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Reaching the kids: NFL youth marketing and media

Jeffrey Montez de Oca, Brandon Meyer, and Jeffrey Scholes

University of Colorado Colorado Springs

**ABSTRACT**

This article looks at how the National Football League (NFL) uses television and new media technologies to engage in a pedagogical project of teaching the game and its culture to children so that they can produce themselves as fans valuable to the NFL. The NFL takes these steps because becoming a fan of any sport is not a passive process; it requires significant, focused labor to learn the requisite knowledge and perform an identity tied to the consumption of specific cultural commodities. We specifically look at the television show NFL Rush Zone, produced in partnership with Nickelodeon, and the website nflrush.com that together form an inter-textual pedagogical and performative narrative space where children can learn to be football fans and simultaneously perform a fan identity. Since fans are central to the NFL’s $9.5 billion annual revenues, we argue that this process of subjectification is also a process of commodification.

“Not everyone that’s a fan is going to play the game, so we’ve really built out what we think is a good portfolio of ways to connect with kids in the 6 to 13 range.” — Peter O’Reilly, NFL VP/Fan Strategy & Marketing (Show, 2009)

Since the 1960s, the National Football League (NFL) has understood that continuous growth in market share and revenue is tied to aggressive, innovative marketing strategies that constantly create new fans (Oriard, 2007). Expanding its fan base is important since fans are what sponsors pay for when advertising with the NFL, making the social process of creating new fans also a process of commodification where people take on economic value as fan-commodities. That basic fact about the NFL has not changed, but aspects of its marketing strategy have shifted with the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism. In particular, the NFL has come to understand that continued growth in market-share necessitates attracting new fans beyond their traditional target market of adult males.

One group that has taken on increased importance for the NFL is youth, both male and female. Youth are important since 55% of avid NFL fans, those that consume more games and merchandise than casual fans, said they became interested in football in elementary school or earlier. Seventy-five percent of avid fans and 62% of casual fans played football at some level as a child (Show, 2009). As O’Reilly’s quote above suggests, the NFL does not rely on parents alone to perform the cultural labor of producing their children as avid NFL fans. Similarly, the NFL understands that youth can participate in the game and its culture by means other than just playing it in the manner of their fathers.

In order to produce new fans, the NFL uses television and new media technologies to engage in a pedagogical project of teaching the game and its culture to children so that they can produce themselves as fans valuable to the NFL. The NFL takes these steps because becoming a fan of any sport is not a passive process, it requires significant, focused labor to learn the requisite knowledge and perform an identity tied to the consumption of specific cultural commodities. This NFL-led process of identity formation, or subjectification, represents a very sophisticated stage of lifestyle...
marketing and engages multiple, inter-textually linked media platforms. Focusing on everyday activities, consumer behaviors, interests, opinions, and demographic characteristics, NFL marketing takes advantage of new technologies to magnify people’s engagement in identity constructions by offering a greater range of commodities to choose from and greater customization that tailors mass-produced commodities to individualized self-expressions and desires (Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011, p. 66; Plummer, 1974, p. 34). At the same time, NFL lifestyle marketing guides fans to work on themselves so that they can make themselves more valuable commodities, that is, avid NFL fans and active consumers.

It is through this dual strategy of teaching fan knowledge and inculcating proper conduct that the NFL qualifies as an exemplary participant in a neoliberal economy—an important context that helps illuminate the tactics of NFL marketing. Paul Treanor defines neoliberalism as:

> a philosophy in which the existence and operation of a market are valued in themselves, separately from any previous relationship with the production of goods and services, and without any attempt to justify them in terms of their effect on the production of goods and services; and where the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs. (Treanor, 2005)

The pedagogical and performative space that children enter through the various media platforms foster the development of an ethic that is filtered and acted out through the NFL brand. Formally, with the extensive integration of television and internet, one feeds the other in a kind of endless circle of promotion (Aarseth, 2006; Whitson, 1998). Kids peering outside of these self-referential platforms for alternative narratives are undesirable for the NFL. Additionally, the NFL also abides by the rules of neoliberalism by fostering ways of being and knowing into its self-contained world, thus “substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs.” As we will see, this is accomplished for kids entering the NFL marketing apparatus through the collapsing of work and play, the replacement of political citizenship with consumer citizenship, and in the process, the creation of kids as commodities—all enacted within an inter-textual, commodified space created by the NFL.

The process of commodification we describe here is playing out amid broader forces that are creating cultural change and market instability. One site of change is in terms of demographics and society. As a result, the United States is quickly becoming truly multiracial, and youth have a greater range of and more flexible gendered identities to choose from than in previous generations. While this challenges previous ways of marketing the game, it also presents opportunities to target new demographics. The NFL would not pay Katy Perry to perform during the 2015 Super Bowl halftime show if it were only interested in appealing to middle-aged men. In addition to demographic changes, football faces a greater array of competing consumer-leisure activities than ever (e.g., soccer, basketball, alternative sports, video games, social media), and there is increasing public awareness of and concern about football’s health risks. To meet these challenges, the NFL has built a sophisticated and thorough marketing strategy that follows youth across media platforms. Peter O’Reilly explains, “what we tried to do was not just expect that kids would come to the NFL and the game would be handed down to them, but that they could find the NFL in all the places where they’re already spending time” (“Child’s Play,” 2010).

Since youth spend a good deal of time in media spaces, NFL marketing is media intensive. Therefore, this article looks at the NFL’s youth oriented marketing strategies in two inter-linked areas of media:

1. Television—NFL Rush Zone is a Nickelodeon television series that serves as the narrative center that structures the rest of the NFL’s youth oriented media. The basic premise of the show is that a group of kids who play youth football are superheroes, akin to the Super Friends (1973–1986), and they protect the world one NFL stadium at a time. Consistent with other Nickelodeon shows, viewers watch a mixed race and mixed gender team of young heroes in order to learn about consumer citizenship structured by postracial and postfeminist discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2007).
Digital Media—Through the website nflrush.com, the NFL leverages digital media technologies to create a “branded virtual world” (Barnes, 2010) that forms what we call an inter-textual pedagogical and performative narrative space. This space involves the television show, social media, videos, online video games, fantasy football, and mobile apps that all demonstrate an impressive integration of imagery, aesthetics, and messaging. Further, NFL youth marketing is structured by multiple strategic alliances with state and market-based organizations, including Nickelodeon, USDA, Dominos, Partnership For A Healthier America, McDonalds, and the National Dairy Council.

This article draws upon academic marketing research, trade journal articles, and a combination of content and textual analysis of NFL marketing across its multiple platforms. We find that NFL marketing to youth ultimately has three central and interrelated messages: 1) football is inclusive, 2) football is cool and relevant, and 3) football is not only safe but also healthful to individuals, families, and communities. In part, the NFL wants to integrate its product into youth lifestyles and ameliorate middle class anxieties about the health risks currently associated with football and the anti-social behaviors of some its high-profile players. But NFL marketing is not simply reactive. It engages in cross-platform marketing in order to expand its market share in the future. In this way, we view the NFL's marketing as a technology of governance that simultaneously works to construct the NFL as a responsible manager of youth health and to produce NFL fan subjectivities within an inter-textual pedagogical and performative narrative space.

NRZ—Entertaining advertisements and advertising entertainment

They wanted to see if there was a different kind of way that they could tap into a fan base at a young age—6, 7, 8 years old—and create these lifelong fans of the NFL. And then for us, the Nicktoons Network—all animation all the time, 24 hour network, really focusing on boys six to 11, so that's when we realized there was a common sweet spot there. — Keith Dawkins, TeenNick and Nick Jr. Senior Vice President and General Manager (Blair, 2012)

The television show NFL Rush Zone is best understood as advertainment since it looks like a traditional Saturday morning cartoon except, like Transformers (1984–1987), it was created to promote a product line (Deery, 2004, p. 1; Kretchmer, 2004, p. 39). Though there have been kids’ television shows with NFL licensing before, what is different now is the way that multiple media platforms link together to create inter-textual circuits of sport promotion across traditional and new media that form unending, self-referential loops of marketing messages (Aarseth, 2006; Whiston, 1998). We discuss the advertainment loop in detail below so in this section we detail how NFL Rush Zone (NRZ) fosters a sense of consumer citizenship

NRZ is part of an on-going effort to cultivate future fans of the National Football League. It waspreceded by an online fantasy role-playing game in 2008 called Rush Zone that targeted kids as young as six (“Kids Tuned Into NFL,” 2010). Begun in September 2010 as a series of 2-5 minute episodes that culminated in an hour-long special just before the Super Bowl, NRZ's success led the NFL and Nickelodeon to partner and expand it into a regular series in 2012 (“NFL, Nickelodeon,” 2010; Kaplan, 2010). As Peter O'Reilly explained, “we've been laser-focused for the last 5 years trying to connect kids to the NFL.” (“Nicktoons To Debut,” 2012). Working together, the NFL and Nickelodeon creates synergies, as Keith Dawkins explains, “Sports and sports stars are bigger than ever with kids because it’s everywhere…. Kids know so much more about sports today, but they still love the Nickelodeon hit shows, so with this show our audience gets the best of both worlds” (Umstead, 2012). NRZ also creates licensing opportunities, which have become increasingly important in sport marketing since these partnerships not only extend a brand and reach new consumer markets, they also generate revenue (Ashley, 2011, p. 1).

The show itself looks a lot like cartoons of the past. NRZ appears to blend elements of Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (1993–1995) with Super Friends and Pokémon (1998–present). It is also consistent in most respects with other Nickelodeon cartoons other than the NFL branding. NRZ
follows the exploits of a group of kids called the “Guardians” who protect NFL stadiums from space invaders called “Blitz Botz” that are led by diabolical robots such as “Wild Card” and “Drop Kick.” The kids “enter the Rush Zone” and transform into Guardians with super football powers. The Blitz Botz hope to take over the Earth by getting hold of shards of a power source called “The Core” that are hidden in the 32 NFL stadiums. The Guardians are led by “RZ,” the hologram essence of a scientist named Dr. Zimmerman, who resides in the “Hall of Knowledge” (HOK). The Guardians also work with the “Rusherz”: monstrous Pokémon-like representations of the 32 NFL team logos. Famous NFL players and coaches make appearances in every episode to offer lessons on life and citizenship. For instance in “Episode 207: Gridiron Ringers,” Hall of Famer Richard Dent (Chicago Bears) tells the Guardians that through hard work they can succeed. Each episode also takes didactic breaks from the primary story to teach the history and lore of the NFL with emphasis on teams and their physical locations. So as the show tours the 32 NFL markets throughout the season, viewers see famous sites in each team’s hometowns, such as Soldier Field in Chicago, and learn about both star players and the team itself, such as the late Walter Payton (Chicago Bears). Ultimately, through the ad-ventures of the Guardians, NRZ subtly teaches viewers basic knowledge about football and the NFL. Further, it normatizes football lingo such as the character “Sudden Death” and teaches knowledge about players, coaches, and teams necessary to create the emotional bonds of fandom.

What is most striking about NRZ is the way it, like other Nickelodeon cartoons, engages in post-feminist and post-racial discourse while conveying messages about youth empowerment. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) argues that Nickelodeon imagines viewers as subjects who need to be trained in and brought into citizenship (p. 9). When it comes to girls and racial minorities, empowerment gets expressed by including more female and racial minority characters so that empowerment is enacted through visibility and the power to make choices. But this also connects citizenship to consumption or the power to make responsible consumer choices (i.e., consumer citizenship). On Nickelodeon cartoons, visibility ultimately depoliticizes inclusion and empowerment through commodity relations and it removes a sense of urgency for social justice (p. 144). And this is the key contradiction of consumer citizenship, “political subjectivity is not necessarily the guiding principle for citizens… representational practices offer what looks like a more inclusive, more democratic society—but one with no political referent or practice” (p. 146). So on NRZ, gender and racial diversity are visible but left unmentioned and thus severed from histories of collective action and politics; instead they become consumable issues of personal identity and choice (p. 145).

Positive but depoliticized difference is a striking characteristic of NRZ that makes the Guardians look like an unthreatening Rainbow Coalition. The protagonists include an African American character that leads the group, a Samoan, a Mexican American, and two white characters. Ash, one of the white characters, is a tomboyish girl and the proverbial brains of the team. Rather than being sexualized or sidelined as a cheerleader, Ash is as important to the team as her male counterparts. She is often a heroic figure, and sometimes she is immune to weaknesses that incapacitate her teammates. The episode “Broken Dreams” is a good example. The episode has two didactic themes that emphasize choice-based models of citizenship divorced from any non-corporatized realm of civil society. The first theme is the importance of volunteerism that is demonstrated by Arian Foster (Houston Texans) who delivers sporting goods to poor kids; Tony Gonzalez (Atlanta Falcons) leads a youth fitness program similar to NFL PLAY 60; and Pete Carroll (Seattle Seahawks) works in a food bank. Not only is Ash heroic in the episode, she is also the most active volunteer on the team. The second didactic theme is the importance of friendship and teamwork. One character’s worst nightmare is losing in competition and disappointing his father, but the others dispel that nightmare by showing friendship as more important than winning. Using their teamwork and loyalty to each other, the Guardians defeat Wild Card and Drop Kick who rely on fear and intimidation.

Despite the progressive trappings of a heroic girl-character and its pro-social values, Broken Dreams, like the NRZ series generally, moves feminism (or racial justice) and citizenship away from traditional collective action to more innocuous personal choices. The focus on the individual is consistent with neoliberal ideology that relocates responsibility for citizens’ welfare from the state onto citizens who must
take personal responsibility for their own welfare through an ethic of choice and initiative (Montez de Oca, 2012). Visibility and individual empowerment on Nickelodeon provides evidence that the public politics of change exist in the past and are no longer necessary now that minorities have achieved access and simply need to make proper choices to ensure their own welfare (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 121).

New media—Extending the advertainment loop

NRZ audiences can follow the Guardians from their broadcast points on television (Nicktoons and the NFL Network) and the internet (the Nicktoons and the Rush Zone websites) to nflrush.com. There they can find a range of NRZ themed media including advergames such as the Megacore, engage NRZ social media such as the Hall of Knowledge (HOK), and download NRZ themed apps to their smart phones. New media does more than just extend NRZ broadcast points, it forms an inter-textual pedagogical and performative narrative space where kids can perform the cultural labor of producing themselves as NFL fans.

Here we draw on Homi Bhabha’s (1991) idea of the double time of the nation in which nationalism has a pedagogical moment and a performative moment. In the first moment, one is taught about national subjuncthood as a pedagogical object of nationalist discourse. The second moment is when members of the nation perform the national subjectivity. We argue that sport fandom, particularly as consumer citizenship, makes people both subjects and objects of sport marketing discourse. Fandom therefore has a pedagogical moment when people learn a sport’s technical knowledge (formal rules, tactics, and strategies) and cultural knowledge (e.g., norms, lore, history, imagery) and a performative moment when fans engage in the sport’s rituals and practices beyond simply cheering. Performing a fan identity includes consuming games live or electronically, following a team and/or players in news media, engaging in discussion about teams and/or players, consuming appropriate foods and beverages, purchasing and/or wearing licensed merchandise, as well as performing the popular rituals of the specific sport. While technical knowledge is necessary to understand and enjoy a sport, the cultural knowledge makes the technical aspects of the sport meaningful and a part of everyday life through the construction of historical narratives and frameworks of perception. Therefore, it is important that the NFL teaches both technical and cultural knowledge so that subjects can perform a fan identity within branded and commodified sporting spaces.

Nflrush.com links different media platforms together and extends the NRZ narrative and branding onto the internet to create a NFL branded virtual space that teaches fanship and encourages youth to perform a fan identity. Central to our argument is the contention that fanship requires competence in both knowledge and practice. Achieving the necessary level of competence to successfully perform a fan identity takes a great deal of labor both in terms of time and energy. Rather than leaving this work to parents, NRZ and the social media guide youth to a fan identity and assist them in the cultural labor of producing themselves as fans.

From the nflrush.com home page, users can access a variety of different areas. Users are encouraged to either log in or become members of the site. Collecting user data to sell to marketers is one of the greatest value-adds of new media since it allows the advertiser to customize its message and track consumers (Breitenbach & Doren, 1998; Calvert, 2008). Critics charge that children are inadequately informed online about privacy and that parental permission is rarely secured (Federal Trade Commission, 2012). Once registered, the site hails users in order to draw them into the cartoon narrative. This happened quite literally on September 26, 2013, when the research team received an email from NFL.com inviting us to enter a contest where “our child” could become a character on an episode of NRZ (NFL.com, personal communication, September 26, 2013).

After logging in, users can access the “Rush Zone” that takes them to the HOK, a social media site where users can make friends, send out challenges, and make incoherent statements. This section of the site creates an online community framed by NFL branding and that integrates social media with the television show. From the HOK, users can access the site’s premier advergame, the “Megacore,” which is a good example of inter-textuality since playing it suggests users have walked into an episode of the NRZ cartoon.
Users can also access “NFLRush Fantasy Football” to play fantasy football and win prizes. Thomas Oates (2009) perceptively describes fantasy football as producing “vicarious management”—a kind of neoliberal fandom that exists primarily in new media where users imagine themselves acting as team owners and thus identify with the institutional regimes of the NFL (pp. 31–32). From this perspective, fantasy football creates neoliberal fanship by replacing cheering for teams with cheering for individuals that you vicariously manage. However, if we see fantasy football as a technology of governance where users are taught to produce themselves as more knowledgeable football fans, we can highlight another aspect of this entertainment. Although users take pleasure in managing athletic labor, the site is actually managing them and their labor. By playing fantasy football, people perform labor on themselves, producing themselves as better, more active and knowledgeable fans. And since fans are consumers sold to advertisers (Meehan, 1990), they are in fact producing themselves as more valuable commodities.

The website nflrush.com had 83 different online games at the time of our research. These are actually advergames since they all feature NFL branding and many advertise the NRZ. Advergames are a type of “stealth marketing” that creates a cool brand perception and emotional connections to brands without users necessarily knowing it (Calvert, 2008; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004). An account director for the agency that handles Capncrunch.com said that “with kids, if you build a good (adver)game, you create a positive brand perception... If you can simply establish the brand as being cool and relevant you’ve cleared a major, major hurdle” (Kretchmer, 2004, p. 51). But the advergames do more than just stealthily create an emotional bond with NFL branding, they make repetitive, directed tasks engaging and enjoyable. More specifically, video games make labor fun so users do not experience labor as work (Yee, 2006), which is really disciplining workers for contemporary white collar labor. Collapsing the work-play binary is a key characteristic of the neoliberal expanse of cyberspace (Harambam, Aupers, & Houtman, 2011; Silverman & Simon, 2009; Sotamaa, 2007; Yee, 2006). Beyond providing free marketing labor in the games and social media (Dart, 2012; Sotamaa, 2007; Terranova, 2000), the labor that user perform ultimately is upon them, producing themselves as more valuable commodities.

Our efforts to better understand the types of work and play taking place on nflrush.com lead us to code the 83 games present at the time of this study. We started by looking at the video game genre each game fell into. Most games would be considered “casual games” meaning they have low production costs and short durations that require little previous gaming experience; many require only one button to play and possess no “steering” or navigational features. Games of this nature often serve as an introduction for adults who are unfamiliar with video gaming, or for children not yet old enough to take on more complex offerings. The remainder of the games all fall into other common genres such as shooter, sports, puzzle, trivia, etc.¹ The wide array of genres and play styles allow for the website to appeal to a wide range of tastes among young gamers. Through advergaming, youth can familiarize themselves with the NFL and have numerous opportunities to interact with other users as they compete for high scores and bragging rights. More important than the style of game play is the genre of football knowledge taught by the games. We found the predominant types of knowledge taught in the games tie into technical aspects of the sport, such as rules, scoring methods, and jargon, followed by games that impart cultural aspects of the sport onto their players (such as stadium locations, elements of spectacle, and fan behavior in general). Lastly, we found that over a third of the games have tie-ins with the NRZ cartoon.² Ultimately, what we found is that many of the

¹When coding by video game genre (i.e., types of gameplay interaction) we found the following percentages for the 83 games we examined: casual games (31%), shooters (22%), sports-themed (18%), puzzles (16%), action (5%), mazes (4%), strategy (2%), and trivia (2%).

²When coding by the types of knowledge present in the games we arrived at following percentages: technical knowledge (42%), cultural knowledge (25%), miscellaneous (i.e., nonfootball related) knowledge (33%), and the total percentage for games containing technical or cultural football knowledge (67%). Of the 83 games coded 36% have imagery or thematic tie-ins that link them to the NRZ cartoon—of the 33% falling under the miscellaneous category, 55% of these games have imagery or thematic tie-ins to the cartoon.
advergames are low-cost casual games with little to no connection to football but have been repurposed for NFL branding opportunities that also teach the types of knowledge necessary for NFL fanship.

The gaming section of nflrush.com advertises a variety of different contests that are linked to the NFL Play 60 portion of the site. Users also receive direct-marketing emails. A number of options are available here, offering prizes to students and schools for demonstrating awareness of the importance of healthy eating choices and exercise. This corporate social responsibility marketing campaign allows the NFL to participate in the governance of children’s bodies by providing funding and expert knowledge on physical activity and nutrition. Play 60 bundles a variety of different technologies of subjectification to produce youth as consumer citizens and avid NFL fans (Montez de Oca, Meyer, & Scholes, In press). Perhaps what is most significant about the contests is that they are a hailing that draws competitors into the NFL’s narrative on health, consumer citizenship and Americanism at that same time that they structure people’s labor. These contests emotionally link competitors to the NFL brand by offering a chance to win desirable objects and social status that will be recognized on the web site and at marquee events such as the Super Bowl.

The final section of nflrush.com that we discuss is titled “Videos” where users can watch game highlights, see video profiles of teams and players, watch commercials for NFL programs, and see youth news segments. In mid-2014, this section’s home page featured a “NFL Draft 2014 Special Program” that began as a typical NFL Total Access segment but then transformed into animation and turned out to be a commercial for an episode of NRZ where the Guardians take football into outer space. The short videos in this section are all commercials for the NFL, its games, its players, its programs such as NFL PLAY 60 and the NRZ. The “youth news” segments also operate as commercials for the NFL and its brand. As Sandra Calvert explains these segments are another form of low cost stealth marketing since they, “are neither presented nor labeled as advertisements, thus potentially breaking down the more critical stance that older viewers take when viewing an advertisement that they understand is trying to sell them a product” (Calvert, 2008, p. 210). These segments express contradictions between Nickelodeon’s impulse to empower children by giving them an authorial voice and to produce them as consumer citizens. Banet-Weiser argues that Nick News allows kids to work as news journalists at times covering important issues such as bullying. However, serious news segments are juxtaposed to faux-news such as coverage of the boy band O-Town that is produced by MTV, also a Viacom network (Banet-Weiser, 2007, pp. 134–135).

Pedagogy and performance—Subjectification and postmodern labor

This article has looked at how NFL marketing uses technologies of subjectification to draw youth into an inter-textual pedagogical and performative narrative space in order to train them in consumer citizenship and NFL fandom. This space is largely virtual in that it exists primarily within the NRZ broadcasts and new media (nflrush.com and downloadable apps). What links the different media platforms and texts is the NRZ narrative that is actually advertainment branding the NFL as inclusive, relevant, and healthful. This is important for attracting contemporary male and female youth and so that it can continue to aggressively build market share.

The NFL’s production of consumer citizens and fans has both a pedagogical moment and a performative moment that makes youth both the object and the subject of NFL discourse. NFL pedagogy consists of two basic lessons. The first lesson is on the technical and the cultural knowledge necessary to be a competent fan conveyed through the norms, values, representations, and images associated with football. The second lesson is on uses of time and the body. Users grinding away at advergames, communicating with “friends” in the HOK, or whiling away hours at fantasy football are playfully engaged in immaterial, free labor that produces NFL marketing material and themselves as fans (i.e., as commodities). By gamifying its marketing material, nflrush.com is not simply stealth marketing pushing messages to viewers; it also transforms the work necessary to produce valuable commodities into play (Sotamaa, 2007; Yee, 2006). Therefore, under neoliberal labor processes, Huizinga’s binary distinction between work and play
characteristic of earlier stages of capitalism breaks down (Harambam et al., 2011 pp. 300–301). NFLrush.com encourages kids to sit for long hours at a computer gathering information on teams and players so that they can compete at fantasy football, patiently honing their skills on the advergames, and learning how to bring Play 60 resources to their schools. Unlike industrial era schooling that appears detached from the real world and engenders resistance to its didacticism (Coleman, 1965; Willis, 1977), gamification’s detachment from the real world makes disciplining labor for the postmodern shop floor agentic and pleasurable.

Our analysis also found several emergent themes in NFL marketing to youth. The first theme is governmentality, since new media technology within a highly integrated marketing strategy allows the NFL to act as a parent, bringing young fans into subjecthood and managing their labor power (Foucault, 1991). We found corporate and consumer citizenship as a salient theme since NFL marketing 1) teaches an ethic of self that is linked to individual choice and the importance of friends that is used to create “word of mouth marketing” (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004; Montgomery & Chester, 2009), and 2) community engagement should be marketable acts of private charity rather than public or corporate obligation. Finally, we see subjectification, since NFL marketing contours youth and leads them to produce themselves as avid fans, and hence more valuable consumers. Multiculturalism is an important theme in NFL marketing in order to keep the NFL relevant as US demographics change. However, since NFL multiculturalism is postfeminist and postracial, difference is visible but depoliticized. So instead of expressing a progressive political project, difference is simply an object of consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 157). We also found commodification since users of nflrush.com are performing labor for the NFL via branding and stealth marketing. This is free, immaterial labor since they produce content that other users consume. Although users’ labor is experienced as entertainment rather than work, it still adds value to NFL commodities and ultimately makes fans more valuable commodities.

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