THE SPORTS MALL OF AMERICA: SPORTS AND THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION
OF THE CITIZEN-CONSUMER

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
August 2012

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate from a rhetorical perspective how contemporary sports both reflect and influence a preferred definition of democracy that has been narrowly conflated with consumption in the cultural imaginary. I argue that the relationship between fans and sports has become mediated by rituals of consumption in order to affirm a particular identity, similar to the ways that citizenship in America has become defined by one’s ability to consume under conditions of neoliberal capitalism. In this study, I examine how new sports stadiums are architecturally designed to attract upper income fans through the mobilization of spectacle and surveillance-based strategies such as Fan Code of Conducts. I also investigate the “sports gaming culture” that addresses advertising in sports video games and fantasy sports participation that both reinforce the burgeoning commercialism of sports while normalizing capitalism’s worldview. I also explore the area of licensed merchandise which is often used to seduce fans into consuming the sports brand by speaking the terms of consumer capitalism often naturalized in fan’s expectations in their engagement with sports. Finally, I address potential strategies of resistance that rely on a reassessment of the value of sports in American culture, predicated upon restoring citizens’ faith in public institutions that would simultaneously reclaim control of the sporting landscape from commercial entities exploiting them for profit.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my parents, Robert and Lee Ann Hillman, for the encouraging support through the often frustrating journey through graduate school and for always being optimistic that I could finish my doctoral degree. I would also like to extend a warm thank you to my girlfriend Abigail Flores for believing in my ability to complete all of this work and for showing patience and understanding as I spent many hours with my books, notes, and computers. I also want to thank my friends Matthew Lamb, John-Paul Staszel, Ryan Anderson, Bruce Lillie, Jacob Turner, Mark Flynn, David Morin, Jenny Armentrout, Franklin Yartey, Precious Yamaguchi, Chuck Debone, Matt Meier, Chris Medjesky, Brion White, Brian Krol, Christian Vukasovich, and Brian Bohn for helping me maintain my sanity all of these years and survive while doing it. I would also like to send a special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Michael Butterworth, for helping me personally and professionally through the dissertation process and for always sharing his professional insights with me. I also want to thank Dr. Clayton Rosati for his willingness to meet with me when he was both stressed and extremely busy and Dr. Joshua Atkinson for approving my fourth year of funding without which I would never have finished. I also want to thank Dr. David Tobar for serving as my Graduate Faculty Representative. If there is anyone I have forgotten, I apologize but as they say, “you know who you are.”
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CHAPTER 1: DEMOCRACY’S CRISIS AND THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN MANUFACTURING THE CITIZEN-CONSUMER

According to many academic, political, and social critics, democracy’s funeral has already been planned and paid for with little hope towards its recovery in any meaningful sense. One way to frame the issue is like this: what hope is there for the future of democracy if, alongside the wholesale dismantling of democratic freedoms such as free speech, the right to a free press, and privacy, Americans continue to believe that they are empowered in the “free market” as consumers?\(^1\) Public skepticism toward the government and society has been coupled with an astonishing faith in the market to coordinate the nation’s well-being and preserve its sense of freedom. The effects of capitalism within a deregulated market have intensified economic disparities which have positioned local, state, and federal governments as incompetent compared to private enterprise to provide for increasingly needed yet underfunded social services.\(^2\) If schools are faced with budget issues, for example, administrative logic is either to resort to more cuts or seek needed revenue elsewhere, often within the private sector.\(^3\) As a result, society becomes more dependent on the corporate state whose only obligation is to its shareholders in pursuing profit by any means. Meanwhile, democracy has failed in providing an inclusive and participatory political space allowing groups to debate about which actions best promote the common welfare in its redefinition as the ability to consume.\(^4\) Consumption, reshaped as the essence of liberty and democracy, promotes a more self-absorbed, narcissistic identity that privileges one’s pursuit of gratification and pleasure, in disregard and sometimes at the expense of the public welfare.\(^5\)
Sports are not exempt from the reconfiguration of citizen identity around consumption as they serve as a cultural ritual in which dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, and social class are expressed, naturalized, and reinforced as common sense. Sut Jhally argues that all societies require various rituals to celebrate their dominant values and that sports function as a key institution in this process in many of them. For example, the Super Bowl celebrates hypermasculinity and nationalism, while aligning itself with the virtue of consumption as naturally complimentary to the event itself. Furthermore, the increasing synergy between sports and advertising, at both the professional and amateur levels, have transformed sports into a commercial spectacle. Whether it is the sale of naming rights to sports stadiums and arenas, the commodification of certain athletic accomplishments (“That stolen base is sponsored by…”) or the use of sports-based video games as a viable advertising platform, this growing commercialization of sports has also transformed the way in which sports spectatorship is defined and practiced.

This is not to suggest that these trends have not been accompanied by some level of resistance; the sale of stadium naming rights, for instance, has been critiqued as trivializing the link between a stadium and the surrounding community that signifies crass commercial opportunism at its worst. As Josh Boyd argues, while sports have always contained elements of commercialism that fans tolerated, the “idyllic illusion” that gives them the feeling of escape is shattered by more intrusive and demanding forms of advertising and marketing. The typical response to these trends by fans is to complain about spiraling, out of control player salaries as the primary cause of these shifts. Yet, the growing commercialization of sport exploits their burgeoning popularity, facilitated by a more sophisticated and marketing-savvy “sports-media complex” that has forged a mutually exploitive and profitable relationship with advertisers and
marketers. As Ron Bishop states, “It seems that we are so busy being cynical about the players and complaining about their salaries that we leave ourselves wide open to a non-stop sales pitch.”12 Thus, despite the criticism regarding overpaid and “whiny” athletes, escalating ticket prices, and invasive advertising, many fans, unconsciously or perhaps willingly, participate in a more commercialized fan identity that, I will argue, coincides with larger cultural forces that are reconceptualizing citizen identity around consumption, rather than more substantive forms of political engagement.

The purpose of this dissertation is to outline how sports contribute to the rhetorical construction of citizen identity around consumption in three ways: (1) the construction of new sports stadiums as class discriminatory, consumer-oriented spaces, (2) the selling of ads in sports-based video games and the neoliberal, capitalist ethic found in fantasy sports, and (3) the merchandising of spectacle through the sports uniform itself to stimulate consumer demand. It should be noted that these three areas of focus are vaguely defined here and each carries within it many layers of complexity and contradictions that will be discussed in greater depth later on.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that sports are not solely responsible for the commercialized redefinition of democracy. Rather, they operate within a larger context of civic and political disengagement that encourages a more self-centered form of individualism defined by consumption in which public interest and welfare is pushed further toward the margins. The implications toward the future health and vitality of democratic practice are both chilling and ominous. As Benjamin Barber states, “The victory of consumers is not synonymous with the victory of citizens. McWorld can prevail and liberty can still lose.”13 While citizens may believe that choosing from a seemingly “unlimited” menu of consumer options is a vital aspect of freedom, the economic reality is that power is becoming more concentrated in the hands of a
privileged few who are more concerned with profit and control than nurturing democracy that matters. \textsuperscript{14} What will follow is a brief discussion of the state of democracy, from its ancient Greek origins to its practice in American society, emphasizing the narrowing of allowable forms of democratic expression leading up to and during World War I. The political climate of the country at that time served as a catalyst for the reformulation of democracy as consumption due to the expansion of corporate power, the rise of the spectacle, and many years later, the decline of the welfare state. Furthermore, I will examine in more detail the trajectory of my three areas of focus and how sports serve as a complicit cultural agent in the construction of the \textit{citizen-consumer} as a democratic ideal.

Democracy on Life Support

In \textit{Amusing Ourselves to Death}, Neil Postman argues that various cities have symbolized the American character and national imagination at different points in its history. \textsuperscript{15} While Boston once embodied the country’s revolutionary spirit and Chicago the energy and promise of industrialization, Las Vegas has emerged as the defining metaphor of our American ethos which values entertainment and worships celebrity culture. Political elections assume the character of show business, where politicians with the right image who understand (or their speech writers for that matter) the conventions of television and new media are more successful than those whose defining characteristic is something to say. \textsuperscript{16} Hollywood plays an influential role in generating credibility in appearances which were, “once linked to notions of self-respect, [but] gradually came to have less to do with character and reputation and more to do with simply looking good.” \textsuperscript{17} Postman traces these developments to television, which forced all forms of discourse, whether political, social, or educational, to adapt to the demands of the medium. \textsuperscript{18} Unlike
previous eras in American life when the written word was the dominant mode of expression which allowed more substantive discourse to thrive, the so-called “Age of Television”\textsuperscript{19} merely asks that information be entertaining and compelling. What counts as truth and knowledge are redefined; as dominant communicative media change, so does our epistemological relationship to the world and how we come to understand it. In the age of television, truth merely has to look (and/or I would add \textit{feel}) believable and sound credible. Postman laments that, “The result of all of this is that Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world.”\textsuperscript{20}

This is not an attempt to argue for the recovery of an “objective” form of truth since this term is loaded with class, racial, and gendered biases of what counts as objective. Rather, I argue for the recovery of a participatory and critical public sphere that values substantive argument, deliberation, and critical thinking as opposed to cheap emotional appeals and shallow yet somehow “convincing” justifications. However, all of this requires a healthy functioning media industry that resumes its commitment to informing the public on issues that are “democratically desirable.”\textsuperscript{21} Jürgen Habermas has been criticized by scholars for his fundamental idealism in his theorizations of the public sphere where inequities in political power could be overcome by privileging rationalism in public debate.\textsuperscript{22} Many conclude that this type of public sphere is utopian and undesirable and that Habermas elides consideration of social class and an understanding how it operates in late capitalism.\textsuperscript{23} Lincoln Dahlberg observes that Habermas’ elevation of rationality as a key foundation of functioning democratic discourse marginalizes specific issues particular to certain groups while naively expressing that imbalances in power can be suspended to foster more healthy forms of debate.\textsuperscript{24} While many of these critiques highlight some important omissions, Habermas is on point in seriously examining the role of the mass
media in manufacturing consensus and undermining critical debate in contemporary society. Even where he can reasonably regarded as unrealistic in his recommendations, Habermas rightly calls attention to the impoverished nature of democratic discourse in modern society. Today, the lack of critical attention often given to contemporary issues leaves power and domination unchecked, creating a more passive and acquiescent public in its wake.

Guy Debord offers a similar plea, claiming that society is dominated by spectacle where reality has given way to representation, distorting our relationship to the world and each other.\(^{25}\) It is a fantastical place where nobody feels as if they belong, a world that specializes in the “manufacture of alienation” and a space where social life is dominated by the colonizing effect of the commodity.\(^{26}\) As subjects of spectacular power, citizens become passive and politically disengaged, compelled merely to consume what they are sold, all in the name of an economic development that they are told must continue at all costs. As Debord emphasizes, individuals have lost the ability to verify truth because of a disparagement of history’s lessons and, as a result, cannot effectively critique and hold responsible those in power. He writes that the elimination of history is, “convenient indeed for those in business” and that “the end of history gives power a welcome break.”\(^{27}\) Christopher Lasch agrees, arguing that our “culture of narcissism” has no concern for either the past or the future, but rather demands that we live only for ourselves hedonistically within an eternal present.\(^{28}\) Returning to Debord, citizens are kept ignorant of the real conditions of their existence and the causes of their alienation. Instead, people are seduced and narcotized by a world of commodities that have penetrated into every level of our lives, things that promise freedom and happiness but only deliver something much, much less.\(^{29}\)
Debord’s warning about cultural and political passivity as individuals eschew the role of the citizen for that of the consumer can reasonably account for what Neil Gabler describes as the blurring of life and entertainment in politics. He charts America’s contemporary obsession with entertainment and celebrity in the United States to the nation’s need to carve out a unique cultural identity apart from the intellectual stuffiness and aristocratic pretentiousness of England in the early years of its development. However, Americans’ seeming inability to discern the difference between life and entertainment explains why celebrities who want to be politicians virtually waltz into political office, using their status and familiarity to generate voter support rather than a clearly articulated political platform. In fact, when celebrity-politicians run for an elected position, they are afforded a different level of media treatment than more unfamiliar opponents, as was the case with Arnold Schwarzenegger when he campaigned for governor of California. News sources not traditionally interested in the whole business of politics and elections, such as tabloid fare like *Entertainment Tonight*, provided the former “Terminator” with uncritical and favorable coverage that competing candidates did not receive. Consequently, the media rarely pressed Schwarzenegger to explain his political policy or his stance on social, economic, and political issues. Thus, according to William Babcock and Virginia Whitehouse, “the majority of voters in the state seemed unconcerned that Schwarzenegger did not know or did not deal with issues of public policy. Issues were simply nonissues to Schwarzenegger supporters because his supporters ‘knew’ who he was.”

As Jean Baudrillard argues, we have indeed entered the age of hyperreality where the difference between the real and the copy (the simulation) no longer exists; the copy can be as “real” as the real itself. If Schwarzenegger the movie actor could eliminate murderous, blood-thirsty aliens (Predator) yet have the sensibility to be great with kids (Kindergarten Cop), voters
assumed that he was able to handle California’s very real budgetary problems. It is true that
celebrity politicians are seen as subverting the political status quo by an electorate who
reasonably conclude that “career politicians” do not operate according to their better interests. 35
Yet, their appeal as candidates, owing more to image and familiarity rather than political
convictions, is quite telling of our civic apathy and disengagement that Debord warned about. It
is a residual effect of the dominance of the commodity, the spectacle, and its narcotizing effects
in ever more intimate facets of existence within a society of image-making and commodification.
However, this harrowing depiction of democracy in relation to celebrity politicians who benefit
citizen’s political frustrations, while not justifiable in the abstract, may be reasonable in relation
to citizens’ perceived lack of agency. While this is not an attempt to excuse political
disengagement, it is important to remember how little media culture encourages and provides a
more informed and critically engaged public.

In the absence of more productive forms of democratic deliberation in which issues are
examined and discussed with the complexity they demand, society is left instead with public
discourse assuming the alienating form of public opinion polls.36 As Matthew McAllister
suggests, if the media truly do serve democracy, then they have to welcome diversified points of
view, something impossible to accomplish by polling.37 Furthermore, the profit-driven nature of
the mass media in an age of concentrated ownership “provides few incentives to serve
democracy. That is not the primary purpose of the media. The media are designed for another
goal: to make money.”38 The deregulatory environment of the Reagan era and the subsequent
Telecommunications Act of 1996 allowed company mergers that previously would not have been
allowed under antitrust law, contributing to the growth of media conglomerates more willing to
sell out to commercialism and advertising. Likewise, there was less of an incentive to provide
media content that assumed anything other than a “middle-of-the-road orientation” that would not alienate potential consumers. The consequence is that the media do not allow the diverse range of opinion necessary for a healthy, functioning public sphere.

Sharon Crowley makes a compelling argument that if dissent is not wanted or desired, then democratic participation loses its appeal as consensus becomes the overriding goal. As Chantal Mouffe emphasizes, we should welcome democratic agonism between “friendly enemies” who recognize the right of those with whom we disagree to have the right to articulate how our “common symbolic space” should be organized. When this is not the case, a public mentality of disengagement and apathy assumes shape and the suppression of dissent engenders more long-lasting and dangerous conflict to fester in a climate of intolerance. Instead of issues being analyzed with the kind of depth that leads to better decision making, public opinion becomes both an abstraction and fiction built on ill-informed premises. The challenge is to recover a more politically engaged public sphere in a technologically-mediated and narcotizing consumer society that has granted more power to large corporations who do not benefit a public able to think beyond the terms dominant economic actors choose.

The Democratic Disease

Of course, it is important to remember that democracy has always fallen short in practice of what it purports itself to be in theory. As a form of political organization that originated in Ancient Greek society, its early incarnations were regarded with suspicion by elites who sensed that it would give those incapable of self-government too much control. In *The Republic*, Plato makes the argument that ordinary people do not understand the workings of the state as it pertains to law, ethics, economics, and military affairs that are essential to self-government. His
student, Aristotle, in *Politics* offers a critique of democracy that questions the wisdom of the working classes who spend most of their time laboring with their hands instead of cultivating excellence in character, or *arête*. In other words, they are too occupied to be concerned with philosophy and other educational interests and thus cannot be trusted with a political voice. For Aristotle and Plato, democracy was the worst form of governance because it grants political control to an “ignorant” majority who are guided more by self-interest than the well-being of the state. Some contend that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* was written as an instruction manual for future politicians of the aristocratic mold attending the Lyceum, educating them “in the necessary evil of engaging in political discourse with ignorant masses.”

The origins of American political democracy represent a similar suspicion of the majority’s capacity for government. Both Robert Ivie and Gerard Hauser argue that the political system was designed to protect elite interests who viewed democratic deliberation as potentially threatening to their own class power. Sut Jhally states that the reason for this is the systematic instability that a functioning democracy provides, stating that in a true democracy “there must be at all times a vigorous and diverse debate under way concerning social policy over a whole range of subject areas.” Political representation was a strategy through which the “democratic distemper” of the public could be contained, observed, and managed. James Madison, a fervent supporter of representative government, believed that democracy was potentially destructive to the nation’s health, stability, and vitality. He argued that over time, there would be an “increase [in] the proportion of those who labour under all hardships in life” who would “secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings.” Elbridge Gerry, who represented Massachusetts in the Continental Congress, echoed Plato and Aristotle that democracy would signal the ruin of civil society. Founding Father John Jay claimed that the masses were neither entitled nor
deserving of democracy, stating rather bluntly that “those people who own the country ought to govern it.”

Despite the historical precedent that illustrates elite suspicion of democracy, a more pluralistic form of discourse was at least tolerated in the United States prior to World War I even as African Americans and women struggled for equal treatment and representation. As Cecilia O’Leary states, America lacked a stable and identifiable set of national rituals and symbols after the Civil War. However, the domain of allowable democratic discourse significantly narrowed leading up to and during World War I as a pervasive culture of militarism overpowered what was once a more fluid and flexible definition of patriotism. It was apparent to elites that the United States “had [become] for the first time a global power with decisive influence” due to its involvement in the Spanish-American War. Those who opposed American military operations in World War I claimed that it would be a battle waged for the benefit of the capitalist rather than the common wage-earning citizen. The position of the Industrial Workers of the World in regard to a more military-infused sense of patriotism was that it obscured class exploitation behind a façade of national togetherness and brotherhood. Progressive Era journalists agreed, committing themselves to a watchdog role in exposing the excesses and abuses of corporations, fostering a more politically mobilized working class less tolerant of their own exploitation. It was within this climate that President Woodrow Wilson’s administration realized they were going to have a difficult time selling the war to those who would be called upon to fight it. One State Department official said that “if we are not careful we will have a second Russia on our hands.”

In response, a commission, headed by George Creel and commonly referred to as the Creel Commission, sent 75,000 people, many of them influential opinion leaders in their
respective communities, to give “pep talks” selling the war to a critical public as well as ensure loyalty of America’s immigrant population. The effort proved to be a success as the political pulse of the country shifted further to the right and a more rigid definition of patriotism took form. This was supplemented by a successful Red Scare that undermined the momentum and political clout of labor unions, equating them to the type of hostile, Communist enemy that the United States was now poised to destroy. Meanwhile, President Wilson, who had previously run on a pacifist platform that was popular with the working class, successfully convinced Congress to declare war in April of 1917. After the Creel Commission successfully completed its mission, some of its members went on to have lucrative careers in journalism and the emerging field of public relations. One such person was Walter Lippmann who would later write the influential *Public Opinion* that reflected the same time-worn suspicion of democracy of Plato, Aristotle, and America’s Founding Fathers.

Lippmann argues in Darwinistic tones that elites are superior decision-makers and that public’s imagination is too simple-minded, ignorant, and myopic. Thus, the common herd could not fulfill the requirement of being informed in a manner that a functioning democracy requires. Lippmann’s recommendation was to create a technically trained elite articulate enough to explain political matters to the public in ways both more digestible and representative of the way things were. In essence, democracy would require a level of management where people would be convinced of the naturalness of this control and their inability to engage in deeper layers of political participation. Noam Chomsky argues that the same suspicions characterize contemporary democracy, stating how:

it is an important feature of the ideological system to impose on people the feeling that they are incompetent to deal with these complex and important issues; they’d better leave
it to the captain. One device is to develop a star system, an array of figures who are often media creations or creations of the academic propaganda establishment, whose deep insights we are supposed to admire and to whom we must happily and confidently assign the right to control our lives and control international affairs…we poor slobs ought to just watch and not interfere.”60

After the conclusion of the war, corporations were encouraged to learn how effectively public opinion could be shaped and managed and how a social climate more sensitive to the needs of big business could be cultivated. In 1921, Roger Babson, a renowned business analyst, stated “that the war taught us the power of propaganda…Now when we have anything to sell the American people, we know how to sell it.”61 These techniques demonstrated their credibility and influence during the war, transforming the field of public relations into a professional science. Edward Bernays and Walter Lippmann became the faces of this new field, instrumental in perfecting the techniques that would be used to convince the American public that they and big business shared common interests.62 Meanwhile, the pluralistic energy that characterized the pre-World War I ethos was funneled into a rigid definition of the public welfare that included the corporation and capitalism as its “rightful” and “benevolent” guarantor. Meanwhile, public relations would to its craft to cultivate consent for this new order. Prior to World War I, business elites were threatened by “the explosive ideas of democracy [which] challenged ancient customs that had long upheld social inequality. A public claiming the birthright of democratic citizenship and social justice increasingly called upon institutions and people of power to justify themselves and their privileges.”63

In other words, people had doubts about the Social Darwinist doctrine that claimed that organization of society followed a natural hierarchy of the “survival of the fittest.” The fact that
people did not enthusiastically support big business was another expression of its irrationality that needed to be brought into line with a corporate world view. Business leaders had learned of the rhetorical power of emotional appeals during World War I, using images to foster identification with the American public. Over time, the public accepted the corporate vision that big business was an appropriate expression of who they were as a nation in the post-World War era. Moreover, many businesses advertised that they were not self-serving profiteers but rather socially conscious benefactors who operated on behalf of the public welfare. These same image techniques used to generate sympathy and support for the corporation as grieving legal persons rather than money making machines were salient after the attacks of September 11.

Meanwhile, the political engagement encouraged by a “muckraking” Progressive Era press noticeably diminished during the 1920s as more citizens were enjoying the benefits of consumer capitalism. The status quo seemed worth maintaining as the economic growth of the 1920s seemingly demonstrated that capitalism was indeed providing for the public welfare. Moreover, the consolidation of the media industry limited the range of public discourse, leading to more standardized content “shaped by the priorities of modern commercial enterprise.” The extension of consumer credit for many Americans encouraged them to borrow in order to decorate their homes with modern conveniences such as radios and furniture that, along with the automobile, were pitched as necessities. Prior to the stock market crash of 1929, 75% of all vehicles and more than half of household appliances sold were purchased on credit, increasing consumer debt to as high as $7 billion. Even though the 1920s saw the growth of the middle class, much of it was sustained by an illusion of abundance as more efficient means of production were pricing out many forms of living labor through mechanization. Wealth was becoming more concentrated, yet the consumer boom persisted because of American’s
willingness and comfort with borrowing money to achieve a higher standard of living that they could not really afford. Many people lost their jobs and were unable to repay the mountain of debt that they had accumulated for themselves. Because of the lack of regulatory oversight by the government in the economy, there was no viable crisis plan when the stock market ultimately crashed in 1929.\textsuperscript{69}

Although many watched in nervous anticipation whether this shift in events indeed signified the end of capitalism that Karl Marx had predicted, government did not commit to seeking economic alternatives, opting instead to “resuscitate a severely damaged economy without jettisoning the basic tenets of capitalism.”\textsuperscript{70} The New Deal not only created the welfare state but also a growing consensus in government that consumer interest would be an important step in restoring the nation’s economic muscle. The role of the state would be to seek a balance between private initiative (the profit motive) and the public’s well-being while nurturing the “citizen consumer” as a political bloc whose interests would be represented by government.\textsuperscript{71}

Thus, unfettered free market philosophy was modified by the ideas of British economist John Maynard Keynes who did not believe that profit should come at the expense of the public good. As David Harvey argues, it was a program premised on the idea that governmental intervention could be a means by which an economic depression could be averted, prevented, and/or overcome.\textsuperscript{72} Or, as William Connolly suggests “Keynesians care more about equality within capitalism; but they approach it through a combination of state management of growth, progressive taxation, a high minimum wage, and welfare for those displaced by the market.”\textsuperscript{73}

During this time, two conflicting images of the consumer developed: (1) the “citizen consumer” who was mobilized as a political collective to ensure its rights in the marketplace and (2) the “purchaser consumer” who viewed selfish forms of consumption as their primary
obligation to society.\textsuperscript{74} The former manifested itself in consumer cooperatives and demands for price and rent controls through government regulation that simultaneously provided a space for women and African Americans to flex their political muscle by threatening boycotts of businesses that persisted on discriminating on the basis of race and gender. However, this eventually gave way to a “new postwar ideal of the purchaser as citizen who simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming.”\textsuperscript{75} As the mass-consumerist utopia seemed economically beneficial for more people in American society after World War II, it was becoming difficult to argue against the tenets of capitalism. Herbert Marcuse contends that the class antagonism between the working and managerial classes Karl Marx described may no longer be relevant.\textsuperscript{76} Both classes now shared “an overriding interest in the preservation and improvement of the institutional status quo [uniting] the former antagonists in the most advanced areas of contemporary society.”\textsuperscript{77} To frame it bluntly, the working class had been “bought off” by a higher standard of living and a more comfortable existence. However, this did not mean that they gained political power in the process in terms of shaping the conditions under which they labored and consumed.

The 1950s are often depicted as the last good decade in the annals of American history before the social turmoil of the subsequent decade.\textsuperscript{78} In the 1960s, African Americans demanded their civil rights, second wave feminists challenged masculine privilege and chauvinism, and college students protested America’s involvement in Vietnam. According to Thomas Frank, the conversion of so many working class Democrats to the Republican Party signifies the “great backlash” against what was seen as the moral bankruptcy of political liberalism that was holding traditional value systems hostage.\textsuperscript{79} As Frank argues, people express their anger toward a more inequitable economy for the middle class by registering and voting Republican. I would add that
this is compounded by visible examples of minorities and women occupying various positions of power and the conclusion that white males now represent a “discriminated” and economically displaced minority because of liberal policies. Instead of considering the impact of labor unions, antitrust regulation, and the importance of a publicly-funded versus privately-controlled social services providing for a more equitable economy, many simply believe that tax cuts provide the solution. This merely perpetuates the economic divide between the “haves” and the “have nots,” fueling working class anger that paradoxically strengthens their allegiance to a political party that speaks to their economic interests yet acts against them. Many Americans believe that if they could only return to the 1950s, the way Marty McFly did in Back to the Future, economic vitality, domestic security, and international prestige in the world could be recovered and assured. It is the promise of this return that explains, at least in part, Ronald Reagan’s long-lasting and fantastical appeal when he was President of the United States.  

It certainly did not help that the political disruption of the 1960s coincided with the diminishing returns of the Keynesian economic plan which was no longer functioning in the manner in which it was intended. The United States witnessed an increase in both unemployment and inflation (stagflation), fiscal crises in which the tax base decreased simultaneously with a rise in social expenditures, and the removal of gold as the metallic base of our international monetary system. Elites had accepted Keynesian economics to the extent that it was fostering growth, even while it meant having to share a larger portion of the economic pie through higher taxes. However, by the 1970s, this once-fertile growth was stifled, compelling the ruling classes to demand less state intervention within the economy in order to maintain their own class power and loosen their social obligations. Thus, classical principles of liberalism were restored and neoliberalism became the central guiding thought behind the new economy. According to David
Harvey, “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practice that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade.” In other words, the state’s role would be that of facilitating capital accumulation within a framework of minimal governmental intervention and regulation and would no longer be concerned with ensuring that capitalism was operating more equitably. This positioned the corporate establishment to direct and redefine democracy in terms more advantageous to its bottom line and economic security.

The inconvenient political and economic realities that undermined America’s claim to worldly greatness in the 1970s were obscured by Ronald Reagan’s successful image-making campaign that capitalized on how Americans wished to see themselves instead of engaging its reality more critically. By revitalizing the myth of the United States as an innocent nation destined for greatness, which had more appeal because of the guilt and negativity of the 1960s and 1970s, Reagan’s popularity signified America’s desire to live more within the domain of fantasy than fact. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner discuss the nation’s declining interest in facts since the Vietnam War and how the implosion between truth/lies and truth/propaganda serve as evidence of this. For example, Reagan operated on a platform of family values (despite being divorced), straight talk (despite fabricating his birthplace and cutting funds for programs he claimed to support), and working class identification (selling policies to the working class that benefitted the rich). Furthermore, Reagan’s image and rhetoric signified the utopian past that white, working class Americans were so desperate to run back to. He exploited their nostalgic desire, embodying a purified past that James Combs describes:
is a place of natural wisdom, of caring mothers and hardworking and faithful fathers, kindly country doctors, crusty but benign judges, crusading newspaper editors, tolerant but firm sheriffs, simple but wise servants, ministers who provide gentle spiritual guidance, teachers who care for their pupils, even whores with a golden heart."

While this may appear as a harmless homage to its past, this nostalgic desire encourages a retreat from the present and its problems that may require more self-sacrifice and community responsibility.

Curtis White suggests Americans are quite comfortable to stare in the face of impending disaster before they feel motivated to engage problems such as global warming seriously. Many claim that the sacrifices that the Left urge people to make are un-American and hostile to its sense of freedom, indicating just another example of Big Government telling people what to do. The inability of many to admit the truth of global warming and the potential for ecological disaster implies an unwillingness to consider economic alternatives to contemporary capitalism more adequate to deal with these problems. As White states, the current ethos of capitalism “is about the self-interested pursuit of private wealth through whatever means are necessary, if not violent, fine, if violent, also fine.” Too often, when Americans act violently in the name of capitalism and the “sacred” economic growth it demands, whether against Mother Nature or likewise, believing they are always doing so on the side of freedom, virtue, and progress among the human race. Richard Hughes contends that by identifying itself as exceptional, “America lifted itself, as it were, above the plane of ordinary human history where evil, suffering, and death dominated the drama of human existence.” It was by divorcing itself from its past and the violence and oppression that characterized it that Hughes suggests continues to allow the nation to view itself as innocent and pure while denying its rather selfish and self-serving impulses.
This is not to suggest that everything the United States has done is in the name of evil or bad faith; America has its periods of benevolence where it acted virtuously and improved the world for many. Even though nostalgic desire may appear to signify an engagement with history, the irony is that it is a past that never was. Rather it is a projection of a collective fantasy, sustaining a myth of greatness past, present, and future.

However, in a time when citizens should be informed and where they should care about contemporary issues of wide consequence, receding further into isolated enclaves of privatized consumption is democratically irresponsible. Greg Dickinson argues that consumer choice is often considered a “sensible” replacement for citizens who feel that their voice matters little within the political system where many feel that political and social problems are better left to experts anyway.\(^91\) It is almost as if people will gladly sacrifice their democratic rights so long as the consumer economy can provide them with a level of comfort to make their existence, if not ultimately fulfilling, at least more tolerable. Meanwhile, consumption provides an escape from the troubling political realities of the present. While many believe “the system” is broken and that change is certainly desirable, many are complicit in its perpetuation because they are never provided political and economic alternatives aside from business as usual that matter.\(^92\) And it certainly does not help that the political economy of the mass media diminishes the capacity for journalists to maintain their role as watchdog for the people.\(^93\) Suzanne Braun Levine writes that “while citizens were being downgraded to consumers, journalists were being demoted, too, from hero to villain. The adversarial stance that was seen as courageous during the Watergate scandal degenerated, in the eyes of the public, into gutter-style bullying; reporters came to be seen as mad dogs out to tear down big shots, build up celebrities, and make fun of everyone else.”\(^94\)
While muckraking journalism from the past represented the voice of working class angst, it is now viewed as an intentionally negative, cynical profession that cultivates American guilt.

Even as the average income of the bottom 80% of the population continues to decrease, society becomes more committed to mimic the consumptive practices of those in the top income group due to an advertising apparatus that uses images of abundance to spur consumption.95 Whereas our communities once served as reference groups that served as a barometer of what one’s spending habits should be, celebrity lifestyles, fashions, and tastes now serve as the standard for how and what others should consume. Juliet Schor refers to society’s propensity to consume as a means to compete symbolically with one another as a consequence of what philosopher Alain de Botton describes as “status anxiety.” This is represented by a chronic fear of failure, augmented by society’s greater intolerance toward the “have nots” and the other so-called losers of neoliberal capitalism96 All of this perpetuates a sense of personal dissatisfaction and insecurity because, as the affluent become the reference group for everyone else, people expect a standard of living that many simply cannot afford, unless, of course, they accrue more debt to acquire the visible status goods that signify success, status, and personal accomplishment. Mainstream media normalize high class consumption which, since it is economically out of reach for many of those seduced by it, leads many inevitably down the path of despair and unfulfilled expectations. The subtext is that happiness, security, and respect can only be guaranteed within the realm of consumption rather than elsewhere. This may explain why many Americans were not terribly troubled by the assault on civil liberties in the wake of 9/11 in order to “preserve” what was counted as being truly American, their right to shop as an expression of their democratic citizenship.
Sports and the Cultural Position of the Spectacle

The relationship between sports and democracy is represented by the former’s value of fair play and equality which reflects the egalitarian nature of what Robert Hariman and John Lucaites describe as the “democratic ideal.” In other words, sports operate as a potent metaphor for democracy within American culture, as a meritocracy that fosters equal opportunity on a level playing field. While this is certainly an exaggeration, Michael Butterworth argues in reference to baseball that “the game’s history can boast many democratic triumphs. Without question, even as it perpetuated problematic conceptions of race and gender, the national pastime nevertheless has earned its reputation for welcoming a far more diverse population than other sports and cultural institutions.” For example, the breaking of the color barrier in Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 happened prior to the desegregation of the public education system in the United States. It served as a symbol of progress and hope even where visible signs of racial discrimination persisted in baseball and elsewhere.

Of course, the relationship between sports, politics, and the quality of democratic life is not often acknowledged, much less welcomed, as many view sports as a necessary escape from the political. It is the seductive nature of this conception of sport that diverts our gaze away from how they participate within our political imaginary. Sports function as another cultural arena in which dominant constructions of class, race, gender, and nationalism are ritualistically celebrated and reproduced, serving as “cultural performances” where normative values and beliefs can be (re)enacted. They have always been political, yet athletes who challenge the status quo are often told to keep politics out of the game, no less a political play in its own right. In particular, there seem to be few athletes who are protesting sports’ growing commercial nature
because, if nothing else, political gestures of this sort are viewed as “complaining” by fans who feel that athletes should feel grateful for the money they make. Meanwhile, one’s identity as a fan has extended beyond watching and attending games and has moved into the realm of consumption of branded team merchandise and more interactive forms of fandom, such as fantasy leagues and sports-based video games.

Josh Boyd notes how the selling of stadium naming rights to placeless corporations severs an important connection between a team, the community, and the memorializing function that stadium names once served. He states that “corporate names communicate two critical identity statements [emphasis mine]: as an event, this ‘game’ is actually a business that rewards the highest bidder, and as fans, team supporters are nothing but paying customers.” Of course, team owners have always considered the fans who attend their games to be customers, but such an orientation today in a commercialized public sphere risks relegating the value of sports to the larger commercial function they are called upon to serve. As the Cleveland Indians Baseball Company stated about Jacobs Field (now named Progressive Field), “Fans at Jacobs Field are offered a customer-focused experience in an attractive, comfortable environment featuring a variety of amenities, concessions, and merchandise options.”

In essence, stadiums at the professional and collegiate level increasingly resemble a shopping mall with a theme-park atmosphere. New facilities are constructed with the goal of facilitating consumption while older venues such as Fenway Park are being altered to remain in keeping with this new structural ethos. Many include food courts, video game arcades, museums, and banks; Tropicana Field in Tampa Bay, Florida even includes a three level mall replete with a barber shop and an automobile dealership. The focus is not only to facilitate consumption by redesigning stadium space to encourage a consumer mentality, but also to attract a higher class
and more casual fan base who otherwise would have little reason to purchase a ticket. One representative involved in the planning of the Atlanta Braves’ new ballpark Turner Field stated that “if we are going to hook people on baseball, we don’t do it by making them sit through nine innings. If we can make the experience more pleasurable, we should.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, the goal is to promote baseball paradoxically by giving people reasons not to watch it, selling the “experience” of attending a game in a stadium with attractions and amenities that often have little to do with the game itself.

In the case of sports stadiums, team owners attract higher income fans through cost prohibitive ticket prices, family-friendly “codes of conducts,” and the mobilization of spectacle that promises a unique and novel experience. As I will argue, the stadium operates as a rhetorical text that addresses higher income audiences, or what I call ideal fans, in ways that speak to their anxieties (increased spatial surveillance and codes of conduct) and values (consumer options and stadium spectacles that allow for the performance of social class). Likewise, these spatial and discursive practices demonstrate that teams are vigilantly concerned with the enjoyment, satisfaction, and safety of the ideal fan and promise to regulate, through ethical codes and prohibitive ticket prices, to contain certain populations. Where this is not possible, fan codes of conducts target the behaviors associated with lower class behavior in order to ensure that all fans operate “with class.” The Disney-fied spectacle of new sports stadiums mirrors the contemporary democratic condition, the favoritism toward consumers over citizens, rich over poor, spectacle over substance, and the inability of the public to resist large business interests supported by neoliberal-friendly local and federal governments.

Spectacle is mobilized as the sales pitch to seduce higher income fans to attend sporting events, although it is plausible to suggest that fans of all socioeconomic stripes are enchanted by
its power. It is also a symptom of the commercialism of sport that simultaneously masks
America’s growing poverty, economic inequality, and democratic impoverishment while
privileging a consumer’s worldview. As mentioned earlier, a social formation that becomes a
“society of the spectacle” occurs once the commodity and its logic interpenetrates into deeper
levels of our existence. While image becomes an increasing concern, the spectacle represents
more than an accumulation of images but a structuring force that mediates our relations with
others. It is an instrument in which the dominant economic order is reproduced and signifies the
“totalitarian management of existence.” Finally, the spectacle is narcissistic, worships its
trajectory and economic development, and manipulates popular consciousness in order to
cultivate its own consent.

Douglas Kellner states that in our media saturated culture, sports signify one of the
largest and most profitable spectacles. Today, the spectacle is a “phenomena of media culture
that embody society’s basic values, serve[s] to enculture individuals into its way of life, and
dramatize[s] the society’s basic conflicts and modes of conflict resolution.” In addition, it
“include[s] media extravaganzas, sporting events, political happenings, and those attention-
grabbing occurrences that we call news.” The commercialization of sport that breeds the kinds
of spectacle that I am addressing is unquestionably a part of what Sut Jhally describes as the
“sports/media complex.” As the twin realities of sports and media collide and intertwine, the
former is co-opted into the latter’s modus operandi of marketing and advertising commodities,
brands, and lifestyles. And, as sports achieved additional popularity and visibility through this
relationship while the media benefitted from ratings sports programming yielded, a new breed of
team owner entered the equation.
As economists James Quirk and Rodney Fort explain, today’s owner uses sports as a platform to market other business assets operating under their control.113 Likewise, management is focused more on profitability rather than fielding a competitive team as they are “quite content to load up the roster with low-priced talent and have no qualms about moving the team if fans don’t flock to watch a second-division turkey.”114 For example, in the 1970s, Atlanta Braves and Atlanta Hawks owner Ted Turner decided that he would broadcast Braves and Hawks games as part of his WTBS regular programming schedule, a valuable and lucrative offer for local cable operators who recognized that sports programming would vastly boost cable subscriptions. In the end, cable television became more commonplace and Ted Turner walked away with a fortune as WTBS became a staple in basic cable packages as a premiere “home” for major league sports.

While owners have long considered their teams as profit-generating businesses, today’s breed of owners are also concerned with the ways in which a sports franchise can be used to increase profits elsewhere. There is also little doubt that the “sports/media complex” in which sports dominate the media airwaves provides the kind of visibility and promotional potential that makes owning a team an attractive option for an owner who may not even enjoy them. Furthermore, ownership may use the popularity and status that a major league franchise provides a city as leverage for a new stadium with more revenue generating potential on the taxpayer’s dime. It is also important to remember that the consumerist-orientation of most stadium designs are also a consequence of the changing ownership culture in professional sports where having a team requires one to be exceedingly wealthy and more business savvy than in eras past. Today’s owner is a more shrewd, business experienced individual (or company for that manner) who is well versed in the craft of making money and who is all the more comfortable with fans being regarded simply as consumers from whom the maximum amount of revenue can be extracted.
Michael Butterworth states that “spectatorship is divorced from the original product, favoring the broad consumption, souvenirs, and memorabilia over the critical appraisal of the team. The modern fan, then, can delight in the sensory experience of the ballpark without ever taking note that a game is taking place inside.”

Thus, it stands to reason that the commercialism of sport is directly linked to a management ethos that aims to extract the maximum amount of revenue from sport without reflexively addressing the question of whether sports institutionally benefit from this philosophy. Consumer-friendly ballparks and stadiums, fantasy sports, advertising in sports video games, and the spectacular commodification of sports uniforms, are not only centered on creating additional revenue streams, but also normalizing a consumer-based worldview conducive to its operation. In this fashion, they can be said to be operating rhetorically in manufacturing a particular vision of culture that appropriates many common and taken-for-granted assumptions as to how culture should operate, as a thing to be consumed. This is not only the effect of the spectacle as Debord would have it, but also a consequence of neoliberal capitalism which, as David Harvey describes, equates the social good with the expansion of market transactions into more spheres of human activity. While professional sports in the United States has long been a business for those who operate and manage them, never have fans been so encouraged to view them as a commercial proposition in which consumption is the means by which this identity is crystallized and validated. But there is nothing about this transaction that is truly unique to sports fans; identity as it is viewed today depends on the symbols attached to the commodities people buy.

Furthermore, as Greg Dickinson notes, it is through purchasing power that individuals enact their citizenship and demonstrate their patriotism.
It is important to note that Debord’s theorization of the spectacle centers on its production of a passive and acquiescent public as a byproduct of a capitalism whose logic depends on a particular social organization and ethos. As I will demonstrate, sports are not only an element of the totalizing and all-encompassing spectacle, but are complicit in reinforcing a passive form of democratic citizenship all too often narrowly conflated with consumerism and consumption in the United States. Yet, I will also refer to the more active and productive forms of fandom, such as fantasy sports participation and the uses of licensed merchandise in performing identity, in the following chapters. Thus, there would appear to be a particular inconsistency in my treatment of both citizens and sports fans, as seemingly both active and passive. However, there is a double-codedness in this particular dichotomy within the very term of “active” itself. For example, while a fan may draft a fantasy team as a more seemingly active engagement with sports, they are nonetheless passive in fulfilling a particular role that sports organizations depend upon them assuming. Thus, fans can remain passive even where they are superficially active in their fandom. This holds true even where the avenues of engaging sports increase, such as sports video games for example, as each new layer of engagement remains girded to the logic of capital and spectacle that produce both passive fans and citizens in their wake.

Furthermore, both the organization of sports and their relationship to fans are shaped by the contours of a larger spectacle under conditions of neoliberal capitalism whose economic philosophy requires a particular kind of citizen and (dis)engagement with democracy. To be sure, some of the examples that I will use in the following chapters may appear to follow the reduction of spectacle to mere distraction, especially where I will discuss the mobilization of stadium “spectacles” in enchanting and attracting upper income fans to sporting events in newer venues. Douglas Kellner’s work on sports and spectacle, while acknowledging some of Debord’s larger
theoretical proclamations, tends to channel his vision into a reductive notion of attention-grabbing effect. While this may be the case of new sports stadiums to a degree, the phenomenon that I am examining are connected to how sports reinforce larger cultural, economic, and political forces in manufacturing a passive democratic public seduced by the idea that democracy is simply one’s freedom to consume. Thus, my goal is to remain consistent to Debord’s philosophical vision that not only recognizes the spectacle as a form of distraction but also acknowledges how it structures relationships between people, mediated all too often by images, while crafting consent to living in a world outside the individual’s control. Furthermore, the conditions fostered by neoliberal capitalism intensify the spectacle’s effect and how a dominant social institution such as sports increasingly mirrors the preferred worldview of this overdetermined economic logic and effect.

Ballparks, Video Games, Fantasy Sports, and Jerseys

In Chapter Two, I will focus on the subject of publicly funded stadiums which have attracted scholarly attention in recent years due to the accelerated replacement of existing stadiums and arenas as part of urban renewal strategies anchored around tourism and entertainment to draw more affluent residents and visitors back to the city. Civic officials argue that investments in new stadium construction will serve as an economic stimulus to justify the generous public subsidies that accompany them. Yet, empirical studies that have examined the net economic impact of these development projects have concluded that they generate little to no significant economic growth. As a result, supporters of new stadium construction have shifted their focus away from alleged economic benefits these projects are supposed to generate toward an emphasis on the improved quality of life they provide. Yet, these appeals obscure
underlying class-based motivations that, in effect, are foundationally anti-democratic. According to Peter Eisinger, most referenda for new stadiums projects are routinely rejected by the public, many of whom claim they will not be served by a taxpayer-supported facility that will serve tourists, suburban visitors, and corporate socialites. Yet, in many of these cases, new stadiums are built in spite of public resistance, conveying rhetorically by local governments that they are primarily concerned with catering to consumers rather than serving citizens.

As I have previously mentioned, new sports stadiums are sought after by team owners because of the additional revenue streams incorporated within them that are often lacking in older venues that are not viewed as “fan-friendly” in comparison. In order to maximize these streams, team owners aim to attract higher income fans through cost prohibitive ticket prices, family-friendly “codes of conducts,” and the mobilization of spectacle that promises a unique and novel experience. As I will argue, the stadium operates as a rhetorical text that addresses higher income audiences, or what I call ideal fans, in ways that speak to their anxieties (increased spatial surveillance and codes of conduct) and values (consumer options and stadium spectacles that allow for the performance of social class). Likewise, these spatial and discursive practices promise that teams are vigilantly concerned with the enjoyment, satisfaction, and safety of the ideal fan and promise to regulate, through ethical codes and prohibitive ticket prices, to keep certain populations out. Where this is not possible, fan codes of conducts target the behaviors associated with lower class behavior in order to ensure that all fans operate “with class.” The Disney-fied spectacle of new sports stadiums mirrors the contemporary democratic condition, namely the privileging of consumers over citizens, rich over poor, spectacle over substance, and the inability of the public to resist large business interests supported by neoliberal-friendly local and federal governments.
Stadium spectacles themselves satisfy upper income fans’ desire and longing for novelty and social status through both architectural and environmental motifs that possess a “must-see quality” that “anyone who is anyone” must visit and consume.126 A representative example can be found with the new Marlins Ballpark which opened in April, 2012 as the new home of Major League Baseball’s Miami Marlins. As part of the design, the Fort Lauderdale-based company, Living Color Enterprises, constructed two large saltwater fish tanks that will serve as the backstop behind home plate. Speaking to the essential novelty of this feature, MSNBC noted, “in addition to the spectacular new stadium that features a retractable roof, pool, sculptures, and other amenities, the 37,000 LEED Silver certified stadium also includes something no other ballpark can claim – two custom saltwater aquariums that flank either side of home plate.”127 Mat Roy, President of Living Color Enterprises, enthusiastically stated that “this was a unique opportunity for us. As a South Florida based company and diehard fan of the Marlins, we are thrilled to have the opportunity to showcase Florida sea life to the stadium’s visitors.”128 The statement implies that many of the stadium’s “visitors” will be tourists, since local residents are probably already familiar with the sea life on display of all places, a baseball stadium. Furthermore, the Dolphin carousel in left center field, which is animated after each Marlin home run, was a tacky aesthetic without precedent in professional sports and a rainbow-colored eyesore to baseball purists.

Similar types of spectacles have been incorporated into stadium architecture in recent years, such as Camden Yards (nostalgia), Cowboy’s Stadium (a large LED television that hangs over the field and caged female dancers), and new Yankee Stadium (its $1.5 billion dollar price tag is its spectacle). These elements are not designed to placate the common, wage earning fan but rather the relatively wealthy and affluent whose values are reflected in these particular novel
stadium landscapes. In the case of new arena and ballpark construction, it is not enough to say that team owners are merely looking to attract consumers, but consumers who can be expected to spend money on many of the amenities these structures have to offer.

I will also focus on “Fan Codes of Conduct” which represent a second rhetorical plea to entice upper income fans through the stadium gates, promising greater degrees of surveillance and localized spatial control intended to maintain a degree of exclusivity within these landscapes. Since lower and working class fans are not prohibited from purchasing tickets and attending games, these codes are allegedly designed to facilitate a “family friendly” atmosphere that tacitly speaks to the moral anxieties of upper income fans. Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder’s study on the growth of gated communities in the United States reveals an upper class retreat into more exclusive areas that promise greater degrees of spatial control.129 For Blakely and Snyder, gated communities are a reaction against heightened fear toward an immoral world as well as the growing heterogeneity of traditional suburban communities. Fan Codes of Conduct represent a kind of virtual gate, targeting and prohibiting behaviors commonly associated with lower and working class fans behind a rhetorical veil of family-friendliness. Furthermore, these Codes of Conduct also address historical anxieties toward the same urban environments in which many new stadiums, ballparks, and arenas are geographically situated.

Finally, Chapter Two will also include two case studies centered on new stadium projects in New York and Detroit, two seemingly disparate worlds pursuing pro-sports and entertainment-based growth strategies. I will investigate how new stadium construction in New York operates as a rhetorical demonstration of its status as a “world class city.”130 Meanwhile, Detroit’s persistent reputation as a “poster child of urban decay” was offered as the condition that necessitated new stadiums for the Tigers (MLB) and Lions (NFL), as architectural gestures
to signify the city’s resurgence and urban renaissance. In both cases, civic policies privileged the needs of consumers over citizens in diverting tax revenues toward stadium projects. In New York, Mayor Mike Bloomberg announced a $324 million dollar budget cut for New York City public schools while committing an additional $380 million toward construction costs for the Yankees (MLB) new home at the team’s request. In Detroit, the city generated new tax revenues stemming from rental cars, hotel rooms, and local casinos as the city’s schools crumbled and its stubborn poverty widened. I offer these case studies because they are a microcosm of the stadium issues that I will address as well as a representative example of the consumerist-driven ethos of contemporary democracy.

In Chapter 3 entitled “The Sports Gaming Culture,” I investigate the evolution of advertising in sports video games and the explosive popularity of fantasy leagues and the particular purposes to which they are mobilized not only to spur consumption, but perpetuate a particular way of envisioning the world through frames that capitalism prefers in the context of sport. The growth of sports video games as a viable advertising platform reveals how fans and gamers alike perceive the burgeoning commercialism of professional sport as inseparable from sports themselves. Video game companies, such as Sony and Electronic Arts (EA) promise that their titles replicate the realism of live sport which has provided them with a significant degree of license in selling virtual advertising space to league sponsors and other affiliated interests. Because many aspects of real sports are filtered out of digital sports games due to political considerations and technological limitations, the inclusion of sponsors’ advertisements is a rhetorical decision that reflects the preferences of sports organizations and gaming companies to conflate marketing and consumption as indispensable to the realism they are creating.
But none of this would be possible without the consent of gamers which is premised on the degree to which they are firmly comfortable (or at least tolerant) with a consumer form of identity. As Naomi Klein argues, youth culture and identity has been made over into a corporate brand where dominant cultural events and institutions feel remarkably hollow and meaningless without a complimentary sanction from companies like Reebok and Nike. With the majority of gamers being under 34 years of age, in-game advertisements provide the rhetorical proof that the realism of sports video games is subsequently confirmed. If the next generation of citizens view culture in this fashion, it is difficult to imagine that the quality of democracy would not be significantly impacted, owing to the cultural importance bestowed upon corporate brands.

I also frame the evolution of in-game advertisements in terms of the fragmentation of sporting audiences and the commonplace of product placement within other cultural texts such as television shows and mediated sports productions. As traditional advertising strategies such as commercials have proven to be less effective due to technological advances that have provided viewers the agency to bypass them, marketers must pursue new pathways of ensuring exposure for their advertisements. The popularity of video games, and in particular sporting titles, meant that their appropriation by companies to pitch their wares was all but inevitable. The fact that these gestures are considered as enhancing the realism of fictional sports productions (which often mimic actual mediated sports broadcasts) substantiates the connection being made to the inclusion of advertisements in sports video games.

The fact that in-game advertisements underscores gaming companies’ claims to providing an authentic sporting experience is evidence of the hegemonic grip that the forces of commercialism have on the ways fans view sports. While not all gamers are sports fans, many sports fans are drawn to virtual sports as a further expression of their fandom. In accepting in-
game advertisements as supplementing the realism they are purchasing, this reveals not only a complicity in perpetuating sporting commercialism, but proof of how naturalized the relationship between sports, fans, and consumerism has become.

Furthermore, I provide two case studies by examining not only in-game advertisements in popular sporting titles such as *MLB: The Show* and *Madden* but the sophistication in which they are mobilized to fulfill very specific institutional missions. *Madden* was the predictable forerunner in this trend, legitimatizing not only in-game advertisements in sports titles but also served as part of a synergistic marketing and branding strategy between the NFL, EA Sports, and ESPN. Meanwhile, the ads included in *MLB: The Show* were part of a “cause-related marketing” strategy to sell an image of philanthropy on the part of Major League Baseball and its sponsors to generate greater profitability and likeability for both. Each of these games is tied to sports and consumption in numerous ways, specifically to bolster brand credibility for companies such as EA and ESPN each with a product to sell. Moreover, they perpetuate a particular ideology that equates sports and consumption with particular socially beneficial causes through an alleged commitment to philanthropy. As Samantha King argues, “cause related marketing strategies” signify “consumption-based acts of generosity” through which consumers are assured that through purchasing power (in this case, *MLB: The Show*, Major League Baseball, or a product or service by its corporate sponsors), they are simultaneously *doing something* about a particular social issue. This privileges a model of citizen engagement anchored on a voluntary association to a cause, rather than a compulsory involvement through taxes and other government-mandated policies aimed to address them.

Meanwhile, the popularity of fantasy sports owes much to the ubiquity of the Internet, growing by 60% in the last four years and includes 32 million participants in the United States
According to Thomas Oates, fantasy sports not only offer a general manager’s perspective of sport, but reduce athletes to commodities that “can be consumed selectively and self-consciously by sports fans.” In this way, fantasy sports normalize a selective and sanitized capitalist worldview that reflects not only the institutional management and operations of sport, but obscures how such business logic violates some of the fundamental assumptions fans harbor about professional sports and who owns them. While inviting fans to control a fictional team of athletes using the same insider knowledge and information available to general managers in pursuit of victory, fantasy sports elide certain issues regarding how real franchises are operated to be profitable, if not always competitive. Thus, fantasy sports do not replicate to any accurate degree how an actual franchise is managed and controlled, yet interjects an additional layer of capitalist, free-market ideology in how fans watch, consume, and experience live sport.

As I will argue later, fantasy sports are undermining the community building potential of sports fandom, as a space where individuals otherwise separated from one another can unite symbolically in their love of particular team, sport, or athlete. To be fair, fantasy sports yield aspects of community building in other ways and there is no reason to expect or assume that the kind of unification promoted by more traditional sports fandom will entirely disappear. Yet, fantasy sports are increasingly hailed as a compliment to sports spectatorship, a dominant fan cultural practice that introduces competition in the realm of fandom where it has been previously non-existent. As Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Richard Halverson argue, the kind of “competitive fandom” generated through fantasy sports promotes “the consumption of franchise media as well as the consumption and production of fan-based media.” In this fashion, detailed sports information about player production, injuries, and trade rumors emerges as a lucrative
commodity that translates into large sports-knowledge industries such as ESPN and fantasy-based programming such as MLB Network’s *Fantasy 411* that benefit from such commodification. Furthermore, fantasy sports provide an additional avenue of engagement that assist in the aggressive marketing efforts of professional sports leagues who are not only targeting already existing fan bases but casual sports fans as well. My purpose in examining the “sports gaming culture” is how certain aspects of it, such as advertising in sports video games, naturalizes the burgeoning commercialism of sport while others, such as fantasy sports, promote the economic and philosophical logic that perpetuates it.

In Chapter 4, “‘It’s Not How You Play The Game, It’s How You Look’: Sports, Branding, and Fashionable Consumption,” I investigate how professional and collegiate leagues, teams, and institutions are marketing team merchandise to a general consumer bloc based on lessons learned from the retro jersey phenomenon and its association with hip hop that proved such a market existed. At various moments in recent history, the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL have exploited America’s nostalgic longing through retro ballparks, Turn Back the Clock events, and “throwback jerseys” in order to illustrate a contemporary connection to a lost “golden age” of cultural innocence, virtue, and simplicity. While I interrogate each of these efforts, the locus of my analysis will center on the phenomenon of retro jerseys and how they are connected with what I describe as the *bold jersey phenomenon* illustrated by collegiate football programs such as the University of Oregon who have garnered a national reputation for uncanny and “flashy” uniforms. Specifically, I detail how hip hop was responsible for the opening of a general consumer market for team merchandise, beginning in the late 1990s when artists such as OutKast, Jay-Z, and P. Diddy sported retro sporting apparel in music videos.
I connect the retro jersey phenomenon in hip hop to a particular crisis of authenticity facing the genre in the 1990s as its mainstream commercial ascendency violated its countercultural and subversive presumptions. Most of the retro apparel featured on hip hop artists are 1970s and 1980s sports jerseys and baseball caps in a symbolic ode to the roots of rap music that originated in the same era. As demand of these same styles outpaced the ability of retro sports apparel companies such as Mitchell & Ness to produce them, professional sports teams sensed an urgent marketing opportunity in outfitting their teams in 1970 and 1980s style jerseys for select games in hopes of boosting sales of the same merchandise now being sold in souvenir shops and online websites. Not only were sports fans getting their “retro fix” by purchasing throwback jerseys and caps, but general legions of consumers otherwise uninterested in sport were demanding them through their cultural association with hip hop “cool.” Despite being a fad that predictably waned in ensuing years, professional teams still occasionally wear retro jerseys for select games and profit from their sale through merchandising outlets.

Jersey styles from the 1970s and 1980s are considered more colorful and flamboyant than their more modern counterparts, primarily because teams were adopting an aesthetic favorable to color television which had become a common staple in American homes. Yet, their capacity to enchant the consumerist inclinations of a general consumer base meant that the same aesthetic could be mobilized in fashioning modern sports uniforms today. As a case in point, I focus on the University of Oregon football program whose institutional image was transformed by a licensing deal with Nike that commanded the national sports media spotlight as a consequence of the flashy, bold, and interchangeable uniform combinations the team sported on the field. By placing an emphasis on a fashion sense without precedent in organized sport, Oregon’s neon jerseys and glass-beaded helmets transformed them into the “undisputed champions of the 21st
As a matter of fact, the football team emerged as a nationally-ranked football powerhouse precisely because of the recruiting power of their uniform styles alone that garnered incomparable national visibility and ironic esteem. In ensuing years, other universities such as the University of Maryland, Michigan State, Florida, and Oregon State experimented with a similar branding model. While many of these jersey styles made traditionalists wince, their capacity to generate attention excited younger fans and recruits bolstered merchandising sales while catalyzing discussion on new media sites such as Twitter.

As Ron Bishop notes, fans no longer consume licensed merchandise to symbolize their allegiance to a team, rather “[basing] their decision to buy a garment on flat, peripheral dimensions of connections with a team – color, style, and national reputation.” In connection to my overall argument about the role of sport in relation to consumerism and democracy, I offer the example of sports uniforms not as a symptom of shallow consumption (which it often is), but as a broader reflection of contemporary culture more generally. As Bishop observes, the role of the athlete within these broader merchandising efforts, is reduced to a fashion model sporting the latest look that fans are rhetorically compelled to buy. According to Burke in his discussion on identification, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.” As I argue, when athletes are reduced to a “fashion model”, they are not only speaking the language of consumer culture that fans accept, but reinforcing the terms by which identity is encouraged to be defined and performed in contemporary society. Given the case that all of the universities I highlight in this chapter are public institutions and the fact that most people’s primary engagement with them is through sport, the discursive implications indirectly reinforce a more privatized mode of democracy through which the role of the public is increasingly determined by commercial
imperatives. But I am not merely implicating the institutions or the companies involved in the branding efforts, but the fans themselves who identify, first and foremost, as consumers. The bold jersey phenomenon at the University of Oregon and elsewhere is merely the “image, attitude, idea” in which identification is achieved because its terms coincide with the consumerist worldview of fans themselves.

Finally, in Chapter Five, “Resisting the Rapid Commercialism of Sports: Reclaiming a More Democratic Future,” I will focus briefly on critical approaches that are attempting to reconfigure the role of sport in society, from a passive consumer-driven leisure option toward more active forms of participation that are more democratically amenable. These efforts aimed at reforming the corporatist ethos of professional and collegiate sports are certainly noble and offer many points of critical engagement that are discursively valuable. However, as I will argue, these maneuvers are unlikely to gain significant momentum without a larger social, cultural, and political transformations in the ways we view (and are encouraged to view) freedom and democracy in the contemporary moment. Particularly, this depends on reinventing and restoring a more positive association to “the public” which has both materially and discursively been assaulted by pro-privatization, neoliberal policies and philosophies in recent decades. This idea centers on sports’ status a public institution that, in the way people make sense of them, are embedded with “quasi-religious” and ritualistic elements that reinforce core societal values and norms. Furthermore, as Michael Butterworth contends, sports are one of the few institutions that Americans turn to in moments of domestic crisis and uncertainty, as evidenced by the instrumental role they were proclaimed to occupy in the national healing process after the September 11th terrorist attacks.
As Don Mitchell argues, public space has always been regarded as an indispensable component of democratic societies, as a place where citizenship can be enacted. Yet, in an era of neoliberal capitalism and increasing privatization, the erosion of public space not only has political implications for marginalized groups who depend on it, but privileges a corporate-defined vision of democracy that is concerned more with consumers than citizens. The commercialism of sport can be viewed as an additional example of privatization and a rhetorical expression of how definitions of the public have shifted in recent decades. For example, Daniel Rosensweig argues that older stadiums and venues, despite offering fewer amenities and manufactured consumer-oriented “experiences,” were more fan-friendly than their successors because of affordable ticket prices that welcomed more groups of people. While this may have given upper income fans a reason to avoid attending live sporting events, new sports stadiums sacrifice class and racial diversity in catering to upper income patrons not only through cost prohibitive ticket prices, but through heightened and more vigilant surveillance operations. Following the suggestions of economist Robert Reich, a society that privileges consumers over citizens not only welcomes privatization as rightful appropriation of public space by those who “deserve” to control it, but frames the “public” as a meddling nuisance that deserves such treatment. As I will argue, it is only by reimagining the public apart from such negative connotations that fans will ever seriously challenge sport to embody virtues outside of consumption and corporatism that, at present, may not always be welcomed but are, at worst, hesitantly tolerated.

Concluding Remarks
In the weeks following September 11th, President George W. Bush urged the American public to shop, consume, and travel as a symbolic expression to terrorist cells believed to be responsible that the nation’s way of life and commitment to democracy had not been deterred. As Greg Dickinson suggests, the politicization of consumption in this way was not without historical precedent. During the Cold War, America’s consumer culture was implicated in a larger ideological battle with the Soviet Union as a patriotic gesture associated with national superiority and righteousness. As I will argue, the commercialism of sport should not be considered apart from these politicized conceptions, but rather a further symptom of the conflation between democracy and consumption that is effectively transforming how Americans view their roles and responsibilities as citizens. Thus, I rely on Lizabeth Cohen’s description of the “citizen-consumer” which she describes as “responsible for safeguarding the general good of the nation, in particular for prodding government to protect the rights, safety, and fair treatment of individual consumers in the marketplace.”

In the context of new sports stadiums, in-game advertising in sports video games, fantasy sports, and the fashionable branding of sports stadiums and institutions, the purpose of my work to demonstrate not only how the relationship between fans and sports is increasingly mediated by consumption. It will also entail how sports are implicated in the rhetorical construction of the “citizen consumer” that reinforces particularly narrow claims of the public welfare, consumerism, and democracy defined by conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

As this point, it is necessary to consider what it is at stake in my analysis and why it is significant or important. As Benjamin Barber notes on his theory of “McWorld” which is a “commercially homogeneous global network” connected by “technology, ecology, communications, and commerce,” there is nothing fundamentally democratic about the
As a matter of fact, it is a vision of the public good defined by transnational companies and instrumental rationality that promotes greater synergy and coordinated economic, cultural, and political control to wealthy corporations. Meanwhile, it discourages civic discourse whose definitions of public welfare, civic and social responsibility, and freedom are not consistent with a corporate worldview that claims to guarantee all of these things under the umbrella of consumerism and the market.

As Curtis White suggests, questions of impending doom that pertain to potential economic collapse, environmental devastation, resource shortages, and growing economic stratification are not discussions that corporate capitalism welcomes, much less facilitates. Yet, the consequences that could manifest from each of these scenarios indicates that they should be afforded more urgent treatment and debate then they are currently given. Thus, the importance of a functioning democracy that addresses these issues, regardless of the effect they have on capitalism and America’s sacred consumerist lifestyle, should be self-evident. While my point of intervention is through the world of sports, they represent merely a convenient space for discussing political issues that transcend them. In other words, suggesting that the growing commercialism of sport is undesirable is no less an invitation to discuss the contemporary status of democracy and the penetration of market logic, capitalism, and neoliberalism within more intimate realms of existence and how such perpetuates a worldview that is fundamentally destructive. Yet, the citizen-consumer and its ideology of consumerism cannot be troubled by such guilt-breeding and “unpatriotic” presumptions; they are merely issues fit for another place, another time, or for somebody else.

Notes
I place this term in quotations because there is some debate about whether contemporary capitalism in America truly operates as a free market. Curtis White in his book, *The Barbaric Heart: Faith, Money, and the Crisis of Nature* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2009) argues that large corporations view the role of government as providing them security and protection from the market, pp. 32-33. Meanwhile, Matthew P. McAllister in *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control, and Democracy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996) states that the production value of advertising by large companies are better positioned to attract audience attention amidst the clutter compared to smaller companies because they are more entertaining and flashy than others.


3 Klein, *No Logo*.


5 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979) argues that the distinction between public and private has collapsed, resulting in the selfish expectation that our outer world serve as a mirror for our inner selves.


Ibid., 36.


Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Ibid., 8.

Ibid.


28 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*.

29 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.


32 Babcock and Whitehouse, “Celebrity as Postmodern Phenomenon, Ethical Crisis for Democracy, and Media Nightmare”

33 Ibid., 183.


35 Ibid.

37 McAllister, *The Commercialization of American Culture*.

38 Ibid., 6.

39 Ibid., 43.


42 Mouffe; Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*.


46 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices*; Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*.


48 Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*, 34.

49 Ivie, Ibid.

50 As quoted in Ivie, Ibid., 65.

51 Ivie, Ibid.


57 As quoted in Chomsky, Deterring Democracy, 38.

58 Ewen, PR! A Social History of Spin.


61 As quoted in Ewen, PR! A Social History of Spin, 131.

62 Ewen, PR! A Social History of Spin.

63 Ewen, Ibid., 13.

64 Ewen, Ibid.


67 Ewen, PR! A Social History of Spin, 176.

68 Ewen, Ibid.

69 Ewen, Ibid.


71 Cohen, Ibid.

72 David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).


75 Cohen, Ibid., 119.


77 Marcuse, Ibid., xiii.


82 Harvey, Ibid.

83 Harvey, Ibid., 2

84 Combs, *The Reagan Range* 


87 Curtis White, *The Barbaric Heart*

88 White, Ibid.

89 White, Ibid.,169
90 Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 155


92 White, *The Barbaric Heart*


106 As quoted in Ritzer, Ibid., 123.


110 Kellner, Ibid., 458.
111 Kellner, Ibid., 458.
114 Quirk and Fort, Ibid., 97.
115 Butterworth, Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity, 71.
116 Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism
119 Debord, Society of the Spectacle.
120 For a representative example, see Kellner, “Sports, Media Culture, and Race – Some Reflections on Michael Jordan.”
and Michael P. Sam, “Public Consultation and Stadium Developments: Coercion and

122 Burd, “Mediated Sports;” Rosensweig, Retro Ballparks, Rosentraub, Major League Losers;
Santo, “Beyond the Economic Catalyst Debate.”

123 Santo, “Beyond the Economic Catalyst Debate.”

124 Peter Eisinger, “The Politics of Bread and Circuses: Building the City for the Visitors Class,”

125 Eisinger, “The Politics of Bread and Circuses,” Robert Reich, Supercapitalism: The


127 “Miami Marlins Stadium Designed and Built by Fort Lauderdale-Based Living Color
Aquariums,” MSNBC.com, March 12, 2012, available at
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/46707805/ns/business-press_releases/t/miami-marlins-stadium-
aquarium-designed-built-fort-lauderdale-based-living-color-aquariums/.

128 Ibid., para. 3.

129 Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, Fortress America: Gated Communities in the

130 Susan S. Fainstein and Robert J. Stokes, “Spaces for Play: The Impacts of Entertainment

131 The quote regarding the city of Detroit is taken from Dante Chinni, “Detroit’s Gambit to Lure
People Back Downtown” Christian Science Monitor, para. 7, available at http://www.lexis-
nexis.com/universe.


Ibid., 480.


For more on the profitability orientation of American professional sports, see Chris Gratton and Harry Solberg, *The Economics of Sports Broadcasting* (New York: Routledge, 2007).


Bishop, *Stealing the Signs*, 34.

Ibid., 23.


For a comprehensive assessment of neoliberal economics and policy, see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.


Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity*.


Daniel Rosensweig, *Retro Ballparks.*

Reich, *Supercapitalism.*

Dickinson, “Selling Democracy.”


White, *The Barbaric Heart.*
CHAPTER II: NEW SPORTS STADIUMS AND THE RHETORIC OF CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL CLASS

In recent decades, new stadium construction for professional sporting franchises have been used by city governments in a strategic investment aimed to stimulate urban renewal in an effort to attract investment, jobs, and residents back to decaying urban centers.¹ Between 1990 and 2010, there were 104 new sports facilities built for Major League Baseball, National Football League, National Basketball Association, National Hockey Association, and Major League Soccer franchises in both the United States and Canada compared to 128 over the previous 90 years.² Without question, team owners wield significant bargaining power over local governments to gain new playing facilities through both implicit and explicit threats to relocate if their demands go unfulfilled. For franchise owners, new facilities are a profitable investment at the taxpayer’s expense. They promise additional revenue streams while fulfilling the desires of a consumer-driven society and its demand for novel “experiences” courtesy of public subsidies that finance the infrastructure used to generate private profit. Meanwhile, civic officials justify public investment in new sports stadiums by noting how they will ostensibly create jobs and enhance the quality of life for residents who will allegedly benefit from the status associated with living in a “major league city.”³ Such is the symbolic value of hosting a professional sports franchise as an instrumental necessity toward branding a city, fostered by a staunch neoliberal capitalism that generates greater competitive fervor between cities for jobs, investment, and other resources.⁴ In short, the explosion in new stadium construction can be explained through the intersection between greedy ownership and the vulnerable urban politics that shape economic life and activity in a neoliberal age.
New stadiums are a hot ticket item because of the additional revenue generating potential they possess over existing facilities that include luxury boxes, simulated games, and themed bars restaurants. Furthermore, these assist in creating an environment that speaks to the moral anxieties of white collar, upwardly mobile fan bases. In this way, new stadiums function as “rhetorical landscapes” that “[constitute] in individual citizens a shared sense of common identity as members of a national public” in which that same public is “being educated…in matters of individual and collective identity.” Thus, these novel facilities and the urban environment in which they are situated prescribe a preferred notion of American citizenship that prioritizes consumption as foundationally democratic. Whereby Clark focuses his critical inquiry on tourist-oriented national landscapes such as the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Parks, his insights are of particular usefulness and relevance here. While new sports stadiums may not operate at the level of a national park, the popularity and cultural importance attributed to professional sports can arguably elevate sporting landscapes to a similar degree of symbolic power and national significance. However, what is important here is the manner in which Clark addresses how landscapes can function rhetorically and discursively in reaffirming particular identities.

In order to maximize the revenue streams of new stadiums, owners must seek ways to attract a more affluent fan to the ballpark who can be counted on to consume. Thus, in order to attract these kinds of fans with higher degrees of discretionary income, the new sports stadium must offer a closely monitored and supervised “experience” that reveals a sensitivity to family values, Disney-fied consumption, and spectacle in order to persuade them that “this is my kind of place.” These strategies raise an important set of tensions and contradictions that I will discuss later, as sports franchises must also perform the pretense of democracy that does not exclude.
Therefore, sports organizations often promote a family-centered and fan-friendly experience as a
rhetorical cover that is superficially inclusive, yet operates as a subtle form of classism.

This argument depends on the understanding of the persona within rhetorical theory, adding credence to the idea that new sports stadiums do, in fact, operate rhetorically and thus create an experience that implies a preferred audience of freely spending, upper income consumers. According to Edwin Black, discourses imply a first and second persona, or more simply, an implied author and audience. Furthermore, Black adds that “the author implied by discourse is an artificial creation: a persona, but not exactly a person.”

New sports stadiums are certainly a non-human persona whose landscape addresses a particular kind of fan, those who have the financial means to purchase tickets, exotic concession items, team merchandise sold in stadium shops, and afford the cost of other novelties such as themed sports bars and simulated games. But as Philip Wander notes, each discourse also implies a third persona which signifies who the speaker and the audience are to avoid identifying with and becoming. In this case, the working class fan constitutes such a persona that, in order to draw upper income fans, must not only be excluded but also the behaviors stereotypically associated with their class must be strictly monitored and regulated. To be sure, working class fans still attend live sporting events in newer venues but they do not represent the ideal consumer, or auditor, that the stadium landscape typically hails. Here, is important that class-based identities constitute performances; performing a working class or suburban identity compel certain behaviors and attitudes to be sure in order to affirm one’s membership to them.

Furthermore, new sports stadiums and the urban renewal strategies of which they are a part are symptomatic of the changing character of democracy, one that is centered on pleasing consumers rather than citizens. According to economist Robert Reich, “the last several decades
have involved a shift of power away from us in our capacities as citizens and toward us as consumers and investors.”¹¹ This leads to several damaging implications when democracy is equated with consumption, as those citizens without the ability to consume are demoted to a second-class or “invisible” status. According to Don Mitchell, it is the ownership of private property in a modern, capitalist society that provides one access to the public.¹² I would add that one’s ability and means to consume is what largely determines their degree of citizenship and whether political actors feel any obligation or duty to serve and accommodate them. In other words, a society in which consumption is hailed as quintessentially democratic welcomes a form of classism that limits or restricts the democratic efficacy of non-privileged groups. While the protests of public workers and Occupy Wall Street movement may challenge my proposition, the future of this movement and the political changes they may bring is undetermined. On the other hand, the clandestine politics of new stadium construction supports my very argument. Here, D. Stanley Eitzen notes that the “powerless bear the burden” as their tax dollars are funneled away from public schools and other vital social services toward new stadiums whose benefits they will not enjoy and whose construction they are relatively powerless to resist.¹³

Meanwhile, team owners must use the stadium landscape in performing what I refer to as a suburbanized ethic that operate by what I call status-scapes which reference a landscape whose socially exclusive nature enhances the social status of those who occupy or have access to them. This term recognizes that the landscapes one inhabits or is granted access to are instrumental in the performance of particular social and class-based identities. While based on the idea of rhetorical landscapes, it is a higher-order term that denotes the status-enhancing effects of particular places that form the basis of their desirability and demand. It is a fluid term that recognizes that a place’s designation as a status-scape is not guaranteed or static, but is
conditional on its relationship to culture and capital in particular moment. For example, Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri is not typically a status-scape, but as the host of Major League Baseball’s 2012 All-Star Game, it will become one for those who have tickets to the event during the three days of festivities. Yet, on any given day at the ballpark, particular places such as a luxury suite, the owner’s box, and the team locker room, all operate as smaller status-scapes within a larger enclosed landscape that does not usually warrant this designation. Furthermore, certain upscale neighborhoods such as Manhattan are status-scapes because they allow those who live there to demonstrate that they can afford to and therefore are often afforded a degree of social status precisely because of the particular cultural values our society endorses at the present moment. To be sure, many residents of Manhattan made the choice to live in this privileged space precisely because of its status-enhancing effects, suggesting that landscapes are often mobilized in the performance of social identities, as an expression of who we think we are. While some may not have discretion over which spaces they ultimately live and inhabit, it is the nonetheless the case that others will make biased assumptions about their character, way of life, and values based on the physical character and desirability of these landscapes. While team owners may not think in the theoretical terms of the status-scape that I have defined, there is no question that many consciously craft stadium landscapes and experiences that welcome the performance of upper class identity. As a matter of fact, it is the very promise of this performance that largely determines whether or not they will ultimately be inhabited by affluent fans, the often targeted demographic of ownership in sports, especially in the case of newer consumer-focused stadiums, arenas, and ballparks.

Because team owners seek novel facilities for the additional revenue streams incorporated within them, the stadium landscape that must also address and resolve the anxieties
and consumer preferences of affluent, ideal “fan” bases, or the second persona. Thus, they must be exclusive spaces whose access is relatively restricted to all but those with some degree of economic privilege. However, terms like “suburbia” or “suburbanized” are themselves imprecise signifiers; the contemporary American suburb is more socially and racially diverse compared to earlier decades. According to Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, this diversity is a significant factor in the growth of gated communities in the United States as citizens seek to reestablish and reclaim the “holy grail” of an isolated and exclusive community. Both Blakely and Snyder note that gated communities are merely a contemporary extension of the suburban phenomenon, mobilized by the cultural anxieties regarding a “mean world” outside their borders. For purposes of both clarity and simplicity, I will use the phrases “suburbia” and “suburbanized ethic” as umbrella terms to describe an upper income class that is socially exclusive, economically privileged, and whose spatial practices express fear toward an outside world perceived as more dangerous, morally abject, and threatening. Finally, I use these terms to denote a group whose conspicuous consumptive practices become the resources through which their class identity is performed and subsequently reaffirmed.

The Effect of Suburbanization of Sports

During the late 19th and early 20th century, the population of American cities continued to expand as the manufacturing and urban-based economy promised jobs and economic opportunity. It was around this period that the Cincinnati Red Stockings baseball team became the first professional franchise in 1869, subsequently going undefeated in their first season. Early ballparks and stadiums from this period were not rhetorically linked to civic identity nor were they permanent structures, often including little beyond a fence to discourage rowdy fans
from rushing the field and disrupting play.  

Because these early facilities were temporary, it was not uncommon for teams to move several times during a given season within their host city. Yet, when the profit-making potential of professional sport had been effectively demonstrated, team owners financed more permanent stadiums usually constructed of wood and other durable materials. Yet, when fire destroyed the Baker Bowl in 1894 and the Polo Grounds in 1911 due to causes stemming from fans’ tobacco use, newer facilities were built out of concrete and steel.

According to Daniel Rosensweig, early ballparks were an “anarchic space” that afforded working class fans a particular degree of freedom to drink, smoke, and gamble, activities that were commonly targeted by Protestant gentile reformists as morally degenerate.  

As a matter of fact, after Albert Spalding renovated Lake Front Park in Chicago in 1883, he hired a security team to police these kinds of fan activities in the bleachers to satisfy upper income fans. By 1909, otherwise known as the era of modern stadium construction, Forbes Field in Pittsburgh was built as an attempt to shed the city’s blue collar image and demonstrate to the nation that it was committed to “cultivating an emerging upscale citizenry.” While Pittsburgh did not ultimately transcend its working class identity, it serves as an early example of how professional sports stadiums were used as symbolic indicators of progress and cultural sophistication during the industrial age. It should come as no surprise that the construction of Yankee Stadium in 1922, whose opening game attendance was reportedly in excess of 70,000, was part of a cultural blueprint in New York to portray an additional layer of cosmopolitan sophistication.  

While team owners labored to maintain the allegiance and support of wealthier fans by offering exclusive seating options and higher ticket prices, bleacher seating provided a sanctuary for the working class fan from the soul-crushing discipline demanded from modern industrialization in other areas of social life.
With the labor shortages in manufacturing plants caused by the outbreaks of World War I and World War II, a growing number of African Americans migrated North in search of jobs in vacated plants.\textsuperscript{22} This led to a noticeable demographic shift of the urban population in certain areas of the United States. Between 1910 and 1966, the number of African Americans living in the industrialized North increased from 800,000 to 9.7 million.\textsuperscript{23} Yet like other facets of public life, seating in Major League ballparks was segregated with African American fans routinely confined to the outfield bleachers.\textsuperscript{24} As further evidence of the segregationist divide, the establishment of the Negro Leagues by Rube Walker in 1920 became “perhaps the largest and certainly most geographically diverse black-owned business in the United States.”\textsuperscript{25} Not only did it provide a space for African American baseball players to compete at a professional level, but also generated employment opportunities rarely available elsewhere for black accountants, bookkeepers, and trainers.\textsuperscript{26} Some of Major League Baseball’s most heralded and iconic players such as Satchel Paige, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and Jackie Robinson played some or most of their professional career in the Negro Leagues.

While boxing had long been desegregated, along with professional football in 1946, Robinson’s crossing Major League Baseball’s official-yet-unofficial “color barrier” in 1947 was a major symbolic and political victory for African Americans owing to the cultural significance of baseball in American society.\textsuperscript{27} Of course, while the Brooklyn Dodgers have been memorialized in sporting and cultural mythology for their progressiveness, there is evidence that it was economically motivated. Saylor R. Breckenridge and Pat Rubio Goldsmith’s quantitative analysis of attendance patterns during racial integration in Major League Baseball, while largely speculatory, suggests that the plug on baseball’s “experiment” would have been pulled prematurely if attendance had been negatively impacted.\textsuperscript{28} John Paul Hill writes that “the
dramatic population shifts triggered by the war also helped the integration campaign…Noting the changing demographics, critics of the color line appealed to baseball’s pocketbook by maintaining that integration would swell black patronage.”

Former Negro League All Star and Major League Baseball Hall of Fame inductee Buck O’ Neill stated that:

Branch Rickey [Brooklyn Dodgers owner who signed Jackie Robinson] saw how [Negro League teams] put 30,000 fans in his ballpark. He saw how we drew 40,000 in Yankee Stadium, 30,000 in Griffith Stadium in Washington and 50,000 in Chicago. This is the reason he signed Jackie Robinson – not because he was thinking about blacks. He was thinking about money.30

To be sure, some teams resisted including African American players on their Major League rosters years after Robinson made his debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers. For example, the Boston Red Sox waited until 1959 before promoting utility player Pumpsie Green to the major league roster after passing on the opportunity to sign future Hall of Famers Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson. Meanwhile, the Washington Redskins owner publicly touted his refusal to integrate until 1962 when the Kennedy administration issued an ultimatum to either sign an African American player or risk a lockout from their new stadium in Washington D.C.31

These events transpired in the context of noticeable growing racial tension in American inner cities as whites feared the integrationist fervor among black citizens and progressive politicians.32 The presence of blacks in major league sports, along with the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown vs. The Board of Education, substantiated these anxieties. The famously quipped “white flight” to the suburbs was a reactionary strategy aided by the federal government who subsidized mortgage loans and highway construction that coincidentally made residential transplantation easier. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and the Veterans Administration...
(VA) financially backed low interest mortgage packages that required minimum down payments. In 1956, Congressional approval of the Interstate Highway Act under the leadership of President Dwight D. Eisenhower ensured that the growing suburban class could travel from work and home with a greater degree of efficiency. By 1957, 70% of the homes sold that year were in suburban neighborhoods that, coupled with discriminatory lending practices, guaranteed these spaces would remain predominately white. This signified a general wave of racial containment no longer confined to the ghetto but rather the entire urban landscape as a whole.

These changing geographical demographics potentially threatened the bottom line of professional sports franchises as many of their facilities were situated in the same inner city environments that white citizens were fleeing from. Businesses deserted the urban landscape and moved to the suburbs, further eroding the economic prospects for African Americans isolated in the city. In areas like Cleveland, manufacturing jobs shifted to the Sun Belt, exacerbating long boiling racial tensions that ultimately erupted into a full scale race riot in the 1960s. Meanwhile, the most infamous race riot was arguably the 1967 race riots in Detroit which were politically energized by police mistreatment of minorities, scarce and poor-paying jobs, deteriorating schools, and massive disinvestment and blight caused by the fallout of white suburbanization. The twin economic devastation of deindustrialization and the fiscal pressures endured by municipal governments in the 1970s disproportionately affected African Americans living in cities where the impact was more deeply felt. For professional teams with inner city stadiums, these conditions were not favorable to attract white suburban crowds. Many team owners sought new stadiums and arenas in suburban neighborhoods to preserve their existing fan bases. Where this was not possible, city officials and team owners strategically situated new stadiums near the suburban transportation system of choice: the highway.
During the late 1960s, the “first wave of public stadium building” was in full and invigorated swing as multipurpose stadiums were built in St. Louis (Busch Stadium), Pittsburgh (Three Rivers Stadium), San Diego (Jack Murphy Stadium), Cincinnati (Riverfront Stadium), and Philadelphia (Veterans Stadiums) inspired by the bowl-shaped design of Shea Stadium (New York).37 However, when the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team relocated to the Richfield suburbs in the 1970s, it was part of a “nationwide trend” where “many teams sought to follow their wealthier fans to the suburbs to avoid the conflicts and tensions that were dominating so many of America’s urban centers.”38 In Detroit, the Lions football team moved to suburban Pontiac while the Pistons basketball franchise relocated to nearby Auburn Hills. In Chicago, journalistic accounts revealed that White Sox owners Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn refused to finance routine maintenance costs for Comiskey Park located in a predominately African American neighborhood on the city’s South Side.39 Their goal was to justify that the stadium was structurally unsafe in order to convince the city to finance a new ballpark in Chicago’s western suburbs.40 Behind the scenes, Reinsdorf negotiated with Washington D.C, Indianapolis, Buffalo, and St. Petersburg as possible relocation sites to pressure the city into compliance. While White Sox ownership did not receive the suburban ballpark they had so desperately fought for, they finally received a new facility on Chicago’s South Side which opened in 1991 after a series of lengthy delays.41

Indeed, the multipurpose stadium assembly line symbolized early attempts at urban renewal. When Riverfront Stadium opened in Cincinnati in 1970, it was praised as a “world class” facility and a symbol of civic achievement at a time in which urban areas were on the rapid decline.42 In the same year, the opening of Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh was accompanied by a front page story in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that observed how “it
obviously made a big hit with first nighters. Clearly they fell in love with it. They used adjectives such as terrific, great, and fantastic. But the most commonly heard word was: beautiful.”

Unfortunately, multipurpose stadiums were cookie-cutter doughnut-shaped bowls that valued function over aesthetics that in later decades would be casually dismissed as cold, sterile, and desolate environments to watch a game, especially for baseball.

There is no question that the great stadium construction wave of the 1960s and 1970s was galvanized by racial factors. While many of these facilities were multiuse structures that were intended to accommodate larger crowds for the booming popularity of professional football, their geographical locations exhibited a conscious sensitivity to providing convenient access and exit for suburban fans. Whether these stadiums were situated near highways that provided easy accessibility in and out of the city, or within the “safe” confines of suburbia altogether, the shifting racial demographics of the American landscape influenced these developments. The city, a graphic symbol of cultural and physical decay, deterioration, and racial strife contrasted with the predictable safety, security, and localized spatial control of the average suburb. Team owners were assuredly attentive to the ways inner city ballparks, stadiums, and arenas could influence attendance numbers and the profitability of their respective franchises. While the city has not completely transcended its image as a dangerous space, urban renewal policies that focus on new stadium construction aim to make the city “safe” for the suburban consumer. It is through this particular emphasis on urban regeneration that team owners have been able to leverage taxpayer subsidies for new stadiums from desperate municipalities, accompanied by threats of franchise relocation to amplify the pressure.

The Stadium Game and Taking Back the City for the Suburban Class
In 1960, 31% of Americans resided in the suburbs, 44.8% by 1980, and over 50% by the year 2000. Meanwhile, African Americans were held responsible for the decay, crime, and deterioration of America’s inner cities with little or no acknowledgment of how discrimination, political disenfranchisement, residential segregation, and deindustrialization were responsible factors. As Robert Fishman writes, “every true suburb is the outcome of two opposing forces, an attraction toward the opportunities of the great city and a simultaneous repulsion against urban life.” The potentiality of urban space is one of thrill, excitement, and novelty, dynamics that are antithetical to the bland and stale conformity of the suburban milieu. There is little question that urban renewal policies are tacitly centered on reclaiming control of the city for the benefit and leisure of upper-income, suburban Americans who can safely consume its experiences within the kinds of heavily policed environments they demand. According to Allan Bryman, many cites have been given the Disney-fied makeover that invite suburbanites to consume novel “experiences” within highly sanitized environments monitored by both public and privatized systems of control. For Bryman, “citizenship under Disneyization almost comes to be defined in terms of one’s capacity to consume. Consequently…those without the capacity to consume or who are deemed to have a limited capacity to do so, or those who might hinder the consumption inclinations of consumers, are either excluded or kept under the watchful gaze of security cameras and guards.”

Indianapolis was just another Rust Belt city in 1970 struggling for both a national image and economic survival in the postindustrial economy of the United States. After annexing suburban neighborhoods to reclaim lost tax revenue and other resources stemming from suburbanization, a national study indicated that Indianapolis suffered from a “nonimage.” According to Mark Rosentraub, “it was simply unknown to too many Americans.” With the
exception of the annual Indianapolis 500, the city existed as a simple footnote in the national imaginary, a place located somewhere in Indiana but otherwise sitting in the middle of nowhere.

At this time, the Lilly Endowment supported a local growth coalition that coveted a sports-based development strategy that would be directed toward branding the city as an amateur sports capital.\textsuperscript{53} While many new sports facilities at the time were built in the suburbs, civic officials and business leaders in Indianapolis decided that their new facilities should be located downtown. The plan included luring the Indianapolis Pacers from their suburban home four miles outside the city with a new downtown arena that would double as an amateur sports facility for championships and other exhibitions. In addition, a nearby convention center would be renovated and expanded into a domed sports facility to coax an existing NFL franchise to move to Indianapolis. Less than a year after the stadium’s dedication in September of 1984, the Baltimore Colts left the suburbs of Baltimore for Indianapolis after a failed stadium deal.\textsuperscript{54} With two major league franchises in a new downtown stadium and arena, in addition to the annual Indianapolis 500, the city’s image and symbolic capital was significantly enhanced from the national media coverage that these new facilities generated. As Rosentraub remarks, “everything seemed possible in the wake of the Colts’ move from Baltimore.”\textsuperscript{55}

Indianapolis is offered as a successful exemplar of a sports-based development plan that triumphantly bolstered the city’s economy and international status. However, a powerful dark undercurrent persisted that politicians, business leaders, and the media failed to address, specifically those persons who would be underserved by these “big ticket” items built at their own expense. It is not uncommon for civic leaders to make exaggerated claims about the economic benefits of new sports facilities, the numerous jobs that will be created, and the fan spending that will be stimulated in and around the ballpark, stadium, or arena.\textsuperscript{56} Yet, as
Cleveland union activist John Ryan stated, “none of these are jobs that the mayor hugs his kids and says, ‘I hope that you can get one of those jobs someday.’” The overall impact that a professional sports franchise has on a local economy largely indicates the brevity of these exaggerations as professional sports-related jobs encompass only 1% of all private-sector jobs. Notwithstanding, Mark Rosentraub argues that cities must auspiciously create a consumer-focused brand identity in the new global economy where businesses are provided geographical flexibility by virtue of technological developments in communication and transportation. “The changing structure of the United States and world economy…meant that companies could now locate where the best and brightest workers wanted to live. As people’s incomes rose, they also wanted to live in areas that offered a greater number of varied and interesting tourism experiences through the unique entertainment produced by sports, art, culture, and other amenities.”

Unquestionably, professional team owners have generously profited from renewal strategies anchored in “civilizing” urban space. Of course, much of this is driven by the monopoly status of professional sports that limits the amount of teams far below the number of cities willing to host them. By operating as legally sanctioned cartels, they are insulated from many of the free market dynamics that other forms of business are subjected to. Consequently, relocation threats are an effective means for team owners to leverage the new facilities they demand. During the 1980s, several Major League baseball teams, such as the Chicago White Sox, Seattle Mariners, Texas Rangers, and San Francisco Giants threatened relocation to St. Petersburg (where the unused Sun Coast Dome, now Tropicana Field awaited) in order to leverage new stadiums at home. This is not to suggest that all relocation threats are empty, strategic bluffs; many franchises have actually moved after team owners were unable to extract
public subsidies for a new facility. After the conclusion of the 1995 NFL season, Cleveland Browns owner Art Modell moved his team to Baltimore after a failed new stadium deal despite several seasons of sellout crowds at existing Cleveland Municipal Stadium. The NFL Houston Oilers relocated to Nashville after the 1997 season after owner Bud Adams’ unsuccessful attempt for a new stadium to replace the Astrodome. After Houston learned its lesson of what could happen to a city if they did not answer to ownership demands, they publicly subsidized new facilities for baseball’s Houston Astros and an NFL expansion franchise, the Houston Texans. Texans’ owner Bob McNair stated that after the Oiler’s departure, “there was concern we could lose the Astros. It was a wake-up call.” Oliver Luck, former Oiler’s quarterback and then member of the Houston County-Houston Sports Authority remarked, “That’s the irony. Bud’s leaving was the catalyst for a massive public funding of stadiums [in Houston].”

It is important to note that public subsidies for new stadium construction have not always been the norm in professional sports. While the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, Soldier Field in Chicago, and Municipal Stadium in Cleveland were funded through taxpayer assistance, most stadiums in the late 19th through the mid-20th century were privately financed by team owners. However, when baseball’s Boston Braves departed to Milwaukee in 1953 where a taxpayer funded facility awaited them, “teams began to see the value of a new publicly funded stadium.” In 1952, the Boston Braves drew only 281,000 fans for the entire season but after moving to Milwaukee, attracted 67,714 fans in its first two games alone. By the end of the season, team attendance for the Milwaukee Braves exceeded 2 million fans, a 750% increase from the season prior. Consequently, team owners pushed for publicly funded stadiums that would hopefully reproduce the same degrees of economic success of the Milwaukee model. New facilities were erected in New York, St. Louis, Houston, Oakland, Anaheim, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh,
Philadelphia, and Kansas City as part of a great wave of new stadium construction in the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, the Braves migrated to Atlanta in 1965 where a more architecturally modern and publicly subsidized stadium awaited them in a larger television market in the South.

Within a few decades after the majority of these stadiums had been constructed, owners and fans complained of their obsolescence, especially the multipurpose stadiums designed for professional football and baseball. Much of this had to do with the opening of Baltimore’s Camden Yards, home of the Orioles (MLB) and its retro architectural aesthetic of exposed brick and steel characteristic of pre-World War II baseball stadiums that visually transplanted fans back to a “mythic past” situated in downtown, rather than suburban, settings.\textsuperscript{67} The cavernous, cookie-cutter multipurpose stadiums that served as the home of many MLB and NFL teams were objectionable to many baseball purists. Camden Yards was unprecedented in its ability to capitalize on and admonish America’s cultural nostalgia, specifically suburbia’s yearning for a consumable experience of the past from the Disney-fied mold.

As a consequence, Major League owners elsewhere leveraged new stadium deals with promises that such would stimulate urban renewal with a new facility that copied the Camden model. New “retro” baseball-only stadiums were built in Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Houston, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh each with optimistic accounts of economic benefits that rather served ownerships’ demand for novel facilities with additional revenue streams that could be profitably exploited.\textsuperscript{68} Many professional franchises in the NFL, NBA, and the NHL received new stadiums and arenas as urban renewal policies centered on a pro-sports growth strategy. In addition, part of the rationalization for the stadium construction boom in the four major professional sports was based on civic officials avoiding the charge of favoritism if a city subsidized a new facility for one sports team and not the others.\textsuperscript{69} The cultural capital and
visibility of sport in an urban renewal culture, coupled with the monopoly status of professional sports leagues, ensured ownerships’ upper hand in the stadium game.

Of course, new stadiums are desirable because they incorporate supplemental revenue streams that are absent in older facilities. The most notable are additional luxury boxes which can be rented by corporations and other wealthy constituents for a higher premium compared to those in older facilities that lack the necessary novelty and prestige. Amenities are specifically appealing, such as themed bars and restaurants, exotic food and beverage options, shopping malls, and merchandising outlets, through which owners can extract greater degrees of revenue from patrons by offering a “fan-focused” experience. While older facilities included some of these options, they were not as structurally dominant nor were these stadiums and arenas catering to consumers rather than fans. Today, ownership views these facilities not only as spaces where games take place, but as an experience that generate higher levels of consumption through a commitment to be consumer-friendly. As the Cleveland Indians Baseball Company remarked about new Jacobs Field (now Progressive Field), “Fans at Jacobs Field are offered a customer-focused experience in an attractive, comfortable environment featuring a variety of amenities, concessions, and merchandise options.”

One representative involved in the planning of the Atlanta Braves’ (MLB) new park, Turner Field, stated that “if we are going to hook people on baseball, we don’t do it by making them sit through nine innings. If we can make the experience more pleasurable, we should.”

In order to maximize the profitability of these new revenue streams, team owners must engage the cultural and political emotions, prejudices, fantasies, and desires of a more financially prosperous public who can be counted on to consume. While I will discuss the significance of this strategy later, it is important to note that new sports facilities are not inclusive spaces that
are, indeed, open for the pleasure and benefit of everyone, in spite of the oft-repeated pretensions to the contrary. This is important because much of the tax revenue that is directed toward new stadium construction comes from people who may not be legitimately served by a new stadium due to the rising costs of attendance. As a matter of fact, it is these same groups that have consistently resisted taxpayer revenue being diverted toward new stadium construction and away from more vital public and social needs. According to Peter Eisinger most referenda for new stadiums and arenas are routinely voted down by the public, which is precisely the reason that many civic officials and team owners seek to avoid them through legal maneuvering whenever possible.  

Stadium referenda can provide an illusion of democracy that does not guarantee that the public’s voice will ultimately prevail. In Seattle, voters rejected a $336 million dollar bond for the construction of a new facility for the Mariners (MLB) only to have the decision overturned by the Washington Supreme Court. A few years prior in Cleveland, 56% of city residents turned down a taxpayer subsidy for a new baseball stadium for the Indians. In response, public officials extended the vote to the suburbs and successfully garnered the necessary support. This example of political gerrymandering had previously occurred in Denver when civic officials sought a suburban vote after city residents disapproved public funding of Coors Field for the Rockies (MLB). A more egregious example occurred in Chandler, Arizona after a referendum was issued to decide whether public funds would be allocated for a spring training facility for a Major League Baseball team. When the mayor was asked what he predicted the outcome would be, he stated bluntly that “if voters pass this, we’ll move forward. If the voters don’t pass this, we’ll still move forward.”
In other cases, franchises have been subjected to elimination threats by league officials as an additional power play to corner their host cities into submission for a new stadium or arena. In 2000, Commissioner of Major League Baseball Bud Selig announced his plan to contract the league by two teams which he claimed would restore competitive balance between small and large market clubs. Although a “blue-ribbon” panel recommended that contraction could be avoided through increased revenue sharing, luxury taxes imposed on high spending franchises, and an international draft, Selig ignored these suggestions. Instead, he recommended the Minnesota Twins and Montreal Expos for elimination, two teams struggling to get new stadium proposals approved in their respective cities.

In fairness, contracting the Expos did make some sense due to waning fan support and embarrassingly dismal attendance numbers that the team attracted playing in cavernous Olympic Stadium. The facility had been built for the 1976 Olympics and was subsequently renovated to be a permanent home for the Expos who had been playing at nearby Jarry Park since entering the National League as an expansion franchise in 1969. Ironically, the league had previously threatened revoking the franchise in the early 1970s after the team and the city of Montreal failed to secure a new stadium. However, when the city won the International Olympic Committee’s bid to host the 1976 Summer Games in 1974 based on a commitment that the necessary facilities would be put to longer term use, the Expos were saved because one of the new facilities would be converted to a baseball stadium. In the end, the Expos’ home was saddled with a non-functioning retractable roof and other structural flaws that left the city $1 billion in debt that would not be fully paid until 2006.

Meanwhile, the Minnesota Twins were a championship caliber club with loyal fan support, yet were unsuccessful in attaining a new stadium to replace the Metrodome which had
only been open since 1982. In response to the recommendation made by Selig and team owners to contract the franchise, the Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission in Minneapolis successfully sued the Twins to honor a performance clause to play in the Metrodome in 2002. The plans for contraction were never realized, yet Minnesota took the threat seriously enough that a stadium initiative for a new facility eventually passed in 2005. In the meantime, Major League Baseball purchased the Montreal Expos for $120 million in 2002 with ambitions of relocating the franchise to a more lucrative market. Selig passively entertained offers from potential host cities while patiently awaiting for the most lucrative offer which eventually came from Washington D.C. (where the Expos would be renamed the Washington Nationals) in an unprecedented deal that promised a new facility financed entirely by the public.\textsuperscript{79}Sports economist and critic Andrew Zimbalist stated that “a plausible explanation for the contraction gambit is that owners were seeking leverage in the stadium and player markets. Threaten to eliminate the Twins and maybe Minneapolis or St. Paul would finally put up the public funds to build the team a new facility. Threaten to eliminate the Expos and maybe the Washington D.C. market would produce a solid ownership group and support stadium funding.”\textsuperscript{80}

When Commissioner Bud Selig testified before Congress regarding Major League Baseball’s alleged financial problems in 2002, he cited the Boston Red Sox as a representative example of the league’s dire economic future. According to Selig, the Red Sox had incurred $21.93 million dollars in operating losses from 1995 to 2001, nearly half of which ($13.7 million) occurring in 2001 alone. Ironically, an ownership group at the time was willing to pay $700 million to purchase the team and its assets. While it is commonly known that franchise values are strategically inflated, Selig was using the example of the Red Sox to persuade Congress that the financial future of Major League Baseball was in dire jeopardy. Furthermore,
his testimony reinforced the message that owners had commonly repeated, namely that the public would have to favor public subsidies of new stadiums in order to “save” their teams from financial ruin or relocation.

Of course, I should note that public funds that used toward these projects does not mean that money would be necessarily directed toward more urgent public needs if no stadium proposals were in place. Often, new taxes are momentarily imposed to raise the necessary revenues, such as ticket surcharges and sales tax increases. Nevertheless, if the facilities are being used to generate private profit, then it stands to reason that they should be privately financed instead of having constituents pay additional taxes to finance them. However, the monopoly status of professional sports leagues, where the number of teams is far below the number of cities willing to host them, does not yield an environment where team owners feel they should. Given the visibility and symbolic capital of professional sports, their capacity to brand a city as “major league” in an era of interurban competition is certainly advantageous for the ownership class of professional sports.

One, Two, Three Beers Yer’ Out: Sanitizing the Sports “Experience” for the Suburban Class

The mascot of baseball’s Milwaukee Brewers, known simply as Bernie the Brewer, was and iconic and legendary crowd favorite at old County Stadium known for sliding into a large beer keg to celebrate Brewer home runs. These antics personified Milwaukee’s beard-wearing, working class culture as County Stadium solidified its reputation as “baseball’s blue collar bastion.” In 2001, the Brewers began play in the new publicly financed Miller Park, named after the famed Miller Brewing Company who negotiated a 20 year, $41.1 million dollar naming rights deal with the club. Unfortunately, Bernie’s beer keg was superseded by a yellow slide
that carries the mascot onto an unceremonious flat scaffold after each Brewer home run. In an effort to be more family friendly, Bernie’s niche was cleaned up, symbolizing a departure from working class fare such as oversized beer kegs and an alcoholic mascot. Never mind the obvious irony of a stadium named after a beer company, or that the team itself is called the “Brewers,” or that one of the park’s concourses itself is named “The Keg.” Instead, upper income fans who could afford tickets to the new ballpark would not have to worry about such a visible salute to Milwaukee’s working class, beer drinking culture or the impression it could have on children that beer kegs are suitable way to celebrate a homer. I argue that family friendly policies are indeed attempts to lure families to the ballpark because they form an ideal consumptive group. However, these attempts also signify an implicit and covert form of classism that is more aligned with the politics of exclusion that operate in tandem toward creating a socially upscale, consumer-focused, and novel landscape.

I am not endorsing the manner in which working class culture has been discursively aligned with irresponsible alcohol consumption within the cultural imaginary nor am I suggesting that fans from all social classes do not benefit from family-friendly policies that curb intoxication. Even if the positive outcomes of these measures are ostensibly shared my most, the issue is that they are motivated by appealing to a particular class audience in which inclusivity is not a goal desired by them nor the team owners addressing them. Alcohol consumption is not limited to a particular social class, yet the degree to which the activity is considered deviant depends on the socioeconomic status of the individual because of cultural assumptions that often link social class with moral conduct. Family-friendly policies appeal to an upper income audience who, because of their class identity, are always already presumed to be morally disciplined because of the “common sense” assumptions owing to our ideas of personal and
economic success. As we will see, fan codes of conduct, operating under the umbrella of family-friendliness, discursively position working class culture in particular ways, namely the kinds of irresponsible alcohol consumption these policies are specifically targeting. While even working class fans may enjoy the benefits of the family-friendly ethos of professional sports, they are not the targeted audience to which they are directed.

In new sports stadiums across the country, owners have had to navigate a tension between providing a family friendly experience and profiting handsomely from the sale of overpriced alcoholic beverages that have traditionally been traditionally linked to sports spectatorship. As Lawrence Wenner notes, “wetting one’s whistle while watching sports has become a naturalized artifact of fanship. Beer, in particular, has a longstanding cultural association to those enmeshed in sports.”84 For example, Chicago Cubs fans consume approximately 29,000 cups a beer per game at historic Wrigley Field while beer and wine sales increase an average of 34% during the week of the Super Bowl.85 Of course, the relationship between alcohol and sports was not always a partnership celebrated by team owners particularly because of its association as a working class beverage. As a matter of fact, the history of alcohol and sports is no less a discussion of inclusion, as purification policies limiting consumption of alcoholic beverages were often linked with protecting the gentility of elites. In 1881, the National League banned the sale of beer at ballparks, specifically targeting working class fans to appeal to the gentile sensibilities of sober, upper class patrons. This encouraged Pittsburgh owner Denny McKnight to form another professional baseball league called the American Association, otherwise known as the “Beer and Whiskey League,” that profited from the sale of alcohol at games.86
Indubitably, the linkage between alcohol and sports fandom became crystallized many years later as a natural pastime that enriched the experience of consuming sports due to the various sponsorship deals leagues had with beer companies. As a matter of fact, the macho-image of professional sports was exploited by beer companies in their sales pitch to masculinize light beer to a male sporting public that largely dismissed it as a women’s drink. In 1973, the advertising company McCann-Erickson developed the first Miller Lite ads, featuring NFL stars Matt Snell and Ernie Stautner that incorporated the memorable slogan “Tastes Great, Less Filling.” This was followed years later by Miller’s “Lite All Stars” comprised of sporting icons such as John Madden, Dick Butkus, Mickey Mantle, and Deacon Jones. Within five years, sales for light beer increased from 7 to 31 million barrels a year.87

Today, the relationship between sports and alcohol is no longer regarded as innocently as it once was as many professional sports teams are more vigilantly policing alcohol’s consumption inside the stadium gates. While there may be nothing objectionable toward curbing intoxication, I argue that it is but one rhetorical strategy for pacifying suburban anxieties toward a “threatening” world of moral indifference. In this manner, new sports stadiums must strategically embody a suburbanized ethic of moral purity to magnetically draw suburban fans to downtown ballparks and arenas. According to Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, the growth of gated communities in the United States is a modern incarnation of the suburban phenomena, as financially well-off families are seeking more isolated, policed, and exclusive communities in which to live.88 The gates themselves speak to a heightened fear of the world as a dangerous cesspool of vice, immorality gone wild, and unconstrained fear toward racial and class diversity that typify a so-called progressive society.
According to G. Scott Thomas, suburbanites harbor several neoliberal assumptions regarding the autonomy of the individual that are inspired by Horatio Alger-styled myths of personal responsibility, economic opportunity, and financial success.\textsuperscript{89} John McMurria observes that “neoliberals blame society’s ills on the immoral values of deadbeat dads or lazy welfare mothers who exploit entitlement programs.”\textsuperscript{90} It is because of these assumptions that professional team owners must regulate alcohol consumption in an effort to hinder deviant behaviors attributed to intoxication and its associated moral undertones. While claiming to be family friendly, owners are certainly attentive that behavioral permissiveness in the ballpark will offend suburban fans whose moral anxieties extend to those behaviors typically ascribed to the working class. Christopher Lasch notes how healthy lifestyles are themselves markers of social class identity and that cigarette smoking and excessive beer consumption are behaviors commonly associated with working class culture often viewed as morally permissive.\textsuperscript{91}

Thus, to stem the anxieties and fears of the suburban class that must travel downtown to see a game, ballparks and their surrounding spaces must show that surveillance is everywhere, that security is alert and vigilant, and that the “dangerous” underclass is thoroughly contained.\textsuperscript{92} It is a means to ease the burden of having to watch your back wherever you go; it is a trusted ally for “decent and responsible” suburban fans against the burgeoning vice and criminality of the world. Ronald Lee and Shawn T. Walhl remark that:

\begin{quote}
It does not seem so many years ago, as we reminisce through an admittedly sentimental lens, that kids went running out the front door in the morning, ran all over the neighborhood with friends, congregated in a vacant lot to play ball, and then came home again for supper. Now, we have indoor playgrounds, supervised sports leagues, nanny-cams, and surveillance cameras mounted in school doorways.\
\end{quote}
However, it is no longer enough to alleviate the fears associated with urban sports stadiums through a constant and visible presence of security personnel. The fact that behavior must be more vigilantly monitored by inviting fans to participate within larger and more centralized surveillance efforts suggests that the forces of a violent world are achieving momentum and, thus, must be more forcefully combatted and contained by inviting fans in the effort. Fan Codes of Conducts rhetorically invite stadiums patrons to occupy the dual role of fan and policeman that reassures their sense of safety through a complimentary degree of localized control and personalized degree of power over that space.

Most teams in the NHL and MLB each have Fan Code of Conduct policies that stipulate, with some ambiguity, which behaviors are not permitted while the NFL and the NBA have similar league wide policies that all teams and fans must adhere to. This contributes rhetorically to manufacturing the association that team owners are trying to ameliorate between professional sports and family values. For example, the NFL’s Miami Dolphins include a “Sun Life [Stadium] Fan Code of Conduct” on the club’s website that prohibits, among other things, “intoxication, or other signs of impairment related to alcohol consumption.” Fans are encouraged to report violations of the Code of Conduct to stadium personnel by physically alerting nearby security staff or, more inconspicuously, via text message. The particular audience being addressed in this statement is telling as it reassures the sober-minded, family-oriented fans that their enjoyment and safety is an utmost priority and that the morally undisciplined must be expelled. One cannot divorce the third persona in this statement, the one who is intoxicated, from social class. As a matter of fact, the suburban imaginary that associates socioeconomic status with hard working, moral discipline is acutely aware that those who indulge in alcohol represents a moral failing that is tacitly connected to working and lower class behavior.
Other organizations in the NFL have extended the Code of Conduct beyond the stadium gates, regulating what behaviors are allowed for tailgating parties prior to games. Ken Johnson claims to be a lifelong fan of the Buffalo Bills and his alcohol-infused binges in the parking lot outside of Ralph Wilson Stadium have turned him into a local icon. While his customary tradition of cooking meat on the hood of a 1980 Pinto is fairly benign, the Bills organization determined that Johnson’s drinking Polish cherry liqueur out of the holes of a bowling ball was not family friendly. Prior to the Bills’ home opener in September, 2010, a league official told Johnson that he would need to move from a nearby stadium lot because of his repelling effect on families. In response, Johnson relocated from the lot where his pregame ritual had been a staple of Bills’ home games for over twenty years. He stated that “in my case, I do push the limits, so I can’t scream too loudly. But you wonder how many people go to games because of characters like me. I think I add to the experience.” However, Johnson’s brand of experience was attractive to the wrong kind of fans. According to Jeffrey Miller, the NFL Director of Strategic Security Programs, the league has been targeting this kind of behavior to remain profitable during the economic recession. Thus, they must be sensitive to upper income fans, typically less impacted by the recession, who might see activities such as Johnson’s as working class, fraternity-inspired nonsense. “Irregardless [sic] of the fact that he may have been doing this over the course of a number of years, it doesn’t make it right. People taking shots out of a bowling ball actually has the effect of repelling families.”

Of course, even high income fans drink, sometimes excessively, and thus can easily violate the rules of the Code of Conduct. However, the degree to which these activities are tolerated by other fans is another form of classism that sports team owners and fans are performing. As philosopher Alain de Botton states, money and social status in the United States
carry within them a “moral connotation” suggesting that economic affluence and moral virtue are inextricably intertwined in America’s self-proclaimed meritocratic society.\textsuperscript{98} “Faith in an increasingly reliable connection between merit and worldly success in turn endowed money with a new moral quality. The rich were not only wealthier, it seemed that they might also be plain better.”\textsuperscript{99} Thus, the degree to which a transgression of the Code of Conduct occurs depends on the perceived social status of the offender. It is important to note that the Code of Conduct does not discriminate explicitly by social class for the benefit of a preferred group of consumers, yet it is addressed to upper income fans for their benefit. As stated in the NFL Code of Conduct, “We want all fans attending our games to enjoy the experience [emphasis mine] in a responsible fashion.”\textsuperscript{100} However, it implicitly targets behaviors typically associated with the lower working class who are stereotypically appraised as more indulgent, expressive, less restrained, and by virtue of their social class, less moral. As a matter of fact, these characteristics form the basis by which working class identity is performed and through their hegemony within that culture ensure their reproduction.

Thus, Fan Codes of Conduct that are coupled with the increased presence and visibility of security staff perform the suburbanized ethic in that sports stadiums must mirror the social exclusivity and surveillance-based ethos of isolated suburban and gated communities. While many working class fans still attend games, the stadium environment rhetorically encourages forms of self-discipline often attributed to those of a higher class. It is a question of not only who claims ownership of family values which suburbanites certainly do but whose anxieties are simultaneously put to ease by these various fan codes. According to Daniel Rosensweig, new stadiums “have become the centerpieces of efforts to renew the American city” that are
“dramatic symbols…of the need to cleverly choreograph an experience attracting and satisfying a still-expanding suburban population.”  

Sports Stadiums, Spectacle, and Rituals of Consumption.

The focus on providing a family friendly experience for fans is premised on a rhetoric of innocence that simultaneously valorizes the various acts of consumption that take place inside the stadium walls as similarly innocent and, hence, apolitical. My emphasis will center on the manufacturing of stadium experiences that create spectacular landscapes that rhetorically privilege the primacy of consumption as a naturalized compliment to the experience of attending sporting events. Here, I am not simply focused on consumption as the act of buying particular team goods, merchandise, and amenities. Rather, the entire spectacle becomes part of that consumer-focused experience that new stadiums offer. Not only must team owners satisfy the suburban fan’s desire for social exclusivity within confines where surveillance is constantly present, but also in providing an experience whose essential novelty satisfies the consumption inclinations of affluent fans. The incorporation of greater degrees of spectacle is not only tantamount to the creation of a novel landscape, but satisfies a certain level of trendiness and consumer-focused uniqueness that upper income fans demand.

When 39 year old firefighter Shannon Stone fell to his death in July, 2011 after he attempted to catch a foul ball at Rangers Ballpark in Texas, Rangers president Nolan Ryan stated that “We’re about making memories…You can see how many people come into our ballpark with gloves, just hoping to have that opportunity [of catching a ball]. That’s just part of the experience of being here.” After the Rangers organization announced that they were going to honor Stone with a statue outside of their home ballpark named “Rangers Fans,” Ryan reinforced
the idea that it would “represent what I think we’re about and that’s about making memories for our fans and families.” There is nothing objectionable about attending live sports being a memorable experience as long as it is an experience that aims to be as inclusive as possible.

While professional sports have enjoyed many memorable moments, Ryan’s quotes suggest that professional sports organizations are in the business of actively manufacturing them. With sports having become a common and banal programming option, their ability to operate as a spectacle is significantly reduced outside of certain mega-events such as the Super Bowl and other championships. Thus, the stadium itself becomes the symbolic territory through which the effectiveness of spectacle is significantly restored through an incessant priority on manufactured experiences, both visual and environmental.

As Mark Rosentraub suggests, city officials learned through a laborious process of trial and error that the success of urban renewal strategies, in part, depended on creating novel urban landscapes that provided consumer options that the suburbs could not. Thus, seducing professional sports franchises back to the inner city by publicly subsidizing new stadium construction would function as the magnet to draw the “visitors class” from the suburbs. Many of these facilities consciously focused on the spectacle of the visually aesthetic, such as the famed Camden Yards in Baltimore, which operated alongside cost prohibitive ticket prices to attract suburban fans. According to James and Nancy Duncan, the significance of aesthetics in any particular landscape is layered with social class dimensions that mirror the socioeconomic position of those who both occupy and create them. They contend that “landscapes are integral to the performance of social identities” that can be “stabilized or fixed in architectural forms.” Many of the older facilities, such as the cookie-cutter multipurpose stadiums that many professional baseball and football teams shared, were not viewed as aesthetically appealing nor,
for that matter, especially suitable for the performance of upper class identity. Thus, new stadiums and arenas had to incorporate various degrees of visual spectacle into their architectural design that not only expressed a degree of novelty, but a recognizable level of representational sophistication befitting the upper income patrons who would be drawn there.

Without qualification, what is aesthetically pleasant in terms of a sports stadium is significantly impacted by wider social, political, and economic currents that constitute a given historical moment and social context. As Robert Trumpbour notes, many of the multipurpose stadiums of the 1960s and 1970s that came to be regarded as “ugly” and “sterile” in the 1990s were once hailed as tangible symbols of architectural innovation and forward-thinking progress when they first appeared on the sporting landscape. Contemporary notions of what is aesthetically pleasurable in sports stadiums has had the effect of rubbing off on classic facilities whose visual character and ambiance are more authentic than the Disney-fied simulacra of newer stadiums that aim to recreate their charm. For example, as new retro baseball stadiums became more common, the cultural and symbolic capital of older venues such as Boston’s Fenway Park and Chicago’s Wrigley Field was significantly elevated. Today, they are tourist-oriented destinations where owners charge a premium for a ticket, thus operating as what I refer to as a status-scape. More specifically, they are spaces whose access is in such demand yet so intensely limited, that being able to afford a ticket provides the holder a certain degree of social status and personal esteem because of its apparent cost-based exclusivity.

Yet, some owners would deny such characterization by employing symbolic gestures heavily infused with working class inflections to market the idea of equality and inclusiveness. A recent Associated Press article reported that the Chicago Cubs had negotiated a brewing rights deal with Old Style Brewing Company which had long fashioned its reputation as “a throwback
According to the author, “it’s an anachronism to the frequent criticism from crosstown White Sox fans that Wrigley is filled with yuppies less interested in the game than taking photos of one another.” However, it was a gesture that was aimed primarily toward the same yuppies who attend Wrigley Field not necessarily as fans, but as consumers of novel and trendy experiences. According to Cubs spokesman Kevin Saghy, “For more than six decades Cubs fans have been drinking Old Style beer at Wrigley Field and it has always been part of the gameday experience at this legendary ballpark.” Lost on Saghy was that this same Wrigley tradition had itself become a commodity largely for fans who would otherwise never be caught drinking Old Style beer but for its status as part of the so-called authentic Wrigley Field consumable experience off limits to virtually all but the more financially privileged fan. As a form of tourism of working class fare, it speaks to the relative void of authenticity of the superficial, corporate feel and taste of professional sports. Drinking Old Style beer is but a half-baked and ironic attempt to “keep it real” within highly controlled and manufactured sporting landscapes.

When a new football stadium opened for the Dallas Cowboys in 2009, it not only included the usual consumer amenities and upscale leisure options such as themed bars and restaurants but also caged-female dancers and a mammoth high-definition LED television suspended above the playing field. Known as “Jerry Vision” after team owner Jerry Jones, the NFL asked Jones to raise the large in-house television screen after expressing legitimate concerns that it could interfere with gameplay. As a matter of fact, these concerns were realized during a 2009 preseason game between the Cowboys and Jacksonville Jaguars when Jacksonville kicker A.J. Trapasso hit the television with a punt. When the Commissioner of the NFL asked Jones to raise it, he declined by indicating that it would interfere with the
To the surprise of many, the $40 million dollar price tag for the Mitsubishi HDTV exceeded the entire cost of the Cowboys’ previous home, Texas Stadium, which opened in 1971 and closed in 2008. Not only would the giant Distractatron “wow” attendees, Jones would also use the field television set that extends between the 21 yard lines as additional advertising space. According to Jones, “[Fans] can’t turn away, so you can hammer them with your message.” Meanwhile, he compared the new Cowboys Stadium to a “modern day Colosseum [sic] of Rome” while Jack Hill, Director of Stadium Construction bragged that “we think it will be a lot of years until any other new stadium tops us.”

NFL commentator Al Michaels reinforced Jones’ metaphor during the Cowboys’ inaugural game on ESPN’s Sunday Night Football, gloating that “what the Roman Coliseum was to the First Century is what Cowboy’s Stadium is to the 21st Century.” This was complemented by a video montage that included images of the Pyramids, the Parthenon, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, and of course, the Roman Coliseum. As National Post columnist Bruce Arthur remarked, “The timelines don’t quite work out, but just as the Roman Coliseum became the centre [sic] of an empire in decline, so too, will the new Cowboys Stadium be the symbol of the American empire’s end.”

There is no question that ownership ego and corporate hubris are also complicit factors in the creation of these spectacular sporting palaces. According to Mark Yost:

Frequent guests in [Washington Redskins’] owner [Dan] Synder’s box include former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan and his wife, NBC news correspondent Andrea Mitchell, [former and late] congressman and NFL quarterback Jack Kemp, and other Washington power players. In Charlotte, bankers rather than politicians hobnob on the club level of Bank of America Stadium before Carolina Panthers’ games. At Denver’s
Invesco Field at Mile High Stadium, oil, gas, and real estate executives gather before Bronco’s games in the club level sponsored by United Airlines.\textsuperscript{120}

As I have noted previously, new sports stadiums are exploited by local corporate groups and other growth coalition members to recruit executive talent.\textsuperscript{121} Nicholas Archer notes that “in essence, the attraction of public underwriting of stadiums is to give team owners and corporate elites in cities ‘something to show off.’”\textsuperscript{122} Even Thornstein Veblein once remarked that “in order to gain and hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put into evidence, for esteem is only awarded on evidence.”\textsuperscript{123} This is certainly one of the motivations for new stadium construction as team owners and corporate elites seek attainment of these civic reminders of wealth and affluence within an interclass status game of their own creation.

However, these civic staples of affluence and wealth have the effect of “rubbing off” on the fans who can afford to purchase the tickets and consume the various amenities that generate the additional revenue streams that team owners are seeking. It is in this fashion that many new sports stadiums and arenas operate as a kind of \textit{status-scape} for an upwardly mobile, class-conscious group of fans whose consumption habits are the very means by which their class identity is performed. But it can also yield a feeling among lower class fans that, they too, \textit{have class} despite not being part of the ideal audience these rhetorical landscapes are meant to address. Thus, stadium spectacles are the resources through which \textit{social class} is rhetorically generated. As Dave Zirin remarks, “it’s no exaggeration, and even a cliché, to point out that the working class people have been priced out of attending sports events; it’s no longer possible for kids to trade in some milk bottles for tickets to the game.”\textsuperscript{124}
However, this need for sports stadiums to provide a novel experience beyond the game itself to attract upper income fans invites discussion of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* in which he argues is a social, political, and economic phenomena that emerges when the commodity has successfully colonized all social life.\textsuperscript{125} Debord describes how the enchantment of commodities is achieved through a perceived novelty, but that over time, such “spectacular prestige evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by a consumer – and hence, by other consumers too.”\textsuperscript{126} Douglas Kellner observes that the spectacle must continuously “outdo” all previous modes of enchantment in order to temporarily avert the inevitable outcome of boredom and alienation that an overproductive commodity culture eventually yields.\textsuperscript{127} According to Kellner, “it appears that professional sports, a paradigm of the spectacle, can no longer be played without the accompaniment of cheerleaders, giant mascots who clown with players and spectators, and raffles, promotions, and contests which hawk the products of various sponsors.”\textsuperscript{128} I would add that the typical fan who attends live sporting events is unlikely to enjoy watching sports in a venue that does not include shopping malls, bars and restaurants, interactive games, and merchandising shops. It is enough to say that professional sports stadiums and team owners are highly preoccupied with attracting and accommodating *consumers* rather than *fans* who demand greater degrees of spectacle to accompany higher ticket prices. Michael Butterworth writes that “in this way, spectatorship is divorced from the original product, favoring the broad consumption of food, souvenirs, and memorabilia over the critical appraisal of the team.”\textsuperscript{129} As a result, “the modern fan, then, can delight in the sensory experience of the ballpark without ever taking note that a game is taking place inside.”\textsuperscript{130} Yet, the manifestation of spectacle within sports stadiums yields the kinds of novelty, status, and consumer-focused experiences that address the desires of upper income patrons.
Alan Bryman’s thesis on “Disney-ization” highlights several revealing intersections between new stadium construction and the consumer-focused experiences that they intentionally foster. According to Bryman:

Disneyization is therefore integrally associated with consumption and in particular with what might be thought of consumerism and consumer culture – the pressure on consumers to buy more than they need and often want and consumers’ frequent willing compliance, a compliance associated with the conviction among many consumers that goods bestow meaning and are a source of identity.\(^{131}\)

Brian Longhurst and Nicholas Abercrombie reinforce this view, arguing that the inescapable infusion of mass media influences in everyday life has led to a situation in which performance is another integral aspect of everyday life.\(^{132}\) Thus, “life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event.”\(^{133}\) While certain elements of identity such as gender have long been viewed as performative, individual consumer choices are the resources by which these identities are primarily performed. Furthermore, contemporary definitions of citizenship have rhetorically linked this political designation primarily to the act of buying goods and services as quintessential democratic ideals of freedom and self-empowerment.\(^{134}\) Once again, Bryman states that “citizenship under Disneyization almost comes to be defined in terms of one’s capacity to consume.”\(^{135}\) Furthermore, he articulates that “consequently…those without the capacity to consume or who are deemed to have a limited capacity to do so, or those who might hinder the consumption inclinations of consumers are either excluded or kept under the watchful gaze of security cameras and guards.”\(^{136}\) Thus, if consumption is the means by which citizenship is defined, and if the capacity to consume defines the seriousness by which one’s citizenship is
viewed, then those without means are, as Bryman suggests, “limited citizens” and, as I would add, limited fans.\textsuperscript{137}

As I have argued previously, contemporary sports venues embody the Disney-fied ethos in order to attract higher income fans by crafting spectacular experiences that privilege the fan’s capacity to consume in a tightly monitored and highly controlled environment.\textsuperscript{138} George Ritzer and Todd Stillman note a dynamic of McDonaldization characterized by “efficiency, predictability, calcuability” that “[parallels] the gentrification of our cities.”\textsuperscript{139} In addition, they note that “the new ballparks are part of a transformation baseball and other spectator sports from a relatively accessible form of mass leisure” into an “increasingly exclusive, capital-intensive form of leisure.”\textsuperscript{140} Thus, the most direct and unmediated experience of professional sports is being defined as a socially exclusive ritual of consumption. While lower and working class fans are certainly not prohibited from purchasing a ticket, they nonetheless are entering an environment that does not acknowledge their presence except through the policing mechanisms that limit behaviors stereotypically associated with their class. New sports stadiums, like the gentrifying cities in which they are situated, make both overt and subtle claims that both the ideal citizen and ideal fan are defined by their social class and their capacity to consume. Once again, team owners scheme to seduce higher income fans to ballparks and stadiums in order to maximize the additional revenue streams incorporated into these new facilities. Meanwhile, these aesthetically-minded, exclusive landscapes provide an abundant set of resources through which an exclusive class identity is performed.

New York and Detroit: Two Attempts at Re-Brand ing the City for the Visitor’s Class
Like other urban centers throughout the United States, New York can be characterized as a “neoliberal” city that has emphasized free market solutions such as privatization and deregulation for its urban renewal and development.\textsuperscript{141} According to Julie Sze, new sports stadiums “are one key terrain through which intensifying neoliberal and cultural development is taking place in New York City.”\textsuperscript{142} New York has made significant and incomparable investments in stadium construction in recent years with new facilities for the New York Yankees, New York Mets, New York Giants and New York Jets (who share MetLife stadium), and the Brooklyn Nets in Atlantic Yards.\textsuperscript{143} Through these public investments, New York is seeking to reclaim and reestablish a “world class image” centered on high class lifestyles and consumption. Because of the media presence and visibility that sports command in contemporary society, sports stadiums became important sites in the rhetorical (re)imagining of New York within the national and global public.

According to Robert Trumpbour, “boosterism is woven into the fabric of New York” which no doubt owes much to the narcissistic, self-obsessive character of many who live there.\textsuperscript{144} \textit{New York Post} columnist Cindy Adams is a case in point, writing that “we are the capital of the world…We are Attitude City…We’ve got it all. If we ain’t got it, you don’t need it…The boonies have Motel 6. We have the Plaza, Pierre, Waldorf, St. Regis [and] Four Seasons…They have Main Street. We have Wall Street.”\textsuperscript{145} It is little wonder why the Occupy Wall Street movement highlighted the adversarial dichotomy between Wall Street and Main Street as part of its rhetoric. As new stadiums were being constructed in cities across the country, New York City leaders felt obligated to build their own that were more architecturally spectacular than its urban competitors. While each of New York’s new stadiums and arenas are each worthy of their own academic treatment, the majority of my focus here will center on New Yankee
Stadium that opened in 2009 for the Yankees baseball team. My reason for this is that this facility has generated the most media attention compared to other new sports stadiums in the New York City area. In addition, the Yankees’ unquestioned status as an international brand has made them one of the most culturally recognizable, mythologized, and iconic franchises in the world of professional sports. Furthermore, no sports team symbolizes New York’s moneyed ego and arrogance more than the Yankees whose undisciplined spending sprees for high-price free agents have made them the most hated, yet ironically beloved franchises in professional sports.

It is difficult to imagine a Yankee legacy without mention of their late owner George Steinbrenner. Known simply as “The Boss,” he made several threats during his ownership tenure to move the team from the Bronx to New Jersey, Connecticut, and Manhattan’s West Side Highway to pressure local officials to finance a new baseball stadium for the New York Yankees. These strategic maneuvers occurred a few decades after Steinbrenner was able to extract public funds from New York in order to renovate Yankee Stadium in the 1970s when the city was essentially broke. Steinbrenner was one of sports’ most recognized and colorful owners, known for his childish irritability and eccentric management style that included issuing “hair cut memorandums” to players with “long” hair. Less known perhaps was his arrest in connection to the Watergate scandal that led to a suspension by Major League Baseball, the first of two he would receive in his long ownership tenure.

Steinbrenner’s legend and mythic character was based, in part, by the Yankees’ iconic status as the most successful professional baseball franchise in Major League history. In addition to having won more World Series titles than any other team, they have fielded some of the game’s most recognizable and/or legendary players such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe
DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, and more recently, Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera, and Alex Rodriguez. The amount of media revenue they generate is unparalleled; Steinbrenner’s creation of the Yankee Entertainment and Sports Network (YES) which requires fans to purchase premium cable services to watch Yankee games is worth approximately $486 million. According to Dave Zirin, this gives the Yankees an “unassailable financial advantage over other teams” that simultaneously “allows them to exist in a financial universe different from any other team in baseball.” Unlike professional football which shares media revenue equally among all teams due to national television contracts, the majority of broadcasting revenue for Major League teams is generated from local radio and television contracts. This provides a noticeable and significant degree of economic separation between small, mid-sized, and large market franchises. Furthermore, the Yankees’ ability to capture a national audience on networks such as FOX and ESPN reinforces their cultural visibility and prestige as Major League Baseball’s most revered brand. The national sports networks’ quest to appease advertisers means that the nationally televised schedule for Major League Baseball consists heavily of those teams guaranteed to generate the highest ratings such as the Yankees, Boston Red Sox, and Philadelphia Phillies.

When the city of New York pledged to replace aging Yankee Stadium, the result was the priciest and most technologically-advanced facility ever built in North America at the time. With a final price tag of $1.5 billion dollars, $850 million from the sale of public bonds, the stadium served as the symbolic leviathan of the New York financial empire. It was a facility largely financed by the public for the enjoyment of the corporate class, incorporating 51 luxury suites, two expansive outdoor suites, eight party suites, and a video conferencing center designed for business meetings. Meanwhile, wealthy patrons were provided concierges that assisted them in securing theatre tickets and dinner reservations alongside an upscale martini bar and
members-only club. According to Yankees’ Chief Operating Officer Lonn Trost, “We’ve tried to reflect a five-star hotel [with] a ballfield in the middle.”

To be sure, the use of public funds for the construction of this “five star” playground yielded resistance by local community board members who objected to such massive subsidies being diverted toward the richest franchise in Major League Baseball. Those who voted against the appropriation of public funds for the project were promptly fired by Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion. After the Yankees signed free agent All Stars C.C. Sabathia, A.J. Burnett, and Mark Teixeira in 2008 for a combined $423.5 million, the team demanded an additional $380 million from the city for their new stadium. Citing cost overruns not covered by the project’s initial proposal, the Yankees would use the funds for $150 million in ballpark enhancements for a high definition scoreboard in center field, $138 million in food and beverage costs, and $50 million for delays incurred from local community lawsuits. In the meantime, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged $324 million in budget cuts for New York City public schools on top of an unannounced midyear cut of $100 million. In the midst of these controversial decisions, allegations of fraud circulated around New Yankee Stadium led by Representative Dennis Kucinich who reported fiscal improprieties and abuses in financing the park. The primary issue centered on whether city officials had pressured assessors to artificially inflate the proposed value of the new ballpark. Criticism of the new facility extended through Opening Day surrounding the tripling of ticket prices and the explosive home run totals that were caused by a wind tunnel effect in right field. Noted baseball analyst Peter Gammons, hardly a critical voice within sports journalism, stated that new Yankee Stadiums was “one of the biggest jokes in baseball.”
Old Yankee Stadium opened in 1923 as the first facility being named a “stadium” that Dave Zirin noted was “respected, even feared, but never loved.” After a quarter-ton expansion joint fell through the roof of Yankee Stadium’s loge level just days after Opening Day in 1998, Steinbrenner and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani found an event that could be effectively exploited in their push to replace it. Giuliani quipped that “you couldn’t have a more dramatic argument that the Yankees need a new stadium.” Craig Kilborn, then host of the Daily Show, joked that Steinbrenner could not be reached for comment regarding the incident because he was “at Sears returning a blowtorch and a hacksaw.” Giuliani iterated that the Yankees and Mets, who were also looking to replace Shea Stadium, were owed new facilities by the city. Yet, when Yankee Stadium was subsequently inspected to determine its structural safety, officials uncovered no further hazards beyond the Yankee’s negligence to perform a similar inspection for over a decade. Some journalists speculated, like Kilborn, that the falling beam was a staged event that Steinbrenner had orchestrated as definitive proof that Yankee Stadium was a crumbling relic from a bygone era.

Mayor Giuliani was proving to be an effective ally in Steinbrenner’s push for a new ballpark for the Yankees, even repeating the Yankee owner’s threat to move the team from the Bronx to downtown Manhattan if Yankee Stadium was not replaced. Giuliani had built a reputation for his “tough-on-crime” initiatives that appealed to voters who supported his uncompromising solution to New York’s growing poverty and homeless population. In one conversation, Giuliani justified the detaining of the city’s homeless through status-crime statutes, stating crudely that “most of these people belong in jail, and that’s where they’ll be.” By the 1990s, New York had successfully transcended its image as an urbanized enclave for beggars, drug dealers, and other miscreants, becoming “a model of the new city: safe, clean, and
prosperous, a place of opportunity where middle-class visitors could feel at home.”

It was prospering from a growing local economy, a profitable real-estate market, declining crime rates, and a budget surplus despite a growing undercurrent of poverty and institutional neglect. Yet, one area in which New York City was lacking “innovation” was in financing new facilities for its professional teams that were being built elsewhere across the country at an unprecedented pace. In 2000, *New York Post* columnist Richard Wilner wrote sympathetically about the “$3 billion sports stadium crisis” regarding public resistance to new facilities for the Yankees, Mets, Jets, and Knicks, asking “will fans ever get to experience a home game at a state-of-the-art stadium?”

Of course, Wilner did not make a necessary distinction between which class of fans would ultimately benefit from these “state-of-the-art” stadiums that were being proposed. One Yankee fan who opposed replacing old Yankee Stadium lamented that “if you build a new stadium for more luxury boxes, what that means is you would leave ordinary fans out. It will be a stadium for corporations, not a stadium for you and me.” This sentiment was appropriate given New York’s emergent reputation as a playground for a Mercedes-driving class that owed much to Wall Street and pro-business neoliberal policies that were creating a divided city between economic winners and losers. In the final days of his mayoral administration in 2002, Giuliani signed a non-binding $1.6 billion dollar stadium agreement with the Yankees and Mets that included a $390 million commitment from the state for related transportation projects. When both stadiums opened in 2009, they were regarded by the *New York Daily News* as the “Taj Mahals of baseball” that were “ushering in a new level of luxury to baseball.” Yankees fan Spencer McKenzie enthusiastically applauded New Yankee Stadium, stating that, “I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like they built a Ritz Carlton and put a stadium in it.” At the new Mets
home at Citi Field, one fan remarked, “let’s be honest here – Shea [Stadium] was a dump. Maybe knocking it down was an exorcism that will change the Mets’ luck. Now we have a major league home.”

The New York Mets were never as endearing to the city as the Yankees, entering the National League as an expansion franchise in 1962 that experienced one of the worst losing seasons in professional baseball history during its first year. Their previous home, Shea Stadium, was built as part of the World’s Fair in 1964-1965 and its futuristic bowl-shaped design inspired new multipurpose stadiums later constructed in places such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati. As a matter of fact, the construction of Shea Stadium antagonized Yankees’ ownership who charged the city with favoritism to guilt local officials into providing public subsidies for renovating Yankee Stadium in the 1970s. Meanwhile, the football Giants had relocated to New Jersey after they received a commitment for a new stadium. By the late 1990s, Mayor Giuliani was stubborn in his conviction that both the Mets and the Yankees needed new stadiums, even sending city officials to tour recently constructed ballparks in Baltimore and Colorado.

In 2009, new Yankee Stadium and Citi Field opened with a combined price tag of $2.3 billion mostly from the sale of tax-exempt bonds that would ultimately burden taxpayers $4 billion for new Yankee Stadium alone. Ironically, the Yankees organization had made previous promises that the entire cost of the stadium would be privately financed by the team, not the public. On Opening Day in 2009, ticket prices were between $5 for obstructed view seats to $2, 625 at Yankee Stadium while seats ranged between $11 and $625 dollars to watch the Mets at Citi Field. New York State Assemblyman Richard L. Brodsky stated, “I don’t know what you think about bank bailouts, but the public is spending $4 billion to build Yankee
Stadium, at a time we can’t fund the [subway system] and schools.” In response to the high ticket prices, Brodsky remarked “[The Yankees and Mets] have a stadium paid for by taxpayers that taxpayers cannot afford to get into.” Yankees President Randy Levine boasted that “it’s always George’s [Steinbrenner’s] philosophy: This is the Yankees, everything has to be done first-rate. We wanted…to create a stadium that, when you go in, there’s a ‘wow’ factor.” While there were some affordable ticket prices to be sure, demand would assuredly outpace availability and force lower income fans to pay a premium to see the Yankees and Mets.

It is difficult to argue against the proposition that New York’s status as a financial empire and world class city influenced the stadium design and amenities found within these new facilities. In essence, they are manufactured landscapes that symbolize high class lifestyle befitting New York’s status, designed to cater to New York’s financial elite and other financially privileged fans seduced by their uncompromising, upscale novelty and spectacle. Gregory Clarke writes in *Rhetorical Landscapes* that “Land becomes landscape when it is assigned the role of symbol, and as a symbol it functions rhetorically.” As I alluded to earlier, Clark is concerned with how American tourist destinations have historically operated in the performance and realization of national identity that “do the rhetorical work of symbolizing a common home and, thus, a common identity.”

It is certainly the case that new sports stadiums like new Yankee Stadium and Citi Field are both presented and regarded as tourist destinations that can work in the same way as Yellowstone National Park to affirm national identity. However, I am going to depart from Clark slightly by suggesting that in the case of new sports stadiums, neither upper income fans nor team management are seeking an expression of identity that is truly common. Rather, both are seeking exclusive, consumer-focused spaces that can be exploited for mutual benefit; owners can
attract high income fans who will spend money inside the ballpark while satisfying the status-seeking motivations of affluent demographics. As Clark himself notes, “rhetorical experiences, whether discursive or not, present powerful symbols of shared identity that teach people whom they ought to aspire, individually as well as collectively, to be.” Specifically, these new stadiums in New York and elsewhere convey “critical identity statements” that rhetorically privileges a particular class and consumer identity with important implications. Namely, whatever cost prohibitive measures are implemented that keep certain kinds of fans out, the hidebound faith in America’s capacity to fulfill meritocratic principles elides serious discussions about the class discriminatory nature of higher ticket prices. While fans may certainly complain about them, it is unlikely a consideration that will burden those who can afford the cost of attendance, much less management.

Years later, new facilities were built for the New York Giants and New York Jets with an arena in Brooklyn’s Atlantic Yards for the New Jersey Nets who will change their name to the Brooklyn Nets upon relocation for the 2012-2013 NBA season. The Jets were looking for a new stadium in order to move out of Giants Stadium, which they shared with the New York Giants. Known as the Hudson Yards Project, the Jets would move from New Jersey to Manhattan’s West Side through tax revenue generated from the inevitable residential and business development that would occur next to the proposed site. In 2003, the Jets were close to reaching an agreement with the city of New York that would include an $800 million contribution from the team for their new stadium. Meanwhile, the city would contribute $600 million for a retractable roof and a rail yards platform, in addition to $2 billion to finance a new subway line and $1.5 billion to expand an nearby convention center. Cablevision, which owned basketball’s New York Knicks, hockey’s New York Rangers and Madison Square Garden where they both played, did not back
the plan. The company feared that a new stadium for the Jets would compete with Madison for sporting events and concerts. In response, they launched an aggressive public relations campaign backed by local residents and elected officials entitled New York Association for Better Choices, to fight the proposed facility.\textsuperscript{187}

Mayor Bloomberg was outraged as he had orchestrated a campaign to bring the 2012 Olympic Games to New York which he assumed depended on a new stadium being built for the Jets. In a public statement attacking Cablevision, Bloomberg angrily remarked that “it is an outrage that you let your own personal economics, or economic interests, stop a major project in this city.”\textsuperscript{188} Bloomberg accused Cablevision of killing potential jobs in an effort to preserve their bottom line, sacrificing public benefit for profit margins. In June of 2005, the Public Authorities Control Board voted against the new stadium, influenced by Cablevision’s campaigning effort and insider access to defeat it. Anna Levin, spokesperson for Hudson Yards/Hell’s Kitchen Alliance stated “we would never have had the access in Albany that this campaign got without the Garden’s lobbyists, and that’s the reality of politics in New York.”\textsuperscript{189} However, the issue never went to a public vote, despite substantial citizen resistance toward the project. After the smoke cleared, the Jets received a new stadium that shared with the New York Giants in a compromised agreement that required the teams to privately finance the entire cost of the facility.\textsuperscript{190} In exchange, the state of New Jersey granted the teams additional naming rights for the surrounding entertainment complex near the new stadium to help finance their contribution. Even Andrew Zimbalist, whose research is largely critical of the alleged economic benefits of new stadiums, stated that is was a “pretty O.K. outcome.”\textsuperscript{191} Yet, with the extended naming rights agreement and the sale of personal seat licenses, the Jets and Giants contribution would largely be covered by these manufactured revenue streams.\textsuperscript{192} While it signified a better
deal for taxpayers, it only came to fruition after the Jets unsuccessfully lobbied for a publicly funded stadium that would have required significant public investment for stadium and associated infrastructural costs.

However, the Atlantic Yards Project in Brooklyn that includes a new arena for the NBA’s New Jersey Nets, is part of a $4.2 billion large-scale redevelopment project, $2 billion of which is financed by the public. In 2002, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz approached Forest City Ratner (FCR) CEO Bruce Ratner to develop a proposal to move the Nets to Brooklyn upon learning that the team was for sale. Subsequently, Ratner purchased the team and the same Metropolitan Transit Authority which owned the railway yards, while Brooklyn made token gestures to soliciting development proposals for the site even though Ratner’s development group had already been approved for the project. Perhaps more democratically objectionable was that the public was not provided any opportunity to voice feedback for how development should proceed in Atlantic Yards. As a matter of fact, the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC) preempted existing zoning and land use laws, “thereby circumventing the democratic process and precluding any possibility that FCR’s plans might be modified or rejected by the city council.”

In the end, all of the proposed benefits had been strategically inflated. The FCR claimed that the project would generate $6.6 billion in tax revenue over 30 years, without accounting for how much the project would eventually cost the city in terms of the subsidies it was providing. Moreover, the promise that the project would create 15,000 jobs did not state that these jobs would be created over 10 years and that few of them would be permanent. The commitment for the construction of affordable housing had not transpired. In the months after the project began, 23 lawsuits were filed against the FCR that included allegations of fraud and
illegal use of eminent domain. While the company has won each lawsuit, the recent sale of the New Jersey Nets to Russian billionaire Mikhail D. Prokhorov following the scaling down of the arena’s design, from a state of the art facility to a more modest structure, suggests that the public had secured some marginal victories. Nevertheless, opponents of the Atlantic Yards project continued to feel that it was a raw deal and a crass example of crony capitalism at its worst. Local councilwoman Letitia James stated that very few local residents had been hired to work on the project, despite promises to the contrary. “[FCR] sold the team to this Russian person. The affordable housing has not been built. Frank Gehry [the original architect for the arena] is gone. And we don’t know whether they’ll honor their commitment to hire local residents or provide low-cost basketball tickets to the community.”

Each of these stadium projects worked in conjunction with larger initiatives to brand New York as a “world class city” for the benefit of consumers rather than citizens. As the site for Wall Street and other moneyed interests that operate there, these expensive and ambitious stadiums and arenas were designed to mirror the ego and status-consciousness of its top economic players who would use them to engage in upscale consumption befitting their particular social class. As William Sites notes ominously, urban renewal policies such as these operate to dis-embed poorer residents and “[uproot]…social actors from inherited social conditions that obstruct short-term economic activity.” The landscape inside these new stadiums is rhetorically inviting to affluent consumers that, much like New York City in general is being transformed into a place where rich people inhabit, consume, and play. Meanwhile, Detroit serves as a counterexample that highlights how the complexity of the arguments that I have been raising in the course of this chapter. Specifically, attempts at “saving Detroit” are premised on racialized fears that charge African-Americans with the responsibility for the city’s
decay and deteriorating infrastructure, rather than more factual discussions of the effects of white suburbanization and the exodus of jobs and capital. In addition, it reveals how the politics of race and poverty of a city can significantly limit the rhetorical capacities of new stadium landscapes to draw suburban fans, regardless of how “safe” and consumer-friendly they claim to be on the inside.

I argue that Detroit’s inability to transcend its racialized identity has largely inhibited its attempts at urban renewal and transformation. While new stadiums cannot, in and of themselves, rescue a city’s economy nor serve as a panacea for its woes, they can speak symbolically as a gesture of urban rejuvenation. In Detroit’s case, the symbolic impact of new stadium construction could not effectively erase deeply embedded prejudices toward the city, its character, and its particular quality of life. However, these new stadium projects did not alter or makeover the image of Detroit as a violent city. Thus, it has not emerged as a space that is welcoming to the suburban consumer nor has its new sports stadiums, Comerica Park (Detroit Tigers) and Ford Field (Detroit Lions) become the kind of status-scapes that ensure a ready supply of higher income fans who can be counted on to consume inside and outside the stadium gates. Simply stated, Detroit continues to be viewed as a dangerous city that is hostile to white suburbanites and a “family-friendly” quality of life.

Like other Northern industrial cities, African Americans were drawn to Detroit due to the labor shortages created during World War II in its automobile plants. Because of the industry’s vulnerability to various booms and busts, the quality of race relations in the city partly hinged on the economic success of the automobile industry. In the aftermath of the Detroit race riots of 1967, local business leaders and civic officials pushed for a suburban multipurpose stadium for the Detroit Tigers and Detroit Lions. There is no question that Detroit’s reputation
was soiled by its “race problem” and that a new facility was economically motivated to maintain the local support of suburban residents otherwise hesitant to travel downtown.

Navin Field, named after team owner Frank Navin, opened in 1912 on the site of old Bennett Park where the Tigers had been playing professional baseball since 1896. In 1937, the facility was renamed Briggs Stadium for new owner Frank Briggs who financed the structural renovations that extended seating capacity to 53,000, and in 1961, it became finally known as Tiger Stadium. While originally designed for baseball, the Detroit Lions played football at the site in 1938 until they moved into the Pontiac Silverdome in 1975. In 1968 when initial proposals were presented for a new multipurpose facility for the Tigers and Lions, Wayne County issued $126 million in bonds for its construction. However, a local activist group sued the county over allegations that the plan had been fraudulently packaged when it was revealed that residents would be responsible for part of the cost despite initial promises otherwise. Shortly thereafter, the Lions received their new suburban stadium in nearby Pontiac while the city of Detroit invested $18 million in structural renovations for Tiger Stadium financed primarily through ticket surcharges.

As one of oldest stadiums in professional sports, Tiger Stadium was viewed as a sacred shrine that united fans and generations across times that bore witness to some of the game’s most memorable moments and players. When Dominos Pizza owner Tom Monaghan purchased the Tigers in 1983, he was mindfully aware of its iconic status and publicly touted his commitment to keep the team in Tiger Stadium while privately lobbying officials for a new facility. In January of 1988, Monaghan commissioned an engineering study to investigate the structural integrity of the stadium which concluded that $100 million in renovations and repairs were desperately needed. When the Tiger Stadium Fan Club, a grassroots organization dedicated to
preserving the stadium, asked to see the report, Monaghan ignored their inquiries. After a local newspaper made several Freedom of Information requests, the Monaghan report revealed that only $6 million of repairs were necessary.

In March of 1989, the stadium construction company Hellmuth Obata Kassebaum (HOK) issued a report recommending a new facility for the Tigers citing that renovation and repairs would cost between $57 and $215 million. In response, the Fan Club commissioned their own study with the assistance of architects John and Judy Davids that determined that renovations would cost only $26.1 million which would include the addition of 73 luxury boxes, expanded concession facilities, and club offices. Known as the Cochrane Plan, Monaghan ignored these recommendations and feverishly continued to pursue his new stadium agenda. Meanwhile, newly appointed Tiger’s Team President Bo Schembechler, the former head football coach at the University of Michigan, told the Economic Club of Detroit, “it’s unfair to you to think you can shackle us to a rusted girder in Tiger Stadium and expect us to compete and win.”

Schembechler warned that the city’s failure to provide a publicly subsidized facility for the Tigers might cost Detroit one its most cherished franchises, threatening eventual relocation without a new stadium.

When Mike Illitch purchased the Tigers in 1992, new stadium opponents assumed that his personal and professional connections to Detroit ensured that Tiger Stadium would be preserved. Not only was Illitch the owner of the Little Caesars pizza chain, he was a development tycoon who purchased the Fox Theatre in 1988 complete with ambitious plans to renovate it. As a matter of fact, he had served on Detroit’s Renaissance board and secured many of the rights for his development company, Olympia Development, to rehabilitate and exhilarate comprehensive sections of downtown Detroit. Like Monaghan, he worked with then
Michigan governor John Engler and Mayor Dennis Archer to push for a new stadium for the Tigers. Archer, the newly elected African American mayor of Detroit, characterized the Tiger Stadium Fan Club and other new stadium opponents as a white suburbanite movement to polarize his constituents toward support for a new ballpark for the Tigers and football stadium for the Lions. Illitch would personally benefit from the proposed construction, as he had already purchased the majority of the land along Woodward Avenue where these stadiums would be located for further redevelopment.\(^{212}\)

In 1996, 82 percent of Detroit residents approved the construction of new stadiums for the Lions and Tigers that would be financed in part, by a 2% tax on rental cars, a 1% tax on hotel rooms, and an 8% tax generated from Detroit’s casinos.\(^{213}\) On the surface, these new taxes would not appear to burden impoverished inner city residents; yet, similar fundraising efforts were never proposed to generate needed revenue for Detroit’s school system and other urgent public needs. Frank Rashid, President of the Tiger Stadium Fan Club, stated, “it’s absurd. We can’t keep our libraries open. The police are undermanned and underequipped. Teachers don’t make a living wage in the city. Our kids don’t have safe playgrounds…”\(^{214}\)

When Comerica Park opened in 2000 as the new home for the Detroit Tigers, it was hailed as a visible symbol of Detroit’s resurgence and renaissance. Denise Illitch, the daughter of Mike Illitch, claimed that “over the years, there has been a lot of talk, a lot of rhetoric of saving downtown. But this ballpark is more than talk. It’s proof that things are finally changing.”\(^{215}\) Of course, this image also depended on the new stadium for the Lions, the opening of a third Detroit casino, and a combined $180 renovation of the General Motors’ Renaissance Center and Orchestra Palace.\(^{216}\) The *Miami Herald* reported that “all this adds up to a renaissance, built on the idea that sports, culture, entertainment, and living should be in walking distance. This return
to class urban sophistication (same revival story in Cleveland, Baltimore, Newark) makes Detroit worth a visit.”

Furthermore, the article referred to Comerica Park, stating that “you don’t have to be a Tiger’s fan to enjoy this family-friendly stadium, a monument to technology, showmanship and, of course, the game.”

The stadium design was based on the kinds of visual spectacle that typified new facilities, featuring large stone crafted tigers that welcome fans into the ballpark, a large 50-foot carousel, synchronized water fountains in center field, a merry-go-round, and monuments of former Tiger greats such as Hank Greenberg, Ty Cobb, and Charlie Gehringer. Meanwhile, Ford Field which opened in 2002, includes more than 132 suites, 8,600 club seats, and glass windows that allow fans to view the Detroit skyline from a comfortable and “safe” distance. The amenities certainly paled in comparison to new sports stadiums, yet each facility honed in on creating the kind of “family friendly” atmosphere that would draw upper income fans from the surrounding suburbs.

After the novelty of Comerica Park had dissipated, the Tigers set a record for the fewest fans per game of any new baseball stadium built since 1989 in the first 14 months of its existence, drawing 400,000 fewer fans than the 3 million initially projected in its first season. While this had much to do with the dismal performance of the Tigers on the field as one of the worst franchises in Major League Baseball, it also revealed the anxieties of residents of the surrounding suburbs being unwilling to travel to downtown Detroit unless the team was competitive. Despite the city’s attempt to rebrand itself through sports, tourism, and entertainment, Detroit remained the “poster child of urban decay” where “suburbanites pride themselves on never having to cross Eight Mile Road, the city’s boundary.” In 2005, the Census Bureau reported that unemployment in Detroit was at 14% with 31.4% of the city’s resident’s living officially below the poverty line.
Bowl in 2006, the city’s homeless population was marshaled together and given its own “Super Bowl Party” at area shelters in order to hide the city’s burgeoning poverty out of the national spotlight and away from the view of out-of-town attendees. A *Detroit News* article observed that “after four years of plans, $1US-billion in investments and commitments from 9,000 volunteers…the [Super Bowl] could shape whether Detroit is regarded nationally as a renaissance city or, as one critic wrote, America’s own Baghdad.” As *National Post* columnist Aaron Wherry wrote, “with the world about to arrive, Detroit is like a nervous bride anxiously tidying up the place with her future mother-in-law set to visit. The living room looks great, but if you open the closet, you might find a mess.”

Sharon Zukin makes the argument that landscapes symbolically express particular cultural values, social relations, and the balance and inequity of economic power. Moreover, she contends that capitalism largely controls the function of landscapes and the particular character they assume. It is in this manner that landscapes, as Gregory Clark reminds us, can function as rhetorical texts that, in the case of Detroit, invite us to engage readings of the city’s landscape that aim to seduce the viewer into reading it in politically proscribed ways. Because of the cultural importance and mass viewership of the Super Bowl, Detroit public officials were certainly aware of the image-making capacity of the event and its effect on a broad viewership. In particular, they were uniquely concerned that the city’s façade could mask the inconvenient realities of Detroit’s material poverty and the persistent residual effects of decades of capital abandonment and suburban flight and neglect. After all, the image that Detroit officials were attempting to portray was one of transcendence and redemption; its sought after status of a “renaissance city” specifically depended on these efforts to rhetorically brand itself as a consumer-friendly city through sport. Ultimately, Detroit did not emerge as a “renaissance city”
and in 2010, Mayor David Bing announced plans that he was going to “shrink” the city by plowing decaying neighborhoods and relocating residents, serving for some as a ‘modern day Trail of Tears for Detractors.’”

New sports stadiums and mega events such as the Super Bowl cannot alone save a city’s economy nor can they actualize the economic resurgence to which they are arguably designed. Yet, civic leaders tend to persist otherwise, as in the case of Emmett Moten, Director of Economic Development for former Mayor Coleman Young, who said “if not for Mike Illitch, there may not be a Detroit.” According to Mark Rosentraub, urban renewal policies can be effective if they can demonstrate a particular quality of life that companies can use to attract in demand human capital that hinges on the degree to which a city is viewed as welcoming and fashionable place to consume through mixed development project that enhance a particular “quality of life.” As Rosentraub reiterates, new stadium construction can work in conjunction with other entertainment-based initiatives to enhance a city’s quality of life, but alone cannot fundamentally alter the trajectory or resuscitate a city’s economy. In the case of Detroit, the city has been unable to transcend a deeply ingrained racialized identity, despite its attempts at urban renewal and other quality of life-based enhancements that target suburban visitors. It remains regarded as a dangerous city that owes much to long standing racial prejudices, where attempts to address the second persona are mitigated by the overwhelming presence of the third persona.

In 2007, the city of Detroit continued to struggle with racial integration, as 90% of its population remains African American, a striking contrast to the surrounding and predominately white suburbs of Pontiac, Rochester Hills, and Gross Point Woods. Comerica Park and Ford Field cannot compete as effectively for the higher income consumer as New York, because the
city itself has not been welcomed as a consumer’s playground that is regarded as a “safe” place
to visit nor is the area as wealthy as New York. It also the case that Detroit suburban residents
are not as typically wealthy as New York’s upper class, characteristics written into the particular
landscapes they assume. More specifically, the structural amenities in Detroit’s new stadiums are
not as lavish, opulent, and palatial nor are they situated within overtly Disney-fied environments
that promise a level of consumer safety and exclusivity from the city’s underclass. In 2006, the
Detroit Tigers announced that they were going to combine nine of Comerica Park’s luxury suites
into a single Champions Club that could accommodate 150 people. Tom Wilson, CEO for
Palace and Sports Entertainment, noted that such a move is typical for teams struggling to sell
luxury suites for games, noting that Comerica is “now in the second stage of evolution for a
typical stadium” Mike Healy, Vice President of Operations for the Detroit Tigers, stated that
“what we are trying to do is cater to the small-business owner, somebody who wouldn’t be able
to afford a suite for an entire season or needs a suite.” Thus, Comerica Park had not effectively
emerged as a status-scape that was rhetorically inviting to upper class fans and business elites,
forcing the hand of ownership to scale back its ambitions. This also reveals that any stadium’s
attempt to become a spectacular status-scape depends not only on social exclusivity, ticket
demand, and high scale spectacular consumption, but also the team’s performance which, for the
Tigers at the beginning of 2006, had been dismal at best. Meanwhile, the Detroit Lions playing at
Ford Field avoids many of these tensions due to the scarcity of games and the built in spectacle
of football to ensure a steady flow of fans into the stadium in spite of the Lions historical
lackluster performance. With the Detroit Tigers World Series appearance in 2006 and recent
postseason visit in 2011, the magnetizing bandwagon effect brought more upper income fans to
the ballpark because of the spectacle of a winning franchise.
Concluding Remarks

The lessons of New York and Detroit reveal demonstrate that a team’s attempt to attract an ideal, upper income fan is limited by how the landscape is read rhetorically both within and outside the stadium as an outcome of the spatiality of race and social class. In New York, the presence of Wall Street and other members of America’s financial elite convey a higher class status scape than is the case in Detroit. The degree to which a team can continue to draw high income fans whose spending habits can maximize the additional amenity-driven revenue streams of new stadiums will ultimately determine the longevity of these facilities and whether replacements will be sought as a consequence of their all-too-fleeting novelty. The monopoly status of professional sports leagues will continue to provide team owners the upper hand to leverage new facilities with predictable threats of relocation if a city does not comply. Finally, the fact that new facilities are increasingly catering to a upper income fans by providing novel, spectacular, consumable “experiences” indicates that the most direct experience of professional sports is increasingly mediated by rituals of consumption and spectacle that privilege certain kinds of fans over others.

I have also argued that kinds of Disney-ification that occurs inside the stadium operates to regulate behavior to satisfy the desires of social exclusivity, personal safety, and family friendliness that befits a mostly white, upper class suburban (or gated community) fan base. As can be seen by the various fan codes of conducts, these policies privilege a particular audience that addresses their fears toward another audience, namely the third persona that is the working and lower class. While targeting behavior, management can conveniently avoid the accusation that they are engaging in a form of classism since they appear to target individuals rather than
entire groups. Yet, because of the cultural connotations between morality and social class, these codes are inevitably understood by their addressed audience as ensuring a degree of exclusivity and localized, spatial control against less privileged groups. While the working class is by no means prohibited from purchasing tickets, the symbolic landscapes of new stadiums and ballparks and the disciplinary apparatuses devised to expunge undesirable behavior prioritize the consumer whims and anxieties of higher income fans unquestionably. Since they can be counted on to consume to a higher degree because of their socioeconomic class, they are the preferred fan bloc from which ownership can maximally exploit the additional, consumer-focused revenue streams that new stadiums offer. Working class fans on limited budgets cannot be trusted to engage in any spending beyond the cost of admission and parking for other additional revenue streams to be profitable. Upper income fans are to be made to feel safe while satisfying their inclinations toward consuming novelty and spectacle that form some of the basis by which their class identity is performed and reaffirmed.

Notes


5 Gregory Clarke, *Rhetorical Landscapes: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke* (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 148.


8 Ibid., 333.

9 Black is speaking in terms of the implied author as a rhetorical construction and is not specifically referencing a non-human persona. This may be problematic, but I justify my usage here by saying that stadiums, while they cannot speak for themselves, embody the “voice” of management and stadium designers. My personification of these spaces is done for convenience in terms of the argument that I am making.


17 Ibid.


Ibid.

21 I am referencing here the disciplinary strategies directed toward the individual’s body or soul, or what Michel Foucault refers to as biopower, “for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” which he believed was a necessary aspect of social regulation in conditions of modern industry and capitalism. For more on biopower, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume 1*, Vintage Books Ed., trans. by Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Random House, 1990), 140.


25 Ibid., 58.

26 Ibid.

27 The “color barrier” was an unofficial ownership agreement in Major League Baseball that prohibited signing African American players that was instituted in the early years of organized professional baseball. While some “light-skinned” Latino and Cuban players had previously signed professional contracts, their ability to pass as white did not presumably violate the terms of this agreement or alienate fans. For more on the “color barrier” in Major League Baseball and the symbolic importance of Jackie Robinson’s entrance into Major League Baseball, see Mike Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity*. 
During the War on Terror (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2010); Dave Zirin, A People’s History of Sports in the United States.


31 Dave Zirin, Bad Owners: How Owners are Ruining the Games We Love (New York, NY: Scribner, 2010).


34 Cited in Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic.

35 Rosentraub, Major League Losers.


38 Rosentraub, Major League Losers, 254.


41 Spirou and Bennett, *It’s Hardly Sporting*.

42 Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.


44 Macek, *Urban Nightmares*.

45 As cited in Rosentraub, *Major League Winners*.

46 Steve Macek, *Urban Nightmares*.


48 G. Scott Thomas, *The United States of Suburbia*.


50 Bryman, Ibid., 172.

51 Cited in Rosentraub, *Major League Winners*, 68.

52 Rosentraub, Ibid., 68.

53 Rosentraub, *Major League Winners*.


55 Rosentraub, Ibid., 69.
For years, city officials and business leaders justified public subsidies for new stadium construction on the premise that they would yield economic benefits that would significantly outpace the city’s original investment. However, research has consistently shown that new stadium construction contributes little to no economic growth. While much of this research had long been ignored by officials, they have recently shifted strategies by emphasizing how a new stadium enhances the “quality of life” which cannot be tangibly quantified or measured. For more on this see Delaney and Eckstein, *Public Dollars, Private Stadiums*; DeMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*; Daniel Rosensweig, *Retro Ballparks*; Mark Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*; Rosentraub, *Major League Winners* and Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.


Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*.

Rosentraub, Ibid., 12

Ibid.

Cleveland was awarded an expansion franchise appropriately called the Browns who began play in 1999 in a new facility. Apparently, Cleveland’s lesson had been learned after ironically losing the original Browns franchise to Baltimore, who a decade earlier lost the Colts when they were moved to Indianapolis because of the city’s refusal to build a stadium. See, Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.


Quoted in Weisman, Ibid., para. 12.

Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.

Ibid., 20.
All of the figures listed here can be found in Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 20.


Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.

Ibid.


Quoted in Ritzer, Ibid., 123.


Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*.


Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity*.

81 Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*.


86 Rosensweig, *Retro Ballparks*.

87 Cited in Hubry, “Love Story.”

88 Blakely and Snyder, *Fortress America*.

89 Thomas, *The United States of Suburbia*.


92 Rosensweig, *Retro Ballparks*.


97 “NFL Intercedes in Bills Fan’s Tailgate,” para. 14


104 Rosentraub, *Major League Winners*.

105 Eisinger, “The Politics of Bread and Circuses.”

107 Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.


110 “Wrigley Field,” para. 5.

111 Quoted in “Wrigley Field,” para. 8.

112 Zirin, *Bad Sports*.


114 Zirin, *Bad Sports*.


116 Quoted in Andrew D. Smith.


119 Arthur, para. 5.

120 Quoted in Nicholas R. Archer, *Ideological Endzones: NFL Films and the Countersubversive Tradition in American Politics* (Ph.d diss., University of Massachusetts – Amherst, 2010), 82.


126 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, aph. 45.


128 Ibid., 460.


130 Ibid., 71.


133 Ibid., 73.

135 Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society*, 172,

136 Ibid., 172.

137 Ibid., 173.

138 Ibid.


140 Ibid., 106.

141 Sites, *Primitive Globalization*.


143 The new basketball arena currently under construction is intended to be used by the New Jersey Nets, who will be renamed the Brooklyn Nets upon relocation.


145 Quoted in Trumpbour, 197.


147 Zirin, *Bad Sports*.

148 The second suspension occurred after Steinbrenner paid Howie Spira $40,000 to spy on former Yankee outfielder Dave Winfield to uncover dirt on Winfield after he failed to lead the team to a successive run of World Series Championships like Reggie Jackson had done during the 1970s. In 1990, Major League Baseball Commissioner Fay Vincent banned Steinbrenner for 30 days from the day-to-day operations of the Yankees. For more on this, see Michael O’Keeffe, “Howie Spira, hired by George Steinbrenner to help smear Dave Winfield, still holds grudge”

149 Zirin, Bad Sports, 46.


152 Quoted in “Martini Bar” para. 2.

153 Zirin, Bad Sports


156 See “Martini Bar.”


158 Dave Zirin, Bad Sports.


161 Zirin, Bad Sports, 53.

162 Quoted in deMause and Cagan, Field of Schemes, 200.


164 Trumpbour, The New Cathedrals.

165 deMause and Cagan, Field of Schemes.


168 Quoted in deMause and Cagan, Field of Schemes, 313.

169 Quoted in deMause and Cagan, Field of Schemes, 202.

170 Sites, Primitive Globalization


173 Quoted in Lisberg and Lemire, “Mets and Yankees Fans,” para. 10.

174 Quoted in Lisberg and Lemire, “Mets and Yankees Fans,” para. 20.

175 Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.

176 Bagli, “Bloomberg Says Details.”


179 Quoted in Dodd, “Baseball’s New Palaces” para. 20.

180 Quoted in Dodd, “Baseball’s New Palaces” para. 30.

181 Quoted in Dodd, “Baseball’s New Palaces” para. 7.


183 Ibid.

184 Ibid., 5.


186 deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*.

187 deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*.

188 Quoted in deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*, 290.

189 Quoted in deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*, 315.


194 Amy Lavine and Norman Oder, “Urban Redevelopment Policy”

195 Quoted in Ibid., 8.

196 Ibid.


198 Quoted in Ibid., para. 18.


200 Sites, Primitive Globalization, 2.


203 deMause and Cagan, Field of Schemes
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid.
206 deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*.
207 Ibid.
208 Quoted in Ibid., 93.
209 Ibid.
211 deMause and Cagan
217 Quoted in Ibid., para. 6.
218 Ibid., para. 7.


224 Ibid., 20.


227 Rosentraub, Major League Losers; Rosentraub, Major League Winners


229 Rosentraub, Major League Winners.

Snavely, “Super-Suite Deal in Detroit.”

Ibid., para. 11.

Ibid., para. 8.

While the Lions recently made their first postseason appearance since 1999 in 2011, this statement remains true if one accounts for their win/loss record since Ford Field first opened.
CHAPTER III: THE SPORTS GAMING CULTURE

According to Irving Rein, Philip Kotler, and Ben Shields, professional sports are in financial trouble despite the exponential growth in the market for sports-based programming and the subsequent growth in revenues generated through the synergistic relationship that has been cultivated with the media.\(^1\) They note that the proliferation of entertainment options and available media channels has fragmented potential sports audiences to the extent that “in a marketplace so crowded, the search for fans has become essential to the very survival of sports.”\(^2\) Consequently, Rein, Kotler, and Shields note that “the competitive strategies for attracting fans have become fiercer and the results less certain as the sports industry continues to grow with no real end in sight.”\(^3\) Much of this owes to the fact that more sports are on television, with each attempting to effectively brand itself within a saturated sports marketplace, challenging the traditional hegemony enjoyed by major professional and amateur sports: MLB, NFL, NBA, NCAA football, and NCAA basketball. Because of the lucrative broadcasting rights that each demands from major networks, and the latter’s dependence on advertising revenue, the issue of audience fragmentation becomes of central concern for each organization involved. Put simply, fans have more options to experience these sports, such as sports video games that deliver elements of interactivity not available in traditional and passive forms of sports spectating. Meanwhile, fantasy sports participation not only aims to recruit new fans to a sport by offering an alternative level of engagement, but also intensifies existing relationships between loyal and casual followers of a specific sport.\(^4\)
Each of these areas provide new opportunities for advertisers to reach potential demographics that are increasingly difficult to reach, while leveraging increasing brand loyalty between fans and the three major sports.

Both sports video gaming and fantasy sports speak rhetorically to the construction of the *fan-consumer*, where an individual is both treated as a follower of sport and as a generalized consumer of sports and non-sports products and services. Specifically, advertising in sports video games speaks to that very identity, as the gamer assumes the subjectivity of both fan and athlete while simultaneously that of the consumer who is expected to consume the goods that are represented in these virtual realms. In the same vein, fantasy sports cultivate and reinforce a competitive fan identity that, through the struggle of expressing and performing superior sports knowledge as it relates to sport and the athletes who play them compared to other fantasy participants, lends itself to consumption. In particular, the “serious” fantasy gamer embodies the role of the general manager, pursuing information that can lead to a competitive advantage through fantasy sports programming, sports talk radio, fantasy publications, and web-based content that are advertising supported. In essence, this “sports gaming culture” not only addresses the challenges posed by audience fragmentation. It also represents a further intrusion of capitalistic logic within a fantasy-based engagement of sports in an effort to extract profit for sports organizations and the advertisers who use the visibility and popularity of sport to sell their wares. Meanwhile, each reinforces the idea that fans are not only followers of sport, but *consumers*.

Thus, the implied auditor or persona addressed in these sporting encounters is seen not only as a fan, but an individual who occupies a consumer role not merely confined in the domain of sport. I argue that, despite the historical presence of advertising in sports broadcasts and
within sports stadiums themselves, the targeting of the dual identity of the *fan-consumer* has become a dominant theme in how sports organizations view fans. My purpose in this chapter is to understand how advertising in sports video games and fantasy sports speak to that identity, analyzing their history and development, while offering a critical rhetorical perspective on the values that are transmitted within the gaming culture as well as those values that are specifically being addressed. As Black notes, “a critic’s analysis of a rhetorical transaction is merely a way of talking about it and understanding it.”\(^6\) Meanwhile, Raymie McKerrow writes that one of the essential purposes of critical rhetoric is to deconstruct, demystify, and understand the nature of power and conditions of dominance as they are communicated rhetorically.\(^7\) Sports video games and fantasy sports have operated as rhetorical platforms by advertisers and sports organizations to *sell something*, whether it be a brand, a consumer product, or more abstractly, an ideology that legitimatizes both the commercialization of sport in particular and capitalism in general. Both can be viewed as a harmless amusement and a passionate pastime, yet it is important to understand the forces underpinning their development and the effects on how fans experience and talk about sport.

This chapter will investigate not only the evolution of advertising in sports video games, but also how fans and gamers alike demand that the spreading commercialism of sport be replicated in sports video games to authenticate its claim to realism. This plays right into the hands of gaming companies to sell adds in their products. The fact that most gamers are young and have been thoroughly interpellated in a hyper-branded culture indicates that gaming companies will experience little resistance against advertisements being included in their titles. Rhetorically, the spreading commercialism of sporting culture, whether we are speaking of live sports or its virtual counterpart, is not respectful of one’s identity as a fan, but rather addresses its
audiences as primarily consumers. Meanwhile, fantasy sports have been offered to fans as a more immersive experience of sport that not only intensifies one’s loyalty to a particular sport, but are also used to market the sport itself to seduce casual and non-fans to watch more of them. Consequently, their growing popularity suggests that fantasy sports participation is becoming the preferred means of engaging professional sport, especially football. In the process, athletes are reduced to commodities to be consumed, fandom is moving away from a collective experience toward an individual and competitive pursuit, and the logic of neoliberal capitalism becomes naturalized in the process, albeit in ways both transparent and mystifying as we will see.

Advertising, Culture, and Sport

Before discussing the evolution of in-game advertising in sports video games, it is necessary to engage the historical role of advertising in the United States to better understand the hegemonic position it holds in defining American definitions of the good life. Advertising works by transforming private desires into socially desirable symbols that consumers are told can be accessible through the act of purchasing a product associated with those symbols as a means of personal fulfillment and transcendence. According to T.J. Jackson Lears, advertising valorizes certain values and assumptions regarding our world while marginalizing and obscuring others. Furthermore, he argues that advertisements do not so much as arouse our desires as they do manage them in ways conducive to legitimatizing the market “while containing dreams of personal transformation within a broader rhetoric of control.” Advertising works to enchant otherwise mundane and interchangeable commodities by infusing them with magical properties that are somehow supposed to resolve the everyday personal problems and insecurities of ordinary Americans. Marketers do not so much create false needs as much as channel real
needs through the market, objectifying their satisfaction and fulfillment within a vast consumerist utopia. Historically and within the contemporary moment, advertisements have long focused less on the real characteristics of the products they are selling and more on the “empowered” consumer.  

Contrary to conventional wisdom and mainstream thought, advertising accomplishes more than selling products through persuasive appeals; it performs cultural work to the benefit of social and economic elites whose worldviews are affirmed and reinforced by ads. After World War I when American companies learned the value of public relations in manufacturing and shaping popular opinion, these principles were quickly adopted by big business to convince Americans that they and the business community shared common interests. At the time, many citizens regarded the corporation with suspicion, as self-interested profiteers placing profits over the collective well-being and economic security of the American worker. These attitudes, while temporarily alleviated during the so-called “roaring twenties,” were intensified with renewed fervor in the aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929. To many in the business community, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal was a punitive device that affronted free-market wisdom in fixing the economic devastation that characterized the Great Depression. Business journalist Greg Griswold argued that the time had come for corporate America to use public relations and advertising to attack the principles of the New Deal through co-optation and convince the public that it was they who could protect collective well-being, not big government.  

What followed were ubiquitous advertising campaigns that personalized faceless companies using images and symbols that paid rhetorical “tribute” to the ingenuity, hard work, and values of working America. By the 1950s as postwar prosperity led to the growth of the
middle class, it became difficult to sustain a critical argument that the American business community was doing nothing else but providing a public service through job creation and competitive wages. As Frankfort School scholar Herbert Marcuse states in *One-Dimensional Man*, higher standards of living foreclosed the public mind from being able to imagine economic alternatives outside of consumer capitalism. “Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized.” For Marcuse, the battle was not only being successfully waged in a more equal distribution of material comforts but also discursively as ideas such as “freedom” were being cleansed of any association aside from capitalism and its corollary in consumption. It could very well be servitude that defines it, but the foreclosing of meaning indicated that the public could not image it as such, much less articulate it.

Whatever revolutionary fervor that existed in the 1960s was seamlessly appropriated by Madison Avenue. By mocking mainstream advertising’s conventions that mirrored youth rebellion toward the dullness and standardization of mass consumer living, consumption now signified individualism and independence. Not only were consumers regarded as reflexive subjects who understood the traditional formulas of advertising, companies mobilized this Great Refusal to bolster their profitability. According to Marcuse, the Great Refusal is marked by a radical negativity that can be wielded to resist the social domination exercised by bourgeois society. Resistance was reduced to a symbol that could be attached to a particular commodity through a sophisticated marketing and advertising apparatus that rhetorically equated certain forms of consumption as rebellion. Through this, they effectively convinced much of the public, most notably American youth, that revolution and rebellion could be sought within the
market, not outside of it. Resistance was no longer an attitude or radical action, but a hollow and empty lifestyle. According to Thomas Frank, advertising in the 1960s rallied against the tyranny of de-individualized conformity, encouraging a kind of personal insurgence against what others were thinking, doing, and/or purchasing. But this was no war against the market; on the contrary, it answered to the importance of innovation, creative thinking, and “hipness” in co-opting a younger generation of consumers into the fold of market populism. As a matter of fact, it was necessary for growing and expanding the market where pre-packaged rebellion spoke to the needs of bored and disenfranchised youth. According to Frank, the counterculture was as much a myth as a social movement. While serving as the impetus behind some important social and political changes, it was not as subversive as public memory would serve as it performed the role that contemporary capitalism called upon it to serve. Despite popular cynicism regarding the legacy left behind by the tumultuous 1960s, that same spirit of revolution and rebellion remains a dominant symbolic ethos of contemporary corporate cultural production.

As we will see later, that same feeling of rebellion shapes video gamers’ perception of in-game advertising as a rather benign and unobtrusive trend that few take issue with. As companies associate themselves by purchasing advertising in some of the most popular sport video game titles, they are then associated with a particular perception of “cool” and “hipness.” This enhances their cultural capital among a younger generation who feel perfectly at home within consumer capitalism. Their revolutionary spirit is funneled through the market and reflected back at them in a manner that reinforces the market as a worldly sanctuary of freedom, style, personal expression, and worldly transcendence. Here, it will be necessary to discuss the evolution of advertising in sport, albeit briefly, and other contributory factors responsible for targeting consumers through sports-based video games.
Advertising has long been a part of the fabric of sport, as many sports stadiums and arenas have historically allowed companies to pitch their products to fans through purchasing space to do so inside the venue itself. For example, photographs of historic baseball stadiums illustrate the ubiquity of this trend, as many outfield fences were covered with an array of colorful, yet often primitive, advertisements that generated revenue for team owners. Furthermore, as advertisers exerted more pressure on newspapers to expand their readership in the 1920s, editors used sports coverage to increase sales and bolster subscriptions. This forged a symbiotic relationship where sports gained cultural visibility while newspapers used the sensationalism inherent in sports to make money. Meanwhile, the first baseball cards were sold as inserts in individual cans of chewing tobacco, a precursor to the development of trading card companies such as Bowman and Topps decades later.

Sponsorship signified another early example of the commercialism of professional sports whose origins lie in the late 19th century. The first evidence of sports sponsorship occurred in 1887 when the French magazine Velocipede financed an auto race. According to Matthew McAllister, sponsorship exists on a dialectical continuum between opposing goals: philanthropy and self-promotion. The former is emblematic of goodwill by a company or wealthy investor whose giving is not premised by an expectation that the act will yield any financial return. The latter is entirely predicated on self-interest, a gesture intended to enhance profitability and visibility. The beauty of sponsorship in combining these goals is that companies can associate themselves with a socially desirable event, bolstering their capital by manufacturing a perception of philanthropic goodwill and thereby obscuring its commercial intent. According to Samantha King, “cause-related marketing” operates under a similar ethic, where corporations link themselves to charitable causes to market an image of benevolence that will translate into
profits. In today’s sporting landscape, many sponsored events are created intentionally to promote, indicating that contemporary sports sponsorship is balanced more toward self-promotion than selfless giving. In other words, as McAllister aptly puts it, “sponsorship is advertising” in contemporary sports at both the professional and collegiate level.

According to the Football Bowl Association (FBA), the organization in charge of the NCAA’s collegiate football 35 postseason games, the growing cultural impact of the sport has elevated the demand among communities who are all too eager to host these events. As the number of bowl games has increased in recent years, the FBA argues that this grants more conferences and schools the opportunity to play in televised postseason games before national audiences. But there is little question that media networks, local organizers, and sponsors are also responsible for this kind of expansion. The growing popularity of college football benefits networks who can more easily sell advertising at a premium while the expansion of bowl games generates more sponsorship opportunity and revenue. There is no bowl game that exists without a corporate sponsor attached to it. While one bowl game decides the “national champion,” others exist simply for corporate promotion and to generate more income for networks that cover the games and the cities that host them. But this is not necessarily the case for the schools who are invited to participate. According to Pete Kotz, half of the universities that play in postseason bowl games actually lose money, a condition that could be partly remedied by a playoff system that would allow universities to retain more of the postseason revenues.

As mentioned previously, sponsorship has a long history, once operating as the primary financing structure in the early days of radio and television. Of course, these arrangements gave the sponsor rights to own an event, allowing them to rewrite scripts to warrant that their investment guaranteed maximum profitability. However, as production costs increased, media
organizations sold commercial spots to more than one company to increase revenue. The disciplinary apparatus internalized by media organizations dealings with sponsors persisted and no longer required such direct control over content as organization had learn the “acceptable” way of policing themselves to appease advertisers. In the contemporary sports media landscape, sponsorship remains a vital component of increasing income in sports other than college football. Sports networks actually splice their mediated presentations into distinct units that can be sold to potential sponsors, such as the pre- and postgame shows and the starting lineups. Even individual and sometimes mundane game occurrences can packaged in similar fashion such as pitching changes, the opening kickoff, the initial puck drop, the first pitch, all tagged by the line “brought to you by…” Even mediated sporting space can be commodified and sold to eager marketers, as in the case of “virtual ads” in which graphical representations of a company logo can be inserted on the field, court, or ice, visible only to viewers watching the game on television. Because of the virtual, non-materiality of these ads, they can be substituted with others each half inning, quarter, or period, multiplying the flexibility of media networks to accommodate more advertising. Sports networks justify these practices, arguing that since they are paying a premium for the rights to broadcast sporting events, creating more revenue streams has become necessary to offset the escalating costs of securing the rights to do so.\(^{30}\) Globally, sponsors spent $38 billion on sports in 2007, a substantial and noticeable increase from the $5.6 billion spent in 1980.\(^ {31}\)

These movements are also unquestionably driven by the commercial anxieties of advertisers and networks where traditional advertising vehicles such as commercials can be easily bypassed or ignored by viewers with the aid of a remote control or personal video recorders. The Super Bowl is the only television program where traditional advertising remains
effective as the well-known “Super Bowl ad,” in some ways, overshadows the event itself. This, coupled with the Super Bowl’s status as one of the few programs that can still deliver a mass audience highly attentive to its commercialized aspects, renders it ripe for commodification and spectacle. Purchasing advertising time has become essentially “priceless,” since they are not regarded by viewers as the kind of nuisance they are regarded to be in other kinds of programs. Along these lines, the elevation of Super Bowl commercials as a newsworthy cultural event fosters an abundance of free advertising and publicity. Commercials are deconstructed, discussed, and then ranked in terms of their popularity, entertainment value, and creativity on televised news, company websites, and “cultural” repositories such as YouTube and Facebook. In every other instance apart from the Super Bowl, traditional advertising spots such as commercials are yielding diminishing returns, requiring alternative strategies such as strategic product placement within programming content itself to attract eyeballs.

The popular pseudo-documentary comedy, The Office, is notorious for selling content-space to advertisers whose products are then weaved into an episode’s narrative. For example, in the season two episode “Christmas Party,” Michael Scott (played by Steve Carrell), boss of the paper company Dunder-Mifflin, and his employees participate in their annual “Secret Santa.” Michael exceeds the $20 dollar spending limit by purchasing an Apple iPod for Ryan, the office temp with whom Michael regularly expresses his affection for, despite otherwise performing a more traditional form of heterosexuality. When Michael is offended after he receives a pair of knitted gloves from his Secret Santa, Phyllis, he suggests that instead of Secret Santa, they play “Yankee Swap” where each office member can either select an unwrapped gift or “swap” for a gift that has already been opened and chosen. After doing so, many of Michael’s employees compete for the Apple iPod after a few strategically placed character dialogues about the
product’s capabilities and cost. Other episodes find Michael professing his love for his favorite restaurant Chili’s, employees eating out at Hooters, and one character, Dwight, taking a job at Staple’s after being fired from Dunder Mifflin. Product placement has become more common in shows such as “Sex and the City” and “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” perpetuated by the claims of network executives that it contributes to the realism and authenticity of these shows.\(^{36}\)

Of course, inserting such messages into a show’s content blurs the distinction between commercial/programming while overcoming many of the issues that burden the effectiveness of traditional, commercial-based advertising. According to Sut Jhally and Bill Livant, audiences perform a kind of labor (watching time) that creates a product of value that media companies can then sell to advertisers looking to capitalize off of that labor.\(^{37}\) A particular program is used to convince the audience to work on behalf of the networks (by watching the commercials that accompany the program) and it is their time and attention that forms the basis of value. In other words, audiences are compelled by this type of contract to watch the commercials in exchange for programming content; if audiences bypass commercials by changing channels during breaks or fast forward through them completely, they are essentially violating the terms of this tacit agreement. As a consequence, there is a reduced value to the advertising time that networks attempt to sell to companies since audience time and attention to commercials can no longer be guaranteed. One of the reasons that product placement has become more common in mediated sports productions, as in the case of the proliferation of sponsored events and segments, is to compensate for this reduction in the value of traditional advertising. For example, Matthew McAllister found that during the 2007 BCS Championship game, 80% of the broadcast coverage included some visible form of advertising.\(^{38}\)
With that said, contemporary sports are also faced with an additional problem of attracting and retaining the “elusive fan” as the entertainment marketplace has become cluttered and audiences more fragmented. Exacerbating the problem is “higher fan expectations, the paradox of commercialism, new technology, individualism, family decision-making, and time pressure[s] [which] have conspired to make fan connection more challenging to the sports industry.” One reason for the cozy relationship between sports and media is that the former attracts an ideal demographic of 18-49 year old males which have both the discretionary income and willingness to spend it. Nevertheless, sports remain immensely popular in our cultural imaginary, yet there is a more tenuous relationship between fans and sports, especially among younger fan bases. In-game advertising in sports video games is merely one solution to encourage the elusive younger fan to “labor” on behalf of gaming companies who are paying a premium for license fees from professional and amateur sports organizations.

The Evolution of In-Game Advertising in Sports Video Games

In many ways, the selling of advertising “space” in sports video games is merely an extension of product placement occurring elsewhere within popular culture to counter the problems that hamper the effectiveness of traditional advertising and more fragmented sports audiences. Much like product placement in television programming, the selling of in-game advertising is alleged to support the realism and authenticity that companies like Electronic Arts aim to replicate in their sports game titles. The fact that the relationship between sports and commercialism has already been forged in the real world means that in-game advertising in sports video games is not viewed as a meddlesome intrusion but rather an extension and reflection of that reality. However, it also reveals the degree to which many gamers are firmly
comfortable with a consumer-based identity consistently subjected to a barrage of sales pitches and gimmicks even in their status as fans. Equating consumption and democracy allows for the burgeoning and seemingly unrestrained commercialism of sports to occur with little resistance apart from the occasional bitter complaints by certain fans. While older generations may long for a time in which their fandom was not so heavily mediated by commercialism and consumerism, newer fans expect this type of mediation in their encounters with sports.44

The first examples of a real world advertisement in a video game occurred in 1978 when programmer Scott Adams’ *Adventureland*, featured an ad for his upcoming release *Pirate Adventure*. In the following decades, non-software companies began experimenting with this strategy, as companies like Anheuser Busch and Adidas purchased in-game ads in Bally Midway’s *Tapper* and Moby Game’s *FIFA International Soccer*.45 At the time, the graphical limitations of computers and game systems prevented these developments from becoming more common. Companies who had invested thousands in the creation of brand logos did not believe that 8-bit replications would be as effective, fearing that gamers would not be able to recognize them. Furthermore, the home video game industry that had flourished during the 1970s and early 1980s led by Atari experienced a “crash” as emerging competitors Mattel and Coleco Industries oversaturated the market with games and consoles.46 As companies worried that the once-thriving industry was about to befall a grim fate, the experimentation with in-game ads was no doubt negatively affected by the industry’s uncertainty. In addition, early in-game advertisements did not encourage gamers to interact with the brand as the logos were merely tangential to the gameplay occurring on screen and could easily be ignored. This changed in 2002, when South Beach Beverage Company (otherwise known as SoBe) purchased the rights
from Ubisoft Entertainment’s *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell: Double Agent* where players could virtually purchase and consume SoBe in the game itself.47

As video games became more ubiquitous and technologically advanced, advertisers exploited these developments to market their products to Generation Y, a highly desirable demographic of 18-34 year olds.48 Sports video games were particularly attractive; as gaming companies could recreate more of the “realism” of live sport, the inclusion of real advertisements was merely a logical extension of the growing commercialism of professional and amateur sport that comprised that element of “realism.” Of course, the spread of video game systems in American households made them desirable outlets for advertisers and marketers to pitch their products. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), Americans spent approximately $25.1 billion on video games and other related accessories in 2010.49 Furthermore, the widened demographic welcomed a more diverse assortment of companies wanting to reach them. The number of people over the age of 50 who play video games has increased from 9% in 1999 to 29% in 2009 with the average gamer being approximately 37 years old. While most in-game advertising targets the same coveted demographic of 18-34 males, the ESA notes that the “growth of gaming overall” will witness “further expansion of these efforts in coming years.”50 By 2014, the expected market value of in-game advertising is projected to surpass $1 billion.51

Early examples of in-game advertising were often static graphical representation of ads alongside product placement and virtual billboards.52 Consequently, the ads could not be changed once they were programmed into the gaming content due to the technological limitations of personal computers and commercial gaming consoles. The increased sophistication of contemporary gaming systems and personal computers today complete with online
capabilities for both allows gaming companies the flexibility to sell more ads that expire after a
given period or are available only within certain geographically regions.53 Known within the
gaming industry as “dynamic ads,” the ability to change virtual ads every time a user makes an
Internet connection provides is ideal for “time-critical campaigns, such as movies or product
launches.”54

Of course, not all video game advertisements are mobilized to enhance the visibility and
likeability of consumer goods, products, or services. In the months leading into the 2008
Presidential election, Barack Obama’s campaign purchased in-game advertisements for their
candidate in _Burnout Paradise_ and the latest incarnation of the Madden series.55 These ads were
only available once gamers had made an Internet connection with their system and then only
accessible to those who resided or “connected” in so-called swing states. Gamers were lured by
virtual billboards to register to vote early followed by the address for Obama’s “Vote for
Change” website. While the purchasing of advertising space by political candidates is certainly
not new, it nevertheless was the first instance that video game ads were used to target potential
voters.56 Even though it is difficult to determine to what degree these ads supported Obama’s
successful campaign for President, game companies and marketers were, at least, able to monitor
their exposure, including the amount of time and angle at which they are being viewed. 57

Video game advertisements are appealing because they elide the many of the issues
associated with traditional advertisements such as clutter and the capabilities of newer
technologies, such as TiVO and DVR-s, that give viewers the agency to bypass them. But as
more companies explore the benefits of these new marketing strategies, the problem of clutter
and diminishing returns will likely be replicated. Nevertheless, “video games offer exposure to
an ever-widening community and guarantee consumers’ optimum attention – a rarity with
The immersive world of video gaming where players can interact with and manipulate what occurs on screen means that a greater level of attentiveness can theoretically be given to the advertisements that are embedded within gaming content. To be sure, in-game video game advertisements are considered less intrusive than more traditional forms of advertising and many gamers consider them more respectful of their space, albeit space that exists only virtually.

Companies and marketers who pitch their products through video games claim that it not only bolsters profitability, but also enhances the overall likeability of their brands. When Gatorade first purchased in-game advertisements in NHL ’09, NHL 10, NBA Live ’07, NBA Live ’09, and NBA Street Homecourt, a Nielsen study revealed that those who purchased these titles spent 24% more on Gatorade products than those who did not. This supported the results of an earlier Nielsen study in 2008 that indicated in-game advertisements yielded a “positive brand attribute association” with 82% of gamers surveyed concluding that video games were “just as enjoyable with ads as without.” While it is difficult to determine with a high degree of certainty why most gamers do not consider in-game advertising as a burden or nuisance, one plausible theory is that youth culture is largely brand driven in the first place. Corporate sponsorship is certainly not a nuisance or an intrusion among younger demographics “for whom generational identity [has] been largely been a prepackaged good and for whom the search for self [has] always been shaped by marketing hype.”

Sports video game companies advertise that their titles capture the realism of professional and amateur sports, as in Electronic Art’s famous slogan “It’s in the game.” According to Elizabeth Harz, Senior Vice President for Global Media Sales for Electronic Arts, “part of the authenticity that is embedded in the game or that is dynamically served during connected play,
include the finer details like in-stadium and in-arena signage.” Of course, it is not merely stadium signage that is part of this delivered sense of realism; many sports games mimic the television-style presentation of networked sports productions, complete with real announcers and network-specific broadcasts. Segments that are sponsored during real live sports broadcasts, such as the starting lineup and opening coin toss, are likewise replicated in virtual sports broadcasts often with same sponsors for both. For example, State Farm is the major sponsor of Major League Baseball’s annual home run derby during the All Star break in July. In Sony Playstation’s *MLB: The Show*, gamers can participate in a home run derby with real major league players, accompanied by references to State Farm’s sponsorship and virtual ballparks plastered with the company’s logo.

Unsurprisingly, many of the companies who purchase in-game ads are those that already have a real sponsorship relationship with their respective sports, a fact not lost on gamers. According to an ESPN Sports Poll, 75% of respondents said that a company’s relationship with a sport is reinforced by that same company purchasing in-game ads within their video game counterparts. There is no question that such a strategy increases the perceived authenticity of virtual sports games. Furthermore, this reveals how gamers perceive commercialism and advertising as a natural and complimentary component of professional and amateur sports, as seemingly “real” as the games themselves. Gamers are not only loosely targeted as fans, but rather as self-interested consumers whose purchasing patterns are expected to be altered and manipulated by the companies who purchase ads. Even though gaming is becoming more common among older Americans, they are still largely enjoyed by younger generations who view consumption as the building blocks of constructing a “unique” and “individual” identity. The commodification of the sports gaming experience merely reinforces this perspective. While
critics may critique the growing commercialism of professional and amateur sport through an ability to imagine them “pure” from these influences, today’s youth have largely never known, much less imagined a world where such influences were not so heavily part of life. They are mostly incapable of imagining an outside, a world apart from consumption, corporations, and branding.

Sports video games exert pressures on professional sports organizations and the networks who broadcast their games to alter their approaches and strategies for reaching a younger generation of sports fans. Since sports video games are a more immersive experience than watching a sporting event passively, live sports have had to compete with the video game medium for the attention of younger demographics. A growing number of them prefer playing sports video games over watching live sports, much to the alarm of professional sports organizations alarmed by the potential loss of this desirable advertising demographic. One youth gamer stated that “when you watch on TV, it’s just boring. I like the [video] games better because you can do what you want to do. Like, I can make the player pass it or shoot it. But when you see it on TV, you’re just watching.” The appetite for interactivity over passivity can be seen in the commodification of war, as American citizens can become “virtual recruits” through video gaming where they play out the latest military conflicts rather than passively consuming them on the nightly news. In the world of live sports, youth preference for simulated, video game competitions over real athletic competitions undermines the effectiveness and reach of commercialism and advertising that is fundamental to the latter. NBA Commissioner David Stern echoed these concerns by stating that “as video games got so graphically close to perfection...there might be a battle between seeing games in person or on television and seeing it play out on a video game.” Furthermore, Stern iterated that if younger
generations of potential fans opt for video game sports, “we would rather have them consuming us on a video game than doing something else.” As long as live sporting sponsors can reach these audiences through video games, then real world sponsorship is not altogether threatened.

As more legions of the sacred 18-34 demographic remain content with virtual sports gaming as their primary means of engaging sports, in-game advertising will almost certainly increase. Already, networks are reconfiguring their presentations of live sports to make them more appealing to younger viewers who viewing habits are largely formed by video games and other new media. Princeton Video Imaging (PVI) is a New Jersey based company that produces graphical innovations that can be incorporated into live sports broadcasts, such as virtual first yard lines for football, virtual strike zones for baseball, and virtual offside lines in soccer. According to the Vice President of Business Development for PVI, “it’s a melding of TV with video games. Younger viewers want the effects of video games with the reality of real games. They want more action, more things happening.” Meanwhile, the presentation of video game sports versus live action sports creates a mutually reinforcing cycle in which the line between virtuality and reality is more difficult to discern. On the one hand, the incorporation of in-game advertising in video games is viewed as complimentary to the “realism” that sports gaming companies such as Electronic Arts promises, and is expected, to offer. Likewise, networks are resorting to a video game aesthetic in order to appease an attention-span deprived younger demographic; virtual strike zones are then regarded as part of that same sense of realism replicated in video games.

As I discussed earlier, in-game advertising serves to strengthen a real world sponsorship connection between a brand and professional sports. The reasoning is that, if State Farm is the real world sponsor of the Major League Baseball Home Run Derby, then a simulated home run
derby in baseball video games should highlight this relationship in order to authenticate its claim to realism. I have also argued that the increasing commercialism of sports video games enhances their realism and is many ways indicative of the naturalization between sports and commercialism. The fact that sports video games become another platform that companies can exploit to reach fan-consumers and the “elusive fan” is facilitated by how deeply embedded the tenets of consumption and consumer capitalism are in many fans’ relationship to the sports they follow. From a macro-social perspective, it reveals how comfortable citizens and fans are with being hailed as consumers, a subjectivity that is quintessentially “democratic.”

In-Game Advertising Strategies in Madden NFL Football

The Madden NFL franchise is the most popular sports title in video game history, selling more than 85 million copies worldwide and generating $3 billion in revenue since it first launched in 1989 on the Apple II, Commodore 64, and DOS systems.72 Because of John Madden’s status as an iconic NFL coach and broadcaster, Electronic Arts (EA) negotiated a deal with Madden to use his name and likeness in the game to boost sales and generate brand credibility. While early editions were crude representations of professional football in comparison to later Madden games, a licensing agreement between the NFL and EA led to the incorporation of real NFL players into the game. In subsequent iterations of the game, players were offered more immersive forms of gameplay to satisfy their dreams of controlling an actual NFL franchise through a “Franchise Mode.” Not only could gamers “coach” a team through a simulated season, but they could also engage in managerial tasks such as trades, fictional drafts, and free agent signings.73
The popularity of the Madden franchise in particular and professional football in general not only guaranteed strong sales of the video game for each annual release, but also created cross-marketing possibilities that companies could exploit. In 2006, ESPN and EA Sports negotiated a 15-year plan to further integrate their respective brands.\textsuperscript{74} One outcome of this relationship was \textit{Madden Nation}, a reality television show that premiered on ESPN in December, 2006 that featured diehard Madden gamers competing head to head in an elimination-style tournament for $100,000.\textsuperscript{75} The deal created a mutually exploitive relationship; ESPN’s brand of cool benefitted from an association with a popular sports video game while Electronic Arts profited by ESPN’s reputation as the premier sports network with a loyal viewership. It signified an ideal example of product placement as the entire premise of \textit{Madden Nation} operated as a commercial with the pretense of offering programming content, complete with narrative drama, tension, and an ESPN endorsement. The “premiere sports network” extended this relationship by previewing upcoming NFL matchups by simulating games on \textit{Madden} accompanied with “highlights” from the video game as a visual supplement to an anchor’s commentary. This synergistic relationship strengthens ESPN’s association to professional football while Madden’s claim to providing gamer’s an allegedly realistic and immersive NFL “experience” is authenticated by its relationship to the most powerful, visible, and popular sports network brand.

\textit{Madden}’s hegemony of the sports video game market allows Electronic Arts to largely dictate the trends that will occur elsewhere within the industry. As a matter of fact, the selling of in-game advertising in sports video game titles was not thoroughly legitimatized until EA signed a deal with Microsoft-based Massive to sell advertising for its top selling sports titles in 2007.\textsuperscript{76} To be sure, the \textit{Madden} football series blurs the distinction between reality and virtuality in ways unfathomable for other sports titles, especially when it comes to assessing athletic value, skill,
and ability. In anticipation of the release of *Madden 12*’s in late August of 2012, ESPN.com and EA have already begun “leaking” player ratings to the public. This signifies, in part, how a player’s value and performance are not completely determinable until the programmers at EA quantify it within their own rating system. In essence, players are measured according to set of real life criteria that is then transformed to the *Madden* rating system to ensure that virtual NFL players perform like their real selves within the game. Leaking player ratings before the release of the game aims to legitimize *Madden*’s accuracy of player ability while valorizing virtual rating system as a newsworthy “event.” The fact that many football fans are thoroughly familiar with the *Madden* franchise means that a player’s real ability is translated into terms that fans and gamers clearly understand. Yet, the dichotomy separating reality and virtuality collapses. For example, author and former contributor to *GamePro* magazine Jon Robinson notes that, “for the [Buffalo] Bills, Lee Evans is a burner on the outside with 96 speed, 92 acceleration. The problem is hitting him deep as Ryan Fitzpatrick has just 80 throwing power, giving corners that extra second to catch up when the ball hangs in the air.” Robinson’s audience is not only presumed to know what these ratings mean, but they are also encouraged to view the real world abilities and performances of actual players within these frames.

Once again, *Madden*’s depiction of NFL football and analytical assessment of those players who play in the league creates a kind of “reality” that enters real world discussion of sports. The game’s particular power to shape and frame reality effectively validates professional football’s growing and unrestrained commercialism within fan-negotiated limits. In essence, *Madden* programmers are compelled to reflect the “reality” of NFL football in as much as they are in the position to legitimate, and in some ways, define it. As mentioned previously, companies who serve as official sponsors of the league find that their connection to the game is
reinforced by their presence in *Madden* whose commitment to “realism” essentially warrants their inclusion. Thus, this real-world relationship limits the freedom of EA in terms of what ads it can include within the game, to whom they can be sold, and their location and purpose in the game. For example, fans and gamers complained weeks prior to the release of *Madden 11* in 2010 that the presence of some in-game ads had violated the terms of virtual sporting reality. Old Spice already served as the “official deodorant of the NFL” but when they sponsored a “Swagger” feature in the new *Madden* game where a player’s ability is boosted by excessive touchdown celebrations, gamers lamented that such had no real world relevance or counterpart.  

Some objected that the feature was only included to promote Old Spice’s brand of Swagger deodorant by manufacturing a component of gameplay that visibly contradicted EA’s commitment to realism. Lost in the discussions of the Swagger’s feature is how boisterous, excessive celebrations speak to a hyper-individual and attention-seeking culture.

While this might serve as an optimistic example of gamer’s ability and willingness to resist the growing commercialization of sports video game content, it does nothing to invalidate the premises upon which it is founded. While some fans may critique the association forged between professional sports, marketing, and advertising, sports games like *Madden* reaffirm these relationships when in-game ads of real world sponsors are included in the content as part of the “reality” they offer. Old Spice’s brand presence in the game makes sense for many fans because they are an official NFL sponsor, but this acceptance is limited by gamer’s experience of mediated sports and they aspects they have grown accustomed to sponsorship. Thus, when the opening coin toss in *Madden 10* is sponsored by Snickers, accompanied with the slogan “chews wisely” in the colors and shape of the company’s logo, such commercialism is viewed as respectful of the commodified sporting reality that gamers have come to expect. As long as these
segments in mediated sports productions include actual sponsors, its replication in a video game does not violate the boundaries of how much commercialism and advertising that sports video gamers are willing to tolerate. Again, sports video gamers, many of whom are real fans of the sports they participate in virtually, have grown comfortable with being hailed by sports discourse as consumers. As a matter of fact, being a football fan compels consumption, an act so intertwined with the game of football itself. Of course, more lukewarm versions of this ethos are found in other professional sports, but in the case of professional and college football, it is almost essential.

In more recent editions of *Madden NFL*, virtual fans are not seen wearing anything without an NFL team logo, sporting officially licensed jerseys, sweatshirts, and baseball hats. While there is nothing inherently wrong or objectionable with fans purchasing these items as gestures of supporting their favorite team in the real world, the *Madden* series rhetorically frames these acts as necessary for being a “real” fan. Garry Crawford notes that “it is through consumer goods that the ‘fan’ can increase their knowledge, and more importantly, display their commitment through conversation and the consumer goods they own and display.” According to Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, the banality and inseparability of the mass media from the practices of everyday life has intensified American narcissism as identities are commonly seen as consumption-based performances. “Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event.” Other people become the audience to whom our performances are directed while, at the same time, the individual is always part of an audience for whom other people’s performances are addressed. According to Christopher Lasch, most people function,
behave, and express themselves with the expectation that they will be noticed and admired as a means to take flight from their own inner emptiness and spiritual impoverishment.\textsuperscript{84}

Thus, fan identity has become increasingly performative as wearing officially licensed merchandise is but one strategy by which this identity is performed for and subsequently validated by others. \textit{Madden’s} framing of fandom in the case of virtual spectators could be read as a reflection of the increasing performativity of a narcissistic society driven largely by spectacle. But this framing accomplishes more than simply mirroring this seemingly basic and unproblematic reality. It sanctions the creation of a recognizable fan identity through consumption by its concomitant claims to realism by overtly making the allegation that one’s status as a fan will not be correctly performed or credited unless that individual consumes and displays officially licensed merchandise, such as a team jersey, sweatshirt, and other branded apparel. In other words, it defines some of the rules that dictate how real fans should perform their identity.

The \textit{Madden NFL} football games validate selective aspects of the reality of professional football in terms largely defined by the NFL to which EA has an licensing agreement. In 2004, the NFL granted EA with exclusive rights to NFL teams, players, and stadiums that gave them a virtual monopoly in the market of NFL football video gaming.\textsuperscript{85} Companies such as ESPN, Sega, and Take-Two who had previously created their own computerized versions of NFL football would no longer have the right to do so, eliminating any competitive barriers for EA to completely corner the market. While the full details of this agreement were not disclosed, the licensing agreement most assuredly gave the NFL control over which aspects of “reality” would be allowed in the game. Perhaps this is one reason why so many real-world sport sponsors can be found in their virtual counterparts. Assuming this to be true, the inclusion of in-game
advertising in EA sports titles is largely driven and defined by the NFL’s contractual agreements with its real world sponsors. In many of the stadiums that are contained within the game, there are fictional companies whose “ads” are featured prominently around the virtual venue, such as Titanium Sparkplugs, Intact Sports Drink, and Colossus Burgers. What this suggests is that the EA licensing agreement with the NFL necessitates the inclusion of league sponsors, but not individual advertising contracts negotiated by individual teams and local and regional companies. These sponsorship agreements where ads make it into the Madden series necessarily privilege the corporation, as smaller businesses are absent presumably because of the high cost of virtual ad space and the lack of a sponsorship contract with the league which itself is cost prohibitive.

MLB: The Show and the Philanthropic Veil

MLB: The Show is a Major League Baseball simulation that promises to deliver the same levels of virtual realism that has made other sports titles such as Madden popular with gamers and sports fans alike. The Show mediates the relationship between fans and sports through consumption but, as we will see, through a surprising philanthropic twist. It should be noted that not everyone who plays Madden, MLB: The Show, or any other licensed sports video game is or is motivated to become a sports fan. Nevertheless, they rhetorically construct a relationship to sport that is necessarily compelled by the forces of consumerism, consistent with other cultural texts and discourses that align democratic citizenship to shopping and purchasing goods and services. The most recent MLB: The Show (MLB: The Show 11) complicates this thesis to a certain degree, as many of the advertisements included in the game are for non-profit organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club of America, Welcome Home Veterans, and Stand
Up to Cancer. As evidence of “cause-related marketing,” this forms a strategy undertaken by Major League Baseball and its corporate sponsors to market their brands behind a veil of statesmanship, good will, and social responsibility.  

In recent years, the economic recession has generated heightened scrutiny by politicians, shareholders, and the public regarding corporate sponsorship of professional sports, some of whom were the recipients of federal bailout money. In 2009, State Farm, Bank of America, and Pepsi announced a strategy to increase their charitable giving in order to craft an image of goodwill and humble sensitivity in light of America’s fiscal crisis. The popularity and visibility of sport is viewed as an ideal channel through which such philanthropic endeavors will be noticed and recognized by the public. Regarding charitable giving during the 2009 Major League Baseball Home Run Derby in St. Louis, the Vice President for Research and Development of Joyce Julius and Associates noted, “It is on a broadcast network, it’s prime time, it draws a relatively large audience and it draws attention leading up to it and has a bit of an afterlife.”

Many of the sponsoring companies involved in the event, such as Master Card and General Motors, stated that they were not only being charitable, but were also seeking ways to boost profitability. For example, General Motors claimed that each dollar spent on sponsoring baseball games translated into $5 in sales, a significant return in relation to the initial investment. Ray Bednar, who heads global sponsorship marketing at Bank of America, said that, “I can completely understand the cynicism and understand the questions about philanthropy and investment in sports.” However, this cynicism had nothing to do with whether Bank of America’s charitable intent was genuine but whether such an act could generate profits. As Bednar notes, “we make money at this, and that’s the most important message to get out.”
In the case of *MLB: The Show*, in-game advertisements serve a public relations function that obscures an underlying commercial benefit behind a philanthropic facade. In the context of an economic crisis in which companies such as State Farm and Bank of America would appear as insensitive to the hardships befallen on ordinary Americans, sponsorship was a commercial sleight of hand that could be used to appear couch advertising within a shroud of social responsibility. As Matthew McAllister notes, sponsorship elevates the philanthropic aspect of the act, even when it is strategically substituted for more traditional forms of advertising with the same purpose of enhancing profitability.\(^91\) Interestingly, the only for-profit companies that feature in-game ads in *MLB: The Show 11* are Majestic (which manufactures the jerseys teams wear), Topps (a baseball trading card company) and State Farm. The first two have a more direct relationship to professional baseball while State Farm’s association is dependent on its sponsorship deal with Major League Baseball. Meanwhile, Bank of America and MasterCard, both which are official sponsors of the “national pastime” are surprisingly absent. For State Farm, whose business operations have little to do with baseball itself, this elevates the company’s social capital as its ads in *MLB: The Show 11* are consistently featured alongside more charitable organizations such as Stand Up to Cancer and Volunteers of America. This rhetorically conflates a private company such as State Farm with good corporate statesmanship through “cause-related marketing.”\(^92\)

According to Samantha King, “cause-related marketing” is a reference to a company’s promise to donate a predetermined portion of their profits generated by sales of a product to a charitable organization or cause.\(^93\) These marketing strategies have proven exceptionally popular among consumers who gain the personal satisfaction of intervening on behalf of a needy cause without a set of commitments beyond purchasing the product itself. Thus, they are sold the
illusion that they are active, rather than passive citizens. Discursively, this also privileges a neoliberal and privatized conception of the State, where consumers can voluntarily “donate” money to causes they appraise as worthy rather than through mandatory taxes that finance other activities they may not support. King suggests that, “in contrast to with mandatory taxes, which are widely held to quash the civic impulses of Americans and to alienate citizens from both one another and the government, voluntary leverages are seen to elicit civic participation and personalize the relationships between citizens and the state.”

It is through these voluntary associations that many citizens have come to believe that social issues are better served by corporations who do not demand engagement rather than the government where they have little discretion where their tax dollars are allocated. Thus, it would seem that corporate-led “cause related marketing” objectives foster more democracy than the state itself. Meanwhile, consumption is articulated with an ideal of active citizenship that promotes social change while the corporations who champion them watch as their sales soar as the aura of philanthropy overshadows the commercial intent buried underneath it.

What is also happening in MLB’s philanthropic efforts can best be described by what Lawrence Wenner labels as “communicative dirt” in which “the cultural borrowing…allows one cultural entity to adopt the logic of another.” For example, beer companies that purchase advertising time during sporting events are hoping that the socially constructed ideology of sport, such as hard, work, discipline, and pride will “rub off” on their brand. Sacrifice is one such value that is present in the world of sports in several different dimensions, whether it is the sacrifice bunt or sacrificing one’s body for the team. In this sense, State Farm’s inclusion in MLB: The Show alongside charitable organizations, much like its sponsorship of the Home Run Derby, operates so that “sacrifice” and social sensitivity will rub off on the insurance company. After
all, a business is an entity designed to make profits while State Farm’s sponsorship subverts the logic of this conventional wisdom; it allegedly sacrifices some of its profits for a greater cause through a philanthropic gesture. This association is reinforced, again through the claim of realism that sports games aim to replicate, in *MLB: The Show* where the presence of the ad and its proximity to charitable organizations elevates the philanthropic capital of the company.

Like *Madden NFL*, virtual fans in *MLB: The Show* are seen wearing logoed merchandise, once again suggesting that one’s fan identity is not complete without wearing official jerseys, hats, shirts, and sweatshirts. While this is merely one aspect of the game’s seeming realism, fans are consciously modeled by programmers to reflect this primary means by which real world followers of sport are identified and labeled as “true fans.” According to Ron Bishop, teams regularly change uniform styles in order to spur consumption of the latest fashions and, in some cases, wearing several different styles during the course of a given season knowing that fans will purchase them. Of course, any “real” fan of a team will be expected to wear the most recent team designs in all their variations in order for their status to be recognized by their particular sporting community. In *MLB: The Show*, gamers can decide which style uniform in which to field their team, options that include alternate and retro uniforms. Whatever style the gamer chooses to outfit their virtual team, fans are seen in *MLB: The Show* wearing the same colors and variations.

State Farm has also negotiated sponsorship deals with both the NFL and Pixar in the movie *Cars* to reinvent its image from “your father’s insurance company” to one considered more hip by younger audiences. Thus, the benefit of real world sponsorship deals with MLB through the Home Run Derby and in-game ads in *MLB: The Show* allows the company to remain appealing to its older constituency while marketing to a younger demographic through video
games. Furthermore, MLB’s commitment to appear sensitive in the wake of an economic crisis is mirrored in \textit{MLB: The Show} where charitable organizations comprise the bulk of in-game advertisements included in the game.

In the case of \textit{Madden NFL} and \textit{MLB: The Show}, many of the virtual advertisements include the same sponsors that have real world partnerships with MLB and the NFL, therefore reinforcing these actual relationships. Thus, it appears that professional leagues have remarkable discretion and control over which ads can be featured in the games, although the lack of transparency in licensing agreements renders this claim mere speculation. It could also be the case that companies who have already inked sponsorship deals with the NFL and MLB are more likely to not only purchase in-game advertisements. As a matter of fact, the revenues from the sale of virtual ads contain rising development costs in programming in a sports game industry that generates $3 to $5 dollars in profit from a game that typically retails at $50.\textsuperscript{99} This would suggest that a company like EA makes money through the inclusion of an ad from State Farm, but this would not ultimately eliminate the possibility that professional leagues bear some authority in terms of what ads are sold and which are deemed appropriate to be associated with their sporting brand.

Ultimately, sports video games become another avenue for fans to relate to the sports that they follow, providing a more interactive realm where fans are granted the fantasy of control by engaging in managerial decisions with real players and teams. In addition, these games reinforce that professionals and amateur sports organizations, such as the NCAA, are not dealing merely with fans, but \textit{consumers} that make these sponsorship deals desirable in the first place. While some fans may critique and lament the burgeoning commercialization of sports that emphasize their business ethos, many are comfortable with being hailed as consumers, rather than citizens,
in their everyday life. The association between democracy and consumption, especially in younger generations who have never known or experienced any other relationship, is reproduced in sport. Furthermore, these games work in conjunction with other cultural discourses that rhetorically construct an ideal citizen identity that privileges consumption.

Fantasy Sports, Vicarious Management, and Competitive Fandom

Fantasy sports have developed into a lucrative industry that has grown by 60% in the last four years, including 32 million participants in both the United States and Canada alone.\textsuperscript{100} Not only are fantasy leagues available for the three major professional leagues (NFL, NBA, MLB) but also more obscure sports such as fishing, surfing, track and field, and darts.\textsuperscript{101} As a result, fantasy sports have become a $3 billion dollar industry with organizations such as the Fantasy Sports Trade Association representing new and emerging companies aiming to capitalize on their popularity.\textsuperscript{102} Not only have fantasy sports attracted the attention of optimistic entrepreneurs who are seizing them as a significant growth opportunity for their respective brands, they have also significantly transformed how fans follow, discuss, and consume sports.

While there is a great degree of strategy involved in managing a fantasy team, the rules and objectives are reasonably stark and uncomplicated. Individuals form leagues, engage in a draft where participants take turns selecting players, and engage in head to head competition where players’ real world statistical performance is then translated into a point system with the goal of outscoring one’s fantasy opponent. Furthermore, participants can trade players with other “owners,” set a reserve roster where players can be placed when they are not in the “starting lineup,” release players who are injured or performing poorly, and “pick up” undrafted players who the owner speculates will produce points for their team. For some, fantasy sports are merely
a casual diversion that can intensify their interest in a particular sport they would otherwise ignore while for others, they signify a serious activity intended to perform their superior sports knowledge.  

The earliest form of fantasy sports gaming arguably was Strat-O-Matic, a simulated baseball game where players rolled a pair of dice whose value and result was determined by the characteristics and real world statistical output of individual players. Others cite the development of Rotisserie League baseball by Dan Okrent and his journalistic colleagues who were stat enthusiasts that scoured through box scores and calculated results archaically with a pen and paper. At any rate, both were subcultural activities for “geeks” seeking their statistical fix in a largely antisocial and time consuming activity with little mainstream appeal. With the advent and popularity of the Internet, easy accessibility to real time stats, the collapsing of geographic boundaries for participants, and the convenience of online communication fueled the growth of fantasy sports. This was coupled with a proliferation of fantasy leagues, many of them free of charge, through the official websites of the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL and affiliated companies such as ESPN as a means to intensify fans’ relationship to their brand. Today, fantasy sports participation is viewed by some fans as a complement to following sports on television and has been demonstrated to increase viewer interest and the number of games watched during a typical week. 

However, it is important to give a brief consideration of the wider social, political, and economic contexts that help explain the factors and dynamics through which fantasy leagues are a desirable outlet for fans to experience sport. According to Thomas Oates, fantasy football functions as a means of “vicarious management” which “invites audiences to identity with the institutional regimes of the NFL (and the authorities who conduct them) rather than with the
Furthermore, “vicarious management narratives establish the marketplace as the preferred mode for engagement, and frame athletes as manipulable commodities to be mobilized by the consumer in pursuit of manly esteem.” For Oates, the appeal of vicarious management is a response to Anglo-centric anxieties that can be redeemed largely through white control of the African American body that can be virtually inhabited, manipulated, quantified, and disposed of freely in fantasy realms. I would argue that a secondary consideration is that such control is enticing in an age in which fans commonly long for a golden age of team loyalty before free agency allowed athletes to sell their services to the highest bidder. It is the fantasy owner who exercises all discretion regarding a player’s movement despite the ironic lack of loyalty applied toward athlete-commodities who are casually “dropped” from a fantasy team if they cease to be productive. In keeping with Oates, athletic performance is quantified and assessed through elaborate and sophisticated measurements alongside information made freely available and accessible via the Internet. Fantasy leagues transform the relationship between fan and athlete into a fan-commodity association; the multidimensional aspect of an athlete’s performance (including intangibles such as leadership in the clubhouse, etc.) is reduced to a point scoring schema for the purpose of bragging rights, or as Oates puts it, “manly esteem.”

The treatment of athletes as commodities is an attempt to erase their privileged status as well-compensated individuals who play games for the entertainment of the masses. Their commodification forces them through fantasy leagues to assume a subjectivity that de-escalates that status to a level consistent with those who play them. The postindustrial economy, the infusion of capitalist logic into more intimate realms of existence, the undermining of democratic principles through the ascendance of corporate wealth and power, and the destruction of the middle class have had disastrous consequences of America’s Everyman. Some of this anger is
then projected upon “greedy” athletes who should merely “shut up and work [play]” and who should feel excessively grateful for the salaries they command. Fantasy leagues restore a degree of power and privilege to the fan who would otherwise feel slighted and ignored. Thus, the athlete’s transformation into a commodity through fantasy ownership and control is merely another realm through which fans reclaim a privileged status where players labor on their behalf.

There are less abstract motivations for the popularity of fantasy sports and their seamless integration into how contemporary fandom is defined, experienced, and performed. Nickolas Davis and Margaret Carlisle Duncan in their study of fantasy sports culture found that not only do they exist as arenas for the reaffirmation of masculine privilege, but that participants expressed a compelling desire to compete with other fans for recognition of superior knowledge of a particular sport. Meanwhile, Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Richard Halverson argued that this is indicative of “competitive fandom [which] is rooted in comprehensive domain knowledge acquired through fan cultural practices, which include the consumption of franchise media as well as the consumption and production of fan-based media.” This acquired knowledge constructed through following sports and consuming sports media products is then appropriated into a fantasy realm where the winner seeks recognition and validation for being a superior, informed fan. However, the definition of fan in this case violates some basic assumptions that have been historically linked to their identity, such as a loyalty to a team and its players. Instead, to be a fan is rooted in various consumptive practices through which superior knowledge and management savvy are to be acquired. In other words, the dynamic of competitive fandom that motivates many fans to play fantasy sports is a profitable element that can be exploited by sports organizations to further market their brands and encourage consumption that is associated with being an informed and knowledgeable player.
This drive also speaks to the degree to which identity in contemporary society is a performance inspired by a narcissistic and self-serving need to be recognized by other people who constitute the audience through which this performance is staged in everyday life. According to Christopher Lasch, the contemporary narcissist views the past as inconsequential and the future as an inevitable Doomsday scenario, thereby retreating into personal preoccupations that assume society as irredeemable, leaving only the improvement of the self as a viable coping mechanism. In other words, people have substituted interest in politics and collective well-being for the simple credo of living for oneself within a larger society of conspiring enemies and competitors. “Plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness, the [individual]…seeks neither self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence, but piece of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it.” The narcissist merely desires a place, even when the environment that forms it is in dire need of redecoration, while being unable to cope without an “admiring audience.” Contemporary fandom is indeed a performance constituted by a narcissistic drive for recognition and validation; fantasy sports are indeed a space where this performance will surely be noted by others. However, it is important to keep in mind that I am not arguing that all fantasy sport participants are narcissists, nor am I suggesting that they are all motivated by a similar set of impulses that lead to a need to be recognized for having superior knowledge of sport. Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Richard Halverson indicate that some fantasy leaguers are merely looking for an activity to increase their knowledge of a sport’s team and players not predicated on seeking and attaining recognition from others. Yet, it is not the casual participant who represents the ideal hailed by fantasy sports discourse, but rather the serious participant who will be driven by competitive fandom to consume in order to gain insider knowledge that historically was only
available to owners, general managers, scouts, coaches and others traditionally positioned to be “in the know.”

As a result, the sports knowledge industry has experienced explosive growth, from fantasy based publications that provide meticulous and judicious information on player rankings, predictions, and statistical analysis to television programming options such as *Fantasy 411* and *Fantasy Sports Weekly*. These are supplemented by mobile phone applications such as ESPN’s Fantasy Alerts that provides users player injury updates, recommends substitute replacements, and real time statistical updates. According to Thomas Oates, “replicating the techniques deployed by multimillion dollar sports franchises as closely as possible is an important part of constructing the [fantasy sport] experience, and claims of authenticity are easy to find in promotional materials produced for vicarious management entertainments.” Simply put, fantasy leagues promise an authentic experience of managing a sports franchise which, as Oates suggests, operate rhetorically to legitimatize and valorize the workings of capitalism and managerial ideology through sport. In order to be a successful fantasy league participant, sports discourses often highlight and emphasize the importance of fantasy player’s possessing insider information in an effort to assess the value, potential, and usefulness of the athlete-commodities they will control. For example, Fantasy Sports Publications, Inc. advertises to “get serious…it takes serious information to field a consistent fantasy football winner.” Meanwhile, ESPN advertises its fantasy football game as “the closest thing you can find to buying your own professional franchise and becoming the team’s coach, owner, and president. All decisions are yours to make. And lucky for you, football is a game unbiased with player performance statistics. By using these statistics, you have everything you need to understand which players are performing and which ones are not.” Discursively, each invites the
participant to consume information through which many advertising-supported fantasy sports publications, websites, and television programs are ostensibly designed to facilitate.

It is clear that consumption in this case constitutes a form of audience or fan labor whose time and attention provides an object of value for content providers to sell to advertisers who market their products alongside the content that serves to give fans the insider information to field a “successful” fantasy franchise. In making this argument, Sut Jhally draws upon Karl Marx’s theoretical musings on labor as the source of value and its indispensability within a capitalistic mode of production. Thus, when ESPN provides fantasy sports content free of charge to users, they hope to direct traffic to their website so as to provide an object of value to those who advertise on their site. In other words, when a participant views injury updates on their websites to no cost to themselves, they are performing a kind of labor because this activity will provides exposure to the website’s sponsor. Meanwhile, the culture of competitive fandom inherent in many fantasy leagues encourages seeking this information in order to secure an edge over opponents. Yet, it also invites behavior that will produce value and profit for media companies who provide fantasy leagues and sports information content free of charge.

Returning to the idea that fantasy sports competition replicates the experience of managing and operating a professional franchise, this is only true to the extent that players are treated as commodities who are objectified, quantified, and assessed to determine their productivity and value. The reality is that fantasy leagues often encourage fans to assume the role of consumer in a strategic contest for bragging rights in a sports culture of competitive fandom that benefits sports organizations aiming to exploit the profit-making capabilities and marketing reach of new media. Here, players are something to be consumed and profited for “manly esteem” and competition. In other words, fantasy sports assist in the rhetorical construction of
the ideal citizen in neoliberal capitalism, where competition has been infused into a previously passive leisure activity in order to spur more consumption. As Oates suggests, fantasy sports also work to fashion a level of identification between the institutional players in professional sports such as general managers and owners while encouraging greater degrees of alienation between fans and players. To a certain degree, they also invite players to adopt a capitalist mentality in order to normalize its logic and its status as a business where managerial cunning determines success, not necessarily the athletes themselves.

According to Robert Reich, declining economic opportunity to vaster numbers of Americans has not inspired revolution but rather greater degrees of ambition and stubborn determination in capturing a more elusive share of the pie. Thomas Frank argues that many contemporary elites such as Bill Gates are depicted as self-made men who symbolize the destruction of old hierarchies, convincing many Americans that there is no “us” versus “them” in a world of rapid technological innovation in which so many opportunistic moments are allegedly available. Meanwhile, in the world of fantasy sports, there is no such thing as inherited privilege or wealth; serious players who consistently succeed in the world of fantasy world do so according to their own skill, knowledge, and cunning, all of which is “earned” through consuming both the right players and the right information. In other words, fantasy sports could be seen as merely affirming the Social Darwinistic doctrine of the survival of the fittest within a thriving universe of meritocracy. Despite the majority of fantasy league participants being college educated and working full time professionals, the idea is that anyone is invited to play and that skill, ambition, and fortitude alone determine winners and losers.

Fantasy sports reaffirm the logic in capitalism along preferred dimensions of engagement that veils much of the actual economic workings of owning and managing a professional sports
franchise. One plausible reason for this is that many fans are uncomfortable with sports being treated like a business because it corrupts their purity and innocence. Thus, while fantasy sports participation ostensibly simulates the experience of occupying the general manager’s seat, they do not replicate to any major degree the reality of that experience. Sut Jhally and Bill Livant contend that sports mystify the operations of capitalism and competition in daily life by not showing us exactly how it works, but how we wish it would work. “The outcome is fair, the win was earned, and the winner deserved to win. In sports competition, it seems to us that reason prevails, justice is done, and we can understand it all. And we hunger for this. Sports competition is the heaven of competitive reason and justice, as life is its hell. Hence, sports are immensely attractive.”

Fantasy sports does not provide the participant an insider’s view inside the ownership’s box nor do they acknowledge the capitalist, economic ethic of sport as a business whose primary goal is to be profitable. Rather, fantasy sports are but one means that sports organizations exploit the marketing possibilities of new media that simultaneously modifies the relationship between fans, athletes, and the teams they play for. They introduce competition within a space where it was previously non-existent, as the collective nature of fandom is suppressed in favor of competitive fandom to showcase superior knowledge and managerial savvy. In this way, information becomes a valuable commodity and players but mere objects to be consumed. Here, it is important to discuss briefly how professional sports management actually operates in light of the arguments that I have made earlier.

One of the mythologies persistent in American professional sports that fantasy leagues perpetuate is that owners have a vested interest in fielding a competitive club on the assumption that doing so will increase fan attendance and interest that will itself bolster a team’s bottom line.
In this way, fantasy sports mystify the operational logic of capitalism in ownership thinking in as much as it reproduces it. For example, there is a substantial difference between “win maximizing” versus “profit maximizing,” the latter a more common orientation in the United States compared to European styles of ownership. Yet, the former is the ethic that fantasy sports embody because it supports cultural ideals and mythologies of contemporary sports management philosophy in the United States. In the case of “profit maximizing,” the goal is to enhance revenues to a maximum degree which may or may not require that a team be competitive, depending among other things, the size of the market in which they reside and the degree to which revenue is shared among competing teams. Former Walmart CEO, David Glass purchased the Kansas City Royals in 2000 in order to keep the franchise in town after reports circulated that the franchise could possibly relocate. Since assuming ownership of the Royals, the team has not enjoyed a single winning season and, despite four clubs spending less during the span of Glass’ ownership, his is the only club out of the five that has not made a single playoff appearance since 2000. Glass has been accused of operating the Royals with the same business principles that have made Walmart the most profitable retail company in the world. By resorting to cheap labor while banking on Major League Baseball’s revenue sharing program, Glass can operate a second-tier club quite profitably. Much like Walmart’s business model, sacrificing quality does not necessarily translate into failure in strict economic terms.

The revenue sharing program began in Major League Baseball in 1995 in the wake of a player’s strike that witnessed the first ever cancellation of the World Series due to a labor stoppage that turned into a lockout the following preseason. This exacerbated the long-standing fan backlash against greedy, overpaid players that led many fans to declare a boycott of Major League Baseball by refusing to purchase tickets and watching games on television. The
revenue sharing agreement stated that a team’s net local revenue, minus stadium expenses, would be taxed 20%. Afterward, 75% of that revenue would be allocated to each team with the additional 25% being given to those teams with below-average revenue on the premise that these maneuvers would increase competitive balance between large and small market clubs. In 2002 when the league was on the verge of another labor stoppage, a last minute agreement was reached between owners and the Players Association that called for increased revenue sharing in addition to restoring the luxury tax that would require teams to pay a fee if they spent beyond an arbitrary amount on salaries agreed to by owners and the players’ union. All in all, these agreements provided some owners an incentive to keep their team payrolls low because the existing revenue sharing agreement provided them with free capital with no ensuing obligation to reinvest that money into player contracts and free agent signings.  

Thus, owners like David Glass have an incentive to maintain payrolls at their lowest levels by relying on cheap, inexperienced players so as to make a profit from the revenue sharing program. Of course, payroll does not merely include player salaries; coaches and scouts who have worked in the organization have regularly complained about a lack of equipment and other fundamental essentials in order to keep the club’s operating expenses at a minimum. For example, scouts were routinely denied access to company cell phones and, when they did finally receive them, were told that they would have to limit their monthly minutes. Meanwhile, the Royals minor league system lacked stopwatches, pitching machines, and enough baseballs to be used for practices. In addition, the Royals cancelled their annual Negro League tribute game where the team wears vintage Negro League uniforms on the premise that the club could not afford the uniforms. While the situation has improved in recent years in terms of payroll and
other expenses, the Royals continue to benefit from the league’s revenue sharing program, “an amount thought to have approached $30 million in recent years.”\textsuperscript{138}

Of course, many team owners are often hidden from the spotlight, which allows them to escape criticism that their greed is a complicit factor in higher ticket, concession, and parking costs that factor into attending a major league sporting event. In order to mobilize public support against rising player salaries and for publicly subsidized stadiums, owners will often plead poverty.\textsuperscript{139} Leonard Koppett of \textit{The New York Times} put it succinctly when he wrote, “what shocks me is the [owners] utter lack of patriotism. Why? By refusing to share, with the rest of the American business community, the secret of their great discovery: how to lose millions year after year, stay in business, and even double their revenue.”\textsuperscript{140} One reason is that team owners are able to hide profits through their other business holdings, often media companies, in order to “show” that their teams are operating at a loss despite actually being quite profitable.\textsuperscript{141} For example, Madison Square Garden, Inc. (MSG) owns the New York Rangers, New York Liberty, and the New York Knicks as well as the cable sports network MSG that broadcasts their games. Typically, MLB, NHL, and NBA teams will sell the rights to broadcast their games locally at a cost agreed upon by the franchise and the network that is bidding for those rights.\textsuperscript{142} For a franchise with this type of relationship, there is a greater degree of discretion in terms of which balance sheet profits will be shown. In the case of the Rangers, Liberty, and the Knicks, the revenue generated from these teams can be shifted to the media network which lowers the profit and operating income that is reported to the IRS for these franchises. When Ted Turner owned the NBA Atlanta Hawks and the NL Atlanta Braves, he was notorious for claiming financial losses despite owning a superstation, WTBS that broadcasted their games, often by shifting profits to the network.\textsuperscript{143}
There are other accounting measures that can be used to as a tax shelter to hide profits from the IRS such as contract depreciation, which allows owners to assign half of the franchise value to player contracts and then depreciate that amount over a period of five years.\textsuperscript{144} It is merely an arbitrary accounting entry with no cash being used to cover the cost but it is often useful in reducing the amount of profit reported to the IRS. Furthermore, many owners will claim an exorbitant salary that later shows up on the teams’ accounting records as an expense that does not actually exist. Former Major League Baseball Chief Operating Officer (COO) and current president of the Toronto Blue Jays, Paul Beeston stated that “under generally accepted accounting principles, I can turn a $4 million dollar profit into a $2 million loss and I can get every national accounting firm to agree with me.”\textsuperscript{145}

Thus, fantasy sports participation obscures as much the workings and pressures of owning a professional sports franchise as they do replicate them. Fantasy leagues perpetuate the idea that the managerial culture of sports is concerned more with fielding a competitive team rather than a profitable one. As Oates suggests, they also reduce the status of the athlete to the dehumanizing level of the commodity while providing any opportunity for fans to engage in vicarious management that “establish the marketplace as the preferred mode of engagement.”\textsuperscript{146}

Traditionally, fandom has been understood as a kind of community where individuals come together in their love for a particular team or club in a unified gesture of support.\textsuperscript{147} At a moment in the nation’s history where individuals are so often uprooted from their communities, sports fandom provide a feeling of belonging among increasingly unfamiliar people and places.

While the capacity for sports to forge feelings of community is certainly not lost or irrelevant, fantasy sports transform the experience of being a fan from a collective-minded act to a personal and individualistic expression of having superior sports knowledge in which
consumption of both athletes and information is essential. Furthermore, fantasy sports provide a site for a way of learning capitalism, but through preferred frames of engagement that are mobilized to normalize its logic and obscure the way in which teams are approached by owners as profit-generating businesses that do not always require competitiveness. Finally, the marketing reach of new media have provided new avenues for fans to consume sport, a truth not lost on professional sports organizations looking to exploit them. Fantasy leagues offer another opportunity for fans to “consume sport,” which generate new opportunities for professional organizations and their sponsors to intensify fans’ relationships to their brands, the experiences they manufacture, and the products they sell.

Concluding Remarks

The sports gaming culture both tacitly and overtly promotes a fan subjectivity in which the ethic of consumption is an essential component. As professional sports have become increasingly commodified by commercial forces seeking to exploit their reach, visibility, and popularity, sports video games reinforce that momentum by including real world sponsors as part of the “reality” of sport they are promising to deliver. Furthermore, the lack of resistance by fans and gamers alike indicate not only the normalcy of commercialism in sports, but how comfortable they are in deferring to it within areas previously exempted from their reach. One cannot discount wider social, cultural, and economic shifts in how people think of identity. Likewise, it cannot be ignored the importance attributed to consumption in not only performing identity, but authenticating them in the process. According to Garry Crawford, the appropriation of sport by big business actors and the growing relationship with the media nurtures the rising tide of commercialism in sport. As gaming systems became more sophisticated graphically,
and as sport video games became more popular because of the “realism” they were able to recreate, in-game advertisements were probably an inevitable byproduct of these forces.

Meanwhile, the popularity of fantasy sports is intertwined with the possibilities afforded by the Internet and new media for sports media organizations to market their brands in ways previously unfathomable. Invariably, by introducing a competitive aspect within sports fandom itself, players are subsequently transformed into commodities that can be consumed for personal esteem. Subsequently, “insider” information becomes an object of value and works to intensify, in many cases, the existing relationships between fans and real sports. While fantasy sports may be applauded for recreating the experiencing of occupying the position of general manager, they obscure much of the capitalist logic that is commonly attributed to ruining the innocence of sports in the first place. But there is no question that fantasy sports are a lucrative revenue stream for professional sports that, like sports video games themselves, perpetuate the commercialization of fan identity.

Notes

2 Ibid., 4
3 Ibid., 5.
In Edwin Black’s essay on the second persona addresses neo-Aristotelian critics’ unwillingness at the time to pass moral judgment on texts because of the commonly held view that they were instruments intended to achieve a particular end. Black challenges this notion, suggesting that rhetorical texts contain traces of their author and thus contain a human element that justifies such moral judgment. The second persona is the intended audience or auditor of a text and, according to Black, the rhetorical text contains evidence regarding who that persona is. I cite it here to suggest that sports video games and fantasy sports not only imply an audience, but the author’s conceptualization of who that audience will be and the assumptions they make regarding the audience’s character, values, dispositions, and role in society. See Edwin Black, “The Second Persona,” in Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader, eds. John L. Lucaites, Celeste M. Condit, and Sally Caudill (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998): 331-340.


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 10


12 Ibid.

13 Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance; Jhally, “Advertising as Religion.”

15 Cited in Ewen, _PR! A Social History of Spin_.


17 Marcuse, _One-Dimensional Man_.


19 Marcuse, _One-Dimensional Man_.

20 Frank, _The Conquest of Cool_.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


26 Ibid., 182


29 McAllister, *The Commercialization of American Culture*.


33 Ibid.


35 *The Office: Season 2*, “Christmas Party,” directed by Charles McDougall (2006; Orlando, FL: Universal Studios), DVD.


40 Ibid., 22


43 David Radd, “Sports and In-Game Advertising.”

44 I have based this argument on the same issues raised by Naomi Klein, No Logo, 2nd ed. (New York: Picador, 2002).


47 “Entertainment Software Association.”

“Entertainment Software Association.”

Ibid., para. 10.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Entertainment Software Association, para. 4.


“Entertainment Software Association.”

“Entertainment Software Association.”


Cited in O’Conner, “In-Game Advertising,” para. 4

Naomi Klein makes this statement in reference to the overt commercialism and commodification of Woodstock ’94 and how the anti-commercial spirit of the original
Woodstock was violated by the 25th Anniversary festival. According to Klein, organizers justified the branding of the event on the premise that kids attending the event would not feel the experience complete without ample opportunities to consume corporate merchandise. In essence, Klein agrees and her statement is testament to the younger generation’s mindset, where consumerism and branding are considered normal. While it is dated to a certain degree, there is no indication that contemporary youth would feel any different today which is why I included the quote here, see Naomi Klein, No Logo.

63 Quoted in “Study Shows In-Game Advertising Maximizes Marketing Dollars in Sports Category.”

64 Cited in Ibid.


66 Quoted in Shiesel, “Who’s Got Game,” para. 6


69 Quoted in Ibid., para. 13.


71 Quoted in Ibid., para. 24.


Ibid.


Synder-Bulik “In-game Ads Win Cachet Through a Deal With EA.”


Ibid., para. 5

Lippert, “Madden NFL: The Ad Game.”

See McAllister, “The Super Bowl as Communal Celebration.”


Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*.

Ibid., 73.


King, “Pink Ribbons, Inc.”


89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.


92 King, “Pink Ribbons, Inc.”

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 481.

95 Ibid.


99 Snyder-Bulik, “In Game Ads Win Cachet.”


103 Halverson and Halverson, “Fantasy Baseball: The Case for Competitive Fandom.”

104 Ibid.


106 Thomas Oates, “New Media and The Repackaging of NFL Fandom.”

107 Ibid.


111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.


Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*

Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism.*

Ibid., 13.

Ibid., pg. 10.


Ibid.


Oates, “New Media and the Repackaging of NFL Fandom.”


For more on the rhetoric of purity in sports, specifically baseball, see Michael Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity During the War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2010).


Ibid.

Mellinger, “Will Royals Owner David Glass Finally Field a Winner?”

Ibid., para. 31


Quoted in Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win*, 56.

Quirk and Fort, *Hardball*; Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win*.

National Football League (NFL) teams do not rely on local television income, with the exception of games telecast during the preseason. As a result, all media income generated during the regular season is shared equally among all its franchises, allowing the NFL to maintain a
level of competitive balance not found in the other major professional leagues. As a matter of fact, the local television revenue generated among small and large market teams in the NBA, MLB, and the NHL places small market teams at a substantial disadvantage, since their local television rights are sold at a much lower rate than large market teams. The importance of local television revenue toward a team’s bottom line exacerbates the problem of competitive imbalance in the NBA, MLB, and the NHL. For more on this, see Quirk and Fort, *Hardball*.

143 Quirk and Fort, *Hardball*.

144 Quirk and Fort, *Hardball*; Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win*.

145 Quoted in Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win*, 56-57.


148 Oates, “New Media and the Repackaging of NFL Fandom.”

149 Crawford, *Consuming Sport*. 
CHAPTER IV: “IT’S NOT HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME, BUT HOW YOU LOOK”:
SPORTS UNIFORMS AND FASHIONABLE CONSUMPTION

After the University of Maryland football team upset the University of Miami (FL) 32-24 in September of 2011, the game itself generated a significant “buzz” on social networking sites such as Twitter and on super sports networks like ESPN. According to Google Trends, the University of Maryland was the number one search term on Google following the victory.¹ But much of this had nothing to do with the team’s surprising victory over ACC foe Miami or its potential bowl opportunities, but rather the “Maryland Pride” uniforms designed by Under Armour that the team wore on the field. And that was the point. The jerseys sported a bold amalgamation of the state’s black and yellow flag interspersed with the school’s colors (maroon and yellow) in a dizzying and uncanny combination fit for a Twitter culture. Shawn Nestor, spokesman for the University of Maryland, remarked that “[Under Armour’s] trying to increase their visibility, and so are we.”² In that regard, the school fulfilled its goal as the uniforms virtually monopolized the media spotlight, becoming the dominant story on NBC’s “Today Show,” ABC’s “Good Morning America” and ESPN’s “Outside the Lines.”³ Even NBA All Star Lebron James tweeted, “OH GOSH! Maryland uniforms#Ewwwwww!” while ESPN sports commentator Michael Wilbon called them “brilliantly ugly.”⁴

Of course, the bold design of the Maryland uniforms is representative of the grip that fashion economics has on college sports in a feverish battle to attract recruits, media attention, and generate revenue dollars through merchandising.⁵ Inspired by the lessons of the University of Oregon, “the trailblazers of the unorthodox,” who attracted the national spotlight for being the first school to experiment with dozens of outrageous colors and uniform combinations, the
Maryland example is an outgrowth of an increasingly common college football template. To this extent, the role of the athlete is reduced to a fashion model where flashy and unapologetic flair can translate into millions of dollars of revenue for the NCAA, its member schools, and companies such as Nike and Under Armour who produce them. Furthermore, they are the commonly a site for sports organizations to embody their “cause related marketing” relationships with entities such as the Wounded Warrior Project. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the transformation of the sports uniform into a fashion statement, the instrumental role of hip hop in this process, and the wider social contexts that explain the centrality of consumption in the constitution of identity and fandom. Furthermore, I will argue that team uniforms not only rhetorically target fans as consumers, but have been strategically mobilized to fulfill various institutional and organizational goals that relate to branding, visibility, recognition, and profitability. In addition, I argue that the commercialism of sport, much like the commodification of identity is general, is the driving mechanism of what I describe as the bold jersey phenomenon in college and professional sport.

As athletes fulfill an additional role of fashionably modeling a team’s latest and sometimes experimental designs, they convey an important identity statement that relates to my overall argument about the conflation between democracy and consumption. Specifically, athletes themselves embody the commodification of identity that is occurring in wider social and cultural contexts. Rhetorically, new sports uniforms have become an avenue for teams to foster an additional layer of identification between themselves and fans through the athlete by speaking the language of commodified identity in a rampant consumer culture. This chapter will also visit Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification in discussing how athletes are not merely modeling flashy uniforms, designs, and styles, but reinforcing a consumer-defined notion of citizenship.
within a neoliberal “democracy.” Since athletes are expected to be ideal citizens in obeying higher ethical standards than found elsewhere, their performance of a consumer identity on the field conveys an accompanying lesson to fans that good citizenship is equivocated with being a good consumer.

The Origins of the Retro Aesthetic in Sports

According to Ron Bishop, fans have typically consumed licensed apparel as a sign or gesture to their allegiance to a particular team or sport. While this remains true to a significant degree, Bishop notes that “creating a brand means more to sport marketing executives than any real connection the fans have to their team.” This particular focus on branding has altered the promotional and marketing objectives of teams and sports organizations, anchored on targeting loyal and casual fans alike. In this sense, the sports brand must be made to appeal not only to die-hard followers of sport, but a more general population of consumers who can be lured to consume licensed sports merchandise without a complimentary commitment to sports and particular teams in general. As Bishop notes, professional sports teams who commonly alter team designs and colors exploit the emotional attachment of loyal fans; as wearing the teams colors becomes the marker of being a true fan, new designs encourage loyalists to consume them in order to reaffirm their status. However, for the more casual sports fan, the latest jersey designs satisfy superficial urges to consume based on a commitment to novelty and a “fad” that expresses a form of knowledgeable and sophisticated consumption. Either way, the uniforms and hats that teams wear on the field are sought after commodities and each variation on a particular team’s look, whether in the case of alternate jerseys or retro apparel, leads to more
consumer options that in their totality, bolster the merchandising bottom line of teams and leagues.

It is important to emphasize that alternative jerseys are not a unique trend, even if they are more common in the sporting landscape today than in years past. Major League Baseball experimented with them in the 1970s led by Charlie Finley, infamous owner of the Oakland Athletics, who was the first to introduce a mix and match combination of uniform styles that included separate green and gold jerseys, including a predominately white uniform that the team would wear specifically for Sunday home games. Finley correctly predicted that other teams would follow and during the course of the decade, alternate jerseys became a regular fixture of professional baseball. While offensive to baseball purists, alternate jerseys pandered to the visual aesthetics of color television. Yet, team owners were not interested in their merchandising potential primarily because the marketing-at-all costs mentality had not assumed shape in professional sport. As a matter of fact, professional teams at the time limited the amount of merchandise sold to fans because they were not convinced that a market existed for them. Some players critiqued the new uniforms as an affront to the entrenched culture of masculinity in baseball. New York Yankees’ superstar Mickey Mantle, for example, joked that “[The A’s] should have come out of the dugout on tippy-toes, holding hands, and singing.”

In the mid-1980s, expressing fandom through commercialized routes, whether through film (*Star Wars*) or sports themselves had becoming increasingly common and accepted. Filmmaker and social critic Spike Lee made public appearances wearing Brooklyn Dodgers’ hats and jerseys during the late 1980s, sparking a nationwide trend particularly among African American youth and hip hop artists. While retro style hats and memorabilia had previously been instrumental in the popularity of sports based memorabilia as a sign of fandom, they also
entertained the possibility that sports, specifically retro style merchandise, could appeal to a wider legion of non-sports fans and consumers. Nevertheless, the appeal of old-style baseball hats and uniforms was largely attributed to nostalgia, a cultural symptom of the desire to recapture symbolic remnants of an innocent and purified past. Ted Spencer, former curator of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, noted that “all the baby boomers have grown up. The [retro] hats are part of a childhood fantasy being fulfilled.”

The market for retro style uniforms and hats remained a subcultural niche market in the 1980s with Mitchell and Ness, a sporting goods store in Center City Philadelphia, manufacturing authentic replicas of jerseys of historical teams and players. Owner Peter Capolino noted that “I figured my market was 35- to 75-year-old, conservative, college-educated, suburban white men. Somebody like me.” The company previously outfitted teams such as baseball’s Philadelphia Phillies and hockey’s Philadelphia Flyers in the 1950s but when Capolino found a large abandoned supply of old flannel in a warehouse in the mid-1980s, he decided to corner the retro market long before nostalgia was fashionably trendy. Averaging $300 per item, these items lacked mainstream appeal, primarily because the ethos that nostalgia could be “cool” had not found the right cultural vehicle to attach itself to in order to become a fad of epic, consumer-driven proportions.

Meanwhile, the success of the Universal Pictures’ *Field of Dreams*, which debuted in theaters in 1989, presented “Major League Baseball with a nostalgic antidote to bad publicity over sagging ratings…player lockout and the fallout from the Pete Rose and George Steinbrenner scandals.” The film centers on an Iowa corn farmer who plows his crop in order to build a baseball field after a ghostly voice tells him to do so. Shortly after it is completed, Kinsella receives a visit by the supernatural apparition of Shoeless Joe Jackson who received a
lifetime suspension in connection to his alleged involvement with seven other Chicago White Sox players with gamblers in throwing the 1919 World Series. Jackson receives permission from Kinsella to allow other dead ballplayers to use the field to play pickup games. While Kinsella is pressured by his brother-in-law and bankers to sell the farm due to his family’s rising debt, Kinsella’s faith in his “field of dreams” is tested. The field itself is symbolic of pastoral and pre-Civil Rights America, a representational space of nostalgia at risk of erasure by the corruption and lost innocence of modern society. At the end of the film, Kinsella is visited by the ghost of his estranged father where the two of them share a game of catch in a closing shot that reveals several miles of cars making their way to the ballpark before the rolling of the credits.

Rhetorically, this image of a traffic backup symbolizes America’s desire for a similar return to cultural innocence, in part, through the game of baseball and the cultural sanctuary that it embodies. Field of Dreams was certainly not the first film that exploited baseball’s nostalgic qualities as The Natural expressed similar themes of baseball’s virtue as a historical repository linked with the nation’s lost innocence, chastity, and moral righteousness.

In the wake of the Field of Dreams, Bonneville Media Communications of Salt Lake City, Utah produced a television advertisement featuring Texas Rangers’ pitcher Nolan Ryan as a young boy playing baseball with his father on their farm.\textsuperscript{20} By selectively exploiting a central narrative trope from Field of Dreams, the commercial reinforces baseball as a family institution in an age of “eroding” family values, using pastoral imagery that speaks to fans’ nostalgic yearning for a return to innocence through Major League Baseball and culture in general.\textsuperscript{21} MLB Properties, a marketing wing of Major League Baseball, advertised its Cooperstown Collection of retro jerseys with a commercial centered on a father and son playing baseball foregrounded by black and white images of the game’s great players and moments.\textsuperscript{22} Again, the choice to use old
footage is a rhetorical attempt to distance the modern game from its ancestral heritage in which the heroic mythology of baseball is attributed to a purified past before it was corrupted by free agency, ego, and ironically, the same commercialism these ads were exploiting. While neither *Field of Dreams* nor these particular ad campaigns were the first to mobilize images of nostalgia, each worked in tandem with baseball marketers’ efforts to “repaint the sport’s image as an experience, an institution, to woo the busy family of the 1990s.”

Despite many of the urban origins ascribed to baseball, the game has long occupied “the broad discursive field of pastoralism and America.” Because of its cultural associations with the perceived stability, organicism, and traditionalism of preindustrial America, baseball has long served as a representational space of nostalgic longing and conservative values. According to Charles Fruehling Springwood, visiting tourist destinations such as baseball’s Hall of Fame museum in rural Cooperstown, New York and the Field of Dreams set in Dyersville, Iowa are often cast in religious metaphors as a “pilgrimage.” Both are “dominated by promises of nostalgic rejuvenation” that have been worked into “hegemonic narratives about country, family, and history.” Given the working class and conservative “backlash” against progressive political gains in the 1960s, baseball sensed an urgent marketing opportunity to exploit its nostalgia-based commercial appeal. As Springwood emphasizes, nostalgia in this case not only operates as a form of social critique toward the lost innocence of Major League Baseball, but against contemporary culture itself. Ron Von Burg and Paul E. Johnson note that the nostalgic and pastoral mythology of baseball itself explains, in part, Major League Baseball’s intense efforts years later to cleanse its association with steroids because of the ways they disrupted this central narrative.
The Chicago White Sox made a concerted effort in 1990 to “pitch the pure experience of historic baseball” by scheduling Saturday night home games with postgame fireworks at an earlier time of 6pm to attract families. They were also the first major professional team to wear retro jerseys during a game as part of a “Turn Back the Clock” night during the club’s final season at old Comiskey Park. In a July matchup against the visiting Milwaukee Brewers, the White Sox took the field in pin-striped uniforms modeled after those worn in 1917 while selling replicas of the caps for $38 in stadium souvenir shops. White Sox first baseman Ron Kittle remarked, “It’s not how you play the game but how you look. I look good in these. I’d like to wear them on the road, but they didn’t make a set of grays.” Meanwhile, Milwaukee Brewers outfielder Robin Yount commented “if they can put people in the stands by doings this, great.” Fans were encouraged to dress in period clothing as part of the festivities which included an organ grinder and monkey to greet fans, barbershop quartets, and five-cent popcorn. Along with tickets discounted as low as 50 cents, the game drew 40,666 fans to watch a White Sox team that was otherwise mediocre and, for the most part, struggling to draw people to the ballpark during its final season at Comiskey.

The 1990s also witnessed a wave of kid-themed baseball movies such as Rookie of the Year (1993), The Sandlot (1993), Angels in the Outfield (1994), and Little Big League (1994) that each suggested that baseball needed to recapture its lost innocence by returning to its foundational, redemptive values. Without question, these films were a response to growing fan resentment toward “greedy” athletes, their astronomical salary demands, and relative lack of team loyalty as free agents were selling their services to the highest bidder. Thus, each of these films relied on nostalgia-based appeals both overt and implicit to corner a market of disenfranchised fans by promoting an ideal that suggested, at its essence, baseball still embodied
the same values they were seeking. Not only was the purity attributed to the game operating as a cultural blueprint for how the nation should negotiate its contemporary problems and political uncertainty, but located greed with the players themselves instead of the owners who operate the teams they play for.\(^{35}\) While baseball seemed to be speaking a language of cultural values that transcend the market, nostalgia was mobilized to fulfill the same bottom-line imperatives held accountable for its decline.

In 1992, the opening of Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore as the first “retro ballpark” made similar attempts to capitalize on America’s nostalgic longing through the game of baseball. The park incorporated exposed brick and steel in mimicking the structural aesthetics of pre-World War II ballparks, while creating a theme park-based experience that proved to be quite popular with fans flocking to the stadium as a tourist destination.\(^{36}\) Meanwhile, other professional baseball teams hosted their own “Turn Back the Clock” events to capitalize on the same trend that had proven popular among white middle and upper class fans. As another first, the White Sox were the first team to honor the Negro Leagues in 1992 when they took the field wearing replica caps of the Chicago American Giants as part of an effort by the team and local community groups to lure more African Americans to the ballpark.\(^{37}\) Rob Gallas, then Vice President for the White Sox denied the economic motivations of these tributes, claiming that “for years, people in baseball have asked where are all the black fans. Hopefully, this is a baby step in the right direction of attracting more African-American fans to enjoy our total entertainment package.”\(^{38}\) While the Negro Leagues are certainly deserving of this type of recognition, it is hard to imagine that they were not, at least, driven by financial motivations for Major League Baseball to address the declining representation symbolically of African Americans on team rosters and fan patronage.
Other professional leagues capitalized on the retro, nostalgic-inspired trend of old style uniforms. In 1996, ten NBA teams wore retro jerseys to mark the 50th anniversary of the league while the NHL and NFL celebrated their 75th anniversary with teams wearing throwback, vintage uniforms in 1991 and 1994 respectively. Christopher Arena, the NBA’s Senior Director of Apparel, stated that “we look at this as theatre…there’s a stage and the players are wearing costumes. Wearing the same uniform 41 times in a row can get a little boring.” Certainly, the goal of these commemorative gestures was to sell replica game worn merchandise of the retro style in order to generate merchandising sales. Nostalgia had become a commodity in the bottom line pursuit of fan dollars, mobilizing images from the past that resonated with larger cultural longings toward a “great” return to a purified, American past.

Nostalgia and public memory have emerged as key sites for scholarly and critical inquiry in an attempt to understand their cultural origins, significance, and impact. According to James Combs, “nostalgia becomes a link to something we fear we may have lost but can recover, or at least celebrate, in the present.” Fabil DaSilva and Jim Fraught note that the “uprooting of past activities and their commercialization for purposes of mass entertainment is geared toward stereotyping thought, action, and artifacts.” Furthermore, they observe that the synthetic and sanitized recreation of the past that lends itself so easily to myth-making operates as an unquestioning defense of the status-quo in both its historical imagining and present interpretation. In understanding the contemporary era of high consumption and stylized identity, Greg Dickinson states that, “made tenuous by postmodern consumer culture, contemporary identities are performances that utilize the resources of memory; these performances occur in and are structured by landscapes of consumption.”
Each of these statements suggests that nostalgia is not only a coping mechanism for negotiating contemporary social and political anxieties, but invites a kind of performance that center on various acts of consumption within landscapes that foster them. In Chapter Two, I discussed how sports stadiums operate as a “landscape of consumption” that rhetorically draw upper class fans who can be counted on to consume. Here, the apparel that athletes wear on the field are complicit in the construction of that landscape where players model the latest styles to stimulate sales in stadium souvenir and merchandising shops. However, retro style had not emerged as a resource upon which a stylized identity could be performed. Rather, it appealed to a niche market that lacked the cultural “cool” to lure and attract young consumers.

To be sure, wearing a throwback White Sox hat still signified a particular knowledge of the game, a subsequent gesture of allegiance to a team, but more openly, appealed to the nostalgic preferences of a greying population. Yet, it had not acquired the cultural capital to become a widespread consumer trend, even in these early instances where wore throwback uniforms as part of a carefully manufactured nostalgic experience. It was not until the retro uniform aesthetic had entered into the world of hip hop that fan consumption of team merchandise transformed from a reliable signifier of individual fandom into a fully (im)mature fashion and MTV-inspired trend for a wider generation of casual fans and consumers.

Keeping it Real: Hip Hop and the Retro Merchandising Craze

Until the late 1990s, the market for vintage gear and apparel was confined to predominately white upper class males between the ages of 35 and 50 as “resources of memory” that signify at once as “memories for sale.” The catalyst for the widening of that market occurred in 1998 when the rap duo Outkast appeared in music videos donning retro style jerseys
such as Nolan Ryan’s 1980s replica rainbow Astros jersey in promotion for their new album Aquamini. This was followed in 2003 when high school phenom LeBron James was suspended by the Ohio State High School Athletic Association after he accepted two retro jerseys as gifts of former NBA player Wes Unseld and NFL running back Gale Sayers from a sporting goods store. Meanwhile, rapper Fabulous wrote a song appropriately named “Throw Back” where he described his retro jersey collection, including a Jordan-era Bulls Jersey that he noted hailed the days “when Mike [Michael Jordan] had hair and a gold chain.” By 2001, hip hop and sport had fully collided through retro apparel which was becoming commonplace in music videos, concert performances, and television appearances. Reebok capitalized on this association, signing endorsement deals with Jay-Z and 50 Cent to promote sneakers that featured their names. According to Russ Bengston, editor-in-chief of Slam Magazine, “what Reebok figured out was that personality was more important than performance when it comes to athletic shoes. So who needs Shaq [Shaquille O’Neal] or Kobe [Bryant] when you have an unathletic rapper? It’s all about image.”

The retro jersey became a signifier of street credibility in hip hop videos and a symbol of mainstream consumer “cool” due to two particular forces, namely a crisis of authenticity in the rap community and Mitchell and Ness’ marketing efforts. By the late 1990s, hip hop had achieved mainstream acceptance, as evidenced by Lauryn Hill becoming the first rap artist to win the “Album of the Year” at the Grammy’s in 1999. That same year, Hill graced the cover of Time magazine as part of an issue entitled “Hip Hop Nation” accompanied by a caption that noted how it “changed America.” For a musical genre that had traditionally defined itself as a subcultural community poised to unsettle the status quo, its growing and widespread cultural
respectability within the masses lent itself to a sort of identity crisis in occupying the polarizing worlds of the underground and the mainstream. According to Kembrew McLeod:

> During hip-hop music’s dramatic ascendency in the 1990’s, hip hop artists and fans found themselves in a contradictory situation that other subcultural groups confronted with widespread acceptance previously faced: being ‘inside’ a mainstream culture they had, in part, defined themselves against.\(^{51}\)

The fear of African-Americans essentially losing control of hip hop by the commercialized power of mainstream music companies and networks such as MTV was complemented by slogans urging rap artists to “keep it real” and “kick it old school” to keep the musical genre anchored to its pre-commercial roots.\(^ {52}\) It was precisely these attempts at reclaiming ownership of a rapidly commercializing art form that led to increasing alienation within the hip hop community among its most successful artists from its musical base. The definition of who was “keeping it real” formed a measuring stick that defined authenticity on the lack of commercial visibility and profitability that had long characterized the genre. After *The Source* magazine ran a cover story on Puff Daddy, a hip hop artist whose videos had become a regular staple of MTV programming in the late 1990s, critics were incensed by his comments that he found musical inspiration in M.C. Hammer. Hammer, hip hop’s version of *Leave it to Beaver*, was considered as another prepackaged phony who achieved mainstream success with his songs “(U) Can’t Touch This” and “Too Legit to Quit” during rap’s commercialized infancy in the early 1990s. One critic lamented, “I can’t believe [Puff Daddy] said he loved Hammer…What true hip hop fan had any love for Hammer? I guess he should love Hammer, he paved Puffy’s way of exploiting hip hop.”\(^ {53}\)
When hip hop artists began sporting retro gear in music videos, these trends were largely inspired by a perceived crisis of authenticity in the face of the genre’s commercial success. The fact that the most sought after apparel were replicas of 1970s and 1980s-styled sports jerseys was signified a symbolic gesture to hip hop’s roots in the same era. The origins of hip hop have been traced to the youth-centric, party culture of the Bronx and New York in the 1970s as a pure African-American art form whose politically-infused lyrics described tales of discrimination, social struggle, and alienation from the white mainstream. Chuck D of the rap group Public Enemy defined hip hop as the “CNN for black people” that recounted the African-American experience of living in America, issues largely ignored by the mainstream media. By the late 1990s, hip hop’s mainstream ascendancy witnessed many hip hop artists such as Jay-Z, Fat Joe, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, and P.Diddy (formerly Puff Daddy) ordering retro apparel from Mitchell and Ness, the only company licensed by the four major professional leagues at the time to manufacture them. Hip hop’s commercial status could not be reversed for financially successful hip hop artists, yet the retro jersey was used by its biggest acts to appease hip hop purists through symbolic odes to its pre-commercial past.

Of course, much of this had to do with Mitchell and Ness’ marketing strategy that included hiring Reuben “Big Rube” Harley in 2000 based on his connections in the hip hop community. Harley had been a longtime customer of Mitchell and Ness sports gear and eventually approached owner Peter Capolino with a deal that he could help generate retro jersey sales. Harley remarked “you hire me, and I’ll make sure your garments are on all the right people” claiming that rap artists “don’t know about you. They think you some old white guy in Philly.” As the company’s new marketing director, Harley stated that “when I get something in, I determine how big a video is going to be, then I provide the garment for that person. Like J.
Lo’s [Jennifer Lopez] new video with LL Cool J. I put that lime-green 1934 White Sox Jacket on him; now everybody wants it.”59

According to Capolino, “in 2000 and 2001, my jerseys started popping up on MTV, BET and VH1. I think I had them in 41 stores nationally as of 2001. I now have over 1,000 stores nationally.”60 In 2000, Mitchell and Ness generated 2.8 million in revenue, increasing to $23 million by 2002 while the sales of rival Hardwood Classics Collection witnessed a 300% revenue increase between 2002 and 2003, “making it one of the fastest-growing revenue streams in the [sports merchandising] business.”61 Of course, the market base for retro apparel was no longer confined to the hip hop community, but a wider legion of consumers magnetically drawn to the latest fad that was defining “cool” consumption.62 What professional sports franchises learned during the experimentation with nostalgia and retro style was the marketplace for logoed merchandise was not confined to sports fans alone. As the sales demographic of throwback jerseys shifted from 35 to 50 year old upper class males to 16 to 24 year old males, sports organizations realized they were engaging a much broader consumer market than originally envisioned.63 As a matter of fact, teams and merchandising companies even explored multicolor variations of traditional logos and colors; an individual could purchase a red Yankee’s cap even though the team wears blue hats on the field. In 2004, sales of NBA licensed merchandise for the 2003-2004 season increased 154 percent, topping the more popular NFL, despite a noticeable drop in ratings as the league shifted the majority of its games to cable television.64 If merchandise sales were fan-driven, this ratings backsliding would perhaps indicate that fans would be less interested in logo apparel; however, with the opposite being the case, increased sales meant that NBA apparel had, in part, been transformed into a consumable, fashion item in spite of waning interest in the sport of which they were a part.
While retro jersey sales were a significant factor in the transformation of sports merchandise into a fashion form of consumption, they composed only 10% of league’s merchandising revenues at the height of their popularity. Nevertheless, this did not prevent professional leagues from acknowledging their cultural impact. Howard Smith, Major League Baseball Senior Vice President for Merchandising in 2002, stated that “I’m telling you, [retro jerseys are] such an explosion. We haven’t witnessed a trend this far-reaching in our business in a long time.” Brian Jennings, NHL Group Vice President of Consumer Products Marketing, noted that “This is still a niche program. But it’s also something that’s very, very consumer driven.” Professional teams had been long aware that the uniforms and hats that their teams wear on the field stimulate the sales of the same apparel in souvenir and merchandising shops. Much of this has to do with the fact that variations of a team’s logo and look will compel “real fans” to purchase each alteration as a means by which their fandom is authenticated and recognized. However, in some cases, each variation simultaneously invites the possibility that a certain look will be fashionably appealing to casual fans riding the stylistic bandwagon.

In 2002, Major League Baseball teams wore retro jerseys for an entire week, a not entirely novel gesture due to the fact that teams had occasionally scheduled “Turn Back the Clock” nights since 1990. For the 2003-2004 season, the NHL urged teams to wear retro jerseys for some their games hoping that the urban-driven clothing phenomenon would foster interest in African American communities. The league also hoped that the strategy would boost merchandising sales for the NHL aiming to capitalize on the popularity of vintage NBA and MLB apparel “which have been deemed fashionable” Meanwhile, NBA teams in 2002-2003 wore “Hardwood Classics Jerseys” for designated games, following the positive response of the Los Angeles Lakers sporting vintage Minneapolis Lakers’ uniforms for a contest the previous
season. Finally, the NFL revisited retro jerseys in 2002 for the annual doubleheader on Thanksgiving Day, arguably to market its’ teams own retro apparel the day before the biggest shopping day of the year. In other ways, these efforts were also geared toward the manufacturing of more mundane spectacles that would not only exploit the popularity of retro jerseys, but create “events” out of otherwise regular sporting contests to spur attendance, ratings, and merchandising sales.

Of course, Mitchell and Ness, the company at the forefront of the retro phenomenon, maintained that its objectives were motivated by an authentic engagement with sports history. Owner Peter Capolino stated in 2002 that, “I do not create sports fashion. I’m not Nike or Reebok. What I do is re-create totally accurate history.” Yet, in another interview, Capolino downplayed the company’s commitment to recreating the past, claiming “we’re not making all this money because of history. It’s because of hip hop.” For the fashion-conscious youth of America, many of whom consume rap music, the visibility of retro apparel on hip hop stars sparked a trend guaranteeing imitation, regardless of the history embodied in the throwback jerseys they were consuming. Art Bowser, assistant manager of a Mitchell and Ness store in Philadelphia, recounted, “I had a kid looking at a Boston Celtics jersey and he asked me, ‘Who’s this guy?’ It was Larry Bird’s jersey. I felt kind of old.” The notion that sports merchandise served a market of rabid sports fans was challenged by an emerging reality that many consumers of retro jerseys and hats cared less about history and more about fashionable consumption. As a matter of fact, the “uglier,” more bold, and obscure the jersey, the more popular and sought after they were among masses of young consumers. Capolino noted that his top sellers were a Dave Winfield old San Diego Padres’ jersey, claiming “it’s that ugly mustard and brown, but the youth
of America loves it” while Nolan Ryan’s 1980s Houston Astros jerseys, “one of the ugliest baseball jerseys ever made” outsold every other design.\textsuperscript{78}

For many young people, sporting an “ugly” retro jersey is a form of ironic consumption that symbolizes the individual’s awareness of the comedic properties of the item that they are consuming that consequently satisfies a desire on the part of the wearer “to be seen.” Jean Twenge’s observations on the burgeoning narcissism of youth culture helps explain the attention-seeking motivations that lurk behind the consumption of “ugly” retro apparel.\textsuperscript{79} Later, when I discuss the bold jersey phenomenon in college sports, where ugly is the new cool in terms of sports merchandise, I will argue that the popularity and sales of bold, “ugly” jersey designs coincide with the performance of identity in a narcissistic culture. My task is not to pass aesthetic judgment on these designs, but rather borrow the terms by which they are characterized by sports journalists, merchandising outlets, and consumers of these items themselves. As Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst note, there is a correlative relationship between identity as a site of individual performance and a wider spread social narcissism.\textsuperscript{80} Scholar Garry Crawford uses this argument as a foundation for understanding the commodified nature of contemporary sports fandom, where the wearing of logoed merchandise and team apparel has become recognized as the preferred means by which this identity is performed.\textsuperscript{81} As Crawford himself notes, wearing team merchandise is not only reduced to sports fans symbolizing their allegiance to a team, but as a resource for the performance of a stylized identity in which the wearer may or may not actually follow sport. In other words, licensed merchandise is often reduced to a fashion statement that, in some cases, may convey an identity statement on the part of the wearer, but one that may not be intended to indicate a particular level of fandom.
While all of the major professional sports leagues exploited the retro phenomenon to stimulate merchandising sales through visible, nostalgia-based gestures that spoke to the impurities attributed to modern sport, the status of throwback jerseys as iconic and urbanized symbols of identity eventually troubled the NBA. In 2005, Commissioner David Stern issued a memo that ordered players to dress “business casual” during team and league events. In particular, players were prohibited from wearing t-shirts, baggy jeans, chains, athletic shoes, and retro jerseys in any NBA-sponsored activity. Critics questioned Stern’s motives, claiming that the memo intentionally targeted the dress patterns and style typically associated with African American culture to appease the league’s white fan base. ESPN columnist Paul Lukas noted that “it’s hard to get past the fact we’re talking about a bunch of predominately white executives making decisions about how a bunch of predominately not-white athletes are going to dress.” Pacers guard Stephen Jackson lamented that, “I don’t agree as far as tucking your chains in. I really don’t respect that because the [highest] percentage of people who wear chains are black.”

Stern’s memo was unquestionably motivated, in part, by the infamous brawl between Indiana Pacers players and fans during a 2004 game at the Palace of Auburn Hills, the home of the Detroit Pistons. Known in sporting circles as the “Malice at the Palace,” few affiliated with the NBA wanted to foreground the issues of race that underpinned the brawl – black players versus white fans – and how the event certainly reinforced racialized fears and anxieties of the NBA’s status as a black game. According to journalist Dave Zirin: the NBA higher-ups fear that the ‘public’ views pro ballers as one step removed from Riker’s Island. They are concerned that ‘Main Street USA’ thinks the league is too
gangsta [sic], too hip hop, too urban, which is all code for ‘too young, Black, and scary’…That means a sport coat and slacks. No jeans, sneakers, or medallions, black or gold.\textsuperscript{86}

The irony of prohibiting NBA players from wearing retro jerseys is that NBA teams would still retain the discretion of wearing them for certain games while continuing to sell these styles in merchandising outlets. Rhetorically, the league was attempting to reclaim ownership of its teams’ retro image and brand from the hip hop community, in order to more substantively control these symbols and how the public would perceive them. In an effort to “whiten” the NBA brand by scrubbing many of its African American cultural associations, the league aimed to redefine the terms by which the retro jersey would be appraised in order to stem further alienation of its white fan base, despite the credit that the hip hop community was owed in elevating their popularity. In order to generate consumption of logoed merchandise among white fans, the league deemed it appropriate to reconstitute the rhetorical claims of its team’s logos and whose culture they ostensibly belonged. Nevertheless, the NBA still retains a compelling association to the African American community and hip hop in particular, despite taking steps to sanitize this association. Rachel Alicia Griffin and Bernadette Marie Calafell state that “in essence, cultural artifacts of hip hop (“blackness”) are acceptable for sales, but not for image.”\textsuperscript{87} They contend that Stern’s memo was part of a crisis strategy directed toward restoring “civility” to the NBA by instituting white norms of style and dress in order to prepackage its image as a sport fit for white consumption.\textsuperscript{88}

Today, teams in the four major professional leagues continue to wear retro jerseys for select games despite the phenomenon having long surpassed its prime. The retro jersey phenomenon in the early 2000s demonstrated that sports merchandise had the potential to appeal
to a broader consumer market. As Ron Bishop notes, a secondary motivation behind the consumption of logoed team apparel is to be seen as a “winner” through purchasing merchandise of successful teams whose status will rub off on the wearer through association. As Bishop states, “the logo has come to signify our love of success and, to a lesser extent, our love of our own consumption and its fleeting nature, its planned obsolescence.” Therefore, the bandwagon effect in sport is not reduced to following winning teams, but consuming the equity to be found in their image. However, this means that sporting consumption lends itself to a kind of tourism, where individuals can maneuver among the styles of winning teams and, consequently gain perhaps, undeserving access into a sporting community. As Garry Crawford notes, wearing logoed merchandise invites such membership, despite the consumer’s level of commitment never gravitating beyond an individualized act of consumption. At any rate, I argue that the retro jersey phenomenon was responsible for the changing marketing ethos of licensed merchandise as appealing to a general consumer and the construction of an additional role of the athlete as a model for the team’s latest to spur consumption among loyal fans and casual fans alike.

The University of Oregon Phenomenon

As mentioned earlier, sports teams at the professional level regularly alter their team colors and logos to lure loyal fans into updating their wardrobe in order to demonstrate and solidify their status as a real fan. However, this dynamic is largely predicated on the redefinition of fandom as a commercial proposition that invites fans to perform their identity along those frames. It is also the case that, as licensed merchandise has become widely popular among a larger consumer public, they serve as symbolic resources in the cultivation of a stylized identity. Of course, it should be noted that not all teams commonly alter their look to generate
consumption; the New York Yankees baseball team is but one example of a professional sports franchise whose logo continues to have significant brand equity even though the team’s look has remained relatively consistent for decades. Thus far, I have confined my analysis to professional sports and the cultural origins of the throwback phenomenon in sport. Here, my focus will center on how these dynamics have infiltrated and affected collegiate sports, specifically college football where the recent trend of bold and daring uniform designs, coupled with an unfathomable amount of color combinations, is a consequence of the same retro phenomenon. Furthermore, I will argue that these jerseys are an additional route through which professional and collegiate teams are fostering identification with fans by speaking in the terms of commercial culture too often associated with democracy in the United States.

The “modern uniform makeover” in college football began when the University of Oregon negotiated a licensing deal with Nike, whose co-founder Phil Knight is an alumnus of Oregon, to design uniforms for its athletic teams in 1996. Since the university’s establishment in 1894, the school’s football program was, at best, mediocre despite relatively recent appearances in the Rose Bowl in 1995 and the Cotton Bowl in 1996. After the university signed its licensing deal with Nike, Creative Director Todd Van Horne boisterously remarked that “nothing is off the table,” including green football helmets made with glass beads that ran $2,400 dollars a gallon. Equally noticeable were the dizzying array of uniform combinations that included yellow, gray, green, white, and neon jerseys, helmet, socks, and shoes that transformed the university into the “undisputed champions of the 21st century’s attention economy.” Nike’s unquestionable brand reputation was mobilized to transform the University of Oregon’s institutional reputation through image and unapologetic flair. Michael Goldhaber, a scholar for Berkeley’s Center for Research on Social Change, observes that the cluttered marketplace of the
modern consumer economy creates increasing pressure on its participants to attract attention through differentiation and spectacle. Through its institutional relationship with Nike, the University of Oregon engaged in a branding experiment without precedent in sport that would fundamentally alter the culture of sport in ways previously unimaginable.

The marketing plan of Nike and the University of Oregon was predicated upon using the team’s jersey style to slice through the competitive visibility clutter of college football while appealing to a younger generation of recruits and fans through the attention-grabbing effect of bold uniform designs. Journalist Mike Tanier noted that “these uniforms, if they make traditionalists wince and sportswriters snicker, do seem to excite recruits and move younger fans to break out their credit cards.” Meanwhile, Washington Post columnist Dave Sheinin wrote that “such a thing would have been absurd just a few years ago, when most teams had two uniforms – home and away – and all anyone needed was a pocket schedule to know which would be worn on a given Saturday…if they cared at all.” The branding imperatives of college football teams privileged style over substance in the ideals that define the youth culture’s notions of identity and the commercial terms by which they are defined. Specifically, the constitutive sense of self and individuality is dependent on the degree to which one’s identity can stimulate the attention of others. According to Drew Pinskey and Mark S. Young, some of this is a byproduct of the reality television generation that glamorizes socially dysfunctional individuals and lifestyles while normalizing higher levels of narcissism and obsession of self. In the case of the University of Oregon, any recognition that the uniforms could foster, whether positive or negative, would have to fulfill these cultural requirements to be successful. As long as Oregon could play by these rules, the more willing would the nation’s most talented football players gravitate toward the institution and young fans be motivated to consume these styles as long as
they answered to the complimentary desires of visibility and attention-seeking in contemporary culture.

For the University of Oregon, the bold marketing agenda of Nike, transformed a mediocre sports team into a national powerhouse. Rachel Bachman, a sports business reporter for the Oregonian attributed the team’s success to Oregon’s uniforms which, as Michael Smith wrote in the SportsBusiness Journal, was a strategy of “Nike’s 15-year project to build Oregon football into a national power largely on the strength of marketing and branding.” Yet, Oregon’s experimental uniform designs polarized the sporting community. For some, they represented a symptom of the unrestrained commercialism of college football while others celebrated the creative and unconventional logic that lay behind them. One journalist wrote that “if no one knows your product exists, there is no demand for your product, and at the end of the day it’s about 18 year old kids. The uniforms are the key ingredient to getting bodies there, and the bodies are what win you football games.” Thus, the University of Oregon’s uniform combinations and self-confident design would fundamentally slice through the clutter of Division I football programs, seduce recruits to attend the school, stimulate consumption of licensed merchandise, using fashionable branding that spoke to the wider culture’s definition of individualism and identity. In the process, Nike and the University of Oregon negotiated a new standard of sports branding in college football where notoriety, profitability and cultural esteem all could be attained through an unforgiving commitment to fashion economics.

The bold uniform trend that began with Nike’s licensing agreement with the University of Oregon significantly altered college football and some of the fundamental criteria by which teams would be judged. While some would be assessed according to traditional variables such as wins and losses, the prestige of the conference in which they resided, and the difficulty of the
team’s schedule, they would also be critiqued in their status as a brand. According to a 2010 ESPN poll that asked Division I football players to rank which universities had the best uniforms, the University of Oregon attracted 53.7% of the votes, the most of any school. One Big Ten football player stated that “I don’t even have to think about that one. I almost wanted to transfer to [the University of Oregon] just for those uniforms.” Boise State linebacker Derrell Acrey said, “Every team wants to be like [the University of Oregon]. If we could, we’d change uniforms every year.” That year, the University of Oregon also introduced throwback jerseys of the same style the team wore between 1996 and 1998, the first two years of the university’s licensing deal with Nike. As evidenced by these comments, the brand credibility of both the University of Oregon and Nike had seeped deeply into the collegiate football culture. In 2010, Nike renewed its agreement through 2018 with the university that would provide Oregon $2.5 million in sporting gear annually, $750,000 in cash per season, and an extra $200,000 in gear as requested by the athletic department, in addition to a $41 million dollar donation by Oregon-alum and Nike CEO Phil Knight to be invested for a new football facility.

The “success” of Nike’s branding efforts in the case of the University of Oregon served as the catalyst for a bandwagon effect that witnessed other Division I school’s replicating the model to bolster their recruiting efforts and to engender merchandising profits. Much of this owed to the competitive marketing efforts of Nike, Under Armour, and Adidas that had licensing agreements with various Division I schools and who had an economic incentive in manufacturing visibility through uniforms. In 2010, Nike held a press conference in New York where they unveiled new uniforms for ten college football teams that included Ohio State, Miami (FL), Boise State, Florida, Alabama, and Oregon State. During this carefully orchestrated “pseudo event,” the company announced that they had created jerseys and helmets that would be
worn for specific games only. For example, the November 13th game between Alabama and Mississippi State would feature the Crimson Tide sporting uniforms with a hounds-tooth number design to honor Paul “Bear” Bryant. Meanwhile, the November 26th meeting between West Virginia and Pittsburgh would include both teams wearing “Backyard Brawl” uniforms to honor their rivalry. While Nike claimed that their agenda was to outfit teams to celebrate tradition and college football’s competitive spirit, game-specific designs invited fans attending the game to purchase these jerseys as a means to embody and perform that particular rivalry or special event. Furthermore, Under Armour announced in 2011 that it had created custom uniforms for the University of South Carolina, Texas Tech University, and the University of South Florida to honor the company’s relationship to the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). As part of WWP’s campaign entitled “Believe in Heroes,” the jerseys would replace player last names with military slogans such as Duty, Honor, Courage, Commitment, Integrity, Country, or Service.

Nike also exploited the increasing infusion of militarism in sport when it unveiled its Pro Combat uniforms in 2009. Touting the lightweight material that would provide players with additional maneuverability and comfort, Nike held celebratory events on college campuses such as Texas Christian and Ohio State in order to hype the new uniform designs. In one instance at Virginia Tech, the apparel company drove a combat vehicle through the Blacksburg, Virginia campus emblazoned with the message “Prepare for Combat.” Critics complained of Nike’s insensitivity to the April, 2007 massacre on Virginia Tech’s campus in using a military-infused marketing pitch that might resurrect negative images of violence and death within the campus community. The focus here is not to center on the growing synergistic relationship between sport and the U.S. military in the “rhetorical production of war” but rather to highlight how the unveiling of new college football uniforms was treated as a newsworthy event complimented by
spectacle to manufacture hype for the latest designs. In the case of the WWP’s relationship to Under Armour, it is telling how themes of patriotism articulate with football jersey designs that can be later marketed to and consumed by fans to not only perform the role of knowledgeable consumer sporting the latest trend but as a gesture to symbolize their loyalty to both team and a social cause. Not only are athletes reduced to the role of a fashion model in Nike, Under Armour, and Adidas’ aggressive pursuit of consumer dollars, but in their subjectivity to the public gaze, athletes’ jerseys become a billboard to advertise institutional relationships, as in the case between Under Armour and the WWP.

As mentioned earlier, one of the lessons of the retro jersey craze, which originated as consumer-oriented response to cultural nostalgia, was that bold jersey designs appealed to a general consumer whose level of fandom may be high, casual, or indifferent. I argue that the burgeoning trend of outrageous and multivarious uniform designs in college football is an outgrowth of the retro jersey phenomenon where the popularity of the commonly referred “ugly” retro designs spoke to the attention-seeking and narcissistic values of a postmodern youth culture. Uniforms become one of the most visible means through which professional and collegiate teams are marketing and establishing their brand status and an effective strategy in opening up an additional revenue stream for teams to sell and profit off a commodified fan identity. In an article written by Adam Fusfeld entitled, “Florida Gators Change Uniforms in order to Help Fans Buy More Stuff,” he notes that “with state funding spiraling downward, athletic programs need revenue sources anywhere they can get them.” This reveals another dimension that aid these movements, specifically how neoliberal economic factors including declining public funding for universities is responsible for the further undermining of the amateur spirit that college sports and the NCAA claim to uphold. In the case of bold jersey
designs and the merchandising profits they yield, many universities have benefitted while more “traditional” schools such as Ohio State and the University of Michigan have had to navigate the tension between honoring their storied histories through the uniforms that are inevitably part of tradition and the economic pull of the bold jersey phenomenon.

In some cases, this manifests itself in using “retro style” as a floating signifier that rhetorically honors a school’s storied tradition while generating a design that is not historically founded or accurate. In September of 2011, Notre Dame and the University of Michigan wore throwback jerseys to celebrate the storied rivalry, although critics and sports journalists lamented that the styles worn by Michigan “resembled nothing the team had ever worn in the past.”

In other instances, schools such as the University of Georgia, Navy, Army, and Michigan State have taken the field in 2011 wearing “futuristic” designs, arguably to justify bold jersey designs that deviate greatly from these universities traditional look. Thus, some schools are limited by the particular styles that they can adopt, while those without a storied past, such as the University of Maryland mentioned in the outset of this chapter, are granted substantial creative leverage.

Identification, Consumerism, and Democracy

According to Garry Crawford, the “changing nature of audiences in late-capitalist societies” is but one factor complicit in altering the relationship between fans and sport in contemporary society. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, whose work underpins much of Crawford’s critique, characterize audiences as simple, mass, and diffused and that, while aspects of each type can be found today, they were individually prominent at different epochs in history. Simple audiences were more common in pre-modern societies in which performances were linked to ceremonies and other rituals that relied on a noticeable separation between the
audience and the performer. On the other hand, mass audiences are a product of the mediated culture offered by television in which the consumption of performance is private rather than public. Because performances are a more common and mundane engagement, they are passively consumed in becoming the “background of everyday life” and thus lose much of the ritualistic qualities previously ascribed to them. Finally, in diffused audiences, there is no separation between audience and performer as life itself becomes a “constant performance” that relies heavily on individuals in using the resources of the mass media for one’s identity to find expression. Each audience can be found in sport but in the case of sports uniforms and branding, it is the diffused audience that provides a suitable metaphor for the relationship between fans and sport. In essence, fans can perform the role of “athlete” through the limited act of imitating their style on the field.

While there remains a strict separation between athlete (performer) and spectator (audience), it is through merchandising that these archetypes overlap to a degree, where the uniform itself becomes the symbolic bridge between the two. No longer is the uniform reserved for the athletes use only, but serves as the resource upon which casual and loyal fans “perform” their identity as fans in a manner all too familiar within contemporary culture in which consumption itself provides the vehicle in which one’s sense of self is too often based. As a matter of fact, when the athlete is used as a model for team’s latest merchandising options, sports organizations are seeking to create an additional layer of identification that can be profited from between themselves and fans by speaking in the terms of consumer culture that the latter is all too familiar with in defining their identity.

According to Kenneth Burke in his theory of identification, “you persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea,
As Zygmunt Bauman suggests, consumption is of such central importance in a late-capitalist society that a person “needs to be a consumer first, before one can think of becoming anything in particular.” If this is true and fans think of themselves primarily as consumers, the athlete who models the team’s latest merchandising designs on the field is the mechanism by which teams are appropriating the terms of consumer culture and commodified identity in stimulating sales of the same apparel. In other words, the athlete becomes the mirror of values that sporting fan bases already are encouraged to (and do in many ways) endorse in contemporary society in not only identifying with fans, but persuading them to purchase officially licensed merchandise. Furthermore, the role of the athlete in this process conveys several important statements in relation to how fans are led to think of themselves as “citizens” in a democracy that is often conflated with the freedom to consume.

It is also the case that fans are often compelled to view athletes as role models who are expected to embody and perform socially preferred values that are often associated with being a productive and disciplined citizen, especially in terms of their influence on younger fans. According to Rachel Kraft and Barry Brummett, “how we think about and react toward sport, games, and players symbolizes social and political ideology surrounding race, gender, and citizenship, revealing which cultural and individual values are important to society.” To be sure, athletes often transgress the moral codes imposed upon them, yet the mythology is persistent in relegating them to the status of ideal citizens consequently due to the character-building qualities often ascribed to sports themselves. As George H. Sage mentions, sports emphasize and instill within participants the cultural ideals of competitiveness, deference to authority, individualism, and disciplined work ethic that are not only valuable to capitalist society, but are hailed as instrumental in preserving national well-being. In the case of fans
themselves, their admiration for the athletes they follow ostensibly allows these virtues to “trickle down” to them through the often intense emotional connections they have with the players themselves. In other words, athletes convey important civic lessons about what is demanded of good citizens.

As fashion economics enter into the discursive field of sports commentary and as universities such as the University of Oregon are celebrated for their commercial daring in sporting unconventional uniforms, an additional identity statement is conveyed to fans: in today’s society, how you look is as important as what you do and how you do it. When the student-athletes who play football for Oregon are evaluated for their style inasmuch as their performance, fans may come to believe that their status as citizens and individuals in a democratic society depends on the same. According to Greg Dickinson, “the emphasis on stylized, performative identities” is a consequential byproduct of “modern consumer culture.” Yet, involved in this process is a form of alienation that compels individuals to regard their identity as something not possessed within themselves, but only can be grasped “out there” within a prepackaged consumer culture. Thus, to be a fan is not a characteristic that relies on intrinsic qualities such as emotional attachment and loyalty inasmuch as a performance that requires extrinsic symbols such as donning a team uniform for valorization.

Rhetorically interjecting the world “style” into debate about the fashionability of new team uniforms are the terms of a commodity culture finding its expression in the world of sports. In 2012, the Nike unveiled its new uniforms for NFL teams that was described as a “gridiron-styled fashion show at a Brooklyn film studio” featuring the many of the same bold aesthetics pioneered by college football. Meanwhile, closer Heath Bell of the Miami Marlins commented on the team’s new orange, blue, black, and silver colored jerseys as “representing the style and
pizzazz of…the city." In the case of the Marlins and the NFL generally, such fashion cues are undoubtedly influenced by the University of Oregon model which has already found many imitators in college football and has become the new template of merchandising where bold and flashy uniform styles translate into a significant revenue source. On the other hand, these issues raise questions about whether the NCAA is betraying the spirit of amateurism that it claims to uphold as a governing body in the face of growing commercialism. Furthermore, they have invited discussions about whether or not student-athletes in revenue-generating sports such as college football and basketball should be compensated in the process.

According to the NCAA’s Division I manual, being a student-athlete is an “avocation, and…should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.” Anthony Mosely, a cornerback at the University of Kentucky, claimed that both the NCAA and its member schools were exploiting the likeness, name, and image of student-athletes through selling replica jerseys bearing their number. “It might not be my name on the back of the jersey, but if it’s a Number 14 Kentucky jersey, [fans] are obviously wearing that jersey for me…You can buy my jersey number on it…the school can potentially profit from it, and the student-athlete doesn’t.” During his senior season, Auburn quarterback Cam Newton adorned 15 different corporate logos each game without he or any other football player profiting off from the endorsements negotiated by the university and its sponsors. As a further demonstration of the big business atmosphere of college sports, TV contracts signed in 2007 generated $1.8 billion for the NCAA and its top five major conferences. Predictably, critics opposed to paying student-athletes in revenue-generating college sports argue that they are already compensated with scholarships with NCAA President Mark Emmert permitting schools to supplement them with a $2,000 stipend. Yet, the stipend proposal was delayed until the NCAA annual convention over
concerns related to Title IX, how the rule would affect athletes on partial scholarships, and timeline for its implementation.\textsuperscript{127} Meanwhile, as Turner Broadcasting and CBS signed a fourteen year, $10.8 billion dollar deal for exclusive rights to college basketball’s March Madness and as licensed NCAA merchandising sales topped $1 billion, it is difficult to argue that these stipends would signify just compensation if they, indeed, become official policy.\textsuperscript{128}

Former athletes Sam Keller (football), Ryan Hart (football), and Ed O’Bannon (basketball) each filed class-action lawsuits against the NCAA for using their likenesses to sell officially licensed merchandise such as replica jerseys, DVD’s, and video games. Each of these cases was eventually consolidated and became known as “In re: NCAA Student-Athlete Name & Likeness Litigation” and is still awaiting a resolution.\textsuperscript{129} NCAA Chairperson Erika Christianson argued that the substance of the plaintiffs’ argument was based on “pure fiction” and denied that player’s likenesses were being commercially exploited.\textsuperscript{130} While my focus in this chapter does not address some of the issues that arise here, they are nonetheless important in illustrating the commercial terrain of college athletics and the irony of an “amateur” organization like the NCAA allowing Nike, Under Armour, and Reebok the ability to use athletes as fashion props for their latest designs.

To be sure, fans engage sport through the lens of modern consumer culture which allows organizations such as the NCAA and its member universities to exploit whatever commercial means to “sell their brand” with little resistance. In the case of the sports uniforms, these entities are merely bridging identification between themselves and their fans by speaking the common language of consumer capitalism so deeply embedded in current political thinking. Fans appropriate the consumerist ethos common in many interactions with other cultural products into their experience of sport. It is also the case that the fashionable branding of sports organizations
is a symptom of the aggressive marketing agenda pursued by prominent business interests in a “cultural feeding frenzy as they seize upon every corner of unmarketed landscape in search of the oxygen needed to inflate their brands.” As professional franchises seek new revenue streams while universities compensate for old ones (such as declining state funding), sports are eager to accommodate the logic of consumerism. Without question, the sports uniform itself is an advertisement for the company that produces them, the team brand in general, while reinforcing dominant ideologies that conflate one’s identity with the items and symbols they consume.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I traced the development of the bold jersey phenomenon in college and professional sport to Major League Baseball’s coordinated efforts to market nostalgia to disenfranchised fans, in part, through throwback uniforms. In the process, they were appropriated symbols by the hip hop community in navigating and confronting its mainstream popularity as “old school” remnants that rhetorically signified an allegiance to its countercultural origins in the 1980s. Consequently, the visibility that was generated by this popular cultural phenomenon forged new markets in sports retro merchandise that were previously nonexistent. Meanwhile, professional teams experimented with alternative uniform combinations in order to multiply the number of consumable styles for sale. This altered the terms by which fandom would be performed, based less on an intense, emotional connection to a particular franchise and more on demonstrating that loyalty through consumption of officially licensed merchandise.

It was also the case that the popularity of 1970s and 1980s-styled uniforms and hats, premised on their colorful, flashy, and daring designs, unquestionably influenced the marketing plan negotiated between the University of Oregon and Nike to reform the school’s football
reputation through image alone. As Oregon’s experimental designs became fodder for endless sports commentary and proved popular among fans and players, other universities tested the bold jersey phenomenon through their deals with major manufacturers to sell merchandise through a commitment to style. This ensured that the consumption of licensed uniforms would not be reduced to fans alone. Because of the narcissistic performativity demanded by consumer culture, these designs would prove popular among casual and non-fans because of their ability to attract attention upon the wearer. Finally, the uniform would be how sports organizations and leagues would foster additional layers of identification between themselves and fans in marketing merchandise by speaking the language of consumerism so commonly associated with democracy in the United States. Finally, the success of Oregon and Nike’s marketing efforts, including the direction they would assume, has influenced uniform designs in professional sports who have signed merchandising deals with the similar athletic apparel companies such as Reebok and Adidas. Finally, these objectives have not only reconfigured the relationship between fan and sport, but also signifies the aggressiveness through which sport is seeking and reaching new markets of more general legions of consumers, as a brand, an image, a look, and a style.

Notes


4 Quoted in Sheinin, para. 21 and 23.

5 Tanier, “There’s an Exciting Clash on the Field. Oh, That’s the Uniform”

6 Ibid, para. 7.


9 Ibid, 37.

10 Ibid.


13 Bishop, “Stealing the Signs.”


19 George Steinbrenner had received a suspension from Major League Baseball for hiring Howie Spira to spy on ex-Yankees slugger Dave Winfield after he failed to carry the team to a successful run of championships. Meanwhile, Major League Baseball had learned that Pete Rose, manager of the Cincinnati Reds, bet on his team, prompting his eventual lifelong ban from professional baseball. This quote is from Matthew Grimm, “Baseball Pursues Field of Marketing Dreams; Major League Uses Nostalgia to Lure Family of the ‘90s Back to the Park,” Adweek, September 10, 1990, para 2. Accessed July 30, 2011. http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe.

20 Grimm, “Baseball Pursues Field of Marketing Dreams.”

21 For more on baseball’s nostalgic character, see Michael Butterworth, Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity During the War on Terror (The University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 2010).

22 Grimm, “Baseball Pursues Field of Marketing Dreams.”

23 Ibid, para. 12.


25 Ibid.,

26 Ibid., 9,15.

27 According to Thomas Frank, the “great backlash” explains the working class’ conversion to the Republican Party due to its perceived association with foundational national values and adversarial relationship with liberal “elitism.” For more on this issue, see Frank, What’s the

28 Springwood, Cooperstown to Dyersville.


30 Grimm, “Baseball Pursues Field of Marketing Dreams,” para. 15.


32 Ibid, para. 10.


34 Ibid.

35 Michael Butterworth, Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2010).


38 Ibid, para. 11.


While LeBron James was suspended, his attorney was able to successfully win an injunction against the OHSAA’s decision, prompting his reinstatement.

48 Quoted in “Rims and Rhymes: NBA’s New Icons: Players with Street Cred, Style,” Chicago
18/news/0502190026_1_mitchell-ness-hip-hop-jerseys.

49 Kembrew McLeod, “Authenticity Within Hip Hop and Other Cultures Threatened With

http://store03.prostores.com/servlet/dcbcollectibles/the-21710/1999-Time-Magazine-cln--
Lauryn/Detail.

51 Ibid, 136.

52 Ibid.

53 Quoted in McLeod, “Authenticity Within Hip Hop and Other Cultures Threatened With
Assimilation,” 141-142.

54 Ibid.

55 Cited in Douglas Rushkoff, Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture, 2nd ed.

56 Strauss, “P.Diddy’s Jersey Connection; For the Hippest of the Hip-Hop, Vintage Uniforms
Just Like New.”

57 Annette John-Hall, “Hip-Hop Haberdasher; Center City’s Mitchell & Ness – Once a Sleepy
Outpost for Replica Sports Apparel – Is Now a Hot Name in Urban Fashion.” The Philadelphia

58 Quoted in John-Hall, para. 10.

59 Quoted in John-Hall, para. 13.


Cited in Heistand, “Sports Gear So Out of Style It’s In Style.”

Ibid, para. 5.


“Retro Jerseys All the Rage” para. 5.


Bernstein, “NHL Thaws Out Retro Jerseys, Hopes to Boost Category to $250M”, para. 4.

Guzman, “Old-School Basketball Jerseys”

Heistand, “Sports Gear So Out of Style It’s In Style.”

Quoted in Heistand, “Sports Gear So Out of Style It’s In Style” para. 16.

Quoted in “Retro Jerseys All the Rage.” Para. 9.

My purpose is not to let my own stylistic preferences encroach on my analysis, but rather reflect how these jerseys have commonly been appraised by merchandising outlets, sporting good companies, and consumers.


Quoted in Walker, para. 10.

Quoted in Walker, para. 14.


Ibid., 125.


Ibid.

Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport, and Culture*.


Ibid, para. 8.

Cited in Kruse, “How Does Oregon Football Keep Winning?”


Sheinin, “The Changing Colors of Fall Saturdays,” para. 3.


Quoted in Kruse, Ibid, para. 30.

102 Quoted in Price, “Player’s Poll: Oregon Uniforms Voted NCAA’s Best,” para. 2.


108 For more on the “rhetorical production of war” in the synergistic relationship between the military and sport, see Michael Butterworth and Stormi Moskal, “American Football, Flags, and ‘Fun’: The Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl and the Rhetorical Production of Militarism,” Communication, Culture, & Critique, 2 (2009): 413.


112 Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*.

113 Ibid., 73.


115 Quoted in Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 4.


118 Sage, *Power and Ideology in American Sport*.


Quoted in Ibid., para. 7.

Ibid.

Ibid.


William D. Holthaus, Jr., “*Ed O’ Bannon v. NCAA*: Do Former NCAA Athletes Have a Case Against the NCAA For It’s Use of Their Likenesses?,” *Saint Louis University School of Law*, available at http://slu.edu/Documents/law/Law%20Journal/Archives/Holthaus_Article.pdf; Nocera, “Let’s Start Paying College Athletes.”


Quoted in “The NCAA Lawsuit.”

CHAPTER V: RESISTING THE COMMERCIALISM OF SPORTS: RECLAIMING A MORE DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

The League of Fans: Taking the Power Back

The League of Fans (LF) was founded by political activist Ralph Nader as a sports reform group dedicated to “encourage social and civic responsibility in the sports industry and culture.”¹ At the foundation of their mission statement is a belief in the idea that sports, at both the professional and amateur level, constitute a public trust that should be committed to goals and ideals beyond winning and profitability. Recently, the LF has challenged the NCAA to replace the one-year renewable scholarship with a five year guarantee or to eliminate them altogether while demanding that the mission of college sports be redefined and integrated with the core principles of higher education.² They have also challenged the use of public money for new stadium construction, the abolishment of the Bowl Championship System (BCS) in college football, and the creation of a regulatory body known as the National Sports Commission (NSC) to encourage access and participation in sport for all citizens.³ The motive behind the NSC would be to challenge the current sports model driven by professionalization and commercialization that encourages a passive engagement of sport through fandom rather than an active, participatory model of investment. In essence, the LF seeks to reclaim the institution of sport in America while challenging some of the fundamental principles upon which sporting professionalism are based.

The policies of the LF, if they were to be both embraced and implemented by the public, would fundamentally alter the landscape of sport in a fashion that would be unrecognizable to many fans and their traditional understanding of the role sports play in our culture. As I have argued, sports at both the professional and collegiate levels have become so heavily rampant
with commercialism that being a fan is increasingly reduced to a commercial proposition and obligation. Despite the level of identification that a particular “fan” has for a team or sport, whether it as a loyal follower or casual observer, each brings with it a complementary pressure to consume as essential to that identity. Furthermore, I argue that sporting identity in contemporary contexts mirrors a preferred definition of democracy and civic engagement in wider societal contexts, namely that democracy has been equated with consumption, and that citizenship has been aligned with one’s purchasing power and ability. In some ways, I am speaking perhaps about the rhetoric of neoliberalism in contemporary definitions of sports and fandom. It is because of this context that the nature and definition of fandom in today’s sporting environment can be so easily reduced and encapsulated by consumption. Whether it is the case that one can only be a fan by purchasing licensed merchandise or building new stadiums that operate as landscapes that encourage consumption, one’s engagement with professional and college sports is mediated by both implicit and explicit pleas to buy things, to shop, to consume.

Of course, these macro-social processes only tell part of the story as serious consideration must be paid to who owns, manages, and operates teams, organizations, and the regulatory apparatus that controls them. For the moment, I will focus my discussion on professional sports and the motivations behind the way strategies have been invented to extract additional amounts of revenue from fans. According to James Quirk and Rodney Fort, team owners commonly repeat a similar refrain that players’ salary demands are threatening the profitability and long-term viability of their teams. In essence, they manipulate the emotional connections that exist between fans and their teams by appealing to fear while exploiting fan anger and resentment toward so-called greedy athletes and players who are viewed as well-compensated for the privilege of playing sports. Since the advent of free agency in professional sports in the 1970s
that allowed professional athletes to negotiate contracts freely with other teams after a stipulated number of years of service, owners have typically lamented that the subsequent salary increases could threaten the vitality of teams and leagues. From the players’ perspective, free agency provided them freedoms enjoyed by other workers in non-sports realms while demanding a fairer share of the revenues generated on their behalf by owners as a result of lucrative television deals negotiated with major media networks. The growing visibility and popularity of professional sports invited a new kind of owner, one who would use sports as a vehicle of promotion for other interests while treating their teams as a stock option that could be dumped once its value had been inflated and maximized. Frank McCourt, the owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers, filed for bankruptcy in June of 2011 after Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig rejected the sale of a television control that McCourt claimed would rescue the team from financial ruin. After receiving a loan from the league, the team was sold to the Guggenheim group, which included former Los Angeles Laker Magic Johnson, for a record $2.15 billion. As part of the deal, McCourt would profit $1.588 billion from the sale while transferring $412 million in debt to the new ownership group. Not bad for a “bankrupt” team purchased by McCourt in 2004 for $421 million.

Thus, the reconfiguration of fan identity into a ritual of consumption was spurred by business-savvy owners seeking to create any additional revenue streams that would effectively enhance the profitability of owning a professional franchise. However, these gestures would not have been successful outside of societal contexts in which the creation of identity is both a performance and a compulsion to consume, where cultural narcissism breeds status anxiety and a desire to be recognized, and where democratic citizenship and conventional notions of freedom are reduced to purchasing goods and services. Sports may not have created these issues, but have
nonetheless spoken to and reinforced these values in order to extract greater degrees of revenue from fans. As Robert Reich notes, businesses should not blamed for their greed and excess because they operate within social and political systems that foster this behavior.\textsuperscript{9} The public is also a complicit actor; in its search for greater degrees of power, efficacy, and leverage as consumers, it too is responsible in undermining citizen agency. According to Reich, it is not about demonizing dominant economic actors, but rather changing the system through which they operate. The purpose of the League of Fans seeks not to modify this context, but rather to reconstitute the institution of sport so that it operates more democratically and responsibly within that system. Whether sport in this way could thus emerge as a launching pad for greater transformations elsewhere is subject to discussion and speculation. Yet, as long as contemporary identity and citizenship is defined and reduced to consumption, individual welfare is prioritized over collective well-being, and “free market” capitalism is allowed to fetter without regulatory restraint, the growing commercialization of sports will unlikely experience any significant decline despite well-intentioned reformist attempts. However, sports can be a point of intervention to begin the process of changing society’s values and dispositions as a site for the reclamation of democratic values and community mindedness. I have largely confined my analysis to professional sports, yet the same processes and dynamics are obviously present in college athletes that challenge its alleged commitment to amateurism.\textsuperscript{10} In the case of the BCS in college football, the line between professional and amateur sport has become virtually meaningless.

The Democratic Potential of Sport
Reacting to Frito-Lay’s sponsorship of the 2007 Tostitos BCS National Championship football game between Ohio State and Florida, Matthew McAllister observes that “given criticisms of sponsorship and integrated promotional forms, Frito-Lay’s definition of ‘good things,’ as well as that of other advertisers, commercially influenced media organizations, and sports organizations, is not the same definition of the ‘public good’ that we should embrace in a vibrant and balanced democratic society.” Furthermore, he asks how much we are willing to allow commercial organizations to control before people feel a dignified line has indeed been crossed. McAllister raises an important theoretical consideration, one that suggests that the definition of the public good in the hypercommercial world of professional and collegiate sport is fundamentally at odds with a healthy, functioning democracy. For Frito-Lay, much like other profit-making businesses of their ilk, the good life is a consumerist utopia awash with associations of the empowered consumer exercising “democratic choice” by purchasing its product.

As I have attempted to show, professional and amateur sports compel fans to see sport as merely another consumer product to be sold and bought. However, this idea significantly underestimates the wide cultural impact of sports, the manner in which they operate politically and socially in our national imaginary, and finally, the ways that sports have been exploited to promote particular values such as hard work, obedience, and fair play that have been fundamentally associated with the welfare of the nation. I am not suggesting that these ideas are lost or irrelevant. Rather, I am arguing that they are funneled toward promoting a narrow definition of citizenship that prioritizes the idea of a consumer-driven democracy over something much more meaningful and responsive to our needs as a society. As a matter of fact, it is
precisely because of sport’s cultural, political, and social impact that they can influence how we think of ourselves as citizens when we engage them as fans.

In the preceding chapters, I have outlined how sports participate in the rhetorical construction of the citizen-consumer by commodifying the relationship between fans and the teams they follow. In the process, sports have too often become another space for people to satisfy their consumer longings rather than an institution that has values beyond those valorized by so-called “free market” capitalism. This, in part, highlights their rhetorical nature simply because sports can influence or persuade fans to see the world in ways preferred by those who own, manage, and operate them. As Greg Dickinson notes in his rhetorical analysis of corporate advertisements in the wake of 9/11, the business community carefully articulated both consumption and patriotism in selling the view that, as consumers, citizens could demonstrate to the terrorists through shopping that they were undeterred in continuing the American way of life in spite of foreign and domestic threats.\(^\text{13}\) By politicizing consumption, such advertisements discursively hailed the citizen-consumer and, in the process, “[created] a comfortable identification among corporation[s], audience, and nation.”\(^\text{14}\) As Lizabeth Cohen notes, the citizen-consumer is “regarded as responsible for safeguarding the general good of the nation, in particular for prodding government to protect the rights, safety, and fair treatment of individual consumers in the private marketplace.”\(^\text{15}\) The appropriation of sports by the U.S. military and corporations such as Bell Helicopter-Textron who manufacture their hardware behind a veil of patriotism suggests that consuming sports is politicized with the same messages that Dickinson outlines in his essay on post-9/11 advertising.\(^\text{16}\) Whether it is stadiums that privilege higher-income consumers, sports video games that include advertisements, fantasy leagues and competitive fandom, and fashionable sports merchandise, consumption is the central motive that
lurks beneath all of them. And, since consumption is hailed as a quintessential embodiment of American democracy, how fans are encouraged to relate to sport is no less than a subtle lesson on how citizenship should be performed within a neoliberal culture.

At the basis of my argument is that Americans are in need of more authentic forms of democracy and that government should be separated from the kind of corporate control that make it difficult to serve the public in ways that would fundamentally restore people’s faith in the institution. Thus, my purpose here is not to suggest that capitalism and democracy are necessarily antithetical or that sports are a corrupt institution or an opiate whose purpose is to simply blind the public from seeing the real conditions through which they labor and consume. As a matter of fact, sports mirror and influence our contemporary cultural, economic, and political condition in which they are situated. Thus, academic discourses on the relationship between sport and society should seek ways of conversing with the public of the many ways in which the most blatant critique of sports, such as their unapologetic commercialism, are a reflection of the forces shaping society in general. To suggest that they are unique to sport, or that they are intolerable only in the world of sports, represents not only a bad faith and a problematic delusion, but prevents what could be an effective social critique from extending outside sports themselves. If the public is serious regarding reforming sports, this would require nothing less than an honest appraisal of how neoliberal capitalism is shaping society, the allocation and control of wealth and material resources, and an understanding how the public’s lack of faith in public institutions is really a consequence of the kind of unbridled and unrestrained capitalism that undermines them.

The question remains to what degree sports still hold the potential to promote democratic values beyond those sanctioned by the market and the dominant economic actors that control it.
Specifically, I am referring to “values” that emphasize an inclusion that maintains respect for difference, reinvigorated faith in community and public welfare, political engagement and civic responsibility, and active versus passive forms of citizenship. According to Benjamin Barber, this would require a society that is motivated in producing empowered citizens rather than infantile consumers in which “civilization is not an ideal or aspiration, it is a video game.” He contends that the world that contemporary capitalism creates is that of the corporate university, aggressive and sophisticated marketing strategies targeted to children and infants, simplistic forms of entertainment that dull the mind rather than expand it, and uninformed and lazy citizens that have long dispensed with any notion of the public good. It is difficult to imagine that contemporary sport promotes a world view at odds with Barber’s ominous vision.

Yet, there are individuals and groups who are committed to transforming the relationship between sport and society. Ken Reed, Sports Policy Director of the League of Fans, suggests that contemporary sports media should establish a sports reform beat dedicated to investigating deeper cultural, social, and political issues pertaining to sport as a demonstration of journalistic civil responsibility. Moreover, he argues that the most effective strategy for countering the commercial hegemony of professional and amateur sport to spur action that challenges its hold rather than reinforcing it. While he admits that commercial sports media outlets have no economic incentive to do so, he nonetheless claims that it is part of their watchdog duty as a journalistic institution. While his recommendation is commendable and certainly needed, it would nonetheless risk the hateful wrath of some fans, journalists, and management for “politicizing” sport. While sports are inherently political, these stakeholders do not label their politics as such. On the other hand, a commitment to sports coverage beyond reporting game results, scandals, and highlights would generate not only novel discussions of sports, but
different ways of imagining them. As the League of Fans Manifesto states, “as these abuses continue to increase, we’re witnessing the takeover of one of our most cherished cultural practices – sport. In effect, those looking to make money, feed their egos, and boost their power – sometimes all of the above – are ‘hijacking the world of sports.’” Not only does it express a sense of urgency, but it also emphasizes the idea of sport as another public trust is hijacked by big business interests relegating its value below its capacity to market, sell, and circulate commodities and capital.

It is because of their status as a public trust that Dave Zirin advocates the implementation of a “fan bill of rights” that would be imposed on team ownership to ensure that they are operating in the public’s interest. According to the hypothetical bill, owners who violate its stipulations would risk losing control of their teams to local municipalities who could enforce eminent domain in assuming control of these franchises. As a matter of fact, the Green Bay Packers are the only publicly owned, not-for-profit major professional team operating in the United States. Facing bankruptcy in the 1920s, the Green Bay community took control and sold shares of the team to the public while limiting the number of shares that an individual could own to 200. Over half of Lambeau Field’s concessions where the Packers play are operated by charities and 60% of each dollar generated by the sale of the famous cheese head (a Packer’s fan staple that pays homage to its local economy) is invested into a cause-related organization. Today, the NFL has written into its bylaws prohibiting community ownership of teams, blocking any community’s attempt to replicate the Green Bay model. As a matter of fact, these provisions apply to other professional sports as well. When Joan Kroc, widow of Ray Kroc, McDonald’s founder and former owner of the San Diego Padress, attempted to transfer ownership of the team to the community in the 1980s, Major League Baseball owners prevented it from happening.
Public ownership of professional sports franchises would not only curb relocation threats and the extraction of subsidies for new stadiums, but would likely ensure that any revenue would be reinvested into the team and the community in which they are a part.

While these recommendations would certainly benefit the integrity of sport and perhaps democracy in general, they will not likely be realized without altering or shaping the larger political, economic, and social context in which sports operate in the United States. At the time of this writing, the Occupy Wall Street movement persists in areas across the country motivated by the slogan “we are the 99%” in an effort to challenge corporate and financial-sector manipulation of government and public policy. Initiated by the Canadian activist group Adbusters, the movement originated in September, 2011 in New York’s Zuccotti Park, including college students protesting growing student loan debt and declining job prospects, public sector workers, academics, and other conscientious objectors concerned about growing economic inequality and corporate-sponsored government. I mention Occupy Wall Street because if the social movement wins over the majority of the American public, is effective in reframing how we think of capitalism, the corporation, and government, and can initiate systemic reform, the world of sport may be significantly impacted. In the wake of the NBA and NFL lockouts in mid to late 2011, athletes such as Troy Polamalu, Etan Thomas, and Charles Woodson rhetorically identified their labor struggle with the political objectives of the Occupy movement. While this attempt at uniting the two causes may have been problematic, it aimed to raise awareness of how certain political struggles were common in both.

In an effort to transform sports from within its institutional structure, critics are missing one key point, namely that the hypercommercialism of sport is really an extension of dynamics already prevalent in the wider culture. In other words, how fans are encouraged to engage sport
through consumption is a symptom of the neoliberal transformation of democracy, in which no institution, public space, or cultural activity is deemed too sacred for commercial exploitation and appropriation. Within this context, the *consumer* supersedes the citizen; as a matter of fact, it is one’s ability to consume that determines their citizenship.\(^{26}\) In this way, Benjamin Barber notes that contemporary capitalism is “allied with vices – although they serve consumerism – undermine, democracy, and citizenship” where assigning the poor to the status of “permanent outsiders.”\(^{27}\) In terms of the fans that it attracts, contemporary sports have no legitimate interest in catering to the poor or unprivileged because of the commercial forces that underpin it. Rather, sports are particularly concerned with attracting consumers, or more specifically, those with the ability to consume the products they are pushing. Thus, the only way that sports perhaps can be reformed is by changing the wider cultural context in which they operate; to restore sports place as a public institution (where, as a dominant social institutional, could embody more healthy and vital democratic principles) would signify no less than a transformation of society itself.

I should emphasize that sports fans are not always as passive as perhaps I have characterized them in the preceding chapters, as hopelessly acquiescent toward the commodification of sport. As Josh Boyd notes, the perceived and expected “idyllic illusion” of sports as offering an escape from the outside world contains within it the potential for resisting its appropriation by business interests to exploit their popularity to sell products and services.\(^{28}\) Fans are certainly critical of stadium names sold to corporations, angered that sports are merely a spectacular sales pitch, and regularly lament the loss of innocence attributed to them. Yet, too often, this same illusion is used to keep unwanted political expression out of sports, even being used to deny that sports have any political character whatsoever. Perhaps, we should not insist that sports operate under the pretense offering such escape or a momentary respite from the
outside world. Rather, fans, critics, and community activists should insist that sports, at both the professional and amateur level, are indeed public institutions that can provide a more healthy, constructive, and productive model for what the collective should be. But this would also require that we restore a more positive and optimistic appraisal of the public and its value in promoting a functioning democracy that facilitates deliberation, greater degrees of equality, and an efficacious check against the abuses of power. In *The Politics*, Aristotle points to a necessary balance that must be negotiated between community and individual needs; a functioning community will always hold respect for the needs of individuals.²⁹ In discussing the infantile ethos promoted by contemporary capitalism, Benjamin Barber notes that:

> the infantilist ethos is fortified by an ideology of entitlement in which human beings are seen first of all as individuals – what political scientists might call rights-bearing legal persons – rather than as family members, lovers, kin-people, or citizens of a civic community. This ideology is closely associated with American individualism and the modern ethos generally, and it spurns the ethics of obligation and responsibility that place the individual in a circle of sociability in which identity is given in part by association with and duty toward others.³⁰

For Barber, contemporary neoliberal capitalism not only reduces citizens to children who consume indiscriminately, but erodes community-mindedness, civic responsibility, and a sense of fairness that democracy is designed to preserve. This is coupled with a widespread skepticism toward government and public institutions that are viewed as inefficient, incompetent, and unaccountable agencies compared to private entities who overcome these burdens because of their seemingly disciplinary market.³¹
In current cultural and political discourse, the word “public” carries a negative connotation and is viewed both as a parasite and constraint on private choice which is hailed as more free and democratic.\textsuperscript{32} As a matter of fact, I would argue that the \textit{public} is commonly viewed as undemocratic and ripe for suspicion, rather than something that guarantees democracy in the first place. Robert Ivie argues that America suffers from “demophobia” that expresses its fear of the \textit{demos} in curbing and containing the very democracy it claims to preserve and protect.\textsuperscript{33} Meanwhile, Jeremy Engels claims that the United States embraces “demophilia” in celebrating the potential and ability of common folk to govern themselves.\textsuperscript{34} While the latter seems to celebrate political agency, it actually operates to discipline and tame democratic disorder while discursively and openly celebrating its possibilities. Today, this schizophrenic view of democracy is reconciled by a neoliberal impulse where self-government is reserved for those who have “earned it”: the wealthy, allegedly moral, “productive” citizen, not the “useless” poor. As Don Mitchell contends, public space has always been regarded as a sacred component of democratic societies as it signified a material realm where citizenship could be enacted.\textsuperscript{35} Of course, space is not only a concrete, geographic position but also includes a mental field through which spatial codes are developed.\textsuperscript{36} How fans have come to think of sports as well as the physical spaces such as stadiums and arenas where they are played are coming to be defined by the terms of capital whose logic has penetrated them. This is not to suggest that sports as a business is a new phenomenon or that they have always embodied democratic potential outside the market, but rather that fans identity is subjected to the same capitalist ethos that befall the individual in American society. Fans, like citizens, are reminded by yet another cultural institution that they are, first and foremost, consumers.
As Nick Trujillo and Bob Krizek suggest, “the local [sports] franchise is not just another bank, department store, or amusement park; it is experienced as a public trust that engenders a powerful sense of identification and identity for fans and franchise employees alike.”

It is difficult to imagine such emotional attachments in the case of Walmart, CitiBank, or Toys r’ Us because sports ostensibly embody a different set of ideals apart from a run-of-the-mill business or corporation. While this view of sports as a public trust is not lost, their association with public-ness is gradually being wiped way by the same hegemonic commercial forces exploiting their capacity to sell something. Some sports fans are certainly angered by what they are witnessing and a few may boycott games altogether in a bitter sign of protest, leaving the stadiums filled with those who can afford to participate in the neoliberal sports landscape. Yet, within a larger culture where notions of the public are commonly attacked by so-called social reformers from the business community, where democracy is reduced to consumption, and where everything in between is being made over in neoliberal capitalism’s own image, we may come to expect something less from sports and fandom than they are capable of giving. By reinventing the value of the public and linking it with discussions of sport as a public institution, then we may resist the commodification of sport and fan identity that has become all too common. But this would require nothing less than a social transformation of how we think, what we value, and a reappraisal of the goals that democracy is allegedly designed to uphold.

Directions for Future Research

The changing landscape of sports stadiums, advertising in sports video games, fantasy leagues, and marketing through team uniforms are not the only sports-based encounters that I could have addressed. The evolution of sports bars and themed-restaurants, fantasy camps, and
the stock market-like speculation of the trading card industry commodify fandom to a degree.

Yet, I selected areas that have already been examined by scholars (new sports stadiums, fantasy leagues) as well as the virtually uncharted territory of in-game advertising and new sports uniforms from the perspective of a rhetorical critic. While there is a significant cultural studies component to my analysis, the interdisciplinary nature of critical research in communication studies rendered this all but inevitable.

Future research could be oriented around the relationship between the twin popularity of fantasy leagues and sports talk radio. As fantasy league participants are invited to view themselves as general managers, sports talk radio becomes another forum for call-in participants to perform their “superior” sports knowledge that often includes detailed analyses of what ownership, management, and managers and coaches should do. Thus, sports talk radio, while not directly reducing athletes to commodities in a way that fantasy leagues do, nonetheless invite callers to adopt the same ownership perspective that yields it. Furthermore, sports stadium research should focus less on the economics of stadium building and more on their status as rhetorical texts that reflect current political and cultural ideologies. Finally, a more sustained analysis should be given to professional and amateur sports and the manner in which they are marketing themselves in the age of social media. In my latter discussion about the reduction of the value of sport to a commodity, one could examine how Twitter and Facebook further this reduction; specifically, how they are mobilized to create sporting spectacles to seduce casual fans into following them.

Unquestionably, the research here will yield further questions about the relationship between sports, fandom, commercialism, and democracy and it would be problematic to assume that I have said all there is to say about the topic. Nevertheless, the goal here was to illuminate
how the mediation of consumption and commercialism between sports and fans finds it corollary in the reduction of citizens in a democracy to consumers. Sports have such a wide and significant impact in American culture that it is impossible to imagine their immunity from cultural or political dynamics, or to conceive how they are not somehow complicit in their construction. Michael Butterworth observes that “to deny sports are political is to lend tacit consent to the discourses of the dominant political order.”38 For many scholars who investigate the relationship between sport and society, such interventions hold, according to Grant Jarvie, “the promise and possibilities that sport may be part of a progressive of hope in keeping alive different versions of the world that we both live in and could live in.”39 While the conventional wisdom perpetuated by team owners, sports journalists, and other industry officials insists that sports and politics should remain separate, it is difficult to overlook significant social changes and the political disruptions within sport that have predated them. Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947 occurred seven years before the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education. Meanwhile, female tennis player’s Billie Jean King’s victory in the “Battle of the Sexes” over male Bobby Riggs issued a challenge to the masculine hegemony in sport and influenced the enactment of Title IX. Sport holds forth the possibility of larger democratic transformations within contemporary culture and can offer a more emboldened and empowered model of citizenship beyond that of the consumer to which democracy is so often reduced. But this may involve a fundamental alteration to what Americans are taught to value, think, and believe first.

Notes


4 James Quirk and Rodney Fort, *Hardball*.


7 Quirk and Fort, *Hardball*.


9 Robert Reich, *Supercapitalism*.

10 This has invited discussions regarding whether college athletes should be paid because of the revenue they generate at Division I institutions, especially in sports such as basketball and football at top tier athletic programs. While this has been a subject recently engaged in the mainstream sports media, the most thorough and complete analysis comes from Andrew Zimbalist, *Unpaid Professionals: Commercialism and Conflict in Big-Time College Sports* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

12 Dave Zirin, *A People’s History of Sport in the United States*


14 Ibid., 276.


19 For more on the political nature of sport, see Zirin, *A People’s History of Sports in the United States*.


22 Ibid.


25 When I claim that uniting these causes may have been problematic, I am only suggesting that athletes’ attempts to identify with the Occupy Wall Street movement and the public workers protests may have appeared as genuine, given the salaries they command.


27 Barber, *Consumed*, 5, 53.


30 Barber, *Consumed*, 108.

31 Ibid., 117.

32 Ibid., 127.


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