounts of data and the ability to manipulate those numbers with relative ease - shows some parallels with other fields, such as the stock market.

For the two UW-Madison professors, the research sprung from an absolute obsession and love for baseball and the time they've spent analyzing statistics on various Web sites as they manage fantasy teams made up of real Major League players.

Fantasy baseball was the obvious answer when they began looking for games that are not console-based that involve "lots and lots of learning," says Rich Halverson, an assistant professor in educational leadership and policy analysis and part of the UW-Madison's Games, Learning and Society research group in the School of Education.

"There's a lot of ways that people learn with new media that don't really have anything to do with console-based video games," he says. "People learn how to play the stock market, they learn how to find a mate, they learn how to negotiate in social spaces with sites like MySpace and Facebook."

The current version of fantasy sports games have emerged from a collision of new and old media. Players now rely on technology, such as the fantasy game sites operated by companies like Yahoo and ESPN, rather than poring over box scores in the newspaper.

It's an area ripe for study. Sixteen million adults played fantasy sports in 2006, spending an average of just under \$500 a year and generating an economic impact of more than \$1 billion a year, according to the Fantasy Sports Industry Trade Association. The majority of those first began playing the game offline and spend about three hours per week managing their teams, according to the trade group.

"Not only is it something we love, but this is a huge market of gaming that's going on where people are spending thousands and thousands of hours playing," Erica Halverson says. "As a research group, we're fundamentally interested in what people learn from gaming and what gaming has to offer education. This is sort of a subset of gaming that's a new avenue to explore."

The heart of the Halversons' research is their own fantasy league, a group of friends and superfans that has played together for six years and consider draft day equivalent to Christmas morning.

"In order for the game to feel powerful for people, you have to feel connected to the community of people that you play with," Erica Halverson says. "We know each other's idiosyncrasies."

One fellow league member admitted that "now when he does his lineup changes every week, he will look at who his opponent is not just to see who he's got on his team, but to know what that guy's tendencies are," she says.

The study will look at how three different fantasy baseball leagues

organize themselves, their rules for play, how they compete and how players feel about their play. Participants will also complete surveys that seek to get at where they rank on fandom and competitiveness.

Along with their own league, the pair's research includes a league made up of their colleagues from the Games, Learning and Society group, people who like to play computer-based games, but don't necessarily know a lot about baseball.

One player from that league asked during the fantasy draft, "what does the shortstop do?" At one point, she managed to move into first place in the league and had no idea why, the researchers say.

The third league is made up of mostly former minor league baseball players who are spread out all over the country. Their goal for play is to create a set of rules that mirror rule baseball as closely as possible.

Erica Halverson says the members of that league "spend tens of hours before the draft arguing over how much a should a single be worth" How much should a double be worth?"

The goal for the study is to include both novices and experts, find out their strategies for play and what they get out of the game. The differences between beginners and longtime players become apparent when discussing how they play, Erica Halverson says. "A novice would say 'Well, here's all my pitchers who've won 20 games so those must be my best pitchers, I'm going to choose from those,' " she says. "Where an expert would say 'Well, winning a baseball game as a pitcher is really dependent on a lot of other things ... so I'm going to group my pitchers based on their ratio of strikeouts-to -walks.'"

The research will feed into the larger work of the Games, Learning and Society research group, which has a digital literacy grant from the

MacArthur Foundation to help investigate how kids can learn through participation in new media environments, like the Internet and computer games. "We're trying to figure out how can we cast a net over something like fantasy baseball to figure out what kind of learning goes on here," Rich Halverson says. "What are the structures that orchestrate the learning? What are the outcomes?"

One initial finding: their baseball novice colleague reports participating in the fantasy league has caused her to become more of a fan of the game and listen to games on the radio.

"If you're thinking about this as a game structure that gives people the opportunity to become more invested in a given set of content, it's kind of a nice insight," Erica Halverson says. "You've hooked people in a way that maybe they're not hooked before."

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison

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