

# *Character and . . .*

# Social Media

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# Fantasy Football and Friendship: The Company We Keep Online

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Matthew R. Schlimm

## Abstract

*Approximately one in ten Americans play a fantasy sport such as fantasy football. People under 35 spend over four hours a week on this pastime. This presentation examines what fantasy football is and how it can impact a life of character.*

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Aristotle believed that friendship was a virtue, that it went hand-in-hand with other virtues. “Without friends,” he writes, “no one would choose to live, even if they possessed all other goods” (Aristotle 451, §). People become like their friends, imitating behaviors in the people closest to them. Friends shape each other’s attitudes, desires, and character. Many people try things they wouldn’t otherwise, simply because of a friend’s recommendation. Friends can make loneliness vanish and laughter abound—which, in turn, can allow people to overcome feelings of desperateness that hold the potential for moral catastrophe. Close friends often know us better than we know ourselves, and they can offer companionship and correction in times of greatest need.

The last decade's growth of social media means that people now relate to friends in new and different ways. For Facebook users, "friend" has become a verb that simply means someone is added to a list and has access to what you post on your page. With Twitter, friends "follow" one another, meaning they can communicate to each other with "tweets" that are 140 characters or less—messages shorter than this sentence.

Another highly popular form of social media is fantasy sports. The Fantasy Sports Trade Association claims that fantasy sports involve more than 10% of the nation's population, with an estimated 33 million American users. Fantasy sports users under the age of 35 spend an average of 4.2 hours per week engaging in sports media (Brown, Billings, and Rauhley 333-342).

What, exactly, is a fantasy sport? There are many variations, but essentially, it is a game where players assume the roles of owner, head coach, and general manager of a fantasy team comprised of actual professional athletes. When actual athletes score for their professional teams, they also score for the fantasy teams they are part of.

So, when I play fantasy football, my friends and I gather online in late August for a draft. We select the NFL athletes we want on our respective teams. We invent names and mascots for our teams. After the draft, we decide which NFL athletes will start on our fantasy teams. We can send messages to each other or the league. We can trade players. We can add undrafted players and drop underperforming ones. We can use the vast powers of the internet to research which players to start and which to bench. We can spend a great amount of time in this sport. In the end, my friends and I find ourselves relating in a season-long digital arena that can be engaging, fun, highly competitive, and filled with trash-talking. Some elements of fantasy football can take place in person as friends gather to watch games or even to draft players. However, increasingly, the game is played online.

Is it worth it? How does such a pastime impact the moral life? Are the friendships formed and maintained through fantasy football the types of relationships that, as Aristotle indicated, are essential to a life of character? Or, does fantasy football simply bring out the worst in people, reducing friends to competitors? I wrestle with these questions in this article, using passages from Aristotle and the Bible, along with modern writings, to arrive at a more developed understanding of fantasy football, friendship, and the moral life. In the end, I conclude that fantasy football can serve a positive role in the moral life, though it is neither all-sufficient nor without ethical risk.

## Types of Friendship

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In his main book devoted to ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines friendship as a relationship where two parties wish each other well, are aware of each other's feelings of goodwill, and base these feelings on positive qualities in each other (Aristotle 457, §). He classifies friendships into three types:

1. Fun friendships.<sup>1</sup>
2. Useful friendships.
3. Virtuous friendships.

Aristotle displays an obvious preference for this third category, saying it represents friendship in its most perfect form. He believes that virtuous friendships can also prove fun and useful; however, with virtuous friendships, companions ultimately value each other for who they are, not just the fun or usefulness they may bring to each other's lives.

Aristotle's thoughts on friendship can provide a helpful framework for evaluating fantasy football and its role in facilitating friendships.<sup>2</sup> He prompts us to consider how important fun and useful friendships are for the moral life, even when they do not fully blossom into virtuous friendships.

## Fun Friendships

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Friendship with a witty person brings pleasure to one's life. The same is true when one becomes friends with others who have a good sense of humor, who engage in similar pastimes, or who playfully approach certain topics. Aristotle does not hold these sorts of friendships in the highest esteem; he does not see them as evil, but he does see them as defective. According to him, such relationships are fleeting. He believes that "fun" friends value each other less for who they are and more for what enjoyment they offer.

However, fun friendships may have much more value to the moral life than Aristotle admits. Playfulness, in particular, is an essential component of a well-rounded moral life.<sup>3</sup> Recent research on refugees shows that children who have been forced out of their homes and suffered wartime trauma benefit tremendously from play. When these children engage in creative, playful exercises, harsh, old realities fade away while new futures are imagined (Tolfree 53-56).

Although most people do not face the trauma of refugees, each of us inhabits a fallen world—one filled with suffering that defies explanation.<sup>4</sup> In this type of moral universe, people need ways of breaking free from their past, whether that past elicits shame over one's mistakes, outrage over injustices, or fear about one's future.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of play, old realities are temporarily suspended. People can receive a break from accepted norms. Imaginations can run wild. New ways of existence can be imagined. When play is over and people return to the tasks of their lives, they can do so refreshed and revitalized.

The Bible endorses playfulness on many occasions. Some texts clearly display a sense of humor, retelling funny occurrences (e.g., Acts 12.11–16). Others show a willingness to suspend given realities, imagining the world in new and fresh ways that upset

the established hierarchies of power. The book of Esther tells the story of Jews in exile facing persecution by the evil war criminal Haman, who wants to wipe them out. Through Esther's cunning courage, the Jews are saved. Even King Ahasuerus ends up doing everything Esther requests. This story offers a playful reinterpretation of reality for marginalized readers who are given hope that harsh realities like persecution are not all that exists. A day of celebration and feasting—the Jewish festival of Purim—exists on the other side of evil times. Readers who join Jews in this story find relief from existing realities as new ways of existence are playfully imagined (cf. Craig *passim*).

The Bible also emphasizes taking a weekly day of rest; it says God did so after creating the universe (Gen. 2.1–4a). It contrasts the workaholic demands of slavery with the rest-required ways of God (Deut. 5.12–15). When Jesus talks about giving rest to those who are weary and heavy-laden, he does so in the context of a discussion about weekly rest (Matt. 11.28–12.8). As biblical scholar Dennis Olson puts it, “We need time and activities that restore our energies, quiet our anxious minds, and regenerate our troubled spirits” (Olson 43-66).<sup>6</sup>

## **Fantasy Football and Fun Friendships**

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Fantasy football, by its very nature, is a game that gives players a break from tired old realities.<sup>7</sup> Members of a league are no longer warehouse workers with monotonous tasks, office workers with impossible deadlines, or sales reps whose futures ride on making the next sale. Players are given a level playing field—free from the demands of everyday life. In the imaginary world created by fantasy football, jobs are left behind.

In turn, every member of a league takes on the new roles of owner, general manager, and head coach.<sup>8</sup> In real life, such roles belong to society's elite. In fantasy football, however, all members of a league receive this privileged status.<sup>9</sup>

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**What If Monopoly Reflected U.S. Wealth Distribution?**

In the game of Monopoly, players begin on equal footing. Each player receives \$1,500 to start the game.

However, if five players played this game and were each given amounts of money relative to the wealth distribution in the US, they would each receive the following:

Player 1	\$6,317
Player 2	\$842
Player 3	\$318
Player 4	\$15
Player 5	\$8

One thing that makes games like Monopoly enjoyable is that people enjoy equality at the outset, whereas in real life, they may have distinct disadvantages.

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The Bible itself emphasizes the equality of all human beings. Genesis 1.27 describes God as creating humanity in “God’s own image,” and this title extends to all of humanity, women and men alike.<sup>10</sup> In a bold and counter-cultural move, the Bible dares to proclaim that all of humanity has sacred worth and God-like characteristics (Middleton 206).

One thing that makes games so fun is that they give people glimpses of the equality we all have in God’s eyes. For the most part, when people play games, they start out on equal footing.<sup>11</sup> (See “What If Monopoly Reflected U.S. Wealth Distribution?”<sup>12</sup>) They gain a glimpse of what it

will one day be like when the universal worth of all peoples is affirmed.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the course of the season, participants in fantasy football leagues are given the autonomy to act like head-coaches of the NFL. They draft players, set lineups, offer trades, and research match-ups. In fantasy football, a group of college students suddenly gets to do what only millionaires do in real life. Fantasy football offers a refreshing break from the stresses we



regularly face—relief from, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, “the vulgar heat of everyday life” (47-48). Fantasy football offers an invitation to a fantastic world where old realities are turned upside-down.<sup>14</sup>

Granted, fantasy football is not a failsafe entry into restful play. Instead of offering a momentary relief from stress, it can become a form of escapism that causes people to ignore real life problems that merit careful attention. Or, as a season progresses and members of leagues watch their teams perform poorly, it can reinforce feelings of frustration and even resentment. Owners often feel a sense of injustice and anger when players they were certain would play well instead get injured or underperform. Pay-in leagues become especially competitive, because games cease to be fun pastimes and instead become real-life struggles over the prize money at the end of the season. Greed takes over, fantasy recedes to the background, and too much rides on players who may have an off game or fall to injury. Fantasy football has the potential to bring out the worst in people, even when it is designed to offer a pleasurable experience for all involved.

Fortunately, there are ways to counteract these negative outcomes of the fantasy football experience. In particular, *leagues can be designed to encourage playfulness and humor, rather than unhealthy levels of competition.*

This past year, the commissioner of one of my leagues had a bold idea: he declared that our league would be themed with elements from 1980s culture. Team names had to refer to something from the decade known for big hair, boxy cars, and keyboard synthesizers. Our league featured these teams:

1. The Gridiron Goonies (a nice alliteration that refers to the movie *The Goonies*)
2. The Hulksters (with logos featuring the legendary Hulk Hogan)

3. The Rad Rockers (with logos showing famous bands from the 1980s with wild hairstyles)
4. The Cobra Kai Dojo (a reference to the movie *The Karate Kid*)
5. The Hill Valley DeLoreans (a reference to the movie trilogy *Back to the Future*)
6. WhoYouGonnaCall? Tim Tebow! (a reference to the movie *Ghostbusters* and, of course, Tim Tebow)
7. The Battle Cats (a reference to the green and yellow striped tiger that He-Man would mount when heading into battle)
8. Papa Smurf (from the cartoon about blue-bodied miniature people)

Although many people had reservations about the commissioner's request that they choose names related to the 1980s, it ended up being a great experience. We were able to relive parts of our childhood. These goofy names were a persistent reminder that our league was simply a game, not anything to be taken too seriously. We had many chuckles and moments of *Oh, yeah! I remember that!*

Interestingly, studies have shown that when videogamers have villainous avatars, they tend to act meaner toward others, but they are nicer when they have heroic avatars (Herbert). *Mutatis mutandis*, choosing one's team name is not a morally neutral decision. Fantasy footballers do well to choose names that are positive or funny.

Another tradition in our league is that teams' logos change each week (we gave the Oregon Ducks a run for their money). Our Super Bowl featured a matchup between the Gridiron Goonies and Papa Smurf. The owner of the Gridiron Goonies



chose the meme on the left as his logo for that week (“Bring Me Another Smurf Baby”).

These elements made our league more conducive to playfulness and laughter, rather than stiff-necked competition and degrading trash-talk. We certainly exchanged smack with each other, but it was done more playfully than in some of the leagues I have witnessed. For example, after I chose to start St. Louis Rams Quarterback Sam Bradford early in the season (a player with a questionable track record), a member of my league wrote, “Friends really shouldn’t let friends start Sam Bradford.” The comment was witty enough that it made me smile, rather than grow angry.

Our league also has a no-wager policy. It is free for everyone to play, with only bragging rights on the line. As a result, the league is more carefree. The difficulty of free leagues, of course, is that members can easily lose interest halfway through the season. However, this tendency is counteracted by two features. First, people who go to our league’s webpages find things to make them laugh. Second, most people in this league were friends before the league started, and it serves as a good way to maintain existing friendships (see “Fantasy Football and Virtuous Friendships” below).<sup>15</sup>

Finally, this league is made up of people with very good moral character, who also know how to have fun. Few things in life are more important than whom we choose to be our friends. As the first Psalm puts it, “The truly happy person ... doesn’t stand on the road of sinners, and doesn’t sit with the disrespectful” (Ps. 1.1). This observation is especially true with internet friends. Social media can bring out the worst in people (Suler 321-326).<sup>16</sup> Games (online or offline) can also cause people to show their vices: sore winners and sore losers snatch away the joy that comes from games. Both social media and games are combined in fantasy football. Therefore, the risks are high for people to reveal the

worst parts of themselves. Thus, it is important to exercise a fair amount of selectivity when deciding whether to join particular leagues or whom to invite.

Reflecting on the nature of fantasy sports, communication scholar Allison Burr-Miller writes:

While the more overt pleasures of fantasy participation come from competitive success (having a good draft, winning a week's matchup, or winning a league championship), the spectrum of the game's symbolic medicine goes far beyond winning and losing. This is not to say that winning does not matter, but it is to say that fantasy participants produce complex texts that tell a larger story. These texts are articulations of loyalties, personal relationships, everyday thoughts and feelings, and other elements of a participant's identity that are expressed through fantasy participation. (Burr-Miller 457-458)

One of the greatest benefits of fantasy football is that it gives users a variety of ways to have fun, far beyond the traditional fan that roots for one team.

## **Useful Friendships**

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The second major type of friendship that Aristotle discusses is friendship based on usefulness or utility. Two neighbors may, for example, keep an eye on each other's property, especially when one neighbor goes out of town.

As with fun friendships, Aristotle could have said more about the importance of useful friendships for the moral life. Living in a fallen world naturally involves struggle. Genesis 3 talks of humanity facing great difficulty in matters like work. Other parts of the Bible depict the struggles people face just getting by.

Friendships, the Bible says, can help people when facing these sorts of struggles. The book of Ecclesiastes puts it this way:

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their hard work. If either should fall, one can pick up the other. But how miserable are those who fall and don't have a companion to help them up! Also, if two lie down together, they can stay warm. But how can anyone stay warm alone? Also, one can be overpowered, but two together can put up resistance. A three-ply cord doesn't easily snap. (Eccl. 4.9-12)<sup>17</sup>

What Ecclesiastes describes somewhat abstractly, readers find concretely illustrated in the biblical story of Ruth. While the characters Naomi and Ruth are technically mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, they function as close friends.<sup>18</sup> Through cooperation, they survive the harshest of situations, including the loss of family members, dangerous travel, and severe poverty. Naomi offers Ruth sage advice, which Ruth carries out; in turn, Ruth is able to provide for both of them. Rather than emphasizing friendships of utility as fleeting and imperfect, the Bible recognizes their importance for surviving and thriving in a world that has more than its share of difficulties.

## **Fantasy Football and Useful Friendships**

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Fantasy football does relatively little to enhance primarily useful relationships; but under some circumstances, it may move in this direction. For example, a football league among co-workers may add elements of fun, excitement, and camaraderie to workplace relationships, allowing co-workers to bond over something other than their work. Such an activity could boost morale, but it would not necessarily enhance workplace productivity. In fact, such productivity could easily decrease as coworkers spend more time researching NFL stats and less time doing their jobs.

Or, a fantasy football league may introduce members to people they did not previously know, people with whom they may form useful relationships. However, such friendships do not always, or even usually, form. With online relationships, one can easily act as if the other person is not really there. Unlike a board game, I can play fantasy football against other people and never once say a single thing to them. I may get to know very little about them as people. I can simply check to see how my players and my opponent's players are doing without much real human interaction.

In short, the potential exists for relationships of usefulness to get started through fantasy football. However, there is little that ensures such relationships become formed.

In fact, on a deeper level, something more sinister may be taking place with fantasy football. In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr argues that the human brain tends to adapt to its environment. When the internet becomes that environment, our brains spend less time in deep concentration and more time scanning, jumping from topic to topic, and deciding whether to click on hyperlinks. We remember less of what we read, even as we read far more than ever before. As our brains adapt to the world of the web, we may be losing some of our most valuable cognitive capacities. Thus, as Carr's book title suggests, with the internet, we spend our days wading around in the shallows of the shoreline while neglecting the vast depths of the ocean.<sup>19</sup>

## Virtuous Friendships

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According to Aristotle, in virtuous friendships, two people know each other well enough that they understand who the other person is. They admire the goodness within the other, seeking the welfare of the other person.

The Bible offers additional insights into the value of virtuous friendships and what they look like. Several texts suggest that love often finds its greatest expression within the context of close friends:

- “Friends love all the time” (Prov. 17.17).
- “Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin” (Prov. 18.24, NRSV).
- “No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15.13).

Elsewhere, the Bible suggests that friends know us better than we know ourselves, providing useful checks on self-deception that leads to moral catastrophe:

- “Oil and incense gladden the heart, And the sweetness of a friend is better than one’s own counsel.” (Prov. 27.9, *Tanakh*)

True friends go so far as to risk offending each other in order to improve character:

- “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27.6, NASB).

It is within the context of faithful friendships that Jesus promises to be present:

- “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them” (Matt. 18.20).

The Bible portrays these sorts of virtuous, godly friendships most vividly in the book of Daniel. Facing harsh persecution by those with power, Daniel and his friends stick together, forming a small community of resistance that maintains its faith in an otherwise hostile environment (see esp. Daniel 1–3).

## **Fantasy Football and Virtuous Friendships**

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At first glance, it would seem that virtuous relationships do not grow deeper through fantasy football. Friendships based on virtue require vulnerability and intimacy. Friends who bring out the moral good in each other admit their struggles, confess their sins, and confront each other about how to live better lives (cf. James 5.16). Such activities do not occur in fantasy football leagues. Most communication, even when it is directed to one member of a league, is visible to all members of a league. Intimacy and deep friendship rarely occur simultaneously among a group of a dozen competitors.

At the same time, fantasy sports allow friends from across the world to come together in shared activities. At a bare minimum, fantasy football can allow people to maintain pre-existing friendships based on virtue. It does not suffice as a substitute for all face-to-face gatherings, but it can fill gaps when geographic and temporal constraints disallow regular in-person get-togethers.

In addition, fantasy football may provide a forum by which people can begin to know other people better, so that virtuous friendships can then result offline. For example, a church in Cadillac, Michigan, has created a fantasy football league. League members gather weekly with their families to watch NFL games with fellowship and food. Through such activities, solid friendships are formed that extend far beyond the bounds of the game. Some people even come into the life of the church through this ministry. Fun friendships become virtuous friendships (Kraai 13).

Research suggests that friendships among men often solidify through the participation in common activities (Shields 1-25). Virtuous friendships may be more valuable to the ethical life than fun friendships, but virtuous friendships need to start somewhere.



They often begin amid the pleasurable sharing in joint activities like fantasy football.

## **The Dangers of Fantasy Football**

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I have clarified how fantasy football can be a source of ethical and moral help. At the same time, it is appropriate to be upfront about some of the moral dangers that reside in this kind of wireless connection. As hinted at above, social media already feels to some users as though it is an invented fantasy realm—an imaginary space where they can take on different personas and act in ways free from normal social norms and graces (Suler 321-326). When a form of social media is, by its very name, called “fantasy,” users may feel even more welcome to act as if typical standards of morality no longer apply. Obviously, the word “fantasy” in “fantasy football” refers first and foremost to the idea that professional athletes play for teams that users coach and manage. Yet, the word itself may invite some players to imagine they are partaking in an imaginary world where they no longer need to care about other league members as actual human beings. After all, they do not see these other players, they do not look them in the eyes, they do not see firsthand how their comments affect others, and they are stripped of many features of face-to-face communication. Trash talking can go much too far, because users never see how their words affect others reading them. In one league I played in, things got so out of control that one player threatened to email another player’s boss, telling the supervisor of all the awful things the employee had ever done in college. Fantasy can be a very good thing, but it is far from a good thing when “fantasy” is interpreted to mean a space outside morality and ethics.

In an article for the online magazine *Think Christian*, Todd Hertz describes how fantasy football tempts him with many of the cardinal sins. He writes:

**Gluttony** is not just about food. It's overindulgence in a quest for pleasure or comfort. I have little self-discipline when it comes to fantasy football. I always think that just a little more research, one more trade, another free-agent addition or more number crunching will lead me over the top. And then, I will be happy and fulfilled.

**Greed** is the inordinate accumulation of material things, status, power or security at the expense of others. I so badly want to accumulate. Two (slightly modified) questions in that self-evaluation tool nail me: Do I seek to use others, my friends, to get what I want? and Do I cheat and steal to get what I want? If I could, I would.

**Pride** can control me in any competition. Somehow, it becomes self-defining. It's been said that fantasy sports are about proving to your friends that you are better than they are. That resonates. I love the community aspect of this game, but I can also fall prey to just wanting to crush my friends. Prove that I am smarter. Competition is good; less helpful is when an insecure need for validation grows into spiteful vanity.

**Envy** goes beyond jealousy. It's not only wanting what someone has, it's feeling that if you can't have it, nobody should. It's not only saying, "I don't want you to have Drew Brees if I cannot." It's also thinking, "If I can't win, I hope that jerk doesn't." Yes, I do get offended by the success or good fortune of other fantasy team owners. And I can feel contempt for those I feel are inferior. All over fake scores from fake football rosters.

**Wrath** flows right out of pride and envy for me. I'll let two self-reflective questions speak for me: Am I cynical, prone to grumbling or easily annoyed in

fantasy football? Do I blame others for my circumstances?

**Sloth** is probably the single most convicting sin on this list for me, in fantasy football or out. Sloth doesn't equal being lazy. Heck, the sheer effort I put into researching defensive metrics is hard work. Instead, the core of this vice is spending time in a way that takes you off mission, away from commitments. It's a refusal to grow, serve or sacrifice for others in favor of trivial things.

For people who have played fantasy football, Hertz's list is all too familiar. Sometimes, the best recourse during an abysmal season is to stop caring about it so much.

## Conclusion

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Fantasy can play a valuable role in the moral life. To experience rest *as rest*, human beings need imaginative ways of engaging the world that give us freedom from some of the burdens we face in daily living. Fantasy football provides a playful way of bonding with friends, one that can give users at least a fleeting glimpse of the equality we all have in God's eyes.

Yet, fantasy football also has dangers. All too easily, users can become obsessed with checking stats, focused on winning money, covetous of NFL players on someone else's team, thinking about whether they are better than their friends, or angry that NFL players underperformed. In the process, users deprive themselves of other rich forms of friendship that are essential to the well-lived life. As we strive to win, we may lose the playfulness, fun, and friendships that the game fosters at its best moments.

By surrounding ourselves with people who have both a good sense of humor and high moral character, these pitfalls can be avoided. We can have a blast, even if we lose.

Those who play fantasy football in positive ways will want to ask themselves not only what fun, utility, or virtue they gain from the experience. They will also ask how they are making the experience fun, useful, and virtuous for others. It may be more important to post something sure to elicit laughter from league members than to win on any given Sunday.

One also needs to remember that fantasy football is not all-sufficient. While it provides a forum for fun friendships to flourish, it does little to enhance useful or virtuous friendships. At best, it lets people maintain virtuous friendships and introduces players to others with whom offline friendships can take root.

Fantasy football can play an important minor role in our lives. However, when it becomes all-consuming or über-competitive, users lose sight, as Wayne Booth puts it, of the “friends who demonstrate their friendship not only in the range and depth and intensity of pleasure they offer, not only in the promise they fulfill of proving useful to me, but finally in the irresistible invitation they extend to live during these moments a richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own” (223).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the Loeb Classical Library, H. Rackham translates Aristotle’s work, talking about friendships based on “pleasure.” Aristotle uses the Greek word *hēdonē* to talk about “pleasure.” This word has negative connotations when used in the New Testament (e.g., Titus 3.3). Today, it is often associated with sex (“hedonism”). However, “pleasure” had a different meaning for Aristotle.

He thus sees that it can be “good” (Aristotle 439 §7.13.1; 605–607 §10.5.10–11). He even goes so far as to say, “It is therefore clear that we must pronounce the admittedly disgraceful pleasures not to be pleasures at all, except to the depraved” (Aristotle 607 §10.5.11). Because he often connects pleasurable friendships with witty exchanges between companions, and because of the linguistic baggage attached to the word “pleasure” today, I have chosen to talk about fun friendships.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Condella uses Aristotle’s concept of friendship to evaluate Facebook, concluding,

“Facebook presents us with something of a double-edged sword. While it allows us to continue friendships which might have otherwise and regrettably shriveled on the vine, its propensity to create and maintain friendships in such great abundance risks choking the deeper sorts of friendships which matter most” (Condella 121).

While Condella makes many valid points, my article goes in different directions not only by looking at fantasy football, but also by doing more to affirm friendships based on pleasure and usefulness that may not turn into friendships based on virtue.

<sup>3</sup> Although dated, there is an excellent discussion of the importance of play in Johnston, esp. chaps. 3–4; cf. Berger; Ryken. Thanks to Elmer Colyer and Gary Panetta for drawing these works to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> As I point out elsewhere, “Fundamental to all of [the biblical book of] Genesis...is the driving metaphor WE ARE EXPELLED FROM PARADISE” (Schlimm 125). Humanity no longer dwells in a delightful garden free from suffering. We now work with sweat on our brows and thorns in our feet.

<sup>5</sup> Granted, guilt, anger, and fear can serve useful purposes. However, it is also possible for people to become so entrenched in these emotions that they lead desperate lives that can easily turn toward moral catastrophe.

<sup>6</sup> Olson makes this comment while talking about the Sabbath. As he observes, the Sabbath initially was simply a day of rest. Later in Israel’s history, it was associated with worship.

<sup>7</sup> While I emphasize how fantasy football facilitates other ways of viewing reality, several publications describe how fantasy football gives users experiences of arousal, enjoyment, entertainment, learning, and even enhanced self-esteem. See Brown, Billings, and Ruihley, 338–339; Billings and Ruihley, 5–25; Farquhar and Meeds, 1208–1228.

<sup>8</sup> This sort of identification can be interpreted as an extension of the type of parasocial interaction and identification fans have with athletes even apart

from fantasy sports. For more on this topic, see Earnhardt and Haridakis, 27–53; cf. Burr-Miller, esp. 448–450.

<sup>9</sup> Two further observations are worth noting. First, the manner in which fantasy football gives users additional identities reflects postmodern trends that avoid any single metanarrative, preferring instead a constellation of identities and small narratives for navigating the world. Second, as pointed out to me by Gary Panetta, one can object that fantasy football does not offer enough of a critique of social dynamics: it reinforces ideas that one should covet the position of millionaire owners, general managers, and head coaches, rather than envisioning a more egalitarian social order free from such hierarchies and elites.

<sup>10</sup> Here and elsewhere, the Common English Bible translation is used (unless otherwise noted).

<sup>11</sup> With respect to fantasy football, the comments here are less applicable to “keeper” leagues where teams retain at least some of the same players from the previous year. Many leagues are not keepers: at the start of each season, there’s a draft where people get to pick their team. These picks are often in a serpentine format, so that even if you have the last pick in round one, you then get the first pick in round two.

<sup>12</sup> The numbers here are calculated using data in Norton and Ariely, esp. 10, which says that the wealthiest 20% of people in the U.S. own 84% of the total wealth, the second most wealthy 20% of people own 11%, the middle 20% own 4%, the next 20% own 0.2%, and the poorest 20% of people own 0.1%.

<sup>13</sup> A helpful concept in Christian theology is the “now-not yet” tension. Simply put, this term means that God’s will and kingdom can be partially glimpsed in the here and now, even though God’s will and kingdom is not yet fully realized. According to orthodox Christianity, it is only with Christ’s return to earth that God will establish a new heaven and new earth that fully reflects God’s will. In the meanwhile, we catch glimpses of what God wants for creation, even as evil also pierces through, reminding us of our need for God’s intervention.

It is easy to see how the “now-not yet” tension plays out in terms of human equality. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech presented clear glimpses of a society that valued all people equally, even though both in his day and in our own, it is clear that society still has a long way to go.

Games may also give us partial glimpses of equality in the *here and now*, even as it is clear we have *not yet* achieved such equality.

<sup>14</sup> This world of fantasy has continuity with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque (122–132).

<sup>15</sup> Our league has also discussed having a pay-in at the start that is refunded to everyone who plays throughout the season. Those who start NFL players on bye weeks lose their pay-in fees, which go to the league champion.

<sup>16</sup> Social media can also insulate people from one another, as described by Sherry Turkle in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* and "The Flight from Conversation."

<sup>17</sup> Early in his discussion of friendship, Aristotle makes similar remarks, writing:

Friends are an aid to the young, to guard them from error; to the elderly, to tend them, and to supplement their failing powers of action; to those in the prime of life, to assist them in noble deeds...for two are better able both to plan and to execute. (Aristotle 451, §8.1.2)

However, as Aristotle proceeds, he expresses less appreciation for friendships based on utility.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, Ruth leaves Moab to stay with Ruth, even though she likely would have stayed in her homeland (like her sister) if the relationship was solely based on being in-laws and not also on being friends (cf. Wadell, 316). Furthermore, the Hebrew name Ruth means "friend" or "companion."

<sup>19</sup> On a somewhat related note, Pollock observes that fantasy football may be distracting fans from the evidence that the sport has extremely detrimental effects on athletes' brains.

Conversely, Burr-Miller, 456–458 argues that fantasy sports actually assist users, providing equipment for living in a fragmented and postmodern world. However, she could have better explained and substantiated this claim. Peter Gray asserts on a more general level that play is essential for preparing people for life.

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